

## **RE-READING AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF RASSUNDARI DEBI AND KUMUD PAWDE AND UNRAVELING “HER STORY”**

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**Abstract:** The impact of patriarchy might appear to be seemingly benign but the repercussions of it can be traced historically which completely disregarded the role of women in the struggle for independence. Education for women remained a distant dream and women's tasks were restricted within the domestic sphere rendering them as invisible from the census. Male reformers such as Vidyasagar, Phule, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Behram Malabari came to the forefront to represent women's issues such as the abolition of sati, abolition of child marriage and reintegration of widows in the society. Gandhi too tried to motivate women to become active participants in the public domain and educate themselves to become proficient mothers. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay also elaborated on how hypocrisy functioned in Indian societies as men would try to be the messiahs of women empowerment without even taking women's opinion into consideration. In reality men were privileged with both rights and duties but women deprived of their rights and only allocated with their duties. Therefore Towards Equality movement in 1974 was introduced with the intention of ensuring social justice and equality in the society. Veena Mazumdar and Neera Desai stepped in to advocate women's movement and incorporation of women's studies in academia through re-reading autobiographies of women which would reflect on the socio-cultural environment and injustices that prevailed in the society. This paper would conceptualize the struggle for education and empowerment of two prominent women from Indian History- Rassundari Debi from West Bengal and Kumud Pawde from Maharashtra. Coming from absolutely different social sections there was a suffocating patriarchal shadow over all women but they shared a similarity- the zest to learn and educate themselves despite all odds.

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### **Introduction:**

**Life of Rassundari Debi:** In the midst of the social code of conduct imposed on women there were two women who fought all ordeals to educate themselves. One of them was Rassundari Debi, born in an upper caste family of landlords in Bengal and married off when she was 12 years old. She described her life through a creative use of metaphors such as “*prisoner on parole*”, “*bird trapped in a golden cage*” etc. in her autobiography titled “Amar Jiban”. She elaborated on the key features of Indian womanhood that imply self sacrificing, non indulgent and submissive demeanor.

The male bread winner paradigm operated in the society and the men being the decision maker of the house was expected to take into account the women's opinion on financial matters but that never really happened. Rajni Palriwala also argued how the upper caste families operate in rural Rajasthan where there are confined spaces of movement and cultural barriers imposed in the form of purdah that restricts women's mobility and access to public spaces. There is seniority in the consumption of food and women are supposed to serve according to that so the woman who cooks is the last one to eat. She in turn has to bear the brunt of men's anger and children's cries incase the food doesn't match up to their expectation. In case of unexpected guests the woman forgoes her meal instead of cooking again. Even the protein rich food, milk and sweets prepared on festivals are made accessible only to the men in the family. The woman attains a certain level of seniority in the house only when her son becomes the head of the household. Rassundari's life was also not very difficult from how Palriwala described in her extensive study.

Marriage is one of the most oppressive social structures that propagates the second class treatment in the society. Madhu Kishwar argued how dowry adds to the reasons for justifying violence against women

especially among the upper caste and has been the reason for young brides committing suicide. Jean Dreaze and Amartya Sen argued how violence against women was prevalent even before their birth through female feticide and infanticide. This has resulted in the skewed up sex ratio in India as daughters are cast as liabilities and hence discouraged from becoming active participants in the public domain. They were denied access to education and nutritious food as the sole purpose of their life was to look after the domestic chores. Rassundari Debi addressed how she was the only girl in a classroom full of boys in a school run by Christian missionaries. Her education came to an abrupt halt as the school where she studied caught fire but it is doubtful for how long she would have continued to study as in those days girls were married off early. The sexuality of a girl represented the honor of the family and all attempts were made to ensure that their name doesn't get shamed in the biradari for any misconduct. The incidents of violence and the fear psychosis that operated in the society imposed restrictions on the movement of women especially from the upper caste. Veena Das had mentioned in her work "An inferior seed cannot fall into a superior field but a superior seed can fall into an inferior field". It clearly illustrated how sexuality of a woman from the upper caste was considered the honor of the family and Rassundari was also in this trap of adhering to the social code of conduct representing her caste.

Rassundari Debi's life revolved around performing domestic chores and her thirst for knowledge eventually died. After the death of her mother-in-law the burden of cooking three square meals a day for thirty family members fell on her. She had twelve children of which seven died and in the process of making them identify alphabets she started trying to read again. This was a secret of which only a few trusted maids were informed. Reading Chaitanya Bhagavat was her dream and she managed to find a way to do so in the few hours she spared for herself in secret corners of the house. Finally she gathered courage to reveal it to her widowed sisters-in-law and much to her surprise they also wanted to be a part of the secret reading circle. They made an elaborate warning system for it to prevent discovery. She regrets how she couldn't get to meet her mother before her death and even getting out of home was accompanied with around twelve guards and two maids. The constant surveillance and suspicion regarding her whereabouts made her life suffocating and she always wanted to break free from those shackles in the name of customs imposed on her and on every woman from the upper caste in those days. Tanika Sarkar translated her lifelong struggle for education and Bengali autobiography describing the socio cultural environment and the plight of women those days.

**Life of Kumud Pawde:** Kumud Pawde on the other hand belonged to the Dalit community in a society segregated on the basis of purity and pollution. She wrote her autobiography titled, "*Antasphot*" where she described her struggle for education and employment in the chapter "The Story of my Sanskrit". Her caste members were denied access to education, basic healthcare, drinking water, sanitation facilities and entry to religious places as their bodies were considered as polluted. Some eminent scholars such as Meena Gopal, Annie Namala, Leela Dube, Ruth Manorama and Sharmila Rege had elaborated on the impact of caste on the lives of women and their self perception. Women belonging to the lower rungs of the society were sexually abused by men from the upper caste through the structures of family, community and religion. For instance; Lavani was a provocative dance performed by women from the Kolhati caste for the landlords in Maharashtra. These women were labeled as "nachees" and worked under the male dominated panchayat that prevented them from getting married or having a family. Devadasi tradition was performed by women from the Isai Vellalar caste where in the name of religion girls were submitted into performing temple based prostitution in South India. Bar dancers also belonged to the Bedia community where the women were the only earning member and had an entire family dependent on their labor. The other occupations allocated to women from the lower caste were of midwifery or dai who is responsible for cutting the umbilical cord and discharging the placenta which were considered as defiling tasks, manual scavenging and tanning of leather. The upper caste members were the receivers of these services performed by the lower caste women. The fear of breaching the code of conduct was so strong that women would comply with it and perform all the allocated tasks without questioning the dominant structures of the society.

Kumud Pawde could also easily take the easy path of making an adaptive preference and a result of her fate by complying with the caste norms but she chose to pave her way through academics. Despite the

constant humiliation she was subjected to and demotivation from teachers who felt that the Vedic scriptures would get polluted if a girl from Malhar community touched them she continued her schooling. She was ridiculed, bullied and called names but that did not deter her from pursuing her Masters in Sanskrit in a school dominated by Brahminical prejudices. She would hear mothers warning their daughters to stay away from her and teachers discouraging her from taking up Sanskrit. After completing her Masters in Sanskrit it wasn't easy for her to even get the job of a clerk. Some words she had overheard "One thing that doesn't change by one's birth and death is his caste" kept daunting her. Seeing her peers getting employed and some even lesser qualified left her frustrated and she decided to write a letter to Jagjivan Ram for a solution.

He also just like others did not assure her of a job instead asked her to pursue research. With no food to eat and finances to run her house she was only left to feel miserable. In order to kill time she enrolled herself for Masters in English during which she had an inter caste marriage. With her name changing from Kumud Somkuwar to Kumud Pawde her fate also changed as she got her dream job as a lecturer in the University that taught her so much. In her autobiography she questions why the people from her maiden caste still remained deprived as it is considered as polluted. Their destiny is not even in their hands and their capabilities restricted to tasks that cater to suit the requirements of the upper caste men.

**Importance of Women's Studies and Re- Reading Women's Autobiographies:** The historiography of women had been overlooked by academicians and only when the National Policy on Education 1986 was implemented that sexist biases and stereotypes in textbooks were being rectified. Policy implementation by the UGC ensured that Women's Studies would play the role of a positive interventionist. Women's tasks were under the purview of non economic activities and expected code of conduct adding to their invisibility from the economy. With the introduction of women's studies by the UGC there have been concerted efforts in incorporating gender sensitization and mainstreaming in the school and college curriculum. Employing more female teachers in primary schools, better transportation facilities, sanitation in school premises, degree and diploma courses, vocational and skill development programs, adult education programs, incentives such as mid day meal scheme and free schooling were seen as a means of ensuring girls attended school.

Women's Studies and feminist methodology of research was incorporated into the curriculum for every course as a means of understanding the society through a different lens. It was built with the idea of empowering women by ensuring their ability to think critically. Re-reading autobiographies of women and translating them for everyone helped in understanding the plight of women and their contribution in the society which had been considered as a part of non economic activities as it did not fall under the purview of gainful employment. Women have been rendered as invisible from the Census and this understanding of their contribution can be analysed only through the autobiographies of some eminent women.

Tanika Sarkar and Partha Chatterjee had elaborated on the public private dichotomy prevalent in the 19th century households. Nussbaum elaborated on how violence and the fear of violence still operates in the society and makes women dependent on their male counterparts. Rassundari Debi and Kumud Pawde defied some of their social norms and within limits of what were the attributes of Indian womanhood gained some power in the society. When we use the word "education", it need not mean to read or write or deal with numbers. In other words it is not only the formal education that one receives in a classroom, but the larger lessons one learns through various processes of socialization. Education means mastering basic skills, acquiring knowledge to enhance one's ability to reason and make sound judgment. The main sufferers in our society had been women as the norms and code of conduct were made by the male dominated regressive society. As long as education remains a far-fetched 'dream for women, we can never claim ourselves to be progressive. An overview of the autobiographies of Rassundari Debi and Kumud Pawde clearly depicted the androcentricism that prevailed in knowledge production and education was a means of asserting their rights in the society.

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