



Research Paper

Legendary Heroines of Bodos that fought for the Community: A Study with the Help of Folk Literature

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ABSTRACT:

The Bodos are one of the indigenous people of Assam. They have been living in this land since the immemorial period. But their histories were properly and detailly not written in time. So, it is called that Bodos are forgotten by the history. Like other communities of this country, Bodos also had some heroes and heroines who fought with enemies for the motherland and its people. Those heroes and heroines could not appear in history as they had no historians at that time, so, they missed to recognized as national heroes. People of the country do not know about them except limited persons of Bodo community. History says nothing about their works and activities; hence, they are called legendary heroes and heroines. The tragic life stories, their love for the motherland and its people, activities towards the nation etc. of legendary heroes and heroines are well described in folk literature. The stories of some such heroes and heroines are still scattered among the people and transmitted orally from generation to generation. Re-minding the works and activities of such heroes is important for the unity and integrity of the people. Besides, pictures of past people's nature and incidents reflect through the story. In this paper, the life story of Gambari and Birgwshri, the two famous legendary heroines of the Bodos are tried to bring to light. They sacrificed their lives untimely fighting with enemies for the welfare of the motherland and its people. Unfortunately, their bravery and heroic activities were not praised and did not get a place in history. Hence, the said heroines are tried to highlight in this paper collecting their works and activities from folk literature.

KEY WORDS- *Legendary, Heroines, Bodos, Folk Literature and Community.*

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I. INTRODUCTION:

History can tell nothing about ancient kings and emperors of the Bodos as written work was not done during their reign. They did not think or feel it's necessary to register the actions and events of their ruling. Another reason for unable to record the incidents may be due to a lack of sufficient literate people among the Bodos at that time. In 1228 A.D., the Ahoms entered in present Assam and started their rule by establishing the kingdom, and from that time they took up the task of recording their activities, events and problems they faced. Their records included a few instances of events of the Bodo kings. But these were not clear and complete. The incidents like defeat by Bodo kings during their attacking was not found place in the written record. Only the names of such Bodo kings or heroes and heroines were mentioned in their writing from whom they conquered the kingdom or could defeat in the war in leading of which king. But their activities and works were not described in detail. For such reasons, fighters of the Bodos for their mother land and community were failed to get place in the history as heroes and heroines like Bhagat Singh, Rani Laxmi Bai, Mula Gabharu, Kanaklata etc. Though, the names of such heroes and heroines could not be found in the pages of history, their names and activities are still alive in the hearts of the Bodo people, because they believe that those heroes and heroines lost their lives fighting with the enemy against oppression and exploitation. As their names are not recorded in written history to introduce their existence, we recognized and called them as legendary heroes and heroines. It means that their activities and works were true and real, but nothing was recorded in the written history. A few of such legendary heroes and heroines are mentioned in the folk literature of the Bodos who are still remembered by the people due to work done for the community during their lifetime. In this paper, an attempt is made to bring out the life story, work, and contribution of legendary heroines *Gambari* and *Birgwshri* based on

folk literature, fictional and non-fictional prose. That is the study is done based on folk literature, fictional and non-fictional prose of some prominent writers.

1.2 AREA OF STUDY:

The subject of study of this paper is the life history of famous heroines who were recalled in the folk literature of the Bodo's for their heroic activities. They were *Gambari* and *Birgwshri*. According to story found in folk literature, the two heroines were born on the northern side of Brahmaputra River or undivided Goalpara area in the early part of the 19th century and tried all-out efforts for the protection of poor Bodo peoples from their enemy. Here, the life story of the heroines of early Goalpara district that occupied place in the folk literature of the Bodos is taken up as a subject of study.

1.3 OBJECTIVE OF STUDY:

1. Try to bring to light the life story, works and activities of legendary heroines scattered in folk literature.
2. An attempt to highlight the existence of heroines who fought with enemies against oppression and exploitation of their motherland, but were about to be forgotten due to not being written about them.
3. Try to study the value and reality of folk literature that is orally transmitted from generation to generation.

1.4 METHODOLOGY AND DATA:

This paper is written using descriptive methods. The necessary data for this paper is collected from the primary and secondary sources.

1.4.1 PRIMARY SOURCES:

Conducted field visits to Bodo-dominated regions in Assam to gather oral histories and folk tales from community elders, local storytellers, and cultural custodians. Used semi-structured interviews with Bodo folklorists, historians, and cultural experts to collect in-depth information about the heroines. And organized focus group discussions with various demographic groups within the Bodo community, including men, women, and youth, to obtain diverse perspectives on the heroines.

1.4.2 SECONDARY SOURCES:

Existing literature including journals, magazines, papers, thesis and other writings on Bodo folk literature and legendary heroines are thoroughly analyzed. The review has been done on archival materials such as manuscripts, historical records, and previous research studies from libraries and cultural institutions and studied their writing thoroughly for better information.

All the collected oral narratives have been transcribed and interviewed the data. The data has been coded to identify recurring themes, motifs, and character traits associated with the heroines. Developed the themes related to the heroines' bravery, leadership, and impact on the Bodo community.

Investigated the cultural and historical context in which the stories of these heroines were created and transmitted. Understand their significance within the Bodo community. Examined the symbolic meanings and representation of these heroines in folk literature, focusing on their roles as warriors and protectors of the community.

1.5 DISCUSSION:

Folk literature is an important part of folklore. It is an asset to the community. It describes the history of some of the ancient events that took place in our society and the picture of previous society, patterns, actions, attitudes etc. With the passage of time and season, the events and day-to-day activities of past generations become a part of history. Folk literature describes the historical events and aspects of our past society which are known to the modern generation of people even thousands of years later. It tells us about what we were in the past, how we survived under what circumstances etc. The literature of world's developed community is also filled with different types of folk literature that portrays the picture of their past era. Among the Bodo community also, there are so many such folk narratives that describe hidden events of the past or untold events in the history. It also narrates how the earth was created; how humans, insects and other creatures were born, etc. The story of the five principles, the *bad* (social law) system, born of the Bodo tribe are found well explained in folk literature. In this way the life sketch of legendary heroes and heroines and their activities towards the community are also could be explored from the folk narratives. The *Gambari* and *Birgwshri* are such two famous heroines of the Bodos.

The *Gambari* and *Birgwshri* were Bodo heroines born in the womb of Bodo's mother. They sacrificed their lives fighting with the enemies of the people of the community to make them free from oppression and

exploitation. They worked hard for the freedom of their brothers and sisters. But, due to a lack of written habits, their names and works did not get a place in the pages of history. Today, history does not tell us anything about them. Though history says nothing, their name, activities and efforts are not forgotten by the people of the community and will not be forgotten in the future. The activities and efforts of said heroines are still heard in the mouth of illiterate people of the villages in form of tale and ballad. Though scattered in the form of tales and ballads, they have never and ever been described or regarded as heroines of imagination. People of the Bodo community still remember, love, and offer honors to them from the bottom of their hearts and tries to make them evergreen. With such effort, some writers have written prose, novels, dramas etc. on their life stories based on folk literature.

1.5.1 BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD:

The tale and related articles that have been published do not say in detail about the date and birth place of *Gambari* heroine. Today, finding out of her date of birth, village and name of her parents is not easy. But it can be known that she was a growing girl when British came and occupied the present Assam.

Like *Gambari*, *Birgwshri* was also born in the region of *Bijni* (present Chirang district of BTAD, Assam). The recorded history of the Ahom kings and the events that happened during British rule notifies us that *Birgwshri* was born in the early period of the 19th century. Based on such data, Vidyasagar Narzary mentioned her year of birth in 1810 in his historical novel "*Birgwshrini Thungri*" (Sword of *Birgwshri*). She was contemporary to *Jaulia Dewan*, another legendary hero of the Bodos of that time. The Novelist Narzary also mentioned that her father and mother's names were *Mwnbaru* and *Alaishri* respectively. In childhood, she was called as '*Thengphakhri*'. The Bodos as cast, had a character of naming their baby observing physical appearance, character, day and month of birth, incident that happened during delivery etc. *Birgwshri* was beautiful but thin, not very tall but she was talkative; so, the parents called her with the name '*Thengphakhri*'. From the early age, she learned lessons about horse riding, and sword wielding techniques and did hard physical exercises. Though a girl, she could deal with men as well. Thus, she became expert in fighting riding on horseback, sword wielding and technique of wrestling.

1.5.2 YOUTH AGE AND MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD:

As they reached in young age, *Gambari* and *Birgwshri* worked for their livelihood. Though they were girl, yet not dependable on others. Alike others of their age, they didn't waste their time only dreaming the colorful dreams of young age. Folk narrative says that *Gambari* could become queen of the *Bijni* kingdom at young age only due to her intent of hard work, courage, and love towards the nation.

In another story of folk literature, it is mentioned that *Gambari* was a successful timber trader. She did her timber merchant in a place named '*Gambari Beel*' situated in the present Kokrajhar district of BTAD Assam. She collected valuable timbers from the forests and sent them to Cooch Behar of West Bengal. Her business ran very well. There was no timber trader in the said area at the time, except her that could succeed. Nobody could look at her with bad intentions and be deceived though she was a woman. If anyone viewed her business negatively, she responded appropriately to him. It is said that a large amount of her profit from the timber trade was spent in the name of aid to help the poor people of the area.

Birgwshri was also a virtuous warrior from very young age. She is mentioned as a tax collector or *Mauzadar* of the *Bijni* area. She could reach in such a prestigious position at a young age only due to her courageous, cleaver and active character. In his novel, Vidyasagar Narzary stated that at the age of twenty years of her life, she showed her bravery and talent of sword-wielding by defeating strong hero *Jawlia Dewan* in a competition held at the '*Losar*' ceremony of Chirang duwar. As described in the said novel, *Losar* is a festival of the Bhutanese where all classes of people grandly take part. There host the events like singing, dancing, wrestling, horse riding, running, jumping and sword-wielding on the last day of the festival. According to the prevailing rule of Bhutanese Drukdesi, whoever could defeat the existing *Dewan* in this sword-wielding contest was chosen as the new *Dewan* of *Duwar* and given the responsibility. *Birgwshri* defeated *Jawalia Dewan*, the existing then-tax collector of *Bijni Duwar*, in the said contest and got the responsibility of the same. But she returned the responsibility to *Jawalia Dewan* through Drukdeshi. Later, she returned to the post of *Tehsildar*. Drukdesi was happy to see her sword-wielding technique of her at the event, for which she was presented with a sword as a gift and announced as '*Birgwshri*' because of her ability, cleaver and technique in fighting by sword-wielding. In this way, she was known as *Birgwshri* from that day.

1.5.3 SOCIAL WORK:

Gambari worked for the development and welfare of the community, engaged with the people of region in every moment of happiness and sorrow, so people loved her. The works done by her were great and vast, but due to lack written records, today it is not possible to give accurate accounts of activities. Yet, different folk narratives describe that she was a social worker. During her time, she took different measures to encourage

the young boys and girls; advised them to engage in such work through which they could give support to family and contribute to the nation. For this, she visited the villages and met young people and discussed.

It is said that along with valuable advices, *Gambari* taught business ideas to young people and provided financial assistance. She always worked to lighten the problems of the illiterate poor people of the village. The sorrowful situation and suffering condition of the poor villagers gave deep pain to her heart. She utilized a large amount of her profit to help the poor people to lighten their problems. While the power of the Duwar administration was in her hands, she reduced the rate of tax collection as much as possible and exempted to those who were unemployed or had no means to pay the taxes. Unlike during the reign of other *Dewans*, she did not forcibly collect taxes from the subjects.

Birgshri also did the same kind of social work as *Gambari* during her reign. She did a lot of work and tried to make it tax-free for the people of the motherland. Thus, during their reign, both the heroines worked for the well-being of the people, and tried to rule the subject peacefully. Therefore, people loved and remained them. Their passion and work for society still stand as a symbol of inspiration for future generations and will continue in the future.

1.5.4 WAR AND CONSEQUENCES:

Both *Gambari* and *Birgshri* became anti-incumbency by standing up against the exploitation and oppression of the community and lost their lives fighting for permanent relief from tax and freedom. According to folk narratives, the subject of *Bijni* was under the rule of the Bhutan king before *Gambari* became queen of the region, and they had to pay tax annually collecting from the people. The revenue or tax needed to be paid every year according to the terms of a treaty with the Bhutanese Crown. In the name of taxes, commodities such as grains, gold, silver, etc. needed to be paid collecting from the people which made dissatisfied to *Gambari*. She was not only dissatisfied by this work but also became intolerable. As a character, she never liked to be inferior to others. So, she stopped the tax payment. She refused the orders given again and again which made the Bhutia king get angry with *Gambari* and finally declare war against her. This led to a war between the armies of the Bhutanese king and *Gambari*. Besides her soldiers, *Gambari* herself bravely fought against the Bhutanese armies riding on horseback. But there was a lack of unity and support from the people to her. Conspiracy and infighting between the people of the community were also there. It is said that the house enemy is the bigger than outside. No matter how powerful the outside enemy is, they cannot easily cause harm if the house or relative's enemy does not cooperate. So, *Gambari* was defeated and executed in the battle with the *Bhutias*. After *Gambari* was assassinated, Bhutia king installed a new governor at *Bijni* and made a promise to repay the taxes as usual. The post of new governor after *Gambari* has not been mentioned anywhere.

In Aniram Basumatary's drama (play) "*Gambari Sikhla*" (*Gambari* girl), mentioned that the Bhutanese army came to fight with *Gambari* to seize the Boro kingdom. From this point, it can be said that after the defeat and assassination of *Gambari* in the war, her kingdom came directly under the control of the Bhutanese dynasty. It remained under the rule of the Bhutanese Kingdom until the British entered Assam and took the said region under their control.

Once *Birgshri* also clashed with the British government taking the payment of tax, and latter this clash turned into an enemy. At that time, *Birgshri* was the revenue collector of *Bijni* Duwar. Like other *Mauzadars* (tax collector), she also had to deposit the tax collected from the people to the British Government. There were about 12 no strong young men accompanied by *Birgshri* to carry the commodities collected from the people as tax. The British blamed the mouzadar for not receiving the taxes on time, if so. On the other hand, *Birgshri*'s heart was torn apart by the forced extortion of taxes from the poor people of her own community. There was no excuse or exemption of tax for anybody. The families who cannot pay tax, their household goods were taken in proportion to the amount of tax, anyway the revenue must be paid on time to the Government. Such behavior of the Government caused deep pain in the heart of *Birgshri*. She searched the ways to protect the people from such a situation. She stopped both the tax collection and revenue- giving system to the British Government. As a result of it, the British Government blamed and sought her. They regarded her to be the enemy who opposed them in their way. Therefore, she was ordered to be arrested and punished. However, *Birgshri* was not bound by the British rule. She formed a group and went on to fight against British forces who tried to capture her. She fought against the British army riding on horseback. The British sepoys were amazed seeing the ability of her sword-wielding and cleave manner of fighting. But she did not have enough troops and arms like the British Government, and as well a shortage of support and resources. Fearing the British rule and their forces, no one came forward to help her. This forced her to leave the village and flee to the forest. But the British Government sleuths and soldiers followed her. She hid in the forest often changing the place. But the British Government was not at a standstill. They employed so many spies to detect her and announced financial rewards for those who would give information about her hidden address. Later they were successful in their attempt. The secret of their enemy was discovered by detectives. One day, *Birgshri* was sitting on the bank of a stream running down from a hilltop near the present city of Bongaigaon. The surroundings were covered by

dense forests, with no human habitation. She took refuge in the area, believing that it was safe. On that day, to relieve her exhausted body, she sat cross-legged on the banks of the river and went out to drink water from the river. She carefully drank water in the river, even then, an English soldier shot her with a gun from behind.

She died untimely trying to do her best for the people of the motherland. She gave up her life trying hard for the freedom of the people, but her subjects did not know how to support and appreciate her in this way. After killing of *Birgwshri*, the condition of the people was restored to the same as usual. Pressure came again to pay taxes to the British Government. Exemption was not granted to anybody even to poorest family. The destitute are forced to live as their slaves. This system continued till India gained independence.

1.6 EXPLANATION:

The life story of the legendary heroines and their activities described in this article are mainly collected from the folk narratives. So, the incidents described here may or may not be exactly actual, as words and stories of folk literature always slightly change in oral transition from generation to generation. It is often mentioned above that they were recognized only as legendary heroines due to lack of written documents, so data cannot be found easily. Hence, the actual time of being queen and tax collector of *Gambari* and *Birgwshri* respectively cannot be pointed out. The period of their activities can be fixed only by imagination from the stories narrated in the folk literature. Their ruling, hostility, and incidents of life were transiting from generation to generation. Hence, their works and activities cannot be satisfactorily found in folk literature as well. It may be the reason for being different in description of their life story in creative literature by different writers. The writers who called *Gambari* a legendary heroine also defined her designation differently. Some of them said that she was a famous timber merchant, while others defined her as the queen of the *Bijni* region. The ancient system of being king or queen shows that no one other than a royal family could attain this position. In this way, the reason for fighting *Gambari* with enemies is also described differently. Some stories narrate that she had to fight against the tax that was to be paid to the Bhutia king every year, while others narrate that she died fighting with Bhutia soldiers trying to resist the onslaught of the Boro kingdom. Pramod Chandra Brahma in the article “*Boroni Jwhlwao Jwhlwaojwphwr*” (Heroes- heroines of the Bodos) mentioned that *Gambari* fought with the Mughals. But in what reason and circumstance, she fought the war against Mughal is not mentioned. Although these events are not clear, indeed, she was a massive heroine, taking whom the people of that time were proud, which strengthened and motivated them to fight against the enemy. This can also be clear by the following folk song lyrics. The song is like this-

“*Swrba Harsa phwibai*
Malaini Deshkhwu Sekho Phwibai
Dagi Dagi Rwuniaphwr
Dong Jwnggha Gambari Shikhla
Jenthra Jwngbw Biswrjwng Ala-Mala’”

(Rendering- someone unknown has come, someone else's country has been seized, don't be afraid soldiers we also have Gambari girls. We will not be defeated by them.)

Like *Gambari*, clearly define about *Birgwshri* also cannot be found. Yet, it can be confirmed by studying folk stories and other creatives like novels, drama and essays composed based on folk narratives that *Birgwshri* was a *Mauzadar* (tax collector) during the British rule in Assam. During her achievement the portfolio of *Mauzadar*, the *Bijni* kingdom was under the rule of *Bhutia* king. When the British came to Assam and occupied the entire region, *Bijni* territory was also gone under their control. The tax needed to pay to the British Government was much more than *Bhutia* king. Hence, she revolted to protest the cruel tax of the British. She fought for the freedom of the people with brave British soldiers and lost her life.

It is said that, once *Birgwshri* also fought with the Mughal general Ramsingh at the place near *Bageswari*. This incident probably happened before the British came to power and occupied Assam. It is mentioned that she cut off the heads of several Mughal soldiers in that battle with Ramsingh.

Dr. Kameswar Brahma mentioned in “*An Introduction to the Myths and Legends of the Bodos*” that the temple *Bageswari*, located near the town of present Bongaigaon, was born centering *Birgwshri*. It has been mentioned above that once *Birgwshri* hid in a small hillock of the said place to escape from the British soldiers. After she was killed, her sword laid on the banks of the river. The sword was found by a saint and taken with the dignified believing it belonged to some deity. The saint managed to build a temple there, and today, it is known as ‘*Bageswari mandir*’ (temple). According to the legend, the name of the temple was changed from *Birgwshri* to *Bageswari*.

1.7 CNCLUSION:

Though not found in the pages of history, the story and events discussed above about *Gambari* and *Birgwhri* are not fully imaginary incidents. The incidents described here may not be the same, but such happens took place in the real lives of past people. So those have historical value. Bodos' incidents of the past were not detailly written on any page of history as they had no habits of writing and author to write the same. The incidents of these periods of Bodos were transformed orally only. So, many incidents were forgotten and others that continued were also changed considerably over time. Considering the incompatibility of the stories, it cannot be said fictitious. If their name and works were documented, today they would have been known by such as Rani Laxmi Bai, Mula Gabharu, Kanaklata Barua etc. Being people of the community, we all have to remember their names and works and try to keep them alive through various records. This is because their life story reflects the picture of the Boro of ancient times.

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