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Role of Women during the Anti-Foreigners' Agitation in Assam 1979-1985

Nabanita Sharma

Abstract: The Anti-foreigners agitation in Assam started against the alleged inclusion of 'foreigners' name in the voters' lists in several electoral constituencies in Assam in the 1970s. This agitation lasted for nearly five years. This event has been researched widely. Women constituted a major chunk among the agitators. Women were most vulnerable to violence that occurred during the agitation and afterward. However, this group of agitators has not been studied separately. In this paper, I have made an attempt to see how they viewed the agitation and what prompted them to join in such a large scale. I have also tried to study the need for looking at women's participation in the agitation separately. Women in Assam, compare to the rest of India were less educated and had almost zero participation in politics in the 1970s. This paper is an attempt to explore the reasons and repercussions of the joining of women in the agitation.

Keywords: Anti-Foreigners' Agitation, AASU, AAGSP, Agitation, Assam, Foreigner, Women.

Introduction

Zoya Hasan argues that contemporary politics in India is pre-occupied with community identities, religious traditions, cultural practices and chauvinistic ideologies and movements that divides people into Hindu and Muslim, natural inhabitants and foreigners, infiltrators and refugees and so on. Multiple identities exist in which often many identities submerge to form one community identity. But in case of community identity assigned on women by community leaders, Hasan has raised the question that how women consent to or resist such assigned identity. Most of the time, community identity is articulated or stressed upon, when identities are neither inherited nor constant, especially in case of women. And these multiple identities are interrelated (Hasan, 1994). While Hasan's work concerns with the rise of communal politics in India in the 1980s and 1990s and its relation to gender; her ideas offer guide-

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lines in studying the issue of representation of women in different political movements in post-independent India. Assam Agitation against ‘foreigners’ was one such political movement where women took part in a large number. If we use Hasan’s views on Indian society what we find is that identity is used as a dividing line among the people and it is varied in various regions. In Assam the sharp dividing line was between the citizens and ‘foreigners’ and everybody came under either of the categories. Women in their attempt to guard the Assamese identity neglected the causes of women as a separate category with their rights to choose what to fight for and whom to fight against. In their fight against the infiltrators, they were citizens and at the time of reaping benefits as a citizen, they were categorised as women. The dividing line among the people of Assam was sharp at all moments-sometimes as men and women and sometimes as citizen and foreigner.

The Assam Agitation lasted for nearly six years and ended with the Assam Accord of the 15th August 1985. The agitation was continued with several rounds of parleys held in between to decide on the issue of identifying the ‘foreigners’ and measures to deport them. Though women agitators were as active as men, they were ignored in the process of peace negotiations. Women are often marginalised at the stage of decision-making because they are not supposed to enter the formal sphere (Brara 2008: 123). As argued by Ritu Menon, ‘Both war and peace is a contract between men, they decide the terms and also when it is to be waged...Both war and peace are discourses of power. When we talk of peace it is a question of sharing of power and women are marginalized. The area of action for women is presumed to be the informal arena (Ibid.). Women, as well as men agitators, were active during the Assam Agitation, but when it came to taking decisions among the chief agitators or to negotiate with the government about the exclusion of ‘foreigners’, there was no woman on board. One-half of the agitators were completely ignored in the entire process of negotiation.

The anti-foreigners’ agitation in Assam was a complex political event. It had far-reaching consequences in the socio-political scenario of the state. This movement had created the platform for the rise of regionalism in Assam. The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was also an offshoot of the same discontents of the Assamese middle class against the situation in Assam. The subsequent Bodo movement was a direct outcome of the rise of regionalism post-Assam agitation. Already a lot of academic work has been done on these developments. In case of participation of women in the anti-foreigners’ agitation in Assam, the participation of women reflects their consciousness towards society. This consciousness was used by the ‘boys’ of All Assam Students Union (AASU) to bring them to the agitation. The response of women was spontaneous and women of different age groups became agitators. The attention of many of these women shifted from driving away the ‘foreigners’ from Assam to create a stable social order.

There are volumes of literature on the agitation but none of the work that I have come across dedicated a chapter on women. Women’s support was mentioned only when there was a need to show the ‘popularity’ of the agitation, and not to show women as a separate category with their own agenda. The question naturally arises

that should we study women's participation in any movement as a sign of the acceptability of the movement? Or, are women pursued to take part in any agitation to make the event 'popular'? Again the same question is applicable to the tribal women and women of migrant community or the 'foreigner' women. The second two category of women were virtually absent in the entire six years of agitation. Women exist as a category, whether biological or social in relation to its natural counterpart 'man'. Otherwise, there is no justification for selecting sex as a category of analysis (Singh, 1975).

In case of the Assam Agitation, the participation of women was as widespread as that of men. The question comes up is that whether this participation was voluntary? My interview with several women agitators reveals that they did not make a conscious choice of joining the agitation against foreigners with clear agenda. As the events progressed, women in general and middle-class and upper caste women, in particular, took part in the agitation. They had full faith in AASU members who went from door to door seeking support. In the course of time, tribal women too became a part of the agitation. Rita Manchanda has argued that violent conflicts open up the public space for women which are generally not accessible to them. As men retreat (or forced to retreat) due to institutional terror or suppression, women are forced to take the public space. She has given an example of the conflict-ridden Kashmir and Chittagong Hill tracts in Bangladesh (Manchanda, 2001: 15). The answer to the question of why women took part in the agitation in Assam in 1979 can be that they were there to support the men folk. Women were conscious of the situation of the wrong voter list, but this did not prompt them to be a part of the agitation. The initial participation of girl students under the guidance of AASU and subsequent participation of other categories of women was the result of state-inflicted violence on the 'boys' of AASU. In different parts of the paper, I have given details of the agitation led only by women on the eve of the arrest of AASU leaders and men employed in government jobs who took part in the agitation. We can use Manchanda's argument that women become aware of the developments around and become resourceful at the time of conflict to protect male members of their family. This is often termed as 'accidental activism' on women's part (Manchanda, 2005: 4739). This sort of awareness can well be a reason for the eventual active participation of women in any movement. Assam Agitation saw similar events when initial passive awareness of women led to their participation in the agitation. This too was termed as a voluntary participation of women to protect their motherland from 'foreigners'.

Historical Background of Women's Political Activism in Assam

Assamese women became visible in any political movement for the first time in the early twentieth century. Initially, the number of women's associations was small and they were formed independently in different parts of Assam. These associations were mostly dedicated to socio-political issues, such as to spread literacy, to make women self-reliant and to inculcate Gandhian constructive programmes, etc. The period from 1930 to 1934 saw the largest number of women in any social movement. It was followed by the Quit India movement which was largely led by women, as all men

Congress leader were arrested on the outset of the movement. However, the agitation of 1979 saw for the first time such large participation of women, though it was perhaps seen as a 'resistance movement' against the overwhelming number of 'foreigners' in the state which threatened the identity of local or indigenous people of Assam. The scale of participation of women differed in the previous movements and agitations and in the agitation as 'the enemy' was different in both the cases. The Quit India movement was the first event in Assam's history where women participated in large number because of the arrest of male members of society. The Assam agitation was different in this regard as here the fight was against the elected government and the period is different, that is, the late 1970s. The changing social norms, that is, increasingly liberal attitude towards women's education, spread in literacy and success of AASU to convince the masses that Assamese identity is in threat, that women in large number took an active part in the agitation. As the agitation was led by students and they included both male and female students, the participation rate of women was higher and they were successful in attracting women of different age groups to the agitation. The changing social values and increasing awareness among women about their surroundings were perhaps the main reason why women in large number participated in the agitation.

The participation of women from the different class, caste and the communal background is one of the most important features of the anti-foreigners' agitation of 1979-85. Women were spontaneous participants and they took part in all activities, be it *satyagraha*, picketing or procession. The agitation is often looked upon as a student-led event which obviously suggests that girl students were active as well. But what was the role of women of the middle-class background without any occupation or peasant women? To understand the responses of women to the agitation we need to look at the position of women in the society and their previous contributions briefly. According to the 1971 census report, 22.31% women were literate, which is a really low literacy rate. In 1981 there was no census conducted in Assam due to the agitation. In 1991 it rose to 43.70 % for women who could read and write (Debi, 1994). And if we look at the rate of women's participation to the agitation, newspaper reports clearly states that generally half of the agitators were women. The participation of women in the agitation was at its zenith during the first two years when the event was peaceful and did not take ultra-nationalist form.

In all the events women were there in equal numbers to their male counterparts, but in many cases, as we see in case of Golaghat district, wives of police were grouped separately for *satyagraha*.¹ Most of these women participants were in Guwahati and during the most active days of the agitation, women agitators numbered thirty to forty thousand every day.² Women contributed to the agitation as the fund raiser as well. The numerous Mahila Samiti (Women's Association) that came up during the agitation contributed money to AASU's coffer to carry on the agitation and this process lasted until the end of the agitation. For example, Assam Mahila Sangha (the Assam Women's Club) on the 18th of November 1979 discussed the ways to provide support to the agitation in Guwahati.³ This meeting was not unique of its kind. Every day several such meetings were going on in different corners of the state. It indicated

the concern of women in general for the happenings in the state. The educated section of women too responded to the agitation. Assam Women Writers Association supported the cause of the agitation and pleaded the government not to hold election without correcting voters list.⁴In a memorandum submitted to the Governor of Assam, Women Writers Association demanded to stop the election with wrong voter list.

In almost every corner of every locality, a women's association was formed and these women were not merely supporting the agitation but they were creating new avenues for self-employment and self-dependence. They used handloom: their traditional companion as an instrument to carry on their fights against the 'other'. The newspaper reports were full of their offer to help victims of violence, to provide food and aid to those who were picketing, they were themselves engaged in picketing and at the same time, they were weaving cloths, which was the main source of earning for many families. Another activity where these women's associations were associated was for the contribution of money for the cause of the agitation. Often they save money from their domestic budget and used to donate it to AASU's coffer.

The second half of the 1980s was crucial for both the agitation and for the women participants. The process of negotiation with the government started and several rounds of talk went without any result. The government forced the people engaged in public sector employment to join offices. After a gap, students had to return to educational institutions. In such a situation, AASU which was leading the agitation from the front, had to turn towards women as the main group to carry on the movement against foreigners. In several public meetings, AASU leaders talked about the importance of women in society. The AASU pitched for the complete participation of women as it could give the agitation a unique colour.⁵Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad played a crucial role in mobilising women: they valorised women as mother and their inspiration as a source of strength to carry on the agitation in the face of hardships.⁶ In 1981, the agitation slowed down a little bit, as several rounds of parleys were held between the central government and the agitators. In 1982, the violence between the Central Reserve Police Force and the agitators again revived the agitation. By 1982, the agitators took the form non-violent movement. Agitators took to fasting as a way to protest against police atrocities.⁷ All these events were orchestrated by the AASU and AAGSP (All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad) leaders. Staging arrest was another non-violent method used by agitators, particularly by women agitators.⁸

An important outcome of the anti-foreigner's agitation in Assam was the emergence of women leaders at the time of the movement. Students involved in the AASU led movement gave girl students the opportunity to lead from the front. An example of such leadership was Rekha Rani Bodo, a tribal leader. She was elected as president of All Assam Tribal Women's Association in 1982 and was a part of AASU.⁹ Rekha Ranis' rise was unique as we see soon after the agitation the women retreated to the home in general. Girl students get back to their studies or were married off, employed or self-employed women returned to their jobs. There were only two women who joined politics as a part of Assam Gana Parishad(AGP) and got elected as Members of Legislative Assembly. Das Bodo was one of them.

The women's groups that were active during the agitation were decentralised organisations working at the grass root level. Women of each religious and linguistic community had their own associations along with the local neighborhood associations. They were not interconnected and were brought together by AASU from time to time. AASU had created the Jagrata Mahila Parishad specially to organise these local women's associations to take part in the agitation. But it was AASU and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) that mobilise these women for different programmes and propagandas. There was no independent participation of women and all women were under such local association's purview. There was no entry fee or other rule for membership in these associations and many of them were dissolved once the agitation was over. The Jagrata Mahila Parishad that started in the 1980s exists even today but they are not engaged in party politics and works for the welfare of women at local level. Not only Jagrata Mahila Parisha but none of these women's associations stayed in touch with AASU once the agitation came to an end. However, during the initial years of AGP's rule, these womens' associations were the ardent supporter of the AGP and with changing socio-political circumstances of the state their support discontinued.

Women as Peace Keeper

The response of men and women to war and peace is different and feminist discourses often identify war and peace as gendered activities with women having different needs and responses. While women work actively at local regional and community level peace building mechanisms, they are completely excluded from the formal level of peace negotiations both at national and international level (Shankar, 2008: 27). In a United Nations report Kofi Annan has stated: 'Women make an important but often unrecognised contribution as peace educators in the families and in the society'. Though women are the chorus at peace rallies, the front line of the humanitarian story, but they are not on the dais, they do not determine the agenda. And once the conflict is over, women are expected to go back to their kitchen, their presence becomes invisible and women themselves look at their activity as non-political and 'stretched roles' from domestic duties. Men take over the formal peace negotiation, women are typically unrepresented' (Dutta & Bhuyan 2008: xvi). During the anti-foreigners' agitation in Assam, thousands of women poured into the streets in support of the agitation and many of them were victims of violence. In such situation, many women's organisations came up who urged for peace. Several Matribahinis (Mother Force) were created to assist those who suffered during the agitation. Samajsewi Matribahini (Social Worker Mother Force) was one such organisation who offered material help to those women who were either molested by Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) *jawans* or lost family members, by granting them hand looms to become self-dependent financially.¹

Purbanchaliya Mahila Sanstha (Northeastern Women's Association) was another organization involved in helping those who suffered due to the agitation. The women involved in this organisation went from place to place, to offer medical and material support to those injured in conflicts that broke out between the protesters

and police/CRPF.² By 1981, there was many women's organisation involved in maintaining peace in society. They were protesting against the army and police torture on agitators.

Incidents of violence were not uncommon in different parts of Assam during the six years of agitation. Acharya Vinoba Bhave, a Gandhian leader, was concerned about the aims and direction of the agitation. He advised some workers of the Sarbodaya Mandal to go to the Indo-Bangladesh border to create awareness among the border dwellers about the impact of the migration on the local economy and to find out peaceful ways to stop migration into Assam. Accordingly, four groups of Gandhi followers went to border areas from different parts of Assam, on foot. They were led by Mrs. Lakshmi Phukan and one of the groups was all women and they were inmates of Kasturba Gandhi Ashram. The main motives of this peace march were:³

- (I) To communicate with the people living on the Bangladesh border, to understand what they felt about the immigration problem and to create Peace Forces at border areas.
- (II) To co-operate with Border Security Force of India and assist them in their work, and,
- (III) To directly prevent infiltration into Assam.

Why the agitation had women participants?

The consciousness associated with the participation of women during the agitation was not homogenous and intensity of their support varied at different time. If we look at the entire period of the agitation, their participation was not of equal intensity. At the beginning, the middle-class women living in urban areas were supporters of the agitation. They spontaneously came out of home for processions and picketing. Old ladies and young girls in rural areas supported the agitation and took to the streets. But once the agitation became more intense, women of different ethnic groups too started participating in the agitation. The common perception was that, as the 'mother Assam' (Aai Axomi) is in danger everyone should come out of home to save her from 'intruders'. This idea of 'mother Assam' was used by AASU in posters, in wall paintings, in the newspapers, banners as well as in the poems composed by many AASU members. Women were compelled to assume new and independent roles and demonstrate capabilities for decision-making during conflict and post-conflict situations. It could be anything - from community management and peacemaking to reconstruction activities (Shankar, 2008: 132). Before the agitation, women would not come out of home even for work, let alone protest or to claim something. The experience of the agitation acquired different meanings for women of different backgrounds. For the educated young middle-class section, it was an opening to visualize them as a part of the society. For the lower middle-class and illiterate women, the agitation brought an opportunity to catch up with different sections of society. A woman who never came out of home or who could have never thought of meeting other women to discuss something, was now squatting on the road, discussing something they believed is just, even if they were wrong in their understanding of the

broader problem. Many women wrote at local newspapers encouraging women to be a good human being, a good mother, and a good citizen (Barthakur, 1980). The traditional duty of looking after the household and the handloom changed into thinking of the social change that was going on how and it could influence the politics of the state.

Different women's associations emerged in these six years and although many of these were dissolved after the agitation, a large number of these associations continued operating. It gave women a sense of unity, togetherness and strength to stand together against issues, such as domestic violence and social disturbances due to drunkards. After the agitation was over many of these women's associations continue working as self-help groups where women of lower income families could save money and after a year or two could withdraw it. They could also take a small amount of money as a loan from the group. This kind of initiatives could be life-changing for lower middle-class women who do not earn and thus could not save money for her future. Also, it gave a sense of empowerment to unemployed women. The numerous organisations and associations of women were not merely agitating against 'foreigners' but they were raising other issues associated with their lives. Assam Janajatiya Mahila Santha (Assam Tribal Women's Association), a leading women's organisation of the period, not only was actively involved in the agitation, they protested against issues, such as a ban on tribal women running *haats* (small markets) in some parts of northern Kamrup.¹ Exhibitions of handicraft were held under Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti's enterprise to boost small-scale industries run by women.²

A positive change brought by the agitation on women's lives was their growing political consciousness. Like in any other Indian state of the 1980s, there were very few women who tend to act actively in the political arena, even in case of voting. From 1952 to 1985 A.D., representation of women in the Lok Sabha was minimal and it was limited to two or three and sometimes single female member (Dutta, 1992: 112-125). I cannot say how after 1985 any change in the representation of women in the Lok Sabha came up. My submission is that now women were politically more aware. More young educated women were visible in the public arena, which was not the case before the agitation.

Women often became the centre of unwanted attention due to their participation in the agitation. In many instances, the women were criticised for their presence in the *satyagrahas*, picketing and other activities. Comments such as, 'women who agitated were manipulated by the male agitators'³ and 'women agitators in Narengi oil field were having pastry and tea as if they were on a picnic' were some of them. There were many instances when girls were not allowed to venture out of home due to the tensions going on the outside. The increasing incidents of state-induced violence against women agitators made their family members to put restrictions on their joining the agitation.

Numerous women's clubs (Mahila Samiti) played a crucial role in organising women to take part in the agitation. By this way, they had created a platform to work united for any cause. Through the activities like distribution of food and medical assistance to victims of violence, they were redefining themselves as agents of change. The women of Mula Gabhoru Santha set up primary health care centers at Guwahati

and in that way; they were trying to bring change to society. Women at local level organised themselves in associations, such as Sanjukta Mahila Sangha (United Women's Association), Satya Sandhya Mahila Sangha (Satya Sandhya Women's Association), Sankari Samaj Mahila Samiti (Sankari Society Women's Committee), Rongpur Mahila Chora (Rongpur Women's Platform), Nazira Mahila Samiti (Nazira Women's Committee), Bilasipara Sangrami Mahila Santha (Bilasipara Struggling Women's Group) different branches of Mula Gabhoru Santha.

Patriarchy Defining Women's Position in the Agitation

Though the patriotic zeal of the women led them to join the agitation in large number, the quest for a patriarchal Assamese identity played a decisive role in the entire process of mobilisation of women. The women's club and other women's organisation were protesting against army brutality on women and offered financial support to rape victims. During the initial phase of the agitation, AASU tends to pick up the students to do picketing and *satyagraha*. As girl students were reluctant to join the agitation, they were grouped under the leadership of girls, though in many instances boy students tend to guide them. Thus at grass roots level, women got the chance to be an organiser. The same picture was not visible at the higher level of the hierarchy, where there was one or two women leader in the AASU and AAGSP. The women's associations were mobilised by AASU leaders and once the agitation was over, many of these associations were dissolved. Women's concern for society was subdued by the notion that the 'boys' are going to save the motherland by driving away the 'foreigners'. It is the duty of 'mothers' to support them wholeheartedly. Women were speaking what they were expected to speak.

Rita Manchanda points out that post-conflict situation witness greater impoverishment of women, especially in relation to the shifts that had been created by the conflict situation (Manchanda, 2005: 4737-45). Manchanda goes on to argue that it is very important to know what happened before the peace table was set to understand why women should be a part of it and aftermath. Women show their resourcefulness at the time of conflict hence it becomes more important for having women a say in the legislative process post-war. Manchanda has developed this argument in regards to conflicts in the Northeastern India, in Kashmir, in Afghanistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka (Ibid.). In case of post-Anti-foreigners' Agitation in Assam, a similar trend was visible in the agitation. Though by nature, Assam Agitation was a democratic movement demanding reforms in matters of citizenship provisions, it was a political agitation with unprecedented support from women agitators. Women had supported wholeheartedly to the cause. But the subsequent developments in the state did not see enough participation of women in matters of political participation neither at grass root level nor in the Legislative Assembly.

The signing of the memorandum of understanding between the central government and the agitation leaders was followed by the peace process in the state. The political party Assam Ghana Parishad (AGP) was formed by the leaders of the agitation. AASU followers played a crucial role in making the AGP win the election in December 1985. The subsequent period of the 1980s was full of secret killings and

the rampage of the ULFA. In this period women were completely sidelined by that same organisation (AASU leaders formed AGP and all the party members were ex-AASU members; AAGSP was dissolved once the agitation was over and some of the leaders from this organisation joined AGP, but their number was very small) which made every possible effort to mobilise women agitators five years ago. In the post-agitation scenario, women were a mute victim of army atrocities resulted from ULFA's demand for *swadhin Axom* (Independent Assam). Many disheartened women joined ULFA, many others continued as peace worker at the local level and the majority of women went back to ordinary life. The entire notion of *Aai Axomi* (mother Assam) and the agitation to protect her from foreigners was a move just to attract more and more women to the agitation. And, once the Accord was signed, and a government was formed, *Aai Axomi* was sidelined. Women's participation in the agitation was clearly propelled by their nationalist zeal. Assamese women, as a part of the Indian nationalism and Assamese sub-nationalism, supported the agitation. Rick Wilford argues that nationalism is propelled by an 'us' and 'them', Insider/outsider, inclusive/exclusive dynamism which could be carried to an exaggerated and dangerous extreme in a divided society, barriers are erected and groups take up arms in order to raise their claim to autonomy. By a condition of armed patriarchy, women are marginalised (Wilfred, 1998). In the Assamese agitation, the society was clearly divided between the insiders and outsiders on the basis of citizenship rules prescribed by the Indian constitution. The aftermath was that ordinary agitators, especially women were marginalised.

The women's associations were mobilised by the local AASU leaders and these associations did not have their own propaganda except offering financial aid to the agitation leaders and food and medical aid to the victims of violence during the agitation. Whenever any violent incident took place women were the first and worst sufferer of it - be it the violence and rape in north Kamrup district or the Neilli and Gohpur massacre. My interview with one AAGSP worker revealed that the girls were not safe even while picketing. While the leaders of AASU or AAGSP used to address the masses for carrying on the agitation they themselves rarely joined the crowd. Whenever tear gas or water canon or *lathi* charge happened the ordinary agitators had to bear the brunt. Women agitators could not run fast in the face of such action, and they used to end up being thrashed and humiliated. As a result, parents used to debar the girls from joining such events.¹ After the rape incidents in Kamrup district in January 1980, the leaders of the agitation used this incident as an issue to win the sympathy of the masses against the government. There was no attempt on the part of the agitators to curb the insecure situation facing women both agitators and non-agitators. The issue of deporting the foreigners' became so important that rape of women by army personal becomes acceptable for both the government and the 'anti-foreigners'.

Contested Identity

The participation of women indicates two separate trends at the same time—(i) how women were negotiating with the state and (ii) how they were negotiating with the

problem of immigration itself. While the women were negotiating with the problem of influx from the neighbouring countries, they were in direct confrontation with the state. Protests were against the alleged wrong voter lists issued by the state agency. There were slogans like 'Indian army we donated blood, knitted wool to you in 1962, 1965, 1971. In return, you rewarded us with raping our mothers and sisters in 1980. Shame! Shame!' (Goswami & Mahanta, 1993). The subsequent period of Assam's history is full of the suffering of women in the hands of state machinery and insurgency groups. By participating in the agitation, women behold the notion of protecting the identity of Assamese people, which was very patriarchal by nature itself and despite their widespread support they remained underrepresented in the political arena of the state.

If we look at the world scenario in the twentieth century, the end of the Second World War saw increasing number of women in different parts of the world joining the workforce. The 1960s and 1970s were the periods that saw widespread movement for the liberation of women, and these fights were against male supremacy. There was increasing awareness about oppression on the basis of gender, race and class (Vogel, 1983: 1-6). The decade from 1975 to 1985 was celebrated as International Decade of Women and naturally, women's issues attracted lots of attention at both national and international level in this period. Women's rights, health, education and employment issues were the center of feminist discourse.

In a small African country Eritrea which was under the colonial rule of another African country Ethiopia, their thirty-years long struggle for independence saw the transformation of the traditional Eritrean society. The struggle of Eritrea was different as here the revolutionary leaders formed the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) to mobilise their women to take part in the revolution and then they themselves worked under the leadership of these women. The struggle for independence in Eritrea started in the 1960s and in 1993 they won independence. From the 1980s, the nationalist leaders of Eritrea started recruiting women for all kind of jobs and in an attempt to encourage women to take part in revolutionary activities, they were encouraged to join at the front cadre. Women were given land right and promises were made to create a more egalitarian society in post-independent Eritrea. After Independence, despite government efforts, the traditional norms are preventing women from enjoying the privileges that were promised to them (Leisure, 2002).

In case of Eritrea, the support of women was achieved in return for the promises of equality after independence and women responded to it, spending the most productive years of their lives for the fight, owning land right and getting rid of oppressive customs. But it was not an all-round victory as even after independence, Eritrean women were grappling with different traditional barriers. In Assam, the women were called upon to join the agitation against the foreigners, to save mother land from the invaders and by that way to protect the identity of Assamese people. Here too we see a negotiation between the agitators and the women as a whole. But in these two diverse societies where the conflict occurred, once the situation became normal women were expected to be back at home. Though the nature of struggle was different and the 'other' against whom the fight broke out was different, the common trend was the

way women as a category was used to assert the universal nature of the fight.

In South Africa, we see a similar trend where the white women's movement demanding franchise in 1894 did not see the representation of colored women. This struggle of women had accepted the differential qualifications which existed between the Northern Provinces and Cape Province. Afrikaner women were completely excluded from franchise debate though the movement was exclusively a women-led movement (Meintjes, 1998). The examples of the women led struggles in South Africa, Eritrea or Assam shows the contesting identities that come into play in any struggle where women are a participant. In South Africa's franchise movement, the question of race overshadowed the question of gender. In Assam, on one hand, by invoking the concept of 'mother Assam' (Aai Axomi) the AASU and the agitators valorised the region of Assam as a woman who needs protection from intruders. On the other hand, the targets of attack by agitators include women 'foreigners' too. Women agitators too were attacking 'foreigner' women which resonate well with Zoya Hasan's concept of multiple, overlapping identities and in Assam Agitation, women's identity as 'citizen' against 'foreigners' was a community level identity which subsumed any other identity.

Conclusion

The anti-foreigners' agitation was one of its kind in the history of post-independent India, as it raised the issues of 'illegal immigration' from neighbouring Bangladesh and showed a new face of Assamese sub-nationalism. Also, Assam Agitation paved the way for the rise of similar agitations in different parts of India. Bodo Movement for separate identity and statehood was one of them. A lot of research has been done on Assamese sub-nationalism and problem of 'foreigners' infiltration' in Assam. In this paper I have analysed the overwhelming response of women in every possible way to the agitation: be it as grass root agitators blocking roads, sole bread earner at home in the absence of male members, fund raiser for the agitation or as peace keeper arranging medical aid to the victims of violence incurred by the state and non-state actors. The agitation lasted for almost six years only because of women's direct or indirect support. As the situation became 'normal' women became politically inactive, again. Studies of the aftermath of the political events in Kashmir, Eritrea or Nagaland have shown that post-conflict situations see impoverishment of women, especially in regard to the conflict situation. Women joined the agitation spontaneously as at many times men were forced to withdraw from public space or arrested (Manchanda, 2005: 4743). In Assam, there was no strategy on the women's part to participate in the agitation. As the agitation was led by students, girl students became an obvious part of the happenings. AASU and AAGSP successfully led the numerous women's group to fight for them. In the latter part of the agitation, women of different background joined the agitation as male members of the society were either arrested or debarred from public space. Hence, women came out to the road without any propaganda of their own. They worked under the umbrella of AASU and AAGSP. In the post-agitation Assam, Asom Gana Parishad government which was formed by erstwhile AASU and AAGSP did not see a lot of women member.

There is an urgent need to study the role played by women in the Assam Agitation against foreign infiltration. And this study should be free from the shadow of the AASU led political struggle. The purpose to study women's role in the Assam Agitation or in any socio-political movement should be aimed at understanding the condition of women today. After 1985, women of Assam have gone through a lot of turbulence due to the rise of insurgency and subsequent violence due to clash between the state and non-state actors. The post-Assam Agitation scenario was marked by a conspicuous absence of women in formal politics. The agitation had exposed them to the problems of the state, and many women wanted to do more for their mother land. As the formal political field was still close to them, many of them joined the ULFA to do something substantial. The Assam Agitation failed to bring more women into the formal politics, despite the wholehearted support of women to the success of the agitation. This paper is an attempt to study the role of women in the anti-foreigners' agitation in Assam to understand the present status of women in the politics of Assam.

Notes

¹ Front page report. (1979 November 15th). Published in daily newspaper *Dainik Asom*. Guwahati.

² Ibid. (1979 November 18th).

³ Ibid. (1979 November 19th).

⁴ Ibid. (1979 November 17th).

⁵ Front page report. (1980 October 25th). Published in daily newspaper *Dainik Asom*. Guwahati.

⁶ Ibid. (1980 October 27th).

⁷ Front page report. (1982 January 31st). Published in bi-weekly *Mahajati*. Tezpur.

⁸ Ibid. (1982 March 28th).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Front page report. (1980 February 28th). Published in daily newspaper *Dainik Asom*. Guwahati.

¹¹ Ibid. (1980 March 8th).

¹² Front page report. (1982 June 13th). Assam-Bangladesh XI mantoloi Santi Sena's Padajatra Published in bi-weekly newspaper *Mahajati*. Tezpur.

¹³ Front page report. (1980 October 14th). Published in daily newspaper *Dainik Asom*. Guwahati.

¹⁴ Ibid. (1980 October 29th).

¹⁵ Front page report. (1980 July 11th). Published in daily newspaper *Dainik Asom*. Guwahati.

¹⁶ Chutia, Parijat. (2012 November 25th). Interview of Ms. Chutia. She was an All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad worker and later became a member of Axom Gana Parishad as a party worker.

¹⁷ Dole, Bhanu. (1980 January 28th). Jai Aai Axom. A poem published in *Dainik Asom*. This poem later becomes the slogan of the AASU leaders during the agitation. Aai Axomi also found popular mention in songs, plays etc.

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