

# CHANDRAPRABHA SAIKIANI , THE PIONEER OF THE FEMENIST MOVEMENT IN ASSAM : A BRIEF STUDY

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## Abstract

Talking about feminism makes us resorts to the different phases of feminism and how there have been different leaders leading those phases. Discussion on feminism can not exist without the mention of Sylvia Plath or Simone de Beauvoir. If we are talking about feminists in India, then discussion is surrounded around Uma Chakraborty, Neera Deshai, Bina Agarwal and so on. What we don't talk or know about the feminists and women leaders from the North East region especially in Assam. Chandraprabha Saikiani was a prolific writer, a noted poet, a renowned social reformer, a Assamese freedom fighter, activist and considered to be a pioneer of the feminist movement of modern Assam. Her contributions for women education made her the ' barrier broker lady' of Assam.

Keywords: feminism, education, feminist movement, Chandraprabha Saikiani, barrier broker lady.

## Introduction:

Whenever we talk about feminist movement in modern Assam, one name must be mentioned i.e. Chandraprabha Saikiani, founder of All Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, a non governmental organization working for the welfare of the women of Assam. She was a recipient of the fourth highest Indian civilian award of Padma Shri for the year 1972 from the Government of India. After three decades the Indian Government issued a commemorative stamp on Chandraprabha Saikiani under the series, Social Reformers in 2002. Chandraprabha Saikiani actively participated in the Non- Cooperation movement and Civil Disobedience Movement in 1921 and 1930 respectively. She was the first lady to contest in politics after independence of India. Her initiation to formal education inspired her to make sure that other girls also to receive education. In pursuation of this she stood up for women education and social reforms since a very young age. Chandraprabha Saikiani fought hard for her and her younger sister to receive education as the boys in her village were receiving education. She would travel quite a distance to study at the school. After school time she gathered other illiterate local girls who could not go to school and started a small school for the girls beneath a thatched roof just at age of 13 years and taught them what she had learnt in school. It was the beginning of a lifetime challenging patriarchal structures that prevailed in our society. She protested all forms of oppressions and discrimination against women.

## **Objectives:**

The core objectives of this study are to highlight the contributions of Chandraprabha Saikiani for women education and feminist movement in Assam and to focus on her works for social reforms which broke the all barriers of women education in the then society. In this article an attempt has been made to describe the status of women in the society when Chandraprabha Saikiani tried her level best for upliftment of women education breaking all barriers.

## **Methodology:**

This article has been prepared on the basis of data collected from secondary sources mostly from books and articles related to the life and works of Chandraprabha Saikiani. This study followed analytical method of research where various books, journals, reports and correspondences have been used as important source material while preparing this article.

## **Early Life and Beginning of Feminist:**

Chandraprabha Saikiani was the pioneer in the history of feminist movement in Assam. She was born as Chandrapriya Mazumdar on 16 March, 1901 at Daisingari village in Bajali District of Assam to Ratiram Mazumdar and Gangapriya Mazumdar. She was seventh out of eleven children and chose the name Chandraprabha Saikiani for herself. As there was no girls' school Chandraprabha Saikiani accompanied by her sister Rajaniprabha Saikiani had to wade through waist deep mud to attend a boys' school several kilometers away from their house. Her passion caught the eye of Neelkanta Barua, who awarded her and her sister a scholarship to study at the Nagaon Mission school. Chandraprabha made the best of her education at this school and even challenged the school authority at multiple instances, one being where girls were not allowed into the hostel unless they converted to Christianity. She protested against this and fought earnestly with the school authority to permit girls of all faiths to stay in the hostel without conversion. The school authority had no match for her fierce approach. Chandraprabha got her way and ensured that girls of all religions could access the hostel facilities.

## **Social Activism and Association with Social and Cultural Leaders:**

At the age of 13, Chandraprabha Saikiani established a school exclusively for girls in Akaya village in a shed. After school Chandraprabha Saikiani gathered local illiterate girls and taught them what she learnt at school. Her social activism started here when she protested against the allegedly discriminatory treatment meted out to the Hindu students by the hostel superintendent. From childhood Chandraprabha Saikiani was so much opposed to honour her parents' decision to marry her off to an aged person and got engaged to Dandinath Kalita, an Assamese writer. This relationship resulted in Saikiani becoming a mother out of marriage. She had to face strong opposition from the conservative society in bringing up her son as a single mother. She sustained all stigma of being an unmarried single mother and this did not stop her, instead it inspired Chandraprabha Saikiani to fight for widow's rights, single mother's right and social equality. She reminds that one is never give up fighting for equality even when there are waves of oppression. When she was in Tezpur, she got an opportunity to meet and interact with

social and cultural leaders like Chandranath Sharma, Omeo Kumar Das, Jyotiprasad Agarwalla and Lakhidhar Sharma. Her association with these social and cultural leaders became a turning point in her life.

### **Chandraprabha Saikiani and Women Empowerment:**

Women empowerment wants to free women from patriarchal domination, gender prejudices and inequality. Throughout history, many women leaders, intellectuals and thinkers are trying to pave a way for women's freedom and empowerment, among them in Assam the name of Chandraprabha Saikiani was noteworthy. She left the mark in the history of Assam with her effort to obliterate the darkness of women during her life time. Chandraprabha Saikiani with her endless endeavor in promoting women's education, women rights and justice. In the annual session of Assam Chhatra Sanmilan held at Tespur in 1918, Chandraprabha Saikiani was the only female delegate and addressed a large gathering on the harmful effects of opium eating on society and demanded for its ban. It was the first event in Assam where an Assamese woman had addressed publicly such large gathering. This may sound easy to do now since almost every event has a women speaking at them, but at a time when women were explicitly treated as property, having no opinion of their own. Chandraprabha Saikiani standing on that platform speaking about opium as an evil of the society was really revolutionary. The gender barriers that obstructed women then continue to do so in many ways even today. However, back in 1825 it took a literal form. At the Nagaon Session of Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1925 Chandraprabha Saikiani delivered a fiery speech on gender inequality and injustice and protested against keeping the women in a barricade from men and demanded the removal of the barricade that was placed between male and female audience so that men could not see the women as they talked vice-versa. She was staunchly against such restrictions and her anger with the current society was not restricted to this incident alone. She was always against the caste discrimination and when she saw that evils are not being eliminated, she took the matter into her own hand. She had boldly claimed the entry of women in religious places and rituals. Her efforts were reported in getting the Hayagriva Madhav Temple at Hajo near Guwahati opened to women and every person irrespective of caste, gender and class. In fact, even now women are barred from entering certain temples in the country.

### **Participation in the Freedom Movement:**

Inspired by the rise of nationalism Chandraprabha Saikiani joined in the non-cooperation movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in 1921 and worked to spread the message of the movement and mobilized the women of Assam. Chandraprabha Saikiani was denied permission to attend the Guwahati session of Indian National Congress. But she continued her social activism and founded Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti in 1926 with a view to act against child marriage, polygamy and the discrimination of women at temples and to take up issues like women's education and self-employment. This was the first organized women's movement in Assam and these ideals are followed even to this date. Chandraprabha Saikiani participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930. Her involvement with the non cooperation movement and civil disobedience movement landed her in jail. She became the first women to foray in politics after independence of India.

## Literary Activities, Awards and Recognitions:

Chandra prabha Saikiani was a noted poet and a prolific writer. She published her first short story in local magazine 'Bahi' in 1918 at the age of 17 years followed by several novels such as *Pitribhitha*, *Sipahi Bidrohat*, *Dillir Sinhasan* and *Kavi Anav Ghos*. In her novel *Pitribhitha* she describes her own life to shed light on the position of women in Assamese society. Chandraprabha Saikiani served as the editor of Mahila samiti's Assamese journal *Abhijatri* for a long time. The Government of India honoured her with Padmashree award in 1972 shortly after her death. In 2002, three decades later of her death, the government of India released a commemorative stamp on Chandraprabha Saikiani in her honour under the series, Social Reformers.

## Conclusion:

This study on Chandraprabha Saikiani reveals that she was a woman who was far ahead of her time in her thoughts and actions. She became a harbinger of change in her surroundings and immediately society. She was so inspired by the teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva, a Vaishnav Saint of Assam, that she fought any sort of malpractice she encountered. Her inherent fiery spirit and fearless attitude were evident when at the age of seventeen, she addressed a huge gathering to call for a ban on opium; an addiction that was ravaging the state. Her joining in the freedom struggle eventually culminated in the founding of the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity in 1926 which dealt with women centric issues. Chandraprabha Saikiani also highlighted the importance of handloom and handicrafts. This Padma Shri recipient stands as a role model for all feminists. Chandraprabha Saikiani was also selected as Election mascot which accomplished with overwhelming participation of new voters specially women voters. Chandraprabha Saikiani spent her entire life striving for the emancipation of women from the clutches of a patriarchal society.

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