



Subalterns in the Anti-British Struggle: Analysing the contribution of Mangri Orang

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Abstract :

Many women played significant roles in the Anti- British Movement though their efforts to lead the movement were often overshadowed by men. However, women freedom fighters, who made their selfless sacrifices for the cause of the nation, did sometimes get attention in popular historical narratives, for their contributions towards the success of the Indian freedom struggle. There were several freedom fighters from the tea garden community who actively participated in the anti-British movement. In this paper, an attempt is made to study the contribution of Mangri Orang, a largely unsung freedom fighter of India from the Adivasi Tea Community, who gave her life for the cause of India's Independence movement. It is a historical truth that Mangri Orang, who also experienced sexual harassment in the hands of the British masters, was a martyr of the Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam. This paper is a historical analysis of the sacrifice of Mangri Orang who belonged to a subaltern section of the society. The research paper is also largely based on secondary data.

Keywords: *Anti-British movement, Adivasi Tea Community, sexual harassment, Women freedom fighters.*

Introduction :

The glorification of some personalities in India's freedom struggle is found extensively in the records of history. The historiography of India's freedom struggle is mostly filled with the narratives of the lives of the great leaders. It is also worthy to note that the freedom struggle against British colonial

hegemony gradually became a mass movement in India. In fact, common people such as peasants, tribals, students and women in large numbers sacrificed their lives for the cause of freeing the nation from the foreign rule. Interestingly, in both national and regional contexts, voices of common masses and their unclassified contribution in the anti-



British agitation have generally been neglected by elite class historian. But since 1980s, the *subaltern* school has attempted to rewrite and reconstruct the *history* of Indian National Movement. Subaltern Studies has asserted that the common people possess the ability to make history. It may be noted that subaltern scholars tried to rectify the elitist bias and started a trend of rewriting history with a perspective from below. In this context, Ranajit Guha has clearly stated that 'The subalterns had acted in history on their own, that is, independently of the elite; and their politics constituted an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter (Sengupta and Mishra 431; Guha 1982 1-8).

In Subaltern Studies, the special focus lies on the study of the subaltern and marginalized class and their contribution in the anti-British agitation. It is necessary to mention here that the British colonial rule faced a number of intense revolts from the country's indigenous groups. For instance, during the British colonial period, *Adivasi* communities of India fought against the British. In Chhotanagpur region, several resistance movements, which broke out *against the British* was mainly led by Adivasi communities. In Assam, the tea garden community also played a vital role in the anti-British agitation. Since the revolt of 1857, the tea garden workers had begun to fight for emancipation from the oppression of the British colonial rule. Similarly, in the non-cooperation movement of 1921-1922, the tea garden community actively participated for the cause of the nation. Many tea garden workers such as Arjun Ghatowar, Mangri Orang played an active role in

the Non-Cooperation movement. The present research paper mainly deals with the role of Mangri Orang, who was a freedom fighter belonging to the Adivasi tea garden community, and gave her life for India's Independence movement.

Objective :

Several women of Assam actively participated in the anti-British struggle. However, the main objective of the present paper is to analyze the contribution of Mangri Orang in the anti-British struggle. She was the first women martyr from Assam in India's freedom struggle. This paper presented in six sections has the prime objective of examining the existing sources and coming up with a historical narrative on Mangri Orang. The first section of paper is introduction, which is followed by the objective and the methodology section of the paper. The fourth section of the paper is devoted to discussion, which is followed by result and conclusion.

Methodology :

This paper is a historical analysis of the sacrifice of Mangri Orang who belonged to the subaltern section of the society. The research paper is largely based on secondary data which are being subjected to external and internal criticisms. Secondary data has been taken from different sources such as research books, journals, contemporary newspapers etc. It is a truism that even in the available literary sources on the India's freedom struggle, the contribution of subaltern characters like Mangri Orang have not been adequately represented. So, an attempt has been made to focus on the revolutionary personality of Mangri Orang by using secondary sources and eclectic logic of reasoning.



Discussion :

“When women, whom we call *abala nari* become *sabala nari*, all those who are helpless will also become powerful...” (Kishwar 1). Participation of women in the anti-British struggle was negligible in the first thirty years of the history of Indian National Congress (INC). However, the movement against the partition of Bengal province (1905) attracted the attention of women in different parts of India. But a new era of women emancipation began with the emergence of Annie Beasant, Bibi Amma and Sarojini Naidu in the arena of politics. Gradually, women from many parts of India participated in India’s freedom struggle against British imperialism. The involvement of women in the India’s freedom struggle was also an important aspect of the women’s movement. The Indian nationalists also felt that women’s active participation gave immense strength to India’s freedom struggle. Later on, it also helped them to achieve in practice many of the political rights for equality with men folk in the liberal democratic system.

It is also necessary to mention here that M.K. Gandhi inspired women to participate in India’s freedom struggle against the British rule. Kishwar in his research paper entitled “Gandhi on Women” has rightly stated as:

“....M.K. Gandhi treated women not as objects of reform and humanitarianism but as self conscious subjects who could, if they choose, become arbiters of their own destiny. In this way, M.K. Gandhi represents a crucial break from the attitude of many of the leaders of the Indian reform movement of the nineteenth century, who trended to see women as passive recipients of more

humane treatment through the efforts of enlightened male...” (Kishwar 1).

Although, a brief attempt has been made to highlight some aspects of women’s participation in the anti-British struggle this research paper seeks to bring into limelight the contribution of Mangri Orang, an Adivasi tea garden ,women freedom fighter. Such an attempt is difficult to accomplish because among other reasons, the subalterns like Mangri Orang had no such historical importance in the elitist history where the bias invariably seeks to focus on the leaders of the movement rather than on the marginal characters. Her life and experience in the culture of providing labour for the growth of the tea plantation has not been the subject of history writing of India.

Mangri Orang was born in an Adivasi family of a remote village of Hazaribagh in present Jharkhand (Kurmi 40). It is a historical truth that the Adivasis for a long time were called ‘tribals’ because they belonged to various ‘tribes’ inhabiting the forest and hilly areas of the country. Although Mangri was born in a high clan family but she had to spend her days of childhood in poverty. After attaining puberty, Mangri Orang fell in love with Shomora, a young boy of a lower clan Adivasi family. She wanted to get married to him. But her father did not give any approval for the marriage. As a result, she got married to Shomora without any permission from home. At the same time, Mangri Orang and her husband met an *arakatti* agent or broker who was appointed to recruit the workers for working in the tea estates of Assam. It is necessary to mention that the labour force in the tea plantation of Assam was largely Adivasi tribal peasants who were



driven out of their landholdings and forced to migrate in search of livelihood into Assam.

Up to 1900, the total number of migrant Adivasi workers in Assam was around 7, 10,000. Similarly, 41 per cent of the 7, 10,000 adult workers were brought from Chotanagpur, while only 21 per cent workers were from the United Provinces (Behal 78). For recruitment of workers in the tea gardens of Assam, the Adivasi people were duped by the agents with false promise of prosperity that came for working in tea estates of Assam. Under such circumstances, Mangri Orang and her husband came to Assam. After arrival at the Rangapara depot of Assam, the newly wedded couple was sent to a tea garden of the present Sonitpur district. In the tea garden, they had to face all kinds of ill-treatment and oppression. Meanwhile, Mangri's husband Shomora died due to malaria leaving Mangri in an insecure and vulnerable state. After the death of her husband Shomora, Mangri Orang joined the same tea garden as a plantation worker and thus started her life bearing all kinds of difficulties as a worker living in the cramped labour lines.

During her period of misfortune, the white manager of the tea garden tried to develop intimacy with Mangri. Subsequently, the white manager forced her to develop an intimate physical relationship. As a result of their intimate relationship, Mangri Orang began to live in the manager's bungalow and became popularly known as Malati Mem (Memsahib). Subsequently, Mangri and her white partner raised three children; but Mangri was unfortunate enough to see her own children being given away by her partner to the Christian missionary (Kurmi 44). Subsequently, the white manager also left Mangri as

he had to join as a manager in another tea garden. It is mentioned in some accounts that Mangri Orang also lived as an intimate partner with two other British sahibs. In spite of her intimate relationship with those white sahibs, she did not find the desired happiness. Mangri Orang suffered from the merciless attitude of the respective white sahibs steeped as they were in Patriarchal mores. To overcome the complexities of that context, Mangri Orang developed addiction to drinking country liquor. She consumed the liquor excessively not thinking of her *physical* deterioration because she thought that she had already lost the beauty of her body.

Another narrative mentions that Mangri Orang was born in Sessa tea estate and subsequently lived at Lalmati in Tezpur. It is also asserted that she was sexually assaulted by the English Sahibs (Patar 39). Thus, it is interesting to note that Mangri Orang was a woman who was considered as a sexual object and was violated repeatedly by the colonial masters. There is no doubt the colonial power perceived the Indian native women as a sexed object from their inherent masculine standpoint.

In the meantime, after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the common people of India became aware and also strongly believed that British colonial rulers wanted to put down Indian people by hook or by crook. In 1920, the famous Non-Cooperation movement was launched under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Assam also found herself in the hub of the movement. The leaders of Assam, who were influenced by Gandhian ideology, initiated the Non-Cooperation Movement with an organized attempt towards Hindu-Muslim unity (Baruah 533). The



Assamese women took an active role in the movement. Amiya Kumar Das, who was a leading Congress leader, wrote:

“.....The awakening that the Non-Cooperation Movement brought among Assamese women, Government’s pressive measure simply accelerated the same. On 9th December, 1921, a women meeting was held at the residence of Tarunram Phukan and fifty women left their kitchens and enrolled their name in the Volunteer list....”(Boruah 711-718)

In this movement, the tea garden workers played a key role in spreading political activities at various levels. The tea garden workers became more active from the beginning of 1921. In this context, labourers from the tea garden of the Brahmaputra valley and Surma valley left their garden works and participated in the anti-British campaign. In both the valleys, tea garden workers decided to boycott market places situated in the British tea gardens. In this regard, Guha expressed his view as:

“...free entry of the Congress volunteers into the tea plantations was necessary for the boycott movement. But the planters would not allow the Non-Cooperators to propagate *swadeshi* and temperance in the coolie lines or even in the tea garden bazaars. Under the circumstances, a direct clash between Non-Cooperators and planters was unavoidable. The only alternative for the Non-Cooperators was to boycott the tea garden *haats* and *bazaars*, and to establish new market places under popular control in their vicinity. This they did with great enthusiasm from April 1921..”(Guha 1977: 110).

Moreover, women of the tea garden community also actively participated in the movement. Many women took to the streets, led processions and held lectures and demonstrations which are seldom talked about. Hundreds of women in Tezpur voluntarily came forward to campaign against the foreign liquor and opium by campaigning house to house. During the period of the non-cooperation campaign in Tezpur of the undivided Darrang district, Mangri Orang, who herself was addicted to liquor, got a new life with the efforts of the congress volunteers and became also a part of the anti-liquor campaign.

With progress of the movement, the Congress volunteers started visiting the tea estates to propagate against foreign goods and liquor. Some of the tea garden labourers boldly helped the volunteers. Mungri or Malati Mem, a woman labourer of Lalmati tea garden of Tezpur also helped the volunteers carry out the prohibition work among the tea garden people. (Telegraph: 13.08.2004).

It is interesting to note that Mangri Orang, who was well known among the European tea planters and also respected by the workers of the tea estate, started the campaign which was eventually joined by the women who were abused and subjected to domestic violence. Mangri Orang had been projected as a campaigner in the anti-liquor movement despite her own addiction to that drink. Along with women volunteers, Mangri Orang vigorously agitated to shut down liquor shops in Tezpur. Amidst the protests, in the year of 1921, Mangri Orang had to give up her life in the hands of British government for the cause of the nation. “...Such an example was shown by Maungri alias Malatimem, a tea garden labour woman of Lalmati



tea garden of Darrang district, who laid down her life for the cause of the temperance Movement in 1921..." (Boruah 718; Sarmah 190).

Amiya Kumar Das, one of the leading Congress leaders of the Non-Cooperation movement, wrote in his autobiography *Jivan Smriti* that Mangri Orang could not live a long life. She sacrificed her life for the cause of the nation. Mangri was secretly murdered by the Britishers. (Das 1983) On the other hand, Wilfred Topno has said that Mangri Orang joined the anti-alcohol movement in the Tea Garden. She was killed during police firing at the agitation programme on 2nd April 1921 (Topno 85).

There is no doubt that her sacrifice for the cause of the nation inspired several women to join in the India's freedom struggle against the British colonial rule. In this context, Mangri Orang truly became a subaltern voice that challenged the oppressive hegemony of the British rule.

Results :

The question as to how far the contribution of the subaltern voice like Mangri Orang alias Malati Mem could be justified for the cause of freedom struggle is very difficult to answer. Mangri Orang had a chequered life sharing a considerable part with the European Sahibs. It is quite possible that she developed an alienation from her masters which came out strongly during her participation in the Non Cooperation Movement. From this discussion, it can be clearly stated that the contribution of the subaltern class in India's Independence Movement was significant but always unwritten. The denial of agency to the subaltern representatives like Mangri Orang alias Malati Mem, Durgi Bhumis

alias Durgi Mem and many other freedom fighters have resulted in 'absences' and 'silences' in history. It is perhaps more appropriate to highlight how such subaltern representatives like Mangri Orang maintain a legitimizing voice against the anti-British rule. There is no doubt that the identity of Mangri Orang alias Malati Mem in its totality was not in conformity with the composition of a normal 'nationalist' leader. It is also true that Mangri Orang alias Malati Mem was perhaps the first martyrs of the Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam.

The unfortunate thing is that the voice of Mangri Orang alias Malati Mem in the anti-British movement remains invisible. The subaltern voice of Mangri Orang has been excluded from the framework of the nation history of freedom struggle. It may be mentioned that the account "Who's Who of Indian Martyrs", which is a biographical document of the India's freedom fighters who had sacrificed their lives for India's Independence Movement and published by the Government of India in 1969, does not mention the subaltern representative Mangri Orang. This has not only underestimated the contribution of Mangri Orang but also erased the 'historical truth' from the mainstream history writing. The case of Mangri Orang may also be aptly appreciated from the perspective of Third World feminism, where the impact of caste, class, gender, sexuality and identity may be considered together.

Conclusion :

Unquestionably, the voice of the subaltern class has been neglected in history for a long time. In Assam, there were many women



freedom fighters who fought against the British colonialism but their presence has remained largely marginal in the dominant version of elitist history. That is the reason why there should be an attempt to rewrite a comprehensive national history of India and relocate the subaltern

subjects of colonial history in the proper place in the anti-colonial struggle. It can also be said that while going to reconstruct the history of colonial Assam, there is not only need to study the margins but also bring them back into the popular public domain.

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