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An Empowered Woman from Indira Goswami's *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*

T. Vanitha

P.G Assistant, English
K.S.C .Govt.HR. Sec. School
Tirupur-641604.

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Abstract:

Indira Goswami the prominent literary personality of Assam published her last novel *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*. It was the last novel of the author. It was the heroic tale of a Bodo freedom fighter. Thengphakhri was the first woman revenue collector who worked under the British. Thengphakhri was a character in the folklore, influenced the author since her childhood. Thengphakhri was honest and sincere in her work. The Bodo community respected women. Thengphakhri being a widow woman got much respect from her people. She made herself hard while collecting tax from the tenants. While collecting tax from Bhola Kachari's house Thengphakhri's melted at the utter poverty of her people. The queen was indifferent at the sufferings of her own people. The prince of the state joined hands with the rebellions to free his people. The glory of the hard working tribals was suppressed by opium addiction introduced by the British. Traditional method of farming did not enhance the farmer's income. Her people's wealth was ransacked by the British in the name of tax. Thengphakhri took the holy mission of freeing her people from the clutches of the British became a rebellion.

Keywords: Empowered Woman, poverty, tax, sufferings, freedom fighter.

Dr. Indira Goswami is one of the leading writers of India. She has won the Jnanpith Award for the year 2000. Her father Late Uma Kanta Goswami was an economist, worked as the Director of public Instruction of the Government of Assam. Indira did her schooling in Guwahati and later in Shillong. She was married to Gaur Raisom Madhavan, an Engineer from Karnataka, in the year 1965. Unfortunately her marriage life prolonged only for one and half years, as her husband died in an accident in Kashmir. She pursued her studies and did research

work in Ramayana for her Ph.D. degree in the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, in Vrindaban. She wrote a novel on the widows of Vrindaban, which was published in the year 1975. Her novels 'Airon' and 'Rusted Sword' are about the work site experience of Madhya Pradesh. For her novel 'Rusted Sword' she received the Sahitya Academy Award in 1982. She worked as the Professor in the Department Of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies in Delhi University.

"The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar" is the last novel of Indira Goswami. The novel is about the forgotten legendary Bodo heroine, Thengphakhri. She worked as a Tehsildar during the British regime in Assam. Being an emancipator of women, the author meticulously planned to present the special features of Thengphakhri. The author's familiarity towards the heroine actually started from her childhood. She had been familiarized with tales about the Bodo heroine. She had listened songs sung in praise of her. Thengphakhri, when she made herself busy in her literary career. Goswami had visited to Bijni in 2007. This is the place where Thengphakhri lived and worked until her death, around 1879 to 1895.

Before dealing with the theme of the novel, it is essential to know the background of the Bodos. The Bodos are also known as 'Kacharis'. They are the largest group of plain tribes in Assam. The Assamese middle class both the Hindu and Muslim community refused equal share and representation to the Bodos. They felt alienated and started demanding a separate home land. The extremists formed National Democratic Front of Bodoland in 1986. Their aim was to establish a sovereign Bodo nation. Thengphakhri was published a peace accord in 2003 between the Indian Government and the BLT.

The National Democratic Front of Bodoland had been maintaining a ceasefire from 2005 though they split among themselves later. The past two decades of violence, the xenophobia of the Bodos, their popular slogan "Divide Assam fifty fifty" had created an irreparable chasm in the relationship of Bodos and the residents of Assam. The growth of Bodo nationalism was not a mere story of bloodshed and struggle. It was also a story of Literary Revolution too. The novel can be described as an ambitious project because Indira Goswami hadn't get sufficient historical evidence about Thengphakhri. Goswami characterized her as an introvert. The novel covers only a tiny portion of Thengphakhri's life from 1857 to 1859. It describes how she worked as a loyal servant to the British.

The novel opens with a river background. Thengphakhri was waiting at the Brahmaputra for the arrival of Captain Harvey. The author describes Thengphakhri's features in an elaborate manner. She is very particular about her hair. She said

“Thengphakhri had much longer hair than other women and when she stood in the sun it glittered like gold. It was just like a sheen on the skin of a cobra which leaves its burrow after a long time.”(P 2)

According to the author Thengphakhri's beauty and personality mesmerized everyone. Being an introvert she seldom shares her agony with others. Captain Hardy taught her horse riding. Once while practicing with the horse, she had fallen to the ground. It was Mr. Hardy who held her hair and pulled her up. He had used her thick crop of hair like a rope. The author presents her greatness in the last chapter. Thengphakhri was given some Narayani coins for fodder, exemption of taxes and eighty *bigas* of cultivable land by the British. She had donated the lands to landless farmers.

Indira Goswami's *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri* is a novel of salvation for the troubles of widowhood in the Indian Hindu Society. Goswami in her previous novels highlighted the plights of Hindu widows. *The Blue-necked God* by Indira Goswami brought out the pitiful condition of destitute widows in the holiest of the holy land, Vrindaban. The people in and around Vrindaban were well educated and familiar with Holy Scriptures but lost their wit in their support to widows. Support for destitute widows must start from one's own family and from one's own society. A widow needs education, protection, freedom. Shrewdness and economic independence. It is a wonder that a tribal society offers such a benediction to its widows, the matured society could only vindicate. The Bodo people are very practical in their life style. As a true emancipator of women, Indira Goswami presented an exclusive theme.

Tribhubon Bahadur, was Thengphakhri's grandfather as well as her mentor. He could understand the silence of Thengphakhri. In the whole of Bijni Thengphakhri was respected greatly by her own people. In their society people had great respect for women. Indira

Goswami highlights the nature of the Bodo people through a song sung by borkandazas to dispel their loneliness. The song goes like this.

“My dear, don't cry, don't cry

We are not marrying you off to

Anyone but a Bodo man,

Not even a Garo guy,

Nor a Nepalese guy

Don't cry, don't cry my dear”... (P 6)

The Bijini kingdom was about to be annexed to the East India Company as per the wish of Rutherford Sahib the representative of the Governor General. The king and the Queen relied on the British Government to defend their nation from the enemies.. Instead the British were given rich gifts and the right to collect taxes. Most of the farmers couldn't pay the tax due to locust attack ,poor harvest and natural calamities. To maintain their safer side the British Government appointed Thengphakhri. Thengphakhri was strict in her duty. Whenever she came upon a tax payer who hadn't paid his tax for the third time , her borkandazes created a ruckus in the country yard of that house. After she was promoted to the post of Tehsildar at the beginning of her career, one of her borkandazes had cut open the body of the tax payer who hadn't paid for the third time

The story of the bronze sword is an interesting anecdote. Thengphakhri's family had got a bronze sword from the ruins of a Devi temple on the banks of the river she had found the bronze sword near the Duloni River in ruins of the temple of the ten handed Mother Goddess. . Those were specific kind of swords used for animal sacrifice in the in the temple of Mother Kamakhya. Her grandfather had given her only a little practice before she started using it. The company had gifted her grand father a khaji-mora gun. Her grandfather worked with the whitemen. Tribbuban Bahadur got the gun as a token of his honest service to the white sahibs. Tribbuban Bahadur trained his grand daughter Thengphakhri was well in gun shooting.

Thengphakhri silently recalled how she used the gun in an unexpected situation. One day she went to the deep forest as if she were mesmerized. She saw two drunkards singing. Suddenly she heard a loud roar. The drunkard fled away. Thengphakhri fired and the tiger crumbled to the ground. She wondered herself from where she got the courage and how the tiger was killed. The tiger that was just about to pounce on the two men, immediately fell into the river. But her bullet had pierced its forehead. Her grandfather was stunned at her achievement. The news spread everywhere. People out of admiration and gratitude picked up the dead tiger and kept it in her country yard. Even captain Hardy and his wife Elizabeth came to her house to see the tiger. She felt that the entire achievement was something that she had done almost as a command from God.

As she was nurtured by her grand father in her personal life, her official life was enriched by three British Sahibs. She often felt she was indebted to captain Hardy who taught her horse riding. He also taught her how to use the gun. Captain Hardy had arranged the horse for her on his own though the horses were not rare things; it was very rare that a British officer teaching horse riding to an Indian born woman of middle class family. Thengphakhri's uncle Musahari was so proud of Thengphakhri. His anecdote about the British women was amusing. He said,

“... the white women – don't you know? The people from the North, say

they are fairies born from eggs laid in trees. The Sahibs hold on their waists so that they don't fly off in the skies..”(P 9)

The relationship between Thengphakhtri and captain Hardy is something special. She longed for Hardy's arrival like a sincere disciple expecting the arrival of her teacher. Every day she was waiting for his arrival. Later she learnt that Hardy had been sent away for six months due to his ill health. But he had died before the ship reached Suez canal. It was narrated by Macklinson Sahib, another British officer who looked after the revenues. Thengphakhri was shocked as if she were hit by lightning. It was Captain Hardy who officiated her as a tax collector. He handed over the appointment letter to her grandfather and explained everything. He

was pleased with Thengphakhri's performance. She remembered how an old man of her region put his hand on her and said

, "our Thengphakhri ! when young widows are burnt alive with their husbands by force and when they have to follow rules and regulations in all they do, in such times Thengphakhri will be collecting taxes! Will be working and earning for her family! Bah! This is amazing. We should be proud of her!(P 18)

Macklinson Sahib also was caring and concerning towards Thengphakhri . When she was waiting for Hardy's arrival he said .It was very late and the roads were unsafe to her. He also advised her to leave the place. Thengphakhri used to go out riding with Macklinson Sahib to the large tracts of land and on the river banks. Thengphakhri used to go out rarely when her husband was alive. Together they enjoyed , red fami flowers which bloomed at the abandoned riverside.He also insisted her to be vijil with new unfamiliar faces. Thengphari understood her uncle Musahari , from Darrung was a new face for the company.

On her way to home she met an old man who came to meet her voluntarily.He said that he too had worked as a borkandos for the company. He became useless after breaking his waist. He further said that his back was full of wounds and scars as he carried seized artiles collected from the tax payers. Raja Bolit Narayana did not like the British just like her uncle Musahari. Because they ransacked the people's wealth. The British understood the king's attitude and they considered him a silent enemy. The King used to take just six Narayani coins as a tax of land suitable for sali paddy. But during the Britisher's turn children and women are crying because everything was snatched away from them for tax. The King loved his people like his own children. He did not tax for aahu paddy. The old man asked Thengphakhari to understand everything. Her uncle once said ,

Thengphakhri , things have changed .You shouldn't be able to stab your own heart with a sword. You haven't been able to understand a lot of things yet. Think, you must think Thengphakhri. If you think deeply, things will

become clear to you just like the sun.”(P 46, 47)

There was a serious conflict going on her mind .She was unable to win the battle with her conscience. She learnt from reliable sources that the Bodos were harmed by the British in the name of tax and the secret revolution against the British was started. She reached her house. She saw a thick crowd which was something unusual. Someone screamed loudly,

”This is the doing of those white Britishers! They have done it! They have shot him!”(P 49)

Tribhuban Bahadur came slowly took her to the corps of Musahari. She was taken aback. Musahari’s face was stuck to the ground. Their courtyard was splattered with blood .His head was bleeding. The drops of blood mixing with the soil, which her uncle was so proud of. She swooned near his legs. The British had spies everywhere. They killed whoever they suspect. Their corpses were taken away to the barracks and when wild elephants descended from the hills, these bodies were strategically placed in the path of these marauding herds. The wild elephants would crush their heads and the rumor prevailed that the elephants had killed them

Tribhuban Bahadur had heard about the boys as well as the explosives He was a, man who respected the British. He couldn’t accept the gun powder culture. Now things had become very different. He understood the cruel, inhuman and selfish motives of the British. Thengphakhri became more silent than usual. Thengphakhri had gone to Unnikhuri to collect taxes .A separate tent was put up for her They took special care to make her toilet and bath room. There were two cases of overdue payment which could be settled soon. Macklinson was disappointed for the treasury was looted by some people. Unnikhuri region was impoverished due to drought and locust attack. Only Thengphakhri could collect tax from them. Macklinson also said that he was leaving for London soon. Thengphakhri was shocked. She suddenly posed him a question as

“I haven’t been able to come out of the trauma of my uncle’s death. He died of a stray bullet. Will you please tell me the name of the person who shot him

dead- before you leave?' (p 63)

Macklinson was stunned. He gave her an evasive reply. The looting of the treasury and her uncle's murder troubled Thengphakhri's mind very much. She came to know that a farmer had held the plough tying his wife instead of bulls. Because everything was seized from him in the name of tax. Thengphakhri knew that the poor farmers did not know modern methods of agriculture. The farmers were deprived of financial support. Nature's support for farming also was unpredictable. The British knew everything but behaved like wolves. Macklinson was replaced by Naken Clark. But the people's trouble never ended. Clark Sahib was a little more reserved than the other two. During her stay in Unnikhuri, at night, Thengphakhri was visited by the prince. She was in a fix. Whether it was a crime to meet him. She felt as if the mysterious part of her heart opened suddenly. She could not guess whether it was dream or real.

The next day they went to Bhola Kachari's house. Nayeb shouted in a rude voice. Thengphakhri was shocked. The farmer pleaded that he was hit by the drought and locust attack. He was suffering from rheumatic pains. Due to his poverty he could not take proper treatment. The only thing left in his house was a broken guava-wood chair. The spectators were in a strange sadistic curiosity. Kachari brought out everything dishes, pans, tumblers and so on. There was a shrill cry in the hut. Perhaps the bowls they ate were snatched away from them. Their young son was lying inside covered with an edhi shawl. He was sick. The boy threw the shawl on the things that were piled up for the company. It was a proof of extreme poverty. The boy also dragged a container of grain out of the house. Four Narayani coins and five other coins were snatched. At last Kachari dragged a thin shivering boy. He said that he had bought the boy from a slave trader of Coochbihar. The boy was mere a frame of bone. Thengphakhari who was watching the drama fell down from her chair and became unconscious.

Thengphakhri's heart ached at the poor condition of her people. She was stunned if her people were able to sell their own children how worst their life condition would be. Even in their adverse condition people tried their best to pay the tax to honour Thengphakhri. The British knew very well without Thengphakhri it was impossible to collect tax from the natives. Macklinson instructed her to accompany him on his meeting with Queen Bhagyeshwori. Her grandfather was much pleased by this meeting. The Queen blessed her by saying

”May your fame increase. You are dear to all of us , our pride. This is a new age, and I hope you will be someone who will be known even after this new age..”(P100)

She told him that her citizens were levied tax after tax. She requested him to talk to the Governer to reduce the tax. She also said that their kingdom was a sovereign kingdom. Thengpakhri felt the bravery and courage of her people were snatched away by addicting them for opium. The Queen’s demand also was shallow and light hearted. Macklinson had promised to inform it to the Government agent. He noted keenly the sound of cannons in the distance. On his departure he warned,

“ For the past few days we have been noticing new people around these areas...people should’t think that we have no knowledge of what’s going on in this region...I hope this strong bond will continue.””(P104)

The Dewan said that the great revolt made the British to feel insecure. The farmers tried their best to save themselves from the cruel man eater like money lenders by the sweat of their brow. But their lands were snatched away by the British in the name of tax. The Queen was not much bothered. But Thengpakhri felt she must save her people from the clutches of the British. After her confidential meeting with the revolutionary prince, Thengpakhri realized how the British used her own hand to pierce her eyes. A silent resolution formed in her mind.

A sutradhar named Khorgeshwor came to Tribhubon Bahadur’s house as an old friend. At the people’s request he performed a small excerpt from “Abduction of Ruckimini” written by Sri Sankardeva. During the performance the people were surrounded by the British soldiers. At the request of Tribhuban Bahadur Khorgeshwor was saved. Thengpakhri understood that Khoregeshwor was a revolutionary. His visit had some purpose.

Khorgeshwor said that all the agricultural lands were seized by the British. By popularizing opium they destroyed the Assamese society. They levied taxes on almost every thing. They converted the natives to Christianity. Tribal villages were burnt. Youngsters were

killed under the name of rebels .At night Tribhuban saw Thengphakhri was talking with Khorgeshwor. The next day she summoned her resignation. Her grand father Tribhuban handed over Thengphakhri's horse. But Naken was not surprised as he expected it already. He had arranged for hanging the prince in a public place. He said that he was going to hang the Prince the next day. Tribhuban walked home desperately. Someone whispered in his ear that the trial for the Prince is a farce .Khorgeshwor came to their house to seek Thengphakhri's help to free the prince. Thengphakhri got her grandfather's blessing and started her mission to save the Prince. The author highlighted the real power of a widow woman which saved the honour and sovereignty of her people.

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