

# My Half of the Sky



12 Life Stories of Courage

图书馆

Indrani Raimedhi



# **My Half of the Sky**

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## Foreword

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The Northeast was for many in the “heartland” a faraway and somewhat mysterious place at the time of Independence. Less so with the passage of time. Even so, Indrani Raimedhi has rendered a signal service by revealing another facet of this very diverse region through a series of fascinating stories of some of its remarkable women, exemplars all.

Although seen at the forefront in many parts of the Northeast, the notion that, unlike their sisters in most other parts of the country, northeastern women necessarily enjoy a greater degree of freedom and an equal and even privileged position in society is exaggerated. This is so even in Meghalaya’s matrilineal society where the youngest uncle controls the purse. *My Half of the Sky* narrates stories of indomitable women who have fought privation, discrimination, and adversities of every kind to become icons and blaze new trails.

Jahnabi was tricked into marrying an AIDS victim from a privileged Assamese home, only to be ostracized and widowed and herself infected as a young mother. Though shunned by society, she fought for her rights, joined Indian Network of Positive People, and found Assam Network of Positive People in 2002. Her message to every women: “don’t match horoscopes before marriage but go for a blood test.” Urmee Mazumdar likewise bravely fought polio and found Swabalambi (self-reliant) in rural Assam to train people with all manners of disability to stand on their own feet. Bertha Dkhar of Shillong, a blind person herself, developed a Khasi Braille and launched a campaign for inclusive education for all in normal schools.

The differently abled do not want sympathy but facilities for training so that they can lead normal lives and cultivate their talents. These three women have shown the way.

Others like Birubala Rabha have fought witch-hunting, a terrible scourge in rural India, where quack “medicine-men” are quick to label any innocent woman as a witch and beat and torment her to death to exculpate their own superstitions and criminal folly. Mary Kom became an Olympic boxer, winning laurels for Manipur and India. And, Parbati, a zamindar’s daughter, became India’s first and best-known woman elephant mahout. Hasina Kharbhih has fought child and female trafficking, a heart-rending but flourishing criminal trade across porous international and state borders.

And then there are writers, journalists, filmmakers, and human rights defenders like Monalisa Changkija and Manju Baruah who probe and mirror the Northeastern reality. Novelist Rita Chowdhury documented the Assam anti-foreigner movement, and has written movingly about the indignity and wrong done by the Indian state to the small, hard-working, and well-integrated Chinese community, long domiciled around Makum in north Assam, by exiling them to western India in 1962 on security considerations. Teresa Rehman has reported courageously and objectively from the Northeast and now runs an online journal [Thumbprintmag.com](http://Thumbprintmag.com) to tell the world about what goes on there. Her story, telling of a daylight fake encounter in Manipur brought her both kudos and threats. Monisha Behal founded the very useful Northeast Network that has empowered women.

Indrani’s pen portraits of these pioneering women achievers make them and their work come alive. She writes with a human touch—about how ordinary women have achieved greatness and of the greatness inherent in ordinary women.

*My Half of the Sky* is a valuable addition to literature on the Northeast. Indeed, it portrays the story of all Indian women and the relentless struggle the country must wage to invest people with dignity.

**B.G. Verghese**

Senior fellow, Centre for Policy Research



# Introduction

Journalism is about the here and the now, and fiction is about the universal and the timeless. If writing is a solitary occupation, then journalism is just the opposite—you interact with people all the time. I had spent 25 tough, memorable years trying to be both a writer and a journalist before the idea of writing this book became a gleam in my eye. An idea travels through the invisible routes of the subconscious before it emerges, fully formed. Writing this book is an intrinsic part of not only who I am, but more importantly, where I come from.

I am an Assamese, belonging to Assam, one of the states of what is known as India's Northeast region. It is a part of the country idealized in glossy tourist brochures, overlooked by the powers-that-be, and utterly unknown to the average Indian. It is a region that is far away in every sense of the term—whether it be in physical distance, accessibility, or cultural affinity. The eight states are clubbed together under a common name that does not take into account the individual identities, cultures, and ethnicities of each state. As if it was not troubling enough to be in the periphery, Northeast India began to feature in mainstream Indian media for all the wrong reasons—insurgency, bomb blasts, ethnic violence, kidnapping, secret killings, and reprisal of armed forces. The picture of emerald hills, sparkling waterfalls, and virgin forests was stained with blood. There were heartbreaking stories of families separated, homes destroyed, and brother turning against brother. Like other writers in this troubled region, I too wrote stories depicting the horrors of this grim reality.

I struggled to convey what it was to be a woman at this point of history in this corner of the world. And then gradually, I realized that it was real stories of real women that were waiting to be narrated, stories that go beyond clichés and hype to reveal the indomitable spirit of woman. The 12 women featured in this book challenge traditional views about women's place in society and the home. They prove that Indian women are boldly stepping out of their marginalized space. They have confronted great odds and endured heartbreaking ordeals to stand by what they believe in. Their stirring narratives dispel gender stereotypes and reveal facets of this beautiful, troubled part of the country. This book also stands for the premise that all issues are women issues.

One of my favorite authors, Virginia Woolf, commented with great perspicacity that "For much of history, Anonymous was a woman." It indeed is still true of women who hail from this corner of the nation. And yet, Gandhiji himself had praised Assamese women for weaving fairy tales on their looms. We have had heroic women like Ahom warrior Mula Gabharu, Ahom Queen Phuleswari, and martyrs like Kanaklata who lived and died for freedom. Many a time, such women are relegated to footnotes in dusty tomes. Our knowledge of their lives is restricted to some flimsy anecdotes, a few stereotyped images, some exotic notions, and most often, a recalling of grim facts. How does a woman of today's Northeast perceive the reality of a lived experience? How are they meeting the challenges of finding their voice and making their lives meaningful? How are they discarding the tag of victimhood to make miracles possible? It was to find out answers to these questions that I plunged into the writing of this book.

The challenges were evident much before I put pen to paper. Who were the women that I would shortlist to feature in my book? The women studies cell of a prestigious local college had already produced a book titled, *Assamese Woman—The Pathbreakers*. It had brief biographical sketches of women social workers, writers, academicians, dancers, artists, entrepreneurs, doctors, and so on, all

neatly pigeon-holed. But the book I had in mind was to be about drama in real life, about women who would lay bare intimate details of their lives, and take me along the journeys they had made from the known to the unknown.

Having grown up in an undivided Assam, I had mingled joyously with Khasi, Naga, Manipuri, Lushai, and Karbi children. In my lifetime I have seen separate states carved out of Assam like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the pieces must fit for a jigsaw puzzle to make sense. And one way to do it was to reach out to Bertha Dkhar from Meghalaya, Monalisa Changkija from Nagaland, and Mary Kom from Manipur. Logistical constraints did not permit me to find role models to represent Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Sikkim. Assam has been represented by Parbati Barua, Teresa Rehman, Jahnabi Goswami, Monisha Behal, and Birubala Rabha. This apparent overrepresentation of my home state Assam has more to do with opportunities of access to them than a natural bias. Anshu Jensempa, the first woman from the Northeast to scale Mt. Everest twice seemed always as distant as the lonely snow-clad peaks. A brief telephone conversation with her and some YouTube clips could not be stretched to a fitting narrative. A distinguished legal luminary's work in her field is enriching beyond measure, but would readers pore over reams of legal terms and references, without a gripping back story? After several interviews and much note-taking, that chapter was shelved, and so was the chapter about an admired and internationally recognized disarmament activist. If there was one thing I was determined to avoid, it was cobbling together a string of hagiographies.

As I waded out to the uncharted sea, the perils became quickly apparent. Almost all the women were known to me, and as much as they agreed to be interviewed, they could not give me time. Jahnabi Goswami was setting up a home for HIV positive orphans. Bertha Dkhar was not keen on my visiting her in Shillong on a Sunday because she was a regular churchgoer. Parbati Barua often vanished without a trace to the heart of jungles far from the city

to be with her beloved elephants, leaving me in the lurch. A giant billboard in front of my office showed Mary Kom at her pugnacious best, and I had to use my imagination, videos, and newspaper reports to script her enthralling story. From faraway Dimapur, a town in Nagaland, Monalisa Changkija patiently answered my questions on an e-mail, and these were used to create an imaginary encounter between her and Tanya Chopra, a Delhi-based journalist. Being a writer of the fiction genre, I made use of such devices in my attempt to give the account a compelling immediacy and context. The sheer breadth and depth of writer activist Rita Chowdhury's work made great demands on me as I struggled to record her life and her beliefs. A great lot of material already existed on her, but in this account her honesty and erudition shines through. Teresa has been a close friend and active editorial collaborator in this book. Shy of talking about her achievements, it took a lot of gentle coaxing and implacable ultimatums for her to go through her life and work. Teresa's story is all the more remarkable, hailing us she does from a minority community that still imposes many strictures on women.

There is a definite element of serendipity in my being able to get in touch with anti-witchcraft crusader Birubala Rabha. But when we spoke on the phone, she could not understand what it was I wanted from her. Finally, I made myself understood. She was to come and see me in Guwahati, be a guest at my home, and tell her story for a book. One rainy afternoon, she arrived at my door. Hours of conversation became possible through an interpreter, and I finally had my story. Urmeem Mazumdar and I had long nightly phone conversations. We lived 10 minutes away from each other. Somewhere along the way, I stopped having a plan and went with the flow, interviewing whoever was free at the moment. So there I was, writing multiple narratives, simultaneously, sometimes finding myself stonewalled and at other times feeling it was as effortless as a walk in the park. As months passed, the manuscript grew, and we became this broad informal group of 13 women, making

ourselves heard, sharing our experiences, and completing the jigsaw puzzle.

All through the writing of this book, I remembered the words of Bohemian American activist and writer Anais Nin, who, with searing honesty, challenged, “How wrong is it for a woman to expect the man to build the world she wants, rather than to create it herself?” These 12 women had built, often from scratch, edifices that are a triumph of the human spirit.

In order to appreciate better the struggles of these 12 women, it is necessary to remember that like millions of others in this troubled corner of the country, these women too suffered the privations of a long, unending conflict. Northeast India has been the theater of the earliest and most prolonged insurgency in the country. Independent demands started in Naga Hills, then still a part of Assam, as far back as in 1952. This was shortly followed by the Mizo rebellion in 1966. The late 1970s saw the emergence of more separatist outfits, including the United Liberation Front of Assam (UFLA) and the National Democratic Force of Bodoland. Except for Sikkim, all the other seven states of the region are affected by insurgent violence. Author and political commentator Wasbir Hussain, in his book *Home-makers without the Men*, describes how in any conflict situation women and children are drawn into the vortex of the problem. He cites numerous instances of husbands, sons, and brothers, besides the women themselves, getting killed either at the hands of militants or the security forces who battle these militants. In some cases, terrorists have slain civilians in this deadly cocktail of hate and suspicion. Hundreds of insurgent cadres have been neutralized by the security forces during anti-insurgency operations. Security personnel have also lost their lives. One is haunted by the fact there are countless families across the Northeast who have lost their breadwinner—be it a father, a brother, or a husband. Women of these families have had to put aside their grief to make a living, raise their children, and rebuild their shattered homes. Organizations such as Mothers Union in Meghalaya, the

Naga Mothers Association, the Naga Women's Union, and Meira Paibis in Manipur have struggled long and hard to restore sanity in a fractured land. Peace processes have been initiated by government and civil society groups, with mixed results. Jnanpith award winner Dr Mamoni Raisom Goswami, with her apolitical credentials and integrity, acted as the mediator between the Union government and the ULFA at a crucial period in Assam's recent history.

The icon of public resistance who has been the most visible symbol of our collective predicament is Irom Sharmila Chanu, a civil right activist and poet from Manipur. On November 11, 2000 she began a hunger strike which continues till date. Described as the world's longest hunger striker, this implacable warrior of peace is on trial for attempted suicide. Her protest can be traced to a horrifying incident on November 11, 2000, when 10 civilians were shot down in cold blood as they were standing at a bus stop. This Malom Massacre was allegedly carried out by the Assam Rifles, one of the divisions of the Indian military forces operating in the state. One of the victims, ironically, was the 18-year-old Sinam Chandramani Singh, a 1986 Child Bravery Award winner. Lacerated by the incident, Irom Sharmila began her fast from that very day. Three days later, she was arrested by the police with an attempt to commit suicide, which is unlawful under the Indian Penal Code. She has been regularly released and rearrested every year since her hunger strike began. This frail and valiant woman has waged a nonviolent struggle to ensure the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA). On July 15, 2004, some women activists of the Meira Paibis stripped in front of the Kangla Fort, the headquarter of the Assam Rifles in Manipur, triggering an unprecedented civil disobedience in Manipur against the AFSPA, 1958, which led to the establishment of a review committee to examine this act. The protests were against the alleged extrajudicial execution of Thangjam Manorama Devi on the night of

July 11, 2004, by the Assam Rifles and to repeal the AFSPA. The AFSPA empowers the representative of the central government, the governor, to subsume the powers of the state government to declare undefined disturbed areas. It also empowers the noncommissioned officers of the armed forces to arrest without warrant, to destroy any structure that may be hiding absconders, without any verification, to conduct search and seizure without warrant, and to even shoot to death. What is more troubling, no legal proceeding against abuse of such arbitrary powers can be initiated without the prior permission of the central government. While introducing the AFSPA on August 18, 1958, the government accepted it as an emergency measure, and it was supposed to have been in force only for a year.

Where does my group of women figure in all this? Like others, they have been under the shadow of the eclipse. They have struggled to hold onto the quotidian assurances of a normal life. They have negotiated their way between uncertainties to bring meaning to their lives and the lives of others. Seen in this wider context, their trajectories assume a new meaning and resonance. Writing about them has been my way of rejoicing in what is good and courageous and noble in the midst of so much tragedy. And I, in all humility second American artist Georgia O'Keefe that "I feel there is something unexplored about women that only a woman can explore."

The 12 women who feature in this book come from diverse backgrounds. The thread that binds their stories is their resolve to change the circumstances of their lives, overcoming tremendous odds, and give wings to their dreams. They are survivors and pathfinders, doers, and dreamers, leaving in their wake surging inspiration and hope. Their testimonies reveal what it is like to live in this often forgotten corner of India. They have overcome personal tragedy, broken the fetters of tradition, fought discrimination, and coped bravely with the harrowing experience of violence and

uncertainty. Through the prism of these true life stories, I have also tried to explore the paradoxes, problems, triumphs, and realities of today's Indian woman.

Jahnabi Goswami is a radiant bride who steps into her husband's home, unaware of the terrible secret he is hiding from her. In a couple of years she loses him and her baby daughter to AIDS. She then takes the unprecedented step of coming out into the open as the first HIV positive woman from the Northeast and sets up the Assam Network of Positive People. Jahnabi reveals how she refused to don the tag of victim and struggles against great odds to help people with HIV/AIDS and fight for their rights. She has transformed herself from a shattered widow and a grieving mother to a powerhouse of energy—counseling patients, coordinating with different agencies, and traveling all over the world, being a passionate spokesperson for people with HIV/AIDS. She embodies feminine strength and resilience in the face of dark adversity.

Parbati Barua is the celebrated Elephant Queen, the only woman elephant trainer in the world. Born into an affluent and privileged zamindar family, she chose to answer the call of the wild, taming elephants, and training them. Her daredevil exploits deep in the inaccessible jungles have captured the imagination of the world. In this exclusive and free-wheeling interview, the reclusive and enigmatic Parbati offers a compelling view of her extraordinary life and her mystical bond with these majestic creatures.

As a teenager Rita Chowdhury spent years as a fugitive student revolutionary hiding from the law. She went on to chronicle the Assam movement against foreign nationals, capturing in gripping prose the drama of those stirring years. Her novel *Deo Langkhui*, an epic work and a historical fiction on the Tiwa tribe of Assam, won her the Sahitya Akademi Award. With her writing committed to the cause of the voiceless, Chowdhury brings to light a dark chapter of the Indo-China war of 1962, when the Chinese Indians of Upper Assam were forcibly transported to an internment camp



in Rajasthan. She uses her remarkable storytelling powers to point out the injustice done to these forgotten people.

Award-winning journalist Teresa Rehman risks her life to uncover explosive stories in India's troubled Northeast. Penetrating deep into a jungle camp to interview an elusive dreaded rebel leader or exposing to world a shocking encounter killing in broad daylight by the state forces, it is all part of Teresa's usual work schedule. Teresa continues to be driven by her commitment to report on issues unknown to the rest of the country and the world. With her ear to the ground, Teresa works to reveal the many facets of the region and feels strongly that every story must be in the larger interest of the society.

Afflicted by polio when she was a toddler, Urmee Mazumdar has always refused to make compromises or seek the easy way out. Her life has been dedicated to working among the disabled through her NGO, Swabalambi, making them aware of their rights, arranging for their treatment, and training them for a livelihood. Because of her efforts, hundreds of differently abled people have learnt to lead meaningful lives. And Urmee continues to win awards for her valiant crusade.

How does one feel when one's world turns dark, familiar faces vanish, and every step ahead seems an abyss? Ask Bertha G. Dkhar, the Khasi lady who turned blind just when life was beckoning her with its many promises. Bertha traveled from fear, heartbreak, rage, and, eventually, to acceptance. Along the way, her heart went out to others like her—blind boys and girls. Against great odds, she created Braille in the Khasi language and ushered in a quiet revolution in the area of education for the visually challenged. Honored with the Padmashree, Bertha Dkhar is today a pillar of the Khasi society and an inspiring role model.

Mary Kom, the daughter of an impoverished farmer's family in a Manipur village, does something unprecedented that puts her on the long road to international fame as an Olympic boxer. Her grit