

RAJABALA DAS

Three  
Score  
Years  
and Ten

One Life, Many Memories

TRANSLATOR  
ADITI CHOWDHURY



# **THREE SCORE YEARS AND TEN**

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**Rajabala Das**

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Published by  
**Handique Girls' College**  
Guwahati

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of Rajabala Das, Translated by Aditi Chowdhury and Published  
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## Foreword

The traditional invisibility of women's distinct voices is what Virginia Woolf referred to when she said that "for most of history, Anonymous was the woman". So when a woman takes an avid interest to tell her life's story and share it with the world, it is something awe-inspiring she performs that merits our applause. Though not of continuous and uniform growth, autobiographical writings by a number of thinking women of Assam constitute a body of most distinguished and celebrated literature exquisitely crafted. These texts are personal documents of a new sense of worth such eminent writers experienced as individuals and as women. These writings have registered a remarkable flowering of this genre portraying an authentic picture of an Assamese ethos and the position and status of Assamese women in the society.

Beginning with Rajabala Das's autobiography, **'Tini Kuri Doh Bosoror Smriti'** (1971), life-writing by many renowned Assamese women writers moves on to such prominent works as Nalini Bala Devi's **'Eri Oha Dinbor'** (1976), Mamoni Raisom Goswami's **'Aadha Lekha Dostabez'** (1988), Nirupama Borgonain's **'Bishwas Aru Xongxoyor Majedi'** (1995), Nirmal Prova Bordoloi's **'Jeevan, Jeevan, Bor Anupam'** (2004), and Anima Guha's **'Jeevanor Jonwar Bhata'** (2009). As social documents and mirrors of memory these autobiographies have made valuable contributions to the whole corpus of life-writing by Indian women. To solve the intricacies and conflicts between the outer and the inner space, these writers have vented their intense feelings presenting different patterns of feminist consciousness. These are accounts of a soul's journey - highlighting what was at stake

in the making of a habitable world in the midst of myriad problems and conflicts the writers had to face in their lives. Their anger, resentment and pathos at the deplorable state of affairs are, however, invariably interwoven with a sense of joyous release from the constrictions of patriarchal ideology and age-old customs. What is common to all these writings is a woman's unrelenting quest for identity with an examination of woman's suffering due to sexist bias in a patriarchal society. Indeed, this literary genre of autobiography has become a suitable medium in the hands of these female writers, enabling them to reconstruct their personal development within a given historical, social and cultural framework.

The name Rajabala Das, (1893-1985) the founder Principal of Handique Girls' College, conjures up in memory the picture of a woman of life-upright, soft, suave, god-fearing and always on the side of righteousness. However, behind this veneer of softness and suavity, there lurked a very strict and stern disciplinarian, an uncompromising perfectionist, who at the violation of any code of conduct would burst forth in an angry rush of words, enough to send shivers down the offender's spine. During her tenure of two decades as the Principal of Handique Girls' College, she displayed exemplary courage and confidence, control and commitment and an unfailing faith in the divine power of God. Her extraordinary visionary power and outstanding leadership qualities have left indelible imprints on the minds of those who had been closely associated with her. The multi-dimensional personality of this woman always makes us feel what it is like to have an exceptional mental power to break out of our little, mundance existence and enter into a much bigger world full of exciting possibilities.

Rajabala Das's autobiography, '**Tini Kuri Doh Bosoror Smriti**', is a truthful record of her career - the vicissitudes she dealt with in family life, the grim struggles and obstacles she had to overcome, the challenges she braved with gritty resolve, and the sufferings she endured while pursuing her goal in a dark, suffocating environment of irredeemable ignorance, superstition and prejudice. Autobiographical writings are rarely found outside the tradition

of individualism and the sense of the personal worth it inculcates. This no doubt applies to Rajabala Das's autobiography, but her work as a whole provides us a wider view because of its projection of a colonial and post-colonial perspective, in the contexts of the nation and the state, drawing our attention to the complex dimensions against the background of which the disquieting experience of women's segregation is sculpted. The authorial voice is not of a militant, strident feminist but that of a liberal feminist striving for gender equality through political, and legal reforms. Rajabala Das's story of her life is a poignant revelation of the predicament of Assamese women as the writer herself passes through different phases of her life in such a way as would voice her own concerns for the perils and problems of those of her own sex. Amidst all her self-expressions and anecdotes, what looms large is the figure of that unblessed creature of God - the repressed and oppressed woman mired in insult and injury, indignity and tyranny, and in the deep-seated malaise of conservatism. Rajabala Das's recollections and the perceptions of the events surrounding her life from girlhood to womanhood, are not romantic nostalgia, they all unpack an unavoidable sense of reality - the stark reality of gender discrimination. The autobiography tries to unearth the social customs and practices that relegated a woman - married, unmarried or a widow, to a miserably inferior status conditioned by religious orthodoxy, rigid patriarchy and Brahminical constraints. The Assamese women of her time, no matter what strata of society they belonged to, had to negotiate survival through an oppressive hierarchy of powers, and Rajabala Das has explored in her narrative this operation of power, the space that was denied to the disadvantaged woman, the deprivation she suffered and the space she gradually tried to create for herself. Her book raises an awareness of overt and covert gender discrimination that reminds us of the multiple ways by which the women of that period managed to exist and thrive despite social, state and community neglect.

Rajabala Das was an eye-witness to the contemporary social, political and cultural upheavals of Assam, and as such in writing her

life, she was deeply affected by the historical and social milieu. Her autobiography gives us a glimpse of her enthusiastic participation in the Indian freedom struggle along with many other women who then came to be regarded as the effective repositories of this national movement. Rajabala Das had the rare opportunity of coming into contact with Mahatma Gandhi who actually had painted a new concept of Indian womanhood along with his non-violent struggle for a sovereign nationhood. Rajabala Das views this national struggle as something that did shape many Assamese women's awareness.

It was against a turbulent background of a war casting its shadow over the Eastern part of India and the Indian freedom movement gaining its momentum, with women fighting hard to discover for themselves a brave, new world that Rajabala Das emerged as a crusader to vindicate the rights of the females, especially the right to education. She dared to swim against the current and came forward to empower the girls with higher education by founding a Girls' College in Guwahati in 1939 only with two students. The very idea of a girls' college sparked controversy and vitriolic comments started pouring in from the press and the public. For some, the college was a 'white elephant', for many her dream was utopian, a sheer bravado. The sceptics deliberately misconstrued her confidence as arrogance, unable to fathom what overwhelming height of glory and success the dogged perseverance of a visionary woman could carry her dream to, making a mockery of all deprecatory gestures. Handique Girls' College is Rajabala Das's tour-de-force, a monument of a woman's heroic spirit - that spurred her to forge ahead in life's onward march. Her autobiography is an indictment on the forceful suppression of women - it seeks to assert that the change in the position of women in any society is the only index to the social change in general. Her college is the pathfinder - the women today view themselves not simply as wives or begetters of children but as the legitimate participants in life's meaningful discourses.

Conducting a research on her life, Rajabala Das in the autobiography has created a time-line, and her story, within the limited

framework of just one hundred and fifteen pages, has been unfolded in a great felicity of style—lucidity, clarity, and simplicity being its hallmarks. In her pithily expressed prose, she has not allowed herself to clutter the pages with a vocabulary which we rarely use.

In rendering Rajabala Das's autobiography from original Assamese into the target language which is English, Aditi Chowdhury has displayed her excellence as a skilled professional. To translate is to pour meaning from one vessel into another one that is equivalent to the first. In a way, translation is both servitude and freedom, and Aditi Chowdhury has been able to strike a balance between the two, successfully conveying the essence of the source text, with utmost fidelity. She has been quite good at dodging language difficulties and a cultivated eloquence has enabled her to find the best expression possible.

The Principal and the faculty of Handique Girls' College deserve warm appreciation for their keen interest in the publication of the English translation of Rajabala Das's book. The translated version titled **'Three Score Years and Ten - One Life, Many Memories'** in its new format will surely attract a much wider readership. Needless to say that the toilsome efforts of a brave woman who many a time fell in the thorns of life and bled to fulfill her noble mission, once shaped a world illumined with knowledge, of which we are now the proud inheritors. Her autobiography is of inestimable value, it is the life blood of a master spirit to be embalmed and cherished for ever.

Emily Dickinson once put it in one of her poems that her life has been "shaven and fitted to a frame" - a confinement she can only tolerate by believing that "the soul has moments of escape / when bursting all the doors / she dances like a bomb abroad". - This perhaps is the truth about Rajabala Das's vision of an unfettered women.

**Geeta Barua**

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Rajabala Das during her office work (1965)

## Introduction

Gandhiji had once likened women's power to "an ancestral treasure lying buried in a corner of the house unknown to the members of the family."

The crisis of identity and the irresistible need to make their voices heard have fuelled the struggle of women all over the world and at all times. Some have succeeded in this battle against insurmountable odds. Others sadly, have surrendered midway. From Sappho in the times of yore to Malala in the present, the history of womankind has been fraught with gender conflict.

Living as she did in times when a woman could only be seen but never heard, Rajabala Das knew instinctively how to discover and nurture this priceless human potential that the Mahatma had talked about. And she worked tirelessly throughout her life to give her gender its rightful place in the sun.

Honest, brave and insightful, her life's story is a testament of her courage and pioneering spirit. It was an unheard of attempt in those days for a woman to venture into male bastions and to try to break gender stereotypes. The narrative reveals the inimitable voice of a resourceful woman, told openly and in personal terms. The frailties and strengths, failures and achievements, highs and lows of life's experiences, which ultimately steered her to success, reach out to the reader from the pages of her book.

The documentation begins with Rajabala Das's early life in Dibrugarh, a conservative town in Upper Assam. A graphic account of her childhood gives the reader a fair idea of the difficulties she weathered to educate not only herself but also her younger sister.

Her primary intention in writing this book was to bring to light the progressive changes regarding women that had taken place in the Assamese mindset during her lifetime. She was born into an educated, liberal family. But she and her three sisters had to constantly conform to the impositions that society placed on women in general.

The book goes on to disclose how, overcoming all impediments, she convinced her parents to send her to Giridhi and Calcutta for school and college education. After her propitious marriage to Dr. Jyotish Das of Gauhati, she joined the Panbazar Girls' High School as an Assistant Mistress and went on to become its Principal. This became the stepping stone for a radical and pioneering career as an educationist. Her husband's political affiliations inspired her to join the Assam Pradesh Mahila Samiti. But women's education remained her foremost concern.

By the 1930s, high schools for girls had been started in all the major towns of Assam. A sizeable number of Assamese girls had passed their Matric Examination. Rajabala Das became obsessed with the dream of providing higher education to these girls who had struggled so much to obtain their right to education. In the 1934 Guwahati session of the Assam Pradesh Mahila Samiti, she, for the first time, mooted the idea of admitting girls into Cotton College. Another feisty Assamese woman, Chandraprova Saikia, enthusiastically supported her. This proposal was finally accepted by the Government and College authorities.

The idea of starting a women's college in the premises of Panbazar Girls' High School had germinated in Rajabala Das's mind in the mid 1930s. But the President of the Managing Committee, Mr. D. C. Humphrey, had rejected it outright when she broached the matter. "It is too premature now to open a Girls' College", he had declared categorically. Her determination, however, could not be dampened and on July 16, 1939, the first women's college in Assam saw the light of day.



Rajabala Das's detractors were many. She was targeted for nurturing an impossible dream and for not having a Master's Degree. Yet she carried on, unfazed by opposition. Very soon, the college received the patronage of Shri Radhakanta Handique, eminent philanthropist and tea planter, and its affiliation to Calcutta University came through. Rajabala Das completed her Master's Degree in Assamese from Calcutta University and established her unassailable position as the founder - principal.

The pitfalls that the college faced in the early years of its inception were enough to dishearten most bravehearts. The first few batches of students had no permanent premise to call their own, and the classes were held in different places according to convenience. The outbreak of the Second World War added to their woes. In 1943, the students appeared for their I.A examination from tents in the Judge's Field. But Rajabala Das's tenacity and personality attracted some of the finest Assamese minds of the time to join as faculty voluntarily, even in the nascent stages of the institution.

There are so many stories about her initial struggle that survive to this day as a part of Handique College lore. Her agenda was a single one—the woman of the house had to be educated for a brighter future of the nation. She never approved of a frivolous attitude towards life. She wanted Assamese women to be knowledgeable, confident and possessed of high self esteem.

Visionaries and dreamers always have their fair share of censure and disparagement. But they are also the harbingers of change and progress. In each trailblazing enterprise we see a coalescence of idealism and pragmatism. Rajabala Das's dream of establishing a women's college in Guwahati also passed through a troubled trajectory initially. Newspaper headlines screamed, "Handique Women's College is a white elephant." But she persisted. The two rooms in Panbazar Girls' High School where the college took birth after a difficult labour, became the incubator of women's empowerment in Assam.

*THREE SCORE YEARS AND TEN – ONE LIFE, MANY MEMORIES* is a complex and nuanced portrait of a woman far ahead of her times in emotional intelligence. That she could foresee, living as she did in a fiercely patriarchal world, the inevitable shift to a more equal world, speaks much of her strong convictions. The book, told in a matter of fact manner, nevertheless enshrines her quality of leadership, her infinite capacity to straddle both personal and professional worlds and most of all, her relentless crusade to dismantle gender biases. It creates a milestone as the first Assamese autobiography written by a woman and records her memorable journey through life, her crosses, her triumphs and the legacy she leaves behind for others to emulate. Today's generations should read her life story and be enthused to take on the challenges that confront them, with grit and unswerving determination, as she did throughout her eventful life.

**Aditi Chowdhury**  
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Handique Girls' College

## My Objective

This book has taken shape because of a compulsive desire to share my chequered experiences as an activist in the sphere of empowering women through education. The shifting paradigms and the eventual progress in the status of our women that I have witnessed and worked for tirelessly, over these last seventy years, form the fulcrum of my narrative. My intention is to present an authentic account of this historical period which saw momentous changes take place in the gender equations existing in our society.

If we go back in time to about sixty years from now, girls from affluent Assamese families were not permitted by their guardians to seek education at all, or at least not beyond school level.

It was an attested truth that proficiency in household work was taken as the benchmark for a girl's education. Instead of attending school, girls were encouraged to acquire and hone skills like weaving and cooking, both taught at home.

Any aspiration for a formal education was discouraged and even eliminated from the minds of young girls. Their worth in the marriage scene was measured by their expertise in household chores and in weaving. The parents, too, became accustomed to these social strictures and accepted them unquestioningly.

With such prejudiced views about women so deeply entrenched in the minds of the people, the issue of women's education became a contentious one in many parts of India. Fortunately for us, the struggle for independence gained momentum in the first few decades of the century. With the escalation of its

intensity, the winds of change began to blow. Women's education became a focal point in the agenda of the Independence Movement. As in other states, in Assam too, several educational institutions were established which espoused the cause of women.

After Independence, a further thrust was added and these institutions were upgraded and received a new lease of life. This change in attitude ignited hope and confidence and for the first time, thousands of Assamese women voiced their demand for education, which resonated across the state. A new country needed a new generation without gender inequalities. Men and women should be able to shoulder equal responsibilities, enjoy equal rights - this became the rallying cry. The invigorating and reformative spirit that independent India exuded, worked wonders for the liberation of women from their traditional constructs.

Over a long period of time, I have been actively involved with several organizations concerned with women's education. Hence it is my personal experiences in this area that I want to share with my readers in this book. If I have been able to in any way influence the expansion and improvement of these institutions, my book will remain a lasting evidence of my efforts.

The present times augur well for the full flowering of a woman's creativity and fulfilling its true potential. But much still needs to be done. Education, I believe, is the most potent tool for liberating and extending the scope of a woman's activities beyond the confines of home and hearth. If this book can inspire the readers to second this belief, I will deem my mission in life to be amply justified.



(Rajabala Das)

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Gauhati