

Rasasundari Debi: The First Woman Auto-biographer of 19th Century Bengal

Arundhuti Bhattacharjee

Abstract

Rasasundari Debi is among the earliest woman writer in Bengali literature. Her autobiography 'Amar Jiban' is known as the first woman autobiography in Bengali literature. She lived in such a time when education was unimaginable for woman and a literate woman was synonymous with a cursed woman. But she refused to remain illiterate and constructed an identity independent of her husband and children. She was born to a rural zamindari family in the small village of Potajia, in Pabna, 1809. She was raised by her widowed mother, with whom she developed an emotional attachment. She was known to the alphabet at an early age. At the age of twelve she was married and from then she spent a life like in a cage. She always felt the grief of being separated from her mother. She was very much conscious about the society where none wish to educate the girl child. As she was a religious person, her desire to be able to read 'Chaitanya Bhagabat' made her dream come true. She taught herself to write later on. She wrote the autobiography at the age of 59, where she wrote about different social issues.

Keywords: 'Amar Jiban', nineteenth century, Bengal, status of women, Bengali literature, society, education of women

'Amar Jiban' was the first autobiography written by a Bengali woman, and very probably the first full scale autobiography in the Bengali Language. As she was a housewife from an upper caste, landed family in East Bengal, her family presumably render a woman's life noteworthy. Her writing and her life stand in a peculiarly significant relationship to each other.

Rasasundari was born in 1809. She finished her first version of autobiography in 1869 and added a second part and a new version came out in 1897, when she was eighty eight years old. In her two – part autobiography 'Amar Jiban', Rasasundari wrote about her early life and marriage with great emotions. As a young child she used to get bullied by the little girl of the locality. To avoid this, her mother dressed her in a black ghagra (skirt) and chuniri (veil) and sent her to sit with the boys of the village who attended the pathshala, run in one of the outer room of their home. Around 1816, the teacher was an English woman, possibly a missionary. The pupils used to write the Bengali alphabet on the mud floor and then wipe it off. Watching them keenly Rasasundari memorized both Bengali and Persian letters of the alphabet. As a girl, she was not allowed to handle a quill or palm leaf.

When she was ten years old, a fire devastated their house and the pathshala was closed down. Her father's sister discovered that she had already learnt some basic functions by watching others. Rasasundari had an amazing awareness of time and at the end of a particular phase in her life, she would make a permit of stating her age. She describes her life-events very vividly. In 1823, she was married into a zamindar family of East Bengal at the relatively late age of twelve years.

Rasasundari Debi was born around 1809 in the village of Potajia in Pabna District, when she was twelve; she was married off to Sitanath Roy, a prosperous landlord from Ramdia village in Faridpur. In the age of fourteen, she was in full charge of all types of household works and also gave birth to twelve children in rapid success. In the age of twenty five, Rasasundari taught herself to read. Over the time she read through all the religious manuscripts at her home. Later she thought herself to write.

Self-Realisation

When Rasasundari was a young child, her mother had developed in her a deep love for God (Parameshwar). Many years later she wrote that she remember nothing at all about the states of her body and the moods of her mind until she was four or five. Her mother knows it all. As her mother always told her that as there is nothing to fear because they have their "Dayamadhab", so she should not fear anything. Whenever she fell afraid, she should call out to him and her fears will be gone.

Rasasundari was very much attached to her mother and she always thought the widows are unmarried. As she knew that she is her mother's daughter, so she was very much surprised when she heard her father's name. She asked her mother "Ma, whose daughter am I?". She smiled but she would not give her a reply. When Rasasundari went to her aunt to get a reply, she told her father's name. She wrote about this "I keep quiet, but my mind was in a painful whirl. Eventually I asked "Auntie, how am I his daughter? She laughed at that and said "there never was such a foolish child as this one. Listen your father had married your mother that why you are his daughter." (1)

Rasasundari had a great faith on almighty God. Her mother told her that the Great lord has created all of us. Wherever one calls out to him, he listens. If she utters his name in her mind, he will still hear her, that is why he is the great lord, he is not a mortal being. These words gave

her strength. She writes that day the first seed of intelligence was planted within her. For that she came to know that the Great lord and their deity are one. Her mind was comforted by the thought that he listens if one utters his name every to oneself.

As a young girl, she was very much keen to do family chores. She helped her neighbour about in her family works. From that day, her days of play were over. She once asked her mother ‘Ma! If someone asks for me, will you give me away?’(2) After that she went into her room, wiping away her tears. Seeing that her mother was weeping, she was very much sure that her mother would give her away. She wrote “I know everyone got married, but I know nothing of what it actually involved.” On her wedding day she was very happy. When all her relatives were asking her mother, “will they leave today?” she thought all the new guests would be going away. When her brother and other relatives came to her and they started to weep, Rasasundari realized that her mother was surely going to send her away. She said ‘Ma! please don’t send me away . Her mother told her not to be so upset, try to be calm. She wrote about her experience. “The memory still fills me with pain. It is not a great tragedy that one has to go away to a foreign land, leaving one’s mother, one’s near and dear ones behind, to live under lifelong bondage? But such is the will of God, so let us praise the custom.” (3)

She wrote “As soon as I was inside, it started to move. I was all by myself, not a single familiar face came with me. I felt that I had been plunged into a sea of danger helplessly, I pleaded within my heart. “Great lord, be with me “and I cried as I said it. At the time of the annual worship of the Goddess Durga or Shyama, when the sacrificial goat is dragged towards the altar, it cries for its mother, abandoning all hope. I was crying exactly the same way.”(4)

Rasasundari felt like the other woman, she describes “what I had felt at that time. Who knows what other girl go through, may be not all of them suffer as much. People have fun, taming birds in a cage. I was that caged bird. I was now shut up in a cage and I won’t ever be free again for the rest of my life.” (5)

When some people or other family persons consoled her mind she never finds any comfort in them. “They only stoke our grief all the more; just as pushing bales of straw into the flames makes them blaze forth. My heart filled with terror when I listened to them. Helplessly, I recited the name of the Great Lord to myself. Then my mother – in – law came and put her arm around her and began to soothe her with soft words. Rasasundari wrote “what a marvelous way

of grafting the bark of a tree onto another.”(6)

Quest for Reading

She wrote about her education and her passion for learning. She started her household works at early morning and it went on beyond midnight. She would learn to read and would read religious manuscripts. She felt as unlucky, as in those days women were not educated. She wrote about the status of the women in the society “People would say: Ah, it seems the kali Age is, indeed upon us! Now women will take over men’s jobs. This had never happened all this while, but now it is going to come! In our days we were spread this; now the man is but a passive thing, the women is the public figure. The way things are going, soon gentlefolk will lose their caste. Perhaps these wretched females will get together and start educating themselves. (7)

Rasasundari was so scared that if she came across a piece of paper, she would not glance at that because if people suspected that she was trying to read that. She was forever praying to read that. “My Lord! Teach me to read, I’ll read religious manuscripts.”

She never thought of worldly affairs, her own thought was none to do all her work and how to please everyone. As then she was not allowed to educate herself because she was a woman. She thought how very lucky were the girls of the generation! When she was writing her autobiography, then many men tried to educate their daughters. She describes that as a most positive development.

Rasasundari was all day engaged with her children and family. Many days she did not get the time for lunch and dinner. But she writes that not to talk of all that, as it was not worth mentioning, she was ashamed even to bring it up.

In her autobiography Rasasundari expresses her deep mental involvement with mother. She had a very loving mother of her own, but she never got a chance to look after her ... that would be a great sorrow forever. A mother is such a precious gift, but even when she came to realize it, this knowledge was useless to her. My mother had suffered so much for me, but I was of no use to her, I did nothing for her. Rasasundari could never be allowed to visit her because of the household works would suffer if she had to go to her on some ceremonial occasion, she was like a prisoner let out on parole.

She expresses her grief in these words! “Why was I born a woman ? shame on my life !..... I did have this priceless treasure in my mother, but I could not look after her. Is there anything in the world to match this sorrow? Had I been her son, I would fly like a bird to reach her side when I got news of her end. What was I to do, I was behind bars, I was shut up in a cage. (8)

She expresses her desire to learn “Little by little, a desire took shape in my mind and I came to be possessed by a single wish: I will learn to read, and I will read a sacred text.... Women do not read, how will I do it and why does this bother me so. Everyone got together to deprive woman of education. It must be said that woman of those times were most unfortunate, they were hardly any better than beasts of burden.” She was wondering that how could she learn anything. Slowly with great efforts she managed to recall the thirty-four letters, the vowels and the spellings. That, again was something that she could recite but not write. She wrote, If no one teaches you, you can’t learn a thing . Moreover, as she was a woman she prayed all the time : Lord of this world ! if he teaches her she shall certainly learn .

She was very keen to read, she wrote “This house has many books, may be ‘Chaitanya Bhagabat’ is also there. As she was not even identify the book, so she was always praying “Lord of the poor! Lead me to the book that I did not know how to read. You have to do this, who else can bring Chaitanya Bhagabat to me?”.

One day her son of eight years was in her kitchen. Then her father told him to bring the Chaitanya Bhagabat when he asked for. He left the book in the kitchen and Rasasundari was very much delighted. She opened it and felt it all over. Manuscripts were very different at that time. They used to be pressed between wooden slats which were colourfully illuminated. As she did not read she memorized the illumination in order to identify the book.

Rasasundari secretly took out a page and hid it carefully. As nobody could’t find it in her hand, so for her it was not very easy to do something that is forbidden and then to face the consequences. She was a very much nervous person and that page was headache for her. She was very much engaged with her children. Someone wanted to go to bathroom another wanted food, and want to go to mother’s lap. She had to look after all of them. And as she didn’t get any time for herself so there was no time to read the page. She held on to the page, she would occasionally keep that page on her left hand while cooking and sometimes steal a look at it

from under the veil.

Her elder son was practicing his letters on palm leaves at that time. She hid one of them as well and sometimes, she went over that, trying to match the letters from that page with those that she remembered. She also tried to match the words with those that she heard over the course of her life. Even she hid them under the hearth once more. She spent quite a bit of time in that fashion.

She wrote about all her efforts like sad thing as because only she was a woman. “We were in any case imprisoned like thieves, and on top of that, reading was yet another crime”. She wrote “It is good to see women having an easier time of it now even if someone has a daughter these days, he educates her carefully. We suffered so much just to learn to read. Whatever little I learnt was entirely because god was kind to me. (9)

Condition of society

Rassundari had a very particular view about life and social taboos of that time. She described her husband as her master and he was a good person, but as it was most difficult to abandon the custom of the land, so she had to suffered a lot. Her view was in those days people were very much convinced that it was sinful to educate women. She describes time as a priceless treasure, if someone wants to compare those days and times, it would be impossible to count how much change happened from that time.

She described, if people from those times were to see the ways of that day, they would die of grief and horror. Rasasundari always thanked the Great lord had taken care of her. “As a child, I had been made to sit in that now helped me a lot. I could match the letters I remembered with those on the palm leaf and on the page. I read to myself in silence all day, I would try to go through this in my mind. With tremendous care and effort and over a long stretch of time, I learnt somehow to limp and stammer across Chaitanya Bhagabat. My readings were s painfully acquired. Even after such effort, I didn’t know how to write. It takes a lot to be able to write – paper, pen, ink, and inkpot. I would need to spread them all around me and then sit down to write. I was a woman, and on top of that, a married one. They are not meant to read and write the authorities have that this is a cardinal sin for women. How could she have tried to write in that situation? She was so scared of rebukes. So she killed her desire for writing and would only read, and that too in, secret. Even that had so far been beyond her wildest dream. It is

almost an impossible in her case only because the great lord himself guided her with his own hands .The fact that I could read at last was enough for me. I didn't think of writing."

When her mother-in-law passed away and whole family responsibility fell on her shoulders. She then fulfilled all others members necessity. Her childlike behavior also disappeared. She began to tell herself that then she became a full-fledged householder.

Rassundari writes about one thing very vividly. "There was a horse in the house it is called Jayahari. One day, my eldest son was sat upon it and was brought inside so that I could see him. I could hear folks say that this horse belongs to karta and some of them called out to me: come and see, your son is riding a horse. Since I had heard that this was karta's horse. I began wonder: how can I go out and stand before it? I must be shameful if Karta's horse gets to see me. So I hid myself inside. Even though people kept calling me outside. I simply peeped out once or twice.

Another day she had served a meal to my children and had gone into another room and that horse came and started nibbling at the paddy. She entered into a fin. As the children just started their meal and one began to cry, but she was very confused, she didn't know what to do as the horse was not moving, she kept dithering. She wrote "I couldn't let myself be seen by Karta's horse! My eldest son came to look for me and he tried to reassure me! "Ma there's nothing to fear, that's the horse Jayahari, it won't do anything to you". "Then I began to laugh at myself: Shame on me, am I really a human being? It isn't as if I a horse, not a person, how does it matter if it sees me? If people come to know of this, they will think that I am mad, they'll laugh at me . Actually, no one knew that I was shy of the horse; they thought that I was scared of it. I was so ashamed of myself to explain the real reason to then. But I gave up running away from the horse. In fact those days we feared everything while these days' younger people don't fear anymore. On the contrary, it is the older people who are wary of them.'(10)

With the passing time she grew older and a massive inner change happened within her. She was the same person with the same mind but she was fearless. Then she feared nothing.

Rassundari had a very clear and strong perspective of their society when she wrote the autobiography. She wrote there were so many people who said that it was evil to teach women to read. They said: "Do women need to earn money? These days women are crazy about education. We used to think that women need to observe the proprieties, do their work at home,

cook and serve the food. We had lived in saver times. These days there is a craze for education. We are not educated, aren't we human beings, then? Did we not live? full lives ?" clearly , the only use that they can see for education is that of earning money such talk frightened me enormously , but I didn't stop my secret reading .

When her sister-in-laws came to know that she could read books they were delighted and said "How marvelous that you can read! We didn't know that all this while! "But though Rassundari tried to teach them, but they could not pick much Rassundari was very much adored as she could read.

As she knew nothing, but the great lord had helped her to fulfill her desire. She gradually finished all the books that was present in that house Chaitanya Bhagabat, Chaitanya Charitamrita, eighteen chapters of Jaimini's Bharat, GobindaLilamrita, Bidagdha Madhab, Premabhakti Chandrika, Balmiki Puran .

'Amar Jiban' was Rasasundari Devi's self-creation. As the author of her life, she can command any control over it, can bend it to her will. She said, again and again, that her life-events derive significance only as examples of God's mercy or his Leela.

In her writings, the author gives a short autobiographical sketch, a self-introduction, to explain the sourced and nature of inspiration behind the exercise. Tanika Sarkar in her book "Words to Win: the making of a modern autobiography" writes that it makes a bold statement, in a woman householder. A woman, moreover, who is not connected to a figure of religious or temporal significance, who is not connected to a figure of religious or temporal significance, who cannot claim any miraculous powers or capacities. The life of such a woman would not be written-for less read before the 19th century.

Even in that century, this particular autobiographical enunciation does rather stand out. Rasasundari thrusts the life itself as us, she drags our attention to the fact that the book is about her life, not about writing. She was very keen a reading and writing. It helps her to take a place within the domain of the great secular miracle -tales of 19th century Bengal.

Rasasundari refers to her life as entirely of God's designing, but she has a clear sense of the social making on it. On various issues she speaks about the painful consequences of social regulation. She debates on these matters: Women's education, about the restriction of old times, relentless pressure of domestic labour, the problem of motherhood. She was very conscious

that she is educating her readers about gender issues, and she adopts an appropriate tone. Rasasundari's life and writing stood at the confluence of two orders of patriarchy and of women's desires. On the one hand she was a devotee of her 'Dayamadhab' and on the other hand she describes about different social differences. It was on the whole an uneventful, unremarkable life. The book "Amar Jiban" was being written in the nineteenth century. It was through writing a book that the life that she wanted to express could take on life. The text had an intimate introspection which however, revolves round a fixed emotion of pain, submission, obedience and fear and humility.

Reference:

1. Tanika Sarkar, Words to Win, The making of a Modern Autobiography, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1999, p. 167
2. Ibid, p. 172
3. Ibid, p. 173
4. Ibid, p. 175
5. Ibid, p. 177
6. Ibid, p. 178
7. Ibid, p. 184
8. Ibid, p. 190
9. Ibid, p. 195
10. Ibid, p. 199