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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Role of the Assam Mahila Samiti in Promoting Women's Education (1926–1935)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contribution of the Assam Mahila Samiti, formerly the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, to the promotion of women's education in colonial Assam between 1926, the year of its founding, and 1935. This Samiti was established by the reformer Chandraprabha Saikiani in the political ferment surrounding the non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements. The Samiti combined institution-building, print activism through its journal Ghar Jeuti, cultural mobilisation around events such as the Joymoti Utsav, and direct legal action against child marriage to advance the cause of girls' schooling. This paper studies the Samiti's activities within the wider context of halting the progress of female literacy in the province. It argues that the Samiti's significance in this first decade lay less in large-scale enrolment gains, which remained modest through the mid-1930s, than in its role in building an associational, print, and cultural infrastructure within which the later institutional milestones of Assamese women's education became possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

Between the two World Wars, colonial Assam saw the emergence of an organised women's movement that was, by the standards of other Indian provinces, unusually early and unusually broad-based (Medhi 2023). At the centre of this movement stood the Assam Mahila Samiti, more formally the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti (APMS), the word *Pradeshik*, or "provincial," distinguishing the apex body from the town- and district-level samitis, such as the Tezpur Mahila Samiti, that were federated under it. Founded in 1926 by the Assamese social reformer and writer Chandraprabha Saikiani, the Samiti pursued a reform agenda that combined anti-colonial nationalism with an assertive critique of patriarchal practice within Assamese society: child marriage, polygamy, the exclusion of women from temple worship, and, the concern of this paper, the chronic neglect of girls' education.

This paper asks how the Assam Mahila Samiti pursued the cause of women's education in its first decade, from 1926 to 1935, on the eve of institutional milestones such as Lady Keane College at Shillong (1936) and Handique Girls' College at Guwahati (1939), the first women's college in the Brahmaputra valley proper, that are conventionally treated as markers of the arrival of formal higher education for Assamese women.[1] It argues that the Samiti's contribution in this period is best understood not primarily in terms of schools it directly founded or pupils it directly enrolled, since reliable Samiti-specific enrolment figures are not available in the secondary literature, but in terms of the associational, print, and cultural infrastructure it built: annual provincial conventions that passed resolutions on girls' schooling, a journal that carried a sustained public debate on female education, festivals that normalized women's organized public participation, and, critically, direct legal action against the single obstacle to schooling that contemporaries most consistently identified, early marriage.

### Sources and Methodology

This paper is a literature-based study rather than an archival one, and that limitation should be stated plainly at the outset. It draws primarily on three bodies of work: first, Hemjyoti Medhi's monograph *Gendered Publics: Chandraprava Saikiani and the Mahila Samiti in Colonial Assam* (2023), the first scholarly monograph on the organization, which is itself grounded in the author's project of digitizing Samiti minute books and collecting oral testimonies; second, Chiranjib Dahal's (2021) survey of women's education in colonial Assam and two articles by Suranjana Barua and L. David Lal draws on Aparna Mahanta's 2008 reprint edition of *Ghar Jeuti*, and third, public-history and journalistic accounts that report on oral-history and digital-archiving projects concerning the Samiti and its district branches. The Wikipedia biographical entry on Saikiani, cross-checked against the academic sources above, is used sparingly for supplementary chronological detail.

Because the Samiti's own minute books, annual reports, and runs of *Ghar Jeuti* were not directly consulted for this paper, quantitative claims about school numbers or enrolment are drawn from government and college records reported in secondary literature, not from Samiti records themselves, and are flagged as such throughout.

### The State of Women's Education in Assam before 1926

When the Assam Mahila Samiti was founded, formal education for girls in the province had a very recent and limited history. The earliest attempts were missionary: American Baptist missionaries Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter reached Assam in 1836, and in June 1839, Cutter's wife opened a school for girls at Sadiya, generally regarded as the first formal attempt to educate girls in the province; Miles Bronson's wife opened a further girls' school at Sivasagar the following year.[2] Government involvement followed slowly. The first elementary school for girls in Upper Assam was opened at Sibsagar in 1860–61 by Utsabananda Goswami, Deputy Inspector of Schools; within fifteen years, forty-four such schools existed across the province, enrolling 552 pupils, but even after twenty years, total enrolment in girls' schools had still not reached 900.[3] The 1882 Hunter Commission recorded the ratio of girls attending school to the total female population in Assam as 1 in 2,236, against an all-India figure of 1 in 843, among the poorest ratios anywhere in British India. According to the 1901 Census, female literacy in Assam stood at only 0.59 per cent.[4]

A small circle of Assamese male reformers had, from the mid-nineteenth century, argued for girls' education: Anandaram Dhekial Phukan educated his own daughter Padmavati at home from the age of five;

Gunabhiram Baruah sent his daughter Swarnalata to Calcutta's Bethune School and used the journal *Orunodoi* to campaign against differing norms for boys' and girls' schooling. Such efforts, however, were confined to a handful of upper-caste, English-educated families, and higher education for women barely existed. Cotton College, Assam's first college, founded in 1901, had almost no female students for its first two decades, and as late as 1929, Sujata Roy was reported to be its only girl student. It was against this backdrop of stark institutional absence, of schools, of trained women teachers, of a public culture in which girls' schooling was seen as normal, that Chandraprabha Saikiani and her associates organised the Assam Mahila Samiti in 1926.[5]

**Chandraprabha Saikiani and the Founding of the Samiti**

Chandraprabha Saikiani was born Chandrapriya Mazumdar on 16 March 1901 at Daisingari village in the Bajali region of Kamrup district, the seventh of eleven children of the village headman Ratiram Mazumdar. Denied admission to a nearby girls' school, she and her sister, Rajaniprabha, who later became the first woman doctor from Assam, walked several kilometres through waist-deep mud each day to reach a boys' school. While still in her early teens, she gathered local illiterate girls and began teaching them informally in a makeshift shed at Akaya village, an initiative that came to the notice of the school sub-inspector Nilkanta Barua, who secured a scholarship for her and her sister at the Nagaon Mission School.[6]

Her public career began early and combatively. At the Tezpur session of the Assam Chhatra Sanmilan in 1918, she became the first Assamese woman on record to address a large public gathering, speaking against opium consumption. She joined Gandhi's non-cooperation movement in 1921, mobilising women in Tezpur, where she was by then the headmistress of the Girls' M.E. School. At the 1925 Nagaon session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, convened partly to discuss the importance of women's education, she famously called on the women present — seated behind a bamboo partition separating them from male delegates — to break the barrier and sit in the open, which they did. Shortly afterwards, denied permission to attend the Guwahati (Pandu) session of the Indian National Congress, she resigned her teaching post; that same year, amid the charged political atmosphere surrounding the Congress's Assam session, she founded the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti.[7]

The Samiti's stated aims were to campaign against child marriage and polygamy, to challenge the exclusion of women from temple worship, and to take up issues of women's education and self-employment. Contemporary and later accounts describe it as Assam's first organised women's movement. Within a few years, it had spread through district- and town-level branches, the Tezpur Mahila Samiti among them, federated under the provincial body, and had grown substantial enough that the Congress socialist leader Sucheta Kripalani could describe it, in 1949, as the "largest democratic women's association in India".[8]

**Strategies and Activities, 1926–1935**

From its founding, the Samiti organised itself through annual provincial conventions (barshik sanmilani) held in different districts, at which local samitis presented reports and passed resolutions. Records reproduced in Aparna Mahanta's 2008 edition of *Ghar Jeuti* show conventions at Goalpara in 1927 and at Jorhat and Golaghat around 1928–29, each documented in reports that Saikiani herself wrote as the Samiti's secretary. The national development required girls to receive education on equal terms with boys and proposed the formation of groups of trained women teachers who could be sent out to spread literacy in the villages, a locally generated response to the chronic shortage of women teachers that official reports of the period also identified as a central bottleneck. This is worth underlining: rather than simply petitioning the government for more schools, the Samiti's own resolutions tried to address the supply-side problem of who would staff them.

Perhaps the Samiti's most enduring instrument was *Ghar Jeuti* ("The Light of the Home"), the first Assamese women's magazine, launched in 1927 from Sibsagar and continuing into the early 1930s under the joint editorship of Kanaklata Chaliha and Kamalalaya Kakati.[9] Kanaklata Chaliha's husband, Taraprasad Chaliha, who had studied law in England and witnessed the militant suffragette movement there, supported the venture and, with an associate, had already helped establish a local girls' school; his own writing helped set the magazine's early agenda around women's education, reading habits, and physical exercise.

While not formally a Samiti organ in a narrow sense, *Ghar Jeuti* functioned as its principal public forum: it carried Saikiani's own annual reports as Samiti secretary, and hosted a sustained, multi-voiced debate on female education among both male and female contributors. In 1923, a mere 4,313 women had received

teacher training in the whole of India, and missionary women outnumbered Indian women in most training institutions, evidence, in his reading, of how far Indian women's higher education still lagged.[10] Other contributors addressed the content of a proper girls' curriculum: Dibyalata Barua proposed a course of study spanning home science, health education, Indian history, mathematics, and an optional English component; Dakheswari Brahmani argued for extending girls' education beyond the primary stage into genuine secondary and higher learning; and women writers such as Nurjahan Begum and Bidyawati Hazarika insisted on quality education regardless of caste or religion, situating the demand within a longer history of Indian women's learning. That the magazine's contributors were predominantly women was itself notable in a period when female authorship in the Assamese public sphere was rare.

The Samiti and the *Ghar Jeuti* circle also worked through a cultural festival, using the commemoration of Joymoti, the Ahom queen remembered for sacrificing her life to protect her husband, and reframed in this period as an icon of feminine courage — as an occasion for an organised public assembly of women. Whereas the first Joymoti Utsav in 1914 had consisted of a single essay competition, the 1928 celebration at Sibsagar, organised within the *Ghar Jeuti*–Samiti network, offered nineteen prizes across categories including acting, singing, recitation, weaving, spinning, and boat racing, with forty further consolation prizes.[11] Such events were not schooling in the narrow sense, but they served the Samiti's broader educational project by legitimizing women organized public participation and competitive skill display, precisely the behaviours that a culture of purdah and domestic seclusion had discouraged.

***Confronting Child Marriage: The Sarda Act and the "Mini" Case***

Contemporary reformers, in Assam as elsewhere in India, regarded child marriage as the single greatest practical obstacle to girls' schooling, since marriage typically ended a girl's education outright. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, the "Sarda Act," after its legislative sponsor Harbilas Sarda, fixed a minimum marriage age of fourteen for girls and eighteen for boys and came into force on 1 April 1930; it was welcomed by women's organizations across the country, with Muthulakshmi Reddy, president of the All-India Women's Conference, ranking it among India's landmark social reforms.[12] Enforcement nationwide was notoriously weak: of 473 prosecutions in the Act's first two years and five months, only 167 succeeded, and the number of child wives recorded nationally rose rather than fell in the years immediately following.

Against this backdrop of weak state enforcement, the Assam Mahila Samiti moved from advocacy to direct action. In 1934, it served a formal legal notice, invoking the Sarda Act, on a groom who had married a twelve-year-old girl referred to in the records as "Mini" — an episode that recent scholarship treats as a landmark test of the Samiti's willingness to use the colonial legal apparatus against patriarchal practice within Assamese society itself, and which reportedly caused a "great sensation" in Guwahati.[13] The episode illustrates concretely how the Samiti's fight against child marriage and its fight for girls' education were, in practice, a single campaign: a girl kept from an early marriage was, in the logic of the Samiti's own publications, a girl who could remain in or return to school.

**Everyday Reform and Access: Purdah, Temple Entry, and Women's Time**

The Samiti's agenda also extended into the everyday domestic arrangements that structured women's access to any activity outside the home, education included. The Tezpur Mahila Samiti, a constituent branch, is recorded to have passed a resolution urging Assamese families to adopt fixed household mealtimes specifically to secure women "leisure", time freed from continuous kitchen duty that could then be devoted to cultural and educational activity outside the domestic sphere. Separately, the provincial Samiti's campaigning helped open the historic Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo, near Guwahati, to women, an assertion of women's right to public and religious space that paralleled its arguments for their right to public education. Neither intervention increased school enrolment directly, but both were of a piece with the Samiti's broader claim that women's seclusion, whether from temples, from unstructured time, or from public assembly, was the deeper condition that made educational neglect possible.[14]

**Measuring Impact: Education Indicators to the Mid-1930s**

Assessing the Samiti's direct, causal contribution to enrolment figures is difficult, since the surviving statistics describe the education system as a whole rather than any Samiti-run institutions specifically, and the secondary literature consulted for this paper does not document a Samiti-run school system on the scale of,

say, the missionary network. What the record does show is a slow but real increase in women's participation in formal education across precisely this period. At Cotton College, the number of women students rose from six in the 1931–32 session to eighteen in 1932–33; across all the men's colleges of the province combined, only twelve women had been enrolled in the five years 1927–32, but this had risen to roughly a hundred by 1936–37. Rajaniprova Dutta of Bajali, in Lower Assam, headed the list of successful candidates in the Intermediate Science examination in this period and went on, by this account, to become the first woman from Assam to qualify in medicine.[15] These are provincial, not Samiti-specific, figures, and the growth they show remained modest in absolute terms, a story of individual exception more than mass enrolment. The Samiti's own resolutions, however, explicitly framed such gains as insufficient and called for structural remedies, such as training corps of women teachers, that anticipated the institutional developments of the following years: Lady Keane College at Shillong (1936), and, at the end of the following decade, Handique Girls' College at Guwahati (1939), the first women's college in the Brahmaputra valley proper, followed in 1940 by the formation of the Assam Women's Education League under Lady Reid, a body explicitly dedicated to furthering the cause the Samiti had been raising for a decade and a half.

### Limitations and Critiques

The Samiti's reach and achievements in this period should not be overstated. Its leadership and much of its readership were drawn from an educated, largely upper-caste, urban and small-town Assamese milieu; the literature consulted gives little indication that its activities extended in any organised way to tea-garden labour communities or to the hill districts, where female education lagged even further behind the valley districts. Saikiani's own position as an unwed mother from a non-dominant caste made her a genuinely marginal and, at times, contested figure even within reformist Assamese society, a tension recent scholarship treats as central to understanding both her radicalism and the limits of her acceptance. Nationally, the weak enforcement of the Sarda Act noted above meant that legal victories such as the one the Samiti secured through its 1934 notice remained exceptional rather than systemic; colonial officials did little to publicise or enforce the law, particularly outside the major towns. Finally, because this paper relies on secondary literature rather than the Samiti's own archives, quantitative claims specifically about the number of schools it founded or girls it directly enrolled could not be independently verified here and are accordingly not asserted; closing this gap through archival research remains an important task for future work.

## CONCLUSION

Between 1926 and 1935, the Assam Mahila Samiti did not single-handedly transform female literacy in Assam; the underlying numbers remained small, and the province's first women's college was still several years away. What it did do, this paper has argued, was build the associational, print, and cultural scaffolding within which the demand for women's education could be organised, publicly argued, and, in the case of child marriage, legally contested. Through its annual conventions and Saikiani's own reports, it moved beyond generalized appeals to propose concrete remedies, such as a cadre of village women teachers; through *Ghar Jeuti*, it created a sustained public forum in which Assamese women wrote, in their own words, about what and how they should be taught; through festivals such as the Joymoti Utsav, it normalized women's organized public participation; and through direct legal action against child marriage, it confronted what contemporaries agreed was the single greatest practical barrier to keeping girls in school. In this sense, the Samiti's first decade of activity, from 1926 to 1935, is best understood as the essential precondition for, rather than the direct cause of, the institutional gains in Assamese women's education that followed later in the 1930s and 1940s.

### Suggestions for Further Research

Given the largely secondary-literature basis of this paper, a fuller account would need to draw on the original run of *Ghar Jeuti* (1927–c.1931/32), reprinted with editorial notes by Aparna Mahanta (2008); the Samiti's own minute books and district reports, portions of which have been digitized under Hemjyoti Medhi's archiving project; Census of India reports for 1921 and 1931, which would allow a more precise district-level reading of literacy trends against the Samiti's areas of activity; and the proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council on the implementation of the Child Marriage Restraint Act. Oral-history and digital-archiving initiatives such as the Northeast Lightbox project on the Tezpur Mahila Samiti also offer under-used material for reconstructing the Samiti's activity at the district level.

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