

## Rassundari Devi's Amar Jiban: Challenging the Norms

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*"Are you sure that god will go with me?" Mother promptly reassured me that he most certainly would. "He will be with you all the time, so stop crying now."*<sup>1</sup>

Amar Jiban, or My Life was the first published autobiography in Bengali literature, first reaching publication in 1876. It was an extraordinary achievement, considering the fact that Rassundari Devi was the unlikeliest of breakthrough authors: a poor child, god-fearing woman and a dedicated housewife- simply put, a female in a time when educating girls was not even spared thought.

It talks of Rassundari's life on a whole: instances from childhood, the advent of her marriage, married life and the like. On a deeper plane, it portrays the dissatisfaction, fear and even frustration she felt at being forced to follow a certain path- being a woman, that is. Her marriage, her household chores, her everyday life- all form the narrative, which at once gives us a window into the life of a feudal housewife in 19<sup>th</sup> century reformist Bengal but also delves into the issues of inequality, oppression and lack of opportunity for women. The book creates a picture of the changing world, the status and role of women and Rassundari's own views on the changing times.

Rassundari was widowed at the age of 59 in 1868 and she finished and published Amar Jiban in the following year. A second part was added in a new version published in 1897 when she was 88. The first part consists of 16 compositions and tells the story of her life. The second part consists of 15 compositions and focusses primarily on the idea of death, premonitions of impending disaster and her wish of the awareness of her dying day.

Taking into consideration the society she was born in, lived in and was part of, her very desire for learning to read and write was an act that challenged the norms. In fact, she writes about how public

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controversy on the issue of female education made her tremble with fear:

*"Let alone voicing my innermost feeling, my heart used to quiver at the thought of anyone guessing how I felt; so much so that if I saw a sheet of paper which had been written on, I used to look away. This was in case anyone accused me of wanting to study. But within my mind I kept praying to Parmeshwar, " Oh Parmeshwar, please teach me how to read and write. Once I have learnt, I will read religious Poothies (manuscripts). I invoke your name only for this. "<sup>2</sup>*

She was fourteen when her wish to learn how to read and write first developed. As she was already a married woman, she performed all the requisite duties of a traditional Bengali housewife:

*"My day used to begin very early- and there was no respite from housework till long past midnight. I could not rest, even for a moment. But thanks to the grace of god I did everything with a sense of duty. Because god wished it, I managed to gradually finish all the household tasks. "<sup>3</sup>*

However, society at the time was vehemently opposed to female education and hence her previously mentioned fear took shape.

And yet learn she did, all on her own. As a child in her mother's home, she had the habit of observing from a distance when boys studied Bengali and Persian letters. Not allowed to handle even a quill or a palm leaf, she had memorised these symbols by sight. After all these years, she tried to remember those signs and learnt to write by trying them on a blackened kitchen wall. She tried, and so this timid, extremely busy and fearful housewife managed to learn to read and write.

Throughout the book, Rassundari talks of the happenings in her life- from the most significant to the most commonplace. Interestingly, many of these instances reflect a deep unrest with respect to the status she had being a woman and further, a sincere desire to someday see womankind with more freedom than she was allowed. An analysis of these thoughts of hers makes it quite pellucid just why her desire to study amounted to such passion and why she pursued it against all odds.

One such example comes in the form of her objections towards being called her father's daughter. Rassundari's father passed away while she was very young, and hence she grew up believing herself to be her mother's daughter. However, it was her father's name that was used to refer to her in accordance to common usage of the time. She has written about how this saddened her and was a cause of great anxiety. Clearly, she had a fierce sense of her own identity and desired to protect it. Such references were commonplace – they were the norm, in fact. And yet she found herself unable to accept these unsaid rules and this caused her great discomfort. In this scenario, it is this discomfort, perhaps, that could be seen as what differentiated her from most Bengali women.

Another instance where we see her struggle between the throes of common practice and her own thinking is the time of her being borne away in a palanquin after marriage:

*"Since there was no way out, I started praying through my tears. Please be with me, god. If I am asked to describe my state of mind, I would say that it was very much like the sacrificial goat being dragged to the altar, the same hopeless situation, the same agonized screams."<sup>4</sup>*

Knowing that she must now leave what has been her home and go to an entirely unknown place, she is terrified and weeps uncontrollably. It is the imagery she forms of herself being like the sacrificial goat, however, which is interesting. In her usual understated tone, she seems to have commented upon the helplessness of the woman when it came to marital affairs. Wed to an unknown person, snatched away from home and now forced to live with and serve complete strangers, it is not her pain but her expression that makes her unique.

One must understand, however, that Rassundari Devi was not agonized by every single common practice. She was a product of her environment and also possessed an agreeable disposition in general. For example, she held her new family and the people there in high regard:

*"But I must admit that the people here are very good. They are fond of me. Whenever I was physically ill they were so concerned that I forgot all my discomfort. Even the neighbours and servants*

*were kind. It was as though god had asked them to be particularly nice me.”<sup>5</sup>*

Here we see the same person who saw herself as a ‘caged bird’ when it came to marriage, did at the same time respect her new family and held them with affection:

*“I have learned to work for others. And there is so much I should do. These people have become very dear to me....”<sup>6</sup>*

In fact, this pattern repeats itself throughout the book: despite feeling caged and subdued, she did not resent the people around her. She used that energy to learn to read and write. This remarkable quality of hers is perhaps what allowed her to continue on the difficult path she had chosen for herself.

Returning to instances where her free-thinking and rebellious streak found representation, we look at the time she became a widow. Her husband died in February 1869 and keeping with the prevalent humiliating customs of that age, her head was shaved. This experience was “*more painful than death*”<sup>7</sup> for Rassundari. Again, remarkably, her personal agony inclined her towards acknowledging the pitiable situation of wives in general:

*“Towards the end of my life I have been widowed. I feel ashamed and hurt by the realisation that even if a woman has lived her life fully, has brought up her children and leaves behind her sons and daughters to carry on, her widowhood is still considered a misfortune.”<sup>8</sup>*

She laments upon her misfortune of being a woman, unable to tend to her beloved mother while she was dying:

*“Why was I ever born a woman? Shame on my life! A mother is the most affectionate person in the world, the representative of God on earth- and I could not be of any use to her. My grief knew no bounds. If I were a son I would have flown directly to my mother’s bedside. But I am helpless. I am a caged bird.”<sup>9</sup>*

Being very close to her mother, she deeply resented the fact that she wasn’t allowed to go and care for her when she lay dying, merely because the housework would have suffered. Such scenes were quite common in that era, in fact.

Also, we see that Rassundari again chose her writing as a refuge from the harsh reality. It was her escape, her method of fighting for herself, as is evident by the aforementioned incident. Recounting details of events which occurred several decades earlier, Rassundari's memoirs are alive with the tensions and anguish she had to silently bear. They also speak of a single-minded determination to overcome the situation.

One sees through countless references throughout the book that she had an unshakeable trust in the Almighty and this belief was a source of infinite strength, a source she counted upon quite often. All her pains were bearable as God willed them to be, and it is God's name that gave her the strength to persevere and continue despite the difficulties she faced. In fact, it can be recalled that it was her desire to read religious books that was the primary reason for her learning to read. It was her firm belief that god wanted her to learn to read and write, and hence all common usage and oppression ceased to hold her back.

Conclusively, Amar Jiban gives the reader an insight into the life of a housewife in the house of a prosperous East Bengali zamindar. It chronicles the saddening realities of a girl child in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It talks of pain, subordination and oppression. It reflects angst, loss and a cry for help.

It also, however, talks of resilience. Of the perseverance of a woman determined to live her own life despite being held back by custom and usage. Amar Jiban speaks in lucid prose of a woman that taught herself to read and write beneath the veil of her saree. It talks of the woman who wrote the first published autobiography, a woman who practised letters on a kitchen wall.

Above all, the book essays a message of hope.

A girl's hope for a better life.

A child's hope for help from the divine.

A woman's hope for a better future.

Rassundaridevi challenged the norms by her way of life itself- by dreaming of what was deemed wrong. By passionately chasing that dream. By actually learning to write, and by telling this moving story of Her Life.

**References**

- <sup>1</sup>*Amar Jiban (My Life)*, pg. 192
- <sup>2</sup>*Voices from Within*, pg. 116
- <sup>3</sup>*Reform and Nationalist Movements*, pg. 194
- <sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, pg. 193
- <sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, pg. 195
- <sup>6</sup>*Ibid*, pg. 195
- <sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, pg. 191
- <sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, pg. 191
- <sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, pg. 199