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### BODO WOMEN AS PAINTED IN LITERATURES AND THEIR ROLE IN SOCIETY DURING COLONIAL PERIOD

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#### **ABSTRACT:**

The Bodos have rich folktales, myths, legends, songs, proverbs, cultures and traditions. They constitute an ethnic group in northeast India with their distinctive culture and linguistic traits. The Bodos are one of the earliest settlers in Assam as well as its adjoining areas like West Bengal, Bangladesh, Nepal and others, who are believed to be migrated from northwest China between the head waters of Hoang-Ho and Yang-Tze-Kiang River. Bodos have number of legendary figures of both sexes. The legendary women like Tengpakri, Gambari and others had played roles in society with their male counterparts. Thengpakhri was assigned as a collector of revenue in erstwhile Goalpara district of Colonial rule in Assam. She showed a courageous role among Bodo women by serving as a collector. Gambari had also played an important role against the Bhutias operation in the plain of Bodo dominated areas. She helped Bodo youths of both sexes from the captivity of the Bhutias. Apart from these two legendary women others also played role in society and were considered as the symbol of courage in society.

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

Bodos have rich folktales, myths, legends, songs, proverbs, cultures and traditions. They constitute a very important race and ethnic groups in northeast India with their distinctive culture and linguistic traits. Linguistically in Bodos include a large group who are the speakers of the Tibeto-Burman speech of the North and East Bengal, Assam in India and Nepal, Burma and Bangladesh. At present they are divided with a new political setup. They are the Bodos or Boros of the Brahmaputra Valley, they are known as Meches in Lower Assam, West Bengal and Nepal and also known as Rabhas, Garos, Dimasas and Kacharis, Lalungs, Sonowals, Misings, Deuris, Chutias, Modahis, Ramcha, Thengal in Assam, Tipras in Tripura and Tripura in Bangladesh. At once it

was mentioned that they had well established political entity in this sub-continent of India. However, in course of time, all had swept away with the rise of other new socio-political and cultural expansion into the domain of this Tibeto-Burman speaking land. Their greatness once of this political entity is shreds of evidence by the linguistic available in this sub-continent. In such circumstances, their activities were recorded by some of the British colonial writers. At this juncture the relationship between hills and plains in the northeast region of India is commendable.

#### **THE BODOS IN LITERATURE:**

The term Bodo was used for the first time by B.H. Hodgson in *Essay the First: On the Koch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes* (1847). From his writing it is understood that the term Bodo is the generic name of the people; it means all the Tibeto-Burman (Bodo) speaking group of the Sino-Tibeto origin. Robert Snafer, in his book *The Linguistic Survey of India* describes the Boros or the Boro-Kacharis are members of the Bodo (Boro) sub-section under the Assam-Burma group of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibeto-Chinese speech family. The Bodos had well established socio-political entity over the Brahmaputra valley and extended west upto North Bengal, North Bihar. They had well-established workforces. It can be understood with a totem that they have a surname. All Bodos practice this tradition. Their extensions over these regions with political entities indicate one of the first settlers in the region. A *History of Assam* by Sir Edward Gait which may be considered as the first history book for Assam may be seen leniency towards others in observing the evidence of existing kingdoms in the phases of a historical period. In some cases, this book has glorified extensively some kingdoms without the root in this sub-continent. The Koch kingdom was explicitly glorified by him. Popularizing of this may be seen at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* by Minhaj-Uddin-Siraj written at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. translated by Major Raverty talks it differently. It says that while Muhammad Bakhtiar Khalji took a mission to invade Tibet at 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and in the ensuing period, the Koch and Mech chieftains of northern Bengal achieved a degree of independence (H. Blochmann, 1968, p.152). The account of this invasion refers to the Koch and Mech tribes in western Kamarupa (Goalpara, Rungpur and Jalpaiguri district and the Cooch Behar) (Abu-umar-i-usman, Maulana, Minhaj-ud-din, 1873, trans. by Raverty, p. 152). A Mech chief who was to be the adviser in this expedition was converted to Islam and popularly known as Mech Ali. Cosmopolitan social life might be popular at this juncture. A definite political entity based on ethnic composition is not seen. However, the *Darrang Rajvamsavali* chronicle suggests the ancestor as Mech. Assam District Gazetteer, Volume-V by B.C. Allen also clearly mentioned that the founder of the Koch kingdom was a Mech named Viswa Singh (B.C. Allen, 1905, reprinted, p.24). However, the reason behind the popularizing Koch and Koch kingdom is not known.

#### ***Origin Of Kingdom and Raj (Estate):***

Haria Mondal or Haridas Mandal was a Mech chief of Khuntaghat *pargana*. Haridas Mandal, the father of Viswasingha, had his capital at Chikina (A.A.K.

Choudhuri, 2005, trans. Hiten Nag, p. 100). The ruins of the city of Chikna still exist between the rivers Saralbhanga and Champamati, in the district of Goalpara 50 or 60 miles to the north of Dhubri (A.A.K. Choudhuri, 2005 trans. Hiten Nag, p. 100). At present, it is in the Kokrajhar district of Assam. From Bhutan, 10 or 12 miles to the north of Chikna, there are ruins of “*Killa Bisensing*”, a fort of Viswasingha (A.A.K. Choudhuri, 2005, trans. Hiten Nag, p. 100). In course of time, he shifted his capital to Kamatapur (Kantanagar) and later on to Cooch Behar. The Kingdom which originated from Mech chief Haria Mondal and was supervised by his son Viswa Singha was known as Koch kingdom. Later on, the kingdom split up into two parts i.e., the Eastern Koch Kingdom and the Western Koch Kingdom. The Eastern Koch Kingdom spread out from rivers Sonkosh to Manas. Raghudev Narayan ruled the eastern portion with capital at Barnagar till his death. His capital was known as Ghila Bijaypur in Assam Buranji (S.K. Bhuyan, ed. 1960, p. 39). The area surrounding Barnagar was thenceforth known as Ghila Bijaypur (S.K. Bhuyan, 1949, p. 260). The eastern Koch kingdom formed by Raghudev Narayan was usually known as the Koch-Hajo Kingdom by the Mohammedan writers.

While the eastern Koch kingdom was to pay tribute to the western Koch kingdom in the midst the eastern Koch Kingdom stopped it and a conflict became inevitable between the two. Lakshmi Narayan the ruler of the Coochbehar kingdom invaded the eastern Koch kingdom but was defeated. To avenge the defeat, he sought help from the Mughal and by the Mughal's help; Parikhsit Narayan was defeated and sent to Dacca and later on to Delhi. But the Emperor of Delhi released him on condition that he was to recognize the Mughal suzerainty over his kingdom (E.A. Gait, 2008, pp. 42-48.)

The outcome of the Bijni kingdom was based on political supremacy in the Koch Behar area. The emergence of Ahom power in Assam and subsequently entry of the Mughals and the British in the political arena made complicated the existence of the Koch kingdom. Parikshit Narayan, the Koch ruler over the eastern part of the Koch kingdom, was taken away as a prisoner of war by the Mughals. In such circumstances, Chandra Narayan, son of Parikshit Narayan was given the tract between the rivers Sonkosh and Manas to rule as a de facto ruler under the Mughal with a tribute of Rs. 5,998/- which was afterward commuted to an annual delivery of 68 elephants (B.C. Allen, E.A. Gait, H.H.F. Howard, & C.G.H. Allen, 2010, p. 526.). He lived at Bijni and became the founder of the Bijni kingdom under the Mughals. The area was 10,359 Sq Km (S. Barman, 1994, p. 15). In course of time, the tract was broken into six chieftainships i.e., Bijni, Mechapara, Chapar, Karaibari, Parbatjoar and Gauripur. The intervention of the Mughal, Bhutia and the British changed the revenue system as well as political affairs of the region. And it was the British intervention that led to change the existing system of land as they got right the *Dewan* of Bengal in 1765. Revenue had been introduced where the people of the region had no idea about the system. The idea popular among subjects was *paik*. Accordingly, subjects enjoyed merely supplying manual labour to the government as tax during the time of peace and as soldiers during the war. To look after their administration local people were appointed to the British government's offices according to their capacity.

### *Bodo Women in Literature:*

Thengphakhri's date of birth and birthplace could not be ascertained. It is assumed that she was born at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is considered that she was born in 1810 and died in 1879. On the other hand, many people believed that she died just after the Anglo-Bhutan war in 1865 at the age of 65. Eyewitnesses suggest that her birthplace was at Bijni which is now a sub-divisional administrative office of Chirang district of Assam. But others believed that she was born at Naigaon of the present Tipkai sub-division of Kokrajhar district of Assam. Some say that she was born at Belakoba nearby Sapatgram in the Dhubri district of Assam. And on the other hand historical novel, *Birgwsrini Thungri* of Bidyasagar Narzary refers Thengphakhri as Birgwsri who was named because of her trained knowledge with a sword that she could challenge her male counterparts.

In February 1830, *Lowsar Fwrbw* (Lowsar Festival) was held in Chirang under *Druk Desi, Desi Chhoki* Gyaltsen. Chirang was then a *subha* (province) of the Bhutan king. He was 30<sup>th</sup> *Druk Desi* (B. Narzary, 2012, Revised Edition, p. 9). *Druk Desi* was the official from Bhutan who looked after the bordering affairs between the Bhutan hills and the plains of northeast India. In this festival usually, many youths from the plains participated and showed their talent, and accordingly the youths were recruited as Bhutan king's soldiers. Jawlia a youth succeeded in defeating other youths and he was very happy and became proud of his talent. *Druk Desi* appointed him as *Dewan* (rent collecting official for Bhutan) in *Duar* (the immediate place between the hills and plains). The date of ownership of the *duar* by Bhutan is not known. However, there was a tradition that the Assam kings' had policies in maintaining peace and tranquility in the bordering region by introducing a system known as *posa*. It is well known to this part of the region that facilities and endowment of nature are not equal between the hills and plains. Therefore to meet the needs of the day, frequent raids usually occurred in the plains of the bordering region. Therefore, a system known as *posa* was introduced by the kings' of Assam. Therefore, this may be the cause where rights of collecting resources were transferred to the hills' people, and later on, Bhutan might have enjoyed the ownership.

Jawlia who was newly appointed as *Dewan* became arrogant. Thengphakhri stood against him and held a sword fighting. Jawlia was defeated. Everybody was surprised by seeing Thengphakhri's talent that she had defeated her male counterpart. *Druk Desi* was confused and handed over the *Dewan* to Thengphakhri but she requested the *Druk-Desi* to hand over the *Dewan* to Jawlia. As a gift *Druk-Desi* handed over his sword and named her Birgwsri because she fought like a bird (B. Narzary, 2012, Revised Edition, p. 9).

Thengphakhri did not possess extraordinary strength, but her prowess in sword-fighting and horse-riding propelled her to a position that very few women could then dream of. Her pedigree helped her. Her grandfather was an employee of the British Government. He taught her how to hold the sword as a child. Thengphakhri got some extraordinary knowledge being privileged from

her grandfather. Thengphakhri impressed the British in Bijni when she shot a man-eater in mid-air as he pounced on an unsuspecting villager on the banks of the Brahmaputra. They first appointed her *izardar* (land inspecting official), and promoted her to *tahsildar* (land revenue collecting official), within a year.

With the British Government's appointment to the post of *tachildar*, Thengphakhri became the first woman revenue collecting official in India. Batiram Boro who was an eyewitness of Thengphakhri said that she usually had come and set up a tent at Unnikuri which is about 8 km. from present Bijni town to collect revenue (M.R. Goswami, 2009, p. 2). And on the other hand, *Bagduarni Birgwsri Sikla* highlights that Thengphakhri was the rent collecting officer of Mwnasw, Sonkosh and Buridhihi. These three locations fall under Bijni *Raj*. She accompanied McInson an English official to Gossaigami. It is said that she also judged civil and criminal cases of the people of the region. She usually went to Goalpara (district headquarter of the British government) to submit the revenue that she had collected from her circle. For her security, there were around 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> soldiers. Among them, one of the soldiers carried out the order of Thengphakhri in performing her duty in collecting rent from the common people.

Thengphakhri was initially in favour of the British Government because they protected the people of the foothills of Bhutan from Bhutanese soldiers' atrocities. However, she soon faced an inner conflict when she found that the colonial taxes were very high to Bijni *Raja* (Bijni was an estate reduced by the Mughals and later on by the British from Koch kingdom). To save his position *Raja* had to collect more taxes from his subjects. Such as the British administration had not put any option in milking poor farmers of their last pennies in drought hit year. Thengphakhri witnessed such atrocities of British government. She always thought to liberate those people from the British rule in her position. She picked up her famed bronze sword to join the underground nationalist movement.

To achieve her goal i.e. to liberate her people she joined Jawlia who was the *Dewan* of the Bhutan government on the foothills of the Bhutan. Jawlia was the collector as well as in-charge of soldiers of Bhutan government on the foothills of Bhutan. He always worked in favour of his master. He kept a strict vigilance of British troops' movement on the foothills of Bhutan. The Bhutan government satisfied his role against the British. Jawlia invaded Bijni and destroyed the palace of the *Raj*. For which Bijni *Raja* shifted the royal palace to Abhayapuri.

In such a situation Thengphakhri thought to organize a Mech state. Mech is an ethnic group. Mech appeared for the first time in *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* of Minhaj-Uddin-Siraj along with Tihari and Koch in eastern India. At present they are known as Bodo or Boro in Assam and Mech in West Bengal. According to Thengphakhri, the Mech state would be on the foothills of Bhutan and therefore she joined with Jawlia *Dewan*. She thought that if a Mech state was to be organized on the foothills of Bhutan then that was necessary to drive out the British troops from campaigning in Bijni kingdom. Jawlia accepted the proposal given by Thengphakhri and one night a massive operation had been

carried out by the joined troops of Thengphakri and Jawlia Dewan on the bank of the Sonkosh river. Gambari a young Bodo woman whose name is still prevailing among Bodos as a legend also took a great role in dragging out the enemy. She was also in favour of creating a new Mech kingdom. Ramwnda a gentleman always wanted the post of *Tahsidar* (rent collecting officer) which was served by Birgwsri. For this, he always played tricks but failed and he was killed by Gambari. In carrying out such a policy Thengphakri entrusted Gambari. Gambari also carried out her duty which had been entrusted by Thengphakri. But one day she failed in carrying her secrecy. The British ambushed Thengphakri nearby the Aie river and shot to death. However, history does not link the continuity of any of these events. But it is seen that Thengphakri was involved in revenue collecting in literature as well as in the legends. The local people are aware of her in carrying out such duty in the Bijni estate. However, an eye witness Batiram Boro shown in literature is the most important that has a connection with the legend. Though her connection with revenue was not found in any of the British official files but she may be considered officially or unofficially as one of the first revenue collectors of India so far. And on the other hand, Gambari's active role in the war against Bhutia asserted the spirit of nationalism in the region. The legend of Gambari is popular in the immediate foothills of Bhutan. The guerilla war tactics shown by her were much popular among the people on the foothill of Bhutan.

The Bodos' dominion in the subcontinent of India collapsed with the expansion of new socio-political and cultural entry into the region. The kingdom which emerged again in the medieval period (1228-1826) A.D. in Assam and West Bengal collapsed again with the coming of Muhammadan from the west, Ahom from the east, Bhutia's from the north and finally the British who had controlled the entire sub-continent till 1947. However, in the ensuing period these powers had introduced their administration but in some cases in the excessive ethnic compositions' internal relationships in their domain sometimes witness tragic incidences.

### CONCLUSION

The role of Thengphakri, Birgwsri, Gambari and other Bodo women had played a great role in liberating them from the bondage of Bhutias. Bodo or Mech nationalism germinated in their activities. Their spirit remains among the Bodos. Thengphakri's role was much commendable. Being from a family of British government servants she acquainted herself among the people of the foothills of Bhutan. Her role to the British government was appreciable and people consider her a revenue collector at the time wherein in India no woman was seen on this ground. However, her inner conflict dwindles her career as a revenue collecting official. Reestablishment of Mech kingdom was her aim which was against the authority. Therefore, it might be the cause that no record of the British government talks about her contribution towards her service. But she is considered as a revenue collector of the British government in India by all sections of people in the region of Goalpara district of British India. And it was the collective consciousness of the people of the region that a statue of horse riding was unveiled in Bijni sub-division on 19<sup>th</sup> January 2009. On the other hand, the activity of Gambari was also much commendable. It was her prowess that she could fascinate Bhutanese soldiers

to hide her villagers' youth from capturing them. It was Gambari's tactics of guerilla warfare that the people still remember her. And in memory of her various public and private structures are named by Gambari. Birgwsri's name is also popular among the people and accordingly, she is also remembered and her name is also seen in the structure of buildings and others. In social institutions also their names are popularly used by the people.

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