



THE CONTRIBUTION OF INDIRA MIRI TOWARDS THE FIELD OF EDUCATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

Preetismita Bora

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

Ph.D. Scholar,
Department of Education,
Jadavpur University, Kolkata,
West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Preetismita Bora

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250307059>

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to find out how women can play a pivotal role in bringing about societal changes by setting the example of Indira Miri. Indira Miri was born in 1910 in Shillong, a city in the state of Meghalaya (North-East India) in a Scheduled Caste (SC) family. At that moment, it was quite impossible to get access to education, especially for the women. Additionally, for women from the SC community background, it was hard enough to get educated. However, Miri found this loophole that was hindering social progress and accordingly started putting efforts to modify the existing notions that dominated society at that time. Against this backdrop, the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) played a vital role since based on her achievement, Miri was selected as the top officer in the NEFA Education Department. At that moment, though the NEFA was deprived of the light of civilization, Indira Miri took the initiative to spread the light of education by cutting the dense forest and setting up schools, where there was no proper provision of transportation to remote places in the concerned hilly areas for the promotion and spread of modern education. She established altogether 140 schools (approx.) in her 10-year service tenure (approx.) as an Education Officer. Hence, despite being born and raised in a patriarchal society, Miri became the most popular Assamese woman figure since she devotedly tried to bring revolutionary changes towards the underdeveloped society, especially in the field of education. This paper will deeply explore the contributions made by this hidden icon of Assam, especially during the mid and late 20th century, which is constantly countable in today's context.

Keywords: *Indira Miri, SC community, North-East India, NEFA, Assam*

Introduction

Education plays a very significant role in upgrading people to proper civilization. Education is a tool for community development, where individuals can develop knowledge and skills to improve their lives and contribute to the betterment of the community. Education helps achieve both personal and collective goals, which will help build a strong and sustainable community. "An education that allows each child to live with purpose, to discover himself, others, and his environment and to become an agent of change". Education helps to maintain sustainability in community development, where the feeling develops that each individual of a particular community contributes to the well-being of the nation to which they belong. It also helps to promote self-reliance, self-determination, self-confidence, and empowerment among the community people (Hapuarachchi,2022). To solve different community problems such as terrorism, poverty, gender inequality, lack of proper recognition, etc, a high-quality education is needed here. "Education is important for having awareness for almost everything in life and it is a basic human right of every human -being" (Rana,2021).

The Introduction of North-East India

North-East India, officially known as the North-Eastern Region (NER) comprises eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. These states are known as "eight sisters" or "seven sisters and one brother". These states are the greatest example of "unity in diversity" because they have very distinctive cultures and multiple ethnic groups from different cultures, religions etc. are living here (Singh, 2018). This paper mainly focuses on Arunachal Pradesh, considered the largest state among the Northeastern states. The area of Arunachal Pradesh is 83,743sq. kilometre and a low-density population of 17 per sq. kilometre. This state is sharing international border with three countries namely- Bhutan, China and Myanmar (Mihin, 2018).

The History of NEFA

The North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), previously known as the North-East Frontier Tracts (NEFT), was a political division of British colonial India and later the republic of India until 20th January. After many political and colonial struggles, NEFA finally received the status of state as Arunachal Pradesh on 20th February 1987. The late prime minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru made a statement on the indigenous community especially on NEFA people, "I am not at all sure which is the better way of living, the indigenous or our own. In some respects, I am quite certain theirs is better. Therefore, it is grossly presumptuous on our part to approach them with an air of superiority to tell them how to behave or what to do or not to do. Previously, NEFA was divided into 5 divisions which is now called as districts namely- Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tirap. Shri Jairamdas Daulatram who was a former Governor of Assam made a statement on the NEFA people so that for the sake of development their originality never being compromised- "Each section of the large population contributes to the making of the nation in the same manner as each flower has the right to develop its own colour and form and to spread its own fragrance to make up the cumulative beauty and splendour of the garden. I would not like to change my roses into lilies, nor my lilies into roses. Nor do I want to sacrifice my lovely orchids and rhododendrons of the hills"

A Brief Introduction to Indira Miri and Her Educational Background

Indira Senapati who is popularly known as Indira Miri was born in 1910 at Shillong in an indigenous schedule caste community of Assam. Her father late Rayabahadur Sonadhar Senapati was a registrar, freedom fighter and social worker of Assam secretariat who inspired Indira Miri to become self-reliant and independent. Sonadhar Senapati constantly opposed patriarchy, social discrimination, gender inequality etc. for which he tried to make her daughter educated so that she would become empowered to fight against all discrimination. At that time, the condition of women's education was very poor and the recognition of women was within the four walls of a house. Despite all the challenges Indira Miri started her school education in a Bengali medium school in Shillong (the city of Meghalaya) and continued it in different districts of Assam as Nagaon, Dhubri etc. Later, by the force of her father, she enrolled at Bethune High School, Kolkata at the age of 11. After that, she enrolled the Scottish Church College, Kolkata in 1921, where she graduated from. After graduation, she got a first-class B.T. degree from Lady Kiran College, Shillong.

Miri also got the chance to directly connect with Madam Maria Montessori and associate with the Montessori Education System in Ahmedabad. In 1945, Indira Miri received a scholarship from the Assam Government for higher studies abroad and she joined a two-year teacher training course (B.Ed.) at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland and also took up a teacher training course at Oxford University. In 1947, after two years she came back to India and joined as the top officer of the Department of Education in NEFA and her remarkable journey towards the contribution of education started from here. Indira Miri was awarded many prestigious awards for her contribution to community development works as "PADMASHRI" in 1977 by the Government of India, the "SHANKARDEV AWARD" in 2004 which is the highest honour of the Assam Government and the prestigious D.Lit. title from Dibrugarh University (Kirtonia,2022).

Objective

To know how Indira Miri took the challenges to educate the indigenous community of NEFA.

Methodology

To make this research paper, the researcher has going through with different historical records. This research paper is based on qualitative research with different observations, discussions, analysis etc. where the researcher gathers data from different secondary sources as research articles, books, news etc.

Findings

There was no scope for formal education in NEFA before independence. Only Buddhist scripts were there which was also for those who wanted to serve the society through Monastery. (TAMUK,2014). In 1947, Indira Miri was joined as the first education officer of NEFA. In the autobiography, *Moi Aru Nefa (I and NEFA)*, Indira Miri wrote about her professional journey as an education officer (1947-1957).

Indira Miri proposed what she wanted to do as an education officer and submitted it to the Government. First of all, she decided to set up an educational institution in Shadiya because the Arab-Mishima hills were convenient for Shadiya and Tirap, Sobanshiri, and Balipara these places were also close to Shadiya. That was why almost all the hilly indigenous people of those divisions would be educationally benefitted by her decision. According to her, if she truly wanted to educate indigenous students she might stay in Shadiya. To teach in that place, the teacher should know properly about the indigenous people, what were their needs, demands, complaints etc. This would help them to prepare their child for the future society.

Additionally, she has decided to set up a teacher training institution in Shadiya. Her logic was that these areas are untouched by education so this is a big responsibility to fulfil as children come easily to study in school. To implement this, eligible teachers must be there and at that time there was not a single one in that community to teach their children. By roaming around in Shadiya Indira Miri came to know this thing that those indigenous people have their own language scripts and they were familiar to the Assamese language. So, she decided to appoint teachers who were fluent in the Assamese language and the medium of instruction should be in the Assamese language. The government also accepted her proposals.

According to Indira Miri, education must be life and opportunity-oriented. Education must be there sufficiently so that the indigenous people can lead a healthy life and fulfil all their socio-economic demands. Otherwise, education has no meaning. She focussed on bringing all-round development in body, mind and spirit through education. For that reason, moral and value-based education should be provided to the children along with the traditionality in education. Then only there will be a complete education for children. She has also stated that sound education is only possible in a sound society. Indira Miri tried to bring educational awareness among those indigenous people so that the aim of child education would be fulfilled. School education is not sufficient for a child to become completely educated. So, it is equally important to educate the society along with child education. Moreover, Indira Miri also decided on the aim of education for the indigenous community based on the statement which was given by former president Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru i.e., “the indigenous people should not be our second edition”. That means the children should be educated in that way so that they can preserve their originalities and they can decide what is good and what is bad for them. In a nutshell, the objective of education was that child should be educated in that way so that they could preserve their cultural identity, heritage etc. and transform those things to their future generation in the right way.

Indira Miri also gave attention to skill development among children by appointing skilful teachers in different fields. The officers of the agriculture and health department of the Shadiya division gave agriculture and health education. There were different kinds of co-curricular activities for children as handloom, weaving, PT etc. Late Muktinath Bordoloi (AEO) taught teaching theories, and teaching methodologies of different subjects, child psychology, music etc. in the teacher training institution.

There was also a provision for teachers to learn indigenous scripts so that they could easily motivate and create interest among indigenous children for schooling. Late Gopi Medhi, Madan Bordoloi, Gopal Bordoloi, Bidya Sharma etc. all teachers helped Indira Miri to popularise education at the Shadiya division.

After getting the permission from government and 1 year of teachers’ training, at the end of 1948 Indira Miri first set up a primary school. There was also a provision to learn both Hindi and English by special teachers. The trained teachers also served for development in villages and societies. There was also a provision for Adult Education that incorporated different things such as the 3Rs, socio-economic development, Agriculture, Handicrafts, health, water supply, cultural education etc. which are most important for community development.

However, the devastating Earthquake in 1950 changed the scenario of education. The education centre transferred completely from Shadiya to Margherita in 1952. After 1954, the Single Line Rule came and the Education Office of NEFA transferred to Shillong.

Indira Miri also introduced an education scheme named Zen school. The concept of Zen school was that was not limited to child-centred education and it would work like a centre for the all-round development of the particular village. Both primary and adult education were incorporated with Zen education. They introduced Zen school firstly at Rengoni, Chiang Valley (Dowerah&Dao,2022). Indira Miri established about 140 schools in NEFA in her ten years tenure from 1947 to 1957.

There were only 3 schools in that area when Miri joined as an education officer (Kirtonia,2022). In 1957 she left as a NEFA officer and joined as the Principal of Post Graduate Teacher’s Training Centre at Jorhat (Assam) on the same day. Till 1968 she served in this centre and the same year she took charge as the principal of Banikanta Kakoti Bachelor’s Training College in Guwahati. After that in 1983 she was appointed as the chairman of the Social Welfare Department of Assam (Gogoi&Goswami,2021).

Besides all these, she was associated with many organizations such as the principal of Kanya College, elected vice-chancellor of both Dibrugarh and Guwahati University (Assam), Assam Red Cross Society, member of the governing body of JB Law College and Handique Girls College, Member of The Illiteracy Elimination Committee under the department of All India Adult Education etc (Kirtonia,2022).

Conclusion

In this research paper, the researcher focused on the contribution of Indira Miri towards the field of education in North-East India (NEFA). The researcher did not find proper research work on her educational contribution towards the nation. Indira Miri’s remarkable contributions as an education officer and what she did during that tough time should be popularized among students which will be inspiring for students along with the nation. More and more opportunities should be created by the present Government so that students can come to know about Indira Miri and why her name should be remembered. She is also a great example of women's empowerment. Therefore, her historical works must be preserved. The researcher urges young researchers to do more research work on Indira Miri to find out the untouched areas of what she did for society. The researcher also urges the government to include the journey of Indira Miri as a chapter in the school curriculum.

Acknowledgment: No

Author’s Contribution: Preetismita Bora: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing.

Funding: No

Declaration: Not Applicable

Competing Interest: No

References

1. Dowerah, & Dao. (2022). Indra Mirir Moi Aru Nefa. Nitul Neog, Assam Book Trust. <https://scientiabooks.in/product/indira-mirir-moi-arun-efafa>
2. Gogoi, L., & Goswami, K. (2020). Women's education as a site of self-formation: Understanding Indira Miri's Moi Aru NEFA. *Srotaswini*, 5, 21–29. Retrieved from https://srotaswini.in/images/downloads/vol_5/womens_education_updated.pdf
3. Hapuarachchi, K. (2022, May 11). Why is community development important in nation building. LinkedIn.com. Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-community-development-important-nation-building-hapuarachchi/>
4. Kirtonia, D. (2022, April 13). Biography of Indira Miri - Dev Library. Dev Library. Retrieved from <https://devlibrary.in/biography-of-indira-miri>
5. Mihin, L. (2018). Development scenario of education in Arunachal Pradesh and comparative study of male-female literacy. *Dera Natung Government College Research Journal*, 3(1), 25–35. Retrieved from <https://dngc.ac.in/journals/index.php/dngcrj/article/download/130/78/129>
6. Rana, U. (2021, December 14). Why education is important for the development of India. Times of India Blog. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/thinkandgrow/why-education-is-important-for-the-development-of-india-39599/>
7. Singh, S. K. (2018). Literacy rates in North East India: An analysis. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, 8(11). Retrieved from https://www.ijmra.us/project%20doc/2018/IJRSS_NOVEMBER2018/IJMRA-14646.pdf

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2025. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>