



ISSN Print: 2664-7699
ISSN Online: 2664-7702
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.53
IJHA 2025; 7(2): 330-332
www.humanitiesjournals.net
Received: 24-08-2025
Accepted: 26-09-2025

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Amar Jiban: A Challenging Life-Story of a Courageous Bengali Woman of the 19th Century

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26647699.2025.v7.i2e.232>

Abstract

Amar Jiban, (My Life) by Rassundari Devi stands as the first full-length autobiography written by a Bengali woman. It is a feminist document capturing the lives of Indian women of the 19th century. The writer not only provides a vivid portrait of her personal journey of life but also offers invaluable insight into social, cultural and educational constraints faced by Hindu women in colonial Bengal. The text is a groundbreaking account of a woman's struggle for literacy and self expression amidst the constraints of patriarchy, and colonial society. It is a timeless reminder that even within the confines of patriarchy, a determined voice can break through and create history. This article explores the life story of Rassundari Devi, highlighting her courage, struggles, and the significance of her autobiography as a testimony of resistance against societal norms.

Keywords: Feminism, patriarchy, empowerment, spiritual domain, life

Introduction

Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* is a pioneering autobiographical text written in 1876, 8 years after the death of her husband, in the chest of Bengal, that broke new ground in a time when women's voices were often silenced. Devi's decision to compile and publish *Amar Jiban* was itself a seminal act of defiance against gendered prohibitions on female authorship and public expression. It was not only a personal narrative but also a vivid document illuminating the patriarchal social structure and the oppressive conditions faced by women in the 19th-century Bengal. It holds immense significance in the canon of Indian literature and feminist discourse.

As one of the earliest autobiographies authored by an Indian woman, the autobiography articulates the lived realities, inner struggles, and determined resistance of a woman in a socio-cultural milieu that repressed female agency and voice, as women were treated as caged birds and were unable to speak freely. It has inspired subsequent female writers and feminists by foregrounding women's experiences in a voice hitherto suppressed in mainstream histories. The text offers a rare glimpse into the private world of Bengali womanhood. Its legacy lies in championing the importance of education for women as a transformative tool and urging recognition of women's intellectual and spiritual capacities. Rassundari Devi's life story continues to resonate as a beacon of resilience and feminist consciousness, illuminating pathways for generations of women.

Rassundari: An Early Feminist

Rassundari Devi was born in 1809 in the village of Potajia in Pabna district, now in Bangladesh, into a modest Brahmin Bengali family, witnessed conservative cultural attitudes, especially regarding gender roles where women's role were circumscribed within the domestic domain, limiting their social mobility and intellectual growth. Devi's father died when she was a child, and she was raised by her widowed mother in a deeply patriarchal society that denied girl's formal education and freedom. Growing up, she realized that in her life, her mother played the most influential role and she became the role-model in her life. She always preferred to call herself a mother's daughter.

From her very young age, she was aware of the harsh realities of being a girl in a male – dominated environment. She became angry once when she was not allowed to take care of her mother in her last hours. If she was a boy, the society would have allowed her to meet her

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mother. She was vexed because society looked at her not as a human being but as a girl child or a woman. Her experiences reflected the rigid gender norms that restricted female autonomy and education. At the tender age of 12, Rassundari was married to Nilmani Roy, aligning with the custom of early child marriage prevalent among Bengali families. Rassundari described her child marriage and agony of separation from her mother thus:

“People put birds in cages for their own amusement. Well, I was like a caged bird. And I would have to remain in this cage for life. I would never be freed”, In fact the metaphor of a bird being caged is quite dominant in Rassundari’s autobiography. She compared herself as a prisoner of marriage from where she wished to break free and transcend her worldly duties as a wife, mother and daughter-in-law to meet her God.

Although initially spared from heavy domestic works due to the presence of her mother-in-law, Rassundari eventually had to bear the full responsibilities of housework when her mother-in-law fell ill. She also raised twelve children, of whom seven died in young age, illustrating the personal tragedies women endured silently within their family roles. Her life was marked by a heavy burden of responsibility from a young age: at the age of 14 she took all the responsibilities of the entire household.

“I had to cook for twenty-six people twice a day.... I was all by myself.... I had to cover my face, my veil had to reach down to my chest, and, dressed in this way....I would start working at dawn, and I would still be at it until well beyond midnight.”

Devi described her experience of pregnancy and child birth in a very detailed and frank manner at a time when they were considered taboo topics for women to speak. Writing about her pregnancy and sharing it with the public by publishing was certainly a very feminist outlook. Devi definitely acted as an advocate to challenge the patriarchal domination prevailed in that society. Her life story was an inspiration and a testimony of a woman’s will power to fight all odds. The monotonous, drudgery, isolation and social captivity of domestic life was described poignantly in her writings, however it also emphasized Devi’s personal journey for literacy and self empowerment, revealing a struggle and triumph within these oppressive conditions. She questioned “is this my fate because I am a woman? Just because I am a woman, does it necessarily mean that trying to educate myself a crime?” She critiqued social practices which forced young girls to play adult role permanently and the cruel isolation that widows suffered that she experienced after her husband’s death.

Amar Jiban is widely celebrated for its narrative of self-education. Denied formal schooling due to her gender, Rassundari clandestinely learnt to read and write by observing others and practicing secretly at night. What led her to take this courageous and unconventional step? She wrote that God’s mercy and benevolence towards her made it possible for her to achieve literacy. This pursuit of literacy, especially in religious texts was both a deeply personal aspiration and a potent act of defiance against patriarchal control. The dual discourse of divine intervention and personal agency permeates the text, portraying literacy as both a gift from God and a result of Rasasundari’s unwavering willpower. This interplay enriched the narrative by contextualizing learning as a spiritual empowerment and a socio-cultural transgression. Studying sacred texts not only

fulfilled her devotional goals but also symbolized an intellectual emancipation that contest the gender norms forbidding women’s education. Her act of writing autobiography itself extended this defiance into the public sphere, challenging the male dominated literary tradition, claiming the space for women’s history and subjectivity. The autobiography also denounced the societal view that women’s education was undesirable. Older women in her family and community often expressed disapproval and tried to prevent her learning, reflecting internalized patriarchy that policed female bodies and minds. Her metaphor of being a “caged bird” symbolized both her captivity and yearning for freedom and knowledge. Many Bengali male authors and poets who came after Rassundari Devi, wrote about the greatness of a housewife by positing her as grihalakshmi or the domesticated goddess. Patriarchy has always present the figure of a grihalakshmi as an ideal woman whose salvation and satisfaction lay in her endless servitude, and whose happiness lies in the happiness of her husband and children. She challenged the idealization of the grihalakshmi—the devoted wife—by exposing the backbreaking labour and invisibility involved in domestic works.

The use of symbolic imagery—especially the motifs of light and darkness—imbued “Amar Jiban” with profound metaphorical significance. The transition from darkness (ignorance, oppression, confinement) to light (knowledge, freedom, self-awareness) was central to Rassundari’s life journey. Literacy was the illuminating force that expands her consciousness, enabling her to transcend limitations imposed by her gender and class. Another recurrent theme was the concept of the home as a paradoxical space—both prison and sanctuary. While the home confined Rassundari physically and socially, it also became the site where her intellectual and spiritual liberation began. The intersection of domesticity and resistance highlighted the complex roles women navigated within patriarchal society. The presence of Dayamadhav, the Vaishnava deity, provided a spiritual dimension that legitimized and sanctified Rassundari’s struggles. This religious devotion underpinned a form of resistance that was both passive (as acceptance of fate) and active (as claiming divine sanction for breaking social norms)

Widowhood, in Rassundari’s time was marked not only by personal loss but also by social alienation. Widows were marginalized and often lived austere, restricted lives, treated as ill-omens in the society dominated by patriarchal norms. Rassundari’s narrative brought to light the cruelty endured by widows, underscoring their invisibility and the harsh rules that controlled their existence. Her reflections revealed the systemic gender inequalities institutionalized by tradition.

The origin of her recourse to religion, went back to her mother who advised her to seek refuge in Dayamadhav when she scared. Her choice of the idiom of devotion within the space of Vishnu bhakti was somehow a means of articulation of the self. As a Bhakta, she participated in the divine “leela” and rendered supposedly mundane acts significant. For instance, her desired to read Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was catalyzed when she saw herself reading the text in a dream. Such instances moulded her pursuit of literacy. She patiently described her subservient relationship with God and emerged as the feminist protagonist whose

success in learning to read and write enabled her to undercut the patriarchal norms prescribed by religion.

Rasasundari Devi's autobiography ended by highlighting her personal triumph in achieving literacy and documenting her experiences, which was almost unimaginable for women of her time. Her narrative closed with a tone of gratitude—towards her children who enabled her writing, and towards her own perseverance—which transformed her life into an act of social defiance and hoped for future generations of Bengali women. The concluding part of this work celebrated her achievement in chronicling not just her individual life but the story of countless women silenced by tradition. The final pages marked the text as both a personal testimony and an enduring symbol of women's literary and social emancipation. Rassundari Devi, an enduring symbol of inspiration, became the strength behind the present feminist and women's rights movements.

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