



# Nalinibala Devi

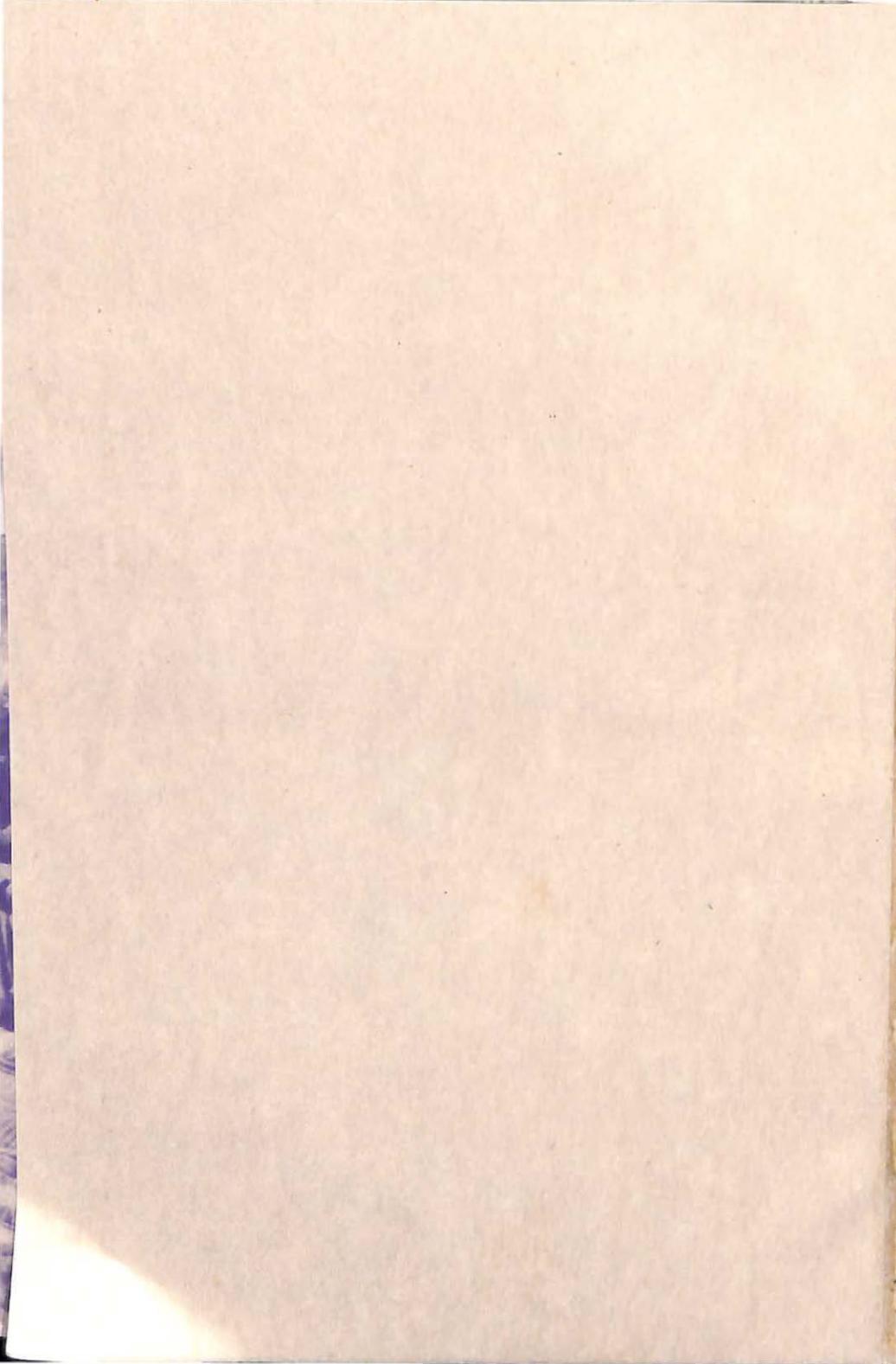
Preeti Barua

891.451  
009 N 147 B

Makers of

891.451 009  
N 147 B





NALINIBALA DEVI

Nalnibala Devi

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From : Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.  
Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

# Nalinibala Devi

ग्रन्थालय  
गोदावरी विश्वविद्यालय  
गोदावरी विश्वविद्यालय  
गोदावरी विश्वविद्यालय  
गोदावरी विश्वविद्यालय

Preeti Barua

0-0100-001-8 2003

00000 00000/0 2003

1001300000

26.2.2011



साहित्य अकादमी पर अधिकारी  
देश का एक विश्वविद्यालय विद्यालय  
साहित्य, साहित्य विद्या एवं साहित्य पुस्तकों का विद्यालय

Sahitya Akademi  
Rabindra Bhavan, 35 Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi 110 001  
Sales : Swati, Mandir Marg, New Delhi 110 001  
Jeevantara, 23A/44X, Diamond Harbour Road, Calcutta 700 053  
Guna Buildings, II Floor, 304-305, Anna Salai, Teynampet,  
Chennai 600 018  
172 Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg,  
Dadar 400 014  
Central College Campus, University Library Building  
Dr. Ambedkar Veedi, Bangalore 560 001

© Sahitya Akademi

ISBN 81-260-0916-0

891.451009  
N 147 B

First Published 2000

Library

IIAS, Shimla

891.451 009 N 147 B



00116426

Price : Rs. 25



Published by the Sahitya Akademi  
Typeset by Calcutta Creative Printers Pvt. Ltd. and  
Printed at Basu Mudran, 19A, Sikdar Bagan Street, Calcutta 4

## Contents

Ancestry	1
Nalinibala— The Poet	10
The Poet's Bouquet of Prose	18
Influence of Indian Heritage	24
Nalinibala's Role in Political and Social Matters	33
Reference	48

Office of Student  
Affairs, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-0000  
Telephone: 269-387-5000, Facsimile: 269-387-5001  
Fax: 269-387-5001, E-mail: [wmuinfo@wmich.edu](mailto:wmuinfo@wmich.edu)  
Cape Holloway, B. Ph.D., 2016-2017, Associate Professor  
Chair: 609-318  
Dr. Barbara M. Holloway, Department of Psychology  
Phone: 609-318  
Central College Campus, University of Michigan  
Dr. Barbara M. Holloway, Ph.D., 2016-2017  
Chair: 609-318

## Courses

	Office of Student Affairs	Office of
01	Midpoints -- classmate	Midpoints -- Peer
01	Two hour's duration in front	Two hour's duration in front
05	One Professor	One Professor
05	available later this term in front of all students	available later this term in front of all students
05	it is available	it is available

from Dr. T.

Office of Student Affairs, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-0000  
Telephone: 269-387-5000, Facsimile: 269-387-5001  
Fax: 269-387-5001, E-mail: [wmuinfo@wmich.edu](mailto:wmuinfo@wmich.edu)

## Ancestry

The state of Assam belongs to the eastern most part of India. This part was known in ancient times as Pragjyotisha. This name was mentioned in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and some of the principal Puranas. In the later period this was changed to Kamrupa. In the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D. the Shan invaders entered the Brahmaputra Valley and one of their tribes, the Ahoms established the Ahom rule. Since then the land is known as Assam. Assam had always been an independent territory before it was brought under the yoke of British rule in 1826. Conflicts within and assaults from without had weakened the six hundred years old Ahom reign before the British took over. The state suffered three invasions of the Burmese in 1816, 1819 and in 1821. The reign of terror let loose by the Burmese armies during these years has become part of the Assamese folk memory.

The Burmese invasions resulted in large scale migrations within the state. The township of Shivasagar in upper Assam was the centre of the Ahom rulers, and hence it had to bear the brunt of the Burmese attacks. Many old Assamese families left Shivasagar in the wake of the Burmese atrocities and came down to Lower Assam to settle in North Guwahati. Kalpanath Bordoloi, Nalinibala Devi's Great grandfather, had almost fallen into Burmese hands before making his escape to North Guwahati in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Kalpanath Bordoloi came from a Daivajna family. The Daivajnas or Ganakas are one of the two classes of Assamese Brahmins, they are followers of the Atharva Veda or the Solar cult. The Daivajnas were held in high esteem and they enjoyed high positions in the Royal Courts of the Ahom Kings. Historians tell us that the Daivajnas came in batches from Kanauj to the Ahom Kingdom, and from Kanauj, Gaur and Kochbihar they made their way to the Koch Kingdoms of Darrang and Kamrup. They were not only expert astrologers

but they also excelled in the art of statesmanship. The title of 'Khori' was conferred on these Daivajnas. Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, a renowned historian from Assam has this to say about these Brahmins : 'The Daivajnas of Assam have contributed a great deal to the uplift of their motherland, mainly in the cultural and political spheres; and a few distinguished names may be mentioned as examples; Srijut Harakanta Majindar Barua, Sadar-amin of Sonamua family, author of Assam Buranji, published by the D.H.A.S.; Rai Bahadur Srijut Madhab Chandra Bordoloi of Rudra Khori family, the editor and publisher of Madhab Kandali's Ramayana translated in the 14th century in Assamese; ... Srijut Nabin Chandra Bardoloi of Rudra Khori family, a patriot and a man of letters. ... Mrs. Nalinibala Devi of Rudra Khori family, poetess;...' [Golokeswar Barua's *Surya Aru Surya Vipra*.]

When Kalpanath reached Guwahati he was only twelve years of age. The boy was fortunate in finding a kindly Englishman who picked him up, gave him education, and fixed him up with a job. Later, he married two ladies who were sisters and settled permanently in North Guwahati. The elder wife Padmavati gave birth to Madhab Chandra, Nalinibala's grand father. By sheer tenacity, he managed to get a Law degree from the Calcutta University and became a practising lawyer. Later he joined government service. Madhab Chandra's second son Nabin Chandra (1875-1936), later called 'Karmabir', dominated the Assamese mind for more than five decades. Nabin Chandra married Hemanta Kumari Devi, daughter of Malbhog Barua, a wellknown teaplantation and noted person of Dibrugarh. Hemanta Kumari also helped her husband in his political activities. Nalinibala was the daughter of this illustrious son of Assam. Nalinibala was born in the year 1898, towards the very end of the nineteenth century, at Barpeta which was the seat of Vaishnavite religion and culture of Assam. Her grand father had first named her 'Padmini' later, father Nabinchandra preferred 'Nalini', presumably because of his more modern tastes.

The path which Nalinibala followed, which made her life flower with quiet inevitability to a full bloomed louts (Nalini) can be truely appreciated only if one is given a preview to the Assamese society in the beginning of the twentieth century. A fair picture of the environment and culture within the Bordoloi household is also essential. In her autobiography 'Eri aha dinbor' (Days I Passed) Nalinibala had given a lucid account of the Assamese society towards the end of the last century. The aristocracy were an effluent lot, but they were magnanimous. Under the protegy of the gentry, by enjoying the fruit of their loyalty, a large lesser fortunates subsisted for generations altogehter. The womenfolk were a veiled commodity except for the very lowly placed. The middle calss and the upper class ladies had to spend heir lives confined to their 'personal quarters under 'Purdah'. Their occasional excursions to the street were always under the cover of large mobile canopies. In religious and social engagements like marriages, they go out in a group to gather ceremonial water from the river. Their movements were, however, restricted to a rectangular space hastily set up with cotton nettings called 'Chowdhuli'. On the day of immersion following Durga Puja, the ladies watched the idols floating away from the safety of an isolated canopy set up on the river bank to prevent prying eyes. Such state of affairs were easily accepted by the ladies themselves; they knew of no other life.

At the time of Nalinibala's childhood there was no school for girls in the state which taught the 'three r' in Assamese. Only a Bengali School existed in Guwahati. A majority of the girls had no opportunity to learn the language at home. They learned, by tradition, the intricacies of the 'pujas', the religious ceremonies and devotional songs or hymns. Every girl whether of 'noble' birth or common, had to learn her course on handicrafts, especially weaving. Upper class ladies, however, learned to weave flowery designs with golden thread on costly silk and muga.

Sri Sankardeva (1449-1569), heralded the Assamese renaissance in religion, fine arts, literature and society. This

cultural revolution affected everybody, from the kings to the poorest illiterate. In his lifetime of 120 years, travelling throughout the land, Sri Sankardeva had the opportunity to learn from close contacts the life of the common man, his social conditions and spiritual outlook. People from all strata of society thus came to be exposed to Sri Sankardeva's teachings. His views on religion, on disciplined social thought centering on the 'Namghar' (prayer hall) and his music and literature gained immense following. Thus we find that everybody in every nook and corner of the State was singing the devotional 'Bargeet' or reciting in perfect tune the 'padas' of the Kirtan and the 'Bhagavata'. The girls, though not given formal education, were encouraged in the proper singing of these geets and hymns. They were free to interact among themselves either in the sanctuary of the deity room (puja ghar) at home or in the village 'Namghar' (Community prayer hall). As a consequence of this spiritual awakening, the Assamese mind took a new turn towards arts and literature.

Modern western thought came to influence the Assamese mind as a consequence of two reasons. First, there came the British. They gradually took to appreciate the Assamese intellect and illustrious persons were given high government jobs. People working as Munsiffs, Extra Assistant Commissioners and Dewans took to writing or to collecting old manuscripts, to edit and publish them. Thus they contributed not only to the foundation of modern Assamese language and literature but also generated the nationalistic enthusiasm of the Assamese youth. Then there were the American Baptist Missionaries. Their tremendously important work in Assamese language and literature has to be fully appreciated.

Nalinibala Devi's grandfather, Madhab Chandra Bordoloi, was the Commissioner of Barpeta Sub-Division under British rule. In 1897, a major earthquake occurred in the area and Barpeta town was almost totally devastated. On Madhab Chandra's untiring efforts, the town was rebuilt. For this work of his, Madhab Chandra was rewarded with the title of 'Rai

Bahadur'. He was also a connoisseur of music and literature. He played the Sitar, collected rare folk music, and edited and published the Assamese version of the Ramayana, which was translated in the 14th century by the pre-vaishnavite poet, Madhab Kandali. It is worth mentioning that the translation of Valmiki's Ramayana in Assamese is the earliest in the North India. Madhab Chandra's second son Nabin Chandra Bordoloi was a man of various activities, prossessor of mervalous spirit. He devoted much of his time to fruitful social activity, even from his childhood, and was known for his organisational capabilities. In those days, Malaria and Kala-azar were rampant in house irrespective of caste or creed. He learned homeopathy and started practising it. On getting free treatment, the poor and the sick crowded his house from early morning. Nalinibala was then about ten years old. She helped her father in whatever way she could, and developed a love for the science. In her later years, she did become a homeopath practitioner herself. Of course, she treated for free.

Durga puja then was a household affair and public puja 'Mandapas' were not yet organized. Nabin Chandra and a group of young men of the Uzanbazar area of the city first organised a community puja. A huge thatched hall was built near the community puja, which served as a Theatre. On it, was staged Nabin Chandra's drama 'Griha-Lakshmi' to great refinement, it is told.

Nabin Chandra was a great host, a trait also inherited by his daughter Nalinibala. Nabin Chandra's house was an open guest-house for impoverished students, young widows and the Congress workers. He also hosted Mahatma Gandhi, Jamunalal Bajaj, Rajendra Prashed and Nataji Subhash Chandra Bose. He, with Deshbhakta Tarun Ram Phukan, was the fulcrum on which rested the entire freedom movement in Assam. The Assamese ladies were taken out of the 'purdah' as volunteers, and they marched along with the men to organise the movement all over the state.

Nabin Chandra had to stay behind bars for a number of times. In true Gandhian fashion, he spent some time every day in prison spinning on the 'Charkha' and sent home the

yarns. Nalinibala too started spinning khadi yarn at home, and weaving 'dhoties' out of them. In the Sylhet Jail, the political prisoners were treated very harshly, Nabin chandra wrote a poem addressing these prisoners :

I bow to you, all heroic workers  
 glowing with austere endeavour  
 I bow to you whose footsteps have—the earth  
 In chains and fetters have you spent  
 Many a sleepless night  
 Braving the merciless lashes of the guards.<sup>1</sup>

Though the cry for freedom made Nabin Chandra utterly devoted to the Independence movement, he still found time to engross himself in literary activities. The literary talent in him, hidden till then, started to find expression. He wrote many a song and poem expressing the emotional glow of his nationalism. The initiation of social comedy in Assamese literature was done by his play 'Grihalaksmi'. He then translated several Shakespearian plays into Assamese. He also wrote the novel *Sevali*, the Anthology of stories, *Hatem tai* and the biography of the Italian revolutionary *Garibaldi*. If he were not to have involved himself in such a pivoted role in politics, he could very well have achieved accalim as a litterateur alone. It is but consequential that Nalinibala Devi acquired her father's flair for writing.

In almost all his works and thought, Nabin Chandra's concern for women's rights and women's emancipation gained high priority. Since she started understanding her father's works, Nalinibala recognised this feeling her father nurtured deep in his mind. Her father's first step towards women's emancipation was to do away with the purdah system existing among the ladies of the upper class families. This he accomplished by starting right at home; later he persuaded others to abolish the 'purdah' system. Nalinibala, later in her life, was thus inspired to do away much backwardness from social life. Though she never had any formal education, by her tremendous personal effort and constant guidance of her father Nalinibala learned Sanskrit, Bengali and Assamese

literature. This learning gave her an insight denied to other girls who would come to her home, and she readily passed it on. Her grandmother tutored Nalinibala on devotional hymns and songs and her father taught her to sing 'Borgeet' and the modern classics of 'Rabindra Sangeet'. In later years, when one disaster after another took a severe toll on her mind, it were these that pulled her up every time. 'Let my head be bowed in tears.'

For sometime Nabin Chandra practised law in Calcutta. There he allowed her daughter to take music lessons. Nalinibala's father got her acquainted with Vaishnavite literature and religion. Thus, with her father's guidance, she cultivated her informal education and her social awareness. She also developed a sense of respect and humility for the Vaishnavite religion and the two great Vaishnava saints Shri Sankardeva and Sri Madhavadeva.

Nabin Chandra taught his daughter all that was necessary for her physical, mental and spiritual uplift. He even taught his daughter how to swim. Sensing his daughter's artistic leanings, Nabinchandra placed Nalinibala under the guidance of the noted artist Ramakanta Majinder Barua of North Guwahati. There she learnt lessons in painting and become competent in it. Her art was based on traditional and mythological figures. Even at her age of sixty she did several illustrations of her book *Visvadeepa* herself.

When she was a child of eleven, in accordance with tradition, Nalinibala was married off. This was in 1909. Eight years later, her husband Jibeswar Changkakati died. By this time, Nalinibala became the mother of four children. Her fifth issue, a daughter, was born with a posthumous father. Nalinibala's widowhood was a great blow to Nabin Chandra and his family. For Nalinibala herself there was in front a future with miles of darkness and despair. Nalinibala's father, bearing himself with great effort, gave her some consolation saying 'Pain and pleasure in life is inevitable. Life's reward lies in being able to cope up with both'. Her grandmother asked her to dress in silk Riha-Mekhela and not in the

traditional white of widowhood. But her father said, 'Even since her childhood I loved to see my young one dressed in a variety of silken colours. But now, if I were to see her dressed in the white of goddess Saraswati "Sarvashukla Mahashveta", my fatherhood would be blessed.'

In times of darkness and despair, when the soul cries out for light and peace, when everything seems indefinite and beyond reach a mere statement or word can brighten up the whole horizon. All despair vanishes and life's meaning and path become clear. For Nalinibala, her father's words decided her course for her, and she pulled herself up from desperation.

The word 'Mahashveta' kept on echoing in her heart, kindling her deepest passions to fire : 'I am Mahashveta, no stigma on earth can touch me. Ahead of me lies a path of infinite struggle, a path I'll have to tread alone. I have the responsibility of honouring my father's aspiration'. Kneeling down before the idol of Gopala, she surrendered herself at His feet. Her life, from that day onwards, was wholly devoted to the services of the Supreme Being. Her father then initiated her to the 'Madbhagavat Gita' and the three volumes of Swami Purnanda Giri's *Veda Vani*. Nalinibala Devi's need of spirituality was thus satisfied. The environment and circumstance made her extremely sensitive and emotional. She learned to lighten her sorrows and despair on the deep and sad devotional poetry of the 'Gitanjali'. A sense of profound peace lifted her soul to immense spiritual height.

Nalinibala's misfortunes did not end with her premature widowhood. In 1922, 'Karmabir' Nabin chandra was taken to jail during the Non-Cooperation Movement. Her five year old child Putali (Ramamurti) was accidentally burnt to death. This child of five, brought up amidst the nationalistic fervour of the Bordoloi family, was attracted by the slogans of nationalism and he would march along with the volunteers raising money for the 'Tilak Swaraj Fund', lending his feeble voice to Nabinchandra's song :

Bring forth what you have

There will be mother's puja today

Who has gold, and has silver  
handful of it give away  
And one who has nothing to offer  
Can give his heart which suffer.<sup>2</sup>

During these days the letters which Nabinchandra wrote to his grief-stricken daughter from the prison were touching, but full of warmth and consolation too. Then again in 1935, soon after the death of her father, Nalinibala lost her younger and dynamic son, Pabitra. The elegy she wrote on her elder son Putali's passing away is one of the most touching elegies written in Assamese literature.

A life thus stricken with one misfortune after another gradually started to glow with the brightness of gold. Nabinchandra wrote, 'You are burnt. Sad and bitter sorrows are engulfing you... who knows for what divine purpose he has tested you such... May your soul be blessed with 'Vairagya': out of a woman's 'Vairagya' will finally emerge universal love. On her father's inspirations Nalinibala took to the road to attain Vairagya—not by shunning the world, but with bountiful love for her land and her nation, for the world and its humanity. As a consequence, she emerged as a poet—a poet of noble proportions.

## Nalinibala— The Poet

Nalinibala Devi's early initiation to Sanskrit verse and to Bengali literature, her belonging to a serene family background, and her close identification with nature created in her a deep longing for poetry, *Pita and Sandhya*, her early poems, were written at the age of ten.

In 1917, on the demise of her young husband, an utterly grief-stricken Nalinibala came to live with parents once again. Her father gave her the strength to bear her burden with grace and dignity. He initiated her to the Srimat Bhagawat Gita and the Upanishads, and the verses of these epics in time brought peace to her mind and heightened her spiritualism. She got over her mind and reawakened spirit found expression in numerous poems.

*Anabuta* and *Param Trishna* were two of her poems of this period which brought her fame and recognition. These two poems were published in *Anaban*, a literary monthly which is regarded as the harbinger of modern thought to Assamese literature. Soon Nalinibala came to be recognised as a competent poet, and she was pressed by her admirers to collect all she had written earlier, finish what was left undone, and in 1928 published the first anthology of poems— *Sandbiar Sur*.

These poems are the gift of an anguished heart which has flowered in loneliness and suffering, and ripened into the fruit of golden tranquility. Through long meditational years, and her writings are saturated with the beauty and power which are part of nature's own gift to that lovely province. Sadness, it is true, lingers in her *Sandbiar Sur* (Evening Melody) and in her *Saponor Sur* (Melody of Dreams) the two books of verse that she has published, but in the rare atmosphere of her mind, sorrow has lost its heaviness and attained the translucence of pure vision. Her patriotic poems have a fundamental touch and reflected the same keen concern for humanity which infers her more subjective writings.'

[Foreword of *Sandbiar Sur* the (English Version) written by Dr. Amiya Chakrabarty.]

The poems in *Sandbiar Sur* have one feature in common—spiritualism. The source of her melody was the sufferings she endured in life, a lonely life which she offers solely at the feet of the Supreme Being. The essence of Indian philosophy which she has so painstakingly gleaned from the Gita and the Upanishads has greatly influenced her outlook. Her poems 'Parasmani' and 'Saponor Sur' bear testimony to this influence. The recognition of eternal beauty as reflected in the midst of nature has moved the poet to surrender to God the Creation of Beauty. Discussing *Sandbiar Sur*, the revered writer Hem Baura wrote 'Nalinibala is a mystic poet par excellence rustlingly oriental. She is like Virginia Woolf, a thoroughbred mystic. Though not the first of her sex to take to poetry, she is undoubtedly the first of her sex to rank as a first-class poet. She is a spiritual quietist, she possesses magical cadence, exquisite lyric measure and a subtly reflective poetic ardour... Nalini Devi has produced amidst pain grievous existence some rare master piece. Nalini Devi is a mystic not by religious association, but by temperament and ultimate wisdom. No poems of mystic thought have ever been more free than hers of creative emotions... she has drunk deep into perennial spring of Eastern philosophy and Vaishnavite mysticism.'

Nalinibala is gratified by the image of infinity in everything worldly. She is not disheartened by the world being material or life being short. Instead, the poet finds immense pleasure by drowning herself in the waves of heavenly thoughts inspired by the colourful world. One is touched by the closeness the poet feels to the world's form, essence, smell, touch and rhythm. The poet meets the eternal beauty—'On the sacred moment/ In the crimson light of the morning sun/ My endless union with thee takes place/ And I see thee daily in my jasmine garden.'

And again,  
Lo : the sun doth appear  
in a golden chariot

in the eastern sky.  
 The thick shades of darkness are  
 receding  
 To a great distance slowly.  
 The sweet melodies of the flute  
 coming from the Bokul tree I heard  
 On waking up I found  
 My body fragrant with the scent  
 of sandal touch

My body is scented all over  
 with the pollen dust  
 of the flower of thy garland.

I see thee not but I feel  
 Thy touch of celestial agaru.<sup>4</sup>

Shattering the stillness of the dark and stillly night, a distant  
 tune falls on one's ears. 'What unheard melodies of the flute/  
 From the far/sounds in my silent harp today.' In the midst of  
 this quiet and solitude, the soul of the poet stirred by the  
 melody.

In the night calm and quiet  
 The three worlds are fast asleep.  
 Cities and gardens are enveloped in  
 darkness

How skillfully thou stealth away  
 The sleep from slumbering eyes,  
 And keepest it concealed somewhere  
 What entralling melodies  
 Dost thou sing on the celestial lyre?  
 O mystic one  
 Who art thou, oh  
 Who art thou?<sup>5</sup>

In her efforts to lose herself gradually with eternal truth  
 and beauty, the poet is again and again confronted by earthly.  
 This results in an internal conflict and to dissuade herself  
 from this conflict, she promises to surrender completely and  
 hopes to again God only on death, after a patient waiting.

Nalinibala— The Poet

I am waiting with my last offering

With a view to worship your feet

In the evening of life

With a view to welcome you.

Slowly the lamp of life

Is getting extinguished.

If you come today in the evening

At the time of parting

With what shall I worship you?

The final funeral pyre (of life)

Shall I give to an alter of offerings

Vase of the offerings

Shall be built in oh in you

Funeral pyre shall liven to the fire of the 'Home'.

The wind shall blow with the sandal scent

That day shall be blessed indeed,

Offerings of life complete.<sup>6</sup>

To find a solution to her conflict between the Finite and the Infinite, the poet delves deep into Indian philosophy and the Upanishadic teachings. Nalinibala believes in the fruits of *Karma* and maintains that man is reborn.

Many a time I was born on your lap

And many a time went back

with the load of Karma unfulfilled

Come back many a time to thee.<sup>7</sup>

At the sight of a flock of birds soaring high up in the sky, the poet is eager to fly herself to the distant horizon.

The disconsolate bird in my bodily cage

also wants to go out in the unknown path

of the infinite to merge itself in eternity.

She has realised that man's inherent yearning for peace and beauty is not worldly, it is but an attempt to consign oneself to Eternal Beauty.

The endless thirst for beauty in mortal eyes

Is not short lived, but

They are the desire for eternal happiness  
 And eternal thirst for the beauty  
 of the ever beautiful.<sup>8</sup>

The Upanishads too preach this truth. The central note of *Param trinshna* is the imperishability of the soul.

In the course of her life's attainment in the union with eternity, she has not found it easy to completely isolate herself from the worldly life. It is for this reason that the poet has asked for the help and mercy of the ever alert sentinel of her life The Infinite.

If you fulfilleth the imperfections of  
 My life on the last day  
 Then make these few days of life on earth  
 Eternal and endless  
 In your nectared abode.<sup>9</sup>

However she has no doubt in her mind that she is not deprived of the mercy of the Merciful, because—

Never have I separated from thee in any form  
 Deep feelings of my heart want to merge in thee  
 This earthly body will mix up with the earth.

The soul will diffuse itself in the sky  
 Air and blue  
 It will light the  
 Darkness with the glow of fireflies.

That day nothing will exist  
 All will vanish in the past  
 You and me shall remain  
 In this endless and infinite universe  
 My union with you will, only be a thin  
 And fine perception  
 and with that perception I shall  
 Diffuse myself all through the universe.

You are light and I am a molecule  
 Oh thou formless but abode of forms  
 I shall merge myself in thee as a molecule.<sup>10</sup>

*Sandbiar Sur* (Evening Melody) is Nalinibala's first book of verse. It was in this book that the poet's first phase of spiritual and poetic thoughts were established. The second phase started in her second book of verse *Saponor Sur* (Melody of Dreams). Late Pandit K. K. Handique the renowned scholar and the first Vice-Chancellor of the Gauhati University, had this to say about *Saponor Sur* : 'these poems are not pessimistic but actually disclose a deep faith in man's infinite future and the immortal nature of the spirit of man.' Principal Hem Barua also said 'Nalini Devi's poetry is noted for a certain quality of spiritual absolutism. She is a mystic not by religious association but by temperament.... The negative impersonal and detached aspect of God where the absolute is viewed as 'Neti, neti' does not constitute the central motif of poetry, to her. It is 'Rasa vai Sah' a positive personal and adorable origin.'

Since publishing her first book *Sandbiar Sur*, written within the span of 1948 to 1964, Nalinibala published four other books—*Saponor Sur* (Melody of Dreams), *Parasmani* (Touchstone), *Yugadevata* (Hero of the Age), *Jagriti* (Awakening) and *Alakananda*.

Most of the poems of *Saponor Sur*, echo the sentiments of *Sandbiar Sur*. Here too the poet searches for the elusive mystic Supreme Soul-searching for it in vain in the external worlds, the poet finally realises that it can only be got within oneself.

*Parasmani* was the springboard from which Nalinibala rose to greater spiritual heights, offering herself to the Supreme soul and glowing in its divine touch.

Pilgrims through the ages  
 rail along the beaten track  
 raving inaccessible forest and caves  
 climbing snow-clad peaks

\* \* \*

Pilgrims, rest a while  
 Look into your hearts

dreams of love sprouts  
from the dust of the earth  
beauty blossoms  
in the immaculate canvas of the heart  
mirrored in meditations  
in the lotus-garden of the mind

\* \* \*

Kindle the flame of life  
to burn steady and upright  
make your life the holy sacrificial fire.

All constraints will dissolve that day  
Of time, place and others  
elaborate falsehood  
and segregations  
of religion, caste and various holy lents  
Only the heavenly Ganga  
flow in each and leave the trace of  
an immortal consciousness

(Parasmani)

The book *Parasmani* is a beautiful illustration of poet's spiritual awakening and mysticism. She writes on the preface of this book that life is an eternal mystery and that the soul is an eternal seeker of peace. The truth has been able to convert mundane philosophical thoughts to a luxurious state of beauty.

*Antim Sur* (Swan song) is Nalinibala Devi's third phase of path of mystic outlook she followed. This phase is the outcome of her maturity in age where she has earnestly surrendered to the Eternal Beauty. In the short poems of this book, the poet has expressed her fervour to merge with Eternity through death.

Her body is broken with age, her spirit dampened, yet the poet is ecstatic in *Swapna Magna*. She understands that her time is coming to an end *Samai Nai* and it is time to get ready.

Let not be lost the key and the path  
No, no there's no more time

darkness has fallen come ye traveller  
There is no more time.

(*Samai Nai*)

*Nilar Snapna* (Dreams of Blue) reaches the ultimate in mysticism where she personifies Lord Krishna in His blue form and advocates merging with that being through meditation. 'Thou art unessential today in this earth', and the poet now goes out in search of an abode of peace. Nevertheless, Nalinibala is a patriotic and nationalistic poet. So, she knows that even death cannot separate her from her motherland.

*Alakananda* was the next book of verse which she published in 1967. It is worth mentioning that an ardent admirer of Nalinibala's poems, Dr. K. K. Handique, provided the entire cost of its publication. The poems in this book were written in the later days of the poets' life. Mysticism, Patriotism, Praise of the beauty of nature, surrender to the Supreme being and sadness found expression in these poems. She was awarded the *Sabitya Akademi Award* for this anthology.

## The Poet's Bouquet of Prose

In the field of Assamese literature, Nalinibala Devi is widely known as a poet, her prose remains virtually unnoticed. Nalinibala however, has her characteristic style imprinted on a handful of literary pieces. As in her verses, Nalinibala has shown her philosophical outlook in a score of essays incorporated in her anthology *Shantipath*. She has deep respect and faith in the Upanishads and her essays in *Shantipath* deal with Upanishadic philosophy. Nevertheless, she has tried to make her message as simple as possible for the common reader to understand. In her essays dealing with literature she has refrained from giving the usual explanations that go over the heads, but has tried to put forth a new view of her own. The articles on culture of Indian women, and the educative pieces all have been carefully compiled, based on Upanishadic thoughts. The message of the Upanishads is eternal and universal. On her days of trouble and sorrow, the Upanishads brought her peace. For this reason, she has profound respect for and faith in it.

*Shantipath* portrays great depth in feeling. Its style is dignified, its meaning is lucid and effective. Its language contains a surfeit of Sanskrit words, clearly effective in the context of particular essays. Another great piece of prose written by Nalinibala Devi is the address she read as the President of the Assam Sahitya Sabha. This piece of writing is preserved in the fourth volume of the Assam Sahitya Sabha Bhasanwali—a collection of the orations presented under the auspices of the Assam Sahitya Sabha. In her discourse, Nalinibala has again expressed her strongest feelings of love for her country and mother tongue. She describes the beauty of her beloved Assam :

'In the early hours of dawn, when the world is still shrouded by the swirling mists of autumn, I stand on the bank of the mighty Brahmaputra to absorb the myriad beauties of my

motherland. While I watch, in the hazy mornings, I see emerging one by one from bosom of the great river—Umananda, Bhairav, Mahatirtha Bhasmachal, Urvashi and Karmanasha. Slowly the morning rays dispel the mist and I see on the other bank Monikarnika, Aswakranta Mandir, Kamakhya to the south and the domes of Bhubaneswari. To the north are the towering Himalayas our silent sentinel, which have stood with the ravages of time and are a mute witness to our hoary past. The golden sunbeams embrace the mighty peaks. And I marvel at my good fortune that this beautiful, blessed land is my motherland. The sweetness and melody of my language also strikes responsive chords in me, arouses deep emotions in me—so vibrant, so lyrical is the language of my beloved motherland.' Nalinibala Devi was always extremely conscious about her responsibilities towards her mother tongue. 'Healthy social environment is necessary for the full flowering of our language. Ensonced in every nuance of our mother tongue, hidden in its melodies is the identity of the entire race.' She spoke impressively and charmingly on the importance of nurturing one's own language in various meetings and gatherings. Her most significant contribution in the field of prose literature is her celebrated father Karmabir Nabin Ch. Bordoloi's Biography—*Smriti-Tirtha*. This biography of three hundred pages is not merely a learned daughter's tribute to her great father but is also a memorable document of the socio-political history of Assam. In a letter of commendation to Nalinibala, the famous literary critic Dr. Banikanta Kakoti says of this book :

'The simplicity of language and the lucidity of thoughts make *Smriti Tirtha* a unique treatise. I am happy that the impression that I had of the Nabin Chandra resembles yours. Actually, your book is authentic. There has been no exaggeration or distortions. On the whole, *Smriti Tirtha* is a landmark in Assamese literature. You have achieved a perfect fusion of emotions, language and matter.'

*Smriti-Tirtha* begins impressively and Nalinibala's romantic style endows it with the qualities of a novel rather than a staid

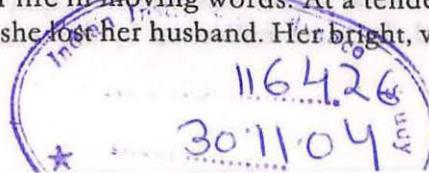
biography, 'Sitting at the shores of the vast ocean of sorrow, I look back upon the past. So many reminiscences crowd upon my mind— a veritable kaleidoscope of happy incidents, celebrations, the fond memories of the noble, passionate soul, uttering words of wisdom.' In this book Nalinibala Devi has also faithfully reproduced the social and political climate of Assam during that period, the awakening of Assamese national awareness, student agitation, the influence of the Bengal's Swadeshi Movement on Assam. And all these are correctly described.

The writer has also described her father's funeral in poignant and moving words : 'The people from the north bank of the Brahmaputra built funeral pyre with Sandalwood at the foot of the elevated Aswaklanta. Their holy chantings reverberated all round. The last floral tributes were over and the pyre was set ablaze. The fragrance of sandalwood wafted across the mighty Brahmaputra and seemed like a silent benediction showered from the heavens. The mortal remains of Karmabir Nabin Chandra Bordoloi will mingle with the dust of the beloved motherland from where he took shape. The cycle has thus been completed. Towards the end, a sudden shower fell and the flames of the burning pyre are assuaged and then the setting sun's rays luminated the earth once again as if welcoming and gathering the Karmabir's noble soul bade good bye to his beloved motherland from his chariot of fire— 'Farewell, motherland, adieu...' So lyrical is Nalinibala's prose style that it is almost poetic. So poignant is her language that the description becomes pulsatingly alive and compelling as in the final climatic pages of a tragic novel.

Among other prose works of Nalinibala Devi are the biographies of *Sardar Patel* and *Bisnadeepa*— a collection of the lives of several famous women. Her most voluminous prose work is her autobiography *Eri Aba Dinbor* (Bygone Days). In this book the three chief characteristics which have dominated the life of Nalinibala, the writer, as well as Nalinibala, the woman have been beautifully brought to light. The first important characteristic is her deep and abiding love for her

motherland, the fountain head of her meditaion and inspiration. The second is her awareness of a severe spirituality and the third fact is her tremendous sense of responsiblity and duty towards her country, nation and above all humanity in general. Her autobgiography is not merely her autobiography but a very important social document. In recording the manifold activities of seventy eight years of her life Nalinibala Devi has also succeeded in capturing the various aspect of Assamese society of that period. Life within the Bordoloi family, their various religious rites and ceremonies, the life style and attitudes of all well-to-do Assamese families in Guwahati at that time—all these came under the purview of this book. In the first few decades of the twentieth century, ladies were leading sheltered lives while women from socially inferior classes had freedom of movement. Nalinibala gives us rare glimpse into the restricted lives of the Assamese upper class women in those days. 'So many have silently withered behind the impenetrable curtains, who will account for them?'—It is from her book that we learn how her father Karmabir Nabin Ch. Bordoloi and some of his progressive contemporaries fought these customs and finally abolished them.

The rich feast of colour and beauty provided by nature, her compassion for the sufferings and the innocent, and the influence of her patriotic father arouse an intense love for her motherland in Nalinibala's young and impressionable mind. In her book she also described religious leaders whom she met in the course of her eventful life. Their learned discourses combined with her own studies of Indian Philosophy and religious treatises and her father's spiritual wisdom and advice, helped her tide over her deep trauma of sudden widowhood. She turned to spiritualism and this aspect of her life can be easily traced in her poems. She felt the presence of an unknown power in a life which had its share of woes and this realisation was like a balm for her troubled soul. Nalinibala has described the tragedy of her life in moving words. At a tender age of twenty one years, she lost her husband. Her bright, vivacious



youngest son died when he was just five years old. Pabitra—another son, independent and intelligent, actively involved in the non-cooperation movement since school—died at the age of twenty. Nalinibala stoically bore all her tragic losses and sought solace from her sufferings in spiritualism. Nalinibala's autobiography is invaluable from another point of view. Here we are given not only an insight into the source of her poetic inspiration but the readers also become aware of the different social, political and personal interaction and reflection which led to the creation of each poem.

*Eri Aba Dinbor* is also a record of the Indian independence movement, seen through Assamese eyes. Every detail is vividly given. The role played by Assamese leaders, students and general public, their reactions are all reproduced and the book is a very important document for historians to help them while tracing the history of Assam during that fateful period. The second world war, the Quit India Movement, the dangers controlling Assam in those days are graphically described. Nalinibala was never a silent witness during this historic phase. As the president of Assam Sahitya Sabha, she exhibited considerable firmness and shrewdness in maintaining the dignity of the Assamese language. During the Chinese aggression in 1962, she spoke bravely and succinctly in the meeting attended by then Congress President Sri Sanjiv Reddy. She submitted a memorandum regarding the language problem to the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and was quick to voice her protest against Home Minister G. B. Pant's derogatory remarks about the Assamese people. She also wrote strongly against Home Minister Indira Gandhi and Defence Minister Y. B. Chavan. Her awareness of political issues and her astuteness in dealing with them was remarkable.

Besides being a political and social treatise, this autobiography also gives us a glimpse into Nalinibala's personal life. Vignettes of her active and colourful life, excerpt from her speeches, the laudatory remarks she received—are all included. What makes this autobiography so unique is that facts and dates are enlivened by the writer's exceptionally

vital and easy prose style. It is the most authentic record of her life and times. Her love of life, her humane qualities shine through and this book is the greatest living proof that Nalinibala's renunciation was never a rejection of life.

Translation of her prose or poetry can never do justice to the purity and beauty of her work. The verve and lift that she injected into the Assamese language is beyond dispute. Her biographies and autobiography may not be credited with a strictly scientific approach, but she succeeds in bringing out the essence of the characters about whom she has written and that in itself is no mean achievement.

## Influence of Indian Heritage

Nalinibala Devi's life was moulded on the echoes of Indian heritage. The Indian sages and their ideals have always inspired and stirred her soul. She was deeply influenced by the ancient Indian socio-cultural heritage. In almost all of Nalinibala's writings one finds her thoughts steeped in the Indian philosophical thoughts and traditions. She has expressed her reverence to many a historic and contemporary Indian religious and social figures. The Upanishads brought peace and hope of Nalinibala's sorrowful life. In her verses one finds echoes of Upanishadic sayings. Her mind glows with the pride of ancient Indian heritage. India to her mind is the Bharat of *Rishitantra*.

All enlightenment in earth  
A boon of the mediators in the forests  
Taught us humanism  
Emerged in India the light  
Of humanity and equality.<sup>12</sup>

The ancient Indian pride is eroded today. 'The Virginal pure Indian has lost its devotion'. So the poet calls the young priests to get up, rise and determine the path of duty. This is an echo of the Upanishads, 'Shrinantu Vishe Amritashya Putra ye dhamani dibyani tastu.' Again, she is also aware of the fact that her motherland—the 'Swargadapi gariyashi' Bharat, of course, of her sons, is not to be subdued long. She says, 'Satyameva Jayate Nanritam'—Truth shall prevail.

Indian culture has always sung the praise of the effectiveness of Tapasya or meditation. All good and beneficial work is attained by 'Tapasya'. Even Brahma created the universe after hundred years of tapasya. Uma won Shiva only after hard tapasya. The Upanishads and the Puranas are replete with stories of the 'tapasyas' by monks and mendicants, princes and devotees. In true Indian tradition Nalinibala has been inspired by the sentiments behind 'tapasya', Her Various poems

and prose pieces show sincerity towards and Indian way of life, its ideals and its philosophy. She favoured the age-old customs of meditations, non-violence, sacrifice and various other tenets of the Indian heritage.

She is also influenced by the Gita and the Chandi. Her Melodies of the Srimat Bhagawat Gita's Panchajanyadhari Srikrishna flow in her blood, she believes that evil in this world will be removed by Parthasarathi's Panchajanya. She sees Krishna as a fountain of love and compassion. In a similar manner some verses of Nalinibala has seen Chandi as Shakti and in others, herself in the role of shakti—the conqueror of the Mahishasura.

In her poem *Matri Vandanashe* has called upon the *Dasabhuja matri* to uplift her country and establish universal peace by lighting up man's soul.

That Nalinibala Devi was well versed in Sanskrit, that she had an intimate relationship with the Gita and the Upnishads is abundantly clear in her writings. She has very simply put forward the essence of Srimad Bhagawat Gita in the poem *Satya Pathik* (True Traveller) :

Unlimited strength in your arms,  
 In your closed heart the mighty  
 current of deluge is making a mighty sound.  
 the fruits of works of every moment  
 remain stores till Eternity  
 The world will unite at your smiles  
 Moon and Stars will also smile.

\* \* \*

If you shed tears, do you think  
 It will go in vain?  
 You are true, you are eternal  
 Where is fear then, and where is death?  
 Do not look behind  
 But proceed forward.<sup>13</sup>

Again in '*Param Trishna*' the observation is similar :

'If your enjoyment could have brought on satiety  
 Desires could not have existed

If only the souls of man can merge in the endless  
Life and death will cease.<sup>14</sup>

Nalinibala accepts the theory of rebirth, which finds a lovely poetic expression in *Eta Digholia Rati* (One long night). His body is lying in their back yard there, under the 'Tulsi plant' covered by a white cloth. The grief striken family is gathered around. It is quite apparent that he is dead, for him all relations with this beautiful world is lost. The body turns into air. The soul is abodeless. He needs the world no more. But he still has the job unfinished. This attraction pulls him back to earth again and again. He pleads for a new body and life, his soul yearns for a new life on earth.

Nalinibala held Gautam Buddha in the highest esteem. The poem *Sidhartha*, induced in *Panasmani*, revolves around Buddhadev (in Yuga devata) and welcomes Buddha's call for love, peace and non-violence and she believed that world-peace can be achieved through it.

There are innumerable instances, in both her verses and prose, of her deep love and respect for ancient Indian lifestyle and customs. She has appreciated the importance of rejuvenating the tradition; Indian tenets of non-violence, sacrifice and love in view of the escalating tension brought about by violence, inequality and materialism of modern life. The poet has called for the emergence of a new Messiah.

Another instance of the profound relationship Nalinibala developed with Indian philosophical thought found expression in the poem *Is it true* she addresses her God :

Is it true that you can't  
Endure the anxious yearnings of heart

\* \* \*

That you cannot endure the  
Tears of despair welled  
Out of the unsteady heart of  
The sufferer and that you  
Yourself fell the sorrow?

\* \* \*

That you make the heart, suffering from  
 Great pains hear words of hope  
 Which brings peace?

\* \* \*

Oh my dearest, I hear your  
 Soothing voice in every moment  
 Of life, why then do I not get  
 Peace in life?<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the poet has found peace of mind. The heart strucken with teenage widowhood and the cruel death of her sons found peace in the knowledge gleaned from Upanisadic philosophy. She has been able to accept life's ups and downs as His wishes considering Him to be the Eternal Beauty. Nalinibala's poetic personality has achieved multifaceted characteristic. She did not remain immersed in her own thoughts. Life in general, the human society, one's country and nationality, all these found meanigful place in her mind. Self-salvation had never been her goal. She has sought to build a new world, one devoid of human failings and sufferings. She has appealed to the poets to be a part of this sufferings. She has appealed to the poets to be a part of this endeavour. Nalinibala's support of man's fight for survival is full of such fervent appeals to the poets, scientists ans educationalists to awaken the conscience of the blood-thirsty demons.

This fervent appeal is a strong reflection of Nalinibala's personality. Though she has never been found wanted in boldly protesting against anything anti-human in the material sense.

*Janambhumi* or motherland is one poem in her first book *Sandbiar Sur*, where Nalinibala's patriotic aspirations first found expression. Though primarily a mystic poet, Nalinibala's poetry has encompassed the wide horizon of life. Her *Janambhumi* is one of the best patriotic poems in Assamese literature;

In the early dawn of my life  
 I opened my eyes on thy lap  
 There shall be dawn again,  
 And in the late evening shut my eyes.

Oh mother even when I die  
 Clasp me in thy fond embrace,  
 The fatigued soul will take  
 Its last much needed rest.  
 Like a bird shall I fly about  
 In the bosom of the lofty tree  
 Shall I build my humble nest.  
 Sweet pastoral shall I sing  
 And wake thee up at day break.  
 In the high heavens I shall be a star  
 And the feast my eyes on the green and glorious  
 beauty of the earth  
 With moonlight shall I mingle  
 And sing holy hymns all night long.  
 Tarrying on the milky way  
 In the lake of Manas Sarobor  
 On the snowy summit of the Himalayas  
 Like a flower I shall offer at thy feet  
 Earth-like I shall be a golden cloud  
 And cast reflection of bright smiles  
 On thy pale weary lips.  
 Thy dust and sand, thy air and sky  
 Are paradise unto me, O, mother  
 The holiest shrine  
 My only place of salvation.  
 Oh my dear, beloved motherland  
 Thy abode of heavenly bliss  
 Where shall I meet with such love  
 Such sign of sincerity;  
 Such selfless service  
 Such golden deed or sacrifice,  
 Each humble cottage of the poor,  
 Is holy place of pilgrimage, a hermitage,  
 May I be born again and again  
 In this my poor, beloved motherland.<sup>16</sup>

The *Jugadevata*, the *Jagriti* and the *Alakananda* these three anthologies includes a number of verses eulogising patriotism.

Though many of Nalinibala's poems particularly mention her love for Assam, her motherland, her sentiments are totally free of parochial nationalism. Her love for the land of Assam blends with her Indianism and her universal humanism.

The foresight of the poet can be appreciated from the fact that way back in 1954, from the platform of the Asom Sahitya Sabha, she appealed to the people of Assam to learn the tribal languages to preserve national integrity. Nalinibala's poetic expression of a mind steeted in nationalism is exemplified in her poem *Message of India*. To her mind this expanse of the world's foremost land is unique. This land's truth lies in winning over the violence, with the Ahimsa. She learned to be firm in her faith on the virtues of Himachal and every grain of sand in its vast expanse taught her that the search for true love is the ultimate goal. Her grateful heart welcomed the new harbingers of Indian awakening Gandhiji and Rabindranath. In the poems *Muktidoot'* (Messenger of freedom) and *Maha Manab* (The great Soul) she ideolises Gandhiji. In her poem on Gandhiji—*Maha Manab*, she says,

...What unprecedented knowledge to the world you  
have offered  
The message of true, indiscriminate and friendly love  
The secret news liberty sublime.  
'Oh great,  
Thou hath sounded first  
The unuttered words of dumb and filtered human hearts.  
Crores of tortured and crushed  
Ever hated untouchable poor souls  
Received the human wisdom of a noble life  
And the bilssful news of salvation of free world.  
Oh wise,  
Thou hath revealed the  
Invaluable values of human life  
And in the path of Ahimsa  
A new creed for a new age  
That will vanquish the powers of malignant weapon  
even by denouncing death

to tear off the disgraceful bondage of slavery,  
Indian pledges life and death.

The heavenly strains of liberty

Thy lyre has sung,

Heart's nectar love

From thy lyre sprung,

Thou art the worshiper of Liberty

The idols of India's heart

Crores of Heart's pearl made thrones

In silence are adorned

And oblations prepared for Thee'<sup>17</sup>

As she was by Gandhiji, Nalinibala was deeply influenced by Rabindranath, too. She mentioned with great sensitivity Rabindranath's influence upon her mind, 'Kaviguru Rabindranath's certian poems in the Gitanjali has been my heart and soul. I derive consolation from the soulful singing of these in the evenings. At the injury of insult I cry out my heart's pain with 'Let my head be bow at thy feet let all my pride be drowned in tears.' In fact, Rabindranath's love for India—'I shall be born in India again and again, with all her poverty, misery, I love India best' seems to reverberate in Nalinibala's *Janambhuni*.

Rabindranath has greatly influenced Nalinibala's poetic exploits, both in content and language, and to some extent in rhymes. It is, however, not unique in Nalinibala only. Many a contemporary and post-Rabindranath Indian poet has been essentially influenced by the thoughts, words and rhymes of Rabindranth's poem. The first thing that strikes one on reading Nalinibala's poems is her beautiful choice of words due to her extensive reading of the Rabindranath and Sanskrit literature. Though her vocabulary, imagery and certain similes bear influence of Rabindranath, what exposes her talent is her ability to use beautiful, soft words in their content. Principal Hem Barua writes in his History of Assamese Literature, 'A word must be said regarding the techniques. The role, the rises, the carol and the evocation of her poetry are exquisitely musical. She has copiously draws on the rich

treasure-house of Sanskrit, and her Similes, Imaginaries and Vocabularies are enriched by the sublimity of that literature.' In her poem 'Rabindra Tarpan' she expresses her great respect to this Sage-poet.,

The constrained conscience  
of the enslaved, straying land  
of the oppressed and unfortunate land  
struck a chord somewhere  
in your comprehensive soul  
and flowed down in sad strains.

\* \* \*

Unconstrained Yogi and Prist of Beauty  
in the revealed light of meditations  
touched off by immortal beauty  
left us eternal music

\* \* \*

With your birth you brought  
eternal life  
and the gaiety of freedom  
despite numerous restraints  
your music gave the world  
a life beyond death.<sup>18</sup>

Nalinibala's appreciation of Vedantic philosophy is reflected by her ability to raise philosophical hypotheses to the supreme heights of beauty. The essence of mysticism is the feeling of the existence of power in the midst of uniqueness and the feeling of comradeship amidst variety. For this belief of hers, the land of birth and its environment are all very dear to her heart. Love for her land is mingled in the blood flowing in her veins. Her patriotism knows no distinction of land and space, love and truth and for this she knows no difference between nationalism and universal humanism. A unique synthesis of the tunes of spiritualism and nationalism is thus found in Nalinibala's verses, an influence of the Indian heritage.

Nalinibala Devi claimed the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1968 for her book of verse titled *Alakananda*. In her acceptance

speech, she said about the source of her poetry. 'The basis of Indian philosophy is the nursery of my poetry. In the midst of Indian philosophy I found my ill-fated life's way of peace.' And with this peace in heart, the poet wishes to bring the world the message of a new age. She calls upon all the poets to sing the song which can raise the dying, the song which can raise hopes in shattered lives, the song which will be a beam that lights up darkened souls. The message of light is her message :

Sing the song of life  
O poet  
With the light of your version  
Fashion a song  
Fit for the new age.  
O poet  
Your song shatters the torpor  
Of an era  
And sing to the triumph  
Of the resurgent nation.  
May you go on shining  
In such cadences  
that from age to age  
The coursing blood off your vains  
Keeps time with your song.  
May it be trumpet-note  
to herald our march  
to victory.  
Your poets vision  
Penetrates in to the future  
and fails it with the promise  
of music.  
Your songs are songs  
of glory  
of their deep and  
meditative thoughts  
Which can raise life  
Out of death itself.<sup>19</sup>

## Nalinibala's Role in Political and Social Matters

Nabin Chandra Bordoloi was the vanguard of those people born at the end of the 19th Century who were instrumental in building modern Assam and establishing the State's positions in the mainstream of Indian life. Patriotism and profound faith in personality and humanity were the cornerstone of these enlightened personalities. In addition to music, crafts, and literature Nabinchandra Bordoloi stressed the importance of proper physical training. In fact, the combination of all these endowments have given shape to Nabin Chandra's towering personality. Though Nabinchandra was Indian in outlook, he was always aware of the separate Assamese identity. The Montague Chemsford report of 1918, which did not give Assam the same status as the other states, irked Bordoloi so much so that he testified before the joint Selection Committee of British Parliament thus :

'If it means that figures showing it not got education enough, I beg to submit these figures showing it is taken, Assam I think comes third or fourth in India. I do not understand how Assam is considered to be socially backward. On the other hand, I believe it is more forward in many respect that should be included among the major provinces of India.'

As a leader of the Assam Association, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi's effort in London borne fruit. In 1920, this association was converted to the Assam Congress. Of the leadership of the Non-Cooperation Movement of Assam, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi was the foremost. Assam played a vital role in the Non-Cooperation Movement and the leaders of the movement called upon the meritorious students who were undergoing higher studies in Calcutta to take part in it. It may be recalled here that the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee convened by Babu Rajendra Parasad made a special mention about the role of these bright young men in the Non-Cooperation Movement.

Nabin Chandra Bordoloi was of the firm opinion from the beginning that the first duty of a colonized nation was to achieve independence. For this reason alone, he gave up the life of peace and prosperity and embraced the physical hardship entailed in the mass movement. He had no yearning for comfort and led a life of hard sacrifice. He was a lucid and fearless orator.

It is not out of context to speak thus about Nabin Chandra Bordoloi when it comes to taking about Nalinibala Devi. For though Nalinibala Devi was primarily a poet, a life developed to the search of the mystic beauty, she had till the end of her life shown such awareness about country, nation and society that all its roots can be traced back to Nabin Chandra's direct influence upon her thoughts.

By 1919, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi's house became the centre piece of Assam Politics. Political leaders and congress volunteers had at all times free access to the Bordoloi household. Inspite of being forever busy with important political discussion and work, Nabin Chandra made it a point to spare time with his family, especially with his beloved but ill-fated daughter. Thus Nalinibala was imbued in progressive ideals of current Indian political thought. Lokamanya Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal and other leaders and the image of Gandhiji created a deep impression on Nalinibala's mind. She eulogises Gandhiji in her poem 'The Great Soul'.

O' great  
 Though hath sounded first  
 The unuttered words of dumb and fettered human heart  
 Scores of tortured and crushed  
 Ever hated untouchable poor souls  
 Received the human wisdom of a novel life  
 And the blissful news salvation of free world.

The brightness of Nabin Chandra Bordoloi's burning spiritualism gradually lit up the aura of darkness in Nalinibala's life. Her poetry endeavours to perceive the call of the land, nation and humanity. In being associated, though to a limited extent, with her father's important political work, Nalinibala

was able to write her father's important political work and biography *Smriti Tirtha* at a later period of her life. The Disobedience Movement which spread throughout the country in 1921 also took Assam by storm. On the call of Nabin Chandra's leadership students come out of schools and colleges and jumped into movement. Forgetting all thoughts about individual future, scholastic achievements of career, students came out to sacrifice their lives for their Motherland—inspired Nalinibala's verses. Nalinibala's brother, who was studying medicine, and son Pabitra, who later had a tragic premature death, also took part in the Movement. It was at Nabinchandra's residence the Office of the Congress in Assam was first set up. Bordoloi was the first secretary. He travelled like a storm all over the state and awakened widespread public awareness with his fiery and emotionally charged oratory. It was from her father that Nalinibala acquired her ability to deliver lengthy speeches with the most lucid and fluent language. Nalinibala's son, Upen Changkakoti, then doing his schooling, built for his Grandfather a box-type spinning machine. When Gandhiji came to Assam, Changkakoti presented another of these spinning machines to him. In her autobiography Nalinibala claims that Gandhiji designed the *Wardha Charkha* on the prototype of his small spinning wheel.

Nabin Chandra kept Nalinibala in faith during the Congress movement by bestowing several responsibilities upon her shoulders. When disobedience movement gathered momentum, a number of searches were conducted in the Congress office. Nabin Chandra secretly kept important documents in the able custody of his daughter Nalinibala, who successfully kept them off the clutches of the police who were searching for them. This earned her much-appreciated praise from her father.

When the news was announced that Mahatma Gandhi would visit Assam for the first time, it created great enthusiasm among the Assamese public. Carefully selected 500 volunteers from all over the state were given intensive training on the laws on the congress office located on Nabin Chandra

Bordoloi's *Shanti Bhawan*. All of these 500 young volunteers were sworn on oath by Bordoloi to sacrifice their lives for the sake of Motherland. Addressing them, he said in his speech, 'We must be the first to sacrifice on the alter of freedom. We shall build the foundation with brick and upon us shall stand the temple of freedom. We shall remain hidden on the ground, and none shall see us. The task of sewing 500 Gandhi Caps for these volunteers fell on Nalinibala and her kin in the family. They had to work hard day and night to meet the deadline.'

Gandhiji, Maulana Md. Ali, Begum Md. Ali Jamunalal Bajaj, Azad Shovani, Krishnadas, Gandhiji's associate, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and all other leaders, big and small have visited Bordoloi's *Shanti Bhawan*. Her contact with all these luminaries of the freedom movement moulded Nalinibala's profound sense of love for her country.

Nabin Chandra Bordoloi understood the importance of popularising the weaving of Khaddar, Nalinibala writes. For the campaign of Khaddar, Desbhakta Phukan and Karambir Bordoloi carried sackful of these clothes over their shoulders and sold them in the market. This action had a direct effect on the cotton threads on the wheel, including Nalinibala. For ten years 1922-1932, Bordoloi was in prison where he too picked up the art of spinning fine threads. Nalinibala's inspired her father's efforts by weaving these threads into fine khadi dhoties in the loom. It can be mentioned here that in the Assamese society of those days, every woman in the family, from the poor to the aristocrat, made cotton and silken clothes on their handlooms. This practice is still maintained in the villages but however easing out of the towns and cities.

Md. Ali Jinnah, in the year 1941, again raised the issue of combining Assam with East Bengal and form a state in the style of East Bengal Muslim province. There was furore all over Assam. Waves of mass protest spread over the state. Finally, this proposal was rejected. Gandhiji being silent on these terrible days for Assam, prompted Nalinibala to send him her agony in the form of an emotional poem. The poem

had been translated to English by writer-politician Hem Barua. In terms of literary value, this poem of Nalinibala cannot be critically hailed, but in the sense of patriotic fervour it only shows the poetess' maturity in her responsibilities.

1941 gave Assam the Muslim League Ministry. The collaborators of the British Colonists, in order to give public recognition to the British war effort, organised an exhibition at the cotton college at Guwahati. The Cotton College student's Union boycotted the exhibition and picketed it. The DC ordered a lathi charge and a lot of students both boys and girls had to be taken to the Civil Hospital with injuries. The students along with the entire populace were enraged. Under Nalinibala's leadership, the Mahila Samiti took a resolution blaming the govt. for the physical repression. A spontaneous but organised protest all over the state compelled Rohini Kumar Choudhury to resign from the League Ministry. Nalinibala exerted considerable influence over the students.

The Cabinet Mission with Mr. A. V. Alexander, Sir Stafford Cripps and Lord Pethick Lawrence as members arrived in India on 23rd March 1946 to discuss the question of India's freedom. They had the proposal of uniting Assam with Bengal for smoother functioning of administration. The plan was originally accepted by both Muslim League and the Congress. The leaders of Assam Congress raised objection against this grouping. Gandhiji had initially accepted the plan. Mr. Gopinath Bardoloi the then Chief Minister of Assam persisted in his opposition and submitted a memorandum to the Working Committee. He met Gandhiji and there was resentment all over Assam. Ultimately Gandhiji changed his views and gave support to Bardoloi's stand. League also rejected the Mission's proposal. At that moment of crisis the *Assam Sangha* was formed in Calcutta to wage a war against the secessionist movement. She called upon the gentle Assamese people to awaken to their rights and to assert themselves. Her fiery speeches roused the public spirit. The Assam Movement gained momentum and for the first time took a lone stand against the rest of India. Thus the fact that an united Assam

was a force to be reckoned with was acknowledged by the rest of India.

To recognise Assamese as the State Language, a Language Movement took place in 1960. In association with other in leadership, Nalinibala Devi too exerted her efforts in favour of the movement. On remission of the mass movement and its consequent troubles, Jawaharlal Nehru visited Assam. He said in no uncertain terms that 'if the Assamese language is not the state language in Assam, then would it be in Bihar or in Bengal.' Nalinibala had met Nehru then and had handed over a letter containing opinion in the matter.

A student of Cotton College, Ranjit Barpujari was killed by police bullets in the thick of the language movement. The students gave a call for a statewise *hartal*. On Nalinibala Devi's request the students finally withdraw their call. Another issue, this time for an Oil Refinery in Assam, again turned into a mass movement. Nalinibala Devi played a very creative role in this movement by her total involvement with the leadership of it. Though the Refinery was finally set up, in terms of employment of the local people had grievances of deprivation. A delegation was sent to meet Feroze Gandhi, the Chairman of Oil India. Among other Nalinibala too was a member of that delegation. On Feroze Gandhi's intervention, employment of locals was given due priority.

The proposal to remove the hill districts from Assam and to form an independent Hill-State (The Reorganisation of Assam) cropped up in 1968. This caused serious concern and acute dissatisfaction among the Assamese people. Nalinibala Devi opposed this plan in public meeting and also sent telegrams to the Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi and Defence Minister protesting vehemently that an Assam divided would mean an Assam disunited. She also wrote an impassioned yet totally rational appeal to the President Dr. Radhakrishnan : 'People with vested interests have used the language problem as a crutch to raise slogans for the creation of states. Their intention is to destroy the unity of India. This spell disaster for the future of our country. My Motherland, Assam also

faces danger from such policies. If the hill districts are separated from Assam, the state's firmly rooted foundation will be shaken to the core.'

In 1955, as the president of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, Nalinibala Devi led a delegation of eight members to State reorganisation Commission and submitted a memorandum. Mr. Fazal Ali, H.N. Kunjru and Sardar Panikkar were the members of this commission. West Bengal had staked a claim on the Goalpara district of Assam by stressing on its majority Bengali population. This move sparked off deep resentment all over the state. The delegation led by Nalinibala Devi proved before the Commission that Goalpara was an integral part of Assam and the Assamese language had its own root and identity and was never an off-shoot of Bengali. She said, 'as a writer in Assamese I can boldly say that Govt. of India has committed a grave mistake by basing the division of states on language. This disastrous policy can achieve nothing but chaos and disunity for the country. As for Assam, I request you again not to undermine the importance of Pragjyotispur and Kamrup and the rich traditions of the Assamese language which has a hallowed past and therefore should not be unjustly treated.' Nalinibala succeeded in her social mission. Goalpara remained with Assam. The contribution of Assam Sahitya Sabha along with Assam Congress to this end was also immense. In 1962, Assam again faced danger this time from external quarters. China Attacked India suddenly and the Chinese Army entered Arunachal Pradesh. This unexpected assault stunned the entire nation. Our defence crumbled easily and the Indian Army was in no way equipped to face such a strong opponent. Instead of rising to the occasion, the Prime Minister sent message expressing concern for the people of Assam. The Govt. seemed totally incapable of coping with the grave situation, at a time like this. Nalinibala Devi together with several veteran leaders moved throughout Guwahati, urging the frightened citizens to preserve their sanity. With patriotic songs and poems and undeterred zeal, they roamed through the streets of Guwahati inspiring the Assamese to

rally forth unitedly against a common enemy. Her unfettered love for Assam made her such a remarkable person. Her intensely emotional nature at time made her perspectives hazy and she might have exceeded her limits but even this flaw was a result of her loving and affectionate nature.

In her autobiography, Nalinibala Devi has stated... 'There is a time in man's life when the urge to serve is very strong. The mind is at peace only by serving the motherland.' The desire or urge for peace is sometimes diverted to serving the family, the society and the country. In her personal life, Nalinibala Devi faced a lot trauma but she rode over all suffering sphynx-like and found solace in writing. Her love for God also diverted her mind to the service of her motherland and humanity. The first decades of the 20th century saw no progress in the field of woman education in Assam. Dibrugarh boasted of the only Assamese Girls' High School, established in 1926. In Guwahati, Assamese girls went to local Bengali primary schools. Nalinibala Devi started a school in her residence but the venture did not succeed. Although she herself had no formal education she realised the importance of educating women and was always an enthusiastic promoter. It was with the view to promote and propagate the education and all round development of Assamese women that Mahila Samiti's (Women's Association) were formed in Assam. Many committed social workers and politicians advocated this cause. In 1931, the Kamrup Mahila Samiti was formed and Nalinibala Devi became its first President. It was at this juncture that the reformatory Sarda Bill created a ripple all over India. The Sarda Bill passed in 1930 declared that the marriage of girls below fourteen years was illegal and anyone who did not adhere to this law would be fined or even jailed. Even before the bill could be submitted before the Central law commission, there was a spurt of child marriage all over the country. Assam was no exception. Hundreds of innocent young girls were victims of circumstances and suffered terribly. In later years, Nalinibala Devi likened these child marriages to 'Kanyamedh Yajna'. A terrible aftermath of these hasty child marriages was the rapidly

growing numbers of child widows all over India. Nalinibala Devi was always vocal in her stance against child marriage and her ardent support of the Sarda Bill can be found in her autobiography : 'I have seen my aunt Dharmada Devi—a child widow. Her sufferings and the discrimination meted out to her has made me rebellious. I have also seen the sad plight of my niece Annada. She has pledged that 'I will not think of marrying of my daughter Aruna before she is eighteen'. Her firm resolve was not personal. She publicly voiced her support to the Sarda Bill and began to work actively against child marriage with the members of the Mahila Samiti. The women of Guwahati were not united in their support of the Bill when Nalinibala persuaded a renowned citizen of Guwahati not to marry off her minor daughter, it sparked off a controversy. A public meeting was called and votes were cast for and against the Sarda Bill. The majority supported the Bill and thus a landmark was achieved in the history of emancipation of women. Nalinibala Devi, Kamala Devi Goswami, two ardent supporters of the bill celebrated the marriages of their daughter and niece respectively only after the girls were sixteen. After this, in Brahmin as well as other families, girls were married at a respectable age.

Nalinibala Devi was a true social reformer. She never hesitated in speaking out fearlessly against superstitions, the inequality of women and the great injustice that has been heaped on Indian women for so long. Her love for Mother-tongue was immeasurable. In 1947, just after the Independence, at the Nagaon session of Assam State Mahila Samiti, as its president, she called out to the women of Assam, 'A great responsibility now rests on the shoulders of women at the time of building up our nation. We must strive for unity without discussion caused by caste or creed'. She believed that woman as the eternal mother, could play a major role in fighting corruption, superstition, use of drugs, in fact all social evils. Nalinibala Devi was very much aware of the status of women in society and protested strongly against any type of disrespect shown towards them.

With all her multifarious activities, a subject very close to her heart was the welfare of children, she never ceased to worry about the plight of poor children. She started a Child Welfare Centre in Guwahati, assisted by social workers and later on, Mrs. Krishna Hatheesing, the Director of Social Welfare opened its branch at Guwahati and Nalinibala Devi became its president. She was so involved in its functioning that she was physically worn out because of constant hard work. Her doctors tried to make her divert her extraordinary energies into politics : 'Why are you wasting your strength in minor matters? Why don't you apply your great talent to politics?' She replied 'Politics means good administration, a sound defence and excellent organisation. I will be involved, in every problems of my country and will contribute my little bit.' So overwhelming was her love for children that she wrote plays, taught them dramatics. Her care and concern for the little ones very essential requisites for child education. So besides her serious literary pursuits, she always spared, time to write for the young. The *Sesh Puja*, *Parijatar Abhishek*, *Prablad*, *Holi* are dance-dramas she wrote for children. Two of them were published. *Parijatar Abhishek* and *Shesh Puja* were inspired by Rabindranath Tagore's *Natir Puja*. In her we see the perfect fusion of the serious writer, the zealous patriot. Her unstinted effort for the well being of children extended beyond Guwahati and she attended meetings all over the state. She was everready to spread a little bit of love and laughter among these unfortunate children.

The North-eastern Frontier Provinces were under Assam Govt. before Aruanchal Pradesh was formed and their children had to study Assamese in their schools. One such student Tagang Taki wrote to Nalinibala Devi after reading her poems:

Dear Aita (Grandmother),

We study in a school NEFA. We love the sweetness and simplicity of the Assamese language. We have read about the learned people of Assam in books but have never had the good fortune to meet them. God has not been very kind to us. We have never been involved with the cultural activities of the plains. This isolation saddens us. We have studied

Assamese, can converse in it, we can write it. But we are cut off from the people of the plains. We have read your poems and would love to meet you. Will we ever get the opportunity? Please write a poem for us ...'

The spontaneous outpourings of the simple tribal touched Nalinibala's heart. She did write a poem for him. Later on, the Assamese Language was removed from the school of Arunachal and hurt the sentiments of not only the Assamese but also the simple people of Arunachal. On the invitation of the Assam Sahitya Sabha some students from NEFA once attended a session and addressed the august gathering in fluent Assamese. There was a concentrated effort by the Assamese for the continuation of the Assamese language in NEFA, but the central Government was against it. In fact, the then Home Minister Govinda Ballabh Pant even branded the Assamese people as 'Petty'. Nalinibala Devi instantly wrote a letter of protest to Panditji, her father's friend, 'Assam did not expect such a slur against an ancient race from a veteran freedom fighter and a liberal thinker like you.' Whenever the honour of the state was at stake, Nalinibala Devi sent spirited rejoinders to many national leaders. Her love for Assam was intense and her awareness of her rights made her bold and forthright. She regretted her lack of command over English but never let it deter her. She proudly spoke in her mother tongue and asked someone to interpret for her when the need arose her mind forcefully and fearlessly.

The Assam Sahitya Sabha is a glowing example of the Assamese literary and cultural awakening. This institution has carefully nurtured and sustained the Assamese language, literature and culture over the years. The Presidentship of the Assam Sahitya Sabha is therefore a highly respected and coveted post. In 1954, there are certain anomalies within the Sahitya Sabha and these were highlighted in the newspapers. The incumbent president refused to take over charge. At last Nalinibala Devi stepped in at that crucial juncture to steer the Sahitya Sabha. It was because of her involvement with Sahitya Sabha, that the genius of Nalinibala, the poet fully flowered.

The people of Assam became aware of her contributions and gave her due recognition. During this 1954 session, several important proposals were undertaken.

The Assam Sahitya Sabha protested against certain damaging remarks made about Assam and Assamese people in the memorandum submitted by the West Bengal Congress Committee before the state Reorganization Commission. The Sahitya Sabha insisted that these offending statements should be withdrawn.

'The Assamese has no real patriotism. They have already betrayed the case of Indian unity and integrity by allowing Sylhet, a Bengali speaking area to go easily to Pakistan. The motive behind there is nothing but to increase the percentage of the Assamese in Assam. Assam is therefore, not eager to maintain the present frontiers of India. So it cannot be relied upon so as to prove equal to the task of maintaining strategically important frontiers.' Nalinibala Devi, spoke succinctly and strongly against these allegations.

Even after her tenure as the President was over, Nalinibala Devi remained actively in the Assam Sahitya Sabha. She charmed her audiences with her poetic speeches. Her repertoire as a public speaker was not confined to the Sahitya Sabha alone. In Mahila Samitis, students gatherings, amongst the little children, in schools and colleges, in cultural discussions, in the Sahitya Akademi, Viswa Hindu Parishad Sabha everywhere she spoke lyrically on matters of serious import. Just as Sarojini Naidu captivated her audiences with her sweet speeches, which earned her the nickname *Bharat Kokila* from Gandhiji, Nalinibala Devi also cast a similar spell over the people of Assam. Since most of her speeches have remained unpublished the new generations have not been able to appreciate her worth. But in her speeches that the patriotism, love for her language, her clear conceptions about literature and above all the beauty and dignity of her style and language found expression.

The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee felicitated twelve former Presidents of the Sahitya Sabha. In that meeting

Nalinibala gave an extempore speech. She said that the Congress party has shown their generosity and broadmindness. She thanked the political leaders on behalf of the people and lovers of literature and said, 'A creative writer writes inspired by his soul. Public recognition, honour, fame, wealth these can never inspires and considered encouraging the arts to be part of their kindly duties. That is why the literary history of Assam is so rich. The primary duty of the nation will be to lovingly nurture and rejuvenate the works of unrecognised writer. If our new Govt. sees that the works of poor writers are published and given due recognition, it will be the greatest service rendered to the literatures of India.'

The President of Assam Pradesh Congress Committee thus paid homage to Nalinibala Devi.

'You have remained steadfast in your pursuit of the massess even while being faced with so many traumas in life, it is not that you have confined yourself to the world of poetry. Your contributions towards the emancipation of women and child welfare have been immense. You are indeed the glowing symbol of the unique heritage of Assamese womanhood.'

In that historic meeting, after Nalinibala Devi's appeal on behalf of writers, the Chief Minister of Assam Sri B.P. Chaliha, gave his word that he would try his best to publish the works of Assamese writers. The Education Minister Sri Debeswar Sarma immediately sanctioned a sum of Rupees one Lakh from the Education Department to start Assam Publication Board. Since then, this board has done invaluable works by publishing many works of art and literature and Nalinibala Devi contributed a lot to its auspicious beginning.

As a poet Nalinibala reached the pinnacle of creativity and success. She felt that for her poetry was the best means of self-expression. But she was also aware of her capabilities in other spheres. She involved herself in politics, social work and religious matters and has left her indelible mark in these fields. Anything that was constructive and creative drew her attention. Whatever be the matter she spoke on, the effect upon her audience was magical. A masterly command over

words, knowledge of Sanskrit, and apt quotations, her melodious voice combined to weave an enchanting spell over the audience. The length of her speeches did not detract from these qualities.

Nalinibala Devi's philosophical bent of mind can be seen in her speeches. These are oratorial masterpieces. People who have heard her speech publicly, talk of it as a memorable experience. Certain detractors state that her speeches are more emotional than rational. But none can deny that however rich and crowded the imagery might be, the substance of her speeches is not banal. The lyricism and the richness inspires the audience to reach out for the ideal which she promises. Hers were ideals based on reality, very much within our reach and not romantic figments of her poetic imagination. She preached the work ethos—to work hard for the progress of humanity, for a world filled with joy, dream and promise. All her life, she strived for this world.

Towards the end of her life, looking back upon her past, she questioned herself about her achievements what has she gained after a life filled with struggle and activity. 'The only pleasure I derived was from selfless service.' It is indeed sad that her sensitive speeches have never been published cohesively in book form.

Nalinibala Devi has not received her due recognition and her true worth has not been appreciated by a wider reading public as she wrote only in Assamese. She was felicitated by all India Institutions like Sahitya Akademi and Viswa Hindu Parishad but her poems as well as prose writings have not been translated into Hindi or English. She is in no way a lesser poet than Mahadevi Verma in Hindi or Kamini Roy in Bengal or Sarojini Naidu in English. Since her writings have been confined to Assamese, critics have not had a chance to ascertain her true worth.

In her personal life, happiness eluded Nalinibala. Tragedies are strewn over her path. She herself said that while crossing life's thorny path, the urge to write was born. Fortune never smiled on her throughout her long and eventful life, but she

remained undaunted. She overcame sorrow and loneliness by spreading joy and happiness to lesser mortals than her—through songs, poems, love and her social work. Perhaps her personal tragedies and sufferings honed her innate qualities and this, combined with the influence of her great father, made Nalinibala develop into the creative genius that she was. Had she lived as typical middle-class housewife, perhaps the full flowering of her creative powers would never have taken place. It is Assam's good fortune that inspite of many personal tragedies, her talent did not wither away, unheard and unexploited.

In her autobiography Nalinibala Devi has recorded the rise and fall, dreams and aspirations, the struggle and sufferings of the Assamese race. Although a mystic poet dedicated to the mystery and beauty of life, she did not let life's realities pass her by. She compromised beautifully between the two worlds, the world of dreams filled with melody and beauty and the world of reality where she suffered personal traumas, fought over controversial issues, but nevertheless emerged victorious and unscathed.

Nalinibala's life's journey came to an end on the twenty fourth December 1977 at the age of seventy-nine.

At the end of her glorious career Nalinibala Devi bid adieu to life with her love for motherland and her faith in human nature intact. Inspite of being dogged by misfortune, she was not disillusioned with life. She said, 'What have I gained from my long life? The gains have been many. The most precious gift I have received is the love and benediction showered on me by myself with. Throughout my life I have been guided by this gentle spirit. He has given me a sense of purpose and direction. I felt that no person with a questing soul is destined to lead a life of idleness. We are unconsciously drawn into the whirl pool of ceaseless activity that is life. Now I prepare for the last phase of my life's journey. The unknown beckons to me. Good bye, my Motherland.

May I be born again and again  
In this my poor, beloved motherland.'



## Reference

1. Translated by the monographer
2. Nalinibala's autobiography, p61
3. Translated by the monographer
4. 'Morning' : English version of *Sandhiyar Sur*; Translated by Nabinchandra Bordoloi and Padmadhar Chaliha
5. Darkness : Ibid
6. Last offering : Ibid
7. 8. Param Trishna : Ibid
9. The Infinite : Ibid
10. Immolation : Ibid
11. Parashmani : Translated by the monographer.
12. Dabatar Bani : Ibid
13. True Traveller : Ibid
14. Param Trishna : Ibid
15. Is it True : Ibid
16. Motherland : Ibid
17. The Great Soul : Ibid
18. Rabindra Tarpan : Ibid
19. Song of Life : Translated by Khitish Roy

## Bibliography

1. Eri Aha Dinbor : An autobiography of Nalinibala Devi, 1976
2. Nalinibala : Published by Asom Sahitya Sabha.

## Nalinibala Devi's Published Works

### Poetry

1. Sandhiar Sur (1928)
2. Soponor Sur (1948)
3. Parashmoni (1945)
4. Juga Devata (1958)
5. Jagriti (1962)
6. Alakananda (1964)
7. Antim Sur (1977)

### Prose

1. Smriti Tirtha (Biography of Nabinchandra Bordoloi) 1945
2. Sardar Vallav Bhai Patel (Biography)
3. Santipath (Eassys)
4. Vishvadeepa (Short life-sketches of some noble women)
5. Sesh Puja (Children's drama)
6. Parijatar Abhishek (Children's drama)
7. Prahlad (Children's drama)
8. Eri Aha Dinbor (Autobiography) 1976

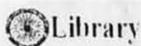


Nalinibala Devi (1898-1977) was born at Barpeta, the great centre of Vaishnavite culture and learning in Assam. She came of a highly cultured family and inherited from her illustrious father Karmavir Nabinchandra Bardoloi, an active interest in politics and a flair for writing. She had been married at the age of twelve but after only nine years of married life she lost her husband.

She composed one elegy on the death of Putuli, her daughter and sublimated her personal sorrows and separation from husband to a spiritual separation. Her mysticism is free from any tinge of religious parochialism. As a result, a good number of mystic poems flew out of her pen. Though Nalinibala is widely known as a poet, her prose writings are not less important. *Smriti-Tirtha* (1948), the biography of her celebrated father is not merely a learned daughter's tribute to her great father but also a seminal document of socio-political history of Assam. Among other works *Santipath* (1971) written in prose, *Eri Aha Dinbot* (1976), an autobiography and *Antimar Sur* (1977) were published in the last part of her life.

She was elected the president of Asom Sahitya Sabha in 1954, awarded the Padmasree in 1958 and the Sahitya Akademi award in 1968 for her book of poems *Alakananda*.

Preeti Barua, a translator and critic takes a fresh look at Nalinibala's life and work in this monograph. Her important publications include *Nirarthak* (A collection of short stories, 1962), *Akash Nila Steppe* (stories from Sholokov, 1966). *Sheerna Toran* (A translation of André Gide's *Strait is the Gate*, 1996) etc.



Library

IIAS, Shimla

891.451 009 N 147 B



00116426

ISBN 81-260-0916-0

Price : Rs. 25