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Of Quests for Peace: Juxtaposition of Recreating a Forgotten Legend and Building a Chasm.

The turbulent period of violence, disturbances, trauma, and chaos leave people with minimum choices. The people who live in intermittent low intensity conflicts have no choice but to abide by the alternatives that are thrown in their way. The states of “Northeast” India are a region which is charged with diverse issues and that is a reason the region opens up new ways of observations and studies. Insurgency, counter-insurgency, violence, illegal migration, poverty, underdevelopment, chaos are the major issues that are prevalent in the states of “Northeast” of India. The interventions by armed personnel and the imposition of special laws like AFSPA have emerged as cases of intense atrocities, terror and complete disorder. The armed conflict in the states of Northeast has led to insurgency and which was further followed by counter-insurgencies. These operations have resulted in severe violations of human rights.

The many aspects of crisis are reflected in the literary narratives of and from the region that bring forth the traumatic picture of inhuman side of violence inflicted upon people. The authors who are a part of the collective experience of the atrocities, pain and losses lend voices to those experiences which remain unheard and silenced in mainland narratives. The writings and narratives can be seen as new approaches and perspectives to discuss peace. Tilottoma Misra writes that, “Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be a never ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt ‘to live with it’, as they are expected to do by the distant centers of power” (Misra xix).

Writing in such conflict zones can be seen as an inescapable process, an act that brings forth the violence inflicted upon people. Among many writers only few play a role to promote ways of peace and understandings among communities and keep hope alive. One of the writers this paper attempts to study is Indira Goswami from Assam. She is one of the prominent literary figures who has voiced in championing the peace process among Bodo

people and Assam. She has written about those whose voices were silenced, about social changes and also made attempts to bring peace between Assam and Bodos through different discourses.

This paper examines the importance of invoking a forgotten Bodo legend Thengphakhri in building the irreparable chasm between the relationship of Bodos and Assam. Writers writing about conflict zones employ metaphors of peace and peace-processes in a variety of ways and at times to characterize the very experience of conflict. Violence and rebellion stand as evidence of something violent and traumatic that has happened over a period of time at a place. The larger interest of the paper is in the ways in which peace and understanding between Bodos and people of Assam can be located in the narratives of Northeast states of India and particularly in *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*.

When the Britishers invaded Northeast India, an internal conflict between Bodos and Assamese society had been prevailing, since the establishment of Ahom kingdom by Sukhapa in 1228. An internal conflict was going on in the region because Bodo people demanded a separate homeland. “After the signing of Assam accord- a memorandum of undertaking between the govt. of India and the representatives of the Assam agitation (1979-1985) –it brought out Assamese chauvinism in an ugly fashion as it had rested power mainly on the Assamese middle class, percolating insecurity among Bodo people... the Bodos felt alienated and started demanding a separate homeland” (Goswami ix). The movement for a separate Bodo state has its origin in the economic and social-cultural aspirations of the Bodo people, who first raised the demand for a separate homeland while still under British rule. The movement is not a sudden outcome, but a result of genuine aged old grievances.

In *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* by Indira Goswami, the narrative puts forth the role of a forgotten legendary woman called Thengphakhri. The third person omniscient narrator brings forth a complicated story which is based on ten episodes that carry the fragmented memories of old Bodo people regarding the protagonist Thengphakhri. Indira Goswami’s *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* is translated by Aruni Kashyap, and the narrative explores the life and history of a forgotten Bodo heroine, Thengphakhri. She was revenue collector of Bijni kingdom under the British rule in India. The novel covers only three years of Thengphakhri’s life from 1857 to 1859. When she appears in chapter one “Suez Canal” she is already a loyal British servant who never dares to challenge the hegemony of her masters. But in the subsequent chapters, we see her gradual transformation from loyalty

to revolution. The novel is based on Indira Goswami's extensive research and collection of facts from the Bodo people. There are memories of living witnesses on which the author has heavily relied upon. As I mentioned earlier the novel covers only a particular phase of Thengphakhri's life, the disputed date of her death (1879 or 1895) in the *Introduction* of novel by Aruni Kashyap is also mentioned but there is no detailed description of Thengphakhri's life after her joining the rebel group. The narrative is silent about the heroic deeds of the protagonist, there is no praising of the protagonist anywhere in the novel and even when she joins the rebel group the narrative does not exaggerate the fact and it seems as if it was bound to happen. What the narrative focuses on is the overall account of Bodo life, Bodo people and their struggles in various ways. The novel is set in late 1800's and the focus on a particular period seems to be a deliberate attempt because looking back to the influential history it is that in 1856 and afterwards there was an uprising among Indians to seek freedom from Britishers. A revolution was silently being planned on against the British Empire in many parts of the country. The states of Northeast India were also touched by the spark of revolt.

The narrative propels the fact that Goswami reconstructed Thengphakhri and her life but in doing so she also put forward rich history of Bodos. Although she has relied upon oral sources, she in the process brought the social and political history of the Bodos to the forefront, whose lives and history have otherwise been seldom documented. The main reason for the Bodo movement in the late 1980s was because the Bodos in Assam's history were usually dodged. This novel Goswami attempts to revive the contributions Bodo community had made in India's freedom struggle. Their contribution has usually been underestimated in the popular documents.

The construction of legendary figures like Thengphakhri reflect the inclination of Bodos to construct an identity of "being" Bodo rather than being called as Assamese. The regeneration of forgotten legend becomes significant for Bodos as it helps them in constructing their own political identity and cultural self assertion.

Therefore it becomes a moment of pride for Bodos who now are equally important especially for the history, because they are still in the process of claiming their identity and participation in the freedom struggle of India. "... the past two decades of violence, the xenophobia of the Bodos, their popular slogan divide Assam fifty-fifty had created an irreparable chasm in the relationship of the Bodos and the residents of Assam" (xi-x). Therefore the narrative which revolves around the forgotten legend in *The Bronze Sword of*

Thengphakhri Tehsildar brings her to the centre of Assam and Naga literature and she in a way attempts to bring a peace accord between the two regions.

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