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Thengphakhri Tehsildar: A Journey from British Loyalty to Rebellion

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Abstract:

Indira Goswami made an attempt at recreating the rich Assamese history in the Bodo heroine Thengphakhri. Goswami had heard about her in the folk songs and tales that were told in her childhood. It was by sheer luck that Goswami heard about Thengphakhri's valour from a Bodo elder- Batiram Bodo from Bodidara village who claimed to have met Thengphakhri. She dug out the story with first hand help from Bodo scholars to craft a work of fiction based on the real story. The transformation of Thengphakhri from being a tax collector for the ruthless British rulers to shifting allegiance to her people fighting for freedom encompasses Goswami's last novel. The paper will trace this journey of the protagonist.

Keywords: Colonialism, Widowhood, Patriarchy, Exploitation, Rebellion.

Indira Goswami was one of the most important literary figures, writing in regional language in India. Born and bred in Assam, the regional flavour forms an important backdrop to her fiction. She spoke out boldly and with passion about those whose voices had been silenced or never heard: women, the marginalized, the powerless and the unfortunate. She wrote with an aim to bring about social change. Critics have hailed her as an eminent literary figure in India and a woman of remarkable courage and conviction. She was an important voice in championing women's causes, and has done much to highlight the plight of widows. She is known for her fresh and original style with novel themes. Her short stories and novels set in different locales of India (including Assam), give a taste of life of those places. There are myriad themes in her fiction like the social issues of urban life, harsh life of the labourers and the plight of the widows. She expresses her anger on the orthodox social set up in a very subtle way.

The Stream of Chenab based in Kashmir, launched her as a novelist. The construction site for a bridge on the river Chenab forms a backdrop to the novel. *The Rusted Sword* is an acclaimed novel with a plot revolving around the exploited workers of a construction company. The politics of labour unions is an important theme in the plot. Her realistic portrayal in *The Rusted Sword* won her the Sahitya Akademi Award. *Pages Stained with Blood* deals with the communal riots that broke out in Delhi after the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It is in the form of a diary of the female protagonist mentioning the political violence and social unrest that she witnessed. The novel records her first hand experiences. *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* is probably her last novel. It describes the life of a Bodo freedom fighter, who was the first woman Revenue Collector in British India. *The Blue Necked*

God is loosely based on her own experiences while living in Vrindavan. The novel explores the misery and helplessness that the widows of Vrindavan suffered in almost all aspects of life. They were of all ages bound together by the thread of common suffering and rejection by their loved ones. The novel was a path breaking work of fiction on the subject of the Vrindavan widows. *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is her masterpiece. Set in a Satra in South Kamrup in Assam, its plot revolves around the lives of three Brahmin widows in the family of the Satra Adhikar. Its theme is the decadence of the feudal system at a time when the country was on the verge of freedom. It boldly talks about the subjugation of widows in the Brahmin families. *An Unfinished Autobiography* is her autobiography which has been written in a very candid and frank way. It has won critical acclaim due to the forthright manner in which it portrays the highs and lows of the author's life. Her boldness, strength of character and charisma permeates through her work. Besides fiction and research, her attempt to foster peace in the strife torn Assam is an important milestone in her life. She played the role of a mediator between the Government of India and the militant outfit United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). She not only wrote about but also tried to bring about peace in her motherland. She was a woman of exemplary courage whose actions supplement her writings.

Indira Goswami's protagonists are invariably widows, who are trying to cope up with the unfavourable tides in their lives. Indian society offers a secondary status to women. Once their husbands pass away their existence comes to a screeching halt. The condition of women in Assam during the colonial rule was no different from that of women in other parts of India. The women faced hardships and carried on their struggle for survival. Goswami's widows forfeit their chances of a happy and fruitful life as widowhood engulfs them and they cease to be treated as humans. They are tied down by age old traditions and unscientific customs which add to their tale of woes. Thengphakhri, in *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* is a widow, but not a victim in the traditional sense of the word. She was not subjected to the horrors of widowhood. She had a supportive family in the form of her loving grandparents and a caring uncle. She was respected by the society, as her own family was just towards her. Her bravery and expertise with the gun attracted the attention of a British officer, Captain Hardy who offered her the job of a tax collector in the Company. She gladly accepted the offer and worked in alliance with the forces of the Company to collect taxes from the people in the Bijni region of Assam.

In a departure from the other characters woven by Goswami, Thengphakhri stands out as an embodiment of strength, resilience and poise. At a time when social reformers were trying to fight social evils like Sati, child marriage and the purdah-system, there was this woman working with the British officers shoulder to shoulder, riding a horse, wearing a hat and knee-length black hair. The women during that period were a suffering lot but Thengphakhri stands out as a woman with strong will power, out to achieve the unthinkable.

Once when she went out with her grandfather in the forest to learn using the gun, she saved the life of two drunken men who were about to be attacked by a tiger. She shot the tiger from a large distance but the gunshot pierced its forehead in the middle. This news spread far and

wide and people came to see the dead tiger and the woman who had shot it. Captain Hardy of the British army came along with three companies of soldiers to meet her and handed over an appointment letter. She was given the responsibility of collecting revenue in Mahan, Sunkush and Burhidiya banks in the position of an Izardar. She was told that if she performed well, she would be promoted to the position of a Tehsildar in one year. When this was announced, a few farmers sitting in the courtyard asked, “What? A woman Izardar? Will she be able to do the job?” This brought out the patriarchal mindset to the fore which could only see a woman within the confines of the boundary walls. But Thengphakhri laid all their speculations to rest and performed her duty with utmost dignity and responsibility. Soon her fame spread far and wide. People who came to the Bijni kingdom, made it a point to come “to see the only woman in India who went to collect taxes mounted on a horse.” Seeing her people exclaimed:

She has the Mother’s blessings! Here women are respected and look at us: our women are hidden behind the purdah. They can’t even leave their hair open like this, they can’t wear hats like this and when their husbands die – they are also burnt alive in the cremation ground(27).

People were surprised to see the sheer beauty and bravery of the woman who was very different from other womenfolk who had become meek sufferers. She carried on her duty with dedication and loyalty but wherever she went to collect taxes in the Bijni kingdom along with the Company’s soldiers, she saw impoverished people, who could not even get two meals a day. Children remained stunted as they could not get proper food that their body required. Poor farmers became poorer due to high rate of taxes levied on them by the British. The taxes on commodities of daily use, agricultural land and grazing fields left the farmers with almost nothing. The pathetic condition moved her and forced her to think about the people of her region.

Feeling of disillusionment started growing among the oppressed population and stray incidents of revolt against the company started increasing. Revolutionaries’ garnered support from the people as the poor people saw them as their only ray of hope. The revolutionaries sent feelers to all they possibly could, including Thengphakri. She was loyal to the British Company and worked honestly for them, following orders to collect taxes from the famers of Bijni region. Her grandfather who had already worked for the Company was an old loyalist and motivated his granddaughter to be loyal to the Company under all circumstances. He always told her about the good work done by the Company for the people and exhorted her to see the brighter side of the British rule by claiming that, “Don’t forget British are our masters, they are divine.”

Seeing the pain and suffering around her, Thengphakri, was forced to think otherwise. The rebels like Romochondro and Khorgheshwar made her see the hard realities of the times. She herself got the first- hand account of the widespread exploitation of her people when she saw their impoverished condition on her visit to collect taxes. On one such incident when she had gone with the soldiers to collect taxes from a man called Bhola Kachari, the man had no yield in his fields for two consecutive years as one year there was severe drought and the other year

locusts destroyed his crop. The soldiers of the Company, in order to recover their dues took away all his belongings- furniture, clothes, pots and pans. Frustrated by this he offered his starving slave too, who was reduced to a skeleton. Seeing the crying boy who could barely stand due to hunger and starvation, Thengphakri, was hit hard by the realities of the British rule. “Thengphakhri’s mind was dark with melancholy” as she realised that he was not a little boy but a young man stunted due to hunger and starvation. In the short story *Shishu*, Mahashweta Devi presents a similar situation in post-independence India where tribals remain stunted due to malnutrition and starvation. The pathetic picture portrayed in both the situations helps to draw an analogy between the conditions of pre and post-independence India. In pre-independence era the colonisers exploited the natives, and once they left the country their legacy was taken over by the natives in higher positions whose attitude towards the tribals replicated the colonist view. In the short story the tribals, to the government official Mr. Singh, are mysterious, superstitious, uncivilised and backward who need to be brought in line with the others. The rebellious among them have been pushed to the forest and are starving there for years. At the chilling climax, we are brought face to face with the reality that these ‘children’ who thrust their starved bodies towards Mr. Singh are not children but adult citizens of free India, and stunted by free India. Here Mahashweta Devi describes how tribal people have been literally and figuratively crippled in post-independence India. Goswami makes the same point when the starved slave of Bhola Kachari is presented before the British tax collecting team lead by Thengphakri.

Revolutionaries like Romochondro and Khorgeshwar apprised her of the worsening condition of her region. The growing exploitation and injustice being meted out to the natives gave rise to a feeling of nationalism in the region. Nationalism has historically functioned as one of the most powerful weapons for resisting colonialism, and for establishing the space of a postcolonial identity. Although nationalism has nurtured much of the movement towards women emancipation in the ‘Third World’ yet the relationship between nationalism and feminism is a complex one due to the conflicting nature of their social and political goals. On one hand feminism transcends cultural characteristics and geographical boundaries to empower women; on the other hand nationalism has exaggerated such characteristics and boundaries in order to resist hegemonic occupation. Nationalistic discourses are largely male-centric and control women by capturing them in traditional stereotypes, but Goswami’s Thengphakri succeeds in breaking these stereotypes by her final act of rebellion.

In the aftermath of colonisation, the natives were forced to accept the supremacy of the colonisers and equated the advance of European Colonisation with the triumph of science and reason over the forces of superstition. As portrayed in the novel, *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*, the author shows this attitude of their natives when Thengphakri’s grandfather, Tribhuban Bahadur vehemently argues in favour of the British with Khorgeshwar Sutradhar. He says that the British might have taken away a lot from their land but in turn had saved their people from man eaters and elephants. They gave employment to the people and

made efforts to prevent evil practices like sati and spread education. Ania Loomba makes the same point in her book as:

Many nineteenth and twentieth century writers equated the advance of European colonisation with the triumph of science and reason over the forces of superstition, and indeed many colonised peoples took the same view. An Education Despatch of 1854 explicitly connected 'the advance of European knowledge' in India to the economic development of the subcontinent. English education would 'teach the natives of India the marvellous results of the employment of labour and capital', and 'rouse them to emulate us in the development of the vast resources of the country' (21).

This was countered by Khorgeshwar Sutradhar who argued that the Europeans took more than they gave back. This mental slavery to them was helping them to grow stronger. They thrived on displaying their superiority and thus tightened their control over the natives by showing them that they were underdeveloped and lacked scientific outlook. They were judged and scrutinised on various counts like their cultural practises, customs, language and beliefs. It became habitual of Europe to approach other cultures as objects of study, bodies of knowledge to assemble and to bring into shape. The interest in poring over others was seemingly inexhaustible. The result was European self-projection and representation of the people who inhabited the lands they claimed: the natives, the colonised, and the subaltern. They were interpreted by way of stereotypic reproduction. The process of othering became fundamental to colonisation. Always with reference to superiority of an expanding Europe colonised people were regarded as lesser: less human, less civilised, savage, wild or headless mass. European hegemony was marked by a strong belief in the potential for universalisation of its knowledge in science, politics and religion. They held the conviction that the rest of the world could be understood in their terms. Time and again derogation of other cultures was used to validate the violence, exploitation, invasion and occupation of native territories. This fact is supported by M.S. Nagarajan in his book *English Literary Criticism and Theory*, in the following words:

There is an inherent clash between the native, indigenous precolonial cultures, and the culture imposed on the natives by the imperial forces. Cultural colonisation still exists, and there has been no complete decolonisation. Much of postcolonial criticism is concerned with the loss of postcolonial identity. Colonist discourse represents the language in which colonisers expressed their superiority over the natives. The natives were uncivilised, lacking morals, and the Anglo-Europeans must educate them, because they were advanced in life. The whole native culture must be set aside. The colonisers were the centre, 'the self', and the colonised were the margins, 'the other'. This is the practice of 'othering' going by names such as 'the demonic other', or the 'exotic other'. It is the result of the long-held arrogant and supercilious belief in the racial superiority of the Caucasian over the Asiatic. This attitude, of raising the European culture as the

ultimate standard by which to measure the other cultures, is designated Eurocentrism which employs what is called the philosophy of 'universalism'. European ideas and experiences were universal, the standard for all others to follow(185-186).

Thengphakhri was a brave woman with a thinking head on her shoulders. She was shown the progressive and humanitarian face of the British empire. She worked happily for them as she believed that the rule of the company was ushering in an era of peace and prosperity for her people. This notion changed when she saw the poor farmers who were suffering due to drought and crop failure, were levied hefty taxes by the company. Soldiers resorted to cruelty on the poor people to recover taxes and fines. The plight of the poor people moved Thengphakhri and forced her to change the tide of her thoughts from loyalty to the British forces to rebellion for her people.

Unlike, Goswami's other novels, where thoughts of her characters are very closely mapped, Thengphakhri is an introvert. Her complex emotions are expressed through very little action and almost no words. The three years from her life from 1857 to 1859, covered in the novel, *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*, map her slow and complex transformation from that of a loyal British soldier to a sword wielding rebel. Goswami has conjured up an intriguing image of a woman who faced social evils in the form of widowhood and fought colonial mindset to wage a war of rebellion for her people and her motherland.

As Chinua Achebe mentioned, "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter". In keeping with this view Goswami has reconstructed Thengphakhri's extraordinary life and rich Assamese history relying on oral sources and traditions, in the process she has also touched upon the social and political history of the Bodos, an indigenous Assamese tribe, whose lives have seldom been chronicled. This bypassing of the Bodos in Assam's history was one of the main reasons for the Bodo movement in the late 1980s. By this novel Goswami has helped literarily resurrect the contribution of the Bodo community in India's freedom struggle, so often lost in popular consciousness. Thengphakhri has no doubt joined the ranks of Kanaklata Barua and Mula Gabhoru because of Goswami's literary intervention and hopefully, one day, will also be remembered in the same way as Rani of Jhansi.

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