

Estranged Identity: The Problem of Hindu Widows in Indira Goswami's *Nilakantha Braja*

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Abstract: *Nilakantha Braja* (The Blue-necked God) written by famous Assamese writer Indira Goswami highlights the plight of Hindu widows living in the sacred city of Vrindavan. It depicts the despicable and undignified life and even death experienced by widows. Indira Goswami through her protagonist Saudamini, a young widow raises a basic question on the practice of widowhood – is there anyone as lonely as widows? Known as *Radheyshamis* (widows who sing devotional songs in temples for a pittance) in Braj these widows sing *bhajans* (hymns) on empty stomach so that they could accumulate enough money for their last rites. The Braj seems to be obsessed with death. For some it is a means of livelihood, for some it is an escape from the drudgery of life and for a few, a direct gateway to heaven. The stigma attached to widowhood has been there in Hindu society since ages. It was for social reformers Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) and Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) in *prachin* (ancient) Bharat and Sulabh International (an NGO) in *adhunik* (modern) Bharat that efforts have been made to emancipate Hindu widows. My paper is an attempt at understanding the uglier side of widowhood in Hindu traditions and mental agony Indira Goswami experienced herself on becoming a widow.

Keywords: Widowhood, Braj, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar.

Introduction: Braj, the holy place where Lord Krishna spent his childhood and adolescence, comes across as a complex abstract painting that reveals some hidden meaning every time one looks at it. Assamese novelist Indira Goswami in her beautiful novel *Nilakantha Braja* (1976), translated into English as *The Blue-necked God* highlights the plight of widows living in the sacred city of Vrindavan, who are left by their relatives to live an undignified life and die an even more undignified death. The protagonist Saudamini, a young widow, is forced to leave her Christian lover and make Braj her new home, along with her parents. She roams around the streets in search of an answer to her question – is there anyone in Braj as lonely as she? She finds her answer in characters that she encounters. Shahsiprova is another young widow who shares a room with a priest in the name of *jugal upasana* (worshipping the divine as a couple). There are the old *Radhesyamis*, (widows in Vrindavan, who sing devotional songs in temples for a pittance) sing *bhajans* in praise of Lord Krishna on an empty stomach so that they can accumulate whatever pittance they earn from the temple priests in order to afford their last

rites. Mrinalini, a middle-aged woman, is forced to lead a frustratingly lonely life, taking care of her mentally deranged mother and almost-blind father. Chandrabhanu Rakesh considers himself a useless descendant of ancient *ashtadhatu* sculptors of Braj. At the end, he trades his art for a clean Gandhi *topi*.

The Braj: Braj, as painted by Goswami, seems to be obsessed with death. For most it is a means of livelihood, for some it is an escape from the drudgery of life and for others a direct entry to heaven. Saudamini's character is the autobiographical element in *Nilakantha Braja*. Indira Goswami, a young widow herself at that time, tried to come to terms with the loss by emerging herself among the widows of Braj. This was also the basis for her research. The emotional upheaval felt by Saudamini comes across as deep, her desperation to find the answers real and the narration about the plight of these abandoned women in Hindu society in general is very heartrending.

Stigmatised Widowhood: *Nilakantha Braja* is a sarcastic but true comment on the stigma attached to widowhood- widows are kept away from auspicious ceremonies. These hapless women are treated as a burden on family. To quote the report published in English daily *The Hindu*, "I have been living at Vrindavan for the past 16 years after my three sons found it difficult to fend for me in our house at Midnapur. They are daily-wagers and have children to look after, so I decided to take shelter at Vrindavan," says Bijoli Devi, reluctant to share the real circumstances that forced her to leave her house after she was widowed. She does add, however, that she doesn't wish to visit her family this time. "You know, I have a sister-in-law in Kolkata but they are so rich that I am scared to enter her house. I visited her house 10 years ago but never after that." Ashokasundari has been in Vrindavan for six years but hesitates to share her story. "One day, several old women in the village decided to go to Vrindavan, so I tagged along and never looked back," is all she says. Traditionally kept away from social gatherings and auspicious celebrations, these abandoned, aged women – most of them widowed in childhood – have been abandoned by their families or have fled their inhospitable homes, to make Vrindavan their home – their last destination. Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, president of Sulabh International, an NGO says, "Our NGO is actively participating in preparing a road map to eradicate this age-old practice of ostracism of widows. In fact, I always think that widowhood is life imprisonment for these widows." The hundreds of widows in Varanasi and Vrindavan lead an isolated life to attain *moksha*. Living in small rooms in narrow alleys, they spend most of their time praying, and looking for food in the absence of family support.

Initiatives for Emancipation: Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820 – 1891), a philosopher, reformer, and philanthropist did the revolutionary work towards the upliftment of women's status in India. Vidyasagar vigorously promoted the idea that regardless of their caste, both men and women should receive the best education. Unlike some other reformers who sought to set up alternative societies or systems, he

sought to transform orthodox Hindu society from within. Vidyasagar introduced the practice of widow remarriage to mainstream Hindu society. The prevailing deplorable custom of Kulin Brahmin polygamy allowed elderly men — sometimes on their deathbeds — to marry teenage or even prepubescent girls, supposedly to spare their parents the shame of having an unmarried girl attain puberty in their house. After such marriages, these girls would usually be left behind in their parental homes, where they might be cruelly subjected to orthodox rituals, especially if they were subsequently widowed. Unable to tolerate the ill treatment, many of these girls would run away and turn to prostitution to support them. Ironically, the economic prosperity and lavish lifestyles of the city made it possible for many of them to have quite successful careers once they had stepped out of the sanctions of society. Arguing that the practice of *Kulinism* was inhuman, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar presented the government with a petition requesting the legislative prohibition of polygamy and subsequently took the initiative in proposing and pushing through the Widow Remarriage Act XV of 1856 in India. He even demonstrated that the system of polygamy was not sanctioned by the ancient Hindu *Shastras*. The condition of widows was worsened by another social evil practice of Sati. Raja Rammohan Roy was the first Indian to protest against this custom and supported widow remarriage.

Commodity of Trade: Some books are meant to be forgotten. Some are to bring forth forgotten truths. *Nilakantha Braja*, one of the seminal works on widows has long belonged to the latter class. It is an insightful critique on hapless Hindu widows who travel to Vrindavan from across the country to submit their lives to singing Lord Krishna's praises in the temples of the sacred town but invariably end up being a putty in the hands of exploiters, their bodies violated, their minds broken, due to their penury and lack of family support. It is shown how the widows are being treated as commodities of trade. Charanbehari along with a group of licentious men “like butchers examining animals before buying, would make these young widows strip off their clothes in order to examine their bodies thoroughly and to make sure that they were without any blemishes” (BNG p.9).

Autobiographical Perspective: *Nilakantha Braja* translated into many languages, perhaps for the first time in the literary world brought out so poignantly the tragic plight of Hindu widows. It highlights the exploitation and poverty of widows, dumped in by their callous families under the guise of religious sanction and tradition. The novel depicts the confusion and mental agony the writer herself experienced as a widow.

Inglorious Past: Indira Goswami introduces us to the black phase of Braj's history; through one of the characters in *Neelkantha Braj*, she says “Sikander Lodi destroyed all the temples of Mathura and set up butchers' shops in their place. And he ordered that the broken pieces of the images of the deities be made into weights for measuring meat that butchers were selling” (BNG, p.9). She further writes, “the Koran forbids the worship of idols. Therefore the Muslim historians glorified

the vicious acts of looting and destructions of the temples” (BNG, p.10). The foreign researchers interested in knowing about the history of widowhood ask with curiosity the place of Braj in Bhakti movement and Indian literature, Braj in the days of East India company, Braj and Akbar, *Zamindars* and Braj.

Sexual Exploitation: The widows are exploited by the *paandas* (local priests) even at the time of their death. One of the *paandas* says, “I will send four men to remove the corpse. They will take the body and dump it in the Jamuna” (BNG, p. 15). The destitute widows known as *Radheyshamis* are grossly undernourished wear dirty and faded old *dhotis* (cotton sari) and live in pigeon holes. But their foreheads shine with *bibhuti* (sacred ash) and lines drawn with holy sandalwood. The sexual exploitation of young widows by the priests in Braj is very common. One of the characters Shashiprova living with a priest Alamgari says, “there are many women like me in Braj, who live with *pandas* in the name of *jugal upaasana*” (BNG, p.59).

Asking Identity: Some of these young educated widows ask for their identity and protest their worse condition. The protagonist Saudamini shouts, “I cannot spend my entire life like this, doing charity work...I am not a *devi*(Goddess), I am an ordinary girl...I am an independent person...”(BNG, p. 71). The society at large and families in particular are responsible for the pathetic condition of these widows. Pointing out an accusing finger at her father, Saudamini screams, “you are all hypocrites. You are like butchers” (BNG, p.71).

Destigmatising Widowhood: In order to destigmatize widowhood, Goswami very aptly brings in the dialogue between Mirabai and Tulsidas when Mirabai had asked Tulsidas, “have I not sinned by leaving my husband?” Tulsidas replied, “Bhakta Prahalad left his father, Vivishan left his brother, Bharat his mother, Bali his guru. But all of them gained in virtue by it. So why should you think you have sinned?” (BNG, p. 99). Saudamini asks herself in the end, if widowhood is a sin. Indira Goswami questions “the things that happen at Braj! and this is the holiest of holy places! the centre of the universe!” (BNG, p. 35).

Conclusion: *Nilakantha Braja* not only elevated modern Assamese writing to higher echelon but also has placed the problems of Hindu widows in the centre, soliciting right to a dignified life for the abandoned women left to themselves.

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