

Professor Aparna Dutta Mahanta: A Tribute

Dr Sheila Bora[†]



Professor Aparna Dutta Mahanta

[†] Professor (retired), Department of History, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam - 786004

Email: shielabora@gmail.com

© 2022 Bora . This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The news of the demise of Professor Aparna Dutta Mahanta in the early hours of 27 January 2022 has left all her friends and colleagues in deep shock.

Born on 20 August 1946 in Sivasagar to a family of six girls and one boy, Aparna Dutta spent her childhood mainly interacting with girls. Having joined St. Mary's Convent, Shillong and spent her entire school life being tutored by nuns, she was taught for the first time by a few male teachers only when she joined St. Mary's College for her graduation. Till this point of time she had never really experienced the difference in upbringing between boys and girls as she had always been in the company of women. The nuns in school had set an example of independent women for her. However, in an interview with Manisha Behal, Aparna Mahanta recalls that one-day sister Paula, a nun from Canada, was angry with her and had rebuked her, saying, "Oh! You'll be just a house-wife! Just a house-wife!" This comment had an everlasting impact on her young mind and made her realise that there is something else a girl should do besides getting married and looking after her household. However, she had admitted that no clear thinking about a career or a profession had developed in her mind at that time.

Aparna Mahanta's contact with the outside world began when she came to Gauhati University to pursue her M.A., where she had both, boys and girls as her classmates, besides also being taught by male teachers. Having completed her Masters in English Literature from Gauhati University and the University of Leeds under a British Council scholarship programme, she had joined Dibrugarh University in the Department of English as early as 1968. She further pursued her Phd from Dibrugarh University in 1982 to become the first woman in Assam to have a doctorate in English.

While at Dibrugarh University, she was fortunate to work with vibrant young colleagues like Udayon Misra and Kabin Phukan in a wonderful and congenial atmosphere. But a gradual realisation dawned on her that though her male colleagues were friendly towards her, there

existed a difference between man and woman. The turning point of her life came when she realised that she had to fight to get herself heard and having become opinionated about this necessity, she resorted to participating in debates in order to make sure that her voice was heard.

Aparna Dutta Mahanta was also a pioneer in the modern feminist movement. Soon after joining the University, Aparna Mahanta met Professor Dilip Barua, who had just returned from Sheffield University after working on Edward Carpenter and feminism in the 19th Century. He suggested that she should work on feminism, and as per his suggestion, by 1968 -69, she chose to work on George Orwell and feminism. Once she started working for the cause of women's rightful place in society, there was no looking back.

During my tenure at the University, I have had the opportunity of working at very close quarters with her as a contemporary. It was mainly due to her untiring efforts that Women's Study slowly gained prominence as an academic discipline in Assam. I have had the good fortune of having worked as Professor Mahanta's associate in initiating the documentation for a women's research centre at the Dibrugarh University. Ultimately, the Centre for Women's Studies, established in 1998, received UGC approval in 2004. Professor Aparna Dutta Mahanta was appointed as the first Director of this Centre and she continued in this position until her retirement in August 2006. This was one of the five Centres started by Dibrugarh University with a special development grant from the UGC and was considered a feather in Dibrugarh University's cap as it was the first Women's Study Centre to receive UGC's recognition in the entire North East. The Centre marched ahead due to Professor Mahanta's dogged determination in spite of the constant financial crisis. She ensured that Women's Cells were set up in several colleges under the Dibrugarh University. She conducted workshops for self-help groups and provided training on gender sensitisation and health and hygiene for girls. Under her leadership, the Centre conducted

several seminars, including two national seminars funded by UGC and ICSSR, on women related issues. Lectures on gender issues were organised, and girls' counselling sessions were held. The newsletter published by the Centre for Women's Studies was an important step forward towards highlighting women-related issues. Under the active supervision of Aparna Mahanta, a project involving the documentation of newspaper articles on women was started, and the Centre built up a library with books, journals, and other publications on women's studies. Professor Mahanta did not fail to realise the importance of collaborating with national agencies like the National Commission for Women and was inducted as an executive member of the Indian Association for Women's Studies.

Aparna Mahanta was involved with the women's movement as an academic and a grassroots activist since the 1980s. Though she was a member and office-bearer of a number of national and state women's organisations like the Mahila Samakhya and the Indian Association of Women's Studies, she was a believer in action. Once she felt that the Mahila Samiti had gradually become institutionalised and elitist in nature, she supported an organisation called *Nari Sanstha*, later renamed *Pragatishil Nari*

Sanstha, and remained its active member between the years 2002 to 2005.

Her attendance at the 3rd Conference of the Indian Association for Women's Studies in 1986 made Prof. Mahanta conscious about the absence of women in the majority of the statutory Committees of the University and she took the lead in fighting for women's equal representation in all important bodies of the University as well as to take up cases of sexual harassment within the University.

Professor Aparna Mahanta's contribution as a researcher and a writer on women's issues in English and Assamese is a legacy to cherish. Besides writing articles and books like, *Journey of Assamese Women, 1836-1937*, published in 2008, one of her greatest contributions to Assamese women, neigh to the Assamese society at large, was the task undertaken by her to edit the collection of the first women's monthly literary magazine published between 1927 to June-July 1931, called *Ghar-Jeuti*.

A lady with an iron will and a determination to work for the cause of women at large, I consider it a privilege to have had the opportunity to work with her as a colleague and support her in her passionate endeavour to ensure women's equality in all spheres of life.

I wish her departed soul to rest in peace.