

"Memory, Movement and the *Mahila Samiti* in Assam, India"
Funded by the Sefhis Programme, IISH, the Netherlands and Supported by Tezpur
University

Project No. 2849-DCO0055943/sephis/res/09/162

Report on activities for the period January, 2011 to February, 2012

The project "Memory, Movement and the *Mahila Samiti* in Assam, India" has been completed. It has created a digital archive of mahila samiti documents, manuscript, print, audio and visual records of three mahila samitis, Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, Guwahati; Dibrugarh District Mahila Samiti, Dibrugarh; Tezpur District Mahila Samiti, Tezpur, spread across the state of Assam in the northeastern part of India. The oldest document scanned and preserved is from January 1928 of Tezpur District Mahila Samiti. Nearly five thousand pages have been scanned and preserved. There is also an audio visual archive of interviews and conversations with past and current members and people associated with the mahila samiti and recordings of current activities. The emphasis here is on preserving social memory through documents, oral and visual records.

The period from January, 2011 to February 2012 has been the most eventful. The following major threads have been addressed-

Following the last Report:

Documentary: Annexure 4

A compilation from the archive titled *Seito Monot Ase* (That I Remember, 21 minutes long) has been created. The compiler Puloma Pal came from Mumbai, nearly two thousand five hundred kilometers away and lived in Tezpur for almost two months and studied

the recordings and has finalized the film now. We intend to use this as a promotional for the archive while problematizing the paradox of preservation itself.

Recording:

We recorded interviews of Meenakshi Bhuyan; Hemalata Boruah; Jahanara Begum Hussain and the Weavers of TDMS during the period (February to June 2011). It was immensely satisfying to meet Jahanara Begum, daughter of Majida Tayabullah (?- 1936) who was at the forefront of the Kamrup Mahila Samiti in 1920s and '30s. As Muslim women have increasingly become marginalized from decision making positions in all the three samitis and overall in the mahila samiti in Assam, listening to Jahanara Begum was very enriching. I discuss the whole question of cultural pluralism at the end of this report (page 6).

Dissemination:

We have been very fortunate regarding the dissemination of the project.

1. **Radio Programme, All India Radio, Guwahati FM Channel, 6pm :** On 16th March, 2011 we aired a radio programme largely based on the material of the archive commemorating the birth and death centenary of Chandraprabah Saikiani (1901-72), the founding Secretary of Assam Mahila Samiti. I would like to thank Puloma Pal and Banti Barpujari for their help in the production of this programme.
2. **Publication in Assam Tribune, 16th March, 2011 :** "Remembering Chandraprabha Saikiani" by the coordinator
3. **Dissemination Meet and Exhibition:** The first Dissemination Meet of the project was organized on 25th April 2011. The objective was to i) hand over copies of scanned documents and photographs to the three mahila samitis ii) hold an

exhibition in collaboration with TDMS. and iii) receive feedback from the samitis on the film and the project.

The Meet was very successful. The Project Advisor Dr. Rimli Bhattacharya, traveled all the way from Delhi for five days and relentlessly worked for the exhibition and the Meet. We are thankful to Meenakhi Bhuyan and her colleagues at TDMS for their input in the exhibition. I would also like to thank Reetamoni Narzary and student volunteers Purnima; Trisha; Sagar; Niharika for their help in placing the exhibition.

Secretaries and members of all three mahila samitis participated in the Meet. Their enthusiasm was extremely rewarding given the hard work behind the Meet and the project. They were very pleased to receive the scanned copies of their documents.

Comments by visitors (Annexure 1 Encl. 1) has been a great inspiration. A few photographs and the invitation card are also enclosed. (Encl 2)

The Project Advisor, Dr. Rimli Bhattacharya is in touch with the Director of Nehru Memorial Museum and Library for an exhibition in the Indian capital, New Delhi.

The Project Coordinator presented the findings of the Archive in two seminars

- i) National Seminar by Sahitya Akademi and Cultural Studies Dept, Tezpur University: Paper presented "Reading Gender in the *Mahila Samiti* Narratives in Assam: Notes from a Documentation and Archiving Project", 21 April, 2011.

- ii) International Conference "Gender Diversity and Cultural Pluralism: Canada and India", University of Delhi: "Diversity and Questions of Alliance: The Case of Assam Mahila Samiti, India and a comparison with Mahila Shanti Sena, Canada". January 2012, New Delhi.

As per the commitment, the coordinator submitted a paper to the *Sephis e magazine Global South* and this was published in January, 2012 "The Making of an Archive: Memory, Movement and the Mahila Samiti in Assam, India"

The Project in Media:

The Dissemination Meet and the Exhibition was covered in the regional television channels, Doordarshan, Guwahati; All India Radio, Guwahati; NewsLive; NE TV.

Reports of the Meet were published in the Assamese Daily *Dainik Janambhumi*, Guwahati, 26th April, 2011 and two faculty members from J B College, Jorhat visited the archive seeing the report. They are interested in organizing a workshop on questions of archiving next year.

Ms Tereza Rehaman, an award winning journalist from Northeast India wrote on the project and the mahila samiti "When we Came Together" in *HIMAL: Southasian*, September 2011. It is available at himalmag.com/component/.../4630-when-we-came-together.html.

Visit by Resource Person Abhijit Bhattacharya, CSSS Calcutta

The comments and suggestions of Abhijit Bhattacharya were very helpful in recognizing what we have been able to accomplish and what more may be done. Mr. Bhattacharya congratulated the team and wrote that "scanning is very good and after international standard for archiving" (Encl 3). He suggested that we may have additional back up

with the university IP address. We are exploring this option. Right now we have adequate back up in removable storage. He expressed satisfaction and hoped that we pursue other archiving grants such as the British Library Grant in the future. I thank Mr Bhattacharya for taking time off from his busy schedule to visit Tezpur from Calcutta nearly one thousand kms away.

Utilization of Funds: The fund utilization certificate for the project has been issued by our finance office after the audit of accounts post 14th March 2012. We are enclosing all the original vouchers along with that certificate.

Available Fund for Part 3

A. Unspent Balance from Part 2 (Rs. 19954 + 75,000/- (Documentary))	Rs. 94,954/-
B. From Sephis (Part 3)	Rs. 1,92,335/-
C. From Tezpur University (Part 3)	Rs. 48,000/-
I. Total Fund (A+B+C)	Rs. 3,35,289/-

A. Expenditure under Heads

i) Non Recurring	Rs. 7990/-
ii) Recurring Expenses:	Rs. 2,46,688/-
Expenditure (i)+ii)	Rs.2,54,678/-
B. Overhead to Tezpur University	Rs.28,850/-
II. Phase 3 Grand Total Expenditure (A+B)	Rs.2,83,528/-

Available Balance (I-II) = Rs. 51,761/- (This remaining balance is from Tezpur University's contribution and bills will be submitted to the University. Contribution from Sephis has been fully exhausted)

Total Sephis Contribution (Part 1+2+3) = Rs. 5,85,532/-

Total Expense Submitted to Sephis (Part 1+2+3) = Rs. 6,80,070/-

Future Course of Action:

Prof. M K Chaudhuri, the Vice chancellor of Tezpur University has been supportive of the project right from its inception. His comments (Encl 4) during the Dissemination Meet and later during a meeting of the Women's Studies Centre has **made it possible for the project to continue with support from Tezpur University**. It was formally resolved after an external member Ms Tereza Rehamn spoke highly of the project in the WSC meeting held in May 2011.

In my last report I had mentioned that this project seeks to document and historicize women's experience of colonial modernity and an emerging gendered public sphere in non metropolitan settings like the frontier province of Assam. Our contention is to see how groups of organized women take on constituting frameworks i.e. national, regional, legal, domestic and so on to transform and rewrite the conditions in which they are framed. However the constitution of a gendered subjectivity ran parallel to identity markers such as community; ethnicity etc. I have already mentioned Jahanara Begum and her mother Majida Tayabullah. Mrs Tayabullah served as the Secretary of Kamrup Mahila Samiti and she along with her joint Secretary Sashiprabha Hazarika published reports of income and expenses of the sipini bhoral (weavers cooperative) regularly in the press. In most early ms in the 1930s and 40s a few Muslim women remained crucially involved. Chashme Nurjahan Begum in Tinsukia Mahila Samiti , Mrs Z Haque in North Lakhimpur and others at Tezpur samiti. Theoretically the mahila samitis were always open to all religion, community, caste and other identity markers. Some samitis like Tezpur made a strong point of their secular ethics stating in their "Niyamabali" (Rules and Regulations) on 12 Feb, 1928 that "one can read essays in praise of one's own religion but can't demean other religion" (File TDMS Proceedings 1928-1939, Scan 0007). However the praxis of mahila samiti meetings, conferences and other everyday practices regularly invoked rituals like starting meetings with a *Borgeet* (Vaishnavite devotional songs), lighting lamp, and so on which are associated with Hinduism.

Usha Das, in an account published in the Commemorative volume of Chandraprabha Saikiani, relates how the office assistant Gulnara Begum transformed herself into a Hindu woman by wearing sindoor so that the Brahmin family providing shelter to the ms workers would accept her. Das reads this act of Begum transforming herself into "Renu Devi" as an "example of sacrifice in a woman's organization". The anecdote is representative of personal accommodation and sacrifice as well as a context where such "sacrifices" are legitimized. Were such "accommodations" accepted/expected in an increasingly communal context? Some Muslim women were being mobilized separately in Assam by 1945 as the overall communal politics in the country had made such different mobilizational ventures on communal ground possible.

This project therefore has opened an entire world of shifting alliances that women forged at given historical moments. Reading these as only nostalgic moments of the past or historical "sound bytes" is to miss the constant play between memory and history between remembering and forgetting. I elaborate this in detail in the essay published in the Sephis e magazine. (Annexure 5)

I must in this last report thank all the mahila samiti members and people who directly and indirectly participated in the project, gave us time, spent crucial details of their lives with us. I must specially mention the three Secretaries Jaylakshmi Bora; Deepali Saikia and Manashi Dutta. I have learnt a lot from Meenakshi Bhuya, Lily Saikia; Bina Hazarika and have enjoyed their love and blessings for the project.

I would like to thank the Project Advisor Dr. Rimli Bhattacharya who traveled twice to Tezpur (Feb, 2010 and April, 2011) for both the first workshop and the Dissemination Meet despite heavy teaching; research work and the distance.

I must thank team members P Anbarasan who worked till February 2011 in the project. I am grateful to Reetamoni Narzary. A special thanks to Puloma Pal for taking up the film at such a low budget. We hardly shot for the film, we have mostly used the archival footage and the discrepancy in the quality of the images is representative of the different conditions in which these were shot.

At a personal level, thanks is due to my parents for getting me in touch with people of a different generation; leading me to them. My son and husband have been immensely supportive especially during the crucial period of my illness and surgery in Nov-Dec 2011.

Finally I must acknowledge with sincerity the support from Tezpur University and most significantly the Sepsis Programme for granting this project. I would like to especially thank Jacqueline Rutte for always being so supportive and bearing with the delay.

Yours truly,

Hemjyoti Medhi
Hemjyoti Medhi 21/2/12

Project Coordinator, Project No. 2849-DCO0055943/sephis/res/09/162

Asst. Professor, Dept. of EFL, Tezpur University, Assam, India

21 Feb, 2012

I. Phase 3 Total Fund (A+B+C) Rs. 3,35,289/-

A. Expenditure under Heads

i) Non Recurring Rs. 7990/-

ii) Recurring Expenses: Rs. 2,46,688/-

Expenditure (i+ii) Rs. 2,54,678/-

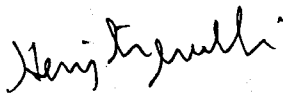
B. Overhead to Tezpur University Rs. 28,850/-

II. Phase 3 Grand Total Expenditure (A+B) Rs. 2, 83, 528/-

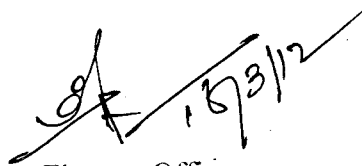
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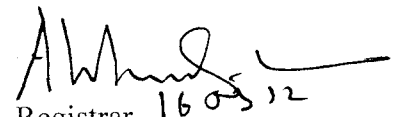
Total Sepsis Contribution (Part 1+2+3) = Rs. 5, 85, 532/-

Total Expense Submitted to Sepsis (Part 1+2+3) = Rs. 6, 80, 070/-


Project Coordinator

15/3/12


Finance Officer


Registrar 16/03/12