

**Gender, Power and Nationalism in Colonial Assam: Rethinking
Chandraprabha Saikiani**

Anchala Duarah¹

¹Assistant Professor
Department of History
D.C.B. Girls' College,
Jorhat, Assam,India

Email:anchaladuarah123@gmail.com

***Abstract:**History is witness to the fact that across time, gender has always been used as an instrument of 'male politics' with women hardly being involved as active counterparts. The present study critically examines the interaction between gender and power that appears to be woven into the fabric of nationalism contributing to the politicisation of women. Chandraprabha Saikiani, an Assamese reformer, freedom fighter, litterateur and activist, is known for her unbounded revolutionary zeal and progressive ideas. She fought fearlessly throughout her life against the patriarchal norms of the society and at the same time called upon other women to do the same. Her works are a reflection of her thoughts regarding the gender biased society of the time and her fierce condemnation of it. By examining her life and works, the study seeks to illuminate the issues concerning gender relations and the institution of patriarchy in twentieth century Assam, highlighting Saikiani's significant role in reshaping both women's agency and the regional nationalist discourse.*

***Keywords:** Chandraprabha Saikiani, Gender, Nationalism, Patriarchy.Women's agency etc.*

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Introduction

Women in India, both as subjects and makers of history, have been long shoved into oblivion and it was not until the nineteenth century that their existence came to be manifested by the nationalist historians as a way to critique the colonial thinker's view on the Indian civilization. The persistent marginalization of women in historical discourse has been critically examined by gender scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir, Kathleen Brown, Judith

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Butler, Gerda Lerner, and Uma Chakravarti, among others. The development of gender history as a field of study repositions women at the centre of the pedestal of history and recognises them as equal participants in the making and writing of history. The fact that history writing, over centuries has remained the stronghold of the male historians clarifies the idea of power and authority entitled to them through various forms. This reality reminds us that patriarchy has been deeply woven into social systems over time, changing in form but continuing to influence whose stories are told and whose are left unheard.

To grasp the concept of patriarchy properly, it is important to first unfold the meaning of gender. Gender can be viewed as a set of social obligations which places the two biological sexes into fixed categories (of being a man or woman) with imposed sets of roles and attributes. Gender is a social phenomenon that permeates our everyday lives. It is discernible in the way a girl or boy is expected to behave, how they dress, the toys that are provided for them to play with, and so forth. The nurturing begins at a very early age through the process of socialisation, which takes root so firmly that it seems indisputable. The gendered categorisation further creates an unseen hierarchy between the male and the female sex thus forming the base of patriarchy.

The Indian past has been diversely studied by scholars producing a saga of information on the history of male oppression and female subjugation, validated by the societal sanctions of the time. However, the case of the North Eastern states, especially Assam, tends to be quite different from the other parts of India largely because of the absence of a rigid caste system. But this doesn't provide a ground for escape in studying gender relations in Assam. As Sujata D. Hazarika¹ have rightly put, "The myth of a casteless society has been demystified here by instances of proselytization of tribal communities, who in this specific case were the 'constructed untouchables'." So, while situating gender identity and patriarchy in the Assamese society one needs to deconstruct the various subtle layers of caste and tribal differences which have made for the inadequate representation of women despite the absence of rigid social customs like *sati*, *pardah*, dowry, bride burning etc. Though not popular but there have been instances of female infanticide and child marriage since it found mention in the novels and stories of Chandraprabha Saikiani. The research article puts Chandraprabha Saikiani at the pinnacle of understanding the feminist discourse in Assam that emerged in the twentieth century.

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Objectives and Methods

The research work has attempted to examine and analyse the interconnectedness of gender, power and nationalism in the context of colonial Assam. Effort has also been made to understand how Chandraprabha's activism and intellectual awakening could negotiate the existing power structures and reclaim a space for writing women's history in Assam.

Historical method of enquiry used in the proposed work is based on both primary and secondary sources which have been subject to description and analysis. The relatively scarce and fragmented sources available on this topic has restricted my consultation to only a few primary sources including articles written by many prominent intellectuals in the journals belonging to twentieth century Assam [*Ghor Jeuti* (1927), *Abahan* (1929) and *Banhi* (1909)] and the novel, *Pitri-Bhitha*², a story named *Devagya Duhita* and her article "Unnatir Pathat Rusnari". Many of Chandraprabha Saikiani's unpublished works have been lost over the course of time due to severe lack of preservation while some others are in personal possession of her family. But with the available sources it is quite evident that Saikiani was a woman far ahead of her times. Her ideas on female education, widow remarriage, abolition of *purdah pratha* blatantly challenged the conventional patriarchal norms of the society. Her most acclaimed work, *Pitri-Bhitha* heralded a new dawn in the era of Assamese literature by being the first of its kind to portray the basic ideals of feminism at a time when no one thought it was possible. Saikiani's writings function as a form of intellectual resistance, offering alternative narratives of women's roles in the nation-building process.

The Triumvirate of Gender, Power and Nationalism

An analysis of gender and power remains incomplete without the study of Michel Foucault. He perceives power as something intrinsically embedded in the social structure, cultural norms and economic institution. This offers further understanding of feminist scholarship that examines gender relations and focuses on women's bodies, voices, and behaviour. Instances of gender and power becomes more prominent in Foucault's later works, specifically in *The History of Sexuality*³, where women have been analysed as bodies with agency and were no longer represented schematically. The feminist movement, which dominated politics in the 1960s and 1970s, understood sexuality as a result of social interactions, behaviour, and bodies through the lens of Foucauldian gender relations and power⁴. However, his theory do have certain shortcomings. Foucault have been constantly criticized for his androcentric

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views- his negation of subordination of women or specific subjectification in particular. This places a fair argument that mere inclining towards examining power relations between men and women is not adequate, rather properly exploring the experiences of women is equally essential. Post modern theories of feminism also links a interconnectedness between colonialism, identity and patriarchy. This requires unfurling multiple layers of oppression faced by women in the form of colonial rule, regional marginality and class-caste privileges. Uma Chakravarti adopts a critical approach of analysing the origins of Brahmanical patriarchy by placing gender in close association with caste hierarchy. In the context of colonial Assam, Chandraprabha's relentless activism have reshaped the definition of nationalism, launching a resistance against the existing power structure and defying the multiple layers of marginalization.

Additionally, the rise of feminist literature has made a significant contribution to the gendered comprehension of the concept of an imagined political identity associated with a nation. Many scholars have interpreted that nationalism draws from the deeply constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity while defining their distinct role in political participation and cultural mobilization, making it a gender biased agenda. Women are often treated as biological reproducers and social transmitters of the nation⁵ assigned with the great task of nurturing offsprings to develop a sense of loyalty and belongingness towards the nation. Partha Chatterjee's 'inner and outer sphere' thesis examines the allocation of the outer sphere to men who are perceived as the carriers of modernity, while women are deliberately linked to the domestic sphere and culture in the context of constructing a national identity⁶. These ideas exclude them from the space of actual political participation and rights. S.L. Baruah argues that even in Assam, the political participation of women in the nationalist movement was mostly confined to organizational and constructive activities based on the existing gender norms.

Chandraprabha emerged as the forerunner of feminist-nationalist movement in Assam with her exceptional leadership and mobilization skills leading to the establishment of the Asom Mahila Samiti in 1926⁷. However, existing literature available about her, fails to assure a proper space to the entrenched social traditions prevalent in Assam and its unbreakable link with the patriarchal institutions of the era. There have also been selective discussions on the life of the 'upper caste', 'middle-class' women of Assam, ignoring the voices of the 'other'⁸ women in the process.

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The State and evolving Nature of Gender Relations in Assam

The subjugation of one gender by the other reveals the subtle layers of power that is incorporated in every levels of the society- making way for patriarchy to flourish. The nature of patriarchy has changed dramatically with time but the only thing that remained constant is the control over women. However, the forms of patriarchy tend to regionally and contextually.

The concept of patriarchy acts as an important instrument in understanding gender relations.⁹ The nineteenth and twentieth century Assam has evolved its own distinct form of patriarchy mostly prevalent among the upper caste middle section of the society. The evolution of the nature of patriarchy in Assam has been a result of the culmination of various factors. Assam has predominantly remained a tribal society despite the advent of Brahmanism during the reign of early Kamrupa kingdoms of 4th century AD. Geographically speaking, many parts of the Brahmaputra valley still stayed aloof from the influence of Brahmanism and the rigid caste structure. And it was not until the Ahom state was established that the society based on caste lines came to be organised. The medieval times also saw the emergence of the Mahapurushiya Dharma of Srimanta Sankardev which emphasised on a shift from casteism and Brahmanism but remained significantly intolerant of women's freedom. The inequality in power relations not only places women at the bottom of the society but also allows the subjugation of other marginalised groups as well. The emergence of the concept of private property and the desire to safeguard it led to men's control over the process of reproduction through the invented traditions of laws and regulations for the perpetuity of the institution of patriarchal family system.¹⁰ However, the tribal background of the Assamese society have placed women at a comparatively higher position than their counterparts in other parts of India. Women's involvement in agriculture from the very early period has placed them as equals with men thus giving them a slightly better taste of dignity and liberty. As Shekhar Bandopadhyay writes, it was the existential compulsions and the need for productive labour that have broken the barrier of un-freedom¹¹ for the lower caste and tribal women.

The relationship between gender and power was intrinsically woven into the fabric of nationalism. The nationalist movement in Assam was two-folded- it was essentially anti-imperialist and at the same time also displayed characteristics of sub-nationalism. Sub nationalism is nothing but emerging nationalism within a nation or can also be referred to as

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regional nationalism. This very emphasis on regionalism has led for the creation of an Assamese identity significantly founded upon Assamese language, literature and culture. The formulation of a larger idea of Assamese identity had no place for women as active members alongside men. Rather they were seen just as an object in realising the civilizing mission to glorify their culture and bring it at par with the West. It was by the virtue of this, that they initiated reforms and focussed on women 'empowerment'. The nationalist movement in Assam was spearheaded by the Assamese middle class who were mainly upper caste elites. The educated women of colonial Assam mostly belonged to these families and hence the idea of emancipation of women was largely elitist or 'creamy layered'. Not much is known about the females of the lower sections of the society. It is also notable that many of the proponents of social reforms were personally quite apprehensive of the idea of altering of gender biases in the system. When female education was first introduced by Gunabhiram Barua in Assam, many conservatives opposed it as they feared it might educate women 'wrongly'. Some of them were- Ratneswar Mahanta, Punakanta Sarma and Balinarayan Borah. The nationalist agenda of the Indian intelligentsia put women at the centre of their reforms yet isolated them from their personal freedom. The *Joymoti Utsav* was celebrated in Sibsagar for the first time in 1914 with the motive of involving women into the nationalist movement. However, this whole celebration actually symbolised Joymoti's sacrifice and her story of feminine chastity, urging the Assamese women to be like her. The political participation of women in the freedom struggle also remains ambiguous in general. It is for this very reason that women found themselves voicing their demands through a separate discourse since the larger political movements tend to shun them as over-ambitious.

Assam was not as engulfed in social evils like that of the other regions of India. However, instances of child marriage, *purdah pratha*, forceful widowhood and even dowry were not uncommon. If it had not been on the part of the colonial state to introduce certain institutionalised policies, the reformist agenda of the upper caste intelligentsia would have remained a big failure. While considering this, it is important to understand that the colonial state was itself patriarchal and exploitative. Gender and imperialism are interlinked, based on which it can be inferred that the patriarchal system of the country is one of the pillars upon which the British consolidated their rule. The policies that they introduced and the institutions that they created were just a part of their 'civilizing mission'¹² and a way to run their administration smoothly.

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Nationalism from the Margins: Saikiani's Life and Activism

To understand better the emerging feminist discourse in twentieth century Assam, it is vital to look into the experiences and contribution of Chandraprabha Saikiani, the pioneer of women's movement in Assam. She was born to Ratiram Majumdar and Gangapriya in Daisinagari, Bajali as Chandapriya. Both Chandapriya and her sister Rameswari received both primary and secondary education away from home due to lack of schools in vicinity. Later, they had to discontinue after facing a tremendous lot of difficulty. Chandraprabha was always determined to work towards the education of women in her village having faced the difficulties herself to get educated. She opened a girl's school named, *Abhinav* in the village of Akaya in 1913 to promote the importance of education for girls. The school lacked quality infrastructure yet it was a pioneering attempt at ensuring female education. Seeing her zeal towards education, Nilakanta Baruah, the then Inspector of Schools, Barpeta invited her to complete her studies in the Nagaon Mission School along with her sister in 1915. The American Baptist Missionaries played a significant role in promoting education and setting up schools for girls. Although the motive was quite in favour of the British, it did help a lot of privileged sections to benefit from it. She then completed her Teacher's training programme in 1917 and worked in a primary school in Nagaon for some time and then moved to Tezpur as a Principal of a Government Middle Vernacular School.¹³ The journey to Tezpur was life changing for her. She met prominent leaders of the time like Omeo Kumar Das, Chandranath Sarma and Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and was straightaway inspired by them to join the National Movement. In 1918, in one of the sessions of *Asom Chatra Sanmilan*, Chandraprabha fiercely supported the resolution passed by Omeo Kumar Das to boycott opium and startled everyone with her fearless speech. It was for the first time that a woman stood up to share her opinion in public. Later, she along with her sister Rajniprabha became the first women delegates to attend the session of Asom Sahitya Sabha in 1919. From here starts her journey as a social and political leader.

Despite the failure of the prior localised women's organizations, the Asom Mahila Samiti came into existence in 1926 which later came to be known as Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti. The need to establish a unified regional women's organization was not an immediate decision. The increasing political consciousness among the people in Assam and the formation of regional associations like Asamiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Sabha, Assam Association, Asom Sahitya Sabha, Asom Chatra Sanmilan etc. inspired the educated women

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mainly the wives, daughters and sisters of the enlightened men. With the advent of Mahatma Gandhi into Indian politics changed the face of the struggle against the British. He constantly urged the women of the country to come out of the houses for the cause of the nation. Many responded to his call and took active part in the national movement. However, their role was restricted to constructive activities like spinning, weaving, boycott of foreign goods, etc.

Chandraprabha's experiences had an undeniable impact upon the foundation of the AMS. Despite all odds, she was determined to get educated and have consistently challenged the low status ascribed to women in society. She advocated equal rights for both men and women. She was greatly influenced by women's role in the Russian Bolshevik Revolution as known from her article in *Ghor Jeuti*, titled *Unnatir Pathat Rusnari*¹⁴. She strictly opposed child marriage, forceful widowhood, *pardah pratha* .etc through her activities and writings and even she herself was a victim of discrimination in society. While staying in the Mission School in Nagaon, she had to face a lot of racial discrimination. Later while in Tezpur, her courtship with a renowned author Dandinath Kalita ended up in her getting pregnant and he refused to marry her against his family's will as she was of a lower caste. She then fiercely raised her son as a single mother despite being loathed by everyone. She strongly denied all negativities that came her way and devoted her life to empower women in all aspects of life.

Conclusion

Although analysing patriarchy and gender relations in colonial Assam is a challenging endeavour, it is nevertheless necessary to carefully and delicately reveal the layers of patriarchal dominance to gather a deeper understanding of Assamese society. The existence of a self-sufficient village economy in pre-colonial Assam have somewhat ensured physical freedom for women but this did not make for their higher status. Moreover, patriarchy tends to be deeply rooted in a feudal society which flourished significantly under the Ahoms. With the change in power politics from the ancient to modern period, there have been drastic changes in gender biases. The inter-relationship between gender, power and authority gives a vivid picture of what patriarchy looked like in nineteenth and twentieth century Assam. The political participation of women heavily influences their social and cultural position. The role Chandraprabha Saikiani played in the conscious awakening of the womenfolk and her constant negotiation with the state structure in ensuring women empowerment and agency

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through various political organisations is immensely appreciable. Education was a privilege meant for the rich and elites and the severe lack of it prevented the common women¹⁵ from realising their rights. It was Chandraprabha who made pioneering efforts by demanding the establishment of girl's school in each districts of Assam. The pre-AMS women organisations were founded partially or totally under male supervision thus restricting the exercise of its true goals. The AMS, on the other hand, was founded truly on women leadership. The feminist movement in Assam undoubtedly brought a new dawn of freedom for the Assamese women. Saikiani's writings and her fearless ideas strongly contested the existing power relations. However, the movement lost its significance due to the greater nationalist movement. The fight against foreign rule subdued the feminist ideologies meant to challenge the existing social norms. Hence, it was mainly negotiation than resistance that shaped women's quest for freedom in Assam.

Notes and References

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⁴ Amigot, Patricia, and Llombart, Margot, "On Power, Freedom and Gender", *Theory and Psychology- THEOR PSYCHOL*. Volume. 19, No. 5, 2009, pp. 646-669.

⁵ Anthias, Nira Yuval-Davis & Floya (eds), *Woman-Nation-State*, London: Macmillan Press, 1989.

⁶ Chatterjee, Partha, *The Nation and Its Fragments*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

⁷ Bora, Sheila, *Emergence of Feminism and Feminist Nationalism in Assam: Role of Chandra Prabha Saikia and Asom Mahila Samiti (1926-47)*. Shillong: North East India History Association, 2013, p. 10

⁸ The term 'other' women has been used to refer to the women belonging to various class, caste and tribal affiliations other than the upper caste, middle class Hindu women. Throughout history, the 'other' women have been 'othered' for their lower social status depriving them of political and social freedom.

⁹ Walby, Sylvia, "Theorising Patriarchy", *Sociology*, Sage Publications, Volume. 23, No. 2, 1989, p-213.

¹⁰ Lerner, Gerda, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 22

¹¹ Bandopadhyay, Sekhar, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004, p. 143.

¹² Civilizing Mission is a political term that legitimises the British imperialist agenda of civilizing the so-called backward people of the colonies.

¹³ Bora, Sheila, *Emergence of Feminism and Feminist Nationalism in Assam: Role of Chandra Prabha Saikia and Asom Mahila Samiti (1926-47)*. Shillong: North East India History Association, 2013, p. 10

¹⁴ Saikiani, Chandraprabha, "Unnatir Pathat Rusnari", Mahanta, Aparna (ed) Ghor Jeuti, Guwahati: Publication Board, 2008, pp. 404-405.

¹⁵ The term 'common women' here refers to women belonging to the non-elitist and lower strata of the society.