



NALINIBALA DEVI

Bequeathing a Rich Legacy

“Even though she never challenged the prescribed norms for women within a patriarchal set-up or rebelled against women’s fate, she definitely carved a space for women like her in the social and literary arena.”

Nalinibala Devi (1898-1977) was born in 1898 at Barpeta, which is still considered the seat for Vaishnavite culture in Assam. Her father Nabin Chandra Bordoloi popularly known as ‘Karmabir’ belonged to that group of Assamese intelligensia whose contributions allowed the Assamese society to transform and evolve. Her mother Hemanta Kumari Devi helped her husband in his political activities in spite of being confined to the inner quarters of the home, as was the custom of those times. However, Bordoloi himself being an advocate of women’s education and emancipation began his daughters’ education at home because of the unavailability of proper schools for girls at Guwahati. Nalinibala along with her sister Mrinalini started their education at home under the guidance of Gopalkrishna Dey. Along with the regular subjects, he taught them to read poetry and understand poetic devices, which helped Nalinibala to evolve as a poet. Later on Nishikanta Sen and Jagnyeswar Baruah taught the two girls Sanskrit, English, mathematics, history and geography.

In the year 1909, at eleven years of age, Nalinibala Devi was married to Sibsagar based Jibeswar Changkakoti. She was widowed after eight years and by that time, she was a mother of four children and was carrying her fifth child. After this misfortune, her father brought her back with him to Guwahati. In her autobiography *Eri Aha Dinbor* she writes how her father supported her by declaring, "my life as a father would be blessed to see my child in the white attire of Sarvashukla Mahasweta (apparently referring to Goddess Saraswati)" (p.61). These inspiring words made a deep impact on her, encouraging her to face the challenges of life with confidence. At first, she found solace in the pages of Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita and in the songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore and after that she started composing numerous poems which were published in Assamese magazines such as *Ghar Jeuti*, and *Awahan*. Her first anthology of poems *Sandhiyar Sur* was published in 1928 followed by other poetic compilations such as *Saponor Sur* (1943), *Parashmoni* (1954), *Alakananda* (1967), and *Jagriti* (1962). Preeti Barua in her book *Nalinibala Devi* writes thus:

"These poems are the gift of an anguished heart which has flowered in loneliness and suffering, and ripened into the fruit of golden tranquility....Sadness, it is true, lingers...but in the rare atmosphere of her mind sorrow has lost its heaviness and attained the translucence of poetic vision' (p.10).

She is probably the best-known female poet of her era. She wrote her first poem, "Pita," when she was 10 years old. She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi in 1968 for *Alakananda*. Her prose works include her father Nabin Chandra Bordoloi's life, *Smritir Tirtha* (1948), her autobiography, *Eri Aha Dinbor*, and her collected articles, *Shanti Path*. Her position in the Assamese poetic canon was acknowledged even in her lifetime, as evidenced by her presidency of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1954.

Nalinibala Devi's life was both inspired and shaped by her father Nabin Chandra Bordoloi. Her father's Uzanbazar home to which she returned after her husband's death played a significant role in shaping her poetic self and determining the course of her life along with instilling in her a nationalist fervour, which allowed her to contribute significantly to the nationalist discourse that was emerging in the early part of twentieth century Assam. Their home, being the first Congress office, facilitated her active participation in the freedom struggle even while remaining within the threshold of her home. The 'world' (public sphere) had entered her 'home' (private sphere) and she could enjoy privileges of both the worlds. Her home became the site where all her desires and wishes could find expression. Her encounter with national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jamunalal Bajaj, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose among others opened up a whole new horizon before her where different notions of freedom emerged from these different voices.

In due course of time, on her father's advice she concentrated more on her poetry than on politics, as the latter was not the proper life that Nabin Chandra Bordoloi had dreamt

for his widowed daughter. However, in her autobiography she mentions the names of various women belonging to prominent Assamese families – like Hemantakumari Devi, Dharmada Devi, Snehalata Bhattacharya, Girija Devi - who participated in the freedom struggle in various ways. She herself served as the president of Kamrup Mahila Samiti in the year 1931. Even before that in the year 1919 she along with her uncle Probodh Chandra Bordoloi and Snehalata Bhattacharya (daughter of Kamalakanta Bhattacharya) tried to establish a girls' school in the Uzanbazar area of Guwahati. The mission failed after a period of six months due to financial constraints. In her autobiography, she writes a great deal on the Sarda Act of 1929, which fixed the marriageable age for girls at fourteen years and its impact on the conservative section of the Assamese society, which was not ready to comply with the decision.

Even though she never challenged the prescribed norms for women within a patriarchal set-up or rebelled against women's fate, she definitely carved a space for women like her in the social and literary arena. With a literary culture where women's act of holding a pen was in itself an act of violation, where language itself was inadequate to express women's vivid experiences, where women had to fight their internalization of patriarchal structures in order to establish themselves in the domains of writing, speaking, and rationalizing, Nalinibala Devi with her compelling presence placed Assamese women firmly in the history of Assamese literature and language. Not only that, she contributed significantly to the emerging nationalist discourse through her poems as well as through her autobiography, *Eri Aha Dinbor*, which is not merely an account of her life but is a document which successfully retrieves and reconstructs history placing Assamese nationalism as a variant of the pan Indian nationalism. □□