

Indrani Raimedhi's book "My Half Of The Sky" chronicles the life journey of 12 incredible women from the North East

"A north-eastern woman, in mainstream consciousness, is either the rape victim in Delhi often referred to as a 'chink', or someone like Mary Kom, a celebrated Olympian put up on billboards."

In writer-journalist Indrani Raimedhi's observation lies a pertinent question — where are the women that fill up the gap between these two extreme images in the mainstream public eye?

Searching for some examples to counter this oft-seen "north-eastern women's invisible identity in the rest of India", Guwahati-based Raimedhi has recently brought out a book, "My Half Of The Sky". The Sage India publication situates the life journey of 12 women from North East India between its 170 pages with the aim of highlighting their path-breaking contribution to an umbrella of streams. While Mary Kom does feature among the chosen 12, yet another icon of north-eastern women in mainstream consciousness — Irom Sharmila — is found missing. But what is significant about the book is not what is absent from its pages but what is present. Each story of these women achievers — presented in a breezy, interview format that draws amply from Raimedhi's experience as a journalist for over two decades in the region — conveys to the greater world a North East that is often overlooked, a bouquet of issues it has been dealing with emanating not as expected from the overriding problem of terrorism alone.

Primarily, it breaks the common myth outside of the North East that women in the region are far more 'liberated' than their counterparts in the rest of India. The impression doesn't go unobserved in the foreword by veteran journalist B.G. Verghese where he highlights, "...the notion that, unlike their sisters in most other parts of the country, north-eastern women necessarily enjoy a greater degree of freedom and an equal and even privileged position in society is exaggerated."

Responds Raimedhi in a telephonic interview from Guwahati, "B.G. Verghese rightly points out that you can't blanket all north-eastern women with this notion. Yes, they are more forward, more economically emancipated but they still have to manage their lives within the frame of patriarchy, which most of these 12 women have. Take for example, one of the women in the book, journalist-writer Monalisa Changkija. She was once referred to as 'the only man in Nagaland'. So, when a woman is independent and is out to carve out a niche for her, she is seen as a man, even in the north-eastern society."

The women exemplars in Raimedhi's book belong to a wide spectrum. It talks about Jahnabi Goswami, an HIV survivor. Jahnabi was married off to an HIV positive man without her knowledge who passed on the killer disease not only to her but to her baby too which finally claimed the little one's life along with that of her husband, leaving her to face a hostile society all alone. It chronicles the making of the world's only woman mahout in Parbati Barua and her enduring love for elephants leading to the book by British author Mark Shand,

“Travels on My Elephant, River Dog”, also the BBC documentary and the book, “Queen of the Elephants.”

The book also brings to the readers Birubala Rabha, a victim of witchcraft, ostracised by society who searched within her the strength not only to fight it all but also to become a much-needed symbol of inspiration for many such voiceless women quietly bowing down to social injustice. Then there is Sahitya Akademi winning author Rita Chowdhury, whose trajectory in writing springs from her association as a leader in Assam student’s agitation leading to a period of life led in hiding. Also, if National Award winning Manju Borah’s life journey is interesting as a woman filmmaker, it is no less so of Hasina Kharbhih who has taken on the women trafficking mafia in Meghalaya.

There are also others — Monisha Behal to whom goes the credit of “singlehandedly professionalising social work in NE”; disability activist Urmee Mazumdar; visually impaired Bertha G. Dkhar who created Braille in her native Khasi language and award-winning journalist Teresa Rehman besides Monalisa Changkija, the only woman editor, publisher and owner of an English daily in the NE.

Says Raimedhi, “Each is a readable, gripping story. The reason why I chose these particular women achievers is because I wanted to cover as much area as possible and women’s role in them.” Though she has been “writing articles with a feminist slant for the last 25 years,” Raimedhi says, “What I learnt from these women is that it is not enough to beat your chest and claim to be a feminist. What is required is to face the odds and come up triumphant.”

Next in line is a “similar book”.

Says Raimedhi, “These 12 women are known, at least in NE, but I am now working on another set of north-eastern women who are more invisible but their life stories are equally important and worth documenting.”