CHAPTER VI
THE SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHERS
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6.1 Rasosundari Devi

The best evidence of social consciousness of Rasosundari Devi is her autobiography entitled 'Amar Jiban'. The author silently defied the restrictions of her contemporary society and educated herself to open a vista of Bengali literature and to complete her autobiography which created a genre. The society in which she lived was a rigid and conservative one, full of superstitions. The restrictions of that society as a rule, were a misnomer for oppression, specially the term women's liberty was reckoned as a crime.

Rasosundari Devi is described by an authoritative critic in the following lines which are to be regarded as authentic. "It is really surprising that in those days when there was a strong superstition that if a woman reads book she would become widow, Rasosundari being a house-wife of that period started reading first hand written book (puthi) and then the printed book and at last she could be able to learn writing, by taking full responsibility of a big family as she had the earnest and undomitable desire for learning".

(Jekale strilok puthi parile bidhaha hay, ei sanskar prabal chila, sekaler grihastha badhu haiya Rasosundari kirope adanya gnanipasa laya o brihat sansarer bhargrosha haiya ashes kasta swikar kariya prathame puthi o pare chapa bai ebang aro pare likhite shikhiya chilen taha satya ei bismayabaha).

The social restrictions were imposed on them by men. In the male-domination women had to pass their lives in confinement under veil. There was no question of individual liberty of women. Even to be learned by self effort was an unpardonable offence on the part of women.

1. Sen, Sukumar - Bangla Sahitya gadya, 3rd. ED. 1356 B.S., P-148
"It was a time when women did no learning as in today"²

(Takhan se ek din chila, ekhankaar mata meyechelera shikhita na.

The social consciousness of Rasosundari Devi was not awakened by any person. Her personal realization and sense of justice and injustice impelled her to judge the propriety of the restrictions imposed upon women by the society. Although a daughter of a conservative family, she was, in a way, fortunate enough compared to other women of that age. Since in the compound of her paternal home itself, there was a Bengali School where the village-boys were taught. The entrance of the girls in the school was prohibited. But Rasosundari Devi availed the change of entering the school in her very infancy, although not as a student, but as a visitor.

Rasosundari Devi first learnt her ABC in a forlorn corner much away from the eyes of others. Neither the family members nor the teachers could know about her secret learning of alphabets. - "Then the boys used to write the 34 letters on the ground. Then holding a rod they read out the letters in a loud voice, stayed there all along and silently learnt the lessons thus taught to the boys. During that time Persian was learnt by all. I learnt that language also silently to the knowledge of none"³.

(Takhan cheleka ka, kha, choutrit akshare matite likhito, pare ek nari hate laia ei sakal lekha ucchashware parita. Ami sakal samay ei thakitam, ami mone mone ei sakal para ei shikhilam. Sekale Persi parar pradurbhab chilo. Ami mane mane tahao khanik shikhilam. Ami je ei sakal para mane mane shikhiachi tahaar keho janita na).

At that time Rasosundari was only eight years old. But even at that age she had a realisation. She was aware of the fact that learning was an offence for women at that time. As such the learning by hearing from others even at a distance was better to be concealed, she assumed.

Rasosundari Devi enjoyed a pretty long lease of life which is being divided here into two parts, pre-marriage and post-marriage for the facility of our discussion.

During the first period (pre-marriage) along with her child like conduct, her heart filled with devotion, faith on God and even within that some where a grievance for the confined life of women can be heard. But nowhere Rasosundari Devi uttered a single slogan or expressed a feeling of direct rebellion against this social rigour or compulsion. But that injustice of imbalance pained her intensely is divulged by her in a variety of words and modes.

It was a great pain for her that education was not available within the reach of women. In this regard the words of Sarada Sundari Devi, mother of Keshab Chandra Sen, the celebrated protagonist of the Brahma faith and social reformer are memorable. - "The women of those days have neither the facilities to learn nor the desire to educate themselves like the women of today".

(Takhankar meyeder ajkaler meyeder maton lekha-para shikhitar eman subidha chilo na, shikhit echahta na).

At the age of only twelve years when Rasosundari Devi's marriage was performed, she was ignorant of the experiences of the worldly life. Leaving
her parental home, the adolescent girl set out for her husband's abode in an entirely unfamiliar environment. Her mental picture at that time is drawn in her book. Here her deep understanding of the meaning of life and the social consciousness are expressed in a rare exactness. To her a woman meant dependence of some one else. As such she had to leave her familiar place of birth and relatives for a new place where she had to adjust herself after marriage. Although the servility of the life of a woman pained her incessantly, nevertheless regarding the social custom as the rules dictated by God himself, Rasosundari had to bear all these by virtue of her tolerance.

"In fact, leaving one's mother and all other kith and kin, residence in a queer place and life-long obedience to those who are not parents is not a matter of little grief. But since it is just ordained by God, this state is to be accepted as a benevolence of Him and so, an act to be appreciated."^5

(Bastobik apanar ma o apanar sakal ke charia bhinno deshe gia bash ebang jabojjibon tahadige: odhinota swikar, apaner matapita keho nohen - aiti ki samanya dukkhe bishoy, kintu iha Iswarer adhin karma, aijannyo iha prasamsar jogya bate).

Hence her social consciousness nowhere wore the grab of a rebellion or an angry demonstration. But this social imbalance appeared to her to be an unanswered question. - "There was no reason for lamentation for the problems of the domestic life. Only to perform the domestic duties day after day in order to attract the appreciation of all and to satisfy everyone was the only aim and effort for me. But it did greatly hurt my feelings that I could not do any reading or writing since I was a woman."^6

At the age of only twelve years she came to Ramdiya village as a housewife and could win the love of everyone. She also earned adequate reputation as an ideal housewife. But at the age of eighteen years her mind was repeatedly tormented by a sigh that education was not easily available within reach of women in those days. In the later years when she saw the liberty of women, her mind was filled not with envy, but with a great joy.

"How fortunate are the girls and boys of this day! Now with the birth of a girl, most of the people try for her education. Nonetheless this move must be praised".

The 'Bamabodhoni Patrika' edited by Umesh Chandra Dutta was published almost at the same or contemporary period as was mentioned by Rasosundari Devi. - "In 1863 the Bamabodhini patrika appeared, its aim was ladies education (antahpur-siksha). The age of this paper is not a short one - sixty years (1922). During this long period, a lot of essays on female education was published in this Bamabodhini patrika".

(1863 sale Bamabodhini patrika atmaprakash kare, uddeshya chilo 'Atmahpur-siksha'. Patrikatir auishhob)

She welcomed this change of the society. This undoubtedly was expressive of her deep social consciousness.

From the point of view of women, Rasosundari Devi narrated this sad tale of the helpless, confined life of the housewives in the manner of a socially conscious perfect artist. - "Sometimes now, that day reappears in my mind when the bird remained encaged and the fish was panting in the net".9

(Akhan kakhan mame pare saidin pinjirete pakhi bandi, jale bandi min)

Not to speak of becoming learned by reading and writing, the women in general and the housewives in particular had to spend their days within the walls. They could not converse with anybody without prior permission.

"The women in particular had to follow such rules in those days, she would work in the house with a footlong veil covering her face and would not talk with any body. Only then she could be reckoned as a good house-wife".10

(Bisesoto takhan meyechelel eipraker niyam chilo, je bau hai bese hatkhanek ghanta dia gharer madyc kaj karibe, ar kaharo samge katha kahebe na, taha haile bara bhao bai hailo).

She followed the rules of the house-wife without fail and no doubt, performed all the household duties with utmost sincerity; but she could not

10. Ibid, P-21.
greet the rigours of the society with an injured and bleeding heart. She ventilated her feelings through her autobiography which appeared to be the loud protest against the ruling society.

In contemporary life of the married women there was an oppression or restriction all over her movements and wearings. - "There was no fine clothes as today but there were all coarse garments. I wore those clothes with a veil down to my bosom and performed the duties of the household; I talked with no person present thereon.

(sekale akhontar mata chikon kapar chilona mata mata kapor chilo ami shai kapar poria bok porjanta ghamta dia ai sakal kaj karitam ar je sakal lok chilo aharo same kotha kohitam na).

As though women were just toys in the hands of men and only for the guilt that they were born as women, they were deprived of being educated - this was the matter of great displeasure for Kasosundari Devi. - "oh, what a matter of displeasure! Such calamities were to be fall on them for being born as women. Like thieves we have to remain imprisoned - but what should be the offence for remaining educated?"

(aha, ki akkhaper bishoy' meyechele balla ki aroi durdasa! Chorer moto jeno bandi halai thaki, taka balla bidya sikate o dash).

This question which she raised before the society was the outburst of her unfathomed social consciousness. Only after eight years of the birth of Rabindranath Tagore, this lady wrote this autobiography putting much value on the life of woman after becoming self-educated. It is really an amazing and wonderful event.

11. Devi, Rascsundar. Amar Jiban, P-21
Although she did not oppose the social restriction, her conscious self put this question before the society of the nineteenth century which was replete with extreme orthodoxy. - "All the conduct and customs of those days were not so poor; but this matter was extremely sad. Every member of the society deprived women from education. Women of that age were exceedingly unfortunate. They were counted among the beasts". 

(Takhankar amadiger desher sakal achar byabahari bara mando chilo na, kintu ei bisayti bhari mando chilo. Sakolei meyecheleke bidyayai banchito karja rakhiachilen. Tokhankar meyechelegula nitando hatabhaga, prakrito pashur modye ganana karite haibek).

The society of the nineteenth century averted the question without justification whether women of the day had a soul and a right of their own.

It was not only that women education was considered to be an offence in that age, but just to hold a paper and a pen in their hands was believed to be ominous for the domestic world. As regards this the words stated by Saralabala Sarkar are to be recalled. - "In the age of Rasosundari Devi there was hardly any system of imparting education to women, rather there was the misbelief that the women who did any reading or writing became widow and lost fortune".

(Iher samee Bangladeshe meyeder lekhapara sikhibar pratha ekebare chilona, barang meyera lekhaparha sikhile bidhba o durbhagnabati hay, anekeri airup biswas chilo).

14. Sarkar, Saralabala - Sekaler Banglar meye: Rasosundari Devi. (Rachana sangrah, Saralabala Sarkar, (Part-II), P-632)
This misbelieve was a common thing of that period. We find in some critic's comments:

"It was a general believe that widowism is inevitable for the educated women".15

(Erakami sadaran biswas chile je, nari sikshita halei bidhaba habe).

Women who endeavoured for attaining education fell in direct wrath of society. "People of the day opined that it was apparrant that the 'Kali-yug' had just arrived. Now possibly the woman would work at all stations replacing men. So-long it never occured, but now everything is going to happen".16

(Takhankar lok bolita, buji 'koli-kal ipasthit haiache deekhite pai. Akhan buji meyecheleteo puruser kaj karibe. Atakal iha chila na, ekale haiache).

Again she adds the comments of the people of that age. "Now it is the name and fame of only women everywhere and men are only idlers. In our days there wasno wholesomeness like this. Now it is the reign of women".17

(Akhan mager namdak mins jearabharat, amader kale eta apad chila na, ekale haiache. Akhan meve rajar kal haiache).

Rasosundari Devi was neither a social reformer nor a spokeswoman of women's progress, but her sentient and sensible mind was much purturbed by the reactions of the contemporary society. Though a 'veiled housewife' this question injured her mind again and again.

17. Ibid, P-22.
That was a time when women could not enjoy any form of liberty. They could do nothing with their own strength. They had to pass their days in total dependence - in the manner of an encaged bird.\textsuperscript{18}

(Takhankar sel ekkal chilo;sekare meyechelediger swadhinata mateo chilo na;ni jer khamatay kana karnat karite para jaita na,sompurna rupe poradhina haia katjapan karite haito.Se jeno ekkale pinjarabaddha bidangir mato thaka haita).

Despite so much obstructions and of confinement Rasosundari's strong desire for learning and belief in God enabled her to become educated in the long run. This was another form of 'crusade' against the prevalent social customs and systems.

"Now-a-days the parents of a daughter take every care to educate her. We had to undergo so much painful ordeals to obtain such an amount of learning. The petty amount of learning that I have acquired is entirely due to the grace of the Almighty."\textsuperscript{19}

(ekhan jahar ekti meyeche ache,se kata jatna koria lekhaparha sikhay,ei lekha parha sikhbar jaako amader kata kasta haiache).

It was a fact that Rasosundari Devi had no complaint for being born as a woman. But the grievance was that women could not visit their relatives even at their death-bed on account of the shackle of dependence. - "Why was I born in the fateless clan of women? Die upon such a life! Who else is there in the world to substitute one's own mother? .... such a rare personality like the mother - could not be served by me!"\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18} Devi, Rasosundari - Amar Jiban, P-36,37.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, P-30.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, P-27
Again she made comments with lots of pain and complaints. - "If I were a son and received the information about the end of her life, I would have flown from wherever I stayed. But what could I do? I am only an encaged bird".  

In the present age there arises the question of women's liberty. But for a village housewife this question of enjoyment of her rights or the perception of social consciousness is really a surprising thing.

Rasosundari Devi had no connection with politics or any social organisation. Before 150 or 175 years ago, it was an absurdity for a housewife belonging to a respectable family to keep any contact with a social organisation outside her family.

"The waves of the outside world did not touch her solitary life. That is why there is no mention about the remarkable events of nineteenth century in her writings. Even then her mind was surprisingly liberal and 'Amar Jiban' depicts those of her liberal attitude".

But Rasosundari Devi was a rare exception of her age in envisaging her grave social consciousness through various events and occurrences although she lived in the environment of such a family.

6.2 Nalinibala Devi

The social consciousness of Nalinibala Devi is dovetailed with her life, thought and actions. This consciousness can no way be imposed on her as an exterior attribute; it is a consciousness, evolved out of her pure realisation. Although she did not get her education in traditional way, Nalinibala acquired a power to judge the world and life in an acute and analytical way with her education which she attained in her family circle and in the training of the affectionate and efficient private teacher. As a result a distinct picture of social consciousness is visible in her writings whether with her awareness or without it.

Nalinibala Devi was basically a poet. Her poetry reveals a metaphysical and transcendent mode. But this transcendental mode nowhere eludes her perception of the kaleidoscopic view of the realities of the world and the sense of good and evil inherent in it. Her metaphysical conceptions and the sense of social commitment works simultaneously. This social consciousness expresses itself in a variegated way in her family, community and political spheres.

In the preface to her much valued autobiography, 'Eri Aha Dinbor', the author herself has added a brief review analysing her by gone days reckoning the debit and credit of the past. In this erudite analysis her social consciousness and fine sense of reality are well disclosed.
"In the long journey of eighteen and three scores of years the pictures of the roadside reflect in the mirror of my mind, as if in a movie emerging out of their habitat of oblivion. Man's life is like a meteor which orbits in a limited and fixed circle; his dim glamour ends on a day in the void after revolving on the periphery of his life's activities. In the journey of life man harvests a lot of experiences and self-beliefs which help his entity as a man to become a totality".23

(Paharanir arot bur joa ari atinikuri athora becharar dighalia but bulanit batar dukakhar manar chitrabor chnaya-chabir dare namar dapanat jiliki uthiche. Simita nirdharita kakshat ghuri phura eti papia tarar darei manuhar jiban jibanar karma paridhih ghuri edin sunyar majat tar khinajyoti seb hai jai. Manuhe jibanar batat bat bulotepratlya lab korit manushsatya purna kari tolat sohay kare).

Nalinibala asked herself while replying to the queries put forth by all to her. "Many people asked me what I have seen and gained in this long span of my life. I have to answer, 'I have seen a lot and heard a lot as well'".24

(Bahute prasna kare, dighalia jibanor kalchoat mai ki dekhilu, mai ki palnu? Kabalagla hay bahut dekhilnu, bahut sunilnu).

With this experience of seeing a lot and gaining a lot mixed her sense of judgement, the power of distinguishing the just from the unjust and the social consciousness. The social consciousness can be discerned from even her childhood when one observes the individual life of Nalinibala Devi. The childhood of
of Nalinibala passed in the happy and affluent environment of a joint family.

"In our grand-father's house there lived eighty families. A good number of shelterless widows and poor boys used to stay there in the care of male and female servants as though it was their own home."  

(Her grand-father Madhab Chandra Bordoloi reigned supreme over all. He was then a high official under the British Government. In his house, lived a host of relatives in his maintenance and also a good number of students who were not relatives. In such an environment in which she grew up from her childhood, she witnessed the scene of co-existence of selfless help to others, amplitude and restraint. The word 'want' was not so much prevalent or known to the people of those days.

"The life of Assamese was then replete with happiness, peace and enjoyment. The children used to get pure and ample food value. The fruits and vegetables supplied by nature in abundance, helped the growth of their mental calibre and unimpaired health."  

(Asomiya manuhor jiban achil sukhsantibhog sukhere bhora. Sei dinar shishue paisil prachur khadya pranprakitir abadan prachur phal-mul khai puroth mastiska am atut swasthya labh karichil).

Her childhood days were full of joy. - "It is difficult to find a similarity of those
endless joys and enthusiasm of my mind which I experienced during childhood with anything else in course of my later life".27

(ātiyā mar jowa ḍaraḷir maner aţhuranto anando aru uḷḷasar tulona gotei jibanaṭ bichari pābālai nai)

As soon as she attained adolescence, she first experienced the sub-ordination of women. - "Those days were somewhat different for women".28

(sei dinbor achil maikī-ṃanūhar karane aĉutiya)

Even during her adolescence, she first got the sense of injustice done by the society to women. - "The women remained shut in doors as though invisible by the sun and the moon".29

(maikī-ṃahuha achil chandra surjyai dekha ne pawa).

On the occasion of festivities and amusements the movement of women were restricted. In many a sphere they had to pass their days in deprivation and injustice. - "Under the thick veil those were the days of dense darkness. It was a matter of great shame for women to move freely as in today. Particularly the girls of ten, eleven years who belonged to the respectable families were debarred from going out of their homes. All the gentle ladies including the daughters and the daughter-in-laws had to pass their days in the corners of the house under the frightful custom of the 'Pardah'".30

(Daṭh paɾdahar a♭braɾe a♭bra thaka endher din ajir dinardare maikī maヌhobor mukali muriක hai phura achil eti lajor katha. Bisheskai bhada ramaijor sowali dah egharo basaror para gharar baz olsbnoware. Bowari, jiwarir para hakalo bhada mohī bhayanak pardah proṭhāɾ arat gharar chuṭat din katabo lagia ḍaichi).

27. Devi, Nalinibala - Erī Aha Dinbor, P-12
28. Ibid, P-12
29. Ibid, P-12
30. Ibid, P-12
In support of this statement by Nalinibala Devi the views of Sreemati Rajabala Das, a senior educationist and a renowned lady may be recalled. "I remember of travelling in a covered bullock-cart or a closed door pony-cart when we had to go to the wedding ceremony of our relatives or just for a stroll. There was no custom of walking for women on public road like the women today. The aged ladies had also to go to their neighbour's houses under cover of big wicker hats (known as japi in Assamese)". 

During the concluding part of Nalinibala Devi's life, some amount of freedom of women came to her view when her mind was wounded again and again at the thought of the women of the past who had lost their sweet dreams in the maze of inhibitions and narrowness of the society. The days eclipsed under the heavy burden of inhibitions of the 'pardah' during the early period of life and now appear to be mere dream. It seems to be a difference between heaven and earth when one looks at the present day life of freedom of women in comparison to that of the past. "Who counts those numerous life who withered in silence under the hurdle of the unbreakable customs of the pardah? Today I recall those dark days of the past."

(Mor jibanar agchowar ei dorghor 'parda prathar'anar din boralarai manat parile swapan jen lage. Sei din aru aji ei mukta swadhin tirata-jibanar, swargo-martyar byabadhan. e alanghuniya prada prathar anrat bahu narir jibon nirabe marabi gaichit tan lekha kone lay. Aji suwmarichno atitar sei endhar din borar katha).

32. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-12, 13.
This basic social problem - the absence of freedom of women pained her in a varied way. But Nalinibala Devi maintained no malice or bitterness towards the society. - "But such an affair of things in the society could not disturb the peace of my mind. The mind consoled itself considering the same as a norm of the day. But the pain of the first denial of freedom in the early life made my mind restless". 33

(kintu seI paribeshat mor manat hale kono ashanti nachil.seito desh-dostar hichabe mane mani lai santwana paichil.kintu lrali jibanar pratham abaraJhat pedanai hale man asthir kari tulichil).

It was not only the absence of freedom of women which concerned her but the mind also was gravely occupied by the thought of conduct of the youth of the pre-independence and post independence India. She tries to elucidate the difference of their characters by citing a minor instance. In the post independent Assam there was a custom of scattering rice at the end of some puja festival when the idol was taken out in a procession for immersion. This custom harassed the pedestrians and the onlookers. This indecent behaviour embarrassed the writer (Nalinibala) very much and as such she objected to it in clear terms. In its place she proudly admired the higher taste which was prevalent among the youth of the pre-independent Assam.

"This awkward custom of scattering rice on the road was not there in those days and instead, there was an attitude of higher taste in the gentle society. Each and every boy, the youth and the old thought alike that such an immoral or indecent custom should not find place in the society". 34

34. Ibid, P-13.
India achieved freedom but along with it a considerable number of political parties emerged in the country. Nalinibala felt consciously that too much political parties thwarted the general development of the country with their mutual animosity. The memory of her early days reminded her of the unpolluted phase of freedom movement in contrast to the contemporary situation. - "In the minds of the citizens there was not even an iota of peacelessness in that period in which there was no political party in every nook and corner of the country as in today. Nor was there any differences of opinion. Today I remember those days full of peace and unalloyed joy."

Nalinibala felt the pain of absence of female education along with non-existence of freedom. However, she grew conversent in many subjects in the keen desire of her grand-father and father under the guidance of private teachers, although she could not get the facility of reading in a school. - "In those days particularly in the Assamese society, there was no facility for female education. In such an age even in my childhood, as I was taught through the medium of poetry, my grand-father reared the high hope in his mind that I will be able to become educated in higher learning observing my progress in the care and efforts of my private teachers and my father as well."

In her later life she witnessed a number of scenes of progress of women in Assam and herself took active part in it; but the thought that in those days the women enjoyed only a limited right and that there was no value of their individual desire and hope pained her very much.

"In our childhood days the practice of dance by girls was a matter of great discredit. We learnt to sing from our uncle, the late Kirtinath Bordoloi, Sangeet Visharad. Our musician father taught us singing and playing on the harmonium. We two sisters sang together".  

(Amar dinot chowalir nach bodosania katha achil. Git am gabalo sikichil sargio sangeet Visharad Kirti Bordoloi mahar pora. Sangitagna deutai amak gan gabalai an harmonium bazabalai sikaichile, ami dui bai-bhanie gan gaichilo).

In the help of her father in his affectionate indulgence of freedom, the concept of right of women grew in her even since her childhood. - "In those days nobody thought of singing by girls. But my father himself knew good singing. He taught us both sisters to sing.... We deem it to be the great fortune that in those olden days we two sisters could become pioneer women songstars in the Assamese society".

(Sei dinat chowalie gan gaw katha kane bhaba nachil. Kintu mor deutai nije o bhal gan gaba janichil amaka dui bhai-bhanik gan gabale sikaichil.... sei mandhataojugat ami duljani bhai-bhanie he prathame asomiya samajat gaika na baire janajat haba parata amar saubhagya buli bhabo).

In accordance with the social rule of the day, Nalinibala Devi was married at the

37. Debi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-32.
38. Ibid, P-32.
age of twelve years only. But after spending only eight years of happy conjugal life, she came to her parents as a helpless widow with five children with her. She then remained engrossed in the spiritual world.

Her father's affectionate counsel and learned teachings helped her steadily to return to the world of realities. The association of the politician father Nabin Chandra Bordoloi made her keenly interested in politics. The political consciousness of Nalinibala advanced her social consciousness a step further. She not only remained a housewife confining her duties in looking after the fatherless children, the intention of the welfare of the country and its people expanded the periphery of her personal joy, woe, and worries. Although not directly involved in the freedom movement, Nalinibala Devi was particularly influenced by the political career of her father. - "Karmabir Nabin Chandra Bordoloi (my esteemed father) and Deshopran (the silent worker) Chandranath Sarma, with their sincere efforts, made it feasible to use our outside parlour as the first office of the congress.... All the patriot leaders of Assam assembled there to start the struggle for freedom".  

(Karmabir Nabin Chandra Bordoloi (mor deuta) aru deshopran nirab karmi Chandranath Sarma deutar chora ghorate asomor office pata hol. Asomor deshopremi netasokol got khai amar gharat pata congress officeate mukti-jugar patoni melile)  

The political consciousness of Nalinibala revealed in her autobiography 'Eri Aha Dinbor' envisages the backdrop of the pre-independence India's struggle for freedom under the direct and indirect influences of an illustrious politician and foremost freedom fighter of Assam. The pre-independence period either directly or indirectly compelled her to involve herself in many spheres of politics because of her patriotism and social consciousness.  

"As the movement grew more forceful, the government foresaw in it their impending peril. The search and investigations of the government increased day after day. My father entrusted me with a number of such responsible duties and admired me at the successful performance."

(Andolan prabal hai uthat British sarkare bipad manile. Sarkaror khanatallashir kob beril gopanic kagaspatrabor bhalkai lukuai thaboloi deutai mok var dile. Eta bishista thait mai kagazpatrabor lukuai thoishila shaubagya krame police a congress office khanatallashi kari kagaz parta bor napale. Deutai mok ere dharonar bahut daliyapurna kamar bhar dechil, kritokarjat prashamsa karichil).

Such political consciousness generated by the desire for social welfare compelled Nalinibala Devi to stand directly on the political platform with a view to pursue the various programmes of welfare of the country. In 1941, when the impact of Md. Ali Jinnah Assam was claimed to be a part of the proposed Islamic State with East Bengal, Nalinibala, along with the people of Assam, strongly protested the move. She appealed to Mahatma Gandhi in the form of a poem, the miserable plight of the distressed people of Assam. The poem was translated into English by Hem Barua, a distinguished literateur of Assam.

"I felt as though an iota of consolation came to my mind being able to convey to the Father of the Nation the appeal of the afflicted heart of a negligible poet, however trivial it might be, at the moment of a serious and imminent catastrophe of the land."

(monat bhab haichil - ajoni khudra kabir abedon oti tuchcho holeo ane gurutoro deshor bipadat hrihow artonad kari utha ati abedon jatir pitalai janabalai pal monoloi adhaviman santona ahil)

40. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-83
41. Ibid, P-143.
In the later life Nalinibala was actively involved in the reformation of the society. Following the social custom of the day she was compelled to perform the marriage of her first daughter, Usha Devi, at the age of twelve years. But as the 'Sarda Bill' was passed before the marriage of her second daughter, Nalinibala Devi decided never to perform her marriage, under any circumstances before she attained sixteen years of age.

In 1930 as the Central Assembly of India passed the Bill for preservation of child-marriage, proposed by Harvilash Sarda, its impact immensely stirred Assam also. But some tabooed parents of innocent girls of the age-group of 3 to 11 were forced to perform the marriage of their infant wards as if in a furore, out of fear of the social harassments even before the implementation of the Act. Apprised by a concept that in case the marriage of a daughter could not be performed before her attainment of 14 years, her paternal as well as maternal sides would descend to hell - 'the rite of sacrifice of daughters' (kanyamedh yajna) was in vogue in Assam. This sad situation of the time and miserable plight of the girls made Nalinibala firmly resolute never to perform the marriage of her youngest daughter, Aruna, before her sixteen years of age. This bold resolution is expressive of her undaunted and socially conscious mind.

"At first I decided to perform the marriage of my youngest daughter, Aruna with Dev Kanti Bordoloi, son of Rajani Kanta Bordoloi. But I informed Mr. Bordoloi of my inability to perform my daughter's marriage before she attained sixteen years ago.... He agreed with me to allow Aruna to continue her studies and after her matriculation examinations were over her marriage was duly performed at the age of sixteen years. It was first in Assam
that my daughter Aruna and Bulu (sister of Sharda Kakoti) were married at their age of sixteen years. Following this, the marriage of full grown girls came into vogue.\textsuperscript{42}

(Prathamei mor saru sowali srimati)

Arunak Rajani Kanta Bordoloi lora Sri Devakanta Bordoloi-loi biya thik karichillo. Kintu mai sowalir solla basar bayash mahale biya dibi nowarnoo buli Bordoloi dangariak janalnoo, sadashey udar manar Rajani Kanta Bordoloi kale 'kono katha nai! chowalir tomar manamat bayas matei biya dibi'. .... Tekhetar kathamatei arunak parhbaalai diya hal aru Matri pariksha diyar pichat solla basar pura howat biya diya hal).

For a widowed house-wife this step (of social reformation) undoubtedly envisages her firm and deeply reformatory mind. She thanked the propounder of the 'Sarda Act' as a true help for the promotion of women.

"After this occurrence, the custom of marriage of grown-up girls became a vogue in Assam .... As a result, in every household of Assam today the educated girls have been enhancing the glory of female education. Now-a-days, the freedom loving unmarried girls of independent India are enjoying the facilities of mould their future lives in a liberal environment. When today I see these educated healthy and adult girls in each household, I think of the emancipation of women of today who of late had been hidden in the darkness of superstition in India as well as in Assam. The magnanimous Sardaji has blessed the cursed and enthralled society by evolving the Sarada Act".\textsuperscript{43}

(Iar picharpora bayastha chowalir biar prachalan hai pare. .... Ajir swadin Bharatar swadhin-mona kumari showalibare jianar mukali paribesat bhavishyat jiban gari tulibalan subidha paishe aru desh-bideshalai gai bidha siksha labh karibalan paishe swadhin unmukta pathat. Aji ghare ghare parinata bayashar swasthabati shikhita shawalibor dekhi bhobu jen Bharatar tatha Ashomar)

\textsuperscript{42} Devi. Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-214,215.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, P-215.
Although the personal woes and deprivation mortified Nalinibala Devi for a period, her collective thinking could not be eclipsed by them. As such it is evident in her autobiography that along with the personal worries, her worries for the country and the people were simultaneously manifested in the varied way. Her social consciousness again and again attracted her spontaneously towards the sphere of political or social commitments.

When India own freedom Nalinibala used to stay in Calcutta. In this moment of boundless joy and thrilled for achievement for independence she mingled her restraintless feelings of jollity with those of every Indian's heart, thus: - "Hail to the life of India today, hail to the children of India!... We today are the free citizen of India. In this most memorable night (15th August/1947) sleepless are the streets and play grounds of revelrous Calcutta. .... On the terrace of my house I hoisted the tricolour flag with my own hands and fixing eyes in the sky I prayed to the Almighty sheeding tears with both eyes. - "O celestial maidens, shower flowers on the head of Mother India - may she become ever-triumphant, acclaimed and appraised by the world in all ages".

(Dhanya aji Bharat jivan, dhanya Bharat santan. ... Swadhin ani Bharat santan. Ajir ciromoronie nisa, utsab mukharita binidra kalikatar path maidan. ... Mor gharar shatar oparat mai niz hate tini baraniya patakakhani uruawi di akashala chai dudhare chokulu bowai sarbonianta lai pranam janai bhabtso 'puspa

44. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-206, 207.
Swadhinata

Since which forgotten era
Bearing the curse of Gods
Upon your head.
You passed the days like
Petrified Ahalya,
my mother India!
You remained fettered
In the era of slumber;
Today, you are freed from the curse!
Awake, my mother, the mendicant of centuries.

(Kon dur atitarpora debotar avisap sirot saboti
pashani ahalya rupe bharat jononi!
Achila bondini hai nidrito jugat,
Aji sapomukta tum! Devi utha, utha matri
chiro Tapasurni).

In the closing chapter of her life, Nalinibala Devi was engaged in multifarious social activities. In 1949 she presided over 500th year festival of Srimanta Sarkardeva at Jorhat, where she delivered an attractive lecture on Sankardeva's religion and philosophy.

In a vaisnavite monastery (sattra) where there was no admission for women, it was a matter of glory for her that she was made the President over the birth centenary of Sankardeva which she considered to be an unprecedented event. Later she thought to be an evidence of changing development of the era.

"I wondered that a lady was made the President over the 500th birth centenary of Sankardeva, the great preceptor. Later I thought it either to

45. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-208.
be a will of God Himself or the development of the progressive age.\footnote{46}

(Sreemanta Sankara gurur panchashato barshikit ejani mahilak sabhanetri pad jochat mai alap achar haichila, pichat bhabilo, la bhaghabanar iccha ba jugor pragatir bikash)

She considered the thought of the plurality to be a call of God to her mind that followed the path towards infinity eschewing the personal woes of the life of limitations. - "The chief duty of my life was to attend to whatever social call came to me as the directions of God".\footnote{47}

(Samajor kamot jetiai ji ahoban ah sel ahoban bhogabanor nirdesh mani lowai mor jibanar pradhan kartabya)

These reformatory thoughts of the society as well as the directions of God compelled her in later life to involve herself in various activities of progress of women. Perhaps the agonies of the neglected lives of women and sympathy towards the same, inspired her to join the progressive institutions of women. She was selected the President of Asom Womens Samiti and the Kasturba women's samiti. In 1947 she adorned the chair of the President of the conference of the provincial women's society in Nagoan where she delivered an erudite speech on the duty, right and tradition of women. Nalini Bala Devi spent her leisure and energy in the last phase of her life in the welfare activities of the people as well as in the service of motherland. - "In a particular period of life of man an inspiration for service makes him(or her) restless without which the mind finds no peace."\footnote{48}

(manuhar jibonat eta samoi aho seber preronaI mon byakul kari tole. Deshor seba nokorie mone santi nepai).
She paid all her attention in forming the first child-welfare institute in Assam. She was the first President of the much-known children's organisation in Assam, namely, 'Moïna parijat' in 1954. This phase of Nalinibala's life was full of activities.

The basic foundation of Nalinibala's literary pursuits, spiritualism and social consciousness was Indian culture and tradition. Her hope to see her mother 'Asom' in a new attire after independence did not bear the desired fruit. Hence were her anguish and agony. But Nalinibala Devi was a wise and cultured woman and as such her political ire did not stand in her way of onward journey. She could realise that she was inheriting the great Indian culture and hence she knew that her real path was above all personal joys and griefs leading towards the search of truth, beauty and eternal life through the welfare of the country and the world.

"Through a furious and unavated battle with life, I finally reached the wide banks of Brahmaputra and stood before the closed vista to look behind for a moment and asked myself, 'what have I left behind and what have I gained'? I got the answer 'we have been the sons and daughters of the great Indian culture, why should we get exhausted? we hear the great call of the harsh and direct situation of strife to shake hands with us. We have no way to pause'.

(Toyamoya jiban-jujat jujhi gai gai aji bar-luitar duipar sabati simita simat roi khantek picholai jhuri chaicho! ki eri ahilo aru ki palu? or nohoowa jibon jujat jujhi jujhi gai achu, tathapi jano bhagariparishu? nai para, kio nai para? uttar para mahan Bharatio sanskritir santan ami, bhagariparim kio? samghatani nirmamatar prathyakkhya paristhitia hat milabalai kara maha-ahaban kanat pare. Thamaki robbar upai nai;)."

49. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-Agkatha 5.
Work is life. She had no capacity to ignore the call of the society and the world. That is why Nalinibala Devi expressed in philosophical terms the realisation acquired through knowledge.

"As though I hear the call of my motherland to join with every situation. So there is no escape from the co-operation which is tied consciously or unconsciously with every sphere of activities, by the awakened consciousness of the land. We must march ahead on the road of progress. There might be a thousand questions on or about this road by which makes us forget the pains of all on the path of duty trifling the hundred hindrances. We have gained the nectar like rewards of life which remained engrossed in the meditation of beauty and the great of joy despite the personal sorrows and agonies".


50. Devi Nalinibala - Erī Aha Dinbor, P-Agkatha 5.