



## CHANDRAPRABHA SAIKIANI

### Beyond the Beaten Track

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One does not have to look to the West to find examples of women's rights crusaders. We have an example right in our midst - a firebrand personality, whose selfless struggle for women's emancipation stands tall in the history of Assam for all times to come. She is none other than Chandraprabha Saikiani, the legendary figure, whose real life story is stranger than fiction.

Chandraprabha was born in the year 1901 to Gangapriya and Ratiram Mazumdar, the village headman of Doisingari village of undivided Kamrup district in Assam. Her parents had named her Chandra Priya but she came to be known as Chandraprabha during her school days. Since there was no primary school in their village, Chandraprabha and her sister stayed at their maternal aunt's home in Tihu to complete their primary education. For their Middle school, the two sisters faced untold hardships as they had to go to a boys' school which was several miles away from their village. Chandraprabha not only educated herself, but was equally concerned about the education of the girls

in her surroundings. At a very early age, she established a girls' school in Akaya village. It was here that, Neelakanta Barua, the then school inspector, spotted Chandraprabha. Impressed by her profound interest in studies, he arranged for scholarships for Chandraprabha and her sister at the Nagaon Mission School. Both the girls were serious students and, later on, her sister who came to be known as Rajaniprabha went on to become the first woman MBBS doctor of Assam.

Chandraprabha, though a young girl then, was far ahead of her time in her thoughts and actions. The rebellious streak in her nature and her inability to tolerate any injustice found expression even in those early days. She protested against the actions of the school authority for not allowing a student to stay in the hostel when she refused to get converted to Christianity. Her protests compelled the authorities to change their decision and the girl had to be inducted into the hostel.

After completing her education, Chandraprabha was working in Nagaon for a while. Later, she was appointed the headmistress of Tezpur Girls' ME school. Her life in Tezpur broadened her horizons as she came into the contact of illustrious personalities like Omeo Kumar Das, Chandra Nath Sarma, Jyotiprasad Agarwala to name a few.

At the Nagaon session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha (1925), Chandraprabha's revolutionary zeal came to the fore. The then President of the premiere literary body of the state stressed the need for the spread of women's education. Paradoxically, a bamboo curtain segregated the women from the men present in the conference. Chandraprabha went up to the dais and asked the women to come out of the barrier.

Inspired by Gandhiji's ideals, Chandraprabha joined the non-cooperation movement in 1921 and beckoned to the womenfolk to do the same. Chandraprabha turned her attention to organizing the women in the villages. Under her leadership, the Asam Pradeshik Mahila Samity was born in the year 1926. The organisation spread out its wings throughout the state, taking up issues of child marriage, spread of women's education, self employment for women, and stress on handloom and handicraft. The Mahila Samiti, which is also the first organized women's movement in Assam, has grown into an institution in itself, devoting itself to the ideals laid down by Chandraprabha Saikiani. She edited the Mahila Samiti's journal 'Abhijatri' for seven years. She gave vent to her feelings through many poems and fictions written by her. Her novel 'Pitribhitha' was published in 1937.

The rebel in her found expressions in her personal life too. During her days in Tezpur, young Chandraprabha came across the prolific writer, Dandinath Kalita. He expressed his love for her and she reciprocated his feelings. He dared not challenge the age-old caste system to take Chandraprabha as his wife. But Chandraprabha rose to this challenge as well. She never lost heart and played the role of a single mother to perfection. She not only brought up her only son Atul Saikia with all maternal care single-handedly, but also imbibed in him noble qualities of head and heart.

In 1972, in view of her outstanding contribution towards the uplift of women and selfless work for the betterment of society, Chandraprabha Saikiani was conferred the Padmashree award. But she died a couple of days before the day the honour was ceremonially conferred on her, adding another odd to a life full of struggles. Chandraprabha Saikiani breathed her last on March 16, 1972, which was the day she was born. In 2002, this firebrand lady of Assam was honoured by the Government of India with the release of a commemorative postage stamp. The former Girls' Polytechnic Institute in Guwahati has been named after Padmashree Chandraprabha Saikiani. The Government of Assam has instituted an annual award in her honour for personalities with extraordinary contribution towards betterment of women and the society. A crusader of justice, social reformer, promoter of women's education, a harbinger of empowerment, a nationalist to the core, an inspiring leader, she was a path breaker in the truest sense of the term. □□