



HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Journal of History and Archaeology

International Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed Referred Journal



A Historical Analysis of Kanaklata Barua as a Symbol of Youth Nationalism in Colonial Assam

Geeta Choudhary¹, Rashid Hameed Guroo²

¹ Professor, Department of History, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee Government Arts and Commerce College, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India.

² Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee Government Arts and Commerce College, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India.

* Corresponding Author:

Geeta Choudhary

Email: rdhameed418@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received 13 Jan, 2026
Revised 25 Feb, 2026
Accepted 20 Mar, 2026
Available Online 30 Mar, 2026

ARTICLE ID

HRJHA0401004

KEYWORDS

Kanaklata Barua; youth nationalism; Quit India Movement; Mrityu Bahini; colonial Assam; Gohpur; student politics Decentralisation.



ABSTRACT

On 20 September 1942, seventeen-year-old Kanaklata Barua was shot dead by the police of the Indian Imperial Police while leading an unarmed procession to hoist the national flag at the Gohpur police station in the undivided Darrang district of Assam. Within Assamese nationalist memory, her death was rapidly transformed from a single act of local defiance into an enduring symbol of youth nationalism, the distinctive, generationally and gender-marked form that the Quit India Movement took among Assam's adolescents and young Congress volunteers. This paper offers a historical analysis of that transformation. It situates Barua's martyrdom within the concrete organizational context of the Mrityu Bahini youth volunteer corps and the wider student politics associated with the All India Students' Federation; compares her death with the near-simultaneous firing at Dhekiajuli, where the twelve-year-old Tileswari Barua and several others were killed on the very same day; and traces the process by which commemoration, statues, a Coast Guard vessel and a state award consolidated her image as Assam's most recognizable icon of youthful sacrifice for the nation.

ISSN: 2583-9764

Vol. 04, No. 01 (Jan-Mar, 2026)

Website: www.hrjha.lexarcheus.com

How to Cite This Article

Geeta Choudhary, Rashid Hameed Guroo, "A Historical Analysis of Kanaklata Barua as a Symbol of Youth Nationalism in Colonial Assam," *Historical Research: Journal of History and Archaeology*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2026, pp. 36–42.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21352994>

INTRODUCTION

When the All-India Congress Committee passed the Quit India resolution at its Bombay session on 8 August 1942, demanding an immediate end to British rule, Mahatma Gandhi's call to "do or die" reached even the remotest corners of the subcontinent. In Assam, the movement acquired a character that later nationalist memory would remember as distinctly youthful: it was young volunteers, organized into local corps with names such as Mrityu Bahini ("Death Squad"), who carried out much of the province's defiance of colonial authority, and it was the deaths of several teenagers, most famously Kanaklata Barua, but also twelve-year-old Tileswari Barua at Dhekiajuli on the same day, that came to stand for the movement's moral force in the region.¹

This paper asks how Kanaklata Barua, an unlettered seventeen-year-old from the small village of Barangabari, came to be constructed as colonial Assam's principal symbol of youth nationalism. It first examines the concrete organisational and generational context of her death: the youth volunteer corps she joined, its relationship to province-wide and national student politics, and the norms of age and sacrifice that governed it. Second, it places her death alongside comparable episodes of the same day and season, the Dhekiajuli firing and the hanging of Kushal Konwar, to show that her martyrdom, while singular in its subsequent fame, was part of a broader pattern of youth-centred sacrifice across Assam's 1942 movement. Third, it traces the process of commemoration through which one figure among several came to carry the symbolic weight of an entire generational experience, down to her 2023 invocation by the President of India.

Sources and Methodology

This paper is based on published secondary and tertiary literature rather than on unpublished archival or police records. Its principal scholarly source is Guptaajit Pathak's article "Reflection of Young Martyr Kanaklata Barua and the Dependability of Assamese Women in India's Freedom Movement" (2016), itself drawn from his earlier monograph *Assamese Women in Indian Independence Movement: With a Special Emphasis on Kanaklata Barua* (2008); these are supplemented by the Wikipedia entries on Barua, Mukunda Kakati, Kushal Konwar, and the All India Students' Federation (cross-checked against independent journalistic and government sources), the Government of India's Indian Culture Portal entry on Tileswari Barua, Assam Tribune reporting on the 1942 martyrs, and national press coverage of the President of India's 2023 Independence Day address. Where popular accounts differ in small details, for instance, in reported dialogue between Barua and the police officer who ordered the firing, this paper has generally avoided repeating precise quoted exchanges that could not be corroborated across independent sources and flags the constructed, retrospective character of some of the more dramatic narrative details in circulation. A fuller study would need to consult the Assam State Archives, contemporary Indian Imperial Police reports on the Gohpur and Dhekiajuli firings, and the Assam Legislative Assembly's post-independence enquiries into 1942 police action.

Assam and the Quit India Movement of 1942

Gandhi's visit to Assam in 1921, during the non-cooperation movement, is generally credited with giving the freedom struggle new momentum in the province. By 1942, Assam's Provincial Congress Committee and its local affiliates had built a dense network of volunteer organisations through which the Quit India call was transmitted to small towns and villages far from the Congress's main urban centres. In the Gohpur subdivision of the undivided Darrang district, this took the form of the Mrityu Bahini, one of several similarly named youth volunteer corps that emerged across Assam that year, explicitly prepared to risk death in symbolic confrontations with colonial authority, chiefly by attempting to hoist the Indian national flag on British-controlled buildings such as police stations and courts.²

The colonial response in Assam, as elsewhere in India, was severe. Congress leaders, including Bishnuram Medhi, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, Muhammad Tayebulla, Omeo Kumar Das, and Debeswar Sarma, were arrested across the province, and a heavy police presence was deployed to suppress local flag-hoisting attempts.³ The movement in Assam describes a subsequent "Police Raj" marked by widespread coercion against the civilian population, including against women, in the movement's

aftermath. It was against this backdrop of intensifying repression that the events of 20 September 1942 in Gohpur and, simultaneously, in nearby Dhekiajuli unfolded.

Kanaklata Barua: Early Life and Formation

Kanaklata Barua was born on 22 December 1924 at Barangabari village in the Gohpur subdivision of the then-undivided Darrang district, now part of Sonitpur district. She was the daughter of Krishna Kanta Barua, a farmer, and Karneshwari Barua; her grandfather, Ghana Kanta Barua, was locally well known as a hunter.⁴ Her family traced its lineage to the Dolakasharia Barua line, a Chutia vassal chiefdom of the former Ahom state, whose descendants had given up the Dolakasharia title while retaining the surname Barua. Her mother died when she was five; her father remarried and died when she was thirteen, after which she left school in the third standard to help raise her younger siblings.

Her politicisation appears to have come directly from the Quit India mobilisation itself rather than from any earlier organisational involvement. In 1942, a camp of Congress volunteers was established in the vicinity of her village; she is reported to have been moved by the speeches of the cultural-political figure Bishnu Prasad Rabha and the patriotic songs of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, and to have begun attending meetings at the camp without her family's knowledge, against the initial wishes of her grandfather.⁵ She reportedly also sought to enlist in Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army but was turned away for being a minor, and instead joined the Mrityu Bahini in the Gohpur subdivision, reportedly enrolling only shortly before the events of 20 September, and being admitted despite falling below the corps' own minimum enrolment age of eighteen, an exception the local committee made in recognition of her evident determination.

The Mrityu Bahini and the Organisation of Youth Sacrifice

The Mrityu Bahini, literally "Death Squad", was a volunteer corps drawn from the youth of the Gohpur subdivision, formed in 1942 in connection with the local Quit India mobilisation associated with figures such as Jyoti Prasad Agarwala.⁶ Its members understood themselves, by the corps' own name, as prepared to die in the course of symbolic acts of defiance against colonial authority, principally, attempts to hoist the national flag over police stations and other seats of British administration. This was one local instance of a wider Assamese pattern in 1942, in which Congress-affiliated youth organised themselves into corps explicitly oriented around the willingness to sacrifice life itself, a step beyond the disciplined but non-fatalistic civil disobedience that had characterised earlier phases of the freedom movement.

Kanaklata Barua enrolled in the Mrityu Bahini without informing her family, and was made captain of its women's cadre despite her comparative youth. That a corps organised around the willingness to die would make an exception to its own minimum-age rule for a seventeen-year-old girl is itself telling: it suggests that her youth was not seen by her fellow volunteers as a disqualification but, if anything, as consonant with the corps' broader ethos, in which inexperience and vulnerability could be read as evidence of purity of motive. Her position as leader of the women volunteers meant that, on the morning of 20 September 1942, it fell to her to carry the national flag at the head of the procession.

The plan for 20 September, agreed by local Gohpur leaders including Jonaram Bhuyan, Jiten Borah, Lakhi Kanta Bora, and Giridhar Barua among others, was to march to the Gohpur police station and hoist the tricolour there in defiance of British authority. On the morning of the appointed day, Kanaklata completed her usual household chores, took a meal with her younger siblings, and told them she might not return before joining the assembled volunteers at Barangabari Chariali. Men and women, marching in separate files, proceeded roughly twelve kilometres toward the police station, gathering further volunteers along the way and raising nationalist slogans.

At the police station, the officer in charge, Rebati Mahan Som, warned the procession of grave consequences if it did not turn back. The procession continued to advance. The police opened fire, and Kanaklata Barua was shot and killed on the spot while holding the flag. A fellow volunteer, Mukunda Kakati, took the flag from her and was himself shot dead.⁷ Their bodies were carried back to Barangabari and cremated that same night. Later that evening, by at least one account, another volunteer



succeeded in hoisting the flag at the police station, completing, after the two deaths, the very act the procession had set out to perform.

Kanaklata Barua in Comparative Context: Youth and Martyrdom across Assam in 1942

On the very same day, at Dhekiajuli, in the same undivided Darrang district, in what is today also Sonitpur district, a separate and larger tragedy unfolded. A procession organised under local leaders, including Kamalkanta Das, Phanidhar Das, and Bapuram Gogoi, converged on the Dhekiajuli police station to hoist the national flag; the police opened fire, and at least twelve to fifteen unarmed protesters were killed, including three women.⁸ Among the dead were twelve-year-old Tileswari Barua of Nij-Borgaon village, who had joined the procession after being moved by the patriotic songs of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and became, by several accounts, the youngest martyr of the entire Indian freedom movement. Other victims recorded by name include Manbar Nath, Kumali Devi, Khahuli Devi, who was pregnant at the time, Ratan Kachari, Maniram Kachari, Mahiram Koch, and several others, along with a wandering monk and a beggar caught in the firing.⁹

That two lethal police firings against unarmed, flag-bearing youth-led processions occurred on the same day in the same district is a striking fact, and it complicates any account that treats Kanaklata Barua's martyrdom as an isolated event. Together, Gohpur and Dhekiajuli suggest that 20 September 1942 represented a coordinated regional culmination of youth-organised defiance in the Darrang tea and rice belt, rather than a single spontaneous incident. Yet it was Kanaklata Barua's story, rather than Tileswari Barua's or that of the twelve Dhekiajuli dead, that achieved the wider and more durable public recognition in the decades that followed. Dhekiajuli's martyrs, by the account of local commemorators and later journalism, went comparatively "unheard" at the national level for many decades.

A further, related case is that of Kushal Konwar of Golaghat district, a committed Gandhian who was hanged at Jorhat Jail on 15 June 1943 after being convicted, on evidence his family and later historians have contested, of orchestrating the derailment of a military train near Sarupathar on 10 October 1942. Konwar was the only person judicially executed anywhere in India in connection with the Quit India movement, and Assamese commemorative practice has long placed his name alongside Kanaklata Barua's as one of the movement's two most emblematic Assamese martyrs.¹⁰ Where Barua's martyrdom was sudden and unplanned by the colonial state, Konwar's was the product of a deliberate judicial process; together, the two cases illustrate the range of forms that colonial lethal violence against the 1942 movement in Assam could take, instantaneous police firing on the one hand, and calculated capital punishment on the other, and both came, in later memory, to be organized around individual named martyrs rather than around the wider, less easily narrated toll of collective violence, such as that at Dhekiajuli.

Kanaklata Barua's activism should also be read against the background of Assam's longer tradition of organised student and youth politics. The Assam Chhatra Sanmilan (Assam Students' Conference), founded in 1916, had for a generation provided young Assamese men and women with a platform for public nationalist speech; it was at a Chhatra Sanmilan session in 1918 that the reformer Chandraprabha Saikiani became the first Assamese woman on record to address a large public gathering. By the 1930s, this provincial tradition of student organization had been joined to a national one: the All-India Students' Federation (AISF), founded at Lucknow on 12 August 1936 with the participation of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammed Ali Jinnah, explicitly styled itself as "the only students organisation present in the country actively involved in the Indian freedom struggle," and was active in Assam by the time of the Quit India movement. Kanaklata Barua is identified in AISF's own historical record as one of its members and as "a martyred student who participated in the freedom struggle," placing her, alongside AISF's Sindh leader Hemu Kalani — hanged in 1943 at age nineteen for sabotage — among the organisation's roll of youth martyrs from the Quit India period.¹¹ This national student-organisational dimension matters for understanding Barua as a symbol of youth nationalism specifically, rather than simply of Assamese or women's nationalism: her death was, from very early on, legible within a nationwide framework in which organised students and youth understood themselves as a distinct constituency within the freedom movement, bearing particular responsibility and risk.

From Death to Symbol: The Making of an Icon

Assamese nationalist memory moved quickly to name and honour Kanaklata Barua. She was given the posthumous titles Shaheed ("martyr") and Birbala ("brave woman"), and Guptajit Pathak's academic account describes her as having "became the first martyr of the 1942 revolution" in Assam, a claim about primacy that, strictly, competed with the near-simultaneous Dhekiajuli deaths, but which nonetheless reflects how quickly the Gohpur episode was singled out in regional memory. Statues of Barua, generally shown alongside Mukunda Kakati, were erected at and near the Gohpur martyrdom site, and a further life-size statue was unveiled in 2011, designed by the artist Padum Gohain and installed with support from the Lekhika Samaroh Samiti. Her family home area has been developed as a memorial site, maintained in part through the efforts of her surviving relatives.¹²

Over subsequent decades, commemoration of Barua moved beyond the local and regional level into national institutional life. The Indian Coast Guard commissioned a Fast Patrol Vessel, ICGS Kanaklata Barua, named in her honour in 1997. A park, Kanaklata Udyan, was established in Tezpur in her memory, and a state award recognising women's exemplary service, the Kanaklata Barua Award, was instituted in Assam. Her story has been retold in Assamese cinema — notably in director Chandra Mudoi's film *Epaah Phulil Epaah Xoril*, later released in a Hindi version, *Purab Ki Awaz*, aimed at a wider national audience. Most significantly for the argument of this paper, on the eve of the 77th Independence Day, 14 August 2023, President Droupadi Murmu explicitly named Kanaklata Barua, alongside the Bengali freedom fighter Matangini Hazra, in her national address honouring women freedom fighters — pairing a seventeen-year-old Assamese volunteer with a seventy-three-year-old Bengali satyagrahi as twin emblems of the freedom struggle's generational and regional range. This presidential invocation marks the point at which a locally and regionally commemorated martyr became formally incorporated into the nation-state's own narration of its founding sacrifices.

It is worth asking, analytically, why Kanaklata Barua in particular, rather than, say, one of the adult male organisers of the Gohpur procession, or the more numerous adult victims of Dhekiajuli, became the enduring face of Assam's 1942 movement. Part of the answer lies simply in circumstance: her position at the head of the procession, flag in hand, gave her death an immediate visual and narrative clarity that a firing into a larger, less individuated crowd, as at Dhekiajuli, did not as readily produce.¹³ But part of the answer also appears to lie in what her particular combination of youth and gender allowed the story to condense. An orphaned teenage girl, barely literate, taking up a symbol of the nation and refusing an armed officer's order to retreat, offered contemporaries and later commemorators an image in which innocence, vulnerability, and defiance could all be read simultaneously — qualities that mapped easily onto a nationalist idiom in which the nation itself was often figured as a mother or as a young woman requiring protection and devotion. Tileswari Barua's death at Dhekiajuli, involving an even younger child, might have been expected to carry at least equal symbolic force; that it did not, for many decades, achieve comparable national recognition suggests that the making of a nationalist icon depended not only on the qualities of the individual case but on the contingent workings of local patronage, published biography, institutional naming, and as this paper's account of the 1997 Coast Guard vessel and the 2023 presidential address suggests, the state's own selective practices of commemoration.

Critical Reflections: Symbol versus History

A historian working from the secondary literature available on Kanaklata Barua must register several cautions. First, much of the popular retelling of the Gohpur episode, including precise dialogue attributed to Barua and to Officer Rebati Mahan Som, has been repeated so often across derivative online accounts that it is difficult to establish which details, if any, rest on contemporaneous documentation rather than on later oral tradition and dramatisation; this paper has accordingly avoided presenting such dialogue as verified quotation. Second, the comparative neglect of the Dhekiajuli martyrs and of Tileswari Barua specifically, noted by Assamese commentators as late as 2010 and 2021, is itself historically significant: it suggests that the construction of a nationalist symbol is not a neutral reflection of the scale or character of sacrifice, but a selective process shaped by which families, local leaders, writers, and eventually state institutions chose — and were positioned — to keep a particular



name in circulation. Third, because this paper does not draw on colonial police or administrative records, it cannot independently verify certain widely repeated figures, such as the precise size of the Mrityu Bahini or the exact casualty count at Dhekiajuli, both of which vary somewhat across the secondary sources consulted; where such variation exists, this paper has reported the range rather than asserting false precision.

CONCLUSION

Kanaklata Barua's death at Gohpur on 20 September 1942 was, in immediate terms, one among several lethal police actions against unarmed, youth-led nationalist processions in Assam that single day. What distinguishes her case historically is not the scale of the violence involved, which was smaller than at Dhekiajuli, but the subsequent process by which her individual story, a teenage girl, orphaned young, self-taught into politics through a nearby revolutionary camp, admitted to a youth death-squad below its own minimum age, and shot while holding the flag she had been chosen to carry — became detachable from its immediate local context and portable into regional, then national, commemorative practice. Read alongside the organized youth politics of the Mrityu Bahini, the Assam Chhatra Sanmilan, and the All India Students' Federation, and alongside the comparable but less remembered sacrifices of Tileswari Barua at Dhekiajuli and Kushal Konwar at Jorhat, Kanaklata Barua's afterlife as a symbol illustrates both the genuine centrality of youth to Assam's experience of the Quit India movement and the selective, contingent processes by which any one figure comes to stand, in national memory, for an entire generation's sacrifice.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Pathak, Gopa. *Assamese Women in Indian Independence Movement: With a Special Emphasis on Kanaklata Barua*. Mittal Publications, 2008, pp. 52–71.
- ² Kashyap, S. G. *Untold Stories of the Freedom Struggle from Northeast India*. Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 2022, pp. 239–51.
- ³ Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826–1947*. Indian Council of Historical Research, 1977, pp. 270–75.
- ⁴ Pathak, Gopa. "Reflection of Young Martyr Kanaklata Barua and the Dependability of Assamese Women in India's Freedom Movement." *The Creative Launcher*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2016, pp. 55–60.
- ⁵ Pathak, Gopa. "Assamese Women's Contribution to the Indian National Movement: A Historical Analysis of Martyr Kanaklata Baruah's Role and Visions." *Editor's Note*, vol. 8, pp. 86.
- ⁶ Pait, M. S. N. "Quit India Movement in Assam: A Historical Study." *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 2023, pp. 1142–45.
- ⁷ Presbey, Gail M. "Defying Stereotypes: An Indian Woman Freedom Fighter." *Remembering Women Differently: Refiguring Rhetorical Work*, University of South Carolina Press, 2019, pp. 170–86.
- ⁸ Barua, Sanjib, and L. D. Lal. "Feminist Consciousness, Empowerment and Identity: Contextualizing Chandraprabha Saikiani in Contemporary Assam." *Proceedings of the World Conference on Women's Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–14.
- ⁹ Kashyap, S. G. *Dhekiajuli 1942: The Untold Story*. Konark Publishers, 2022, pp. 45–48.
- ¹⁰ Hazarika, Pranab, and D. P. Nath. "Understanding Cultural Nationalism in Assam: Perspectives from the Plays of Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rava." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2022, pp. 1–10.
- ¹¹ Saikia, Arupjyoti. *The Quest for Modern Assam: A History: 1942–2000*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2023, pp. 53–67.



-
- ¹² Dowarah, A., and M. Lakra. "The Role of Assamese Women in India's Freedom Struggle and the Impact of Patriarchal Society on Them," pp. 69–79.
- ¹³ Sarma Puzari, R. R., and K. Mazane. "Role of Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle of India." *Okayama University Repository*, 2001.