

Tribe, Caste, Nation, Gender: Chandraprabha Saikiani's Presidential Address to the First Assam Kachari Mahila Sanmilan (1930)¹

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Chandraprabha Saikiani in Her Times

Chandraprabha Saikiani (1901-72) has been celebrated as a feminist icon in Assam since the late 1990s. She was the founding secretary of the Assam Mahila Samiti (here after AMS, 1926) and was associated with the foundation of early mahila samitis in Nagaon (1917) and Tezpur (1919). Despite being a mother outside wedlock (her partner refused to marry her ostensibly due to caste difference, she belonged to the *sut/boria* caste), she single handedly shaped the mahila samiti movement in Assam travelling across villages and towns in the Brahmaputra valley to mobilise women both as part of the Indian nationalist movement as well as outside it. She remained the driving force in the mahila samiti for over five decades. She was also a prolific writer and published numerous essays, short stories, reports, appeals, and a novel apart from founding two Asamiya periodicals *Abhijan* (1941-) and *Abhjatri* (1948-). The manuscripts of some of the other novels she wrote have been lost. I accessed a handwritten incomplete memoir, a few poems and short stories and a couple of novellas in possession of her grandson Atanu Saikia in Guwahati during 2008-10.

Despite a growing interest in her life in the Asamiya public sphere in recent years, it is unfortunate that except for one short story, a few poems and a single novel, all her other writings have either been permanently lost or remain buried in private collections and on pages of early periodicals in public libraries. Due to the unavailability of her early writings, it is not well known that Saikiani was also one of the early mobilisers against untouchability in the Brahmaputra valley. She was the first signatory and the only female member in an appeal published in the *Assaniya* (weekly) on 10 February 1934 which called for a conference of the leaders of the Depressed Communities

in Assam. The appeal also proposed that a "deputation" on behalf of the *Nigrihita* [depressed] communities be sent to meet Gandhi during his ensuing visit to Assam ('Sadou Assam Nigrihita,' 5). However her interest in the caste question was evident years ago in an early essay 'Bharotor Nari Sikkha' ['Women's Education in India', 1921, written as Chandraprabha Das] where she advocated inter-caste marriage and in a short story 'Akul Pathik' (1929), perhaps the first short story in Asamiya with detailed description of the material practices of untouchability in serving and sharing of food.

Chandraprabha Saikiani's Presidential Address to the First Kachari Women's Conference (1930, for translation see later) is a key text to understand the implications of tribe-caste formation and formulation in Assam. This address was published in a major Asamiya periodical *Awahan* ('Assam Kachari Mahila,' April-May 1930). There is no mention of the dates when the event was held. The decision of the organizers of the Kachari Mahila Sanmilan to invite Saikiani as the President is noteworthy. Her popularity as a public speaker must have been a seminal reason. But her acceptance as President is also symbolic of the syncretic ties that connected the Bodo/Kacharis and the Asamiyas in the late 1920s unlike a sense of distrust and lack of harmony among these two groups in the latter half of the twentieth century. However the presence of Saikiani was double-edged. While her presidential address reflected her acceptability across communities, it is unclear if the Bodo/Kachari women were being mobilised as part of the AMS or were separate from its umbrella framework. If the Kachari women were indeed part of the AMS, the question remains—why were they being mobilised as a community instead of on the basis of their geographical locations as had been the norm in forming local mahila samiti branches in the late 1920s

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and the 30s. Though we have little information on early women's mobilisation within tribal and caste associations, it seems that these associations often mobilised 'their' women separately. For instance similar to the Joymati Utsav that the mahila samitis organized, Sati Sadhani Utsav and Radhika Shanti Utsav were being celebrated by women of the *Sutia* and *Kaibarta Sanmilani* respectively in the 1930s.²

In contemporary sociology, there are two major approaches (or sets of arguments) to understanding tribe-caste formations in Assam. Firstly, there is an overriding understanding of caste in Assam as an open and flexible system where strict and humiliating practices of untouchability are absent. Sanjib Baruah suggests, "caste seems to have been a remarkably open system in Assam" (181). It has been observed that the absence of specialised labour in terms of professional castes remained the social reality of village formation in Assam till the mid twentieth century (Cantille). Secondly, Devabrata Sharma has largely appropriated the mainstream Indian Dalit discourse to argue that *janajatis* and *janagoshtis* [tribal/ethnic groups] have remained marginal to the process of nation formation in Assam and have been exploited in terms of labour and ownership of land. There is a need to contextualize this debate by historicizing caste. Satras, the Vaishnava monasteries, particularly maintained caste distinctions. For instance, the Barpeta Kirtanghar opened its doors to all castes as late as 1947 (and then too, only to men) ('Barpeta Kirtangharot,' 1). Jayeeta Sharma has noted that the Bodo/Kacharis were positioned in a somewhat different socio-economic context from the caste Hindus. Lower Assam Bodo/Kacharis cultivated land mostly by the hoe alone, without the assistance of plough cattle. Moreover most households held land suitable for dry rice varieties, which yielded less than wet rice. In order to supplement their income, Bodo/Kacharis often engaged in wage labour for the Government, the Gosain and their prosperous caste Hindu neighbours (69).

Saikiani's speech connects questions of labour, livelihood, and sustainability to women's participation in the polity. As a representative of a growing women's movement with substantial nationalist influence and being a member of a 'lower' caste herself, her speech embodies both the assertion of hierarchy and the selective permeability in definitions of caste, tribe and nation in fundamentally destabilising ways. Saikiani reminds us that labour is a key factor in understanding the location of the Bodo/Kacharis both within institutionalised Vaishnavism of the satras as well as in a new imagined political order. Saikiani's speech remained rooted in ground realities of everyday exploitation unlike the predominant reading of tribe-caste formation for example by M. N. Srinivas through the sanskritisation

process which often marginalizes the history of labour. The speech instigates a radical restructuring of hierarchy in land distribution and access to social and political institutions:

Till the time the proud upper castes who have monopolised social power deliver equal claims and rights to the exploited lower castes, till the time the Indian men consider Indian women their equal and give them access to education, craft, politics and help them develop themselves, till the time the Indian householders treat the servants as human beings and give them access to education, industry and trade, there is no freedom for India. (746)

She implored the men/women in the conference to stand united against oppression: "You are not allowed to enter the *naamghar* [Vaisnavite prayer house], they [the gurus] take a bath if they touch you. You have to pay the taxes and simultaneously be a *golam* [servant/slave] and carry the guru's palanquin, row boats, build huts and roads, cut hays, reap paddy" (751). The labour mechanisms of tribe-caste affiliation are laid bare here. Saikiani exhorted the Bodo/Kachari women:

But it is a matter of great joy that the Kachari jati is largely untouched by these luxurious habits/superstitions [of ornaments and fine clothes] . . . The Kacharis have largely remained free of the sins of narrow mind sets ['sankirnata paap'] and I do believe that they would remain so in the future. The man and woman among the Kacharis enjoy equal rights, both are equally hard working. Unlike others, the Kachari women do not depend on their men for food and clothing. This is a matter of pride for the Kachari women. The Kachari women are ahead of others in weaving-spinning; thanks to them that the *eri* silk is still available . . . Now-a-days Asamiya women are also seen wearing clothes bought in the market and saris. The Kachari women are yet untouched by this, they have maintained their *jatiyata* [national/communal identity]. (747)

However there is a rider, "I have seen many women among you smoking *bidis* and cigarettes. Other women smoke too—but you must realise that such practices not only harm your health but also hurt your respectability" (748).

Thus, in the speech, the dominant Hindu Asamiya identity remains intact within which a distinct 'Kachari' ethos is to be sustained. Saikiani's speech is also loaded with stereotypes about freedom enjoyed by tribal women, about food habits, discourses of cleanliness which at best may be seen as an ambiguous balancing act. Saikiani states, "It is often said that there is harmful fat ['charbi'] in pork, if this is true better avoid pork. But do not abandon eating chicken and rearing poultry. Food habits do not make people high or low" (748-749). The speech is partly informed by the reformist discourse of appropriating modern scientific knowledge of health and hygiene, and controversial aspects of family, habitat, cleanliness, and

diet. However there is a very significant argument she makes about women's claim to the choice of their partners. At a time when Bihu, the spring festival had come under intense scrutiny for alleged obscenity, because young men and women freely mingled and danced during the festival, sometimes even choosing their own mates in the process, Saikiani calls for reform of the festival rather than a ban. She argues for institutionalisation of such celebration rather than being hidden away from the public and dancing near the forest. It is worth mentioning here that it was customary to give family consent to a couple who eloped during Bihu. Saikiani was carefully invoking what was already a customary practice and yet had faced the wrath of the gentry in recent times. The censorship of women's dress continues to haunt Bihu celebrations even today.

Thus Saikiani's beliefs as articulated in this speech embody contradictions—she offers a radical social critique of caste privilege and exploitative power structures on the one hand, yet she seems to have internalised stereotypes about female respectability and cleanliness on the other. This may have been the very condition of women's access to the nascent colonial public sphere and their participation in the nationalist movement to a certain extent. For instance, the Tezpur Mahila Samiti's celebration of *Upajati Mahila Dibash* [tribal/ethnic women's day] in October 1947, reinscribes some of the ideological indexes of tribe-caste models in the neighbouring village of Kacharigaon near Tezpur. The nuances that informed Saikiani's speech in 1930 are lost in the institutionalised practice of the mahila samiti in 1947. The dilemma of recognition/segregation is particularly crucial in the post Assam Accord (1985) scenario today. Members of ethnic groups living within the political borders of present day Assam have increasingly reclaimed a separate tribal/ethnic identity/homeland predicating their identity politics precisely in separation from a homogenized "greater Assamese nationality" [brihattar asamiya jati]. These reconfigurations of identity debates in various ethnic and tribal groups have drawn heavily on the formative Asamiya nationalist arguments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries using similar tropes of myths and legends. Sadly, Saikiani's speech which was a more nuanced intervention remained in oblivion.

The significant aspect in Saikiani's argument is that she was struggling to approach the idea of tribe-caste with a critique of the material conditions of everyday life, governed by issues such as access and control over land, labour and socio-religious institutions such as the *naamghar*, the Vaisnavite prayer house. Saikiani in her short story 'Akul Pathik' (1929) had addressed the question of caste discrimination through the trope of food, how and where food is served, who serves it to whom and in

what kind of utensil. In this speech, she links the question of tribe-caste to the issues of labour and rights. She thus evolves a complex understanding of labour. If she chides the school-going girl for refusing to do household chores and calls it a false notion of "progress", she is able to articulate a different understanding of the labour of the lower castes and tribes in service of the upper castes (751). Thus labour, in Saikiani's understanding, has multiple connotations for individual, caste, social relations and political assertion. She neither frames it in the prevalent notion of the Protestant work ethic, nor in the Gandhian idea of dignity of labour. Though both these strands inform her understanding, she is invested in the materiality of labour and its implications. Her valorization of "hard work" for men, women and even school-going girls, alongside a critical view of exploitative tribe or caste based labour is significant.

As I have mentioned above, Saikiani met Gandhi during his visit to Assam in 1934 as a representative of the Nigrihato Sampraday Sanmilani ('Sadou Assam Nigrihita,' 5). The content of her conversation with Gandhi was published in the *Assamiya* (weekly). During her exchange, she offered a subtle critique of the Gandhian position by raising a fundamental question about who constitutes the depressed and the backward: "Three communities in Assam have been listed as *depressed*. But there are other communities in Assam who are not classed as depressed in the White Paper or by the government, but they do not enjoy the rights of the caste Hindu. Does your Harijan movement cover them?" To this question, Gandhi replied in the negative ('Anunnata [Backward] Sampraday Samparke,' 5). From the speech and her exchange with Gandhi, it appears that she was uncomfortable with an ahistorical umbrella category of the harijan. She problematized the category of the harijan/backward/depressed by articulating the diverse and varied practices of caste discrimination present in different parts of India. Though Saikiani refers to Ambedkar in her conversation with Gandhi, her sympathies were not yet clearly spelt out. It may be recalled here that Ambedkar was particularly critical of Gandhi's romanticised vision of the dalit as harijan. He argued that the caste system was not merely a division of labour, it was also a division of labourers. Anupama Rao spells out the difference in the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate in the following words:

While Gandhi's analysis rests on a sense of Harijan deprivation, it is fundamentally unable to incorporate the elements of structured violence and coercion that characterise Ambedkar's analysis. Ambedkar's analysis of caste as lived practice grounded in violence contrasts with Gandhi's understanding of caste as abstracted system, whose (negative) effects are to be ameliorated through the moral re-education of the upper castes ... It is in the space between them that we might find an answer

to the problems of caste, culture, and democracy that continue to haunt us. (428)

Unlike a sustained engagement with caste at an all-India level found in the writings of Gandhi and Ambedkar, Saikiani's concerns were limited to caste politics and dynamics in Assam. But her ability to conceptualize identity as a 'process' was remarkable given that these categories were increasingly becoming rigid by 1930. Select members of the community felt that while the Bodo-Kacharis may have remained *anunnata* (backward), they were integral to the geographical landscape, they were the sons of the soil and would remain "ever patriotic" (Khakhlari, 'Anunnataaru Abanata,' 1934, 3). There was also a general resentment within the community about being called Kachari. Within a few months of the publication of Saikiani's speech, Bhupendra Narayan Dev, a Member of the Legislative Council, questioned her, "Which women have you addressed as Kachari Aai? I never think of myself as Kachari. We are not Kachari, we are true Khastriya" (1209). The term Bodo was increasingly being used by members of the community. Dakheswari Brahmani, a contemporary of Saikiani, addressed her 'Bodo' brothers in a speech (published in *Ghar-Juti*, 1930) delivered in a 'Bodo Sanmilan' requesting them to educate the 'Bodo women'. Information on Brahmani is limited but her surname indicates that she came from a family who had associations with the Brahma movement, a Hindu reformist campaign among the Bodos in the early twentieth century. Given this backdrop it is not surprising that Brahmani makes liberal references to Manu, Sita and Savitri. Her speech spans a wide range of issues from invoking and appropriating Manu to articulating legends of powerful Bodo women such as Gambari Chikhla and Thengkakhri Chikhla (344, 346). Was Saikiani anachronistic in her use of the term Kachari, while members of the community were either skeptical of its use or had already moved to the preferred term Bodo? Though her radical engagement with questions of labour and exploitation remains meaningful, the contestation over the term Kachari implicates her or her publisher, *Awahan's*, understanding of the Bodo/Kachari community within the dominant Asamiya vocabulary.

Translation of parts of Saikiani's Presidential Address³

Respected Kachari Aai⁴ and Raijsakal⁵

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Kachari jati is a warrior race of independent Assam in [once] independent India. Every district right up to Coochbehar is full of people from this jati.⁷ The population of this people is greater than any other jati in Assam.

The ruins of temples have stood for hundreds of years in sun, wind, rain, and hailstorm, amidst neglect and indifference, to proudly declare the glory and remind us the valour of this people. Ever since the Vedic age of the Mahabharata, this jati has been a dominant force in this region. History bears witness that the original inhabitant and the true Asamiya in this land are the Kacharis. The valiant youth Ghatotkacha of ancient Kachar district, Hidimbapur, led two contingents of Kachari soldiers and threatened the entire Kurū army during the battle of Kurukshetra in the Mahabharata⁸ . . . [745] The mother of this skilled warrior, Hidimba, was no less powerful and feisty ['tejaswini']. The Kacharis ruled parallel to the Ahoms in Upper Assam and sometimes even threatened the mighty Ahoms. The Kachari king was no way weaker or lower than the Ahom king . . . The Ahoms were few in number and had to abandon their own language . . . but the Kacharis continued to identify themselves as Asamiya and used Asamiya language despite having a language of their own and a population in great numbers . . . Mahapurush Sankar deva faced the wrath of the Tantrik Brahmins and was forced to flee the Ahom kingdom. He found shelter in the court of the Koch King Naranarayana.⁹ Sankardeva's spiritual awakening could fully blossom there. Therefore, truly speaking, today's Asamiya language and old literature and culture are the legacy of the Koch King Naranarayan, and the Kacharis may claim these as their own.

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This was your ancient glory; you have nothing in the present. The great Kachari jati is scattered ['thanban'] today. They have lost knowledge, power, liberty, strength of body and mind, art, craft, peace, happiness, status and pride and now live a life of an exploited, untouchable ['asprisyā'] jati in abject poverty. Brothers and sisters, this is no time to be nostalgic. Despite your past glory, you who were the kings of empires are paupers today. You must strive to better your position. The Kacharis have not yet lost their martial valor. A large section of Kachari soldiers defend the [colonial] Government and its administration along with the Sikhs and the Gorkhas . . . If these three warrior races leave the Government today, it would come to a complete halt. Therefore the future of India is dependent on the goodwill of these three jatis. Brothers and sisters! Though your present educational and economic status is extremely weak, never think of yourself as low ['hin']. A few selfish upper castes might treat you as lowly, but remember, brothers and sisters—Caste discrimination and untouchability is the national shame of India . . . [746] A new awakening has engulfed the entire world. The conch shell of liberty ['mukti

sangkha'] has been sounded. Every jati is overthrowing bondage and oppression, striving hard to achieve a better status through education, industry and trade, and marching in the path of progress with the developed nations. No jati is willing to live under the ancient political and social systems. Every nation demands social reform with freedom. And freedom really depends on social reform, education, and craft/industry. It is a general opinion that politics is different. No. Education, industry and social reform are the very first stages of freedom. Politics is the second stage. In the greater interest of your community you must initially concentrate on the first stage. Till the time the proud upper castes who have monopolised social power deliver equal claims and rights to the exploited lower castes, till the time the Indian men consider Indian women their equal and give them access to education, craft, politics and help them develop themselves, till the time the Indian householders treat the servants as human beings and give them access to education, industry and trade, there is no freedom for India. The Non-Cooperation movement might get India freedom, but such freedom without equality is doomed to fail . . . The status of the majority of women in India today, and those of the farmer, coolie, labourer, servant, and low castes is the same . . . There is great interest in boys' education now-a-days but none for the education of the girls. The country would have made ten times the progress it has seen, if women were educated too . . . But I am very pleased that you have now realized the need of the hour and have organized this conference for the overall development of women. Whatever may be the reason there is little difference between a rat in a hole and the lot of many women in our country today. Yet woman is the happiness in the home, solace to the soul and its strength. It is woman who is the life source of the jati, the nation and the character of man. If the Indian men leave the women behind in darkness and try to traverse the path of progress alone, they are bound to walk backwards. The poet has sung long ago, "Indian society will not awake till Indian women do arise." . . . Even in the field of politics it is clear [747] that no country has attained liberty without women. Women led and fought equally with men during the French, the Russian, and the Turkish revolutions. Today, there is a call for battle for the Indian woman . . . Therefore, gone are the days of debates about whether women are strong or weak or whether they should be educated or not. I do not undermine the power of the youth, but the fact remains that women alone will build the future state and the nation . . . It is extremely sad that the country's position has worsened due to the fall in the status of women owing to her lack of education . . . Luxuries in jewellery and dress have eclipsed all her good qualities.

But it is a matter of great joy that the Kachari jati is largely untouched by these luxurious habits. Others do not even have what the Kacharis have today. The Kacharis have a strong and healthy body, an innocent mind, and a childlike smiling face. There is no practice of untouchability among the Kacharis and no rigidity in social and religious laws. Strong, healthy and hardworking mothers and children are found only among the Kacharis. Poisonous practices of parda and child marriage have not shattered the Kacharis. Thus, the Kacharis have largely remained free of the sin of narrow mindsets ['sankirnata paap'] and I do believe that they will remain so in the future. Among the Kacharis, man and woman enjoy equal rights, both are equally hard working. Unlike others, the Kachari women do not depend on their men for food and clothing. This is a matter of pride for the Kachari woman. Kachari women are ahead of others in weaving-spinning, thanks to them that the *eri* silk is still available. However one lack has negated all these great qualities—and that is education . . . It is very unfortunate that both Kachari men and women are equally lagging behind in education. A jati without education is dead, for education is the source of life . . . Though the present system of education does not help build a man's character, something is better than nothing. One must strive to evolve an independent understanding through this education . . . Kachari brother and sisters! I implore you not to follow anyone blindly. That would be ruinous. Now-a-days, Asamiya women are also seen wearing sari and clothes bought in the market. Kachari women are yet untouched by this practice; they have maintained their *jatiyata* [national/communal identity]. However I have seen a few girls wearing saris. [748] It is a false notion that school-going girls have to wear saris. Though the luxurious women of high castes are primarily responsible for this trend, please do not imitate their dangerous practices. I have seen many women among you smoking *bidis* and cigarettes. Other women smoke too—but you must realize that such practices not only harm your health but also hurt your respectability . . . It is a primary responsibility and duty of women to save the nation from intoxicants ['madok bastu'] and foreign cloth.

Therefore *aaissakal* please remember this much. Now, you may become a Koch if you leave chicken, pork and alcohol.¹⁰ Such a system is not available to anyone among the Hindus in Assam . . . But I shall not ask you to become Koch by paying obeisance to the Gurus. You must be educated, and once you are educated you will see how you are treated with respect. Simultaneously, you must develop self-confidence and never think that you are low or small. You too are Hindu, and you are human . . . the weak is always oppressed by the strong. But jati is not by birth or lineage. In the former times there was one

Brahmin, one Kshatriya, one Baishya or Shudra in the same family . . . It seems the moderate drinking of alcohol among the Kacharis in earlier times helped restore strength and energy. However, as this rule does not seem to hold true now, it is better to give up alcohol . . . Many claim that there is harmful fat in pork; if this is true, better avoid pork. But do not abandon eating chicken and rearing poultry. [749] Food habits do not make people high or low . . . Rearing pigs and hens is a lucrative business. One must do so to increase the domestic income. Our economic condition is deteriorating because we have internalized some of our work as demeaning and have abandoned our livelihood. What would the Kacharis eat if they leave their work in order to become Koch? . . . Do not leave your work and source of livelihood. The Hindustani labourers take away a lot of money from us by building roads, cutting soil and digging wells. The poor among our various jatis should do these works and keep the money [in the region].¹¹

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Aisakal! One of your biggest duties is to weave by spinning the yarn yourself. To buy yarn and weave is as good as not weaving. The price of yarn would be equal to the price of cloth. Therefore if we buy yarn and cloth the money goes abroad. Five *poas* of cottonwool is needed for a dhoti or a pair of *riha mekhela*. The price for this amount of cotton is five annas. But eight times the amount of money is spent if we buy yarn for a dhoti, i.e., Rs. 2¹² . . . Japan has developed today through its cloth and yarn industry. The British have been ruling us on the strength of their cloth manufacturing industry . . . What the mills have done abroad, the spinning wheel ['*jotor*'] will do here. Our handloom is our cloth mill, the *jotor* is our spinning mill and our two hands embody the power of thousands of workers.

[. . .]

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[750] . . . I have already mentioned how important women's education is and how excellent women are. The household, the clothes, the utensils and the food—all of these must be clean and *satvik* [virtuous]. This is also women's work. Children must be bathed and kept clean and [taught] not to utter slang and other bad words . . . Your custom of a girl choosing her own mate is a very good practice. However to force or abduct a girl against her wishes is condemnable. The old system of *swayamvara* [choosing a groom] should be revived if possible. In the ancient times the performance of dance and music was very popular among the Kshatriyas . . . The Kacharis to this

day are dedicated to dance . . . Dance is a social institution abroad. Despite this, some are ashamed of Bihu; young maidens are asked to dance Bihu in the forest away from people's gaze. It is true that Bihu now-a-days has lost the aesthetic appeal of a dance, it is rather ugly. But it must not be banned, it should be reformed and improved. Instead of dancing near the forest, meetings like this one should be organized. In central India, such practice of dancing amidst society is in vogue. Young men and women can freely participate in these events and select their own mates just like a *swayamvara*. Therefore, these customs should be reformed, not banned . . .

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[751] You are truly Hindu in flesh and blood—India's Indian and Assam's Asamiya. You have the full rights of a Hindu. However, as you have lost your strength and voice, the powerful have increasingly exploited you. You are not allowed to enter the *naamghar* and they [the gurus] take a bath if they touch you. You have to pay the taxes and simultaneously be a *golam* [servant/slave] to carry the guru's palanquin, row boats, build huts and roads, cut hay, reap paddy. Or else you are punished with *guru-danda*. But you must no longer blame destiny and bear this exploitation and domination. What the powerful have wrest from the powerless will not be returned with pleas and requests. You have to stand united against the injustice and wrest back your rights . . . You are exploited by others as your poverty has rendered you weak. Therefore both men and women must work hard, become economically sound, unite and overthrow oppression. It is a myth that a school-going girl should not do household chores; the very purpose of education is knowledge and work. Children who become lazy, avoid work and are fond of luxuries must be immediately stopped from going to school. Such education is of no use . . . Many men only plough the field and do nothing else, they survive on their wives' labour . . . In winter, women must delegate the work of reaping paddy to men and concentrate on weaving and spinning.

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The backwards ['*annunata*'] face social injustice because they have not been able to stand united . . . But gone are those days. The oppressed jatis of the world are awakened now. The Kacharis and other oppressed jatis must cast away their sense of inferiority and take up the arms of non-violence against injustice and oppression. Will the guru gosains survive if the backward castes stop paying taxes? If you wish to worship in the temples, who dare stand between you and the closed doors? If the low castes

shed all ties with the upper castes today, will the upper castes not be forced to do the work of the *dom*, *hari*, *hira*, *bania*?¹³ This is no time for gentleness and modesty. You must stand with the strength of the lion, declare revolt against oppression and establish equality and fraternity to bring development, peace and a sacred sense of compassion. [End of speech]

Saikiani's Address and Our Times

Revisiting Saikiani's intervention in the tribe-caste question in our contemporary times may have multiple connotations. First, the invitation of Saikiani as the President may be read as a marker of the friendship between the two communities, the Asamiya and the Bodos. There was definitely no dearth of Bodo women leaders as I have mentioned Dakheswari Brahmani above. However, post the Assam Agitation (1970s-80s) which mobilised across the Brahmaputra valley to drive out illegal immigrants, the fissures among the various indigenous communities in the valley have become acute. A large number of ethnic groups are mobilising for separate homelands, no longer seeking inclusion within the dominant caste Hindu Asamiya polity. Some of the germs of this gradual distancing are visible in the contemporary responses to Saikiani's use of the term Kachari. Second, Saikiani's engagement with the process of tribe-caste formation through an exploration of the material practices of bonded labour may well serve as a reminder to us to revisit categories such as tribe, caste, nation and ethnicity through explorations of materiality, especially in times when various indigenous communities and ethnic groups in Assam are struggling with new economic policies and feel increasingly marginalised from the mainstream both in economic terms and otherwise. Thirdly, women's engagement with caste-tribe formation may still retain the possibilities of building solidarities in times of exacerbating divisions.

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Notes

1. The term Kachari is no longer used by the community. The preferred term now is Bodo. I have retained the term Kachari while quoting Saikiani to remain true to her text while I use Bodo/Kachari in my discussion.
2. The seventeenth century Ahom princess Joymati was reinvented as a Hindu sati in the early twentieth century epitomising strength and will against a despotic ruler

who was in pursuit of her husband, Godapani. Joymati refused to divulge the details of his whereabouts and died under extreme punishments from the king's henchmen. For a detailed discussion on the legend of Joymati and its implications for women's mobilisation in colonial Assam, see Sharma (2012) and Medhi (2013). On tribal and caste associations' mobilisation of women invoking different satis, see 'Assam Chutia Sanmilani' (2); 'Radhika Shanti' (5); 'Radhika Shanti Smriti Utsav' (4); 'Dibrugarhot Radhika Shanti,' (2) and other reports in the *Assamiya* (weekly) in the 1930s.

3. The Asamiya text of the Address was published in the *Awahan* 1.7 (Bohag 1852 Saka [Apr.-May 1930]): 744-752. I am grateful to Nanda Talukdar Foundation, Guwahati for letting me access some of the early issues of the periodical *Awahan* (1929-).
4. The term aai/aaisakal literally means mother/mothers, and is also used in the Vaisnava tradition in Assam to indicate female devotee. During the early years of women's meetings in the early twentieth century Brahmaputra valley, aaisakal was also the generic term to address a gathering of women.
5. *Raij* is literally public. On *Raijmels* (public meetings) in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Assam, see Guha.
6. These asterisks are in the speech published in the *Awahan*. They perhaps represent a certain deletion of the text. There are six such insertions in the text.
7. The term jati has numerous connotations of caste, creed, community and ethnic and tribal groups. See Partha Chatterjee.
8. I have used contingent for *akkhauhini*, which is "a complete army consisting of 1,09,350 foot soldiers, 65,610 horses, 21,870 chariots, 21,870 elephants" (H. Barua, 91).
9. When Chandraprabha Saikiani spoke, the understanding of who constituted the Kacharis was still fluid and the Koches were seen as belonging to the greater Bodo-Kacharijati. However in late twentieth and twenty first century, the Koch-Rajbongshis have claimed a separate identity from the Bodos.
10. See Sanjib Baruah on caste mobility.
11. This sense of insider and outsider, us and them is fully expressed later in Saikiani's writings in the late 1940s.
12. Saikiani's calculation of "eight times" is a little stretched. 16 anna is one rupee, so two rupees would be 32 annas, less than forty anna, which is eight times of five anna.
13. *Dom* is a fisherman; also called *Kaibarta*, a member of the scheduled caste, *Hari* has dual connotations of a goldsmith as well as of a sweeper; a lower caste, *Hira* is a potter of a lower caste (H. Barua 1095, 1099).

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