

# FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS, EMPOWERMENT AND IDENTITY: CONTEXTUALIZING CHANDRAPRABHA SAIKIANI IN CONTEMPORARY ASSAM

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**Abstract:** A crusader for women's rights, Chandraprabha Saikiani was both a torchbearer and an icon of 20<sup>th</sup> century Assam. She became synonymous with the feminist movement in Assam which was, in her days, still in an inchoate state. From her young days, she actively challenged the dominance of men in the public space. Her contribution to *Assam Mahila Samity's (AMS)* (Assam Women Associations) from 1920s to 1960s is crucial in understanding the position of modern Assamese women. During her period, women's movement saw a change in guard from men to women. 'Why in our society the women are confined in a cage like this? Why should you sit in that cage like structure? Who dares to prevent you from sitting outside it?' Saikiani, through questioning mundane discrimination against women, constructed feminist consciousness. This consciousness was further reflected in the freedom struggle and the women's movement in colonial Assam. This paper attempts to analyze her understanding of feminist consciousness, empowerment and identity in colonial Assam using a Critical Discourse Analysis of her select writings such as *Doibajna Duhita* (The Brahmin's Daughter), 'Unnoti Pothot Russ Nari' etc. While doing so, this paper also attempts to locate Chandraprabha Saikiani in the contemporary Assamese society.

**Keywords:** Chandraprabha Saikiani, Assam Mahila Samity, Feminist Consciousness, Socio-Cultural Identity, CDA, Patriarchy

## Introduction

This paper examines the role of an iconic woman leader of Assam in raising feminist consciousness in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through an analysis of her writings, the paper examines the role played by Chandraprabha Saikiani (1901-1972) in articulating and establishing a feminist standpoint in the public discourse of her times. Through contextualizing the life and struggle of this exceptional woman, who redefined the male-centered public and private space in twentieth century Assamese society, the paper claims that Saikiani not only created a feminist consciousness but revolutionized the social milieu of her time by empowering and organizing women in the form of the Assam Mahila Samity (Assam Women's Association). In doing so, she delineated a social identity for women which i) had standing outside the private realm; ii) could contribute to the unfolding nationalist discourse; iii) could stand for self-determination and rights and iv) finally could empower women by bringing them in the organizational folds of a pan regional association with an all-encompassing understanding of issues of women in a true trans-national sense.

The paper is organized into different sections tracing the early life and influences on Saikiani which defined her intellectual oeuvre. As Dutta, A. (2020) notes, Saikiani's life is:

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*“...representative of the struggle of the Assamese Women for education, political rights, fights against social injustice and against other discrimination...She continued to be at the center of the most significant social and political events of her time” (Dutta, A. 2020, p. 12).*

As such, it becomes imperative to examine the circumstances under which Saikiani’s life was representative of the feminist question and how she came to be at the forefront of significant social and political events of the last century. The later part of the paper examines crucial excerpts of discourse from her writings – creative, literary, social as well as political – in an attempt to analyze how exactly she negotiated with the gendered spaces, organized the voiceless women of the society under Assam Mahila Samity and derived strategies to claim women’s rights. The paper broadly employs a critical discourse analysis to examine select writings of Saikiani that challenged patriarchy in Assamese society. Moreover, using this method, the paper attempts to map the emergence of feminist consciousness through the life and works of Saikiani.

### ***Early Life of Saikiani: An Awareness of Rights and Liberties***

Chandraprabha Saikiani was born on 16 March, 1901 in the nondescript village of Doisingari in Kamrup, Assam. Her father Ratiram Mazumdar was the village headman and both he and his wife Gangapriya were keen on their children including Chandraprabha (then named Chandrapriya) receiving an education. This was unthinkable then as women’s education was not encouraged in conservative Assam. Sharma (2013) notes in this regard:

*“Even without the system of Sati, and the prevalence of female infanticide, the condition of Assamese women continued to be poor. She was born and bred up to a strict seclusion. Being married at an early age and confined to life of domestic solitude, she knew little about the world around her nor did the world care of know much about her”. (Sharma, 2013, p.8)*

Hence, it was nothing short of miracle that the couple who had eleven children (Saikiani was the tenth child and seventh daughter), were keen on an education for their daughters too. Most of Saikiani’s siblings did not survive to adulthood given the health condition of rural Assam of those days (Gogoi, 2016, p. 106). Since Doisingari did not have a school, Chandrapriya and her sister Rameshwari (who would go on to become the first woman doctor of Assam), were sent to their maternal aunt at Bhaluki village near Tihu for their primary education. Saikiani completed elementary education at Bhaluki village and returned to her village where her father enrolled her and Rameshwari at a boy’s school in nearby Kothalmuri village for further education as there was no middle school for girls in that entire area. The girls had to endure social sanction for attending a boys’ school but they continued undeterred crossing leech infested muddied ponds on their way to school every day. Eventually, the social criticism and the physical hardship of the everyday commute took a toll and the girls had to forego their education. As per some accounts, Saikiani was married off around this time to an aged man from Uluwa village and, unwilling to live a conjugal life with him, Chandrapriya returned to her parents’ place (Borgohain in Goswami, 2020, p. 116). *Chandrapriya’s recognition of the importance of an education at par with boys and her refusal to stay on with her aged husband speak volumes of an embryonic feminist consciousness.* Undeterred by her personal fate and keen on the amelioration of the situation of girls in her area, she established her own school for young girls at Akaya Village in 1913 (Dutta, J. 2020, p. 102). This was the beginning of her career as a teacher – initially she taught gratis but when her school was brought under the Barpeta Local Board, they arranged for a salary of

Rupees 6/- for Chandrapriya with which she became independent for the first time. A chance encounter with the School Inspector Neelakanta Barua was to further change her life forever. It was Barua who advised her to study in Nagaon Mission School (NMS) and thus in 1915 Chandrapriya and Rameshwari got admitted to NMS on Barua's recommendation where they were rechristened Chandraprabha and Rajaniprabha respectively.

It was the two-year period that Chandraprabha spent in NMS that broadened her horizons but also made her aware of other social discriminations. She writes in her 'Jail Kahini' (Jail Stories) that she felt some of her teachers like Miss Long regarded them as lowly and inferior. "Being Hindus, I and my sister were allotted space in the newly built room for the Bible Class" (Saikiani, trans. Medhi 2020, p. 93). The room which came to be known as 'Hindu Girls Hostel' quickly filled up and when a new girl joined, she was asked to stay in a small, dark and dingy storeroom due to lack of space. *It was here that the crusader for women's rights in Assam took formidable shape as Chandraprabha organized all the girls in the hostel to protest against this treatment.* She writes about this encounter:

*"When I objected to such arrangement, Miss Long retorted, "You Indians live in smaller and worse cottages and huts than this" I heard such insulting words for the first time and realized that though these missionaries live here, they regard us as lowly and poor. I felt a sense of anger mixed with pride. I strongly protested and said "None of our people live in goodam (store) room like this and none of us will stay here". And that is exactly what happened. All our girls refused to stay in that room. I felt vindicated at our first victory against the foreigners". (Saikiani, ibid).*

What is remarkable about this episode at Nagaon Mission School was that Saikiani, as a young school-going girl of fifteen years, organized a group of girls and protested against open discrimination by the Christian Missionary teachers. It also led to a recognition and articulation of nationalist sentiment ("first victory against foreigners") that was soon to be honed to perfection with Gandhi's arrival in Assam (Lal & Barua: forth. 2021). It also marked a staunch refusal on Saikiani's part to accept a lower space in the intersecting social and religious dynamics of colonial Assam and a fight for uniform rights across caste and creed. Saikiani in the same piece also writes how Hindu girls had to pay for necessary clothes, paper, pencil which were given free to Christian students – something she again protested against (Saikiani ibid, p. 93-94). Thus, Saikiani found herself negotiating intersections of colonizers and colonized, religion and caste, education and ignorance during her stint at NMS though she always acknowledged the education she received there. She was instrumental in forming the Nagaon Mahila Samity (Nagaon Mahila Samity) in 1917 but once she passed her Normal School Training, she was appointed as Headmistress of Tezpur Middle School where she joined in 1918. It was Tezpur which would nurture her feminist and nationalist consciousness to the hilt and would catapult her to public life. During the same period, her personal life took a radical turn when she fell in love with a young writer Dandinath Kalita and experienced caste discrimination first hand when Kalita refused to acknowledge her as his wife since she belonged to a lower caste. In the next section, we provide a short sketch of the influences and experiences on Saikiani that were to mould her character into a firebrand feminist for the rest of her life.

### ***Making of a Nationalist Feminist Leader: Saikiani's Lived Experiences and the Public Sphere***

As seen from the discussion in the previous section, Chandraprabha had always championed the case of education. Her commitment to the cause of women took wings in Tezpur under the tutelage of Kironmoyee and Paramananda Agarwala whom she addressed as 'Ma-Deuta' – terms of address for parents (Dogra, 2014, p. 32).

Kironmoyee Agarwala inspired Saikiani to organize Mahila Samity (Women's Associations) for the upliftment of women: her daughter Neera Dogra writes about the encounters of Saikiani and her mother thus:

*"...Saikiani Baideo would pull a tool and chop vegetables for my mother while engaging her in political and social discussions. They would often get engrossed in animated and spirited discussions.... The seed of the Tezpur Mahila Samity – the first forum to have organized women's movement in Assam – was sown through these discussions that took place between my mother and Saikiani Baideo" (Dogra, trans Choudhury, Ibid)*

Chandraprabha's understanding of women and their socio-cultural position deepened under Kironmoyee's influence and direction and in the company of stalwarts such as Omeo Kumar Das, Chandranath Sarma and Jyoti Prasad Agarwala – leading nationalists of Tezpur – she found herself pulled into public life. Jyoti Prasad entrusted Chandraprabha with the task of teaching physical exercise to girl students of Asom Chattra Sanmilan (Assam Students' Association) while Omeo Kumar Das requested her to address a large gathering of the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Sanmilan in support of his proposal for banning of opium. Her passionate and fiery speech on the evil effects of opium based on which she demanded its total ban established her as skilled orator about which Dutta A. (2020) says: *"This was an epoch making event in the history of women's emancipation in Assam as it was for the first time that a woman spoke in a massive public meeting" (Dutta, 2020, p. 11).*

This public speech by the 17-year-old girl thus marked her formal entry into public life and she immersed herself into public service. In 1919, she gave another speech for the Asom Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Association) calling for sacrifices and services of the masses for the cause of the nation and the same year she established the Tezpur Mahila Samity with Kironmoyee Agarwala as the President and her as Secretary. Significantly, this Samity proposed a resolution against the purdah system for the first time (Dutta, J. in 2020, p. 163).

Two significant life events happened hereafter: the first one was Saikiani's encounter with Gandhi and the other was Saikiani's affair with Dandinath Kalita. When Gandhi first came to Assam and visited Tezpur in 1921, he stayed at Poki – the Agarwala residence and Saikiani reportedly had one-on-one encounter with Gandhi of which Dogra writes:

*"My mother, on that occasion, had introduced Saikiani Baideo as the leader of women's movement in Assam. I came to learn that Gandhiji, on being thus introduced to Saikiani Baideo, had imparted the invaluable lesson of committed service towards mobilization of women as also towards social welfare to her" (Dogra, trans Choudhuri; 2020, p. 34)*

As per Dogra's account, it was on Saikiani's request that Gandhi had a meeting with the members of Tezpur Mahila Samity the next day at Bengali Theatre where Gandhi underlined the importance of

boycotting foreign goods. Saikiani followed up on Gandhi's advice in letter and spirit – the Mahila Samity was to become her passion and life-long dedication and she dreamed of a provincial organization dedicated for and by women about which she wrote in 1928:

*“Almost in every province of India, women have their own organizations. Through such meetings several welfare activities like the establishment of orphanages and model schools have been established...Till today the women of Assam did not have an organization encompassing the women of the entire state. It is essential to form an organization. Today Assamese women are faced with several problems and an organization is essential to redress our problems. We can save ourselves if we develop a sense of unity and cohesion amongst ourselves.” (Saikiani in Mahanta 2008a: p. 95-96; trans Bora, S. 2020: p.37).*

What is remarkable is Saikiani's understanding and leadership in this quest for women's rights and her recognition that women's emancipation is entwined with women's education and unity among themselves. Mahila Samity of Assam (the first of which were established in Dibrugarh in 1915 by Hemaprabha Das) were initially just local associations formed mainly in the urban centers and confined to discussions on education, culture and music among the elite *bhadramahilas* (respectable women). However, Chandraprabha and others like her understood the *organizational power of such associations* and worked at grassroots level. Gandhi's visit to Assam and her personal tryst with him had given her an intellectual understanding of the need to organize women into a pan regional association (Barua and Lal: 2020, p.8). The trigger for the same was her speech at the Nowgong Sahitya Sabha under the Presidentship of noted novelist Rajanikanta Bordoloi in 1925. As was customary, special arrangements were made for women to sit behind bamboo partitions – essentially their *purdah* – away from the public gaze. Deeply perturbed and angry with this arrangement, Saikiani had thundered in a fiery speech questioning patriarchal norms that kept women confined:

*“Why in our society the women are confined in a cage like this? It is a matter of great shame for the whole nation. A woman has to hide her face from the men. There can be nothing more shameful than this custom of ours.... Sisters! Why should you sit in that cage like structure? Who dares to prevent you from sitting outside it?” (Saikiani quoted in Sharma, 2013, p. 71)*

Her fiery speech was a clarion call for the women gathered there who broke the bamboo barriers that separated them from the men during the Sabha and took their place at front in the limelight to thunderous applause. Encouraged by this development, Saikiani called upon the women of Nowgong and delegates of the Sahitya Sabha to gather the next day with the intent of forming a provincial organization for women. More than 1000 women collected at the said venue but they were in for a rude shock when a conservative section of men forbade the assembly and tore apart the venue. Undeterred, the women under Saikiani assembled in an open field and resolved to form a provincial women's organization named the Asom Mahila Samity and Saikiani was entrusted with the responsibility of making the arrangements for the purpose (Sharma, 2013, p. 72). It would take another year before Saikiani's dream could be realized – it was at the Dhubri session of the Asom Sahitya Sabha under the presidentship of Benudhar Rajkhowa that the resolution was formally adopted and the *Asom Mahila Samity was formally established in 1926 with Saikiani as its Secretary*. Saikiani gives a report of these developments in her Secretary's Report at the Goalpara Annual Session of the Asom Mahila Samity in 1927 published in *Ghar Jeuti* (Saikiani, in Mahanta 2008a, p. 93-99).

What is remarkable about this phase of her public life is that Saikiani continued her powerful interventions for women despite severe personal hardship. She had fallen in love and married Dandinath Kalita in 1921 post which she had a son in 1922. Kalita, succumbing to social pressure that did not allow inter-caste marriage, had failed to own up to his marriage and had purportedly asked Chandraprabha to abort the child (Gogoi, 2016, p. 116). She refused to do so adopting a pro-life stance and promising to raise her child single handedly. It was due to fear of social backlash in her public life at Tezpur that Chandraprabha resigned from her job and went back to her parents for the birth of her son. Post the 1925 episode, she became increasingly active in Asom Mahila Samity activities and eventually her life as a Satyagrahi when she courted arrest made it impossible for her to continue her teaching job but it was only the beginning of another chapter of her illustrious life as a Congress volunteer and nationalist.

She became a Congress volunteer and organizer at the INC 41st session at Pandu, Gauhati where she once again met Gandhi and other national leaders. She was in charge of the main gate to the Working Committee pandal (Sharma 2013, p. 83) and her increasing stature as a leader of the women's voice can be gauged from the facts that she represented Asom Pradeshik Mahila Samity (APMS) at Curzon Hall, Gauhati against Simon Commission on 28 October, 1928 (ibid: p. 84); she was invited as a representative to the Karachi session of INC 1931 held on 13 March (Dutta, J: 2020, p. 107). As joint secretaries of the APMS, Chandraprabha and Induprava Baruah sent a telegram to the Government warning against the Grouping Plan, "Present Assam without Sylhet stands as a cultural, linguistic and traditional unit. Any attempt to disintegrate this unity will be opposed by the APMS" (Saikiani and Baruah's telegram to Cyril Radcliffe on 22 July, 1947; cited in Sharma, 2013, p. 226).

The above actions are an evidence of her rising political stature – in pre-independence era between 1930 and 1947, she was arrested 3 times and Article 144 clamped on her for seven times (Saikiani, trans Barua, 2020, p. 85). She contested General Elections for Bajali Constituency in 1957 but lost – as per some accounts, she lost on account of her campaign speech against mouzadars, contractors and business class whom she alienated (Das, P 1998/ 2002, p. 18). Her frank, honest and outspoken nature made her unfit for the hypocritical complexities of politics (ibid, p. 19). As per other accounts, the public did not identify with her as she was an unwed mother and she did not have a good name for herself as a woman in Bajali owing to her controversial personal life (A. Sharma cited in Gogoi, 2016, p. 122). Despite her own defeat in elections, she was a strong feminist voice for increasing women's participation in the political sphere. It is significant to mention that it was owing to her constant demand and writing to Nehru for women's representation in Rajya Sabha that Pushpalata Das was elected to the Upper House from Assam (Das interview in Barua and Borah, 2002, p. 13). Das shared a deeply symbiotic relation with Saikiani and not only was her rise to political eminence a fallout of Saikiani's own efforts, she went on to write the well-known biography of Saikiani of which Das (2016) notes:

*...her life as traced by Pushpalata Das becomes nothing less than a guide to the collective fashioning of a new kind of feminine self, the liberation of which lay in collective activities rather than the pursuit on individual ones (Das 2016: 196-197).*

### ***Articulating Feminist Consciousness: Analysis of Excerpts from Saikiani's Writings***

Given the possible causes of the emergence of a feminist consciousness and its expression in her actions in the course of her life trajectory as briefly enumerated above, we now have a context against which to analyze some of the articulations of this feminist consciousness across a spectrum of her writings. Saikiani's oeuvre consisted of her reports as Secretary of AMS, essays, letters, reports and speeches; novels and short stories; translations of books and prose pieces; poetry; edited journals namely, *Abhijan* and *Abhijatri* – the former being a bilingual (Assamese-Hindi) nationalist progressive monthly magazine co-edited with Dharanidhar Das and Kamalnayan Dev and the latter being the monthly journal of the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity and lastly her unpublished manuscripts.

Transcripts of her actual epochal speeches are rare – her 1917 speech against opium consumption or her 1925 speech in the Nowgong Sahitya Saikiani which challenged the gendered division of space (reported in Sharma 2013 cited above) are at best recreated summaries of her actual speeches. However, Saikiani was a meticulous organizer of events pertaining to AMS as Secretary of Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity whose activities were regularly reported in the women's journal in Assamese titled *Ghar Jeuti*: example, the latter published her reports as Secretary of AMS in the 1927 Goalpara, and 1928 Jorhat and Golaghat Annual Conventions of the AMS (Mahanta 2008a, p.93-100; p.577-579 and p.748-757 respectively). All these reports present an unfolding narrative of the rising feminist consciousness through AMS activities. Barua and Lal (2021/ forth.) give an account of how *Ghar Jeuti*, edited by Kanaklata Chaliha and Kamaloya Kakoti, that was first published in 1927 from Sibsagar awakened the consciousness of women specially in the context of *Joymoti Utsav* (a landmark public celebration of the Ahom princess Joymoti who sacrificed her life for her husband and the kingdom). *Ghar Jeuti* was published for four years between 1927 and 1931 during which it pushed for greater public participation of women through its articles and also provided a platform to articulate their perspectives (see *Preface* in Mahanta 2008a, Mahanta2008b and Mahanta 2018 for a deeper analysis).

An analysis of Saikiani's articles on *Unnoti Pothot Russ Nari* (Russian Women on the Path of Progress) and 'Boidekhik Ponditxokolor Motamot' (Foreign Scholars' opinions) published in *Ghar Jeuti* will be analysed in this paper for an understanding of her feminist leanings. Saikiani was also a poet who mostly wrote love poems – while a compilation of her poems in Assamese is available (Goswami, S. 1996), not many translations are available. One of her most celebrated poems 'Ahalya' was published in the *Smriti Grantha* (Barua and Borah, 2002: p.1) brought out on the occasion of her birth centenary yearlong celebration in 2001-2002. A few excerpts from this poem as translated by one of the authors of the current paper will be analyzed. Finally, excerpts from one of her most well-known novels - *Doibagyna Duhita* ('The Brahmin's Daughter') will also be analyzed for the issues it raises vis-à-vis women and emancipation.

Through the analysis of these selected writings, the paper attempts to showcase Saikiani's feminist consciousness, empowerment and identity in her writings. Her article on Russian women locates the issue of progress in a truly trans-national sense with her contrasting the facilities provided in Russia post the Bolshevik revolution with the situation of Assamese women. In her poem 'Ahalya', Saikiani subverts the popular narratives in mythico-religious and cultural contexts while questioning the patriarchal and sometimes misogynistic perspective in which the woman inevitable pays the price for

no fault of hers. The excerpts that are presented from Saikiani's novel *Doibagyna Duhita* (The Brahmin's Daughter) once again question patriarchy but also – with a remarkably insightful take on feminism – reveal women themselves to be carriers and perpetuators of patriarchy. The excerpts, as well as many of her novels, posit the emancipation of women as being deeply intertwined with women entering the public discourse – more specifically the nationalist cause. Finally, the last extract from one of her prose pieces' showcases Saikiani's clairvoyant and nuanced understanding of Assam in the national, and ultimately global, context of illegal migration that threaten the very fabric of nationhood.

### ***The Trans-National Feminist Standpoint in Saikiani's Prose***

*Unnoti Pothot Russ Nari* published in *Ghar Jeuti* (Saikiani in Mahanta, 2008a, p. 404-405) reveals a startling consciousness of women's situation in a transnational context. She writes after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, women's empowerment occurred establishing an egalitarian society. Equal rights, women's access to socio-political spaces challenged the male domination. In this respect, she reports how the National Women Representative Committee established many institutions for women's development and how the Soviet Government gave special emphasis on working class and peasant women by establishing permanent children houses or crèches (Saikiani, *ibid*, p. 405). In different parts of the country, the Soviet government established maternity wards, women hospitals and children hospitals for women's development. In cities, more than 95 percent women started delivering babies in these care institutions and hospitals as a result of which child mortality and women mortality rates significantly decreased. Further, women associations were established for women's unity and progress; 4 women's newspapers were launched in Moscow and Lenin provinces and the total readership for these stood at 3 lakhs and 50 thousand. She mentions that in the entire Russian province there were a total 15 women oriented newspapers out of which 5 were in ethnic language. Moreover, she writes in her article that till 1927, 12700 working class women and 8000 peasant class women were employed in these papers while in 1925 Azerbaijan had 18 women club and 34 other institutions worked for establishing women equality (Saikiani, *ibid*).

In a brilliant discursive strategy, Saikiani ends her article with the following line exhorting firstly women themselves and then men and rulers of the 'backward' province of Assam 'to think about all these for once':

*"May women themselves and men and over and above them the rulers of this backward society of women in our Assam think about all these for once."*  
(Saikiani, *trans Barua from Ghar Jeuti*, p. 405).

The detailed exposition of all the facilities provided for the progress of women in another country provide for a self-revealing juxtaposition of the situation in a backward province like Assam. This single line not only provides the contrast to the entire article which appreciates the facilities provided to Russian women, but importantly, *shifts the onus first and foremost to Assamese women* to change their lot in life. It also entrusts men and rulers of Assam with the responsibility to look after the needs and requirements of the women of the region.

In another article *Boidekhik Ponditxokolor Motamot* (Foreign Scholars' Opinions), Saikiani (in Mahanta, 2008a, p. 448-450) gives detailed account of the way in which foreign scholars perceive women and give them an exalted position in life. She cites several Western scholars, poets and



intellectuals ranging from Lord Byron, Searle, Thomas Moore, James Northington to Milton, Washinton Irving and Goldsmith all praising women and placing them on a high pedestal. For instance, she writes about Washington Iving, who notes that the common person sees no quality in women, but women are like goddesses in his eyes. Likewise, she cites James Northcourt who waxes eloquent on woman being the best advisor.

***Questioning Patriarchy in Religio-Cultural Context: Excerpts from Saikiani's Poem 'Ahalya'***

Saikiani mostly wrote love poems revolving around her equation with Dandinath Kalita – Goswami (1996) is a compilation of her early poems *Mur Kobita* (My Poems) written between 1923-1955; *Mur Kobita* (Second Chapter) and *Kobita Homagni* (Sacred Fire Poetry). Readers may refer to two chapters in Doley and Choudhuri (2014) for a preliminary analysis of her poetic oeuvre and idiom. For the purpose of the current paper, two stanzas of her poem title 'Ahalya' have been translated by one for the authors – this poem has been published originally in Assamese in the *Smriti Grantha* (Barua and Borah, 2002, p. 1) brought out on the occasion of the birth centenary celebrations of Saikiani.

In popular Hinduism narrative, Ahalya (or Ahilya) is the wife of Sage Gautam Rishi who was seduced by Indra in the guise of her husband. Furious with his wife for her purported infidelity, the sage had cursed Ahalya and turned her to stone who could only be liberated by the touch of Lord Ram. In a variant to this mythological tale, in Saikiani's poem, Ahalya is depicted as the wife of Brihaspati – the God of Learning. Here too, he had turned her to stone and Saikiani questions as to how Lord Brihaspati, the most learned of all the gods from whom all other gods derive their wisdom, could have bestowed such a terrible curse on Ahalya. It is a long poem of 13 stanzas of which only the second and third stanza have been translated for this paper and are being given below:

***Ahalya***

*Tell me, what was Ahalya's fault?*

*You are the Guru Brihaspati – the learned majesty.*

*All the godly clan – Indra, Chandra, Varun –*

*Seek knowledge from you.*

*Seems you are the jewel amongst the Gods.*

*Why, then, did you turn Ahalya to stone*

*Even though you knew her innocence?*

*Did you ever doubt her love?*

*Had the simple helpless girl neglected you ever?*

*Then why did you – even if mistakenly ,*

*By virtue of your love as husband –*

*Bestow on her this abject curse?*

*(Saikiani; trans. Barua from Smriti Grantha, 2001: 1)*

As seen from the above lines, Ahalya subverts the popular narrative of the wife who failed to recognize her husband and got into infidelity by questioning the husband as to how he – in spite of his greatness and all his wisdom – could not fathom that she was, in principle, innocent. At the end of the poem, Saikiani celebrates Ahalya as Mother Goddess Dharitri (Goddess Earth). Saikia's poetic idiom and dexterity are nowhere near her contemporaries like celebrated poet Nalini Bala Devi (feted with Padma Sri in 1957 and with Sahitya Akademi in 1968 for her collection 'Alakananda') but the leitmotif of emancipation that resonates in her poem finds expression even in her other creative writing like her novels one of which we shall discuss in the next section.

### ***Emancipation through Nationalism: Analysis of Excerpts from a Novel***

Chandraprabha Saikiani's first novel was published in serialized form in the journal *Awahon* in the first and second issues of the first year (October and November Issues, 1921). She wrote another novel titled *Aparajita* but most of the pages of this work are not available (Bora, J. 2020, p. 121). Her first short story titled *Devi* was published in the journal *Baanhi* in 1921. Her novel *Doibagyna Duhita* was published in 1947 in *Awahon* and in this section we shall analyze a few excerpts from its translated version published in Neog (2002, p. 1-26). The novel traces the life of the beautiful Menaka born to a humble Brahmin Bhargav. Her horoscope said that she would be widowed and "nothing good is foreseen" (ibid, p. 2). The girl was given in marriage at the age of eleven to a much older man with grey hair and fallen teeth named Giridhar Sarma. On the night of her wedding, she escaped and jumped into the river to die. She was rescued and the old man's elder brother promptly returned her to her parents. After a year, when her 'husband' dies, women in her neighborhood impel her to bathe and stay in wet clothes and not eat anything for four days. She refused to even cry arguing with the women at which her friend Gauri asked her why she was arguing foolishly. It is to her that Menaka replies:

*"Are you mad, like the rest? An enemy died. I'm freed of him. You too want me to cry? Strange! You women! Nothing is dearer to you than having a husband. When a person marries, he or she should have a preference... whom she should marry. When an aged woman marries a man younger than her, it is a sin but when an old man marries a girl fit enough to be his granddaughter then everything is fine! And this is our God-damned social system... You can abide by these rules, I can't."*  
*(Saikiani, Doibagyna Duhita 1947; trans. Neog in The Brahmin's Daughter; 2002, p. 4)*

Saikiani's portrayal of a strong minded character like Menaka is laced with a very nuanced understanding of the way patriarchy functions through women themselves as evidenced from the above extract. In fact, Menaka goes on to argue with Gauri that social customs, mores and rituals are all structured to the detriment of women and that the same do not apply to men indicating a very unequal social order. She further argues:

*"Had there been things like sin, rebirth... that would have applied for men too! Why only women? As long as woman does not understand her position and protest*

*against the suffering inflicted on her, till then she will continue to suffer” (ibid, p. 7)*

Menaka breaks social customs to the extreme when she falls in love with Maheswar and becomes pregnant. He refuses to own up to the child and people advised her father Bhargav to have the child in her womb aborted (the parallels to Saikiani's own life are strikingly obvious here). She was hauled in front of the village which met to decide on the punishment for her sins. She rebelled against them and left home and took refuge in a brothel where she gave birth to a daughter. She ultimately became a prostitute to support herself and her child and also perform the last rites of her father who in the mean time passed away. Her emancipation comes in the form of the idealistic nationalist and freedom fighter Madanmohan who takes an interest in her. She bluntly asks him towards the end of the novel: *“I'm a prostitute. Will you allow me to work for my motherland?” (ibid, p. 25)* to which Madan takes her hand and replies:

*“Here, I pledge to you and tell you that you too have the same rights, like me. ...we breathe the same air; we stand on the same soil. Had it not been like that, this ground would not have held you. You can surely be my co-worker and work with me... without doubt” (ibid, p. 25)*

It is through service to the motherland and, ultimately, an entry into the public sphere within a nationalist discourse that Menaka finds ultimate emancipation and salvation. She is set free when she is jailed for taking part in the freedom movement. Menaka's words in each of the excerpts above articulate a strong feminist consciousness while Madan's words are the voice of the liberated men – who, in the service of the motherland or otherwise – treat women on an equal footing with men acknowledging and accommodating both the mistakes one may have done as well as the possibilities for redemption through a life of service in the cause of the nation.

Saikiani was not the first woman novelist of Assam – there had been others before her like Padmavati Devi Phukanani ('Sudhormar Upakhyan' in 19<sup>th</sup> century) and Sneholota Bhattacharya ('Bina' in 1926). But her novels and short stories between 1920s and 1940s like *Pritribhita* (1937), *Doibagyna Duhita* (1947) served as a clarion call for other writers over the next decades right into the twenty first century like Suchibrata Roychoudhury, Hiranyamoyee Devi, Uma Boruah, Nilima Dutta, Pranita Devi, Nirupama Borgohain, Mamoni Raisom Goswami, and more recently, Arupa Patangia Kalita, Tilottoma Mishra, Rita Chowdhury, Anuradha Sharma Pujari to become powerful voices in the articulations of regionalist, nationalist and feminist concerns (see Rashid 2017 for a representative sample).

### ***Regionalism, Nationalism and the Feminist Perspective***

In this final excerpt, Saikiani's understanding of regional and national politics finds apt expression: she outlines the need for a proper administrative solution to the question of illegal migration from East Pakistan – a problem that has beset the region and redefined its geo-politics in post-Independence India too.

*“In Assam, six to seven lakhs Pakistanis infiltrated and are trying to settle down in Assam while procuring land, house etc. and already most of them have included their names in the list of Indian citizen. After that also, it has come to light that fresh infiltration of Pakistanis in various means are still continuing. But why are*

*these Pakistani Muslims coming to Assam of Hindustan? And why some Assamese Indians, both Hindus and Muslims, are trying to hide infiltrators amongst themselves?" (Saikiani, trans. Goswami M. in Goswami Ed. 2020, p. 86)*

As a representative of the AMS, Saikiani had already portrayed the standpoint of the feminist group with regard to Grouping Plan (see her telegram to Cyril Radcliffe cited above). She was also instrumental in getting the government to include women in governance at all levels – in her Secretary Report of AMS for the Jorhat Convention, she notes that the Eighth Resolution adopted was for the Government to nominate women members to the Councils and local Boards (Saikiani in Mahanta, 2008a, p. 585). She continued articulating women's and women's organizational standpoint in various capacities even in post Independent India as a Member of Assam Social Advisory Board and Female Jail Visitor for Government of Assam and the organization she created – the Asom Mahila Samity – continues to work for the emancipation of women and the downtrodden till this day. Her rallying together women from different corners of Assam facilitated the formation of powerful and emancipatory communities of women in Assam with AMS leading the way in terms of public participation, political representation and feminist articulations of identity (Medhi, 2016).

### **Conclusion: A Legacy of Feminist Articulations**

Chandraprabha Saikiani articulated, created and represented a space of empowerment for women hitherto unseen in the public life of women in Assam. She always fought for the rights of women while simultaneously overcoming the social ostracization faced on account of her tumultuous personal life. In doing so, she challenges patriarchal norms and emerges as a powerful icon of feminist consciousness, empowerment and identity whose example is truly worthy of emulation in a transnational context.

*"When I analyze her character I feel she was a born rebel. She could be categorized in three forms: as a child, she was against discrimination between boys and girls. As a young woman, she was a crusader against the social injustices between men and women between higher class and lower class, and as a matured woman she took the pen to picture the exploitation of vested interests" (Das, 2014, p. 94).*

Her personal life raised questions on the institutions such as marriage, family, motherhood, caste and parenthood: there have been quite a few biographical accounts including Das (1998/2002) as well as popular fiction in her honour: Nirupama Borgohain's novel *Abhijatri* (1995) that won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1996. It is her own writings across a variety of genres, however, that best reflected the absence of liberty, choice, equality in many of the above institutions when it comes to women. It is in and through her writings therefore, that she articulated a feminist consciousness for an equal position for women in society. Her role as a crusader for women's education and rights assumes greater significance and establishes her as the "*most remarkable example of women writers as agents of social change*" (Deka, 2013, p. 24). Through her lived experience as well as her writings whose glimpses can be seen in the excerpts discussed in this paper, Saikiani envisioned a better society where socio-cultural institutions could be liberated from clutches of patriarchy and women could organize themselves for their own amelioration.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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