

## Life Writing as a Source of History- A Study of *Eri Aha Dinbur* by Nalinibala Devi

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### Abstract

Life writing or autobiography indicates writing about self and life. The form has evolved as a serious medium of representation with objectives: sometimes search for identity, as a voice of resistance and reconnecting or relocating the past. Life writers state that life writing are useful because it provide firsthand knowledge or accounts of individuals and their relationship with society, history, public life as well as detailed personal insights.

*Eri Aha Dinbur* is the autobiography of Nalinibala Devi. She is the first women president of *Assam Sahitya Sabha*. She was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 1957 for her contribution to literature and she won the Sahitya Akademi Award given by Sahitya Akademi for her poetry collection *Alakananda*. Being the daughter of Assamese freedom fighter Karmaveer Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, her autobiography *Eri Aha Dinbur* depicts some of the aspects of Assamese social life. It is also a record of the Indian Independence Movement seen through Assamese eyes. The rise and fall, dreams and aspirations, the struggle and suffering of Assamese race, the role played by the Assamese leaders, students and general public their reactions are all reproduced and the book is a very important document for historians to help them while tracing the history of Assam during that fateful period. The present paper is an attempt to study the influence of this autobiography or life writing as a source of contemporary history of Assam.

(Keywords: autobiography, history, freedom movement in Assam)

### Introduction

With the acknowledgement of human participation in the process of self making that is generally identified with the movement out of a medieval world view into a modern, life writing has gained an importance as a record of that process. We can examine the general historical context of the contemporary society by examining the personal story of the autobiographer- family background, childhood, adolescent experiences, intellectual formation and commitment to ideology or political movement. Jeremy D. Popkins in his book *History, Historians and Autobiography* reveals “The connection between history and autobiography as a way of reconstructing the past approaching life writing text as a source for the knowledge of the historians experience and professional position.” According to Patti Millar, life writing is non-fiction writing on subjects of personal experience and observation; it includes autobiography, biography, memoirs, personal essays and travel and sojourn writing. The form has evolved as a serious medium of representation with objectives: sometimes search for identity, as a voice of resistance and reconnecting or relocating the past. Life

writers states that life writing are useful because it provide firsthand knowledge or accounts of individuals and their relationship with society, history, public life as well as detailed personal insights.

*Eri Aha Dinbur* is the autobiography of Nalinibala Devi. She is the first women president of Assam Sahitya Sabha. She was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 1957 for her contribution to literature and she won the Sahitya Akademi Award given by Sahitya Akademi for her poetry collection *Alakananda*. Being the daughter of freedom fighter Karmabeer Nabinchandra Bordoloi, her autobiography *Eri Aha Dinbur* depicts some of the aspects of Assamese social life. Nalinibala Devi's (1889-1960) father Karmabeer Nabinchandra Bordoloi was a poet and frontline leader of the Indian Freedom Movement. Born into a privileged literary family the life of Nalinibala Devi was enlightened with the father's wisdom and foresight. Owing to her father's enlightened vision she had faced off all hurdles she met in her life. Despite her life stricken with one misfortune after another she had not totally lost the passion for life. She was married before puberty and lost her husband very early. She came back to her father's house with her five children. Her father's moral stand was her strength to bear grief with grace and dignity. He initiated her to the *Bhagavat Gita* and the *Upanisads* and the verses of these epics brought great solace to her mind and the need of her spirituality thus accomplished. She made up her mind with this reawakened spirit which found expression in numerous poems with noble proportion.

#### **Objective:**

The main objective of this paper is to study the influence of the autobiography or life writing as a source of history. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data comprises of the chosen works of the author and the secondary data includes critical readings and different sources from books as well as internet sources.

#### **Discussion:**

A fair picture of the environment and culture within the Bordoloi household is depicted in the autobiography. In her autobiography *Eri Aha Dinbur*, Nalinibala Devi had given a lucid account of the Assamese society towards the end of the last century. She is inspired by her mother Hemanta Kumari Devi who also helped her husband in his political activities. From her autobiography we also come across her father's role as a freedom fighter and how she is influenced from her father. Nabinchandra Bordoloi was the forerunner of those people born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who were instrumental in building modern Assam and establishing the state's position in the mainstream of Indian life. Though Nabinchandra Bordoloi was Indian in outlook he was always aware of the separate Assamese identity. The Montague Chemsford report of 1919, which did not give Assam the status as the other states, annoys Bordoloi so much so that he testified before the joint selection Committee of British Parliament as that Assam is more forward in many respects that should be included among the major provinces of India. As a leader of the Assam Association, Nabinchandra Bordoloi's effort borne fruit. In 1920, this association was converted to the Assam Congress. Assam played a vital role in the Non-Cooperation Movement and the leaders of the movement called upon the meritorious students who were undergoing higher studies in Calcutta to take part in it.

While talking about Nalinibala Devi we must have to go through her father's influence upon her thoughts about her country, nation and society. By 1919, Nabinchandra Bordoloi's house became the centre piece of Assam politics. Political leaders and congress volunteers had at all times free access to the Bordoloi household. In spite of being forever busy with important political discussion and work, Nabinchandra Bordoloi made it a point to spare time with his family,

especially with his beloved but ill-fated daughter. Thus, Nalinibala Devi was imbibed in progressive ideals of current Indian political thought. Lokmanya Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal and other leaders and the image of Mahatma Gandhi created a deep impression on Nalinibala Devi's mind which compelled her to pen down a poem about Mahatma Gandhi. The brightness of Nabinchandra Bordoloi's burning spiritualism gradually lit up the aura of darkness in Nalinibala Devi's life. Her poetry endeavors her to perceive the call of the land, nation and humanity. In being associated with her father's important political work, she was able to write her father's important political work and biography *Smriti Tirtha* at a later period of her life.

The Disobedience Movement which spread throughout the country in 1921 took Assam by storm. On Nabinchandra Bordoloi's leadership students come out of schools and colleges and jumped into the movement. Forgetting all thoughts about individual future, scholastic achievements of career, students came out to sacrifice their lives for their motherland- inspired from Nalinibala Devi's verses written for the national movement. Her brother who was studying medicine and son Pabitra who later had a tragic premature death also took part in the Movement. It was at the house of Nabinchandra Bordoloi where the office of the Congress in Assam was first set up and he was the first secretary. He travelled like a storm all over the state and awakened widespread public awareness with his emotionally charged oratory. It was from her father that Nalinibala Devi acquired her ability to deliver lengthy speeches with the most lucid and fluid language. In her autobiography, she claims that Mahatma Gandhi designed the Wardha Chakhra on the prototype of Nalinibala Devi's son Upen Changkakoti's work of box-type spinning machine which he presented to Mahatma Gandhi when he came to Assam.

Nabinchandra Bordoloi kept his daughter in faith during the Congress movement by bestowing several responsibilities upon her shoulder. When Disobedience Movement gathered momentum, a number of searches were conducted in the Congress Office. He secretly kept important documents in the custody of his daughter Nalinibala who successfully kept them off the clutches of the police who were searching for them. This earned her much appreciation from her father. When the news was announced that Mahatma Gandhi would visit Assam for the first time, it created great enthusiasm among the Assamese public. Five hundred volunteers from all over the state were given intensive training on the laws on the congress office located on Nabinchandra Bordoloi's Shanti Bhawan. All of these volunteers were sworn oath by Bordoloi to sacrifice their lives for the sake of motherland. He addressed them "We must be the first to sacrifice on the altar of freedom. We shall build the foundation with brick and upon us shall stand the temple of freedom. We shall remain hidden on the ground, and none shall see us."<sup>1</sup> The task of sewing five hundred Gandhi caps for these volunteers fell on Nalinibala and her siblings in the family. They had to work hard to finish it off.

When Mahatma Gandhi along with Maulana Md.Ali, Begum Md. Ali, Jamunalal Bajaj, Azad Sovani, Gandhi's associate Krishnadas, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and all other leaders visited to Bordoloi's residence, her contact with all these legends of the freedom movement moulded her profound sense of love for her country. She talks about her father in her autobiography that he understood the importance of popularizing the weaving of Khaddar. He along with Tarunram Phukan carried of these clothes and sold them in the market. This had a direct effect on the cotton threads. When he was in the prison for ten years from 1922-1932, during this period he picked up the art of spinning fine threads. Nalinibala Devi inspired her father's effort by weaving these threads into khadi dhotis in the handloom. It can be mentioned here that in the Assamese society of those days, every woman in the family, from poor to the aristocrat, made cotton and silken clothes on their handlooms. This practice is still maintained in the villages.

In the year 1941, Md. Ali Jinnah raised the issue of combining Assam with East Bengal and wanted to form a state in the style of East Bengal Muslim province. This proposal spread mass protest over the state and finally this was rejected. Mahatma Gandhi being silent on these terrible days for Assam, prompted Nalinibala to send him her agony in the form of a poem. In sense of patriotic fervor the poem shows the maturity of Nalinibala Devi in her responsibilities. In the year 1941, the Muslim League Ministry formed in Assam. The collaborators of the British Colonists in order to give public recognition to the British effort, organized an exhibition at the Cotton College at Guwahati. The student union of Cotton College boycotted the exhibition and picketed it. The Deputy Commissioner ordered lathi charge and a lot of students both boys and girls had to be taken to the civil hospital with injuries. The students along with the entire mass raised up against the government. Under Nalinibala's leadership, the Mahila Samiti took a resolution blaming the government for the physical repression. A spontaneous but organized protest all over the state compelled Rohini Kumar Choudhury to resign from the League Ministry. Nalinibala Devi exerted a considerable influence over the students.

The Cabinet Mission with Mr. A.V. Alexander, Sir Stafford Cripps and Lord Penthick Lawrence as members arrived in India on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1946 to discuss the question of India's freedom. They had the proposal of uniting Assam with Bengal for smoother functioning of administration. The plan was originally accepted by both Muslim League and the Congress. The leaders of Assam Congress raised objection against this. Though Mahatma Gandhi had initially accepted the plan but after Mr. Gopinath Bordoloi the then Chief Minister of Assam submitted a memorandum to the working Committee, Gandhi also changed his view and gave support to Gopinath Bordoloi's stand. The league also rejected the Mission's proposal. At that moment of crisis the Assam Sangha was formed in Calcutta to wage a war against the movement. She called upon the gentle Assamese people to awaken to their rights and to assert them. Her speeches roused the public spirit. The Assam Movement gained momentum and for the first time took a stand against the rest of India. Thus, the fact as a united Assam was a force to be reckoned by the rest of India.

Along with other Nalinibala Devi too exerted her efforts in favour of the language movement of 1960 to recognize Assamese language as the state language. When a student of Cotton College, Ranjit Barpujari was killed by police bullets in the midst of the language movement, the students gave a call for a state wise hartal. But they finally withdrew their call only after Nalinibala Devi's request to not do it. Another issue, when Oil Refinery in Assam turned into a mass movement, she played a vital role in this movement by her total involvement with the leadership of it. Though the Refinery was finally set up in terms of employment of the local people but a delegation was sent to meet Feroze Gandhi, the chairman of Oil India. Among other Nalinibala too was a member of that delegation.

Nalinibala Devi also opposed the proposal to remove the hill districts from Assam and to form an independent Hill State cropped up in 1968. This proposal actually causes serious concern and acute dissatisfaction among the Assamese people. She sent telegrams to the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Defence Minister protesting vehemently that an Assam divided would mean an Assam disunited. She also wrote an impassioned yet totally rational appeal to the President Dr. Sarvapally Radhakrishnan regarding the matter.

In 1955, as the president of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, Nalinibala Devi led a delegation of eight members to state reorganization commission and submitted a memorandum. As West Bengal stressed about Goalpara as a part of their state by stressing on the majority of Bengali people, Nalinibala Devi proved before the Commission that Goalpara was an integral part of Assam and the Assamese language had its own root and identity and was never an off-shoot of Bengali. She said, 'as a writer in Assamese I can boldly say that Government of India has committed a grave mistake by

basing the division of states on language. This disastrous policy can achieve nothing but chaos and disunity for the country.' She succeeded in her social mission as Goalpara remained with Assam. The contribution of Assam Sahitya Sabha along with Assam Congress to this end was also immense. In 1962, Assam again faced danger this time from the external affairs. China attacked India suddenly and the Chinese army entered Arunachal Pradesh. This unexpected attack messed up the entire nation, but the Indian army is not able to face the Chinese armies because of unavailability of arms and armaments. Instead of giving any security to the people of Assam, the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru sent message expressing concern for the people of Assam. The government is incapable to maintain the situation. Nalinibala Devi along with several leaders moved throughout Guwahati urging the frightened citizens to preserve their sanity. With patriotic songs and poems they roamed through the streets of Guwahati.

Her unconditional love for Assam made her such a remarkable person. In her autobiography *Eri Aha Dinbur*, Nalinibala Devi has stated 'There is a time in men's life when the urge to serve is very strong. The mind is at peace only by serving the motherland.' The desire or urge for peace is sometimes diverted to serving the family, the society and the country. In her personal life, Nalinibala Devi faced a lot of trauma but she rode over all suffering and found solace in writing. Her love for God also diverted her mind to the service of her motherland. The first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw no progress in the field of women education in Assam. Only Dibrugarh seemed to have the Assamese Girl's High School. Assamese girls went to local Bengali primary school in Guwahati. Nalinibala Devi started a school in her residence but it did not succeed. Despite she is not familiar with formal education she realized the importance of educating women and she remain the forerunner of women education. Many women's associations were formed in Assam with the view to promote and propagate the education among the women. In 1931, the Kamrup Mahila Samiti was formed and Nalinibala Devi became its first President. It was at this time the reformatory Sarda Bill created a ripple all over India. The Sarda Bill passed in 1930 declared that the marriage of girls below fourteen years was illegal and anyone who did not follow this law would be fined or jailed. There seemed to be a wave of child marriage all over the country before the bill could be submitted to the central law commission. In Assam, a number of young girls who are still not attaining their puberty become the victims of child marriage. A terrible aftermath of these child marriages seems to be the growing numbers of child widows all over India. Nalinibala Devi was always against child marriage which can be found in her autobiography when she talked about her aunt Dharmada Devi- a child widow, her sufferings and how she is discriminated in the society of that time. Her ardent support to Sarda Bill can be seen when she pledged that she will not think of marrying her daughter Aruna before she is sixteen. She publicly support the Sarda Bill and began to work actively against child marriage with the members of the Mahila Samiti. The women of Guwahati were not united in their support of the Bill for which a public meeting was called and votes were cast for and against the Sarda Bill. The majority supported the Bill and thus a landmark was achieved in the history of emancipation of women. Nalinibala Devi and Kamala Devi Goswami were the two women who celebrated their daughter and niece's marriage after the age of sixteen. The marriage of girl child before puberty comes into conclusion and after it girls were married at a perfect age.

Being a true social reformer she never hesitated in speaking out fearlessly against superstitions, the inequality of women and the great injustice that have been done to women for so long. In 1947, at the Nagaon session of Assam State Mahila Samiti, just after the independence, being the president of the Mahila Samiti she called out the women of Assam that a great responsibility now rests on the shoulders of women at the time of building up the nation and all must have to be strive for unity without any distinction of cast and creed. She believed that women as the eternal mother, could play a

major role in fighting corruption, superstitions in fact all the social evils. Nalinibala Devi was very much aware of the status of women in society and protested strongly against any type of disrespect shown towards them.

### **Conclusion:**

Nalinibala Devi's autobiography *Eri Aha Dinbur* is a record of Indian Independence movement seen through Assamese eyes. The rise and fall, dreams and aspirations, the struggle and suffering of Assamese race, the role played by the Assamese leaders, students and general public their reactions are all reproduced in the book and it seems to be a very important document for the historians to help them while tracing the history of Assam during the fateful period. Nalinibala Devi was never a silent witness during that time. As the President of Assam Sahitya Sabha, she tries to fight for the dignity of Assamese language. During the Chinese invasion in 1962, she worked bravely for the Assamese people. Besides being a political and social treatise, this autobiography also gives us a glimpse into Nalinibala Devi's personal life.

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