

Sahitya Akademi & Jnanpith Award Winner

INDIRA G o s w a m i

five novellas about
women

Translated from Assamese by Dibyajyoti Sarma

THORNBIRD

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Introduction

CONTEXTUALISING INDIRA GOSWAMI

Is Indira Goswami still relevant? The answer is an empathic yes—both as an Assamese writer of influence and a woman writer of importance. She blazed the trail by tackling hitherto taboo issues in her writings (widowhood, female sexuality, caste/class oppression) and remains one of the few writers to do so with the clear-eyed vision of a seasoned storyteller and the zealotry of an activist.

In Goswami's writing, the personal is always political. She wrote what she saw and what she saw was an unjust world at war with itself within the bounds of patriarchy. Her vision of the world was the universal desire to transcend the norms of society and live the idealised individual life. While her characters usually fail to achieve this, what makes Goswami's writing important is this indomitable desire, this constant struggle to rise above one's station. Thus, as long as there's societal strife, as long as women struggle to assert their rights, Indira Goswami will remain relevant.

In the context of Assamese literature, Goswami was both an outlier and a champion of Assamese literary tradition. On

the one hand, Goswami broke the mould of the contemporary Assamese writing by foregrounding characters and issues hitherto untouched by her peers (her depiction of frank sexuality and her experimentation with the language was indeed something new). On the other hand, she remained a part of the established Assamese literary tradition (starting from Madhava Kandali, who translated the *Ramayan* into Assamese), with a focus on rural dynamics and literature as a vehicle of social change.

The first Assamese woman writer (and second Assamese person so far) to win the highest national literary award, the Jnanpith, in 2000, Goswami can be seen as one of the early women writers from Assam who exclusively focused on women characters and discussed female sexuality in direct, no-nonsense terms, thus paving the way for other authors like Arupa Patangia Kalita and Purobi Bormudoi. Yet, Goswami's thematic concerns far exceeded any other author's from Assam. Her writings range from the inner workings of a Vaishnavite monastery or the Christian missionaries, to the widows of Vrindavan or the sadhus of Kamakhya temple, as also to workers' daily struggles in Madhya Pradesh, to psycho-sexual explorations by the youth in a city like Guwahati. She wrote unabashedly about her loneliness and depression ('those days I used to carry vials of sleeping pills in my bag', she writes in her autobiography) and her connection to the disadvantaged (her concern for her Sikh driver during the 1984 riots described by her in *Pages Stained with Blood and Dust*). More than that, with her red-

bindi adorned forehead, kohl-lined eyes and ever-smiling face, she remains an icon, the beloved Mamoni Baideu for a generation of writers both in Assamese and English.

While primarily a fiction writer, Goswami has never shied away from foregrounding her ideology and beliefs in her writing and her public life. She has written candidly about her depression and suicidal tendencies following the death of her husband. Also, she wrote uninhibitedly about clandestine affairs, female desire and misguided masculinities. Later, she expressed her angst against animal sacrifice at the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati in her creative and journalistic writings. Her active participation to bring the leaders of the banned outfit ULFA to the negotiation table can be seen in much of her non-fiction writing (she was the only civilian who had direct access to the exiled ULFA leader, Paresh Barua).

While Goswami is usually seen as a feminist writer focusing on the themes of women's emancipation, the locus of her writing intersects in the primal conflict between man and woman, with religion and patriarchy fueling this difference by denying women their sexual autonomy and by pushing men towards a false sense of heteromascularity. While the 'single woman' (usually a widow, a reflection of Goswami's own predicament) remains the centre of her writings, irrespective of settings—be it the village in lower Assam where she grew up, or Vrindavan, or Madhya Pradesh or Delhi—Goswami problematises her heroines by giving them sexual agency that runs counter to the societal expectations. The conflict arising from this

clash or the collision between what is deviant and what is rendered normal in a social space is what makes Goswami's writings unique and unprecedented. This inevitably results in violence, both imagined and real ('peeling the skin alive' is one of Goswami's favourite expressions; in a story, a Brahmin woman would rather abort a foetus than carry a lower-caste man's seed, in another a sadhu would sacrifice himself rather than allow animal sacrifice), but it also helps break the status quo. Neither are her women nor her men, villains. Both are victims of the oppressive structures of society/religion.

Goswami wrote exclusively in Assamese under the pseudonym Mamoní Raisom Goswami. She also translated some of her own works into English. We can further contend that Goswami's life and her very act of writing have been shaped as a series of translations: Goswami constantly dealt with translation as an act of defiance, as an act of ushering the change and as an act of negotiating space. She was an attractive young widow who steadfastly fended off advances of suitors and refused to remarry. She was born in an orthodox religious family, yet married outside, against her family's wishes. At a time, when Assamese writing was trying to shed its rural roots to focus on the problems of burgeoning towns and cities, Goswami wrote about far-flung places, about the workers' struggles in Kashmir and Madhya Pradesh and about the plight of widows in Vrindavan. She also remains one of the few major Assamese writers to openly write about a homosexual protagonist.

Later, during her research on the *Ramayana*, she studied the various translations of the text, which remained a lifelong passion. As faculty at Delhi University, she met North Indian authors writing in Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu and absorbed the currents of the prevailing literatures. At the height of the Assam movement in the 1980s, Goswami translated the Hindi poet Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena's poem, '*Desh Kagaj Par Bana Naksha Nahin Hota*'. A large number of her stories (such as 'Delhi, 5 November 1991'; 'Ishwari's Doubts and Desires' and 'Snake-skin Shoes') are exclusively set in North India and a large number of Hindi words are used by her. She popularised the Urdu/Hindi word 'Khoonkhaar' (violent/cruel) in Assamese. On the other hand, the setting of her fictional world in Assam remained restricted to either Guwahati or the region of Chaygaon in lower Assam, where the language is a dialect of the Kamrupiya, which itself is a dialect of Assamese. That is why some of her Assamese stories contain glossaries.

The context of each novella, the reasons for each selection, and some of their nuances are explained in this chapter. For some insights into the translation, please see the Translator's Note and for the meanings of specific words or terms, please refer to the Glossary.

BREAKING THE BEGGING BOWL

The story has a strong allegorical context. The title refers to the wretchedness of the situation, which is so bad that

the begging bowl, perhaps the last material possession of a beggar, breaks and the beggar is left with nothing.

‘Breaking the Begging Bowl’, is a grand tragedy, something on the lines of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and J.M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*, where, in the midst of the demands of patriarchy and an oppressive society, and destiny’s cruel joke, stands a woman, battered and bruised, yet struggling to survive until the end.

This woman is Phuleshwari, a lower-caste woman in the rural parts of Kamrup district in Assam. As the story begins, she is accused of doing something she did not do. Then her husband dies and things go downhill from there. Her elder daughter is widowed; her son joins the burgeoning insurgency movement and her younger daughter grows up to be a loner. To make matters worse, a piece of land belonging to her daughter’s dead husband is grabbed by an opportunist leader of the community.

Indira Goswami tells this story of singular tragedy with stark prose, incisive observation and visceral imagery, where, while she empathises with every one of her characters, she spares none. Instead of taking sides and making comments, she lets the readers confront the reality on their own. She does so with the expert use of a host of literary and stylistic devices, such as the use of the local fauna not just to underscore the region where the story is set, but also to highlight the emotional state of her characters. The Chaygaon region, where the story is set, is traditionally known for its fertile land, washed over not just by the mighty

Brahmaputra, but also by its various tributaries. Fish are aplenty here, and thus naturally, Goswami makes generous use of fish imagery. She also uses the onomatopoeic sounds of the region, from the sound of falling rain to the sound of weeping, to great effect.

However, where Goswami succeeds the most, in the context of this story, is the use of the local dialect. It is said that in Assam, the spoken language changes every 14 kilometres. The local language used here is a version of the Kamrupiya dialect, widely used in its various forms, in the Brahmaputra valley of Lower Assam. The language, especially particular words, is so unique that in the original text, Goswami added a short glossary explaining the meaning of the words.

While the story doesn't refer to a particular date, from the clues available with the text (the reference to World War II and the reference to the insurgency moment), we can safely assume that the story is set between the late 1980s and early 1990s, the time when the government started its first major crackdown on the ULFA movement.

At the end, we must agree that Phuleshwari in the story is Mother Assam herself, and the problems and persecutions she faces are the problems of Assam, the struggle for the land, rural poverty, and most importantly, the insurgency movement.

THE BLOOD OF DEVIPEETH

The Kamakhya Dham, the abode of the Goddess Kamakhya, is a sixteenth-century temple set atop the Nilachal Hill, near

the Brahmaputra River in Guwahati, Assam. It is a popular pilgrimage destination for the followers of the Shakti cult, who worship the Mother Goddess. The presiding manifest of the temple is a stone yoni (female generative organ). It is said that after Sati immolated herself at the sacrificial fire, Shiva roamed the world carrying her body on his shoulder. To save the world, Vishnu started dismembering the body with his chakra. During the process, the Goddess's yoni fell into the spot where the temple resides. It is one of the 51 Shakti Peethas related to the cult of Sati.

In the story, Padmapriya's father lives on the foothills near the long-winding stairs to the hill, called the Mekhela Ujowa Path. Mekhela Ujowa literally means 'lifting the mekhela'. It is called so because the stairs are so steep that women have to lift the hem of their lower garment to climb up.

'The Blood of Devipeeth' contains some of Goswami's pet themes, including her staunch opposition to animal sacrifice, an issue, which will find a devastating conclusion in her later masterpiece, *The Man from Chinnamasta*. Here, the Devipeeth serves as both the backdrop and the central symbol, in a story of a discarded woman finding her strength in a forbidden affair.

We do not know if something happened between Padmapriya and Shambhudev inside the cave, and frankly, it doesn't matter. Yet, the haunting scene, where Padmapriya follows Shambhudev to the darkness of the cave to find the golden flower, is the central motif of the text, very much like the Marabar Cave scene in E.M. Forster's

A Passage to India. The only difference is that the experience gives her the courage to stand up for herself. However, nowhere is this use of a central image to support the narrative more evident than in ‘The Blood of Devipeeth’. Here, the realistic narrative is broken into pieces to give way for the symbolic one. We scarcely know what transpired between Padmapriya and her estranged husband. What we know is that Padmapriya is lost and must find her way. She starts her journey as the sacrificial buffalo (hence the affinity with the scimitar-wielding Shambhudev), and ends up as the enlightened one, who witnesses the Goddess dancing.

Thus, the scenes involving the buffalo sacrifice, the white Kunda flower and the pilgrims climbing up the hill, which Goswami uses repeatedly like a poetic refrain, must be read both as a realistic description of the surroundings and Padmapriya’s inner turmoil. Here, the only way we can enter into the inner world of Padmapriya’s mind is how she interacts with her surroundings. This is why she wants to sacrifice herself like a buffalo. This is why she becomes obsessed with finding the white flowers. This is why her transgressions with both Seng, the dwarf, and Shambhudev, the man who performs the animal sacrifice.

This also illuminates how Goswami uses the colours white and red to signify the process through which her heroine will come to terms with her reality. Padmapriya is discarded by her husband because of a white vitiligo mark on her back. After the initial trauma, she takes refuge in the power of the Goddess.

There is a legend attached to the image of the Goddess dancing naked on the full moon night. It was said that the Goddess danced naked in the temple on the moonlit night and the chief priest was the only person who was allowed to witness this divine manifestation. When the news of this miracle reached the king of the Koch dynasty, Naranarayan, he expressed a desire to witness the dance. He was the king, so the chief priest could not deny him. On the next full moon night, the king stood outside the temple and peeped through a hole to witness the dance. The Goddess was understandably angry. She struck the priest blind and ordered the king never to set foot in the temple again. To atone for his sins, king Naranarayan rebuilt the temple as it stands today, and until this day, his descendants do not visit the temple.

DELHI, 5 NOVEMBER 1991

Not much of Indira Goswami's writing on Delhi has been translated into English. This is the reason why '5 November 1991' has been included here.

The title refers to the 1991 Delhi hooch tragedy, which killed 199 people. Most of those who died were casual labourers and rickshaw-pullers, who had consumed Karpoor Asav or sura, a so-called ayurvedic medicine. The liquor was manufactured by a firm called Karnal Pharmacy, based in Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh. Tests confirmed that the substance contained methyl alcohol.

Goswami narrates the horrors of this singular tragedy from the point of view of a woman, who starts as an outsider

eyewitness, before the devastating effects of the tragedy hit home. Yet, as it is evident in all her stories, Goswami cannot be satisfied with telling just one strand of the narrative. The novella follows two different narrative strands, which merges at one point with devastating results. Here, Vimala is a stand-in for the author to describe the life of the daily-wage labourers and the victims of the hooch tragedy, and yet, Vimala gets her own story as well, the story of a woman trapped in a patriarchal world, a world which looks at her as a sex object.

ISHWARI'S DOUBTS AND DESIRES

Besides being a fiction writer of repute, Indira Goswami was a respected scholar of *Ramayan* literature, who wrote a groundbreaking comparative study of Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* and the fourteenth-century Assamese *Ramayan* by Madhava Kandali, called *Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra*.

Following a particularly difficult time in her life after the death of her husband, Indira Goswami's teacher Upendra Chandra Lekharu persuaded her to come to Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh, and pursue research on *Ramayan*, as a way to deal with her inner turmoil. Her experiences as a widow as well as a researcher finds expression in her novel *Nilakanthi Braja* (*Blue-Necked Braja*, 1976), about the plight of the Radheswamis of Vrindavan. One of the issues the novel touched upon was the plight of young widows for whom companionship beyond the confines of their ashrams