The "Women's Question" in Colonial Assam: A Case Study of Chandraprabha Saikiani and the Assam Mahila Samiti

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EPILOGUE

The Making of an Archive[1]

The project "Memory, Movement and the *Mahila Samiti* in Assam, India" (2009-2011) began with an objective to record memory, history and sentiments of the hundred year old mahila samiti institution by scanning archival documents and conducting audio visual recording at three samitis, i.e. Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti in Guwahati, Dibrugarh District Mahila Samiti in Dibrugarh and Tezpur District Mahila Samiti in Tezpur. Our project has digitally scanned fragile handwritten minutes of meeting and proceeding books and documents such as cash registers, audit reports, photographs, and booklets at three selected samitis. The earliest document scanned and digitally preserved is the minutes of a meeting of the Tezpur Asamiya Mahila Samiti of 15 January 1928. There is also an audio visual archive of interviews/conversations with past and current members, office bearers of mahila samitis and people who have had a sustained engagement with question of equity and justice for women in Assam.

A qualifier is necessary here: As older women re-organize their memory for audio visual recording for a project that had "recovering [mahila samiti's] contestations . . . with the state" as one of the stated agendas, there is an acute danger of imagining a radical past. However, excepting for one interview (Meenakshi Bhuyan, TDMS), there is often a disjunction between women's received understanding/ remembering of the mahila samiti's work in the past and what is revealed in other sources like print and archival documents. Often that elision of memory shapes a complacent reading of the past. As against the reluctant and limited disavowal of patriarchy in general in the present, the mahila samiti's history retrieved in print and in unpublished minutes of meetings relates several radical moments. These moments problematize the connection between memory and history and raise crucial questions about situating the archive and the stories that these sources reveal.

This takes us to theoretical aspects of recovering a sense of agency through memory, especially while dealing with marginalized groups like women in an already

marginalized geopolitical landscape of northeast India. I underscore how women's memory functions within systemic structures of accommodation as well as contestations by sharing field notes here. I would like to cite the interview of Bina Hazarika (Chief Advisor, DDMS) to try and understand the different discourses that inform and intersect the process of retrieving women's memory. The transcript of a part of the interview reads thus –

> B.H:- [When we joined the samiti in 1974], it was almost dead. There was no office, no maintenance of documents.
>
> H.M:- You had a very difficult time.
>
> B.H:- I must acknowledge the help of Chief Engineer Hiren Bhuyan when we started this building in 1978. Gyanadalata Duara, Sulakanti Duara, Nirmala Dutta – they bought the land from Mr. Jalan. *I think, I can share this with you* – this piece of land actually belonged to the *Sahitya Sabha* ([Dibrugarh] Literary Association). And the plot near the main road where the Sahitya Sabha Building stands today was for the mahila samiti. They [the sahitya sabha members] were very clever and our seniors were naïve. They[senior mahila samiti members] were convinced by some Sahitya Sabha members that this plot has more land and thus the Sahitya Sabha took the high land near the main road in exchange of this one. This is a glaring example of how women are always cheated in a patriarchal society. (*laughs*). We had to spend a lot of money filling up this plot to bring it to the road level. Look at them! They went ahead and built a beautiful house in our land.

The problematic[2] of the interview with Bina Hazarika is partly what I would like to highlight here. Out of a range of forty recorded interviews, long and short, one to one and group, my selection of one among many raises certain questions. Firstly, why do I feel the need to highlight Hazarika' interview? Secondly, how does her statement "connect" to the project paradigm – ideological and otherwise? As oral history interviews are seen as constructed and ordered by the active intervention of the researcher, it is important to factor in the "human relationship" behind the interview. Thirdly, how far is her statement made in a given context of reception – both the broad project paradigm and the actual interview space of the Dibrugarh

Mahila Samiti office – amidst fellow samiti members and the project team, an all-female group except for the cameraperson? Fourthly, are there "hidden levels of discourses" in her statement not available in a printed transcript but can be heard, seen and felt in the audio-video clip? Dan Sipe has argued that the richer detail of videotaped interviews record more fully the expression and process of memory generation: "The goal is not . . . [the] displacement of the printed word, but rather to have the moving images of film and video recognised as generating discrete modes of discourse with their own ways to encode information, express concepts, and embody ambiguity and certainty" (387).

In Hazarika's interview there is an acceptance of dominance as systemic in patriarchy and also an ability to see that as endemic to women's mobilization and access to the public. She is certain of the support to her statement in a given context as she looks at her fellow samiti members outside the purview of the camera but unsure of its implications for a wider audience. One of the crucial details that emerge from the interview does not come from individual memory alone. What is the samiti's allegiance to the sahitya sabha? The answer is complemented by print sources. We know that right from its inception in 1926 till the early 1930s the Assam Mahila Samiti had always held its annual conference at the ASS Annual Conference venue. It was formed under the patronage of the ASS and was accommodated in its *pandal*s (tents) for meetings and so on. Given this history of patronage it may not be surprising that the Dibrugarh Sahitya Sabha too had effective control over the functioning of the mahila samiti there. This no way condones the alleged appropriation of the better plot of land but it does open a new perspective onto a simple statement of patriarchal exploitation. We see how mahila samitis function in a far more complex and layered systemic and material conditions that include actual practicalities of registering a plot of land, running around complex bureaucratic mechanism and so forth where traditionally women would be at a clear disadvantage.

How far is it a legitimate exercise to highlight a few women's subversive statements vis-à-vis a large number of women's acceptance of conventional gender equation? Katherine Borland says, "to refrain from interpretation by letting the subjects speak for themselves seems to me an unsatisfactory if not illusory solution"

(321). Feminist rereading is crucial to locate transcripts, translations, slippages and may not to be abandoned for "objectivity" as such. While it is true that many members in various samitis unequivocally accept women's fulfilling of traditional roles in the family, society and the nation state etc, it is equally worthwhile to explore the gendered logic of participation in and engendering the public.

One of the ways of engaging with this transition is to explore if anti-colonial struggle that informed the nascent mobilization of women in mahila samitis facilitated an understanding of gendered subjectivity that some later activists have neither lived through nor conceptualized. We must also remember the class positions of most of the women in mahila samiti's leadership position and the increasing depoliticization process that is linked to a consumer culture in the post liberalization of Indian economy and globalization. The mahila samitis do not function outside these larger political and economic forces. Most mahila samitis are struggling to find voluntary service of women that was the primary driving force till recent times. Meenakshi Bhuyan and Lily Saikia echoed these sentiments and said that women in recent years have moved more inward into the domestic and the family where work related to the larger society does not figure in. This is an important point to factor in our assessment of the mahila samiti. While we may be reluctant about the complacent reading of patriarchy in a few contemporary members, we nonetheless must recognize their motivation and "desire to do something" for society. This is not the same as reading mahila samiti work as morally superior social work but to recognize that many women seemed to have found meaning for themselves and for other women through samiti work whether done in the mode of charity or as social justice, internal hierarchies notwithstanding.

This aspect is pertinent to our project as the samiti has a largely negative and/or indifferent "image" in contemporary popular imagination. We must acknowledge that it is in this context of skepticism and indifference of popular imagination that we were welcomed by all the three mahila samitis when we contacted them with the project proposal of digital archiving. There has been a great deal of enthusiasm about the project among individual members. We must reflect on these methodologically in our rereading of memory without being disrespectful to any

of the participants who shared crucial details of their lives with us. We become aware of the contingencies that inform the creation of an archive – human and technological, academic and logistics without blurring crucial distinctions between voices and visuals, memory and history – where women's memory transforms the very essence of how we attempt to understand women's agency then and now.

Notes

1. A part of the material presented in this section is from my article "The Making of an Archive: 'Memory, Movement and the *Mahila Samiti* in Assam, India.'"

2. Ronald Grele argues, "If read properly, they [oral testimony] do reveal to us hidden levels of discourse – the search for which is the aim of symptomatic reading. If read . . . again and again, not just for facts and comments, but also, as Althusser suggests, for insight and oversights, for the combination of vision and nonvision, and especially for answers to questions which were never asked, we should be able to isolate and describe the problematic which inform the interview" (45).