

Assam -- A New Phase

Women, who participated in a big way in the AASU-AAGSP led agitation, are realising that they cannot hope to get justice from any government unless they wrest it through organised protest...

SINCE 1985, March 21 has been observed in Assam as a day of protest against atrocities on women. On March 21, 1984, Mukuli Bala Rai, an octogenarian, met a violent death at the hands of the police.

At that time, in response to the call of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), people all over Assam were boycotting meetings and functions organised by the Congress(I) government which had come to power in the state after one of the most controversial and bloody elections ever held in India. The overwhelming majority of the people

of the Brahmaputra valley had boycotted the elections and had, in consequence, faced brutal repression.

The Congress(I) planned to hold a meeting in village Khagarpur, Goalpara district, on March 21, 1984. The local people resisted the move. The police began a house to house search for AASU activists.

Biraj Rai, a first year student at Abhoyapuri college, was the secretary of the local AASU unit. While searching for him, the police dragged his 80 year old widowed mother, Mukuli Bala Rai, from her house and shot her dead in cold blood. They then forced Biraj's sister

to sign on a blank sheet of paper, and carried away Mukuli Bala's body which was not handed over to her family.

As news of this murder spread to other parts of Assam, protest rallies were held in various places, demanding a high level judicial enquiry. But, though three years have passed since then, no step has been taken either to carry out an enquiry or to arrest the guilty policemen.

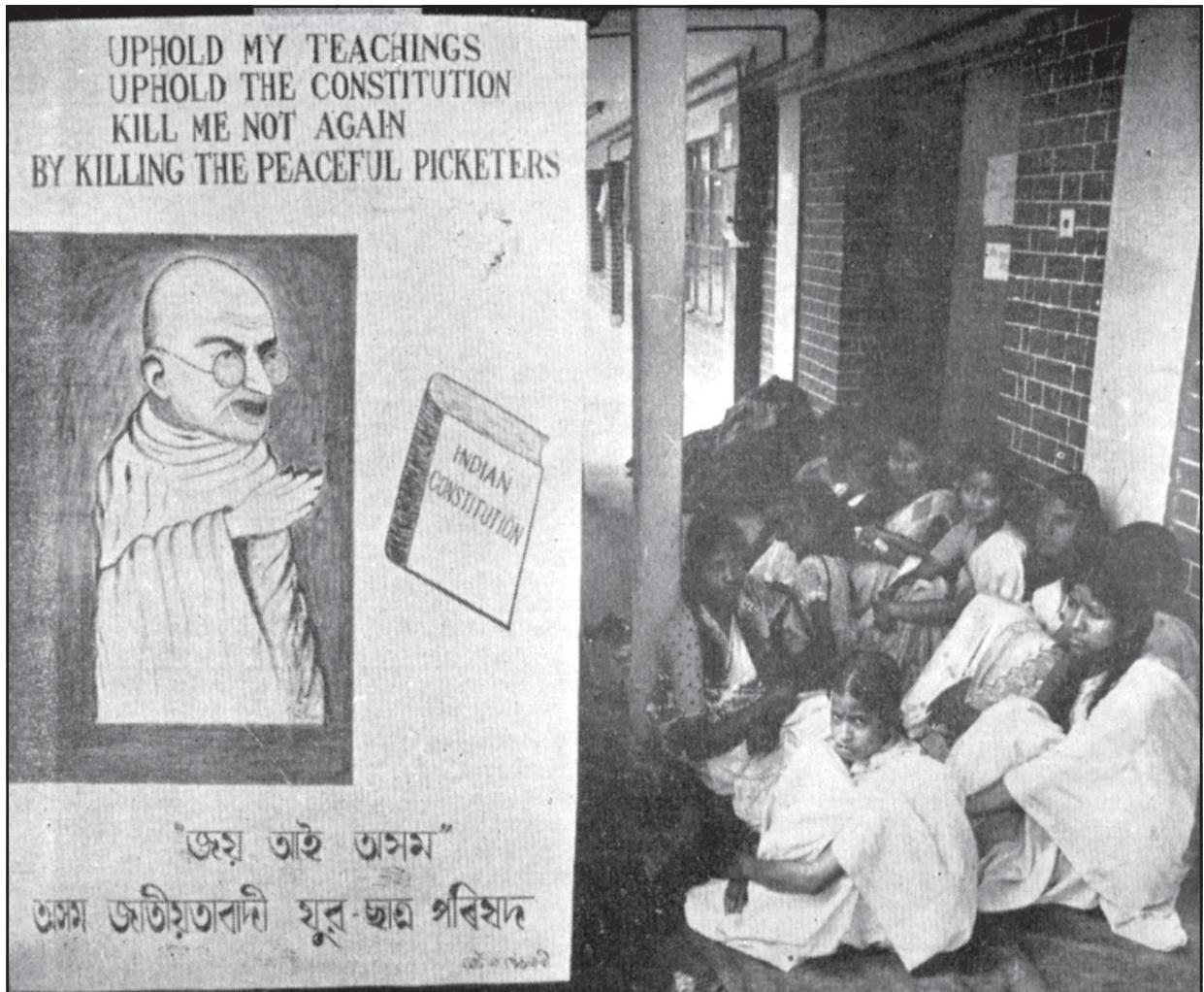
Hundreds of women died in communal and state violence during the boycott of elections movement in 1983, and many others were molested and tortured in north Kamrup and other parts of Assam during the six year movement on the foreigners' issue. Mukuli Bala's death became a symbol of atrocities committed on women by the state machinery.

The fact that the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) government has not yet meted out justice in the case, strengthens the conviction of the women that they cannot hope to get justice from any government unless they wrest it through organised protest. This is the lesson Assamese women have learnt after six years of participation in the mass movement led by AASU and AAGSP.

In earlier years, the protest day, March 21, was more or less a ritual to express solidarity with the cause of the AASU-AAGSP led movement. This year, it acquired a new significance because women's organisations realised that atrocities



Demonstrators setting out - men leading, women following



Picketers outside Narangi oil pumping station, Guwahati

on women do not cease with a change of government.

Ever since the excitement of the mass movement has come to an end and the euphoria of the Assam accord and the AGP's electoral victory has subsided, it has become possible to take stock of women's role in the movement.

Assamese women have a fairly long tradition of participating in mass movements. Women took a leading role in the Moamaria rebellion in the 18th century, which led to the overthrow of the Ahom monarchy for a short period and plunged Assam into a prolonged war.

Women were very active in the

struggle for freedom from British rule. Many women were martyred in the 1942 Quit India movement. Kanaklata Baruah, a teenager from Gohpur, was killed in police firing on September 20, 1942, while trying to hoist the national flag on the Gohpur police station. The same day, three other women were killed in police firing at Dhekiajuli while trying to hoist the Congress flag. Women took a leading role in organising meetings to observe "independence day" on January 26, 1943.

In the post-independence era, women participated in large numbers in agitations for the establishment of oil refineries in Assam as well as for

the recognition of Assamese as the official language of the state. A significant feature of these movements is that they were led by a nonparty student leadership.

Women, responding to the call of the students, would organise at short notice, usually in the local *nam ghar* or prayer house, an important Assamese social institution. The appeal and the response were usually emotional—that mothers and sisters must support sons and brothers in their war against injustice. Women never voiced specific women's issues. After each movement subsided, women quietly retired to their homes and the political arena continued to be

occupied by men.

It was the prolonged nature of the recent movement that enabled women to acquire a certain degree of political maturity. A characteristic feature of this movement was the overwhelming number of women amongst the *satyagrahis* and the demonstrators. Whether it was to blockade the oil installations or to lie down on the railway tracks or to violate prohibitory orders, the AASU-AAGSP leadership could always rely on women to come forward under any circumstances.

Yet, the leaders never considered it necessary to give women proportionate representation in the upper echelons. Not a single woman was included in the numerous discussions between the movement leaders and the representatives of the central government. No woman set her signature to the Assam accord. There was no woman in the AAGSP central executive. In the 1986 elections, which the AGP won with a massive mandate, only two women were given the AGP ticket. They were Rekharani Das Boro and Jyotsna Sonowal. Both won with sweeping majorities.

It was during and after the 1985 elections that many Assamese women became aware of the way they had been relegated to the background, once political power was in sight. Men who had sacrificed little during the struggle and played opportunist roles were now vested with power and authority, while women who had made great sacrifices for the cause were denied any position in the new government.

However, the energy that was let loose by the movement found expression in other, more meaningful, activities. Most of the leaders of the Sadau Asom Mahila Samanay Parishad are erstwhile active members of the AAGSP and the AASU. Amongst them are the two women MLAs and the Rajya Sabha MP, Bijoya Chakravorty. The president of the Parishad, Kuntala Deka, who was the first woman magistrate in Assam and is now an

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advocate at Guwahati high court, was also actively involved in the recent movement.

Women's groups have been involved in organising rallies against atrocities on women. On March 9, the Nalbari district Nari Mukti Santha organised a demonstration demanding the closure of the brothels at Darranga on the Indo-Bhutan border, which have, for years, been encouraging trafficking in women belonging to the poor communities of the border districts.

Another meeting was organised by the Jagrata Mahila Parishad at Guwahati on March 6, in which 31 women's organisations participated. At this rally, a committee for the prevention of atrocities on women was formed. The meeting emphasised the need to pressure authorities to take prompt action against the perpetrators of crimes against women.

The Guwahati rally was provoked by the murder of a young girl in the city on January 30. The girl, Sampriti Devi, was nine months' pregnant, and was allegedly tortured and burnt to death in her father-in-law's house. The primary accused, the father-in-law, Rajen Sarma, was released on bail soon after arrest, and the husband, also suspected of active complicity, has not yet been arrested. Women's organisations have demanded an enquiry by a higher police official.

Soon after, Muhungmin Choudhury, the owner of a school at Dibrugarh, died suddenly without proper medical attention. Her husband, a former executive engineer, is known to have been ill treating her for a long time. The AIR regional news bulletin reported that she had died of cardiac arrest. But, soon afterwards, her relatives, who belong to the powerful Khamti royal family of Arunachal

demanded a post mortem which the husband stubbornly resisted. When the post mortem was finally conducted, he was arrested on the basis of the report and refused bail. Local women's organisations have submitted memoranda to the district authorities and to the chief minister demanding justice.

On March 9, Karabi Hazarika, a teacher, allegedly committed suicide by setting herself on fire. The police registered a suicide case but Karabi's parents insist that her death was the result of continuous ill treatment by her husband, who is an electrical engineer, and in-laws.

During the current session of the state assembly, the chief whip of the AGP drew the attention of the government to these cases and demanded stern action against the criminals. These cases of violence on women have shocked the Assamese middle class society. They have finally shattered the myth that women in Assam have a higher status than women in most other parts of the country.

It is true that because of Assam's isolation, certain social evils, like the rigidity of the caste system, dowry and female infanticide, could not strike deep roots in Hindu society here. Besides, the overwhelming majority of people in Assam belong to the hills and plains tribes and were brought into the Hindu fold comparatively recently.

Tribal customs and practices persisted in Assamese society, the upper castes having comparatively less influence on the common people. The semitribal mode of production in this region until recent times and the absence of a feudal influence allowed Assamese women to retain an important position in rural society.

Not only do women play an



Assam Rifles men watching demonstrators outside D.C.'s court

important part in agricultural activities but they also command a lot of respect because of their skill in weaving and other handicrafts. They enjoyed a degree of freedom and social dignity even though the society is patriarchal.

In the handful of upper caste families, however, things were markedly different. Women of the upper castes were debarred from working in the fields. They led a

secluded life and could not participate in folk festivals. Child marriage was common amongst these castes until recent times, and widow remarriage, which is permissible in other sections of Assamese society, is even today socially unacceptable. Ill treatment of and restrictions on widows was a common feature of upper caste society. In recent times, a change has taken place, but ill treatment of women

in the family continues and often goes unreported.

With the gradual urbanisation of Assamese society in recent years, a marked change is visible in social relations. The new rich class in urban areas has broken off from its past traditions and has acquired the social practices of its counterparts in other parts of the country. This class, comprising people from different castes and ethnic groups, is becoming "Pan Indian" in its lifestyle. It is not surprising, therefore, that the status of women in this class is falling.

At such a crucial moment, the women's organisations of the region have an important role to play.

The state wide protest day observed by the Sadou Asom Mahila Samanay Parishad on March 21 indicates the beginning of a new phase. If women's groups across the state can unite despite political differences, a powerful movement against oppression of women can be built up. □

Vahini Activists Sentenced To Two Years' Imprisonment

Over the last decade, landless labourers in 100 villages of Gaya, Bihar, organised by Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, have been struggling against the illegal possession of 12,000 acres of land held by the Mahant of Bodhgaya. The government was forced by the movement to seize a small part of the land held in violation of land ceiling laws and to distribute it amongst the labourers. But the movement had to face severe repression by police, local administration and hired goons of the Mahant. Many of the labourers were deprived of employment and false cases filed against them. (See **Manushi** No. 14 for a detailed account of the struggle).

On August 8, 1979, a peaceful

procession of labourers was taken out by the Vahini at Mastipur village, Bodhgaya, to protest the harvesting of crops by the Mahant's people on the disputed land. The procession was fired on by the police and bombs were thrown at it. Two labourers, Ramdeo Manjhi and Panchu Manjhi, were killed and one, Janki Manjhi, was disabled. One of the Mahant's men was also killed.

Cases were filed against 33 Vahini persons and 23 of the Mahant's persons. The case dragged on for years. On February 27, 1987, the district court, Gaya, gave its final judgment. Although the presence of the Mahant's men at the site was proved, all of them were acquitted and released on grounds of doubt.

However, nine of the Vahini men were sentenced to two years' rigorous imprisonment for "inciting the mob to violence." They have been released for a month on a security of Rs 2,000 each, to enable them to appeal in the high court.

This sentencing of the labourers and acquittal of those backed by the rich and powerful Mahant, is typical of our government's style of functioning. The labourers had struggled in a nonviolent manner for implementation of government's own stated policy of redistributing excess land amongst the landless. Even to get this promise implemented on a small scale, in one district, they have had to face years of persecution. (See also page 25) □