



# A Study Of The Transformative Educational Legacy Of Indira Miri In The Socio-Cultural Context Of Assam

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## **ABSTRACT**

The role of women education and women empowerment in India was evident from Ancient period. For ages Many women educationist has contributed in the development and progression of the country. In 20th century, particularly after independence many famous women educationist, philosopher had participated and contributed in social and educational reform and played an important role in it, Indira Miri was among them, who became the representative of North eastern India for the upliftment of the backward classes of the society, development of women education in the society and generated awareness about the fundamental rights of each individual. Her role as an education officer in NEFA has inspired millions of woman of the country. She led to various changes in the upliftment of the remote culture and thinking of the backward class of the society and thus resulted in present Day's Assam. She imparted education and its importance in various sections of Assam and inspired people to take up dialects as their mode of instructions. She was also a social reformer who worked and uplifted the widow section of the society. Based on her Auto-biography MOI ARU NEFA (I AND NEFA) ,in this paper we will discuss about her grown up stages, her contributions towards society, its result and her achievements which recognised her as an inspiring activist who contributed her life for the country.

**KEYWORDS:** Women Empowerment, NEFA, Women Education, Backward Class.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Education is a bone for the society, which is an important tool for transformation of the society. A among various contemporary issues of education, woman education plays a major role in the society in women empowerment especially in countries like India. Many famous woman empowering activists are known from the history of India, Mrs. Indira Miri was among them who actively participated in the upliftment and development of woman education and social reforms in the north eastern region of India. In this article we seek to explore her grown up stages, life aspects, philosophy and her contribution towards people of Assam and nearby areas through her educational and social reformation.

## **EARLY LIFE**

In 1910, Indira Miri was born in Shillong to a well-known family of Bania community. Her nickname was given as 'Mereng', derived from a khasi word. Her father was Mr Rayabahadur Sonadhar Senapati, who was a registrar, freedom fighter as well as social worker of the Assam Secretariat, who used to fight and protest against women's ill reforms and lack of their proper education. Miri lost her mother, Mrs Divyakanti at an early age, hence she grew up under her father's guidance and was well inspired by her father's ideology. She was very much clear about her vision to establish self identity and an independent life. During her early life, various problems were faced by the Assamese community which involves caste problems, early marriage of the girls etc. However major problem was that women's were treated brutally and were forced to follow various customs made on the widows by the community. Her father always wanted to keep her away from such society as a result he sent her to Kolkata to get a proper exposure and knowledge on various aspects

## **HER LIFE AT KOLKATA**

In Kolkata Miri was enrolled at Bethune High School at the age of 11. She pursued her education in Kolkata by staying at Hostel. In 1921 she qualified her entrance examination with distinction and admitted to Scottish Church College, a co-ed institution to pursue her graduation. Kolkata gave her wide exposure on grounds of culture, though upliftments and education. During her graduation, she participated in many extra curricular activities like music etc. She got an opportunity to watch a play of Rabindranath Tagore at Jorasako Thakurbari and also attended speeches of reformers and freedom fighters of India like Mahatma Gandhi, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Sarojini Naidu. In her BA final examination she got the opportunity to take Assamese language as a medium of instruction instead of Bengali. This step in her life arouse various thoughts in her mind regarding the differences of life in Assam and Kolkata. This was the very first step she took towards introduction of Folk languages in the regional area of Assam.

## **EARLY WORK LIFE**

After her Graduation, Miri returned to Guwahati and applied for a teaching post at Panbazar Girl's High School. However the school principal Mr. Hem Chandra Das offered her job as an Assamese Teacher which she refused to join due to lack of confidence. Hem Chandra Das and RajoBala Das was fascinated by her skills and appraisal and hence offered her the post of Mathematics and English Teacher which she accepted. Mr Hem Chandra Das and Mrs. Rajobala Das played an important role in her life and helped her to gain confidence and made her a successful and dedicated teacher. Meanwhile her father decided to get her married to Mr. Mohi Chandra Miri who belonged from a backward class and was also a forest Extra Commissioner Officer of Assam. This heterogeneous marriage was another stepping stone in her life. Unfortunately, few years after her marriage, her husband passed away and pregnant Miri returned to her father's house along with her 2 children.

Miri decided to refocus on her career once again and rejoined Panbazar Girl's high school as an assistant teacher and later on became the Principal of Shillong Assamese Girls High School. Gradually she became Indira Baidue for her students and decided her main objective which is to provide proper education to her students and free them from the indecent rules and regulations made by the society. Meanwhile she completed her B.T degree with first class from St Mary's College and also received the opportunity to attend Montessori training for the period of 6 months at Ahmadabad from Mrs. Madam Montessori. In 1945 she once again got a turning point in her life when she received a scholarship from Assam Government for future studies in Abroad and she completed her 2-years B.ED degree from Edinburgh university of Scotland along with a 3 months teacher training course from Oxford University. During her B.ED course her thesis for the programme was "Factorial Analysis of 13 year old children".

## **LATER WORK LIFE**

In 1947, Miri returned back to India and joined North- East Frontier Agency (NEFA) as a Chief Education Officer. The office of NEFA was situated at Sadiya, (present day in Arunachal Pradesh) which is a remote area and generally considered as no man's land. The villages situated there had their own folk and dialects respectively and had their respective socio- economic and cultural practices. The place or area was so remote that there was a no proper transport system and facility. She worked in NEFA for 10 years. Later she helded various posts in Assam Government Education Department like in 1957 as a principal of Post Graduate Teachers Training Centre at Jorhat, Assam which is now popularly known as Institute of Advance study In education(IASE),in 1968 as a principal of Banikanta Kakoti Bachelor's Training College in Guwahati,she was the principal of Kanya College,as a member of Executive Council in Guwahati and Dibrugarh University, member of Governing Body of JB Law college and Handique Girls College, member of Illiteracy Elimination Committe under the department of All India Adult Education, as a chairman of Guwahati Public School and Jalukbari Children's house for many years.

## **HER CONTRIBUTIONS IN PROTOGONISTIC EDUCATION OF ASSAM**

Miri after joining NEFA lead a group of selfless and enthusiastic Assamese teachers and workers whose main function was to generate awareness regarding the concept of education, its importance and advancement of the society. The villages under NEFA have their respective dialects, hence they were unable to understand or communicate with members of nearby villages too. As a result Miri and her team had to learn individual dialects of each village to understand the problems of the people of each village. She along with her team members carried out a survey on understanding the extent of Assamese language as a medium of education. Meanwhile, a circular notice was released by government which instructed that every government school under NEFA should use Hindi and English as their medium of instruction. Indira Miri and her team members protested against such instruction and forced the government to pass a regulation which instructs that every govt schools can use their respective dialects or Assamese language as their medium of education. The Villagers accepted the regulation with joy.

Apart from providing education, Miri also contributed in their overall progress and development. Her team was decentralised where each member was given separate responsibility to train the children respectively like heath hygiene, toilet training, handcrafts working which includes wood, cane, bamboo crafts, making mud pots with clays, sewing, weaving and other extra curricular activities. She even took the aid of Assam Rifles to impart defensive training to her students.

Her progressive work in Sadiya fascinated many educated persons of local community who raised their hand to help her in her path and this motivated her to move on confidently. Her students number gradually increased from 1 to many and slowly spread among other villages of North Eastern region.She also worked for women empowerment and generated awareness regarding importance and benefits of women education.As a result she had succesfully increased the number of schools in Sadiya from 3 to 140 during her 10years of working at NEFA.

In 1957,however a political issue arouse in north eastern region as a result a new regulation was issued. According to the regulation, the north eastern region was instructed to use only Hindi as a medium of instruction in school education and denied the use of dialects in the respective areas. Also the members of NEFA were also changed and non Assamese individual who are well accustomed with Hindi language were recruited.Indira miri also received a transfer letter and a new post of DIRECTOR was implemented. However Indira miri in order to continue her fight against the injustice, rejected her transfer letter and applied for the newly implemented Director post too.Her application was not accepted as a result she took a firm descision of resignation from NEFA.

Indira Miri also contributed as Social activist by holding a post of Education Officer Chairman of the Social Welfare Board in 1983, as Deputy Chairman of Assam Branch of Indian Scouts and Guides, as member of Assam Terminology Committee, also a life member of Kristi Vikas Sangha, Guwahati. She also removed social untouchability by encouraging heterosexual marriages. This was how Indira Miri contributed in various developmental sectors of Assam and enhanced Assamese social policies.

### **HER ACHIEVEMENTS**

During her work life in NEFA she has done various developmental upliftments and also generate awareness and importance of use of Dialects in the society as a result in 1977 She was honoured as 'PADMASHRI' by Government of India, in 2004 she was awarded the 'SHANKARDEV' Award, the highest honour of the Assam Government, the prestigious D.Lit title was also given to her from Dibrugarh University.

### **CONCLUSION**

Indira Miri was far ahead from her society where a patriarchal society was encouraged which includes child marriage, social untouchability, lack of woman education. In North eastern Region particularly in Assam her contribution as an educationist and social reformer, her philosophy and thoughts was also created a huge impact of modernisation in the society. She contribution in upliftment of the backward classes of the society caused a great change in various aspects of Assam. However she died in 5th September 2004. After her demise, the School of Education of KrishnaKanto Handique State Open university was renamed as Indira Miri School of Education (IMSE) in her memory. Also in honour of her contribution in woman empowerment, Assam Government started Indira Miri Sarbojonin Bidhava Pension Asoni scheme where widows of the society was given the relevant benefits.

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