CHAPTER-IV

THE WEALTH OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES
4.1 The wealth of Autobiography of Rasosundari Devi

The description in the book 'Amar Jiban' have been recognised as invaluable assets of Bengali literature even without the knowledge of the author. Many small and big events together with her self-criticisms have exposed some vital and unknown matters to us.

"When the ground floor suddenly becomes the first floor that is known as delusion. When a thing hidden all along reveals itself is known as a turn of an epoch".

(Nicher talata hatat uparer tala haye athkae bale pralay.Barabar ja pracchanna tai prakash habar samaytai jugantar).

Such an epoch making talent is Rasosundari Devi. When the concealed becomes manifest, then the circle is illumined. In this illumination many unknown objects become visible. In Bengali literature 'Amar Jiban' by Rasosundari Devi is a bold stride of a Bengali woman. Veiled under a hard system, holding the woes of social deprivation in her heart still putting much value on her own life to write an autobiography, is undoubtedly a brave attempt which forms a mentionable chapter in the history of Bengali literature making itself a invaluable treasure.

In her autobiography she told a lot of things which undoubtedly give a great number of informations about the unknown matters directly or indirectly.

1. Tagore, Rabindranath - Rather Rashi(Kaier jatra) Rabindra Rachanabali, 11th Vol.,1397 B.S., Calcutta, P-269.
connected with the contemporary thought-currents regarding the significant educational, social, state, the economic system and the individual lives.

The contemporary educational system

Rasosundari Devi at the beginning of her autobiography has mentioned regarding the contemporary educational system while describing the social conditions. Although surprising, the encouraging thing is that in the school established in her parental home, Bengali was taught by an English lady, whose name is not mentioned by Rasosundari Devi.

"That was a time when like today women did not learn their lessons. There was a Bengali school in our home compound itself. All the boys of our village used to learn their lessons in our home school. There was an English lady who taught all the students. The next day my parental uncle made me wear a black gown and putting a scarf around me made me sit near that English lady in the school".


We know from the source of history that in India under the British rule, in the offices and Courts both English and Persian were used at the outset. Besides the vernacular and English, Persian was taught and learnt in those days. In the works of Rasosundari this fact is evident.

"I used to stay in the school whole day long....... The students wrote the 34 alphabets on the ground which were later read out aloud holding a stick in their hands. At that time there was a vague of reading Persian. Secretly I learnt a few lessons in Persian".

(Ami sakal dibas sei school thakitam... . Takhan chelera ka,kha chautrish akshare matite,likhita, pare nari nate laya ei lekha ucchasware parita......... Sekale Pershi parar pradurbhab chila.Ami mane mane taha o khanik shibish;itam).

In many books, written during that time this fact was admitted, and the reason behind learning Persian can be known.

"In those days in Calcutta and outside 20 miles of its neighbourhood, there was no system of learning English. Excepting the works of teaching in the Schools and clerical works, English was not used in any work in the suburbs....... For all state works in the districts, Persian was used. Therefore the elegant families in the suburban areas taught their children Persian instead of English".

(Tatkale kalkata o tatsannhita dash krasher bahirdeshhe Ingraji sikshar bara pratha chilo na. Se samaye schooler sikshaker o keranir pad byatita Ingrajite ar kono karma mafaswale drishta haita na..... Desher samasta jelar rajkarja Parasya bhasay nirbaha haita. sei karane mafaszaler pradhan paribarer apan apan santan digake Ingraji bidyasiksha nadiya Parasya bidya siksha diten).

The educational system and some informations relating to it

Rasosundari Devi became self taught in the long run with her indomitable desire for learning, her

great reverence to God and dependence on Him. Nevertheless she acquired education not by the means of any easy method. She had to cross a great number of hurdles to reach the goal. When she read the book 'Chaitanya Bhagavata' as inspired by a dream and in reality also she got the nearness of the book miraculously and was overwhelmed in joy at the touch of the book which she has described, in which. A clear picture of the contemporary appearance of a book can be viewed.

"I went hurriedly in a great joyful mind and found the book 'Chaitanya Bhagavata'. In a great contentment, I spoke in my heart -'Oh Lord Almighty you have fulfilled my hearts desire'. Saying so I opened the book and saw it throughly from beginning to the end. The books of these days are not similar to those of the olden days. With those books were fixed the wooden mould on which varieties of sketches were engraved".  


At the early stage of education there was no use of paper in those days. The use of the leaves of palm trees for writing was in vague. Rasosundari Devi has described all these in her book."My eldest son wrote on the palm leaves. I concealed a leap on which he wrote".  

(Takhan amar barocheleti talpatay likhita ami tahar ekti talpata o lukiya rakhi).  

Besides the palm leaves, the leaves of the banana tree were also used by the beginners. "The monthly paid Vaisnawi (female member of the Vaisnavite preachers) came regularly to teach 'Sishubodhak', 'Chanakya slokas', the 'Ramayana' and the 'Mahabharata' and gave lessons how to write on the banana leaf. This system of education at home was prevalent not only in the family house of the Tagore but in other places as well".7

(Maini kara Vaishnabi ese 'Sishubodhak', 'Chanakya sloka', 'Ramanay' and 'Mahabharat' parata, ar kalapatay chithi lekha maks karata. Ei niyam sudhu thakurbarite chila ta nav. anek barite chila).

**Economic system**

The writer whether with or without her knowledge has given such accounts of the past, which in fact do not form any part of her autobiography, yet open the door to the past relating to the conditions of the economy and the systems of the society.

"Then there was no prevenance of the 'paise' as in today, the 'courir' (shells) was used as an exchange of money. I brought some couries and made a number of things with them".8

(Ekhankar mato takhan paise chila na, se samaye kebal kari chila, ei karetei karbar chalita. Ami ei kari aniya nanabidh jinish tair karite arambha karilam).

This fact is also supported by renowned critic. "For the whole of the nineteenth century, the Bengali society was exposed to poverty, remittance of revenue to Delhi years after years resulted in scarcity of..."
silver coins in Bengal. As a consequence of this, use of cori (shells) as a medium of trade and transaction in the line of ancient tradition was widely prevalent.\[^9\]

(Gota astadash shatabditei Bengali samaje daityata kareche mukhabyadan. Batsarer par batsar Delhi te koti koti takar rajaswa preraner phale banglay raupya madrar abhan ghatechila, jar parinatite kenabecha o lenden prachin prathanusare korir madhyamei hoye byapakbabe prachalita chila).

The contemporary social conditions

Rasosundari Devi has described without error the familial and social oppressions on the Bengali women in the middle of the nineteenth century. Even the housewives of the aristocratic families had to live a life of heavy prohibitions and inhibitions. There was no weight on the personal wish, likes and dislikes. They had to stay like the blind folded oxen on the oil mill.

"Particularly the housewife had to follow such rules. She would perform her domestic duties under a long veil and would not converse with anybody. Then she would be recognized as a very good wife.\[^{10}\]

(Sishesata takhan meyashele ei prakar niyam chila, je bau haiye, se hatkhanek ghomta diye gharer kaj karibe, ari kahar sange katha kahibe na. Taha haiye bara bhala bau haiye).

Saradasundari Devi had also mentioned about the confined and active life of the contemporary housewives of respectable families in her autobiographies. Only at the age of nine years her wedding took place. Her childlike adolescent days were fettered with austere rules of the society

\[^9\] Sur, Dr. Atul - Athara shataker Bangla o Bengali, 1st Ed., 1985, Calcutta, P-44
\[^{10}\] Devi Rasosundari - Amar Jiban, P-21.
"We had a good number of domestic servants, (both and female) but none of them was permitted by my mother-in-law to enter our room. Those big spacious rooms were to be washed by us alone....... The whole day was thus passed under the pressure of domestic duties. Then we had a feeling to play, but the mother-in-law expressed her arrogance at the sight of the play".

(amader anek dasdashi chila, kintu amar shwashuri dasi ghare achite diten na. Sei bara bara gharguli amader dhuite haite..... Samasta din eirup kaj karite ek ekbar khela karite iccha haita, kintu khela karite dekhile shwashuri birakta halten).

In such a social condition of the day, the status of women was not a respectable one which can be known after going through the autobiography of Rasosundari Devi. In this context we can recall the words of Kailashbasini Devi also. In those days, "The male members of the society thought the region over the female members as on the birds and beasts".

(Purusera bhabta je, pasupakhir mrai meyecheleder upar tara katrittwa khatabe).

From the writings of Rasosundari Devi, the description of the garments used by the ladies of those days can be known in details.

"In those days there was fine cloth for use by the ladies. Wearing such coarse cloth and covering my face with a veil upto my bosom I performed those (domestic) work.... Through those garments nothing was visible; both the eyes were covered like those of the oxen tied to the oil mill. Excepting the feet of my own nothing else could be seen".

The Contemporary social attitude towards female education

Female education was not at all easy in those days. The group of opponents to female education was so strong that certain women who intended to earn knowledge had to abandon such noble ambition in fear of the derogatory remarks from the adverse group. Rasosundari Devi has painted their words like an artist from which we can view exact picture of the narrow minded social groups of those days.

"Unfortunately the women of the time did no learning. The people used to say perhaps the 'Koli age' has just arrived here. Now understandably the women will also engaged themselves in the duties of the male persons. So long this was not so, but now it happens".  

"In our days this ominous event did not take place...... Now it is the reign of the female monarches. Now perhaps the female members of the society will unite to do reading and writing".

14. Devi, Rasosundari, P-22
15. Ibid, P-23.
The strength of the adversaries of the female education were a cause of pain in the minds of the education loving women of the day. The absence of freedom of women and the hundred obstructions in the path of their learning are described by Sarada Sundari Devi, mother of Keshab Chandra Sen in her memoir, "Now a days women can do learning with a freedom and can learn many noble things, but in our days nothing of these was possible."16

(Ekhan jeman meyera swachande lekhaparaha karite pare ebang kato bhala bhala bishay sikahi pay, amader sakele kichui chila na).

An important purpose of education as a way of income of money was recognised in the post and is still recognised so. As due to the oppression of the society women could not move out of their homes, so the masters of the society had this question in their minds - whether education could be a help in their amelioration. Any other purpose of education was not acceptable to them.

"In fact the old people who are still living had the notion that education of women was a very ignoble deed. They used to opine - whether women after having education would go out of earning money? ......... we have known that women should work inside the house, cook food and feel ashamed of their short comings"17

(Bastabik sekaler lok ekhan parjanta jhabara achen, tahadiger nikat meyeder bidyssiksna ohari manda karma balia bod hay. Thahara balia thaken meyechele gharer madya kajkarma. rannabanna karibe lajja saram karibe, amara ihai jani).

During that period Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohan Roy, Gourmohan Vidyalanka and such progressive minded people were much active for female education.

education. In such a society full of adversaries of freedom of women, a number of progressive people fought tooth and nail for the prevalence of education of women. Amongst them the names of Vidyasagar and Bethum besides Gourmohan Vidyalankar are worth mentioning. Vidyalankar's book namely, 'Strisiksha Bidhayak' was published in April, 1822 A.D. in which he pleads for female education.

"If in the scripture and social spheres it was an offence to have learning by the ladies, then virtuous ladies rarely had education in the early days. To name Maitrayi, Shakuntala, Anusuya, queen of king Bahabad, queen of king Bahabat, queen of Laksman Sen, Khana and others studied varied scriptures and were exponents in those branches of knowledge".  

(Yadyapi striloker bidya sikhite sastre o byabahare dosh thakita, tabe purbekar sadhur strigan kadach bidya sikhaten na. Maitrei, Sakuntala, Anushuwa, Bahabat rajar stri, Laksman sener stri, khana prabrite, purbekar strisakal nanasastra paria sei sei sastrer paradarshite rupe bikhyata chila).

Absence of freedom of women, their dependence of others and the society antagonistic to female education pained deeply a bold and creative talent like Rasosundari Devi and kept her concerned all along. Her mind remained heavy with the burden of sadness in the unalterable plight of women.

"That was a time when women enjoyed no freedom; they could perform no work in their own capacity. They spent every moment in a state of threldom. Like an encaged bird, they spent the hapless days".  

18. Bidyalankar, Gourmohan - Stri, sikshabidhayak, 1937, Calcutta, P-17  
For the adverse group in the society Rasosundari Devi had no respect, but instead, a feeling of fear dominated her mind. In her work 'Amar Jiban' Rasosundari Devi's truthfulness, spiritual outlook and the right dutiful mind can be viewed along with her strong mind. Among a great number of social deceptions and negligence which wounded her mind fatally was the attempt of the society at the pilferage of freedom of women in all spheres. Particularly it was the cause of heart burning of the society when women could reach the door to the store house of knowledge after much toil in learning.

"Oh, what an affair of remorse? Women had to live thieves awaiting their trial. Since they were born as women - they had suffer such a lot. But why was this offence when they tried for education?."

But in that age there were hundreds of impediments for women's education. The conservative Hindu Society raised a big movement. The male dominated society is no way can happily accept the women's liberation. In words of Rasosundari Devi, 'In our days there was no prevalence of female education. People of those days said, "What is this untoward affairs - that a women does learning? It is a grave offence when women try for education.'

When a woman does some learning work, she is doomed. A woman should not handle a paper and a pen. This attitude towards education was everywhere there'.


Saralabala Sarkar, granddaughter of Rasosundari Devi while discussing the life events of her grandmother has mentioned again and again about the absence of freedom of women and the obstacles before their learning in those days.

"In her (Rasosundari's) days the system of teaching the women was not at all there. Rather they had the superstition that if a woman tries to learn she becomes a widow soon and loses her fortune".

(Inhar samay bangladeshe meyeler lekha parha sikhaiter pratha ekebare chila na, barang meyera lekhaparha sikhile bidhoba o durbhagya bati hay - anekeri ei biswas chila).

In the writings of almost all women writers the same tradition is mentioned. "Women of Bengal of the time were tied to a number of prohibitions and inhibitions. There was a superstition that the women who learnt her lessons had to lose her husband immaturity".

(Takhankar dine banglar meyera anek badha nishedher dara bnadha chilen. Ekta kusamakar chila je meye lekhapara sekhe, tar swamir akalmaritya hay).

In a remote village corner of Bengal when Rasosundari tried untiredly to read a book, then in the city of Calcutta, there was a great effort to establish a school for girls under the enthusiasm of the English missionaries. Among the girls of the time also a slow awakening of consciousness came into view. However, Rasosunari Devi or any other women of the time did not complain much against the contemporary social prohibition and inhibitions. As regards this remark by a woman writer and critic is memorable.

"However they made no attempt by offering a hard blow to change the society. They observed the society meticulously from a very near point of view, remaining inside the life circle of their families after attaining a clear vision of the value about themselves. Not from outside, but living among the average populace, they tried to judge the good and the evil of the society".

(Abashya thara bara rakamer aghat hene sambandhe ekta sunishchit mulyabodhe pnauche paribarik jibanbritter made thekei thara samajke dekhachilen khub kach theke khutie khutie. Baire theke nay, garparta manuser madye bash kareo samajer bhala manda bichar karechilen).

During her lifetime Rasosundari Devi observed the changes of the outlook of the society. In the society where female education was counted as a regular offence, when the same society accepted the female education, even during her lifetime, this very change of outlook heralded a great news of joy for Rasosundari Devi.

"Now the Almighty has created new rules and regulation in every sphere. I am highly gratified at the sight of present day system. The women of the present time have to face no trouble in any sphere".

Again seeing the changes in the outlook of the society, she says, "The female child born at present finds her parent to be much enthusiastic for her education. I am satisfied to the fullest extent at this sight. This is the best that can happen, I deem." 26

Some realistic pictures of society

Rasosundari Devi was a realistic writer. Though in her view, it is true that everything in the world happens according to the will of the great Graceful One, but along with it the realistic events of the world were not ignored by her. We see a real picture of the deep sorrows of a spouseless woman after her husband's demise in her writings. The attitude of the contemporary society towards a widow can be read in this description.

"There was a golden diadem on my head, that crown is now removed after such a long time. Nevertheless I am not sad for it; the Almighty always puts me in the best place." 27

Though she was a pious lady, but from her realistic points of view, she admitted it and says, "At the last stage of my life, I am facing the fate of a widow. But one thing is difficult to speak for shame and so is to

26. Devi, Rasosundari - Amar Jiban, P-69
27. Ibid, P-45.
hear for sadness.

If the mother of a hundred sons becomes a widow
She is still called unfortunate by the people.

"Although they desist from telling outwordly that you have become a widow but in fact they want to tell it tacitly".28

(Ekkhane seshdasate baidharbya ghatiache.
Kintu ekti katha balite o lajja, suniteo dukher bisay bate).

Sataputrabati jadi patihina hay,
tathapi tahake loke abhagini kay.
Bastabik jadi kichu na bale, tumi bidhaba haiacha, eti balitei chahe).

Rasosundari Devi has disclosed certain valuable materials while describing her autobiography perhaps without her knowledge. The self taught Rasosundari learnt her lesson after toil and self castigation. Her intense desire and indomitable urge for education finally enable her to study 'Chaitanya Bhagavata' even when the scribbling were almost illegible. In her own words,

"I learnt to read with a muttering sound the 'Chaitanya Bhagavata' after many days of painful efforts. The printing pattern of books was quite different during that time. It was a task of great pain to read such handwritings. Such was my study of profound labour".29

(ami anek dibase, anek parisrame, anek jatne, anek kasta karia 'Chaitanya Bhagavata' pustakhani ganggaila partie sikhitam, sekale eman chapar akshar chila na. Se sakal hatar akshar parite bhari kasta haita, amar eta dukher para).

28. Devi Rasosundari - Amar Jiban, P-45
The thought currents with broad significance of her personal life.

Rasosundari Devi could cross over the agitations and complaints of her mind evoked by the affairs connected with the absence of freedom of women and the oppositions to female education by the contemporary society with the strength of her great devotion to God and keen desire to attain Him. A considerably large chapter in her 'Amar Jiban' contains devotion for God which is the absolute treasure or wealth of her work.

The grand-daughter of Rasosundari Devi namely Saralabala Sarkar describes in details the spiritual life of her grand mother.

"In the autobiography of this lady, we find about her unfailing trust upon God. This trust enable her with strength to move ahead towards the goal of success in the path of her life. Many a miracle happened during her life, but she remain utterly free from egoistic feelings".30

Rasosundari Devi was a lady with great devotion bent towards vaisnavism. India the homeland of spiritualism and the breeding ground of philosophy and Indian spirituality has filled with satisfaction the souls which sought knowledge through ages all over the world.

Rasosundari Devi with her limited experience and knowledge of the home and the hearth could realise the supreme truth about India and enhanced the value and glory of her book 'Amar Jiban' in which she incorporated the infinite truth of India.

"Oh my mind, this India full of jewels, has contained (in her bosoms) so many minds of pearls, so many poor souls have enriched their minds with a tiny amount of these jewels and have become great saints. This meanest of all being men (myself) have lying in a dark pit under the thraldom of maya(illusion). Alas, my life as a human being has been thus wasted".31


Sense of history and some patriotic feelings

Although the writer of 'Amar Jiban' was a mere housewife, she has described the colourful events of her life mentioning their dates in the manner of a historian. Although she was not aware of the art of autobiography, her reliance on truth surprises us. Undoubtedly this is the most important feature of 'Amar Jiban'.

"In the month of Chitra 1216 B.E., I was born. Now in 1303 B.E., I am just 85 years old. God has bestowed on me all necessities of my life such as familial properties, sons, daughters, grandsons, grand-daughters etc and has taken back some of them".32

31. Devi, Rasosundari - Amar Jiban, P-61
32. Ibid, P-79.
Again she goes on commenting, "The part-II of my life story has ceased till here. The concluding part may be written by whoever in my family intends to do so after the expiry of my life".33

Another noteworthy and worth seeing matter in the book 'Amor Jiban' is that nowhere in it Rasosundari called her a women of Bengal alone, but introduced herself as an Indian whereby she glorified her more. In a rural woman such patriotic feeling really deserves high accolades.

"In India I stayed a good long and even now I have been here".34

She then acknowledges with gratefulness, "I came to this India to reside for 88 years. The Lord of the Universe ordained me to live three lives together within this single one".35

34. Ibid, P-68.
35. Ibid, P-61.
Although the life story or autobiography is undoubtedly the depiction of an individual, nevertheless it contains certain social and historical facts related to the writer's philosophy and analysis of the life with or without his or her knowledge which later get transformed into an important literary piece. Men are social beings; as such it is not possible to describe a personal matter without reference to the society. We can view the panorama of the society in literature and therefore, though Nalinibala Devi's 'Eri Aha Dinbor' (The day I have left behind) is a collection of the personal reminiscences of her sweet bygone days, still it envisages a number of descriptions of the changes that took place in the society in its political; economic and historical spheres, replete with grave facts that make the work a valuable addition to the Assamese literature.

At the outset, Nalinibala assesses her past days with her natural poetical acumen filled with emotion. "While treading over the sands of time I look back towards the days - I have long left behind - in this journey of seventythree years, where I witness a scenario of my life drama resplendent with mystery".

(Samayar balit khoj pelai bahukal agate eri aha dinboroloi utothi chaicho tini kuri tero basar kalar bat bulani chokur agat jiliki uthiche ekhani rahasyapurna jiban natikat drisya).

Essentially Nalinibala Devi was a philosopher poet. While assessing the past days, she remembers a number of things - a number of gains and deprivations, a good many events of changes in her motherland Assam as well as in India. In doing so, sometimes frustration pressed her down.

36. Devi Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-1
But her mind, nurtured by the tradition of Indian philosophy leads itself towards infinity eschewing the periphery of limitations.

"In the furious battle of life I fought relentlessly while I sped forward. Now I look back from the bank of this big river Luhit(Brahmaputra) embracing the closed limit for a moment: what have I left behind and what have I gained? Fighting relentlessly, have I become exhausted? No, No, I am not tired. But why? I have answered by my inner sense or conscience - well we are the inheritors of the great Indian culture. Why should we lose heart so soon?".37

(Taya maya jiban jnusat jnushi xai gai, aji bar lutar dupar sabati simata simat bai kkhantekalai pichalal ghuri chaichna : ki ekri ahilo aru ki palo? or nahowa jiban jusat jnushi jnusi gaiacho, tathapi jano bhagari paricho? nai para, kino nai para? Uttar pau, mahan bharutia sanaskritir santan ami, bhagari parim kio?)

Such invaluable remembrances have been the grand treasures or wealth of this autobiography.

An autobiography is a ruthless historical documentation of self evident reality. Even the trivial affairs and events of life depicted by the writer later became fathomless mines of wealth for the readers, connoisseurs and researchers.

Nalinibala mentions in her birth episode that her father, Nabin chandra Bordoloi was engaged in his studies in Calcutta when she was born. He was then only 23 years old. The custom of early marriage was in vogue during that time as described by Nalinibala.

37. Devi, Nalinibala, - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-5.
"The boys and girls were married out at an early age in those days. Following one custom, the marriages of my father and of elder paternal uncle were also performed. My father and uncle were then students in Calcutta and used to come home during their vacations."

(Sei dinat lara chalair sonkale biyapata niyam achil, ai niyamere mor deuta, bordeutaro bia haichil. Bardeuta aru deuta kalikatat pariachil, bandho hale gharalai ahe).

Assam in the pre-British days was a land of political upheaval with her history written in blood. She was attacked by a number of invaders and thus her peace and stability were damaged again and again. Towards the conclusion of the Ahom reign, the entire land of Assam was broken into pieces by the civil conflicts. Meanwhile the Burmese invaded Assam devastating, the entire state with no recompense. Nalinibala while describing the ancient abode of her fore-father mentioned thus,

"My grand father Madhab Chandra Bordoloi was a resident of Sibsagar in his early days. During the invasion of the Burmese he left that original home for North Guwahati, where he started residing permanently."

(Knakadeutar adi bashbhumi achi, shivasagarat, Manar attyacharat desh eri Guwahatilai ahi Uttar Guwahati nigazikai bash kare).

Many Assamese people became displaced during the onslaught of the Burmese which also destructed properties in huge quantities. In the same war, the population also diminished profusely. This is evident in many books.

38. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-2
"Besides, the opium addicted populace that survived the prolonged civil war and the Burmese occupation that dwindled down to less than one million, i.e., to about a third of it had been in the mid-eighteenth century".40

Nalinibala refers to certain facts regarding the benevolence of her grandfather, Madhab Chandra Bordoloi.

"A large number of students who came to study in the only college of Assam (in that period) namely, the Cotton College but could not find place for their residence, stayed in the hostel within our home compound and returned home batch by batch after receiving higher education in the College".41

(Sei samayat bohut chatrai ahom ekmatra College, Cotton Collegenat paribalai ahitakibalai thai nepai amar gharar chatrabhasate thaki pari suini collegear uccha siksha tai chame chame olai gaiche).

While recollecting the past days, Nalinibala Devi describes the comparative wearings, cosmetics, ornaments etc. of the women of her childhood. Now-a-days the girls expend a lot in their cosmetics. In our childhood days these were not existant. In the winter when the cheeks developed bruises, my grandmother used to smear the cheeks with the skin of organes dipped in the skim or the floating layer of the boiled milk. She used to wash the hair on our heads with a ground mixture comprised of matidal (a kind of pulse), sesame(til), paste of rice cereal, the seed of an acid fruit. She did not allow us to use soaps on our hair".42

41. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-5.
42. Ibid, P-6.
In the bygone days, in the Jorasan family house of Rabindranath Tagore the cosmetics of the ladies in the inner parlour was similar to the description given by Nalinibala Devi. The beauty of the women of the Tagore's family is almost legendary. On different occasions the mystery of their beauty is mentioned by many daughter-in-laws of the family. Mrs. Rekha Menon, the grand daughter of Samarendranath Tagore describes the preparation of homemade cosmetics of ladies of Tagore family.

I was the most dark complexioned amongst my brothers and sisters..... It was a worry for our grand mother........ As such, the following materials were ready at hand for my use: Skim and flour with tamarind and lemon juice. A paste was prepared with skim and flour and a bit of tamarind in it which was mixed with one or two spoonfuls of lemon juice.\(^{43}\)

Nalinibala Devi gives a vivid description of the economic and social life of contemporary Guwahati, the renowned city of Assam. While describing the story of her life (autobiography).

"Guwahati of the time was a place of enjoyments. Two basketful of commodities (vegetable and other eatables) could be bought with only one rupee. Fish in the Guwahati market was the cheapest in Assam........ The life of the Assamese was full of happiness, peace, enjoyment and pleasure. The child of those days could get ample and pure food nourishment."\(^{44}\)

44. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-8.
She gives many minute informations about Guwahati city. "The city of Guwahati was not as populous as it is today. The road that led to Silpukhuri by the side of the Namghar of Uzan Bazar was the last road on the east of the city."45

"In Guwahati no public Durga puja had been celebrated amongst the Assamese. In the eastern part of the city only in Rajabari (the residential place of the descendents of the Ahom Kings) and in the home compound of Lakshmi Prasad Barua, puja was celebrated. The public of the Uzanbazar area felt the absence of puja very acutely, amongst whom the feelings of my father (Nabin Chandra Bordoloi) were very keen. He organised the youth..."

of the locality in a Puja Committee and public donations were collected. He erected the first public puja pandal in his own home compound. With that a large theatre hall with thatched roof was also constructed. The young artists of Uzanbazar organised a theatre party". 


Nalinibala Devi has repeatedly mentioned about the confined life of the dependent women in her autobiography. In the nineteenth century and till the early part of the twentieth century, women in Assam could not hold a very high status of honour. It was beyond the imagination that women could move freely even on the festive occasion.

"In the theatre hall, plays were staged on the three nights of Saptami, Asthami and Navami. There was an enclosed place for ladies to sit within bamboo-screenes. Because in those days women had to remain separated from male folks in the society".

(Saptami, Asthami, Navami, tinidin theatre kara hay. Maiki mahuhar karane bharar chik di her dihaichil, karan ei dinbor achil maiki mahur karaba achutia).

In the reminiscences of childhood days, the helplessness of women and the social inhibitions injured her feelings again and again.

46. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-11
47. Ibid, P-12.
"The dark days of confinement within the coarse 'Purdah' (screen). It was a matter of great shame for the women who moved about freely as today. Specially the girls of a respectable family could hardly move out of home, when they attained the age of ten and eleven years."\(^48\)

(Dath pardaher abaronit abari thawa andhar din. Ajir dinar dare miki manubar mukali muria hai phura ach eti lajar katha. Bishekkai bhadra samajar chawali dah eghara bachar par gharar baj olaba naware).

The women in general and housewives in particular had to spent their days within the four walls. Nalinibala described the confinement like this, "they had to go anywhere, they had to conceal themselves within the cover of two big wicker hats with their faces hidden under veils. Even while moving in the pony cart, the doors of the carriage to be shut. The women had to remain invisible even to the moon and the Sun."\(^49\)

(Iphal, siphal jaba lagia hale dungar dar japir majat homal jaba lage; mukhat oranir anr lai gharar bagir ghorar bagir duwar bandha kari jaba lage; maiki manuh achil sura chandra dekha nepawa)

These words of lamentation of Nalinibala seem to be echoed in the self portrayal of another feminist of Assam namely Srimati Rajabala Das, an educationist of repute.

"In those days in order to attend the marriage ceremony of some relatives, I remember of journining in a hooded bullock cart or a closed door pony cart. There was no system of walking on a public street by women."

\(^48\). Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dindor, P-12.
\(^49\). Ibid, P-12.
Even the elderly ladies had to move under a big wicker hat while paying a visit to a neighbour's house.\(^{50}\)

(Sei samayat atmiya swaíanar biyarulai naiba phuribalai jabalai hole saí día gorugari ba sakahálaí dare sei dinar tiritai rajaliedi khaj karhi jawa niyam nachil, bayastha tiritai achar chubiriwar gharalai jabalai haile bar japir talatehi gaichil).

Same views are also seen in the words of Jnanadabhiram Barooah. "In Nagoan, ladies while going out use to take veil. Some of them take big wicker hats with themselves. .... Main thing is that women had to move in such a way that their face should not be seen by male members."\(^{51}\)

(Nagoanta amar tirta sakale bahiraloi olale orani lai olaichil. .... Pradhan katha, matamanuhe jen tirta- janar mukh dekha nepay - enekai tirta manu phurichil)

In the nineteenth century, till the first half of the twentieth century, the systematic education of women was not easily available in Assam. Although there were a few educational institutions, enthusiasm was obviously present to send the girl there.

"There was no facility for female education particularly in the Assamese society in the past."\(^{52}\)

(Sei dinat, bisheskai Asomiya samajat stri sikshar kona subhidha nachil).

The absence of female education and liberty of women is also lamented by yet another illustrious woman of Assam.

\(^{50}\) Das, Rajabala - Tini Kuri Dáh Bacharár Smriti, 1st Ed., 1971, Guwahati, P-14
\(^{52}\) Debi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-11
"In those days daughters of the high families were not allowed to attend the school; I remember the existence of one or two primary schools in Dibrugarh. The girls of our childhood days used to stay in their house performing daily the household duties and weaving on the loom."

(Sei samayat bhal manuhar shawali schoolat parihibalai napathichil. Dibrugarhrat sei samayat dui ekhan primary shawali school khulichil buli manat pora. Amar dinat sawali antapurat thaki dainandhin gharuwa kam-ban, tat shut bai kal ka'aba lagiwa haichil).

But Nalinibala was a fortunate woman. Although she could not get school education in the traditional way, nevertheless she availed the chance of attaining education in the subjects like classical literatures under the guidance of private teachers through the encouragement of her father and grandfather.

Nalinibala Devi became thoroughly acquainted with sanskrit epics as she attained education from the scholarly private teacher, in the same manner her poetic mind was influenced by her studies in the Bengali poetry in a varied way. Her father Nabin Chandra Bordoloi had also a close contact with Bengali literature and as such she got the opportunity to read many Bengali Books. These books influenced her mind intensely.

"My father brought a number of good books from Calcutta for my aunt (pehideu). He presented his dear sister three volumes of epics namely Kurukshetra, Raivatak and Prabhas by poet Nobin Chandra Sen. The Mahabharat episodes written in sweet melodious rhymes as stories were recited every evening by Kirtinath Bordoi.

53. Das, Rajabala - Tinikuri Dah Bacharar Smriti, P.3-4
the illustrious musician, literateur and brother of my grand mother. The sweet cadence of his recitation of the epics drew all the members of our family together to drink the ambrosia of poetry".  

Poet and artist Nalinibala Devi acquired another virtue in association of her learned father. She earned some knowledge in homeopathy and in her mellow age became keenly interested in Homeopathy treatment.

"My father started Homeopathy treatment. He puts me in charge of repairing medicines in the morning when the patients started arriving. I liked the engagement very much. The patients without number came to our house when they got free treatment. In the pleasure of such service I became eager to learn Homeopathy. This desire made me attentive to this particular subject in my mellow age".

While describing her teenage experiences, she had disclosed a number of

55. Ibid, P-34.
important information. A feeling of disgust torture her mind intensely that in her childhood there was no literary magazine suitable for children.

"In Assam there had been a few journals that could be counted in finger tips. We therefore used to read a Bengali childrens magazine entitled Balak. We also read another Bengali magazine entitled Prakriti."

(Ashomat keukhanan lekhiba para patrika, ekhano sishur patrika nayai ami bangla seshu alachoni 'Balak' rakhi parhichilon.'Pratriti' namar alachoni ekhano rakhi parha manat pare).

In the expression of the spiritual thought underlying the book 'Eri Aha Dinbor', it is a pioneer work which manifests the wealth of the poetic mind of Nalinibala Devi. Dedication of the self at the feet of the Almighty and devotion to Him placed Nalinibala on a pure Heavenly place above worldly woes and worries.

In the autobiography of Nalinibala Devi, a good number of important and essential facts about the by-gone days are available. The role of the two journals of Assam which aroused impulse for freedom and the love for the motherland can also be known in the writings of Nalinibala Devi.

"The journal that could be counted on finger tips of those days which patronise for awakening (freedom fighting) Assam. The weekly journal edited by Deshapremik late Chandra Kumar Agarwala namely 'Asom' was the main weapon that awakened Assam. On the other hand, the English daily 'The Times of Assam' published by Radhanath Changkakati from Dibrugarh joined in this movement. These two journals together contributed to the total awakening of Assam."

56. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-42.
57. Ibid, P-77.
In her writings we find a sincere portraiture of Assam's role in the struggle for independence. As her father Nabin Chandra Bordoloi was one of the steersman in the battle for independence of India, so there grew and developed in her mind a direct or indirect association with the political life.

"I now remember the forgettable days replete with the myraids of sad memories. That day Indians as a rule grew frantic intoxicated by an urge for freedom. A different sort of atmosphere was there owing to the freedom movement covering the whole of Assam, caring not even whit of miseries, sufferings, fastings, hunger, humiliation and needs. There came out the hordes of youth, the aged and the adolescents".58

From her writings we find many innate pictures of freedom struggle of Assam. "Karmati Bordoloi spear-headed the freedom movement in Assam which he himself started. Then came out stalwarts like Deshabhakta Tarun Ram Pukhan, Maulana Tayabullah, Bishnuram Medhi, Siddhinath Sarma, Gopinath Bordoloi and other Hindu and Muslim patriots in Guwahati to lead the movement forward".59

58. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-77
59. Ibid, P-78.
In the discussion of certain small incidents of autobiography of Nalinibala Devi, some elements of the contemporary history could be found. Karmabir Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and Deshabhakta Tarun Ram Phukan stood as the fabulous figures of the time around whom a great number of songs were composed. Like the minstrel (charanka: Mukunda Das of Bengal, a great number of minstrels here in Assam also filled the sky with the songs around and about the struggle for independence.

"Younder flies the banner of our freedom; Move forward with raised heads Nabin and Tarun today wearing the attires of battle Raise your head and move forward."

(sou je uriche swaraj nissan Unnata sire howa aguan Nabin Tarune aji samar sajere saji Unnata sire howa aguan)

Even the weavers wove the cloth in their looms singing the songs as inspired by and in the patriotic impulse for the freedom movement and love for the land,

"Spin the thread of Gandhi Call Nabin Doloi for there is a knot in the spinning wheel."

(Gandhir suta kat,Gandhir suta kat jatarat aul lagiche Nabin Doloik mat).

60. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-80.
61. Ibid, P-80.
It may be compared to the event that the weavers of Bengal embroidered the praise of Vidyasagar on the border of their cloths after the promulgation of the widow re-marriage Act.

May Vidyasagar live an unending life.
It is announced publicly that there would be re-marriage of widows.

(Bneche thakuk Vidyasagar chirojibi haye sadare kareche report bidhober habe biye).

The history of freedom movement is known to one and all, but in the autobiography of Nalinibala Devi, we find the description of some small intimate incident which give us amplitude to unknown facts.

"The people of Assam were overwhemled in joy at the news that Mahalmaji was coming. The people of Assam regarded Gandhiji as a God. As such they became frantic to have a 'darshan' of the Mahatma."

(Mahatma Gandhi Asomatoi ahar barat suni gotei asomar raije anandat ullasita hai paril. Asomar raije Mahatma Gandhik devata jen bhabi laichil seyhe Mahatmar darshan paba ei anandar manuhar mon apan pahara).

We can get very interesting facts from her narration."Mahatma Gandhi arrived with a multitude of people surrounding him and put up first in the house of Deshabakta Tarun Ram Phukan. There from he went to attend a meeting in the theatre hall(kumar Bhaskar Natya Mandira Uzanbazar). There was no room left in the hall, the people stood in two rows on the ground".

63. Ibid, P-84.
The women of Assam were also inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and his exemplary character.

"From amidst the women the late Ghana Kanti Phookanani presented the Mahatma with a sari woven by herself with fine hand spun threads. As though an ocean of joy swelled in the face of the Mahatma. In the thrill of joyousness he addressed the Assamese people, specially the women with his substantial lecture".64

"When Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose came to Assam, he came to our home and was introduced to members of our family. Even today I remember the soft, brilliant, heroic face with a pair of big and beautiful eyes. My mother affectionately presented Bose with a yard of muga cloth and told him, "I shall be very happy if you get it stitched as a 'punjabi' for you. Every one of us talked with Bose in Bengali".65

64. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-84.
65. Ibid, P-86
dangar dhunia chokujurire sei birjanar pabitra mukkhani chokur awat jiliki ache. Mor aie Bosuk maram kari mugar than kapor eta di kalin - 'Apuni punjabi eta korai pindhile mai bar sukhi ham'. Bseur lagat am sakaloe bangalite katha patichilo).

As inspired by the Mahatma, there was a widespread use of khadi all over the country from which Assam also did not lag behind. A description replete with facts and figures of the same is available in Nalinibala's Eri Aha Dinbor.

"Two stout youngmen with marbal white complexion namely, Deshabakta Phukan and karmabir Bordoloi, carrying a load of Khadi cloths on their backs, sold them in the Fancy Bazar area."

(Kheddar procharer babe, sphotik baranar dujan thular tar purush and Deshabakta Phukan aru Karmabir Bordoloi pithit khaddarer lai Fasibazarat bechi phurichil).

In 1926 Pandu was the venue of the Congress session, of which the reception function is beautifully described by Nalinibala in which the contemporary cultural history of Assam becomes an invaluable addition.

"The prominent musicians of Assam were in charge of the cultural function of the Pandu Congress. The first opening song was composed by the late Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury and Umesh Chandra Choudhury. Umesh Chandra Choudhury's song was the song of welcome of the session. A large group of boys and girls with Shri Prafulla Barua, Phunu Barua, Apurba Bordoloi, the late Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and a host of other musicians raised the voice to a tumultuous pitch. The song composed by Umesh Chandra.

"Swagata Swagata bhakta samagata
Sabakabrinda Sudhir.

The song by Ambikagiri as follows:-

66. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-86.
Nalinibala was basically an artist. She had an inevitable attraction for melodious tunes in her life. Therefore, her interview with musician Pandit Vishnu Digambar Pulaskar and his sweet voice in the reception function of the Congress session began a new chapter of perception of truth in her life. "The concluding programme of the cultural function was the classical song presented by the famous classical musician of India, Vishnu Digambar Pulaskar."  

It was a memorable event in her life. "That day I realised the greatness of melody and was enlightened about the genius of India and the method of mastering the melody as the truth for ever."  

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68. Ibid, P-109.
69. Ibid, P-111.
Nalinibala Devi expressed her feelings like this, "The waves of that melodious voice are preserved in my mind with utmost care. This event has been the first sight of the truth of my life. I sighted the sage Narada of the ancient India."  

(Mor manar manikutat sei sur tarangaber abaddha hai ache. El ghatana mor jibanar pratham satya darshan. Darshan palnoo Bharatar atit narad rishir).

After the death of lion hearted man Nabin Chandra Bordoloi her father, Nalinibala had to face again the deep darkness of helplessness in her life. She had to face the hard realities plunging in various wants and indebtedness. Upen Changkakati her first son, was then the student of B.Com class in Calcutta. He was summoned in Guwahati and was given the charge of establishment of the 'Gauhati Bank' after the request of Jogesh Barua, the great benefactor of their family. In the autobiography of Nalinibala Devi, the historical fact of the establishment of the Assam's own Bank is thus available.

'Upen did not have any flaw in the establishment of the Gauhati Bank with his untire efforts to make the establishment an all round perfect firm, procuring all the requirements under his own supervisions. It was in August 1936'.

(1936 sanar August mahar Gauhati Bank sthapanat Gauhati Bankar jatia sa sajali niz tatwabadhanere taiyar kari akalanta parisramare Gauhati Bank pratisthanti sarbanga sundarrupe gar dibalai Upene jatnar truti kara nachil)

In her book, 'Eri Aha Dinbor, Nalinibala Devi has described a number of historical events.

70. Devi, Nalinibalal - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-111
71. Ibid., P-127.
which are undoubtedly invaluable edition to the history of national life of Assam.

Nalinibala's second son Pavitrapran (Makhan) whom is mother lost in her early life was dauntless and was morally brave, bold. In his school days, when he prepared for appearing in the matriculation examination, then he had to face a trouble namely he was compelled to sign an undertaking that he would not take part in the Swadeshi Movement according to a circular of the then D.P.I. Mr. Cunnigham in 1936. The circular debarred all the students from appearing in the matriculation examination unless they signed the undertaking. The Cotter Collegiate School of Guwahati was a Govt. Institution in which Pavitra and other students were put in such a difficult plight. Pavitra and compatriots did not sign the undertaking and so they had to leave the school for another refuge. Pavitra's maternal grand father Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and his friends attempted to get the recommendation from the Calcutta University and thus the national school Kamrup Academy was established. The revolting students of the Cunnigham Circular, took refuge in Kamrup Academy and were admitted to appear in matriculation examination.

"The Kamrup Academy is reminiscent of a glorious chapter of the national life of Assam. At the same time a number of national schools were established in a few districts of Assam. The students studying in the national school were proud of their institutions." 72

(Kamrup ekadami khan jatia jibanar gauranom swarani. Asomat keibakhano jilat hei samayat jatia school pratistha haichil. Jatia schoolat chatra sakale sikh gaurav anubhab, karichil).

Her association with her political father placed Nalinibala consciously or unconsciously on the

political platform for various reasons. In comparison to personal joys and worries, the problems of the country or community were greater to her mind. When in 1941 Md. Jinnah proposed to include Assam in East Bengal, then Nalinibala like a heroic Assamese daughter voiced her bold protest before Mahatma Gandhi in the medium of a poem. The poet-literateur of Assam Hem Baura translated her poem into English:-

Assam is a separate province of East India having different customs and ethics-

A heroic people of the eastern frontier
In the struggle for independence
The Assamese young men and young girls
have rendered the execution plank
obiterating the sacred name of Assam
why should it be obsolete
Assam Hem Baur
(Purva Bango an Islamic State?).73

(Ashom sukia desh purba Bharatar
sukia achar, niti, bir jati purba shimantar
Ashomar deka, gabharu Bharatar mukti jujit
Swadhinatar hoke balisal karile rongali;
..............................
aji kio punya bhumi Ashomar nam lupta kari
dibo khoje Purbabanga nam Ishlam prode?)

In her autobiography Nalinibala has given not only a number of facts and figures of the 'Gui India Movement' but also she has pointed a distinct scenario of the panicky stricken Guwahati which was almost vacated by its inhabitants scared away by the possible bombardment. Along with it she has given a realistic picture of conveyances and carriages that were used in Assam as well as Guwahati during that time.

73. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-145.
"It was an unforgettable and awful experience of life to see Guwahati were a desolate look during that time. There was no rickshaw to ply on the roads. The only carriage was the boggy or the cart drawn by the ponies. Besides a few private motor cars owned by some rich people, there was no other motor taxi. There was no city bus. The boggies (which were the only carriages for public transport) already were removed by the owners to other side of the river. With that the life line of Guwahati became obsolete. The terrified people fled on their feet up to the river bank and cross it in boats."74


Nalinibala describes the vivid picture of panicky and desolate look of Guwahati at the war time. "Guwahati was a vacated city, where there was complete blackout in the night. It was deep dark all around".75

(Sunya Guwahati, nisha blackout, ghormara endha)

The second world war was a great destroyer of the country which has been described by Nalinibala in her work 'Eri Aha Dinbor'.

"This all damaging war has killed the ethical self of our country. This war has paved the way to 'black-marketing and smuggling'. The business community earned a great lot of money in this opportunity doing the contract works with the army. This terrifying war opened the door to the hell on the soil of our peaceful land".76

74. Devi. Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-162
75. Ibid, P-164.
76. Ibid, P-164.
Although in her later days she became involved directly or indirectly in politics but in her minds she felt an oneness with the spiritual world much more than her attachment with the materialistic world. The spiritualism in her book 'Eri Aha Dinbor' is a valuable annexation.

Nalinibala has been essentially a poet. The last chapter of her 'Eri Aha Dinbor' is the description of her remembrance and analysis of her poet life. It is really significant that she asserted the evaluation of her poetry in the light of her own feelings and judgement in this chapter, in which she has inserted a list of her works. For her poetry she has been honoured many a times, thereby honouring the country as well. But in her meditations and conscious moments always the Eternally Absolute remains a perpetual presence, arousing her feelings.

"I have felt every moment, the touch of the beautiful Being, the constant vigil of my life which remains as a companion all through my life." 

(Prati mohurte anubhab kari anichno mo jibanar sundar sattar, jibanar sajag praharijanar, mor ei akinchitka jibanar anre anre eti ujjwal sundar snigda sneha komal dristhi).

77. Devi, Nalinibala - Eri Aha Dinbor, P-367.