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# CHANDRAPROVA: THE EMERGENCE OF RESISTANCE AND *ABHIYATRI*

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**Abstract**

*Chandraprova Saikiani, an extraordinary woman of colonial Assam who withstood the harsh realities of life with her strong personality and voice of protest, would have remained lost in the annals of history if Pushpalata Das would not have brought her to notice through Agnisnata Chandraprova (1998). Through Nirupama Borgohain's novel Abhiyatri, she gained a new lease of life with her lived experiences coming alive.This paper seeks to establish that Borgohain has made a significant exploration of the colonial Assamese woman as transmitter of culture and bearer of change thus offering an alternative perspective that challenges the traditional views of women's role and agency. Chandraprova is seen since her childhood as one who always stood for the rights of a person. She would always raise her voice for equal opportunities for women and at a very young age she started a school for girls in her village. Her journey to selfhood begins from her childhood when she was old enough to understand the discrimination against women in the society.In order to situate the Assamese women in the backdrop ofsocial ills against women, the task remains with the postcolonial writer to rehistoricise the texts and re-present the colonial woman in the context of today. Therefore, this paper would explore this very rebel woman who questions the very essence of being a woman as immortalized by Nirupama Borgohain in the novel Abhiyatri.It makes a significant study to probe into the acceptance of a rebellious woman in the society who trespassed all the societal norms to instigate women to realize their self-consciousness.*

**Keywords:** Colonial woman, Assamese women, postcolonial, rehistoricise, agency, resistance

Women in colonial India were never expected to be a part of the outer world. Her place was restricted to the four walls of the house and she always had to remain behind the veils whenever she emerges out of the house. This "*andarmahal*" called by Partha Chatterjee

as that edge of uncolonised space which the Indian men prevented to be encroached by the colonizer. Surprisingly, these very Indian men themselves followed the Western value system in public life. The *purdah* system in Assam was prevalent only among the upper castes. People belonging to the lower strata of the society had the freedom to move about freely. In order to situate the Assamese women in the backdrop of all such social ills against women the task remains with the postcolonial writer to rehistoricise the texts and re-present the colonial woman in the context of today.The 'silenced voice' of the colonial woman is re-presented by NirupamaBorgohain in her novel *Abhiyatri* (*The Traveller*) (1993). ChandraprovaSaikiani, an extraordinary woman who withstood the harsh realities of life withher strong personality and voice of protest, would have remained lost in theannals of history if Pushpalata Das would not havebrought her to notice through *AgnisnataChandraprova*(1998). It is through *Abhiyatri* that she got a new lease of life withher lived experiences coming alive. Chandraprova is seen since her childhood asone who always stood for the rights of a person. She would always raise hervoice for equal opportunities for women and at a very young age she started aschool for girls in her village. Her education in the Nagaon Mission Schoolstands out as the turning point in her life, who goes on to be a school teacher andsubsequently devoting herself to the nation's freedom struggle.

In *Recasting Women*,Sangari and Vaid have argued that women in colonial period internalized "the offered models" of private/public sphere ideologies, with "varying degrees of conformity" (21). The suggestion here is that the Indian women were not only offered 'models', but also, they themselves had the tendency to submit or conform to them. This was the sheer destructive power of the all-powerful colonial-patriarchal force that could silence the vulnerable subject. Yet when we examine Chandraprova's contributions to making of the modern state, such a picture turns out to be misleading. She not only actively participated, but also legitimized her presence in the public sphere thus blurring the divide between the private and the public.Chandraprova, in *Abhiyatri,* is quick enough to recognize the social evils during the colonial period. Her journey to selfhood begins from her childhood when she was old enough to understand the discrimination against women in the society. The desire to get herself educated is proved by her sheer grit in continuing her schooling in spite of the arduous journey that she had to undertake by crossing the waist-deep muddy waters. She is able to make her voice heard when she had to stand for the rights of the mute natives. This comes to the fore when she, as a student, verbally opposes the living conditions of the native boarders in the hostel of the Nagaon Mission School: "We have come to know that a girl who has come to our hostel has been asked to stay in the warehouse. The reason that she has been ordered to stay along with other things in the warehouse is that she has refused to accept your religion. If you do not withdraw such a punishment meted out to one of our girls then we

won't do further Bible classes" (62). This daring, fiery character of the young Chandraprova tells of the woman who needs to speak and stand for herself.

A rebel woman who questions the very essence of being a woman has been immortalized by Nirupama Borgohain in the image of ChandraprovaSaikiani in the novel *Abhiyatri*. Citing the importance of the novel Rajen Kalita claims that

> "The novel has sealed the exclusive place that a powerful and significant woman like ChandraprovaSaikiani should attain in history. It has also instilled awareness among the readers by plotting questions on man-woman relationships and women's freedom through the narration of ChandraprovaSaikiani's story set in the Assamese society" (654).

Chandraprova's tumultuous life made her a stronger woman who not only stood up to the circumstances, but made the Assamese woman question her own identity in society and embark on a path to self-realization. She vehemently opposed the *purdah* system in the colonial society and is responsible for consolidating the women throughout Assam which Sandhya Devi, in her article "*AdhunikYugatAxomiya Nari*", compares with that of the protest made by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott against the custom of the veil in the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention held at London:

> The Abolitionist women suffered a great blow at the world Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 when women delegates were denied participation and were forced to sit behind a curtain in the balcony. As a result of this shocking experience Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, activists in the Abolition struggle, resolved to agitate for women's right upon return to the U.S. (38).

It makes a significant study to probe into the acceptance of a rebellious woman in the society who trespassed all the societal norms to instigate the women to realize their self-consciousness. It is also interesting to note as well as question the excitement in Chandraprova upon being conferred the Padmashri award. Her happiness on being conferred the Padmashri may be questioned on the ground that was it for this individual recognition that Chandraprova struggled? Borgohain has noted in the novel: "But alas, isn't she an aspirant for fame? Otherwise, why she would have been so overwhelmed by the news of Padmashri being conferred upon her that she pulled herself from her death-bed and decided to go to Delhi to receive the award from the President on 24$^{th}$ March?" (339). Rajen Kalita argues in his article "*Nirupama BorgohainerUpanyas* (The Novels of Nirupama Borgohain)" that "The author is not on the lookout for such a weakness in Chandraprova. If she had, then she would have come to the conclusion that it would be unnatural to find in Chandraprova a lack of yearning for attachment with the post-independence Congress party" (654). Chandraprova's happiness is not for her individual recognition, but recognition for all women, a victory for

women's individuality as she says to her son Atul, "Is the Mahila Samity different from me that something should be done for me exclusively? The Mahila Samity's pride is my pride" (338).

Society does everything to keep the women silent, and they "coming to voice" agency paved the way for social and political change in society. In *Abhiyatri*, Borgohain identifies Chandraprova as a colonial subject who could voice her demands of the right to speak as well as to be heard. When she was left alone by the man in her life to become a single mother it was her sheer determination and grit that enabled her to face the world. She was not only successful in beginning a new chapter in her life, but was also able to earn the respect that she almost lost. The society's opportunity to silence the "mute" woman was thwarted by Chandraprova's awareness of her 'self'. The postcolonial writer needs to re-write history and unfold the untold stories of the women in colonial times who were most of time asked to keep 'silence:

> All too frequently, male nationalists have condemned feminism as divisive, bidding women hold their tongues until after the revolution. Yet feminism is a political response to gender conflict, not its cause. To insist on silence about gender conflict when it already exists is to cover and thereby ratify women's disempowerment. Asking women to wait until after the revolution serves merely as a strategic tactic to defer women's demands. Not only does it conceal the fact that nationalisms are from the outset constituted in gender power, but, as the lessons of international history portend, women who are not empowered to organize during the struggle will not be empowered to organize after the struggle. If nationalism is not transformed by an analysis of gender power, the nation-state will remain a repository of male hopes, male aspirations and male privilege (McClintock385-386).

Chandraprova not only expressed her demands, but also organized women in Assam. In spite of that she was sidelined once the nationalist project was over to establish what Partha Chatterjee claimed: "the relative unimportance of the women's question in the last decades of the nineteenth century is not to be explained by the fact that it had been censored out of the reform agenda or overtaken by the more pressing and emotive issues of political struggle. It was because nationalism had in fact resolved 'the women's question' in complete accordance with its preferred goals" (237). In this regard, Borgohain has skillfully narrated history from the experience of Chandraprova herself to enable the readers to perceive her ability to bring out the agency within her:

> The story of women's role in the nationalist struggle is not simply one of marionettes who were told when to march and where to picket. First, the

> numbers of women who played some role in this movement, however small, far exceeded expectations. The nature of their work influenced how women saw themselves and how others saw their potential contribution to national development. At the same time their involvement helped to shape women's view of themselves and of their mission (Forbes122).

Veena Mazumdar and Leela Kasturi argue that

> "Even the most cursory examination of women's organised activism from the beginning of the twentieth century explodes the myth still being pursued by many that women's role in the national movements against imperialism was male-dictated or male-manipulated. Once mobilised, women moved on their own, acquiring new confidence and articulating new priorities" (19).

We see Chandraprova emerging as a person who is aware of her capacity for self-reliance and who has the deliberate choice for independence and freedom.

The attempts to keep Chandraprova suppressed goes awry and we see her emerging a winner wherever she goes. She inspires the women to pull down the *purdah* that segregates them and consolidates the women throughout Assam. This was the time when streaks of modernity were gradually creeping into Assamese society. There were a few who advocated women's education and Chandraprova was in the opportune moment to be able to go for studies. But most of the people prohibited the women to step out of the premises of their houses. It makes a striking picture of Chandraprova cycling to school during such conditions. She became the talk of the town, but her sheer determination and sincerity for her work enabled her to attain respect for herself. When she was conferred the *Padmashri*she was elated and looked forward to receive it in person. This is the essential acceptance of a woman who dared to give a voice to the women and establish herself as an individual.It is like the "snow" that came down as "a little mercy" in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: "Softly, suddenly, it began to snow, like a present come down from the sky. Sethe opened her eyes to it and said, "Mercy." And it seemed to Paul D that it was – a little mercy – something given to them on purpose to mark what they were feeling so they would remember it later on when they needed to" (152).

In spite of being abandoned by the man in her life Chandraprova never gave up the spirit of *joie de vivre*. She continued her service for the upliftment of women and never tolerated any kind of injustice against women. A fiery woman, who was so harsh and vocal at times, had embodied within her a "softness" which was felt by her co-workers (Borgohain341). Her son Atul is also at times mystified by the dichotomies of her personality. He wonders about her being so conscious of her 'self' and so proud and rebellious, she is also at the same time so delicate (361). We see him, in the words of Partha Chatterjee, as one who is "struggling to cope with the change" (309). She is the same person

who not only struggled throughout her life for the rights of the women, but also spent her life as a devoted wife in spite of being thwarted by her beloved (362). The consciousness of a woman is embedded deep within her and she asserts her individuality with her strong personality to know herself objectively. Such are the contexts that reveal the inevitable encounter of tradition with modernity.

The colonial woman has been constantly under the scanner and there is a tendency of over-reading the same. Implications arise when the subject is subjected to various interpretations with various theories. In this tug-of-war the colonial woman is relegated to the same position where an image is imposed upon her: "To resist the cultural onslaughts of the West and articulate one's own cultural identity it became all the more important to project an image of womanhood, which would symbolize both the strength and distinctiveness of Indian tradition. This search for unsullied symbols of tradition somewhere rested with *purdah*…and "deification" of Hindu/Indian womanhood" (Chaudhuri28). The colonial woman may have remained under the wraps, but it does not imply she never had a voice. She has always been there and she will always be there; the only way to hear them is to read between the lines the documents of history. Rassundari's*Amar Jibon* may be just a memoir, but is of utmost value to unearth the colonial woman who had to remain silent under the patriarchal system:

> She herself was obedient and her in-laws affectionate. Yet, grafting remained a pain-filled process. Incarceration was the recurrent image for this stage. 'I was caged for life, in this life there will be no escape for me … I was snatched away from my own people … and given a life sentence … I would shed tears in secret but since I had to spend my life with these people, I eventually became a tamed bird…' The love she gave her in-laws was not spontaneous affection but the result of training and necessity, the habit of the caged bird (Sarkar 120-121).

Nalinibala Devi's *Eri Aha Dinbur* too tells us about the patriarchal system that always restricted the colonial woman's life. In contrast to Rassundari's 'caged' life,NalinibalaDevi's life with her in-laws seem to be very contented as she fondly remembers her days, especially about her father-in-law: "Somehow, my father-in-law was very loving towards me. Learning that I could read, write poems, and sing songs, he seemed to have looked at me differently, gave a share of his love, made me sit near him to talk to a lot, sometimes had to sing songs for him too" (53). Both these memoirs draw out the facts of everyday life of a woman in contrasting ways, but both carry the imprint of acceptance of their respective states. If Rassundari talks of the end of her days of playing (Sarkar111), Nalinibala says about having no time to think about herself (59). She even refers to her white attire of a widow that her grandmother detested, but her father insisted on her wearing it to fulfill a father's life (61). Slightest of disagreement or dissatisfaction of things going around them point out

immediately to the voice of protest or resentment that must have been suppressed. Such readings provide us with only an image of the colonial woman. But fiction, with its ingredient of imagination, prompts us to re-read the same and transports us to that particular world to experience it ourselves. It is the genre of fiction that can etch out what the readers want to accommodate in their minds.

Women's history has always been partially visible and it took long struggles to excavate them. Participation of women in the freedom struggle and also their literary pursuits were always sidelined while glorifying the acts of the men. In Assam, the post 1975 establishment of women's literary organizations like the LekhikaSamaroh Samiti and the Lekhika Santha contested the dismissive attitude of the male based literary establishment towards women writers (Mahanta1). This brought in the urge to retrieve the Assamese women's past and bring forth their contributions to India's freedom struggle and also to women's rights in the colonial period.

Nirupama Borgohain's Chandraprova is the depictionof a woman who had a voice, but would have been lost in the pages of history books if not retrieved by the postcolonial writers. Her ability to 'voice' her individuality made her a deviant and as Tilottama Misra recalled that women at that time were strictly asked to avoid Chandraprova because she was 'fallen':

> Men, irrespective of race, caste and creed, have always shared certain attitudes towards women, producing ambivalent female stereotypes in life and literature, myths and scriptures. In India, to be specific, Hindu scriptures and ancient legal codes both deify and circumscribe women. Those who live up to the feminine "ideal" as encoded there, are considered divine; those who deviate are "fallen" (Sengupta183).

It is the sheer artistic skill of Nirupama Borgohain to bring alive the distinctive facet of the colonial woman in Chandraprova who had a mind of her own. But Aparna Mahanta notes that Borgohain is unable to achieve in the novel, the "seamless interweaving of the 'personal' with the 'political' to unearth the 'real' Chandraprova who is

> the passionate, thinking, feeling woman, hidden behind the popular stereotypes of a freedom fighter and leading light of the Mahila Samiti. She believed in living life to the full, whether writing, working for society, loving with passion and commitment or, as a single mother, bringing up her son to be a worthy son of Assam, striving always to go beyond gender and social stereotypes to become in the real sense a 'complete woman', a true human being (Mahanta *The Assam Tribune*6).

Mahanta claims that the life history of ChandraprovaSaikiani is the history of the Assam Mahila Samity, the history of women's role in the freedom struggle in Assam (26). The kind

of rebuke and pain that Chandraprova had to endure made her much stronger and resolute to work for women's development and the country's freedom from colonial rule. Her belief in the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi enabled her to play a significant and laudable role in leading Assam in India's struggle for freedom. She always voiced her protest against the extremist activities during the freedom struggle (Kalita103). It is pertinent to quote Aparna Mahanta here:

> It is well known that ChandraprovaSaikiani was a fighter against discrimination and social injustice all her life, both in personal matters and in the public arena. Less attention is paid to the fact that she was also a great achiever, indeed a role model for women not only for her own generation but also of the present, a pioneer of modernity and change in a society weighed down by the burden of tradition and obscurantism (6)

Thus, we can say that Chandraprova was an aberration who had that consciousness of a woman within and would never let others to transgress her space, which was exclusively her own. The reading of the colonial woman in Chandraprovais, as Spivak said, the author's examination "of the fabrication of repression, a constructed counter-narrative of woman's consciousness". Re-reading unveils the colonial woman who has a voice as Chandraprova, in the true sense of the term. The novel is a platform that enables us to re-read the silent female subject and acknowledge the re-presentation of her sufferings as well as her resistance to suppression, thus engendering individual and political agency.

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