



# Rajabala Das And The Evolution Of Women's Higher Education In Assam.

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## ABSTRACT

Education is considered as one of the significant tool that brings changes in the society. The social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century realized that until and unless the womenfolk of the society are not educated the Indian society will not progress. Therefore they always put emphasis on women education. Even the missionaries also played a pivotal role in educating the girls for which they have established girls' schools. Like in other parts of India, Assam also faced the new era in which the society is gradually growing with scientific and progressive ideas and various distinguished personals tried to elevate the status of women. Hence this is an attempt to explore the contributions of such a personal who committed to educate the womenfolk in order to uplift the Assamese society. Rajabala Das was such an individual who have played a significant role in imparting higher education to the women of Assam. It was at her initiative that the Handique Girls' College was established, which is now a leading womens' college in Assam.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Society, Women education, Asom Mahila Samity, Handique Girls' College

## Introduction:

Women education in India was a neglected area prior to the independence. Only a handful of women have got the opportunity to receive elementary and higher education in the region. The traditional outlook, conservative beliefs and poverty were some of the factors that always stand as barriers for women to get education. No doubt the Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekanand made an effort to uplift the women's conditions in the 19th century. They realized that the progress of a society could not be achieved without their cooperation. Distinguished personalities Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Periyar and Baba Saheb Ambedkar were leaders of the lower castes in India who took various initiatives to make education available to the women of India. Similarly few women like Savitribai Phule, wife of Jyotirao Phule, Swarna Kumari Devi, the elder sister of Rabindranath Tagore, Sister Nibedita, Annie Besant, Kamini Roy, Ashapura Devi have tried to spread the message of female education in India through their works.

Similarly in Assam, women like Hemoprabha Das, Chandraprabha Saikiani, Rajabala Das and Indira Miri were few personalities who realized the fact that women education is the key that lead to a progressive society. Among these women the role of Rajabala Das was significant as she has tried to provide educational facilities to the women and that resulted in the foundation of an higher educational institute named Handique Girls' College at Guwahati in 1939. This institution had fulfilled the aspirations of higher education for the women in Assam prior to the independence and till today. In this paper an attempt is being made to highlight her role in improving the status of women through education.

### **Early Life of Rajabala Das.**

Rajabala Das was born in Dibrugarh on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1893 to Rama Kanta Barua and Kamala Barua. Although grown up in a conservative family she went to Calcutta for education at Bethune school along with her elder brother when she was only eight years old. Further she took admission in Giridhi Girls' School in Bihar in 1912. Later she was transferred to Bethune School, Calcutta and there she passed matriculation in 1915. She has completed her I. A. examination in the year 1917 and completed B.A. in 1920 in Calcutta. During her stay in Calcutta the freedom movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi was raised into a mass movement. There she became a part of the Non-cooperation movement in 1921. She has encouraged the women of her locality to be a part of the freedom movement. She became the secretary of Dibrugarh District Congress Mahila Samiti. In 1923 she also participated in the Gaya Congress session as one of the representatives from Assam.

### **Contribution of Rajabala Das**

After being married to Dr. Jyotish Ch. Das of Guwahati she got a broader platform to achieve her aspiration towards uplifting the status of women in Assam. Even she found her husband the most supporting person along with a group of enlightened ladies. At that time there were many organisations in India that were working for the women progression. But in Assam, there were no branches of such organisations which could work for women upliftment. Therefore Rajabala Das have felt the necessity of establishing few branches of such organizations. She along with Durgaprobha Bora, Chandraprobha Baruah, Swaranlata Saikia, Sashiprabha Hazarika and others founded the Asom Mahila Samiti in 1926 and Durgaprobha Bora became the President and she herself was the Secretary. But due to some ideological differences with the members of the samiti, she had to open a branch of Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sabha in Guwahati and attended the national sessions of the sabha held in Madras and Gwalior. As Secretary of the Samiti she continued to fight for women's cause. Awareness campaigns were launched to stop child marriage on the basis of Sarada Act. Due to such campaigns child marriage among the Brahmin family drastically started to reduce. The praiseworthy activities of the sabha was also recognised by the then Governor of Assam Shri Sriprakash.

The experiences that she has earned in her educational life in Calcutta encouraged her to devote the entire life for the progress of women education in the region. As the Secretary of the Asom Mahila Samiti she also realized the significance of Hindi language in the province so that the region could easily become a part of the mainstream organizations. Therefore she took initiatives for introducing Hindi class for the women. It is important to note that there were no separate hostels for the girl students of Cotton College till that time. The Mahila Samiti for the first time arranged it in the house of the President. Rajabala Das was also successful in opening a primary school in Bamundi village in Kamrup. She became the Secretary of Governing Body of Panbazar Girls' High School and devoted herself for fundraising and arranging bus for the girls coming to school from distant places. After becoming the Headmistress of the school, she now began to contemplate over the issue of higher education of the girls who passed matriculation examination from the school. Rajabala Das now mooted the idea of opening a girl's college in the premises of Panbazar Girls' High School. The Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup told her that it was

too premature to open a girls' college at that time. But seeing her firmness of purpose, he allowed her to open morning shift for college girls in the school premises. Thus the first women college named 'Gauhati Girls' College' with two students was started on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1939 due to untiring and indomitable spirit of Rajabala Das. Education Minister Rohini Choudhury arranged the permanent premises on the west bank of historic Dighalipukhuri along with financial grant. But the next hurdle faced by Rajabala Das was in affiliating the college to the Calcutta University which required Rs.10, 000.00 within ten days. It seemed that the dream of higher education for women in Assam would be nipped in the bud due to financial hardship. But with the help of her supportive husband Dr. Jyotish Das and Surya Kumar Bhuyan, the President of the Governing Body, she managed to convince the tea-planter and philanthropist Raibahadur Radhakanta Handique to donate the required money. Apart from it, he had also donated additional amount Rs.10, 000.00 for opening the Department of Botany, Rs.58000.00 for college buildings as well as four scholarships for the students. In recognition of the contribution made by Raibahadur Radhakanta Handique, the college was renamed as Handique Girls' College. Gradually Handique Girls' College was transformed into a full fledged undergraduate institution with the help of Hem Baruah, Sarat Kumar Dutta, Uma Kanta Sharma, Sarat Chandra Goswami, Satya Ranjan Sen, and many others.

On the contrary, there was a section of people who were against the establishment of a separate women college. A campaign was launched specially against Rajabala Das, who was simply a B. A. degree holder, for holding the post of honorary Principal. By that time she was also working as the head of Panbazar Girls' high School. She took it as a challenge and acquired the Master Degree in 1941. But things did not end there. As her husband was a popular Congress leader, there were nasty campaigns launched, where students of Cotton College were also engaged. In spite of such hardship Rajabala Das was successful in transforming Handique Girls' College into a premier women educational institution in entire Northeast.

Thus, it can be conclude that in an environment where traditional and conservative beliefs along with patriarchy were the factors that always stand as barriers for women to receive education, Rajabala Das have overcome all such barriers and was successful in making the Assamese women empowered through education.

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