

The background of the cover is a photograph of a beach. In the top left corner, blue waves with white foam are washing onto the shore. The rest of the image is a vast expanse of dark, wet sand. Several footprints are visible, most notably a large, clear one in the center and a series of smaller ones in the upper right corner.

# ASSAMESE WOMEN **THE PATHBREAKERS**

Editor

Dr Pori Hiloidari

# ASSAMESE WOMEN THE PATHBREAKERS

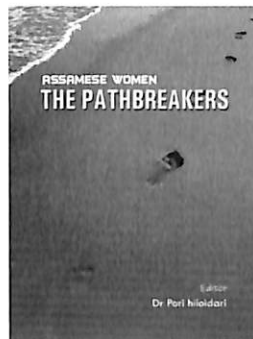
---

Editor  
Dr Pori Hiloidari





# ASSAMESE WOMEN THE PATHBREAKERS



Editor  
Dr Pori Hiloidari

**ASSAMESE WOMEN: THE PATHBREAKERS**

A collection of biographical sketches of seventy Assamese women pathbreakers  
in various fields of activities.

**Published by**  
Women's Studies Cell,  
Handique Girls' College, Guwahati-781001  
in association with  
Bhabani Print & Publications  
Hatishila, Panikhaiti, Guwahati-781026

**Editor**  
Dr Pori Hiloidari

44815

**Members of the editorial board**  
Dr Ajanta Khaund Bezbaruah  
Dr Ranjita Bhattacharjyya

ISBN: 978-93-81139-23-3

Price Rs.: 300/-

**Printed at**  
Bhabani Offset & Imaging Systems Pvt. Ltd.  
7 Lachit Lane, Rajgarh Road, Guwahati-781007

*“We think back through our  
mothers if we are women.”*

Virginia Woolf: *A Room of One's Own*

Dedicated in the memory of  
late Rajabala Das





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

**A**ssamese Women: The Pathbreakers' is a dream come true for all of us in the Women's Studies Cell. I acknowledge all the help I received from each and every member of the Cell as well as many of my colleagues. I wish to thank Prof Geeta Barua, who painstakingly went through the draft of the book and has been our constant support and source of encouragement. I express my gratitude to our Principal, Dr Indira Bardoloi, who made it possible to publish the book. A special thanks must be given to all those at Bhabani Press who toiled with us in editing and correcting. We are also thankful to Katha Publications for the information we could avail of through their publications. Last but not the least, I wish to acknowledge the guidance and help offered to us by Prof Basanta Deka in various stages of the book.

**Ajanta Khaund Bezbaruah**  
Convenor,  
Women's Studies Cell  
Handique Girls' College.







## FOREWORD

---

‘Assamese Women: The Pathbreakers’, published by the Women’s Studies Cell of Handique Girls’ College, a premier institution of higher education for women in the North-East, offers a selection of biographical sketches of about seventy women who have enriched the soil of Assam by their significant contributions over the decades in their myriad roles as writers, leaders, politicians, academicians, administrators, artists, social and cultural activists, sports personalities, doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs etc. The importance of bringing out such a volume lies in the very fact that it will go a long way in making available for our new generation of readers the much required knowledge of the lives of these celebrated women of Assam, some of whom won their way through cold conservatism and orthodoxy to the full recognition of their power. They made tireless efforts to assert their identity heralding a new consciousness, proved their mettle and worth, rose to eminence and carved a female space in the face of all traditional bondages imposed on them.

Gathering accurate information for writing a biography, however brief it may be, is always a challenging task. Memoirs, letters, books, every available material are to be collected and studied, subjects are to be located and interviewed and that way information is to be gleaned and organized coherently. The seventy lives in this volume contributed by a group of competent authors may look like little, formal documentations, but it speaks volumes about the writers' sincere involvement, hard labour and their spirit of research in unearthing biographical materials.

The Women's Studies Cell of Handique Girls' College deserves commendation for this noble but difficult endeavour of capturing the images of these pathbreaking women of Assam so that in the overwhelming flux of time they do not fade into insignificance and oblivion. It is worth remembering that many of these women emerged as powerful in the grim background of patriarchal, empirical and national margins. 'Assamese Women: The Pathbreakers' will undoubtedly give an insight into the difficult dimensions of the self-fashioning and politics of day-to-day life which stood as insurmountable obstacles in the way to achieve the cherished goals for many of these women.

What inspires us the most is the fact that many of these women included in this volume, especially those belonging to the colonial period could abandon the role of the 'peripheral other' and emerge as victors. Unflinching determination and strength within formed the bedrock of their spectacular success.

Pitfalls in the publications of such a volume may be numerous, but these can be made easy allowance with the premise that the book will provide us with some illuminating information about the lives of these women of Assam, over a period of great socio-political changes. We hope 'Assamese Women: The Pathbreakers' will be able to receive due attention and response from a wide range of book lovers.

**Geeta Barua**  
Ex-Principal i/c and  
former Head of the Department of English,  
Handique Girls' College

# INTRODUCTION

---

**I**t is said that women all over the world speak only one language– the language of silence. But this has already been proved to be a misconception, since modern women have been breaking their silence and striving for common good through a variety of medium and platforms, social, political, cultural, economic, to mention a few. They have been creating alternative narratives through their brush strokes, music, film and documentary making, dance performances, philanthropic works, writing, commercial enterprises, etc, which have become not only professions for some of them, but mainly a passion and a platform for asserting and recreating identities for themselves.

Lots of research perhaps have been done on the status of women in our state in the pre-colonial and colonial period. In an article titled “Sankardeva and the Status of Women in Assamese Society”, Dr Aparna Mahanta observes that Sankardeva, the great social reformer and founder of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Vaisnavite Movement , was quite conservative regarding the place

of women in the society. Woman as charmer and sometimes as a chaste and loyal wife were familiar stereotypes in Sankardeva's writings. Even the projection of woman as Mother Goddess in the Brahminical religious tradition is aimed at objectifying female sexuality by refusing to allow woman to have and celebrate her own subject position. It is to be noted at the same time that while under institutional Vaisnavism orthodox tendencies gained ground in the *sattras*, popular Vaisnavism as developed in the villages cultivated liberal temperament among the masses as a result of which women could play an equally active role with that of the menfolk in the religious life. As women were allowed to take part in the community *naam -kirtans*, the *naamghars* therefore provided them with the much-needed public space which had been otherwise inaccessible to them. Moreover, unlike in the other parts of India, *Sati-Sabitri* ideals were also not so deeply entrenched in the psyche of the Assamese people as to keep women completely at the periphery of the society.

During the colonial period, the Christian missionaries and a few liberal-minded Assamese intellectuals like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Baruah played a pivotal role in the empowerment of Assamese women by championing the cause of women's education. Then a new chapter began with the launch of Assam Mahila Samiti in 1926 with the primary aim of generating political awareness among the women of Assam and mobilizing their active participation in the freedom movement. Sibsagar Mahila Samiti's monthly journal "*Ghar Jeuti*" (1927-1932) provided Assamese women with an open platform for discussing many women related issues particularly the subject of women's education. The role of Chandraprava Saikiani as the firebrand revolutionary fighting for women's liberty and women's education can never be forgotten by the women of Assam. Meanwhile, magazines like *Jonaki*, *Assam Bandhu*, *Usha*, *Alochani* and *Banhi Hemoprovra Das*, *Lotika Devi* appeared in the literary scene through these magazines. Without these institutional support and individual efforts in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women's liberty at the socio-cultural and political level would have remained a far-fetched dream in Assam. But some recently unearthed cases of '*Sati*' in the pre-colonial and early period of colonial administration and reports of fast increasing cases of dowry deaths, witch hunting, women trafficking etc in different parts of the state compell us to believe that complacency is not the right approach towards the cause of women's empowerment in our state at present. This accounts for the relevance of the Women's Studies Cell functioning in different institutions of higher education in Assam. Handique on the Assamese women who have had significant contributions to the socio-cultural life of Assam. "*Assamese Women: The Pathbreakers*:" is the result of that humble endeavour. Women in this part of India seem to remain marginalized in any narrative of women's spectacular success scripted and maintained at the national level. Everyone in India

probably knows about Devika Rani, Sarojini Naidu, but very few know about our own Aidew Handique and Chandraprava Saikiani. This book titled *Assamese Women : the Path Breakers* is not aimed at correcting the historical neglect and yet we feel that even through such a small venture, readers in the other parts of the country can be enlightened about our women pioneers and women achievers. Let alone the non-Assamese people, the young generation here in Assam also should be aware and feel proud of those women who have braved the odds for larger social interests.

While selecting the names of women pioneers and pathbreakers for this volume we had to remain satisfied with whatever inputs we received from the sources at our disposal. Lack of communication network is not an acceptable excuse in today's world and yet it has to be mentioned that communication, when remains unresponded, sometimes fail to produce the desired result. We have had to leave out many names in this volume mainly for this gap in communication which, however, is not without a room for redressal in future. But we must apologize to our readers for our inability to include in this volume life-sketches of as many women achievers from all walks of life as possible. Another thing that needs to be mentioned is that none of the contributors of the narratives in this volume is experienced in the art of writing and most of them are indeed complete novices. Therefore any search for literary quality will definitely be met with dissatisfaction. This volume makes an attempt to offer short biographical sketches rather than any researched and comprehensive analysis and assessment of the achievements and contributions of the Assamese women pathbreakers. We sincerely believe that our readers will come forward to offer constructive criticism and that will be the most valuable guideline for further improvement of this volume in the near future.

Pori Hiloidari

25-02-2011





# CONTENT

---

FOREWORD / ix

INTRODUCTION / xi

SOCIAL WORK / 1-32

Chandraprabha Saikiani / 3 | Amal Prabha Das / 6  
Puspalata Das / 9 | Padmashree Hema Bharali / 13  
Shakuntala Choudhury / 15 | Suchibrata Rai Choudhury / 17  
Renuka Devi Barkataki / 20 | Kalpana Bezbaruah / 22  
Birubala Rabha / 26 | Manju Choudhury / 29  
Anjana Goswami / 31

LITERATURE / 33-62

Nalinibala Devi / 35 | Sneha Devi / 38  
Nirupama Phukan / 41 | Preeti Barua / 43  
Nirupama Borgohain / 45 | Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi / 48  
Lakshahira Das / 50 | Sheela Barthakur / 52  
Prabina Saikia / 55 | Mamoni (Roisam) Goswami / 57  
Rita Choudhury / 60

ACADEMICS / 63-75

Rajabala Das / 65 | Indira Miri / 67  
Parukutty Barua / 70 | Nilima Dutta / 72  
Renu Devi / 74

## CULTURE / 77-122

## (i) Film and Media / 77-98

Aideu Handique / 79 | Anupama Bhattacharyya / 81

Lily Das Malik / 83 | Dr Santwana Bordoloi / 85

Manju Borah / 87 | Runu Devi Thakur / 89

Malaya Goswami / 91 | Seema Biswas / 94

Sangeeta Tamuli / 96

## (ii) Music, Dance and Fine art / 99-122

Hemangini Bordoloi / 101 | Sudakshina Sarma / 103

Pratima Barua Pandey / 105 | Gorima Hazarika / 107

Minoti Khound / 110 | Deepali Barthakur / 112

Indira PP Bora / 114 | Parveen Sultana / 116

Jupitora Das / 118 | Tarali Sarma / 120

## ENTREPRENEURSHIP / 123-140

Kamal Kumari Barooah / 125 | Nirupama Goswami / 127

Renu Devi / 129 | Suniti Barua / 131

Minakshi Kakati / 133 | Waheeda Rahman / 135

Meghna Rita Rai Medhi / 137 | Aitreyee Barooah Thekedah / 139

## SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND MEDICINE / 141-160

Dr Sushila Thomas / 143 | Tilottama Roychoudhury / 144

Dr Malati Barua / 146 | Dr Bharati Barooah / 148

Dr Deepali Dutta / 150 | Dr Alaka Goswami / 152

Jayanti Chutia / 155 | Bandita Phukan / 157

Nayan Bhandari Sharma / 159

## ADMINISTRATION AND LAW / 161-168

Meera Sharma / 163 | Sewali Choudhury / 166

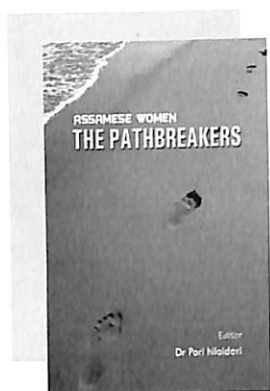
## SPORTS AND ADVENTURE / 169-181

Dheera Chaliha Hazarika / 171 | Susan Das Chaudhuri / 173

Tayabun Nisha / 175 | Parbati Baruah / 177

Monalisa Barua Mehta / 180

## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS / 182



# SOCIAL WORK



*'When society requires to be rebuilt,  
there is no use in attempting to rebuild  
it on the old plan.'*

*—John Stuart Mill.  
Dissertations and Discussions Vol-1 (1859).*

Participation of women in social restructuring entails breaking the barrier of the private sphere for asserting their presence in the male-dominated public realm. As in the colonial Assam such strong-willed women as Bhugeshwari Phukanoni and Kanaklata fought and died heroically for liberty and equality, in the independent national backdrop as well, we get to see the tireless endeavour of women social crusaders committing their lives to larger humanitarian goals. Sakuntala Choudhury, an octogenarian who has recently received Jamnalal Bajaj award for social uplift by empowering seriously disadvantaged section of the society is a role model for many other social activists in the state. Efforts of many perhaps remain localised beyond the publicity glare and we apologize for our inability to include those silent social crusaders in the limited space of this volume.