

## Paradigm shift: An Exploration of Indira Goswami's *An Unfinished Autobiography*

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*"An Unfinished Autobiography is, indeed, an unfinished one. The author has already started work on its sequel. A veritable account of her struggle through life, the autobiography is a truly engrossing piece of work.*

*...it is just fantastic.*

Mulk Raj Anand

Indira Goswami is a uniquely- gifted writer of Assam. She is the recipient of prestigious awards like Bhartiya Jnanpith Award and Sahitya Akademi Award for her literary works. As Kamala Das, the well- known writer, says, "Indira Goswami has achieved a discipline very few women writers of 20<sup>th</sup> century have achieved... She writes even of her own grief with a sense of detachment." (Goswami, Backcover) She has written many novels and short stories, which give glimpses of Assamese life. But her *An Unfinished autobiography* is marked by a subtle sense of suppression, humiliation and deep pathos emanating from a life haunted by personal tragedies. Indira Goswami was a woman who had the courage of her conviction with which she faced the paradigm shifts in her poignant journey of life.

The source of inspiration to write the autobiography and render her heart in front of her readers was the well- known Assamese writer Homen Borgohain. In June 1968, he wrote a letter to Indira, requesting her to write an autobiography. Borgohain wrote in his letter, "I know even without your telling me, how deep the sadness within your heart is. But for an artist, creation is so absorbing that it does not care overmuch for personal misery or happiness. An ordinary man or women may bow down to pain and sorrow, and exist like a living corpse- but that is not the fate for you- because you are an inborn artist, and your creation is the only salvation for your agony, sorrow and even partial death." (Goswami *Preface*) Borgohain's letter encouraged her to write her autobiography, as she says in the preface, "Borgohain's letter contained many heartening words to inspire me and strength my resolve. I was even encouraged to start writing my autobiography- but I could not complete it. I left it unfinished, though many readers appreciated the part I wrote and published. I was also discouraged by several quarters, mostly from Assamese readers, who were critical about a young girl writing her autobiography, however turbulent her life may have been." (Goswami, *Preface*) But when she had written her autobiography, the literary scene of Assam was not so smooth to accept the young girl's autobiography.

Goswami's autobiography depicts an external and internal journey of a woman, representing the lives of millions of women, who are crushed under patriarchal domination. It shows how certain paradigm shifts in life leads one to move from margin to the center through self-discovery. The present paper aims to project the pangs and agonies of life of Indira Goswami and her daunted will to surpass all the hurdles and reach the higher level. In addition to this, she wanted to espouse the harsh social realities of pathetic lives of widowed women.

The autobiography is divided into three parts- as Life is No Bargain, Down Memory Lane and The City of God. 'In life is no bargain', Indira Goswami narrated her journey

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from childhood to marriage and end of the marriage by her husband's death. Her childhood was a world of fun and frolic and full of happiness in spite of ting of scarcity of amenities. She spent her childhood in Shillong, where her father was the State director of Education. He was quite hale and hearty. She had a unique relationship with her father and more attached to her father than her mother. It can be witnessed in descriptions like this; her father was a frugal house keeper, so he brought two tailor-made overcoats for Indira and her sister to protect them from the severe cold of Shillong. It was humiliation for her to wear such an overcoat to school because all her friends used to wear fine lining overcoats. But she did not feel bad because it was her father's choice and she had a sentimental value with the overcoat. Indira Goswami studied in Pine Mount School, Shillong, where most of her classmates were from upper sections of the society. They had high life style and celebrated their birthday with a lot of pomp and show, whereas her birth day was hardly remembered by her parents and moreover her family did not celebrate any one's birth day because her father was very keen to follow the principle of plain living and high thinking and free from ostentation and artificialities. She did not have raincoat to go to school and even attended swimming classes with a discarded swimming suit of a daughter of cook. Though she faced many difficulties, she was not bothered by materialistic world but was happy with voracious love and affection, which she was getting from her family and she was contented with her life.

The death of her father due to cancer came as a blow of whirlwind that gave her such a stroke that she found it difficult to get out of the trauma. It gave indelible scar on her heart and nothing can heal the wound. After her father's loss, she lost many near and dear ones, as she says, "Even at the start of new day, I was under the grip of that old sense of despondence and pain. At an hour when man is eager to follow the course of the new ray of light, my mind seemed busy counting the number of graves in the graveyard. What other wretched soul did ever feel like bearing the cross at the first flush of youth like I did? Oh! The suffering of my soul! Oh! The pain!" (Goswami 12) That was the age where she had to enjoy her life but she was suffering with pain and agony. She was silently suffering with the two old prosecutors of her soul- agony and despair continuously gnawing her internally. After her father's death her mother made several attempts to marry her to grooms of her choice, but she failed because Indira did not get her choice. She was in search of such a young man who professed to love her. To put an end to all her torments and suffering she tried to commit suicide and was admitted in the Guwahati Hospital, where she was unconscious for several days. She might have been arrested for attempted suicide but was forgiven because she belonged to the respectable family as her forefathers were "adhikaris" of a Sattrra on the south bank of the Brahmautra, possessing thousands of acres of land and five elephants.

Indira became physically weak after this incident and failed to construe the life. Her younger sister was accompanying her always, she too reached marriageable age. Due to her mother's simple nature, it was difficult for her mother to find grooms for two sisters, as Indira says, "Mother was rather inexperienced in the affairs of the world. Besides, she was straight and simple – qualities rather unhelpful in a cunning world. During this time, several cases of envy and greed on the part of some of our not-

too – near relatives were narrated to me. Degradation like that is not unnatural to man. A mind without wisdom hardly cares for values- for its animality is its own justification. No man can surely claim to be free from this vulgar touch, but the injury inflicted upon our mind and soul by those relatives their tooth and claw has never healed: it bleeds at times even now.” (Goswami 15-16)

Indira’s mother consulted the astrologers to know Indira’s horoscope for marriage. The astrologers predicted that her horoscope was not good and bad days were ahead. A pundit from Navagraha hills said to her mother, “Better to cut her into two and set her afloat in the river than give her in marriage” (Goswami 16) The pundit’s words represent patriarchal views towards woman and her marginalization, whereas the astrologer from the Navagraha hills projects that she had potentiality and certainly scale the heights. This would be a significant shift- shift from margin to center. To get rid of all evils and bad stars her mother accompanied Indira and her sisters, aunts and other close relations and well-wishers to sacrifice the goat to the goddess Vagala, who dwells on the top of Kamakhya hills. As she was sitting in front of goddess for worship, her mind was neither on the goddess, nor on the act of worship, she was very much disturbed and says, “It bled in agony at the fate of the goat grazing freely over there at the moment. And no sooner had a priest gone out with falchion in hand; my cheeks were flooded with tears. Then all of sudden, I knew not how it happened; I found my crying aloud disconsolately in the temple. Everyone was shocked; I heard some outcry of grief and pain. I felt a shivering, warm sensation as someone put a blob of thick blood of the sacrificed goat on my forehead.” (Goswami 18) This incident always gnawed for guilt and left a deep scar, from which she was never healed.

As fate would have its play, Madhavan Raisom Iyenger, an engineering graduate from Mysore, came to Guwahati with many others to work for the Hindustan Construction Company, which had taken up the Saraighat Bridge project over Brahmaputra. He had rented a house opposite to Indira Goswami. Madhavan and Indira had come into contact and both developed a liking for each other, which made Madhavan to seek Indira’s hand from her mother. But her mother denied the proposal as Madhavan was not from Assam.

But after lot of rough passages, she got married to Madhavan and went to Kunvarbet in the sandy tracts of the Rann of Kutch of Gujarat in the company of Madhu. She got relieved from suffering, turmoil and drudgery after marriage and she felt as, “In my pulse, the freedom of the open, blue sky above me. Each new day was a glory, a revelation. The desert strip of Kunvarbet lost its barrenness, as it were. The old desperation that had gnawed into my vitals was gone. The constant death wish that had oppressed my mind and body was now the thing of the past.” (Goswami 24)

Indira started leading her life happily by visiting different places as Bhuj, Okha, Dwaraka and Gandhidham, where she witnessed thousands of poor, unfortunate who lost their all at the time of the partition, took refuge at Gandhidham. She had picturised the pathos of the worker appointed at the work site and their exploitation, on which she had written her first novel *Chenber Srot* (The Current of Chenab) The novel is based on the life of workers and their struggle for their livelihood, as she said, “Padmabai works for the company. Her husband was drowned in the foundation

well of a bridge at Sarangkhedha. Our contractor brought her here. Haven't you ever seen her three children begging at the kitchens of mates, and 'langers' of the 'Khalasis'?" (Goswami 37) The workers were on daily wages and paid only rupees two-and-half per day against the prevailing rate of rupee three-and-a-half. Madhu was soon given for the first time the responsibility of branch manager for building a bridge over the river called Thandapani Tavi. A battalion of General Reserve Engineering Force was situated on the other side of the bank of the river. The battalions were not allowed to keep their families there with them, so they used to visit Madhu and Indira. Many times Indira had seen that the trucks of Pakistani forces moved up and down on the hill.

Later Madhu was appointed as a manager of Suina aqueduct project. Sunia was a difficult place to reach. Near the aqueduct, the work of tunnel and the blasting of rock were going on. The mud huts of the nearby villages cracked and many men and women were injured by splinters of blast. Their camp was situated in the narrow valley and was made up of coarse mats of bamboo strips. All her experiences of different places with Madhu were just like heaven but this heaven turned upside down by Madhu's death. Madhu met with an accident and was not able to survive. Life was playing hide and seek with her once again and she lost herself in the maze of darkness. It was very difficult for her to come out of it. She thinks, " ....Many years have rolled by since, but the colour of Madhu's cremated bones has not undergone any change. Only, I have changed several of the caskets in which I have preserved them..." (Goswami 50)

The second section 'Down Memory Lane' represents her sense of alienation due to her husband's loss. She moved from place to place in search of peace but she was not able to get it. For a brief while, she took up a job at the Sainik School at Goalpara, where she got sympathy from many people, proposal for marriage from her colleague and lustful and ogling men. She broods over, "Who can ascertain the exact state of the mind of a woman as suddenly hit by misfortune as I was? Who can determine how the abrupt end of a happy conjugal life affects the poor wife? Most of the time, as I released, a sense of endless, ruthless pain suppressed all yearnings of flesh. I felt like being pushed into a deep, dark abyss." (Goswami 54)

Indira has given reminiscence of her childhood days of her father's place Sattra. She recalls her parental care when she was very young; the way her father used to comb her hair and tie her shoe laces. She also remembers having attended school with her brother, and her father's ancestral house. Her forefathers used to keep numerous elephants. She and her brother used to play with Rajendra, the last elephant left in Sattra. These memories poured out the flood of tears in her heart.

The third section 'The City of God' describes agonies and despairs, helplessness and sufferings of Radheshyamis, who had compromised with fate. At parallel level she wanted to project her personal sufferings. Her revered teacher Upendra Chandra Lekharu had sent her several letters and telegrams to take up research under his supervision. But it was very difficult for her to take the task of research. In spite of opposition from her mother and relatives she resigned the job at Goalpara Sainik School and started her journey to Vrindaban where her teacher resided, by recalling her husband's word "You and I shall visit Sri Rangaji together some day. You will be delighted to see the dance of the peacocks in the precincts of the temple there..."

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(Goswami 106) These painful memories tortured her mind and again and again reminding her that fateful day when Madhu was taken away from her forever. After two sleepless nights journey, she reached Vrindaban. Her teacher Lekharu had kept a basement room ready for her. But the room was just like a dark hole, she says, "My head reeled as I entered the room. It was dark hole! It had an old, worm eaten wooden ceiling, which was so low that it almost touch my head. There was no skylight for light and air to enter into the room. There was only a small, wooden window, but it had always to be kept closed, for there was, close by, a row of open latrines. But I knocked it open. An open patch of ground came to my view. I also saw some prickly shrubs, locally named babul, and cluster of pomegranate trees." (Goswami 109) Always she was grim and dull, but as she entered into the room it was very difficult for her to control herself and she was scattered into bits and pieces.

But there was no choice in front of her. She had to adjust with the situation as she adjusted with the life and put her step ahead in research. Professor Lekharu was well-versed in the tradition of Ramayan literature in Assamese. So she chose the topic for research- comparison between *Ramayana* by Tulsidas and Madhav Kandali.

This autobiography is also the biography of many widow women from Vrindaban whom they used to call Radheshyami. Radheshyami's were destitute widows who earned their living by singing bhajanas. They passed their days in small, dark dingy rooms, which should be better called cages. Most of them came from Dinaajpur, Rajshashi and East Bengal. Indira's description of their sufferings particularly that of a one old widow from Rajshashi who was on her death bed is filled with great pathos. It was very difficult to stay near her and take care of her because of smell of vomit and excrement and urine and her clothes were soiled. No one was there to take care of her and two days later she passed away. Another destitute Radheshyami used to keep some old items picked from garbage dumps and she was almost in rags she looked like vulture with broken wings then a human being, she was not in the condition to speak. Someone came and dragged her out with all her belongings and left her on the roadside. In that situation Indira came to know that all these Radheshyami's by their bhajana's and trivial works earning money for their last rites because after their death who will pay for their funeral. Her maid, LalitaDasi, also was a Radheshyami. She used to help Indira for shopping and worked for her teacher. She used to work very hard the entire day, whenever she used to get little bit time, she would go and sing at bhajana ashram and collect half a rupee for half a day and even she used to beg at the LalaBabu's temple. Many a time she used relate many strange stories of the lives of the Radheshyamis, one day she said to her, "Last night, a musical programme was arranged. A number of devotees from Madhuban, Goverdhan, Barsat, Nandgram and Mathura came to enjoy it. Along with them came some ruffians too. At night, some of them took drugs and swallowed gallons of country liquor and got drunk. Then, they started behaving savagely. They assaulted two old maids all aghast!" (Goswami 121)

Indira had given two more examples of strange looking Radheshyami's. One of them was bald and she was literally in skin and bones and had a piece of lion cloth tied round her waist, without which she would have become altogether bare. In spite of such condition Indira was surprised to see that a small pouch hanging from her waist which was preserved carefully for the performance of the last rites. Later Indira

came to know that these Radheshyami's were not cremated but after their death their dead bodies were dragged by sweepers and pushed into the Yamuna. Indira was puzzled that what might have happened with their hard earned money for which they struggled and strived without fulfilling their basic needs.

*An Unfinished Autobiography* is a kaleidoscopic view of Radheshyamis heart-rending accounts of their helpless lives and society's outlook towards these widow women. These Radheshyamis had picked up the gems of wisdom. They had accepted as it is. They had not jumped into the Yamuna. They had accepted life with ups and down and weal and woes. They defeated despair and sorrows. But Indira was not able to withstand the situation and always took the support of sleeping pills as means of escape.

Indira has also very minutely exposed sanctimonious *babas* and their hypocrisy under the name of spirituality. One of the *babas* asked her to marry again then, she thought that she had not gone to *baba* for this answer which was a question and mystery for her, but she had gone to know from him how to free her mind from tormenting thoughts. Meanwhile she had started writing her novel, *Nilakanth Vraj* (Blue- Venied Vraj) she wanted to project the anguish and frustration of her own lives as well as to depict a realistic account of the life and activities of Vrindaban. So she used to observe men and manners by sitting on the stairs of the temple facing the market.

Indira was oscillating between a duel war: one was dejection of life and the other was working on the most of the time on her research and writing of her novel. Meantime unexpectedly Gurucharan, a colleague of Indira at Gpalpara Sainik School, who offered her for marriage to start new life, once again appeared on scene. It was very embarrassing situation for her to see him there and she was worried that what her teacher might think of her. Indira cried in desperation by which Gurucharan left the place at once. One more very humiliating situation she faced as she appointed a lawyer named Balabhadra Das, but she didn't like his ways towards her for he always look out for a chance to pat her.

Somehow Indira managed to complete her research and it was time to apply for the post of professor in Delhi University. Before leaving for interview in Delhi she said to her teacher, "Sir, you must be quite aware that ever since my childhood, I've been suffering from a strange sense of despondency. I was free from it for a brief while after my marriage with Madhu. I could then overcome this obsession with myself and would partake of other people's joys and sorrows. I even thought of taking up some work for the good of the lowly, the depression. I don't know how to escape from it. Could you, Sir, show me some way out?" (Goswami 194) On this situation her teacher very calmly reacted and said that she was *Aparajit* (the undefeated one) and gave her amulet with charm and recited the charm in her ears and told her to recite the charm hundred times every day. Through this recitation the teacher wanted to sooth her emotions and feelings.

After completion of her research she visited places not only in India but also foreign universities to deliver the talk on the *Ramayana*. She read papers on the Assamese language and its *Ramayana* literature and Madhav Kandali *Ramamyana* and the

biographical accounts of the Vaishnavite saints. Her teacher coaxed her to apply the post of lecturer in Assamese, in the Department of Modern Indian Languages of the University of Delhi. But she was not willing to apply to the post and she said, "Excuse me, Sir, but I'm not at all prepared to go to Delhi for the interview. I would rather go to the Himalayas after my work is over, provided I can have the company of a reliable sanyasin." (Goswami 208) By her teacher's guidance and advice she applied for the post and got appointed as a lecture in Delhi University. In these thick and thin her teacher stood like a shadow with her by which she reached that height.

She has not only given the credit of her success and her education to her teacher but also for having endowed her with all human qualities. She concludes with her views as, "It is now many days since my most revered teacher Upendra Chandra Lekharu breathed his last. I have preserved till today, the amulet that he fastened on my arm. I have forgotten the incantation either, he had whispered in my ears. My teacher inspired me to be neither a famous writer nor an eminent scholar, but an individual endowed with all human qualities. Nothing measures up to humanity. For my teacher humanity alone was the prime consideration and nothing else..." (Goswami 219-220)

Many pitfalls and ups and downs gave paradigm shifts to Goswami's life. Her childhood and widowhood, her life in Assam, Vrindavan and Delhi, her literary pursuits and her literary passion have become turning points in her life. She had the courage not to be let down by bitter memories. Instead she converted them into life force that changed her attitude towards life and her surroundings thus exhibiting her own resistance to the tragic happenings of life. With these shifts and changed perspectives, she has calmed the stormy sea of life by many experiences from life.

### Works Cited

Goswami Indira, *An Unfinished Autobiography*, New Delhi: Sterling Paperbacks, 2003.

Mulk Raj Ananad's quotation is taken from the back cover of the book-*An Unfinished Autobiography*.