

Classic Poetry Series

Indira Goswami
- poems -

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Indira Goswami(14 November 1942 – 29 November 2011)

Indira Goswami (Assamese: ইন্দিরা গোস্বামী, Hindi: इन्दिरा गोस्वामी, Tamil: இந்திரா கோஸ்வாமி), known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami and popularly as Mamoni Baideo, was an Assamese editor, poet, professor, scholar and writer.

She was the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award (1983), the Jnanpith Award (2001) and Principal Prince Claus Laureate (2008).

A celebrated writer of contemporary Indian literature, many of her works have been translated into English from her native Assamese which include *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, *Pages Stained With Blood* and *The Man from Chinnamasta*.

She was also well known for her attempts to structure social change, both through her writings and through her role as mediator between the armed militant group United Liberation Front of Asom and the Government of India. Her involvement led to the formation of the People's Consultative Group, a peace committee. She referred to herself as an "observer" of the peace process rather than as a mediator or initiator.

Her work has been performed on stage and in film. The film *Adajya* is based on her novel won international awards. *Words from the Mist* is a film made on her life directed by Jahnu Barua.

Early Life and Education

Indira Goswami was born in Guwahati to Umakanta Goswami and Ambika Devi, a family that was deeply associated with Sattra life of the Ekasarana Dharma. She studied at Latashil Primary School, Guwahati; Pine Mount School, Shillong; and Tarini Charan Girls' School, Guwahati and completed Intermediate Arts from Handique Girls' College, Guwahati. She majored in Assamese literature at Cotton College in Guwahati and secured a Master's degree from Gauhati University in the same field of study.

Career

In 1962, she published her first collection of short stories, *Chinaki Morom*, when she was a student.

Popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami in Assam, she was encouraged by Kirti Nath Hazarika who published her first short stories — when she was still in Class VIII (thirteen years old) — in a literary journal he edited.

Depression

Goswami has suffered from depression since her childhood. In the opening pages of her autobiography, *The Unfinished Autobiography*, she mentions her inclination to jump into the Crinoline Falls located near their house in Shillong. Repeated suicide attempts marred her youth. After the sudden death of her husband, Madhaven Raisom Ayengar, in a car accident in the Kashmir region of India, after only eighteen months of marriage, she became addicted to heavy doses of sleeping tablets. Once brought back to Assam, she joined the Goalpara Sainik School as a teacher.

At this point she went back to writing. She claims that she wrote just to live and that otherwise it would not have been possible for her to go on living. Her experiences in Kashmir and Madhya Pradesh, an Indian state where her husband had worked as an engineer, was used in her novels *Ahiron* and *The Chehnbab's Current*, respectively.

Life in Vrindavan

After working at the Sainik School in Goalpara, Assam, she was persuaded by her teacher Upendra Chandra Lekharu to come to Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, and pursue research for peace of mind.

Her experiences as a widow as well as a researcher finds expression in her novel *The Blue Necked Braja* (1976), which is about the plight of the Radhaswamis of Vrindavan who lived in abject poverty and sexual exploitation in everyday life. One of the main issues that the novel touches upon is the plight of young widows for whom companionship beyond the confines of their ashrams and fellow widows become impossible. Their urge to live, as well as the moral dilemma that they face vis-a-vis the order of precepts of religion in this regard, are brought out with astonishing clarity and feeling in the novel. The novel exposed the uglier face of Vrindavan — the city of Krishna, an Hindu deity — inviting criticism of Goswami from conservative sections of the society. It remains a classic in modern Indian Literature. It is autobiographical in character as she says the anguish of the main character Saudamini, reflects what she had gone through after her husband had died. It was also the first novel to be written on this subject. The novel was based on Goswami's research on the place as well as real-life experience of living

in the place for several years before she joined the University of Delhi as a lecturer under the guidance of Bhabananda Deka who was subservient in the introduction of Assamese Language in MIL Department of Delhi University (DU).

In Vrindavan she was involved in Ramayana studies. A massive volume of Tulsidas's Ramayana purchased during her stay there for just eleven rupees was a great source of inspiration in her research. This finds expression in the unparalleled comparative study of Tulsidas's Ramayana and the fourteenth-century Assamese Ramayana (the first Ramayana to be written in any modern Indian language) written by Madhava Kandali in her work Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra.

 Life at the University of Delhi

After relocating to Delhi, India, to become Head of Assamese Department at the University of Delhi, the most glorious phases of her life begins. While at the university, she wrote most of her greatest works. Several short stories, including Hriday, Nangoth Sohor, Borofo Rani, used Delhi as the background.

Her two classics — Pages Stained With Blood and The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker— were also written during this period. The other books completed while she lived in Delhi were Ahiron, The Rusted Sword, Uday Bhanu, Dasharathi's Steps and The Man from Chinnamasta.

In Pages Stained With Blood she writes about the plight of Sikhs in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India. Goswami had witnessed the riots while staying in the Shakti Nagar area of Delhi. She visited many of the other sites to complete this novel. She even went to G. B. Road, Delhi's red-light district, to depict the lives of the prostitutes who lived there which forms a part of her novel.

In The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker she writes about the plight of Assamese Brahmin widows in Satra, religious institutions of Assam. This novel was anthologised in the The Masterpieces of Indian Literature and was made into a film, Adajya, which won several national and international film-festival awards. The novel was also made into two television mini-series; Nandita Das played the role of Giribala in one of the mini-series.

At the peak of her literary career she wrote the controversial novel The Man from Chinnamasta, a critique of the thousand-years-old tradition of animal sacrifice in the famous Hindu Shakti temple to Kamakhya, a mother goddess, in Assam. Goswami reported that there was even threat to her life[citation needed] after

writing the novel. In this novel she quotes scriptures to authenticate the argument she puts forward in the novel — to worship the Mother Goddess with flowers rather than blood. She said in an interview, "When the novel was serialized in a popular magazine, I was threatened with dire consequences. Shortly after this, a local newspaper, Sadin, carried an appeal about animal sacrifice, which resulted in quite an uproar—the editor was gheraoed and a tantrik warned me. But when the appeal was published, the response was overwhelmingly in favour of banning animal sacrifice. I also had to contend with rejection from a publisher who was initially keen and had promised me a huge advance, but who later backtracked, offering instead to publish any other book of mine. But the rest, as they say, is history and Chinnamastar Manuhto went on to become a runaway bestseller!"

Another major piece of her fiction during the period was Jatra (The Journey), based on the problem of militancy/secessionism that has affected almost the entire North-East India frontier ever since Indian independence.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami died in Guwahati on 29 November 2011.

 Success

She received the Sahitya Akademi Award (1982). She received the Jnanpith Award (2000), India's highest literary award, for writing about the subalterns[clarification needed] and marginalised. Two of the main features in Goswami's writing has been the focus on women and the cultural and political construct of the Assamese society. However, it is also to her credit that she also created possibly one of the finest male characters in contemporary Assamese literature, viz. the character of Indranath in Datal Hantir Une Khowa Howdah (The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker). Her contribution in the Assamese feminist literature is self evident in this takes up the issue of patriarchy existing within Assamese Brahmin families with an illustration taken from a small place in Assam known as Amranga, work is also encrusted with a post-colonial tinge in it as we see the mimicry of the colonizers among the colonised. It is also to her credit that she made extensive use of the relation between different variants of the modern Assamese language as both signifiers of the politics of social and cultural differences among the various Assamese communities. But the overall emphasis remained on the unity of the Assamese identity. This may be taken as her way of dealing with the nature of contemporary politics in Assam marked by ethnic confrontation, besides the larger politics of the militant also contributed a major sum of the Claus Laureate[2008] to a Public Health Centre of Amranga, Borihat in contribution is not merely material in its nature but a dream since her childhood, come true. She died on 29 November 2011 after suffering a long ailment in

Guwahati Medical College.

** Awards**

1982 — Sahitya Akademi Award (for Mamore Dhora Tarowal)

1988 — Asam Sahitya Sabha Award

1989 — Bharat Nirman Award

1992 — Sauhardya Award of Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan of Government of India.

1993 — Katha National Award for Literature

1996 — Kamal Kumari Foundation National Award in 1996

2000 — Jnanpith Award

2002 — D Litt Degree from Rabindra Bharati University, West Bengal

2002 — Mahiyoshi Jaymati Award with a citation in gold by Ahom Court of Assam

2002 — Padma Shri (She refused to accept)

2007 — D Litt Degree from Rajiv Gandhi University Arunachal Pradesh

2008 — D Litt Degree from Indira Gandhi National Open University

2008 — Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar Gold Plate from Asiatic Society

2008 — Principal Prince Claus Award

2009 — Krishnakanta Handique Award, Asom Sahitya Sabha

* Awarded the Ambassador for Peace from the Inter Religious and International Federation for World Peace

* The International Tulsi Award from Florida International University for her book, Ramayana From Ganga To Brahmaputra.

Ode To A Whore

People say that
I excel in making wine.
I can turn the wine
which is brewed today
a hundred years old.
It can make people frenzied and wild
wine that I brew, drinking
I too am constantly intoxicated.

My fleshy breasts
Now sleeps like a dead river.
Intoxicated.
I now can turn this river into a sharp weapon.

The wine I brew
knows how to make
songs from stone, songs from ashes.
People despair to discover my mystery,
they smash their heads
against walls, iron pillars.
They scream, Ah! What is this boon
the heavens bestow upon her path.
How do I say
the way I have brewed
this mellow wine?
I have lain fainted
In the dark hall of sorrow!
In agony
I have whipped my own flesh
and have drunk my own blood.
I couldn't
take off my clothes
in front of my lovers.
And I had a hundred lovers.
yet, I remained a virgin.

The women from the other
Bank of the river, scream
You are a sinner

You will earn a leper's death!

My body, which is like
the supple bodies of barali-fish
that dance with the waves of the Red River!
My breasts—the Saramati Peak
in the Tuensang valley.
My mekhela is like
those branches of Rhododendron
which bloom in the Satoi Ranges!

The women from the
other bank of the river –
spit their venom
Oh hunted woman! Let your body
become a feast for
worms!

The Ladies with white hair
from the other bank of the river
Cry out with many voices!
Oh women, don't gouge at her flesh!
Who knows, those men who
remain like your immediate shadow
would have tried the silky
skin of their own daughters!
Who knows, who knows!
Wise men say, whores are the generals
of the Wars!
Like rivers they lay their traps
Like mountains they protect
the innocent souls!
Oh women, abide by the
Songs of the monk!
Don't gouge at the flesh of whores!
They know unknown
travelers and murky hunters!
Yes, wise men say, that whores are
the weary generals of the Wars!

My body turned into a skeleton;

my skin swung
loosely on the bones
like the hide of a beast
strung up by a butcher
on a long post
to dry!
The demon of misery
and sorrow
looking for my heart
raked my body with its nails!

Suddenly, I discovered the art of
making wine.

I could ford this
river of separation
which flows in the
guise of human life!
which has kept in its bosom
those ancient maps
of the kingdoms burnt into ashes.

Came floating the golden pitcher from the pages of Samhitas
and from the wombs of the Upanishadas
a heavenly voice cries out
Oh Lady, with the heavy breasts
Open! Open the Lid!!...

Many days and many nights
I brewed wine—to open the lids of the golden pitcher
which came from the womb of the Upanishads
Alas, I failed!
drinking made me wild,
only failures drink like a fish!

Suddenly, the lid
opened.
Standing on the other side of
the river—
I saw the glittering
shards of my wine glasses
scattered in a thousand pieces.

Indira Goswami

Pakistan

Oh Pakistan, celestial land!
Give us your heart!
And take our heart in return!
Once we shared the same sky!
Sky with the same sun!
We shared the same pain like twins on the battlefield
to remove the dust.

*

Now our flesh is ripped apart
By that meandering barbed-wire fence!
Oh they have drawn that
dividing line on a flimsy paper!
That line of agony and tears
Can anyone draw that line
In our raw flesh, inside our heart?

*

Friends! Be happy where you
are...now!
Memory never fades, poets say
distance only purifies it...
We sat under the same tree,
Enjoyed the fragrance of the
same flower
Till that time
like a dagger
cut those rivers into
several pieces! Destroyed the
mountains and flower gardens where
we had played!

*

And those banks
where we had counted those
fig-coloured waves!
Like the honey laden
lips of the damsels!
We wore the same clothes
woven by our mothers!
We shivered in winter and in summer our
sweat slid down our backs

*

We enjoyed the same wine
from the poems of Ghalib
Momin and Zauk
We cried together in pain!
Under the blood stained sky.

*

Oh Pakistan! Celestial land
Give us your heart
And take our heart in return!
No we need not speak now
Only silence speaks in a clear voice.
Oh Pakistan! Silence can bring
the fragrance of a mother's soul
Silence can reveal.
The heavenly beauty of Sutlej,
Chenab, and the Red River
Of the East!
Silence can be loud like
a million voices
Oh Pakistan! Celestial land!
Our eyes misted by the
Smoke of blossoming gun powder!
Our soul wounded by the unknown fires!
May these eyes now witness the
new Sunrise
On the banks of Sutlej,
Chenab, and in the Red
River of the East!
Oh Pakistan, celestial land!
Give us your heart!
And take our heart in return

Indira Goswami