

Helming the Asom Mahila Samiti

In 1926, the sustained efforts of a few enterprising women paid off and the *Asom Mahila Samiti* was formally founded in Gauhati. Several stalwarts such as Durgaprobha Bora, Chandraprobha Baruah, Swarnalata Saikia, Sashiprabha Hazarika came to our house to discuss the details with me. They convened a meeting and elected a committee with Durgaprobha Bora as the President, myself as the Secretary, Swarnalata Saikia as the Assistant Secretary and Chandraprobha Baruah as the Treasurer. The working committee meeting was well attended with about twenty one members, including Sashiprobha Hazarika, Mrs Tayebullah, Ghanakanti Devi and others.

We started work with great enthusiasm. A house was arranged for by Chandraprobha Baruah where Hindi classes were started. Small children were taught music and the *Samiti* organised weaving and spinning lessons for interested women. I remember the house becoming a hub of various activities. Some of our regular meetings were also held there.

During this time, a few girl students from Upper Assam had come to study in Cotton College. But there were no hostel facilities in the College for girls at the time. The *Mahila Samiti* stepped in to make arrangements for the girls to stay as boarders in the house of the President of the *Samiti*.

The *Samiti* made its stand clear on women's rights by supporting the judgement passed on the pathbreaking Sharada case and by proposing to start an agitation, if girls below the age of fourteen were forced into marriage by their guardians.

At this particular time, when sentiments about women's rightful place in society were beginning to be voiced, the *Samiti* came to know that a certain family in Uzanbazar was making arrangements for their daughter's wedding. All the members of the working committee went in a group to the concerned person's house and demanded to know the age of the bride. When they were told that the girl was about eleven years old, they requested the parents to stop the preparations immediately.

Ironically, the mother and grandmother of the girl were members of the *Mahila Samiti*. There were only three days left for the wedding and the father begged the *Samiti* not to interfere. But we remained resolute. It was decided in a meeting that copies of our resolution should be sent to the authorities. All the members were not agreeable about taking such a strong stand, but the majority voted in support. The groom's party had already reached Gauhati. There was only a day left. A copy of our resolution was sent to the groom's family as well. The groom himself became apprehensive about getting married to a minor as it might lead to conviction. They decided to call off the wedding and left for home.

A massive outcry followed the *Samiti's* bold action. In the bride's house all the wasted food was fed to beggars. We came to know later that the family members had bitterly commented that they were feeding people for the shraddha ceremony of the *Samiti*.

The militant stand adopted by the *Mahila Samiti* regarding the marriageable age of girls did go a long way in decreasing the number of child marriages in Gauhati. Before 1931, when the Sharada legislation was passed, child marriages were rampant, specially among the Brahmin community. But after 1932, I remember hearing about just one or two stray instances.

During my tenure as the secretary of the *Mahila Samiti*, we took a resolution in the working committee to seek an affiliation for the *Asom Pradesh Mahila Samiti* with the *Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sabha*. I was entrusted with the completion of all the necessary paperwork regarding the matter. We were not fully conversant with

the agenda and workings of the national unit. In 1932, the *Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sabha* held its annual session in Calcutta. I expressed the desire to attend the session in order to learn more about the functioning of the organization. At the same time, I thought I would be able to complete our merger with the parent body.

My husband was always eager to assist me in my work for the country and for the society. He extended a helping hand whenever needed. When I told him about going to Calcutta, he not only encouraged me, but came up with the suggestion that we could rent a house for a month and take our entire family there. I was thrilled with the idea. A friend of Shri Kamakhya Ram Barooah helped us to find a house with a monthly rent of Rs 120. My whole family, a nephew, Kamakhya Ram Barooah and his third daughter, Umi, travelled by train to Calcutta and stayed there for almost a month. We had taken a servant from home. We hired a cook there and I supervised the cooking and serving. Umi's tonsils were removed in the house by a doctor friend of Dr. Das. I watched avidly while the operation was in progress. I remember Umi recovering in about five days and going out with us to see the sights of the city.

The *Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sabha's* session was convened for a period of four days. I was escorted to and from the meetings by my husband's nephew, Nikunja Bihari Das. On the days when the meetings broke up earlier than scheduled, I remember quite a lot of confusion taking place as I had no means to inform him about the change of timing.

The discussion for the affiliation of *Asom Mahila Samiti* to the *Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sabha* went on parallelly with the formal meetings. At the end of the session, I was happy to have successfully engineered the negotiations in a way that met with everybody's satisfaction.

After I returned to Gauhati, I submitted my report to a working committee meeting. Unfortunately, the majority of the members were now against this affiliation which earlier they had

approved of. This turnaround by the members shocked me to core and I resolved to dissociate myself from the organization.

I had personally mediated in the merger of the *Asom Mahila Samiti* and the national apex body and had got it passed. Now how could I inform them that that we no longer wanted the affiliation? It was also a loss of face in front of my husband who encouraged me to work selflessly for the *Mahila Samiti*. He had spent so much money and time on the trip to Calcutta which now became worthless. I was also concerned that this *volte face* might colour his opinion of the work ethics of all women. I unburdened my heart to my husband. He was non-plussed by the development. He told me that I had two choices. One was to explain to the members that the whole matter had become unethical and to try to make them change their minds. The second was to open a state unit of *Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sabha* in Gauhati and save myself a lot of embarrassment.

I went about forming an independent unit of *Mahila Samiti* with a heavy heart. A few very close friends rallied round me and together, we launched the new *Samiti* in Gauhati. The ladies who helped me unstintingly in this venture were Laksheswari Bhuyan, Brajabala Baruah, Sabitri Duara, Hemoprobha Choudhury, Swarnalata Das, Lakhipriya Devi, Labanya Das and a few others. We became a part of the *Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sabha* and I was deputed to liaise between the two units. I became a member of the Standing Committee for Assam and attended the national session of the *Sabha* twice, once in Madras and the other time in Gwalior. Smti Debobala Chaliha joined our unit and travelled with me to Madras. I attended the sessions primarily to understand how the regional units were going to benefit by joining the parent body.

We sustained the *Asom Mahila Sabha* for about fifteen years and opened several branches in different towns and villages. A primary school was started in Bamundi village with our initiative. We hosted two annual sessions of the *Sabha* in Gauhati. One had Anasuya Bai Kale chairing the session while the second session was

graced by the then Governor of Assam, Shri Sriprakashji as the President. He was very impressed with the work done by the *Sabha* for the betterment of Assamese women.

The Gwalior session of the All India *Mahila Sabha* was attended by eight delegates from Assam. Members from the Goalpara and Nalbari branches came and joined us in Gauhati to travel together as a single unit. We had decided to take a flight to Calcutta. I remember that the weather was very inclement on that day and our flight was delayed by about two hours. My husband was very worried about our safety and had come to see us off at the airport. I am sure he did not want me to travel on such a day, but he never forced his opinions on others. I too had misgivings but the tickets were booked and cancelling them at the last moment would complicate all our travel plans. So we took the risk and fortunately had a safe flight.

I was very much against smoking in public places and raised objections about it in the Gwalior session. It was heartening to note that people had stopped smoking in the meetings after I had voiced my reservations.

The Assam branch of the *Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sabha* next raised funds to build a girls' hostel for college girls. It was decided to build it near the existing hostels of Panbazar Girls' High School. The girl students from outside who took admission in Cotton College would have a proper place to stay as the college had no hostel facilities for the limited number of girls who were admitted. Before the hostel was built, these girls stayed in a house owned by my husband. He had built it with the purpose of opening a clinic. The equipment had already been ordered but had not yet arrived. The house was lying empty for sometime. The college girls had come to me with their very genuine problem and I wanted to help them somehow. As usual, I turned to my husband for advice and he once again came to my rescue and suggested that I could use the vacant house for about six months. The girls moved in immediately and I took the responsibility of looking after their needs. Kamala

Devi, the widowed sister of Shri Kali Prasad Barooah, became the first matron, but only for a short while.

My aunt-in-law who lived in Sualkuchi, was always keen on social work. She generously offered to come over and stay with the girls. She took her meals in her daughter's place which was nearby. Though she was about sixty years old and had lived her entire life in a village, she came forward without any hesitation to be of help to the girls. A lady with a liberal mindset, she also played an active role in Gandhiji's Non-Cooperation Movement which had spread to the villages of Assam.

In the meantime, Dr. Das was given several beds in the Government Hospital to keep his patients both before and after operations. So the pressing need to open his own clinic was removed. We continued with the hostel for two years till the building, sponsored by the *Mahila Samiti*, was completed and the girls could be safely shifted.

I was the state's representative for both the *Mahila Samitis* I was part of. It should be mentioned here that the *Assam Pradesh Mahila Samiti* which I had left on ethical grounds, later applied for an affiliation with the *Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sabha* again. I came to know about the matter from the national forum. The rule was that there could be only one representation from each state. When I was asked for a clarification as to why Assam had two *Mahila Samitis*, I did not want to make public our internal feud. I knew that since we were already a member of the *Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sabha*, the other unit would never be allowed in. I pondered deeply over the matter. There would have been no need for me to have walked out of the original *Mahila Samiti*, had the members not created the controversy over the affiliation. I informed the *Assam Pradesh Mahila Samiti* about the new developments. They now expressed the desire to merge the two regional bodies and the working committees of both took the decision to do so. The national unit was informed about the merger. I also let them know that I would no longer continue as the representative of the state.