Women's Education as a Site of Self-formation: Understanding Indira Miri's *Moi Aru NEFA*

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Abstract :
Any reading of the history of Assamese women establishes that for women in Assam the assertion of their rights in the social sphere has been a tumultuous one where the domestic world was assigned as the space for women. The effort to establish themselves in the public realm was unarguably mediated by access to education in the late colonial times. The self-formation of women at such a juncture had to go through a socio-political conditioning where the individual self is inextricably linked to the public self. In an attempt to address this historical nature of women's self especially during the intervention of colonial modernity, this paper examines the way women's education as a site of identity-formation has been explored by the women autobiographers of Assam. The women speakers, as we argue in the paper, produce an image of themselves as public figures through stories developed around this site. A significant autobiographical text – *Moi aru NEFA* (I and NEFA, 2003) by Indira Miri – is studied to establish this point. The text is studied at the backdrop of the history of women's education in Assam till the nineteenth century. It emerges as an example of how the course of institutional education and a sense of real physical place become dominant sites for identity-formation. Indira Miri's particular interest in these two aspects makes her autobiography distinctive. Through a discussion on the attention of critics towards this field in historically situating the question of women in Assam it is argued that through a close scrutiny of the field of education Miri presents her public persona and simultaneously heralds the advent of newer sites of self- articulation for contemporary women.

Keywords : *Women's Education, Self-formation, Identity, Assam*

Introduction :

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was assigned as the space for women. The self-formation of women at such a juncture had to go through a socio-political conditioning where the individual self is inextricably linked to the public self. In an attempt to address this historical nature of women's self especially during the intervention of colonial modernity, this paper examines the way women's education as a site of identity-formation has been explored by the women autobiographers of Assam. The women speakers, as we argue in the paper, produce an image of themselves as public figures through stories developed around this site. A significant autobiographical text – *Moi aru NEFA* (I and NEFA, 2003) by Indira Miri – is studied to establish this point.

Objectives:

The primary objective of this paper is to understand the self formation process of the women of Assam during the colonial period. Another objective is to understand the intricate relationship of private and public self which was continuously mediated by colonial modernity. How women's education acted as a site of identity-formation reflected in certain women autobiographies will also be another objective.

Materials and Methods:

Historical methodology has been used in writing this paper. In doing so mainly textual analysis of both autobiographical and other genre are done. The primary text that has been used in preparing this paper is by Indira Miri's *Moi aru NEFA* (I and NEFA, 2003)

Discussion:

Scholarly works on the growth of education in Assam have already established the fact that in ancient Assam women did not receive institutional education. Preeti Baruah's essay "Assamar Stri-sikshar Itihasat Ebhumuki" (A Glimpse into the History of Women's Education in Assam, 2002) makes a brief survey of women's education in Assam. She states that the Sanskrit *tols* were meant for the caste Hindu boys where they studied Sanskrit language and literature alongside the holy texts. The number of girls receiving preliminary education in their homes was very less and they mostly belonged to the caste Hindu families and the elite section of the society. The religious scriptures and tales were their forte. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also did not do much to change the situation. During this period a few women like Padmapriya, the daughter of Gopal Aata, Bhubaneswari, the daughter of Harideva and Kanaklata, the grand daughter-in-law of Sankardeva could read the religious texts. Padmapriya is known to have written a few devotional songs. No historical record is found regarding these women attending educational institutions but it may be assumed that they learned to read and write because of the initiatives of their respective families. Institutional education was not considered necessary even for men during the pre-colonial times. Though colonial intervention in Assam in the nineteenth century changed the scenario drastically, yet, the East India Company also did not take much initiative to educate the people of Assam. Despite the emphasis of the Charter Act of 1833 on the Company's responsibility to implement the right to education as one of its moral duties and the suggestion of

granting one lakh rupees annually for the development of education, the situation did not change much on the ground. William Robinson's *A Descriptive Account of Assam* first published in 1841 throws light on the status of women and education in Assam. Robinson mentions that unlike Bengal where every village had a teacher, Assam did not have a provincial school in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. He also states the deplorable condition of women's education and laments that young girls were confined to the domestic life and were barred from the public domain.

With the arrival of the American Baptist Missionaries this deplorable state of women's education in Assam underwent a remarkable change. H.K. Barpujari states in his book *American Missionaries and North-East India (1836-1900 A.D)* (1986) that Rev. Nathan Brown and Oliver T. Cutter, accompanied by their families and with a printing press reached Sadiya on 23 March, 1836, heralding a new beginning in the history of Assam. Barpujari records that the earlier attempts to establish schools in the Garo Hills of Assam by David Scott in cooperation with Bishop Herber of Calcutta did not gain any success.

Thus, the missionary school established in Sadiya in 1836 became the first school to offer institutional education. Another school for girls was established by Mrs. Becker in 1841 at Sibsagar. However the Foreign Secretary's visit to Assam in 1850 brought a radical change in the policy. He stated before the Assam Mission that schools are not "a pre-requisite to the preaching of gospels ...and the demand for common schools will be met at no distant day... by the civil government" (Qtd in Barpujari xxxii). As a result of this concern, Barpujari records "These enrolment at the Sibsagar Girls' School dropped down to three in 1862 while in two schools at Gauhati to twelve which stood at one hundred and twelve in four schools in 1851" (xxxii). The missionaries also initiated the 'zenana schools' to encourage women's education but none of these initiatives proved to be long lasting. The East India Company expressed their concern towards women's education as late as 1858. As part of Wood's Despatch of 1854, women's education was prioritized and in 1859 the Despatch re-emphasised the matter. By the year 1879, eight girls' schools were established in Assam. Out of them, five schools were established in Kamrup, and one each in Darrang, Lakhimpur and Nowgong. The first primary school for girls was established in Sibsagar in 1860-61. The scenario gradually changed in subsequent times and formal education for girls became a priority for the government. However, the patriarchal society had its own reservation regarding the matter. Remarkable exceptions were made by persons like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-1859) who educated his wife at home and sent his daughter Padmavati to school at Nagaon and Gunabhiram Barua (1837-1894) who sent his daughter Swarnalata to the Bethune School in Calcutta at the age of nine in 1880. Preeti Barua mentions another girl Sarala Debi, the daughter of Uday Ram Das, who went with Swarnalata. Although these women did not record their stories, it is easily assumable that the act of going forward to receive formal education

itself was their initial step towards self-formation. With the course of time, this scenario changed and women's education gained momentum. By the beginning of the twentieth century women of Assam started going to schools within and outside the state. By the third decade of the twentieth century a significant number of girls started attending colleges outside the state and the same had been facilitated inside the state by the establishment of new colleges. The women community, however, responded to this significant development in diverse ways.

Rajabala Das' *Tinikuri Dah Basarar Smriti* (Reminiscences of Seventy Years, 1971) is the finest example of self-formation, where she establishes herself mostly as a public figure with emphasis on her works in the field of women's education. Born in Dibrugarh in 1893, she records the initial wavering about the necessity of education for a girl. And yet with the realisation that education can provide girls an access to the otherwise inaccessible public world, she not only strove to be educated but also fought to establish educational institutions for girls. Her autobiography gives a detailed record of a personal struggle in the field that she continued till the last years of her life. As she passed the matriculation examination in 1915 securing first division she records that it encouraged other parents in Dibrugarh to send their daughters to schools.

The narrative of women's education in Assam in the later decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century is also a narrative of self- formation within the limits of social custom and regulation. Tanika Sarkar in her study of the autobiography of Rashsundari Debi talks about the importance of discovering newer sites of self-formation in the context of colonial India where "Absence of education was taken... as the basic lack that differentiated male and female capabilities" (103). The change in the picture also contributed to the proliferation of women's writing as Geraldine Forbes discusses in her work *Women in Modern India (1996)*.

Aparna Mahanta in her work *Journey of Assamese Women* establishes the strong connection between the growth of women's education in Assam and their entry into literature. Nevertheless, she also points out the patriarchal society's reservation about the goal of educating women and which according to them, was to produce good mothers and happy homes. She states, "Two lines of thinking had emerged one upholding the anglicised version of the "lady" skilled in the arts of the home and the other the Gandhian version of the "Bharatiya Nari" loyal to the ideals of Sati- Savitri and the nationalist cause" (58).

It is in defiance to such aims of educating women, the early autobiographers present their stories as the stories of mobility in the outside world. The autobiographies by women like Rajabala Das, Nalinibala Devi and others illustrate the rise of education as one of the major domains where women could exercise and assert their selves.

Women's education did not just remain an offshoot of the nationalist projects of social reform in colonial India, but provided women with a sense of identity recognized in the outside world, hitherto inaccessible to them. Partha Chatterjee

refers to Laird and opines that a distant appeal to tradition called for an opposition to the opening of schools for women and the real threat was seen arrangement of women education by Christian missionaries which will not only led to conversion to Christianity but also expose Indian women to harmful western influences (628).

Such a narrative however, started losing ground when in the 1850s Indians themselves began to open schools for girls. Chatterjee refers to the achievements of women like Chandramukhi Bose (1860-1944) and Kadambini Ganguli (1861-1923) who took their B.A degrees from the University of Calcutta in 1883. He interprets this new zeal for education among the women of colonial India as their way of achieving 'freedom' in a new sense of the term. The search for freedom and the project of achieving 'superiority' by this new generation of women culminated in their participation in the field of education. In case of Rajabala Das and many of her contemporaries, it not only provided a sense of being but became a framework to define themselves. The newly educated women could claim a new definition of women's duties as opposed to the notions of both the reformists and the Missionaries.

Following this trajectory Indira Miri's autobiography *Moi Aru NEFA* can be understood as another contemporary woman's effort to define herself through the paradigm of women's education. The work presents her life as an educationist who explored the remotest parts of Assam in the mid-twentieth century and someone who dedicated her entire life to the cause of education. Her autobiography is basically a record of the experiences gathered during her stay at the then NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh) as an education officer. The North East Frontier Agency in 1947(when Miri joined) included five hills districts namely Tirap, Mishimi (now Lohit), Abor (now Siang), Subansiri and Balipara (now Kameng). Her narrative includes a geographical and anthropological study of this place and its people. However, her focus is on the service she offered as an education officer to this part of Assam and the diversity of experiences gathered during her ten years' stay. Born in 1910 Indira Miri spent her childhood at Shillong as her father Sonadhar Senapati worked there and since there was no Assamese medium school in Shillong, she was enrolled in a Bengali medium school. She narrates the beginning of her school days:

My far-sighted, learned father sent me to the Brahma Girls' School at Calcutta at a very early age… my father realised it well that the school education at Calcutta will be better than that of Shillong... However, there was another special reason behind trying to educate me in such an early age. Despite being a man of his times, he considered women's education as equally necessary to that of men... I studied in Calcutta from class IV onward and completing my B.A degree from the Scottish Church College of Calcutta, I returned to Shillong in 1932. To allow me to study in Scottish Church College (which was a boys' college) during those days is another instance of my father's progressive mind (my trans.; 7).

She mentions other girls from Assam who were enrolled at Scottish Church College around

that time. There were four Khasi girls – Silverine Swer, Beatrice Peu, Kelelida Kharsati and Helen Giri from Shillong, Miss Haima Kakoti from Dibrugarh, Halima Khatun from Shillong and Amalprabha Das. Commenting on the status of women's education in the 1930s she says:

My heart was filled with new hope and enthusiasm and more so because I got enrolled in a reputed Boys' College. ... it was only since the previous year that the college allowed girls to take admission. Therefore, only a few girls were there in the college. Only two girls were studying there when I joined the college (my trans.; 12).

She left Calcutta in 1931 and the next year she married Mahichandra Miri, a high ranking forest officer deputed to survey Kaziranga for the first time in the mid thirties. However, her husband died after seven years of marriage and she along with her three children came back to her father's home. She has not recorded the next four years of life from 1939-1943 and elaborated a new chapter of life from 1943 onward as she decides to rejoin institutional education. She writes:

Towards the end of 1943 I saw a notice in the newspaper that Madam Montessori will be conducting a six months training programme in Ahmadabad. I was not yet stable after attaining widowhood and the notice made me think that perhaps a change in place and nature of work might prove good for me. I applied for the programme and received a reply on time that I have been selected and the central government has offered a scholarship as well (my trans.; 25).

This enthusiasm of a woman going through a difficult phase of her life is indeed remarkable. This resolve to prove and establish herself as independent in the patriarchal society is presented as the narrative core of the text. This act of tracing the growth of her public self evades the need to explore the inner world of her emotion. She provides no record of the emotional crisis that she was going through at that time. Rather, she actively participated in this training programme given by Madam Montessori, and learnt the various skills related to children's education. While coming back from Ahmadabad after completing the course successfully she stayed at Delhi for two weeks with her brother Mahendra Lal Das, the then Member of Parliament (MP). This proved to be another turning point in her life as she got selected for a scholarship to study abroad. With the support of her family members she started another important chapter of her life to pursue higher studies in London. She took admission in the B.Ed programme of Edinburgh University in 1945 and completed her B. Ed Degree in 1947. Her thesis for the programme was on "Factorial Analysis of 13- year old children".

This was another achievement for a widow and a mother of three children. The subsequent narration, free from any emotional and personal details is replete with this sense of accomplishment. This impassiveness of the speaker's voice is crucial because the record of an individual life is mostly silent about an important aspect of the life concerned. In fact, the act of writing the autobiography provides an occasion to recollect her achievements in the field of education as she writes:

After reaching home I took rest for a few days and one day met Walker Sahab, the Advisor of North East Frontier states. While I was in London he wrote me a letter asking for my willingness to work at NEFA. Although I replied positively I told him that NEFA is a very remote place, almost a no man's land. If he thinks that I as a woman can work there conveniently, I will certainly work there. He was glad that I met him and told me to prepare a plan for educating the children of NEFA. I submitted a plan hurriedly. After a few days I have been appointed as the chief education officer of NEFA (my trans.; 32).

The subsequent narration carefully records her professional life mostly at NEFA and briefly in some other places of Assam. Miri's self-narration becomes interesting for the way she makes the place a subject of study in the text. Her professional life at NEFA from 1947 to 1957 offers a record of the socio-economic conditions of the place during the period. The text is replete with anthropological records of the various tribes living there, their cultural practices and the central government's political intervention in the field of education. This elaborate narration also includes the diverse experiences of encouraging illiterate people to send their children to schools and the difficulties of implementing educational policies. It is interesting to note that such a detailed record of her days at NEFA make up the major part of the text and the later phases of her professional life are briefly passed over. She mentions that after leaving NEFA in 1957, she was appointed as the Principal of Post Graduate Teacher's Training Centre at Jorhat on the same day. She completed her term of service in this Centre in 1968 and in the same year she took charge as the Principal of Banikanta Kakoti Bachelor's Training College in Guwahati. After leaving the college in 1983 she was appointed as the chairman of the social welfare department. Thus, she spent almost four decades of her life working in the sector of education and yet it is the time spent in NEFA that finds a special account in her self-narration. Her other services and work experience are mentioned briefly only in the last chapter. Nevertheless, she justifies the special attention towards her first job at NEFA:

I leave the task of assessing my work at NEFA to others. However, by my own evaluation I was successful. It gives me immense pleasure to remember that I could work for those people who lived an almost impossible life in such a remote place. I did my job with dedication, courage, enthusiasm, hope and with immense pleasure (my trans.;54).

She records how she had to leave NEFA as a result of political interference in her work. The account of the backwardness of the place is set as a foil to her achievement as a female education officer at a time when living alone and working in a new and distant place was unthinkable for many women. She presents her accomplishment as a woman winning against such adversities. At the backdrop of her contemporary women's confinement to home she weaves her sense of accomplishment as the central motif of her narrative. Contrary to the understanding of women's personal narratives as stories of home and domestic life, these departures point towards the intersections of the public and the private as crucial in women's self-articulation. Domna C. Stanton reads such "conflicts

between the private and the public, the personal and the professional"(138) in autobiographies by women as necessary for assertion of an 'I' against the society's view. She reads the medieval and nineteenth century Western women's entry into the male-dominated site as responsible for such conflicts that finally led to the preferring of public performances over the personal. In case of the early women writers of Assam too such a choice stands justified. The public realm invariably becomes the centre of their self-narrations.

Malavika Karlekar's article "Kadambini and the Bhadralok: Early Debates over Women's Education in Bengal" (1986) analyses the way women's education in Bengal affected the social structure. She says:

By the beginning of the twentieth century, while an increasing number of girls continued to go to primary school, their participation at the higher level was limited; at the same time, zenana education gained in popularity. There were a number of reasons for this uneven growth in girl's education. (28)

The case of of women's education in early twentieth century Assam also resonated with that of Bengal. Assamese periodicals such as *Mou* (1886-87), *Banhi* (1909- 1945) and *Ghar-Jeuti* (1927-1931) had many articles written both by men and women on the kind of education to be imparted to women. The participation of the newly educated women in this debate is significant. A reading of the autobiographical accounts of women including that of Indira Miri points towards the fact that girls were generally sent to school till completion of the primary level but were rarely encouraged for higher studies. Such a social disapproval for education of girls refers to diverse socio-cultural reasons. Two of the primary reasons pointed out by Karlekar are early marriage and refusal to send the girls to co-educational institutions and another crucial reason in case of Assam is the issue of caste. The girls from the upper caste were not just married off before attaining puberty, they also could not mix freely with girls belonging to lower caste families. It is remarkable that amidst such gender and caste based hindrances a few pioneering women not only educated themselves but worked hard for the development of women's education in the state. Subsequently such major achievement of their lives dominated their self-fashioning primarily as formations of their collective selves. Owing to this education emerged as the major site of their self-articulation. It is regarding this changing dynamic of women's education in modern India that Geraldine Forbes comments:

The first generation of educated women found a voice: they wrote about their lives and about the conditions of women. The second generation acted. They articulated the needs of women, critiqued their society and the foreign rulers, and developed their own institutions. (61)

Conclusion :

In the act of autobiography to unveil before the reader an image of the speaking self, formal education for women like Indira Miri paved the way to sketch her image as a woman of accomplishment. The undertones of such a site in women's self-realization in Assam, however, started shifting as access to education for women

by the late twentieth century no longer remained difficult compared to that of the colonial times. Even then other issues related to women's education still remained an area of concern. The shift in the paradigm of women quite presumably led to the emergence of newer sites of self-articulation such as politics, performing arts and others. Yet the prevalence of gendered perceptions of women's duties and responsibilities mediated through these fields time and again posit the necessity of women's self-formation as necessary to question and understand the interfaces of the public and private in the patriarchal set up of Assam.

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