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Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban (My Life)*: Narrativising a Woman's Struggle for Education

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Abstract

Many educated women wrote personal narratives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. These narratives include full-length structural autobiographies, personal letters, diaries and memoirs. These women writers bore open their hearts and recorded detailed experiences through their narratives. Rassundari Devi's autobiography Amar Jiban (My Life) is the first woman's autobiography published in Bengali. It narrated Rassundari Devi's struggle for literacy in the nineteenth century when women's education was not very popular. This paper highlights that Rassundari Devi was the pioneer of writing personal narratives in India and how she succeeded in her attempt to learn reading and writing in an androcentric society. Her struggle for education is evident in her life narrative. The autobiography is an example of the courage of a widowed woman who not only dared to write her personal experiences but also published it when writing was considered taboo for women.

Keywords: *Education, Narratives, Autobiography, Experiences, Patriarchal*

Introduction

The Bengal region was among the forerunners in promoting the reformist agenda of women's education in India. Bengali women enriched the field of writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Janhabi Devi, Subhadra Devi, Hemlata Devi, Anandamoyi Devi, Gangamoni Devi, Hotee Bidyalankar, Shyam Mohini Devi, and Rassundari Devi are the prominent names among them. Several autobiographical works by Bengali women, including Rassundari's *Amar Jiban,* Binodini's *Amar Katha,* Giribala Devi's *Raybari,* Saradasundari's *Atmakatha* and Manadasundari's *Shikkhita Patitar Atmacarit* give voice to their feelings through their autobiographical narratives. They wrote full-length structured autobiographies, personal letters, autobiographical novels, diaries, and memoirs. Autobiography, according to Julia Swindells,"…it has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness; women, black people, working-class people have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a 'personal' voice, which speaks beyond itself" (Swindells, cited in Anderson 2007, pp. 103-104). By penning down their experiences, the autobiographers attempt to express their inner feelings. Similarly, Malavika Karlekar, in her book on the personal narratives of Bengali women, writes, "Writing about oneself is a conscious act as it represents the subject's desire to express and thus record feelings and emotions, as well as events" (Karlekar, 1992,p.15). Rassundari Devi's autobiography *Amar Jiban (My Life)* was published in two parts, the first part was published in 1876 and the second in 1906. It records the signifi-

cant events of her life and depicts the struggle of Rassundari to educate herself and her efforts to create an identity of her own. Her autobiography remains a chronicle of dedication, hard work and devotion towards learning, self-discovery, and quest for identity. Her enduring experiences reflect the striving of women writers' struggle as a universal one.

Rassundari as a Narrator

There are multiple layers of experience that constitute a woman's lived reality. Rassundari Devi's work also vividly captures each dimension of a woman's experience. Well-known Bengali scholar, Dinesh Chandra Sen, writes in the introduction of *Amar Jiban*, "It is a factual document of the life of an old Hindu woman" (Sen, cited in Chatterjee 2016,p.11). Sen further opines, "I wonder if any male writer, however talented, could have alluded to the depths of a woman's heart the way she has done" (Sen, cited in Chatterjee 2016,p.12). Rassundari describes her past events with heartfelt vividness. By ignoring the dates and times of the events, she mentions the events factually by focusing on every minute detail. Rassundari's narrative is an authentic account of a woman's journey from ignorance to knowledge. Her willingness to acquire education is the central theme of her autobiography. Thus the autobiography remains an inspirational testimony of a woman's willpower to challenge all odds and adversaries of life to gain education and liberation.

Rassundari Devi was born in a zamindar family in the small village of Potajia in Pabna in 1809. Her widowed mother raised her after the demise of her father. Her mother was a very religious lady and taught Rassundari to remember God in good and bad times. The entire learning process revolves around Rassundari's urge to read the scriptures, which was prohibited for women of that period. She writes," But I constantly prayed to God. I said, "Please, God, help me learn so that I can read religious books. Dear God, a friend of the poor, I invoke your name only for this" (Chatterjee 2016, p.44). She believes that her transgressive act of reading is God's will, which has happened as a divine purpose. She constantly seeks God's help in her journey of learning.

Women's Education and Social Mindset

In nineteenth-century Indian society, reading and writing were considered a men's arena, and the patriarchal mindset did not allow women to come on equal terms with their male counterparts. People were fearful of the change that women were initiating to educate themselves. In this context, Rassundari writes that people used to comment, "The way things are going, a decent man will very soon lose his caste. Pretty soon, the womenfolk will get together and study books" (Chatterjee, 2016, p.44). Rassundari narrates the dissatisfaction, fear and frustration of being born as a woman in a male-centric society where women were not considered fit for intellectual activities. In only a few instances, women came with their leading role and showed interest in educating themselves and writing their life stories. In nineteenth-century India, people stigmatised women who wanted to educate themselves. However, Rassundari had an everlasting desire to learn since she was a small girl. She regretted that women had no right to enter into school life. Despite societal constraints to educate girls, she never lost hope. She understood that the society she belonged to would never support women's education. To create women's identity in such a society, they need to liberate themselves. Rassundari Devi fears social criticism in the initial stage of her quest for learning. Devi writes, "I have never dared to tell anyone about my desires…I dared not look at a page with written letters on it, in case they attributed it to my desire for learning" (Chatterjee, 2016, p.44). Rassundari's apprehension shows that it was challenging for women who tried to get educated and break the societal construction of gender roles.

Rassundari never received formal education. However, as a child, she sat with her male cousins in the outer room of her parent's house, where a missionary woman came to teach. She listened to the boys, repeated the alphabet on the board and tried to learn. Unfortunately, the school was burnt down due to a sudden fire, ending Ras-

sundari's journey on the education path at the very outset. She was married at twelve to a well-to-do man named Nilmani Roy. Rassundari had to assume responsibility for the entire household at fourteen, as her mother-in-law was blind and bedridden. However, Rassundari performed her domestic duties but desired to gain literacy. She expresses her confinement and frustration in the following words, "I was only fourteen then. Around this time, the idea that I should learn how to read books entered my mind. But unfortunately, girls were not supposed to read in those days" (Chatterjee, 2016, p.44). Rassundari cursed herself for having the desire to learn reading, as it was considered an evil desire for women of cultured households. Rassundari was outraged that she was treated like an animal and denied fundamental human rights. She fumes:

"What is the use of being born as a human being if one is not treated as one? She writes," It is my misfortune. It is a matter of no ordinary regret. Alas, my God, why did you let me be born as a human being? It is indeed a very rare fortune to be born a human being" (Chatterjee, 2016, p.49).

Rassundari represents the existing gender inequalities of the then society and confesses, "I was angry with myself for wanting to read books. Girls did not read. How could I?" (Chatterjee, 2016, p.51). In Nineteenth century Indian society, women looked after their households and children according to their socially constructed roles. In contrast, studying was considered respectable and was to be done only by the male counterparts. Women were considered inferior in the social hierarchy and deprived of education. According to Rassundari, "People used to deprive women of learning. How unfortunate those women were, they said. They were no better than animals" (Chatterjee, 2016, p.51). In nineteenth-century India, Women's Education was not considered necessary, and they were treated as non-entities in society. Rassundari Devi realised that women would get their desired place in society if they were educated. Devi rejected the social inhibitions, crossed the limits set for women, and stepped ahead toward education.

Ardent Faith of a Learner in God's Grace

Rassundari believes that women are responsible for their illiteracy because they do not support each other; on the other hand, they criticise those women who wish to get educated. She writes, "In fact, older women used to show a great deal of displeasure if they saw a piece of paper in the hands of a woman." (Chatterjee, 2016, p.51). Due to the internalisation of the role of custodians in maintaining gender roles in Indian society, older women used to discourage the younger generation of women from getting educated. Rasasundari Devi was very keen to learn the alphabet, and she used to recall the 30 letters with all the verbal combinations. She could recognise the letters but could not write them; now she understood that she could not learn without a teacher, but she was a woman, and a married woman was not supposed to talk to anyone. She writes: If anyone spoke a harsh word to me, I would die of shame. That was the fear that kept me from talking to anyone. My only hope was God, and my constant prayer was, "Dear God, I can learn to read and write only if you teach me. Who else is there to be my teacher?" (Chatterjee, 2016, p.51). Her faith in God was firm, and she believed that if she wanted to learn to read, she would need God's grace.

Even reading a book in dreams was the happiest moment for Rassundari; she was pleased to perform this impossible task, at least in a dream. She felt as if her life was blessed and God had listened to her constant prayers and given her the ability to read in dreams, and she felt delighted(Chatterjee, 2016, pp.51-52). When someone has an earnest desire to do something, they become happy even if they get the chance to accomplish that thing in their dreams. She wrote that she indulged in housework throughout the day and did not have time to educate herself. Another hurdle was that no one could teach her. She recognised some letters but could not write them, and without knowing writing, she could not become literate in the true sense. She was anxious that if someone saw her, it would be a dangerous thing (Chatterjee, 2016, p.53). In the nineteenth

century, if a woman used to read or write, her learning was considered offensive, and she might have had to face social outrage. Devi was also worried that her social image would be tarnished if she had been exposed while indulging in reading and writing.

Rassundari writes that in an attempt to read *Chaitanya Bhagavata,* she tore a page from the book and hid it in *Khori* in the kitchen so that no one would see it (Chatterjee, 2016, p.53). Devi was afraid of social criticism, but she was desperate to learn and narrated her experiences:

I decided to steal one of the palm leaves my eldest son used to practice his handwriting. One look at the leaf, another at the sheet, a comparison with the letters I already knew, and, finally, a verification with the speech of others--that was the process adopted for some time. I would take out the sheet and put it back promptly before anybody could see it (Chatterjee, 2016, pp.53-54).

She struggles hard to be able to read and write because she is a woman. Rassundari Devi remarks, "Wasn't it a matter to be regretted, that I had to go through all this humiliation just because I was a woman? Shut up like a thief, even trying to learn was considered an offence" (Chatterjee, 2016, p.54). Learning to read was difficult for the women of Rassundari's times, and if they tried to read, they did it secretly. Rassundari writes that she had to go through another trouble: decrypting the handwritten books due to the lack of printed books. After much effort, she managed to read the *Chaitanya Bhagavata* but could not learn to write. She writes, "One needs many things if one is to write: paper, pen, ink, ink pot, and so on…Furthermore, what would they say if they saw me with all the writing paraphernalia? I was always afraid of criticism. So I gave up the idea of writing and concentrated on reading" (Chatterjee, 2016, p.55). The fear of social criticism stops an individual from breaking societal norms. Rassundari was also apprehensive about society and dared not learn writing. She further writes, "I was deeply engrossed in whatever I could read, and the idea of writing did not cross my mind" (Chatterjee, 2016, p.55). When a woman tried to break the stereotype, it was a big challenge for her, and it needed much determination, and even sometimes, she gave up her efforts. Rassundari also gave up writing in the initial stage of her learning endeavour. Pandita Ramabai also has similar views about the women who tried to learn reading. She writes, "the little wives can get but scanty time to devote to self-culture; anyone fortunate enough to possess the desire and able to command the time is in constant fear of being seen by her husband's relatives" (Ramabai, 1984,p.103). The women of the nineteenth century could not pursue their goals due to domestic affairs and fear of social criticism.

The Challenging Journey on the Path of Education

In the beginning, Rassundari used to read *Chaitanya Bhagavata with her neighbours* at a lonely place when her sisters-in-law were busy with some work. Later on, her sisters-in-law knew about her reading ability. They became happy, and two started taking lessons from Rassundari(Chatterjee 2016,p.65). Women feel sisterhood because they sail in the same boat and support each other when they get the chance. Rassundari's sisters-in-law also helped her in her venture of literacy. She read all the books available in the house "*Chaitanya Bhagavata, Chaitanya Charitamrita, Jaimini Bharat,* and *Valmiki-Purane*" (Chatterjee, 2016, p.69). Her quest for learning was unending, and she finished reading the first volume of *Valmiki-Purana,* but the other parts were unavailable, so she told her son Dwarkananth to bring the seven volumes of the book. He sent it to her. She further states, "By then almost everybody had come to know of my ability to read though they were not aware of how I used to hanker after books. Later, they were pleased to hear of this. Initially, I used to be nervous but later came to realise that my reading did not displease anybody. Rather, they encouraged me" (Chatterjee,2016,p.69). Familial support is necessary for the progress of an individual. Rassundari's success was also the result of the support of her son and the womenfolk of the house. She could read printed books and began compre-

hending the alphabet without writing. She was unhappy due to her inability to write and prayed to God to teach her to write, and God answered her call when her son urged her to write letters to her and gave her paper, pen and ink, and she practised writing. Rassundari shares her experiences of learning:

The process of my education was not easy at all. It was really a painstaking one. It makes me wonder when I think of those days. It seems as if God was my teacher; otherwise, learning to read and write was impossible in the situation I was in. I consider it my great good fortune that I am able to write some letters (Chatterjee, 2016,p.71).

Ironically, Indian society worshipped Saraswati, a female goddess of knowledge, learning, and wisdom. Simultaneously, it did not allow women to acquire the same. When writing her autobiography, Rassundari recalls that society's attitude has dramatically changed since her childhood:

...Girls were not supposed to be educated in those days. People used to say, what is this? A girl child learning to read and write? It was considered a great offence. Girls should not touch pen and paper; that will bring about their ruin. But God has created new rules now, which I find quite satisfactory. Girls do not suffer any more; there are good rules for them. These days parents of a single girl child pay great attention to her education (Chatterjee, 2016,p.107).

Rassundari Devi's life is a series of actions and decisions that show serious departures from her time's patriarchal social norms. Not only did she learn to read, she also decided to record the events and details of her everyday domestic life in a book and publish it. She dared to disclose her life in print after being a widowed older woman. She writes, "It is such a pleasure to see the women today enjoying so much freedom. These days parents of single girl child take so much care to educate her. But we had to struggle so much just for that"? (Chatterjee, 2016,p.107). At the beginning of the 19th century, girls did not get the opportunity to get formal education compared to the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Thus, Rassundari compares the times when she was a child and at eighty-eight when she narrated her life story.

Education as a key to women Empowerment

The prevailing social customs of the 19th and early 20th centuries made the life of women more pathetic. Rassundari Devi portrays the harsh truth of the time when the life of women was similar to that of prisoners, where they were devoid of their fundamental rights, be it the right to education, the right to expression or the right to a free life. They were destined to live under the veil *(purdah)*, a symbol of patriarchal domination. Her desire not to remain an unlettered woman throughout her life also led to the urge to connect to people and read various texts. She believed that the plight of women could be changed only through education which would help them acquire equality and social status. The famous Indian scholar Pandita Ramabai also supports similar views. She writes, "We, the women of India, are hungering and thirsting for knowledge; only education under God's grace can give us the needful strength to rise up from our degraded condition" (Ramabai, 1984,p.107). Education can play a vital role in improving the condition of women.Well known social activist and writer V.Mohinigiri, in her book,Deprived Devis Women's Unequal Status in Society also writes, "Education has long been one of the most decisive of our life— choices,the key to equal opportunities and the ladder to advancement"(2006,p.233).Gender equality ,which is essential for a progressive society can be achieved only through women's education.

Rassundari Devi established a glaring example of women's empowerment. The process through which her literary potential resulted in the autobiographical narrative makes it evident that education does not provide automatic access to empowerment. Although, The discourses of resistance set up by Rassundari Devi in whatever little means or agency she possesses have been a landmark in their empowerment process. Jyotirindranath Tagore, the famous Bengali scholar, writes in *Amar Jiban* that Rassundari Devi's life is notable for "Her earnest desire to educate

herself". He further writes, "It was considered improper for women to learn reading and writing those days. But she taught herself, taking great pains, and many obstacles" (Preface, 2016, IX). The entire narrative throughout the text echoes the bold step that a woman in the 19th century undertook when women's literacy was not even a spared thought.

Rassundari as a Vindicator of Women's Education

In those days, people considered women's education wrong and even associated it with the dreadful fate of women. Along with this existed the societally ingrained fear of being widowed, a woman who knows to read is fated to be widowed. "It is a popular belief among high-caste women that their husbands will die if they should read or should hold a pen in their fingers. The fear of becoming a widow overcomes their hunger and thirst for knowledge" (Ramabai, 1984,p.103). Rassundari Devi's significant concerns remain very different, ones not frontally addressed by social reformers: patrilocality, housework, the single-handed raising of infants, and the humiliations surrounding widowhood. At the same time, she is somewhat both envious and approved of what is happening to the new-age women, who have easy access to the basics that she had to struggle with so much. She highlights the internalisation of social pressure, which acts against her aspiration to literacy. Her narratives marked her attempt to challenge and subvert the patriarchal hegemony of nineteenth-century society. The life of women in her contemporary society was miserable enough. They were not allowed to step outside without a male companion. Rassundari was not an exception to this. She felt confined, like a "caged bird," as she mentions in her autobiography. The use of avian imagery refers to unnatural societal discrimination and, at the same time, hints at the possibility of freedom.

She started learning the alphabet at fourteen and finished learning it after she became the mother of twelve children. Her son's reading initiated her way of recognising the alphabet. She learnt to read at the age of twenty-six. She learned to write when her son expressed annoyance about her not answering his letters. Rassundari also shows how she has made her own decisions to learn to read, despite the fear of family and social disapproval. Rassundari narrates how her hard work and self-determination, which she has put in to learn reading, succeeded. At the same time, she praises God's mercy in acquiring literacy. Despite all the hardships, she managed to read and write and finally, at eighty-eight, her autobiography was published. Sarkar notices that Rassundari speaks in a declamatory voice on specific issues, describing the painful consequences of social regulations. She is addressing a modern readership here, which is already debating women's education, the restrictions of old times, the relentless pressure of domestic labour, and the problems of motherhood (Sarkar,1999,p.220). Rassundari has made relentless attempts to express themselves through her narration.

Rassundari Devi's autobiography attempts to reveal an authentic account of women's history in the then-era. What makes Rassundari's writing unique is its spontaneity. Devi also supplicates, "This book is written by my own hand. I am not literate in the real sense. Do not neglect it, my dear readers, do not look down upon it. I need not elaborate. You are aware of everything, so please do the needful so that my labour is rewarded" (Chatterjee, 2016,p.122). Rassundari requests the readers not to undermine her work as she was not formally educated and worked hard to receive an education. She refuted the belief that women would bring disaster and disgrace to their families when they learned to read and write. She read and wrote, and recorded her life events by making them public after getting them published. She dared to publicly disclose her private life, which was a forbidden act for the upper-class Hindu woman. Though Rassundari faced many challenges in her life by societal norms, she held her head high. She kindles the dream of millions to come out of their caged condition: "A persistent, almost tenacious sense of her identity, one that she struggles to hold onto in the most adverse of circumstances, is a striking feature of

her narrative" (Tharu et al.1991,p. 190). Within the confined space of her household, Rassundari carved out a niche for herself, and her autobiography becomes a manifesto of the struggle of all those women who were terminated, subjugated, oppressed and alienated within their families and society.

Conclusion

Rassundari Devi represents the strong-willed, determined, honest and resolute woman who does not give up and tries to break open the clutches of tradition and patriarchal rules imposed upon her. She proves to be a rebel who takes a stand for womenfolk by propounding that women should be fully literate, which would make them self-reliant. She advocates equality and freedom for women and subtly presents her radical perspective through her autobiography. The autobiography paved the way for womenfolk to stand for their rights and beliefs. Today the evolved phase in women's lives regarding the right to education has a strong base on the sacrifice of a woman like Rassundari Devi. The sacrifice and extraordinary efforts of Rassundari paved the way for the later generations of women to pursue their heart's desires. Her struggle for education laid the foundation for a new perspective towards women's education in 21st-century India.Her efforts crossing great lengths to educate herself call for special attention while reading the text, especially in the twenty-first century, where the situation has drastically changed. Now, most women are getting easy access to education. The government has introduced many schemes to promote women's education in India, such as 'Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan' and 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao'. The New Education Policy 2020 (NEP) also aims at universalising education in India with a 100% gross enrollment ratio by 2030 for school education and 50% by 2035 for higher education. It is a move as the formation of gender inclusion. It attempts to decrease gender gaps at all levels and ensures gender equity in society. The policy aims to foster women's participation in education because education is a powerful tool that builds confident and ambitious women through which they become aware of their rights and raise their voices against exploitation.

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