

# My Half of the Sky

## 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. “Destiny’s Daughters” 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 ostracised and widowed and herself infected as a young mother. Though shunned by society, she fought for her rights, joined the Indian Network of Positive People and went on to found the Assam Network of Positive People in 2002. Her message to very women: “don’t match horoscopes before marriage but go for a blood test”. Urmee Mazumdar, likewise bravely fought polio and went on to found Swabalambi (Self-Reliant) in rural Assam to train people with all manner of disabilities to stand on their own feet. Bertha Dkhar of Shillong, blind 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 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 Kharbi has fought child and female trafficking, a heart-rending but flourishing criminal trade across porous international and state borders

And then writers, journalists, film makers and human rights defenders like Monalisa Chankija 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.

"Destiny's Daughters" is a valuable addition to literature on the Northeast. Indeed, its pages portray the story of all Indian women and the relentless struggle the country must wage to invest people with dignity.