

Real Life Anecdotes

1. Mamoni Raisom Goswami

In the silence of her room, a young widow in her twenties sat with nothing but grief and despair. Life had already taken her parents and now her partner, leaving her surrounded by loneliness. For many, such tragedy would have ended the will to live. But Mamoni Raisom Goswami picked up the pen and transformed sorrow into creativity. Her novel '*Dontal Haatir Uiye Khuwa Howdah*' became more than literature – it was a mirror to the plight of widows in Assamese society.

Through writing, she turned pain into protest, despair into resilience, showing us that the evolving self is often born when personal suffering finds expression in the service of humanity.

Application in PYQs

- **UPSC CSE, 2020: *Life is a long journey between human being and being humane*** → This journey of Goswami beautifully illustrates the larger truth: life is not merely about being human by birth, but about becoming humane through choices, compassion, and courage.
- **UPSC CSE, 2025: *The years teach much which the days never know*** → Her life reminds us that time matures suffering into strength, and years of lived experience teach lessons that fleeting days of pain can never reveal.

2. Birubala Rabha

In a remote village of Assam, a poor, illiterate woman once stood accused of being a witch. Stigma, fear, and violence loomed large over her life. Many in her place would have bowed down to silence. But Birubala Rabha chose defiance over despair. Her life became her message, and her story resonated like the voice in the book '*A Life in Witch-Hunt*' that chronicles her struggle. From victim to crusader, she led a campaign that saved countless women from the horrors of witch-branding.

Her journey reminds us that the evolving self is not chained by circumstances, but rises through courage, conviction, and an unyielding fight for justice.

Application in PYQs

- **UPSC CSE, 2021: *Your perception of me is a reflection of you; my reaction to you is an awareness of me*** → Society branded her a witch – that perception reflected its ignorance. But her choice to respond with activism showed her deep awareness of self.

3. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala

As a young man, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala returned from Edinburgh with dreams of cinema and literature. But instead of chasing personal fame, he poured his creativity into awakening Assamese identity during colonial times. His film *Jyoti* was not just art – it was resistance, a cultural assertion against erasure. Through songs, plays, and cinema, he taught that true nation-building begins in the mind and soul of its people.

His life reminds us that creativity is not mere self-expression, but a weapon to preserve dignity and inspire collective progress.

Application in PYQs

- **UPSC CSE 2024: *The Empires of the future will be the empires of the mind***
→ Agarwala's cultural renaissance shows how empires of thought outlast empires of power.
- **APSC 2020: *A good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge***
→ His love for Assam and knowledge of art guided him to redefine Assamese identity.

4. Indira Miri

In the 1940s, when the North-East was still seen as a "distant frontier," Indira Miri walked into remote villages with nothing but chalk, books, and conviction. She believed education was not charity but empowerment. Facing floods, insurgency, and social resistance, she built schools where none existed, shaping generations of tribal and rural children.

Application in PYQs

- **UPSC CSE 2023: *Destiny of a nation is shaped in its classrooms*** → Miri's work proves that classrooms in forgotten corners shape the destiny of entire regions.
- **APSC 2022: *Think globally, act locally*** → Her vision of education was global in spirit but deeply rooted in local realities.

5. Lachit Borphukan

In 1671, as the Mughal army advanced with overwhelming might, Lachit Borphukan stood at Saraighat with a frail, disease-stricken body but an unbreakable spirit. When his own uncle shirked duty, Lachit executed him, declaring: "*My uncle is not greater than my country.*" His leadership turned despair into victory, proving that courage is not the absence of fear but the triumph of duty over self. His story is not just about war, but about ethical leadership and sacrifice.

Application in PYQs

- **APSC 2020: *Being a leader is great, but being a good follower is greater still*** → His soldiers' loyalty was born from his own example of discipline and sacrifice.

6. Verghese Kurien

In the 1940s, a young engineer named Verghese Kurien arrived reluctantly in Anand, Gujarat, on a government posting. What he saw there was poverty, exploitation, and farmers trapped in the grip of middlemen. Instead of leaving, he chose to stay and transform despair into dignity. Through the cooperative movement, he empowered millions of small farmers, turning India from a milk-deficient nation into the world's largest producer. His vision was not just about milk — it was about self-reliance,

collective strength, and the belief that ordinary people, when united, can achieve extraordinary change.

Application in PYQs

- **UPSC CSE 2024: Forests precede civilizations and deserts follow them** → Kurien's White Revolution shows how sustainable resource management (milk, cattle, cooperatives) can build civilizations, while neglect leads to socio-economic deserts.
- **APSC 2020: Skill development and employment** → His cooperative model created rural employment, skill-building, and women's empowerment, proving that development is strongest when rooted in local communities.

7. Irom Sharmila

For sixteen long years, Irom Sharmila fasted against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). Force-fed through a tube, frail in body but unyielding in spirit, she became a symbol of resistance.

Application in PYQs

1. **UPSC CSE 2025 – "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting."**
 - Sharmila's fast was a war without weapons. She subdued the moral legitimacy of state power not by violence, but by the sheer force of conscience. Her protest illustrates that the highest form of struggle is one that disarms the opponent without bloodshed.
2. **APSC 2022 – "Prejudice is the child of ignorance."**
 - AFSPA was born of a perception that the North-East could only be governed through force. Sharmila's life exposed this prejudice, showing that ignorance of local aspirations breeds injustice. Her protest was a call to replace fear with understanding.
3. **UPSC CSE 2023 – "Visionary decision-making happens at the intersection of intuition and logic."**
 - Sharmila's decision to fast was intuitive – a moral impulse against injustice. Yet it was also logical, for she knew that violence would only deepen wounds. Her life shows how true visionaries balance moral instinct with strategic clarity.

8. Kalpana Chawla

Born in Karnal, Haryana, Kalpana Chawla grew up gazing at the skies when girls were often told to keep their eyes lowered. From a modest background, she pursued aeronautical engineering, moved to the U.S., and became the first Indian-born woman in space. Her final mission ended tragically in the Columbia disaster of 2003, yet her

life remains a symbol of aspiration — that human progress is built on the courage to dream beyond limits.

Application in PYQs

1. **UPSC CSE 2022 – “A ship in harbour is safe, but that is not what ship is for.”**
 - She showed that safety lies in the harbour, but ships are meant for the sea. She could have chosen a safe, conventional life, but she ventured into the unknown. Her story illustrates that progress demands risk, and that the purpose of life is not safety, but exploration.
2. **APSC 2022 – “If necessity is the mother of invention, discontent is the father of progress.”**
 - Her discontent with limitations — of gender, geography, and gravity itself — pushed her to break barriers. Her life shows that dissatisfaction with the ordinary fuels extraordinary achievements.
3. **UPSC CSE 2020 – “Ships do not sink because of water around them, ships sink because of water that gets into them.”**
 - Despite challenges of poverty, gender bias, and cultural barriers, she never let these “waters” enter her spirit. Her resilience kept her afloat, proving that external hardships cannot sink a determined soul.

9. Nelson Mandela

After spending 27 years in prison under apartheid (*the former official government policy in South Africa of separating people of different races and making them live apart*), Nelson Mandela emerged not with vengeance (*the act of punishing or harming somebody in return for something bad they have done to you, your friends or family*) but with reconciliation (*the process of making two people or groups of people friendly again after they have argued seriously or fought and kept apart from each other*). He invited his former jailers to his presidential inauguration, wore the jersey of the national rugby team once seen as a symbol of white supremacy, and built bridges where others expected walls. His life teaches that true leadership is not about wielding power, but about healing divisions through forgiveness. He showed the world that bitterness chains the past, but forgiveness liberates the future.

Application in PYQs

1. **UPSC CSE 2025 – “Contentment is natural wealth; luxury is artificial poverty.”**
 - Mandela’s contentment did not come from material wealth but from moral wealth — the ability to forgive and unite. His life shows that true richness lies in inner strength, not external possessions.

2. **UPSC CSE 2024 – “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but to test the character, give him power.”**

- Mandela’s character was tested not in prison, but after he gained power. Instead of revenge, he chose reconciliation – proving that true greatness lies in how one uses power with restraint and compassion.

10. Baba Amte

In the 1940s, when leprosy patients were shunned as untouchables, Baba Amte chose to live among them. He touched wounds others feared, carried dying patients in his arms, and built *Anandwan* – a community where the diseased found dignity, work, and belonging. His life was not about charity but about justice: he showed that true humanity lies in restoring worth to those whom society discards. Baba Amte transformed compassion into a social revolution, proving that service is the highest form of protest.

Application in PYQs

1. **UPSC CSE 2019 – “A society that has more justice is a society that needs less charity.”**

- Anandwan was not built on pity but on justice – giving patients work, dignity, and equality. Amte’s model shows that when justice prevails, charity becomes redundant.

11. B.R. Ambedkar

Born into a community condemned to untouchability, young Bhimrao Ambedkar often had to sit outside classrooms, denied water from the same pot as others. Yet, instead of surrendering to humiliation, he turned education into his weapon. From Columbia University to the London School of Economics, he mastered knowledge that would later shape India’s Constitution. As the chief architect of the world’s largest democracy, Ambedkar transformed personal suffering into a framework of justice, equality, and dignity for millions. His life is a reminder that the truest revolutions are born not in battlefields, but in classrooms and courtrooms.

Application in PYQs

- Find out by yourself.

12. Bhupen Hazarika

In the banks of the Brahmaputra, a young boy once listened to the endless flow of the river and wondered why it carried both beauty and sorrow. That boy grew into Bhupen Hazarika, the voice that gave song to the voiceless. His haunting melody “*Bistirno parore...*” did not merely praise the river – it questioned it: *Why do you flow silently while millions suffer on your shores?*

Through music, Hazarika transformed the river into a witness of human inequality, reminding society that progress without compassion was hollow. To listen to him was

to feel that true civilization is measured not by machines or monuments, but by empathy.

Application in PYQs

- Find out by yourself.

SuchitraACS