Appendix

The Copper Sword of Them FhakhRI TahcildAR

Preface

Them FhakhRI was the first woman tahcildAR of India. I visited Bijni several times at the time of writing the novel Them FhakhRI TahcildARar TämAR Tarovâl. The name of Them FhakhRI is not available in any history. A detailed history of lower Assam can not be found. That is why perhaps Târini Prasâd Sen’s Bijni Râjbanâs compiled, edited and introduced by Prasun Barman—mentions—“All the historical data related to the Bijni state proves that it still lacks a history of the state and a comprehensive discussion of it. The history of Assam shows us only one royal dynasty. Āhom culture and its tradition becomes the focal point again and again. As a result of it the small royal dynasties like Bijni become marginal” (10). However, it is true that recently some committed researchers have started serious factual study on the area.

I went to Bijni in 2007 to collect information on Them FhakhRI. The S.D.O. of that area Utjâl Šarmâl, local MLA Kamal Siîn Narihâri and many others helped me greatly during that time. A seminar was arranged in the Bodosâ house to discuss about Them FhakhRI. Many well known litterateurs including the president of Bijni Bodo Sâhitya Sahhâ were there in the seminar. It was a long discussion; yet many things about Them FhakhRI remained in the dark.

I certainly got some powerful evidences. I met old Bâtirm Bodo, who met Them FhakhRI in a village called Bagidarâ near Bijni. I talked with him about Them FhakhRI sitting near him in the verandah of his house. This part of the village where Bâtirm Bodo lives is called London Pârâ. He said that Them FhakhRI came from a nearby village called Khâmriguri. She had beautiful long tresses. She came to this side with Naken Sahib of the Company. Them FhakhRI donned a hat on top of her long hair. I imagined her sitting near Bâtirm Bodo. A unique personality of this Bodo girl floated in front of my eyes. I came to know from Bâtirm Bodo’s talk that the Company sahibs too gave her a lot of importance. Bâtirm Bodo again said that she went to collect revenue on horse like the Company Sahibs and used to spend nights in her camp in a tent. According to him the name of this village was Unninkhrâ Kaliyâ Gâo which is at a distance of eight kilometers from Bijni.

Some days back I read Sri Rupnath Basumatar’s article ‘Birâg Šricikhlâ’. He writes, “Them FhakhRI was a tahcildAR in Mânâh, Sonkoś and Burhidiyâghât. She went to Gossâingaon on horseback with a Sahib called Macklinson. Them FhakhRI even conducted trials in that area. She went to the British office in Govâlpârâ to give the collected money from her ‘mouza’. She had thirteen-fourteen strong and stout gunners with her. Among these
gunners there was one called Rupsim Dafadar who carried Them Fhakhrī’s luggage.” The writer of the article Rupnath Basumatarī met this gunner who carried Them Fhakhrī’s things. At that time Dafadar was more than a hundred years old.

The conversation of Rupnath Basumatarī with Rupsim Dafadar, Them Fhakhrī’s gunner proves that Them Fhakhrī really collected revenue for the British. I made an idea about Them Fhakhrī’s incomparable courage from the folktales I read in my childhood. All the information reminds us that Them Fhakhrī was the first woman revenue collector or ‘tahcildār’ in India. At that time the women in many states in India were under the ‘pardā prathā’ (the system of covering oneself with a veil). It was not possible for a woman to get engaged in this type of a job. The widows in the Brahmin families did not even see the gateways of their own houses.

Perhaps Them Fhakhrī saw the famous queen of Bijnī, Abhayeswarī in her childhood because queen Abhayeswarī came to Bijnī in 1878 after her marriage. Many people are of the opinion that Them Fhakhrī died in 1879. I have mentioned queen Abhayeswarī for the reason that it is a matter of regret that in Assam history queen Abhayeswarī does not find any special place. The British government respected queen Abhayeswarī. The British government honoured her with “Kaijār-i-Hind” and a gold medal. Ambikācaran Chaudhurī in his history book Bijnī, Chidli, Mechpara āru Parbat Jowār wrote with regret — “It is a sign of ingratitude of ignorant people that there is no memorial in the funeral place of such a great woman which is at the confluence of Brahmaputra and Manah”(34). This queen sent one thousand ‘Rajbansī’ subjects to the British troops.

I still remember my visit to Bijnī in my childhood. Years back the roads were so bad that when we went to our village for half of the distance the old Ford car was pulled by an elephant. In those days I heard some songs on Them Fhakhrī. Among the Bijnī royal members I remember queen Sabita Devi clearly. I read in Pine Mount School in Shillong when my father was the Director of Public Instruction of undivided Assam. My father often took me to the family of Bijnī’s last king Bhairabendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur in Shillong during holidays. Most of the time after coming back from office my father went to meet queen Sabita Devi because she used to sit at her music soiree in the evening. My father took me along to listen to those songs. Sabita Devi was a woman of great personality. I still remember her diamond nosepin.

Our family did have relations with Kochbhār. My uncle Bhubaneswar Goswāmī’s daughter Bhebeli Goswāmī was married off to a Brahmin family in Kochbhār. Many students from Kāmrūp studied in Kochbhār during that time. The maintenance responsibilities of the students were taken by the inhabitants there. In those days the Brahmins had to give ‘kanyā
sukla' (bride tax) at the time of marriage. Many Brahmins remained bachelor not being able to
give the money. Many of these Brahmins went to Kochbihār to practice priest hood for a
livelihood. Sometimes by the time they came back they would have crossed their
marriageable age.

Them Fhākhārī must have experienced the earthquake in this area during that time. She
must have seen the attack of the Bhutanese soldiers especially the Bijnī attack by Jhāoliyā
Mech of Bhutan in 1864. Bijnī was almost ruined in that attack. Bijnī's capital was changed to
dumuriyā after the incident. If we assume Them Fhākhārī died in 1895 then she must have
witnessed the attack.

Our protagonist Them Fhākhārī must have listened to stories about the oppressions by
different plunderers and robbers from her grandfather. Khā Chaudhurī Āmānatullā Ahmed in
his book Kochbihārar Ithās mentions that these robbers went to Raṅpur and Dinājpūr.
According to him the historically well known names among them are Bhabānī Pāthak, Devī
Chaudhurānī, Majnu Sāhā etc. A group of seven hundred robbers with elephants, camels and
horses and weapons came to this area in 1782. These robbers openly robbed the innocent
subjects of everything. They even killed these subjects and executed inhuman torture. Captain
Thomas died trying to counter a group of three thousand saint-robbers in 1773. These
plunderers moved around different places in the guise of pilgrims. They robbed by kidnapping
children. The native people worshipped them considering them to be saints. The Company
had to take a lot of trouble to control these robbers. I believe Them Fhākhārī had witnessed
many of these incidents of disaster and calamity of her motherland and had listened to these
stories from her grandfather which inspired her to take the sword and become a valorous
woman.

In my visit to Bijnī I got an opportunity to read an application written by queen
Abhayeswārī to the governor. When I went to Bijnī in my childhood I was too small to
remember anything clearly; yet the forest filled with various trees is still fresh in my mind. I
got down from the car many times to see this charming land. So many trees! I don't remember
the names now; but I still remember the Sonāru trees with their yellow flowers as if the rays
of the sun were scattered everywhere. And the different types of birds! That was an
incomparable land! It brought me reminiscences which would remain in the canvas of my
memory forever.

I think the kings of Bijnī gave special importance to preserve this forestland. We
come to know about certain norms that were laid down and adhered to in order to preserve
this land from some old papers. It was written:

"A tree can’t be cut if the circumference is not of two hands together. A penalty of ten
rupees must be given if a smaller tree is cut. A tree less than the circumference of two hands can't be used except for religious purposes."

After reading these things it becomes clear that the kings of Bijnī kept special focus on the flora and fauna of their land. In those days the forest was attractive with trees like titācapā, nāgeswar, jārul, ghugurā, gandhasarı etc.

... Slave trade was practiced in this area.

In Kāmrūp the price of the male and female slaves was fixed. The price of slaves was fixed in my grandfather's will in Āmraṇā or in other words in Kāmrūp. I have used one will of my grandfather in my novel Ūye Khovā Hāodā. The system of selling and buying human beings was prevalent in lower Assam in 1787. People mortgaged themselves at the time of adversity. Āmānatullah writes in his history of Kochbihār, "Decorated boys and girls were sold in the market. Each year almost one hundred boys and girls were sent to other countries from different places in Assam and Kochbihār. Every girl was sold from twelve to fifteen rupees. The price of a boy from the 'Koch' caste was twenty five rupees and the price of a boy from the 'Kalitā' caste was fifty rupees. The boys and girls from the low caste were bought by the Gāros. Sometimes they were taken to Myanmar to be sold. The people in Bhutan and in Gāro hills made certain boys and girls slaves forcefully." Describing the poor financial condition of the people in Kochbihār Captain Turner said that on his way to Bhutan through Kochbihār he had found the northern side of Kochbihār almost deserted. They bought the essential things rice, vegetables, salt, oil etc by spending one anna everyday.

We get the evidence of human trading more authoritatively in Gait's Assam History (p. 241-242). The men caught in war or sometimes people from the hill tribes were bought and made slaves. The price varied from twenty to three rupees depending on their caste. They were made to do all the dirty and menial works. Like lower Assam, in the Āhom kingdom too slave trade was practiced openly.

I have already mentioned that there is no detailed history on lower Assam.

I have read many books on history of Assam. I have read some invaluable articles on Assam history by regional and foreign writers. I am surprised by the fact that no one seriously thought about writing in details on lower Assam. This could have been done by Sāhitya Sabhā, Asam Prakāśan Parisad or by some other publishers by engaging some writers because a publisher is the Builder of the Nation in the real sense. Once on a trip to Maldeep I heard that they did not have any history of their literature. A publisher from India engaged someone to write their literary history. After reading some books on Assam history including Gait's I told in many of my speeches that the system of 'sati' was not prevalent in Assam. One concubine of Kumār Bhāskar Barmā died as a 'sati'. One or two stories of this nature were
recorded in some pages of ‘Arunodoi’; but it was not a custom in Assam. I talked about it in pride. From my study of the Assamese Rāmāyana by Mādhav Kandali I knew Assamese women achieved a sort of freedom to speech even some six-seven hundred years back. We get the evidence of their serious consideration on politics too. Written in 14th century Mādhav Kandali’s Rāmāyana also reflects on the Assamese society of that time. It is revealed that the minister Sumanta sent Śri Rām to the forest taking bribe from Bharata. Knowing about it the women in Ayodhyā expressed the opinion that he should be sent off from the state.

However, five queens (one of them was a concubine) were burnt in the funeral pyre of king Mukunda Nārāyan in 1788. I was shocked to read about this pathetic scene. King Mukunda Nārāyan became insane at the death of his brother, Devī Nārāyan, starved himself and passed away two and half months later.

Tārini Prasād Sen (in Bijni Rājbarāṇa collected and edited by Prasun Barman, p. 45-46) narrates the custom of ‘sati’ in the following manner:

“Placing king Mukunda Nārāyan’s body on the bed in his heavenly sleep and uttering the name of ‘Hari’ his friends and family started for the funeral place. The four queens and one concubine of the king donning the best of their dresses and jewelleries and with beautiful hairstyle followed them in palanquin. They reached the funeral place and all the subjects of the state followed them to the cremation ground leaving their own work aside. Looking at the crowd it appears as if the royal family had set off for some recreation to enjoy water games in the river. Old and young everyone reached for the funeral ground. The funeral pyre was made ready. The sounds of divine instruments surrounded the place. Many sweet smelling woods, resins, and ghee were brought. Many people wept aloud knowing about the concretions of the queens. The king’s body was placed on the pyre made of sandalwood. The queens taking the name of God slept on the left side of the king with smiling faces. Different types of fragrant things were kept on the pyre. Pitchers full of ghee were poured on the funeral pyre. The funeral pyre burnt ablaze into terrible flames. The bodies of the king and the queens were reduced to ashes in the winking of an eye.”

In Bijni Rājbarāṇa edited by Prasun Barman it is written that it was not compulsory to die as a ‘sati’.

The second ‘sati’ in Bijni was Šubhāṅkarī Devī. She became a ‘sati’ by burning herself to death in the funeral pyre of her husband king Abhay Nārāyan (1829). Our heroine Them Fhākhrī was alive at that time when Šubhāṅkarī died as a ‘sati’. She must have seen the scene with her own eyes. King of Chidli state Surjya Nārāyan’s wife too died as a ‘sati’ in 1836.

My search for Bijni’s Them Fhākhrī made me realize the need of a detailed history of
lower Assam. Recently I read in a national news paper the head of B. T. C. had proposed for a huge history of the Bodos which will include the different sections of the Bodos like Kokboroks, Mech, Kachārt, Dimācā, Sonowāl Kachārī, Gārō etc. We will get to know many things after the composition of this history.

I have written the novel Therî Fhākhrī amalgamating imagination, memories of the stories on Therî Fhākhrī's sword and the reading of different articles. Therî Fhākhrī had roamed about my world of imagination since my childhood.

As has been said by many characters in the novel Therî Fhākhrī's year of birth is fixed at 1810. The novel, however, covers only three years of this extra-ordinary women's life – from 1857 to 1859. To keep the historical truth intact I read many books. Among them Tārini Prasād Sen's Bijnī Rājbarma, collected and edited by Prasun Barman, Ambikācaran Chaudhurī's Bijnī, Chidli, Mechpārā āru Parbat Jovārār Itihas, Colonel L.W. Shākepeare's History of Assam Rifle, Benudhār Šarmā's Sātāvan Chāl bā Swādhīnātār Prathām Yuddha, Santo Barman's Jamindary System in Assam during British Rule A Case Study of Goalpara District, Gunābhīrām Barua's Dhekīyāl Phookanar Jīvan Caritra, Khā Chaudhurī Āmānatullā Ahmed's Kochbhārār Itihas, Amalendū Guha's Jamindarkālīn Govālpārār Ārtha-Sāmājik Abastḥā, Bhaben Narjī's Bodo Kachārīr Gīt-Māt, Śrī Madhurām Bodo's Bodo Loka Sāhitya etc. I owe a lot to the stories I had heard in my childhood on Therî Fhākhrī. I am happy to write this novel in her honour.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami

First Chapter

Therî Fhākhrī finished all her works in the district headquarters and bade goodbye to the eight gunners. She was enjoying the play of the setting sun in the vast bosom of Brahmaputra. Suddenly the river appeared like a pregnant woman to her.... The river wore a red garment... When the rays of the sun play with the wind then this pregnant woman shamelessly sheds her garment. Therî Fhākhrī was waiting for a steamer to come. Would Captain Hardy come? What if he didn't? If he didn't? Sweat of apprehension adorned her forehead.

She heard in the district headquarters that many steamers came and went back. The steamers had been carrying soldiers since the last two days. The barracks on the gateway of Bhutan were getting plump with soldiers. Therî Fhākhrī did not want to reveal the pain in her heart. At this time a line appeared on her forehead... like a trident... Therî Fhākhrī's tresses were longer than the other Bodo women. Her hair glittered like gold in the light of the sun.
Her hair had the glow of the skin of a cobra slithering out of its hole at night. Everyone was attracted by her beauty and her charming personality, but everyone was disappointed by her reticence.

Only her grandfather Tribhuvan Bāhādur understood her silence. Her silence spoke only to him. Tribhuvan Bāhādur was like a teacher to her. Just as Macklinson was a cruel but merciful teacher in her working life. The two steamers were moving towards the bank like two hippopotamus.

She did everything according to the command of Macklinson. He reminded her to show no mercy at the time of revenue collection! -- She was a ‘tahcildār’ now. Her gunners roared at the tenants when they failed to pay land revenue for three times: “This time you can’t escape. Come out with the things for the attachment.”

They brought their dishes and water pots of bell-metal. The naked children of the family lifted and placed them in front of Them Fhākhri. She was sitting on a chair... She did not look up at the children... Macklinson was observing her from a distance. The British official warned her on the very first day: “Softness is not a quality of good administration... Beauty is nothing without personality.” Macklinson even said: “Two lease-holders were moribund by the beating of the tenants in my days itself. One of them was almost killed by them.”

Them Fhākhri retorted: “Sir, don’t be afraid of? People in this side respect women.”

The officer laughed and said: “Yes, of course. This is very much evident, Them Fhākhri. When you stand in their courtyard they are silent. Not a single word! Yes, not a single word. Miracle – it is just a miracle. Do you know that?”

Once the gunners tore down the storeroom of a tenant with a sword just as easily as if they were banana leaves. She did not make a single sound. Macklinson was looking at her from a distance and observing her demeanour he shouted:

“A general can never collapse in emotion...a general is a man made of stone, try to understand – Them Fhākhri you are great.”

Them Fhākhri stood up and looked towards the river – The sun was gearing up to set... The Brahmaputra wrapped itself up with a red garment...as if a priest, red with sacrificial blood on his body was preparing to enter the temple. The sky was covered with swathes of red cloud. The scattered cloud appeared like the blood-smeared foot prints of a priest. Them Fhākhri saw Rupsingh Dāfādār and ten other gunners getting ready with their horses. Dāfādār came ahead with her horse.

They would have to reach Bijnī before it was late in the night. There was no sound audible except the ‘khot khot’ sound made by the hooves of the horses. They saw a flock of
elephants passing in the distance. The gunners paced down their riding speed. They could distinctly hear the sound of the cicada. And what was the other sound about? Was it a tiger? Her grandfather told her how the moguls during their rule at Govālpārā killed more than 200 man-eaters. Tribhuvan Bāhādur was adept at telling the story of the Michael couple – how they were trampled by wild elephants when they came to enjoy the beauty of the forest. From Rāṁpur to Bijnī – that was the empire of the tiger! One day a flock of locusts came from somewhere! The whole sky was strewn with them. All the villagers came out... The locust didn’t go too high into the skies. They didn’t. As if someone had cast a black net on the sky! The darkness of the sky descended ... Then Fhākhri, for the first time, saw that the edges of the wings of the locusts were like some beautiful drawings. That is why they were called ‘kakātī farin’... She often got engrossed in her reminiscences when she returned from the district headquarters with the gunners. It was Mr. Hardy who taught her to ride horses and to shoot with the gun! Mr. Hardy brought the horse himself. There was no dearth of horses. Bhutan used to send eight ‘tāñon’ horses and cartridge worth Rs. 820 and many other things as an exchange for the precious things like dried fish worth Rs 500, oil worth Rs 200 and silver jewellery worth Rs 950 and many others given to them by Bijnī. The ‘tāñon’ horses were bought by the Europeans.

One day Hardy appeared before her with a spirited horse. He informed her grandfather, Tribhuvan Bāhādur beforehand. She smiled secretly as these thoughts came to her mind. She smiled remembering the first day of her horse riding. When she sat on the horse for the first time she fell off the horse twice. When she fell down the second time she grasped Hardy’s shirt... Hardy’s shirt got torn; Mr. Hardy must have worn a very old shirt that day! When she fell down Captain Hardy lifted her up holding her tresses. Uh! Everything was so clear in her mind! Her lock of hair worked like a rope. Mr. Hardy talked about so many things... Stories about horses...Who first tried to tame a horse... who discovered the saddle of the horse! He made her utter the word ‘saddle’ so many times. She remembered everything... She too swore to become an expert horse rider! She could, she surely could!

The gunners started singing. They often sang some delightful songs to break the silence of the night while passing through this road:

Don’t cry āi, don’t cry
You will be married to a Bodo boy only.
Not to a Gāro boy
Not to a Nepāli boy
Don’t cry āi, don’t cry
My daughter is as beautiful as a princess

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Her face is long like the leaves of the Tarā tree
My girl is as clean as the leaves of Jowāi
My daughter is princess.
...Her face is like the leaves of the Tarā tree...

Breaking the stillness Them Fhakhri’s entourage moved ahead with the songs... She was again under the weight of the memories of her past. As if a python had wrapped her up.

Captain Hardy made every effort to teach her. Yes, he tried hard. His whole body was drenched with sweat... Sometimes he came with his wife Elizabeth to encourage her. Her complexion was that of a blooming ‘fāmi’ flower. Her tresses were like golden threads! Hardy said – See Elizabeth you couldn’t ride a horse but Them Fhakhri learned it in five days.

She measured Them Fhakhri’s hair with a surprised look. So long and shiny!

Them Fhakhri’s maternal uncle was amazed looking at her horse riding.

A surprise visitor at night at his own house, MusaharT’s activities were very mysterious.

"Who taught you? Who taught you?"

She smiled and said – “Hardy! Hardy Sahib!”

“Oh Captain Hardy! He is a good hunter and horse rider. Are they the large chested young horses brought from Bhutan to our Bijm? He also taught the soldiers to ride horse! Among the officers Mr. Hardy is the favourite of all."

Them Fhakhri said, “It was really difficult in the beginning. I had to make great effort to control the horse.”

“Listen, do you know how to identify a ‘tātu’ horse: Move round the horse, if the horse looks at you in anger or twinkles his eyes but doesn’t move his ears – you will know the horse is clever... if it behaves like a nettled animal as soon as you jump up on its back you will know the horse is sprightly, all these are there in the ‘ghorā nidan’. Musahārī said to her – “I am sure Captain Hardy didn’t teach you with this type of a horse, did he?”

She said – “Captain Hardy told me he taught horse riding to two British ladies with this horse. One of them narrowly escaped death... Yet she learned”. Them Fhakhri again said, “I was not frightened like Elizabeth Ma’am. The horse did not twinkle at me! But he was not ready to take me on his back.”

“You are a courageous Bodo girl; the horse must be scared of you! That’s why he was frightened to take you on his back. The British ladies – do you know, the northern people call them fairies! They are born from eggs and trees. The European men always hold their hands and waist so that they can not fly up to the sky.”

Them Fhakhri smiled and said – “Listen uncle, I don’t know why the horse did not let
me sit on it. I was not like Elizabeth ma’am; I was not ready to give up. Captain Hardy taught me how to control it with the bridle, but that was not of any use! It tried to fling me off. Everytime I jumped on its back with my left legs still on the stirrup it started to vault in its own way. Once my hair got stuck in the stirrup. Mr. Hardy somehow saved me.” Her uncle laughed.

Then Fhākhri’s procession moved ahead. The gunners stopped singing. Now the hoofing sound of the horses broke the silence of the night.

Everyone noticed suddenly a tiger cross the road and enter the jungle.

Everything came to a standstill for sometime.

Many things of the past came to her mind. Her grandfather Tribhuvan Bāhādur worked with an old European for sometime. He was a hunter. He killed many deer! He used the skin of the deer for his bed and floor. The skin of deer was spread even on his wooden chairs. He kept his hats on the horns of the deer hung on the wall. This man gave a loaded gun to her grandfather as a gift at the time of his retirement from the company. Her grandfather taught her shooting with this gun. And to use sword? She knew it before. The copper sword at home – she got it among the ruins of the temple of the goddess in her childhood. Now her grandfather taught her to practice with that sword.

Sometimes a smile spread on her lips in the quietness of her ride. Her grandfather taught her shooting on the bank of river Doloni. Her grandfather, Tribhuvan Bāhādur made some signs with embers climbing up the peepul tree. Something really strange happened that day… Two young boys sang a song of repentance in their intoxicated state with their feet in the water. At that time she was aiming with her gun. The drunken boys did not realize that they had entered into a dense jungle. They sang, rather screamed... “Eating rice, taking wine broke the house!”

Then Fhākhri hit the targets made by her grandfather. Tribhuvan Bāhādur patted on her back in applause. Then Fhākhri entered into the jungle overwhelmed with joy and reached a tree where tigers clean their nails. The trunk of the ‘uriām’ tree looked variegated by the constant scratch of the tigers. At this time they heard a great roaring sound. The drunken boys got scattered. But what happened? What happened... Then Fhākhri didn’t know herself – when did she fire the gun and the tiger fell down… When did she shoot?

The tiger which was ready to attack the two drunkards fell into the river!

Everything came to her mind – The bullet hit the forehead of the leopard – She remembered – Her grandfather for the first time stared at her in amazement. The news that Then Fhākhri killed a tiger had already begun to spread. Some of the villagers came to her house – in the courtyard there lay the carcass of the tiger. Captain Hardy and Elizabeth too came.
Them Fhākhrī smiled secretly. She smiled because she herself did not know from where she achieved this audacity.

When her grandfather taught her shooting he told her accidental firing is a crime! But this was not an accident. This presence of mind was a gift from God!

For the first time Captain Hardy and Elizabeth observed her standing close to her. Elizabeth measured her hair. She was a wonder to both of them.

Elizabeth thought -- She met many Indian women when she travelled to different places in India – Women from a poor family, women from an aristocratic family, the peasant women, the women who spend nights with the European officers, their eyes along with their rising breasts sparkle like that of a snake coming out from a hole; Elizabeth saw those types of women. But Them Fhākhrī, she was dumb-struck in consternation!

Khot! Khot! Khot!

The procession of the gunners moved ahead breaking the silence.

Khot! Khot! Khot!

Macklinson said – Hardy was sent for six months… Hardy was unwell! Everyone thought it was Malaria, but it was not! That is why he was sent to London by ship. It had been six months. Them Fhākhrī counted in her fingers… yes six months.

The sound of cicada became deep slowly. They could hear the sound of a horse-carriage coming from a distance! Someone was carrying a lantern sitting beside the coach – the place was illuminated by the light of the lantern.

The carriage stopped near the gunners. Two Europeans came out opening the door.

Them Fhākhrī recognized the person – That was Macklinson! He might have gone to attend the invitation of some ‘bhōnā’ or ‘moujādār’.

He stood near Them Fhākhrī’s horse in his typical military manner and said:

“Hey Them Fhākhrī – why are you so late in returning? These places are insecure.”

Them Fhākhrī understood his English -- She replied – “I was sitting on the bank of the river… waiting for the steamer coming from Kolkata.”

Macklinson smiled and said – “The steamers do not arrive in time now. The steamers are late by one or two days. They load goods and carry passengers from different places like Baricāl, Dhākā, Cirājgānj, Deongaṅj, Pāgalātek... and stop in all these places. But why have you to wait for the steamer? Why? Them Fhākhrī it is too late – and the roads are dilapidated!”

Them Fhākhrī got down from the horse and greeted Macklinson. She was wearing breeches wrapping the ‘dōkhnā’ on top of it. She was wearing a long blouse inside. She said – “I was waiting for Captain Hardy. He told me he would come back after six months. Six
months have passed.”

Macklinson retorted in a cry of pain:

“Hardy! Our Captain Hardy?”

“Oh Them Fhākhṛī, I am sorry. I am sorry.”

Them Fhākhṛī asked in alarm – “What happened? When will he come back?”

Coming forward Macklinson grasped Them Fhākhṛī’s hand and replied in an outcry –

“Captain Hardy is dead! He died when his ship reached Swiss canal!”... Hardy roamed
around the jungles to know about the condition of the people he loved, the common people.

She asked – “Which mosquito bit him? Why did it happen?”

Macklinson said – “We sent him off thinking it was Malaria! That’s what happened. He was
given leave for six months.”

Macklinson dabbed his eyes with his handkerchief. Them Fhākhṛī was thunderstruck.

Second Chapter

The gunners waited for her for an hour. No, she didn’t come out. The gunners had
never found Them Fhākhṛī so reluctant to go to the district headquarters. Rupsirī Dāfādār
even went to her room and tried to console her – “Them Fhākhṛī! All of us are painfully
aggrieved at the death of Hardy sahib. He thought you would do a lot of good work. Did he
not give you the charter himself? He and his wife would have done so many things for you.”

Them Fhākhṛī was sitting on a bed made of ‘urīām’ wood resting her head on her
knee. She didn’t reply. But the images in her memory became more distinct and they flitted in
and out of her mind. – Yes, there was Hardy again. – He came on a variegated horse with the
charter in an evening! Three Britons came with him riding different horses!

Captain Hardy didn’t come in to the courtyard and called her to the gateway instead.
He called Tribhuvan Bāhādur too.

The British on the white and black horses were wonderstruck looking at Them
Fhākhṛī. They had seen many Indian women in different places in India – but this woman?

Them Fhākhṛī remembered everything! – Hardy came forward lifting the bar of the
gateway and said – “Them Fhākhṛī, you will have to help us! You will be one of our
members!”

The British on the black and white horses clapped getting down from their horses.
Two of them blank fired directing their guns towards the sky.

Captain Hardy opened the beautifully wrapped charter and explained everything to
Them Fhākhṛī and Tribhuvan Bāhādur.

From that moment Them Fhākhṛī would work as the ‘ijārādār’ on the banks of Mānāh,
Sonkos and Burhādiyā. If she showed expertise in the work she would be promoted to the position of a ‘tahcildār’.

The British soldiers shouted in mirth.

The first woman ‘ijārādār’ in India! After that ‘tahcildār’! Hip Hip Hurray! Hip Hip Hurray! The farmers in the courtyard came forward listening to the merry making.

“Can a girl work as ‘ijārādār’?”

Hardy said – “Why can’t she? Why not? She has killed a tiger. Can anyone of you kill a tiger? All of you run for the help of the British when you see a man-eating tiger!”

The sahib on the white horse called Babakru said to the people in the courtyard – “I killed two man-eaters last year. Do you remember?”

All of them looked up at Babakru. His curly golden hair was visible behind his felt hat.

Then Fhākhrī remembered everything. Babakru said shaking his raised hands – “Do you know how many tigers did the sahibs of our regiments kill?” Everyone said in unison – “We don’t know.” Babakru said shaking three of his fingers towards the people – “Three hundred. Three hundred tigers. Among the twenty man-eaters in this area, I have killed two.”

The man called John jumped down from his horse and said – “I have killed tigers too. You go and see. We use their skin as bed-cloth. We have decorated our wine table with the legs of the wild elephants.”

Everything was there in Then Fhākhrī’s mind. Babakru said with great enthusiasm – “Half of your population would have been devoured by the tigers without the company’s guns.”

The crowd in the courtyard grew bigger. Some of them could not believe that Then Fhākhrī would be the ‘ijārādār’. One old farmer among the crowd blessing Then Fhākhrī – “At a time when young widows are dragged and burnt in the funeral pyre of their husbands, when women are harassed by different social customs – our Then Fhākhrī will work as the ‘ijārādār’ with the British riding on a horse!” All the farmers shouted – “Hail to Then Fhākhrī – hail to Then Fhākhrī!”

Then Fhākhrī bent down and accepted the blessings of these old farmers.

Captain Hardy took Then Fhākhrī to the field where sahibs were taught horse riding to examine her as a horse-rider for the last time. Everyone knew how many timber trees, ‘gandhasāroī’, ‘śilikhā’ and ‘campā’ flowers were cut by the British for this field. She was brought to the southern direction of the field. There was a long pond on this side – full of red and white ‘fāmi’ flowers!

Hardy sahib was pleased with everything. Then Fhākhrī remembered: She was
resting under the timber trees after her last examination of horse riding, when she saw a group of unknown persons under the trees — three women and two men. Then Fhakhri came to know that they were not from this side. The women were brought from the northern side for the entertainment of the British.

They were not the Bodo women from this side. With long veils these women were like the betel nut trees with betel leaves wrapped around them. They were sitting there watching the red and white ‘fami’ flowers. The red ‘bāhakā’ flowers at a distance appeared like the troop of the company’s soldiers. Mr Hardy was surprised to see the women. To distract her attention from these women Captain Hardy ordered her — “Let me see how far you can take this cunning horse! Go! Fast!”

What happened to her? Then Fhakhri knew Hardy sahib too enjoyed with these women with their bodies like that of ‘fami’ flowers. No, she should not think like this about Hardy. This was not fair. Why was she in such a sorry state? Why? What was her relation with Captain Hardy? Love? No, no — Then was Captain Hardy a safe shelter to her as her grandfather Tribhuvan Bāhādur was? Or was he her elder brother as she often imagined? Once a ‘pāthak’ from the bank of Tarsā river came to her place and said — “Then Fhakhri! You would have got a better life with a brother of your own. It is written in Rāmāyana — you will get wife and beloved in every state — you will get people of all relations — but a brother! You will not get anywhere!”

Then Fhakhri thought — Captain Hardy must be a brother of hers in her former birth. He understood her heart, he knew her tears — he was like a sympathetic brother to her. She wept in front of those ten gunners.

Third Chapter

Tribhuvan Bāhādur was busy from the morning. A company clerk told him four soldiers from Uttar Prades were coming this side. They had planned to visit one or two families in Bijnī. They would come to Tribhuvan’s house. They wanted to meet Then Fhakhri. They had not seen any woman ‘ijārādār’. The company had never appointed a woman ‘ijārādār’ in any other place in the country. Besides that these retired soldiers would also visit the temple of Mā Kāmākhyā.

Tribhuvan Bāhādur sent the news to all the villagers. Very soon the villagers thronged the courtyard of Tribhuvan Bāhādur. There was no end to the curiosity of the villagers. Why would they come? If they wanted to visit Kāmākhyā they could have gone by the river!

Tribhuvan Bāhādur laid mats on the courtyard for them to sit on. Some of the villagers expressed their doubt — “Do they really want to meet Then Fhakhri and visit
Kāmākhyā? Or they have some other intention!” Tribhuvan Bāhādur screamed—“You have misunderstood! Don’t you remember the people who came last year? They came to see our farmland and our cultivation system! They wanted to know how our ‘jumai’ is so tasteful!”

One of the farmers said—“We heard they came to know how different crops can be produced from the same field at different times of the year.” Another one said—“Who can block the brooks and streams and drain water to the paddy field as we do? Didn’t that Portuguese or British once tell—‘Bodo brothers, you can even drag the river Mānāh and the river Kalahī and compel them to fall into the paddyfield!—Yet you are in this pitiable condition. Why is it so, why? Is it because of the burden of land revenue?’”

Everyone was silent for a while! At that moment four soldiers came from the company camp in a veiled cart. They jumped down from the cart and stood near the gateway. The cart went back.

Tribhuvan Bāhādur arranged four chairs of ‘uriam’ woods made by himself and cleansed them with a ‘gamocha’. He welcomed them opening the gate. The farmers stood up and the soldiers offered them respect. Two of them were large, one looked healthy and the other one was thin. Asking them to sit, Tribhuvan said loudly—“Respected warriors! You have come from a different state! So please introduce yourself to us!”

The first one said in his introduction—“My name is Dilip Singh. I belong to a place called Ahiran in Maddhyapradesh. I am sure you have not heard about river Ahiran!” The villagers replied in unison—“No, we have not.” He said—“The people of our side do not know about your place. Someone told my family I was coming to a forestland. My family members got apprehensive and told me not to come. They believe only brutes live here. Noone knows a woman works as ‘ijārādār’ here.” All the villagers in the courtyard laughed.

Tribhuvan Bāhādur said—“You are right. The numbers of tigers have increased now. Our Haridhan Bodo was devoured by a tiger on his way to the company barrack in broad day light. At ‘seraśā’ alluvial land where three hundred ‘jotadār’ had to give up their lives with one hundred tigers is still oppressed by tigers.”

The old villagers expressed their pain to know the fact. The soldiers spoke in a different Hindi but the villagers understood them.

The second one said—“My name is Rām Bābu. I am From Fārūkkābād of Uttar Pradesh. My wife, on the other hand, inspired me to come this side. She said—‘One Brahmin family from Fārūkkābād went to Kamrup hundred years back. Try to know about their whereabouts.’” One of the villagers said—“They are settled at South Kamrup. They have many acres of land and they have elephant too. They say that they are from Fārūkkābād.” The soldier said again—“We have not come to know only about that family for sure. Our chief
aim is to visit Mā Kāmākhya.” One of the farmers screamed — “To visit Mā Kāmākhya? For that you could have gone straight by boat. Why did you stop at this dock?” Rām Bābu said — “We have heard that some retired sahibs of our company stay here in the camp. We will meet them.” The other two soldiers too said — “We are retired. We will not be able to see our lords anymore. We consider our lords as gods.”

The third soldier stood up to introduce himself. Everyone noticed this soldier was silent and appeared to have suffered from some agony. He did not take part in the conversation. He stood up and nodded his head to show respect — “I am Ujir Sin from Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. I was a subedar. The company sahibs were like lords to us. We never forgave them who were disloyal to our lords.”... Suddenly Ujir Sin wept hiding his face between his knees.

Two of his companions tried to console him; but he sat in the same posture. Pointing to Ujir Sin, Rab Bābu and Dilip Singh said — “You will be surprised to listen to Ujir Sin. You will have to be very strong.” The villagers became curious. Ujir Sin cried loud and screamed — “Take me near Mā Kāmākhya. Take me, soon.” The villagers were anxious — “What happened to this soldier?” At last the soldier who was yet to introduce himself, said — “Brothers! There was a tragedy in Ujir Sin’s family. His youngest son died and he is mentally very depressed. He wants to get the blessing of Devī Mā.” All the villagers felt sorry for the poor man.

The last soldier said — “My name is Bhīm Bāhādur. I am from Fārukkbād too. I like travelling and came here to see Devī Mā.” At that time Theṁ Fhākhṛī came out. The four soldiers stood up. They were wonderstruck by the extraordinary personality of Theṁ Fhākhṛī. Rām Bābu said — “Theṁ Fhākhṛī is blessed by Devī Mā. Women are respected here. In our places women are kept under the veil. They can’t open their hair. They can’t wear a hat like this. Wives are burnt alive at the death of their husbands. This type of evil practice is not exercised here, isn’t it?” One farmer said — “This practice is there among the royalty. Five queens were burnt with king Mukundadev.”

“Five?” the soldiers were surprised. The villagers said — “You will be able to see the place where these queens were burnt. It seems at night people can hear the queens’ conversation. They hear the sound of their jewels and garments. People think that they are pursued by fire at that place. This type of practice is not there among the Bodos. That is why Theṁ Fhākhṛī can work with the British as ‘ijāradār’. It’s been long since her husband is dead.” The soldiers shouted — “Hail to Theṁ Fhākhṛī!”

Rām Bābu asked — “We heard that a king of this state died fighting with the company to quit this place.”

The village elder, Tribhuvan Bāhādur said — “I shall tell you the story of this king; but
please take some ‘jumāi’ before that.”

The soldiers asked— “Jumāi?”

Tribhuvan Bahadur said — “In Bodo wine is called ‘jumāi jou’. Others call it ‘lāupānī’. We offer our wine to Lord Śiva.”

The four soldiers shouted together — “Hail to Lord Śiva.”

“The discovery and making of this wine is very mysterious. It is as if nature has made it for us. We are blessed by Lord Śiva.”

“Listen, once a woodcutter became very tired and fell asleep under the very tree which he was to cut. The old man woke up by the chirping sound of some birds. The old man saw his whole body was covered with leaves and petals of flowers. The man looked up and saw the birds assembled in the tree in a manner as if they were all fairies. So many birds! ‘Bhīmrāj’, ‘Tiyā’, ‘Bulbuli’... Occasionally the birds went inside a hollow in the tree and took some liquid and start dancing after that. The old man too took some from the hollow—immediately he got a new energy. He carried some for his wife in a bamboo tube. After taking that the old woman started dancing. Both the man and the woman danced for sometime.”

The villagers and the soldiers laughed. One of the farmers said — “If you have that type of a liquid, why don’t you offer it to our respected guests!”

Tribhuvan Bāhādur continued — “I think you don’t know how this wine became prevalent among the Bodos. Listen to the story — the old couple finished the wine in two days. They were very sad for that. Looking at the sorry state of the couple Lord Śiva came down from heaven and taught them how to make that wine. The old man and the woman became expert in preparing this wine and now in our society this wine is dear to all. We keep this wine separately for our guests.”

The soldiers said in delight—“Can we taste this wine?”

“Yes! Of course!”

Them Fhākhī’s grandmother kept two bowls of ‘lāupānī’ in front of the soldiers. Them Fhākhī with two other women in ‘dokhnā’ gave a bowl of wine to each one of the villagers. Everyone was enjoying their ‘jumāi’ when Rām Bābū asked addressing everyone—“Your Beloved king Bijaynārāyan reigned for eleven years, isn’t it?”

“Yes! He did.”

Tribhuvan Bāhādur became excited. Whenever someone took the name of Bijaynārāyan Tribhuvan Bāhādur looked very happy. He felt very proud to tell the story of that great patriot.

Tribhuvan Bāhādur replied addressing the soldiers — “He is the first martyr who laid down his life for his country.”
The soldiers were surprised—“First martyr of this country! Is this true?”

All the villagers shouted—“Yes! He is the first martyr of our country. He is the first martyr of India not of Assam alone.”

Tribhuvan Bāhādur became emotional in his praise for king Bijaynārāyana—“Listen warriors! King Bijaynārāyana always went near a particular ‘sal’ tree on his white horse every morning. Fastening his horse he climbed up the tree. He was as expert in climbing trees as he was in swimming. He could turn awful in war-field. Dear soldiers! I hope all of you are familiar with the great epic Rāmāyana!”

They replied—“Yes, we read Tulsidas’s Rāmsarit Mānas.”

Tribhuvan Bāhādur smiled and said—“I do not know whether you have read or not. When Bhāgavatī Mahāprabhu is invited to read the Rāmāyana on the bank of Mānāh, we, all the villagers listen to him. It seems that one was Balmiki’s Rāmāyana. Rāvan went to take a bath in the river and there were scars all over his body made by swords. Those scars were made in the wars which he fought to save his subjects and to make his Lanka of gold. That showed how popular he was among his subjects. Those scars were natural to the kings who treat their subjects as sons. Rāvan looked more dreadful because of the scars on his body. Our king Bijaynārāyana was a beloved among his subjects. The king understood the tricks of the company before anyone could fathom it. We heard he talked with the ‘mucha’ general at the dock of Govālpārā. One painter of the company drew pictures of the king and the general.”

The soldiers shouted—“Picture of ‘mucha’ general and Bijaynārāyana! Are we fortunate enough to see it?”

Tribhuvan said—“Thousands of camps were set up as if thousands of camels were sitting down. King Bijaynārāyana silently watched those camps from different places—sometimes from on the top of trees, sometimes from the mountain... He saw in his dream that the camp was extending its clasp to drag away his motherland from him. Do you know where he fought with the company? I shall show you the war field.”

The soldiers were confused and replied—“We will have to return soon this time; but we shall come again and then we shall visit different places.” Suddenly the soldier who was almost under shock from the death of his son shouted—“The British are very powerful. You have not realized it.” The villagers looked at him—as if they had noticed this soldier called Ujir Sīrī only now. Ujir Sīrī was speaking in such way as if he was performing in a Rāmllilā and this drew the attention of all the villagers towards him. The man was ugly looking with pock marks on his face. He was dark complexioned and had a big moustache.

The villagers became alert at the sudden speech of this silent man. They did not understand his language properly. Tribhuvan Bāhādur explained it to them. He said—“No one
can compete with the British in intelligence. They are very strong. If they are defeated in one war, they will win in the second one. The sun never sets in their country because the sun is in the clutch of their fist.” Tribhuvan Bāhādūr too agreed with him. Bāhādūr was the helper of the gunners in the regiment at one point of time. He worked with an old British also.

Ujir Sirī then spoke in a different posture – “The villagers in Uttar Prades also think the British ladies have wings – they can fly if they wish. That is why the British sahibs always hold their wives – so that they cannot fly away. Do you know what our village people think about their birth?” The villagers shouted – “How are they born?” “They are born from tree eggs. Queen Victoria is also born from tree eggs.” The villagers who were sitting on the mat started to laugh.

Tribhuvan Bāhādūr spoke again in his bass voice – “Do you know what the prevalent belief is in our society about Queen Victoria? If someone swears in the name of the queen then he is trustworthy. People in Upper Assam believe that Queen Victoria takes birth early in the morning – becomes a grown up girl in the noon! She dies at night and takes birth again next morning.”

“But she dies early morning!” The four soldiers eagerly listened to the story and applauded it with their clappings. The soldiers got up and said – “It’s time for us to leave. We shall come again. We shall visit some more villages.” A horse carriage stopped near the gateway of Tribhuvan Bāhādūr. The four soldiers suddenly stopped near the gateway and asked Tribhuvan Bāhādūr – “Where is Therī Fhākhri?” Therī Fhākhri who was busy cleaning the bowls of ‘jumāi’ was called by Tribhuvan Bāhādūr. The four soldiers saluted Therī Fhākhri and bade her goodbye. The melancholic Ujir Sirī blessed her and said – “The women of these region are honoured by the company. A woman of Chirājgaṇj was taken out from the funeral pyre of her husband by the British soldiers; but the unfortunate woman was already burnt. Henry sahib and the soldiers could not save her; burnt fleshes fell down from her body. Therī Fhākhri, the company people gave you the courage to ride on a horse and you have shown that you can take on the sword – you are more powerful than the men. The British are our lords, they are our gods.” Blessing Therī Fhākhri again the four soldiers got into the carriage and left.

The ‘khot khot’ sounds of the carriage got absorbed in the distance...The farmers were still sitting taking ‘jumāi’ in the courtyard. Tribhuvan Bāhādūr stood up and said—“It was nice to talk to these elderly soldiers. They must be very trustful as they have come as guests to the company Bāhādūr. One of them replied – “The man with the moustache appeared very sad.” Tribhuvan Bāhādūr said in regret – “His son died. There is no grief greater than this for a father to see his son dead!” All replied in unison – “Yes! There is no affliction like this.”
At that time they heard the voice of Muşâhârî. They looked towards the gateway – Muşâhârî came inside. Muşâhârî was Thérî Fhâkhîrî’s maternal uncle – a huge man. He was not in the village for quite sometime. He used to go to different places for different meetings and gatherings. He was busy in those meetings since people in the village came to know about the rumour – “In a short period of time the villagers will have to pay tax for their grazing field and even for their betel nut trees. Not many days are left for that! That is why we should organize meetings as they are doing in Darañ and in Upper Assam.”

Muşâhârî shouted looking towards the farmers – “Dear villagers, the soldiers who came are faithful servants of the company. They have not come to see our country! They are spies of the company.” The farmers replied – “Spy? He is dying at the death of his son!” The villagers reproached him – “You should not say so to a man who lost his son.”

Muşâhârî shouted – “I came here to inform you. According to the information the rebels in their state shot a white lieutenant colonel. Ujîr Sîîn’s son was among the rebels. He was a soldier of the same regiment. The company soldiers shot three soldiers of this rebel group in front of Ujîr Sîîn. The fathers of the other two rebels fell on the colonel’s feet to save them. Significantly Ujîr Sîîn did not beg for his son’s life. Listen – it seems his son was shot from such a close distance from Ujîr Sîîn that blood splashed on his clothes. Yet he was looking at it because in his mind the British are lords and to rebel against the Company is a sin. His son committed that sin. He begged forgiveness from the Britishers for his son’s activities. Ujîr Sîîn carried his son’s bullet ridden body to his village for the funeral. His village was not very far.”

The villagers in the courtyard looked at Muşâhârî in surprise. Muşâhârî continued – “He reached his village with his son’s deadbody at midnight. The soldiers came to know how that wind of rebel occasionally touched our place too. They went back with all the information – nothing is left. They came to know whether dead king Bijaynârâyan’s spirit had inspired the people here with a new fervour. The company is being very alert. They brought guns and ammunitions in the ships from the company headoffice. They did not bring sacks of salt and blanket from Liverpool this time.” Tribhuvan Bâhadur understood everything, but many of the villagers did not. Thérî Fhâkhîrî remained silent. Muşâhârî got up, walked passed the gateway and vanished.

Notes:
1. The story of an old man’s finding the taste of wine in birds’ hollow was told by hundred years old Bâtîrâm Bodo. The same person who told he had seen Thang Fhâkhîrî with his own eyes.
2. We get to read about this type of stories during the Company rule. Subedar Sîîrâm Pânî’s autobiography written in Persian includes several these types of incidents.
Fourth Chapter

Sometimes she used to go to the vast area near the river with Macklinson in the afternoon. She acquired the power of taming horses slowly. Her long hair glittered in the sunshine. The felt hat on her head enhanced her beauty. All the villagers – the children, the young boys and girls flocked in the street – none had seen this sight; they had only heard. She hardly came this side when her husband had been alive. When in the distance the ‘fāmi’ flowers blossomed, when the red ‘bāhak’ and red ‘sonāru’ flowers set fire in the sky; her husband often took her to this place... she remembered! The ‘bāhak’ flowers today appeared like the soldiers of the East India Company with their flags.

Suddenly Macklinson stopped his horse and gestured Them Fhākhṛī to get down from her horse.

Them Fhākhṛī jumped down from the horse. Macklinson said pointing towards the blooming bāhak flowers – “Look, how beautiful your land is! So many varieties of trees! Them Fhākhṛī, you should remember the names of each of these trees and birds. You should know where the flock of elephants comes down, in which place multicoloured butterflies are seen? You should know all these. Them Fhākhṛī, when you see some strange faces in these areas, remember to inform us!”

“Faces? What faces?”

“Listen Them Fhākhṛī, suddenly when you see some strange faces in these areas, you should know they are not worthy of the Company.”

Them Fhākhṛī understood everything but pretended ignorance. She did not reply anything. Her uncle Musāhārī was from Daraṁ. For the British he was a new man.

They reached near the dense forest. This forest was at the border of her village. Macklinson pointed towards some peculiar trees and asked Them Fhākhṛī – “Can you see those trees? All are together. As if someone has planted them in rows! Very beautiful forest! Tell me what those trees are?”

Them Fhākhṛī replied with a smile – “Those are ‘ghugurā’ trees. I can make out from the thin leaves. Grandfather told me about them when I came here with him to learn shooting – those are ‘ghugurā’ trees.”

Macklinson repeated the word – “Ghugurā! ghugurā! Wow Them Fhākhṛī! Now tell me the names of the other trees too.”

Strangely almost all the Sahibs of the Company learned the language of the area. They were not fluent, but all could understand the language.

Both of them went ahead. Listening to the sound of the passing of horses especially
hearing the ‘khot khot’ sound of Their Fhākhri’s horse children of the roadside families came out to see the woman with hat riding horse with Company Sahib.

They reached a place with innumerable varieties of trees this time. Macklinson again said with a smile – “Now tell me what type of trees are these?” Their Fhākhri looked at Macklinson and smiled. Macklinson noticed for the first time the rows of Their Fhākhri’s teeth were like white pearls. She really was a very beautiful girl!

Their Fhākhri had already said the names of some of the trees and asked Macklinson – “The ‘bakul’ flowers are blooming Sahib. The jasmines too are blooming somewhere inside the forest. Can’t you get the smell Sahib?”

Macklinson said, “You called Captain Hardy, Hardy, isn’t it? You call me Macky Sahib.”

She found it a little funny and said, “Macky Sahib! Macky Sahib! Those are ‘jarul’ and jackfruit trees. Some ‘gamāri’ and ‘gandhasarai’ are there too. My Grandfather introduced me to all these trees.” They laughed a lot for sometime. It appeared as if Macklinson liked it that Their Fhākhri could dare to call him Macky Sahib. He understood he was replacing Captain Hardy slowly. Their Fhākhri did not have any sense of enmity towards the British men even in her childhood. Besides she heard many anecdotes on the virtues of the British from her grandfather and did not have any feeling of hatred for them. She developed some sort of respect for Macklinson in her heart. Macklinson Sahib was already ageing. His time of retirement was nearing. Both of them again reached a vast land. The ruins of the cantonment of the British soldiers who came to counter the attack of the Burmese soldiers were lying here and there. Where had they gone leaving these cantonments! There was silence everywhere!

Macklinson had a view of the surrounding standing on a pile of bricks near the ruins of the camps. Macklinson, who was inarticulate in emotion and praise for this land, told Their Fhākhri – “We will adorn this land of yours with beautiful flowers and fruits!”

Their Fhākhri remained silent this time too.

Macklinson looked at Their Fhākhri as if trying to understand something and asked her – “Their Fhākhri are you liking your work? I mean do you like working with us, the British?” Their Fhākhri smiled. Macklinson saw her beautiful teeth. He never witnessed such beauty and such personality in this area before.

Macklinson got down from the horse for the second time. He stood near the ruins of the cantonment of the British soldiers who came to counter the attack of the Burmese soldiers. Macklinson spread his hands and said as if losing himself in joy –

“We will colour this beautiful land of you. No sword of enemies can cut the peacock-like branch of these splendid trees. Do you know how many times Bhutan attacked? They
took deadbodies in the measuring balance on elephants! What oppressions! Do you know how much tax Bijnī gave to Bhutan at the time of taking in of Bijnī Duvār?"

Therī Fhākhīrī replied making Macklinson speechless as if counting in her fingertips—“Macky Sahib! Our Bijnī gave them dried fish and cotton clothes.” After thinking for sometime she said in a sharp voice—“And gold-jewelleries too.”

Macklinson understood that she was very well trained by Tribhuvan Bāhādūr. He said—“Listen Therī Fhākhīrī, I will show you many places which you should know about. You will see the plentitude of your land! Tell me what those flower trees are?”

Therī Fhākhīrī looked towards the distant trees. She looked towards the east. She had never come to this part of her motherland. The flowers of the ‘sonāru’ trees were glittering like gold! Not gold, but as if sudden flashes of pieces of sunshine had got stuck in a net flying from the sky and were writhing like golden fish.

Being spellbound Therī Fhākhīrī looked towards the distance. Those red ‘krsnacūḍā’ had bloomed in such a way as if someone had set fire in the forest. This kind of fire was seen in the month of Bahāg. Macklinson said—“We will protect this beautiful land of yours. We will fight against all obstacles. Don’t you know? Except the native enemies the Portugals too are moving about. Three were caught in these days itself. When asked they told they came for hunting. We are keeping watchful eyes on Bhutan. Who knows at what time they come and create upheaval? Therī Fhākhīrī your land is beautiful, unique, and extraordinary!”

This time too Therī Fhākhīrī remained silent.

Macklinson deeply looked at her again. No, nothing could be made out!

Suddenly they heard the sound made by the horses of the Company soldiers.

A group of soldiers stopped their horses near them. One soldier named Miṇā Badaruddin got down from his horse and told being out of breath: “Wild elephants have come out. They have slaughtered human beings. We have killed elephants. One man died by the injuries of a bullet.”

Macklinson hastily bade goodbye to Therī Fhākhīrī and hurriedly galloped off towards the company barrack. Therī Fhākhīrī rode her horse slowly. One of the old men in the street shouted: “Ai Therī Fhākhīrī, go home fast. Wild elephants have killed men.”

Therī Fhākhīrī saw some people running towards her home. She could make out a flock of wild elephants must have come down. The Śāli rice in the paddy fields was thriving. The elephants will not be able to resist the temptation to eat this rice.

Therī Fhākhīrī suddenly stopped like a pillar under a large tree. She saw a flock of birds falling on the blooming flowers of the tree like bees. Some children and some old men and women followed her to a distance—She saw a few wood-peckers chipping away with a
'khot khot' sound in a big mango tree. Crowned red and with black-coloured back and white plumes the birds were multihued. They have chosen rotten parts in the tree. The old and young people behind came close to her and remained stupefied gazing at her indescribable personality. Then Fhākhṛī kept the pitch hat under her arms, jumped down from the horse and viewed some multicoloured birds on some other trees, and she felt as if she would watch the wonderful trees and birds of her motherland to her heart's content. She loosened her riding breeches. Some two-three families came out seeing her.

An old man in the group addressed Then Fhākhṛī without inhibition, “Then Fhākhṛī! I was a Company gunner too. I broke my leg falling down from a jackfruit tree. So I am at home now.”

Thang Fhākhṛī stopped near the old man knowing he was a Company gunman.

He continued, “Then Fhākhṛī ā! I got sore on my arms by the burden of the materials of attachment which I had to carry. My father was a gunman of David Scott Sahib when the company seized the armed power of Khutāghāt and Habrāghāt from the king.”

Then Fhākhṛī retorted showing interest, “Grandfather! Everyone says tax collection is a difficult job; but Then Fhākhṛī has made that complex task easy.”

The oldman nodded assent; but Then Fhākhṛī could not read his mind.

“Listen Then Fhākhṛī lots of things are needed to be thought over.” Then Fhākhṛī was delighted to talk to the old man. He again told “Do you hear the cry of the children and women while you were on the attachment? But I did hear. I worked with my eyes and ears closed. The king accepted only six ‘nārāyanī’ coins as rent from ‘şālīyānā jamin’. King Balīt Nārāyan lived in the midst of woe and misery.”

Then Fhākhṛī suddenly felt like reading the mind of the old man – this former gunner was about to make a revelation to her! Her grandfather told her about king Balīt Nārāyan – the king with fatherly affection for his subjects! The king with hesitant heart to collect rent of ‘Āhu’ rice! The king despised by the British!

The old man, once a gunner, stood on her way and told: “Dear Then Fhākhṛī! Your intimate Hardy Sahib has died. Now Macklinson manages us. I think you have understood everything, haven’t you?”

Then Fhākhṛī glanced at him with a sense of interrogation as if he wanted to tell her something!

She wrapped the sheet tightly around of her trousers and placing her feet on the stirrup sat on the back of the horse in one jump. Except this main road there was a narrow lane to her house, and she took the lane and moved running her horse slowly. Lakes surrounded the road on both sides with red ‘fāmi’ flowers and water hyacinth. Those were
white bellied water hen with blue-coloured back and stiff tail! Those were herons and cranes! Then Fhākhri had seen this diverse flock of birds in this area after a long time. It seems everyone was singing their own songs. A multi-coloured kingfisher was sitting on a stout tree near water with a sharp eye on water. This beautiful motherland of hers got transformed into a heaven in her imagination. She felt like swimming in the lake getting down from her horse. This was the first time she came alone on her horse towards this side. Her uncle Muśāhārī rightly said,

"Then Fhākhri, things have changed! You will have to push the sword into your own chest. You do not know many things yet. The British have controlled you. You think hard. Everything will be bright and clear like the sun when you think."

She could hear her own heartbeat. How would she explain the complex conflict in her mind? Uncle Muśāhārī had brought her up in his own lap! The day when she got the copper sword of ‘Devi Daśabhujā’ on the bank of Doloni river near the ruined camps of British soldiers who came to defend the ‘Mān’ Attack, Muśāhārī was stupefied to see the huge sword. He said to her, “I have seen this type of swords carried by the sacrificial men of Kāmākhyā temple. King Mukunda Nārāyana brought those expert sacrificial men from the shrine of Mā Kāmākhyā. Do you know how efficient they were? The head of the sacrificial goat was flung down at a distance of twenty ‘gaj’ in one stroke. They never have to go for a second stroke to behead a sacrificial buffalo. They practiced it by cutting the floating ‘autenga’ in the river. Their successors still do the same work. Āī Then Fhākhri, Devī Tripurā Sundarī and ‘Devī Bagalā’ must have accepted sacrificial heads severed by this sword!” Her grandfather and grandmother performed puja on this sword with incense sticks keeping it on the ‘bathau’ pedestal on the very day they got it near the ruined barrack of the British soldiers.

Uncle Muśāhārī again said, “The boys killed by the British on the pretext that they killed the ‘bhatikholā’ elephant were actually killed in suspicion of inciting rebellion? Do you know why Devī has given you this copper sword?”

Then Fhākhri understood everything; but was not able to win the fight against her conscience. She heard the rumour that three boys from the Mechpara area were hiding in a camp in the forest full of ‘gamāri’ and teak trees on the bank of Doloni. They were training four Bodo boys on making gun-powder.

Then Fhākhri saw some wonderful migrated birds on the lakes on both sides. Flocks of storks stood on the mud-water. The colour of the water of this lake blended with their mud-coloured feathures. And those blue-necked wild-ducks! Yes, yes she had not been to this side for many days. Weren't those 'maukhatī' birds with green and yellow plumes? Thang Fhākhri was amazed at the beauty of this place. She did not come by this short road before. She had
never imagined her motherland was an ethereally beautiful land. She came down keeping her feet on the stirrup and remained looking at the lakes being charmed by its beauty.

She heard a hue and cry suddenly at a little distance. Had the wild elephants come down? The uproar at the distance increased slowly. Then Fhâkhrî slackened the rein of the horse and pressed the horse’s thigh with her foothill. The horse started galloping. She would reach home in a short time.

She saw a gathering in front of her house. She got down from the horse before reaching the crowd. Keeping the whip slung around her armpit she walked slowly holding the rein in her hand. People crowded her house. She heard someone shouting, “These are the works of the British! The works of the British! Yes, yes the Company men fired.”

Then Fhâkhrî reached the gateway in a hurry. She saw her two gunners in the gate. They took the rein of the horse from her.

Many people surrounded her as soon as she left the horse.

All were speechless, silent.

Tribhuvan Bāhādur led her holding her arm to the deadbody of Mušâhârî lying flat on the courtyard.

The dead Mušâhârî was lying upside down. The blood oozing out of his mouth made one part of the courtyard bloody. The surrounding men were silent. Then Fhâkhrî looked towards her grandfather being helpless!

What happened? How did it happen?

No, she did not ask any question to the men surrounding the deadbody.

She remained looking at the wounds made by the bullets on her uncle's body. The drops of blood were still falling on the ground from his head. This land! Her uncle always taught her to be proud of this land: “Listen Them Fhâkhrî, the flesh and bone of our grandfather has dissolved in this land.”

Then Fhâkhrî collapsed near the feet of her dead uncle.

Fifth Chapter

It seems Bekî river flown from Bhutan had changed the direction of Hakuwā river. Some new faces were seen on the bank of Hakuwā river now. No one knew from where these new boys had come. Some Bodo boys had joined them. It seems discreetly they had engaged themselves in making gunpowder. Yet where did the British spies not work? They went to every nook and corner and even ransacked some gunpowder making places. They shot some and carried the deadbodies to the barrack. They threw the deadbodies in the midst of the herd of elephants to create the illusion they were killed in their encounter with the wild elephants.
Many people did not accept that! This incident of shooting boys in the Britishers' encounter with wild elephants had become a frequent happening. Two boys from Chirāṁ died in this way.

Tribhuvan Bāhādur heard about the gunpowder making boys secretly. He knew where they had kept the gunpowder and where they had camped, but Tribhuvan Bāhādur did not tell anyone. He was very careful that the news did not reach Them Fhākhri. Some unknown boys camped there to reopen the gunpowder business in Myanmar, Bengal and Kāchār which was closed by the British. Tribhuvan Bāhādur was aware of a rumour about these boys that they had learnt to make sulphur from cowpeas. Cowpeas were boiled in large vessels and sulphur was made from them in the forests of Chirāṁ. Even their lids of the vessel for keeping gunpowder were made from the horns of buffalos like the Luchai and the Kukis. They knew to make designs on those lids with silver and elephant teeth. Tribhuvan Bāhādur could not believe himself seeing such a lid. Such a change in his lifetime! He respected the British. He spent his whole life with the British; but now the wind was different!

Tribhuvan Bāhādur heard these boys made baskets of cowdung rotten and poured urine of cows there to make saltpetre. They had learnt many things.

Tribhuvan Bāhādur knew several activities of those boys but he had never discussed about them with Them Fhākhri. Tribhuvan Bāhādur believed she knew who killed her maternal uncle Muṣāhārī and why they killed him — She understood the mystery. Yet he would never be able to tell her about it. In this mental state the voice from her heart would lead her and show her a path — he thought.

Them Fhākhri remained silent even on the second day of Muṣāhārī's death. She was very fond of Muṣāhārī, her uncle. Who killed her uncle, the one who brought her up in his own lap? How did only Muṣāhārī die in the British's shooting? Two or three young men died last year too! Many people did not believe they died by missed bullets targeted at the wild elephants. Did Them Fhākhri too not believe in it? No, her grandfather and grandmother did not know what thoughts crossed her mind! Tribhuvan Bāhādur suddenly remembered the sprightly young boys whom Them Fhākhri took along to show the Company barracks.

Tribhuvan Bāhādur was surprised at the boys' description of the barrack. They said it could not be comprehended how at the ring of 'biugul' the governor came out and raised the flag and disappeared immediately. They said how many sepoys saluted at the sound of the 'beugul'. They talked about the large barrack wall. It was made of bamboo, cane, thatch, reed and thorny trees. They saw the small rooms inside. The prisoners were kept there with their hands and legs tied. They asked the gunner what were their offence. They did not utter a single word in reply. They told Tribhuvan Bāhādur that their Them Fhākhri 'ābai' said to
them, "'Fām Bāi', don’t discuss everything openly here. The number of inquilabis are more among these arrested people. Some of them are thieves too. Some are agressive border disputers. Some have used weapons in domestic quarrels – goat thieves, cowthieves and womanisers! All types of prisoners! That house with large drum-type locks is an armoury."

Thēn Fhākhṛī again said, "'Fām Bāi'! Have a good look at the armoury. It is shut out with a large lock; yet you can see the lined loaded guns and the mussel loading guns. Look at the row below – those weapons belong to the variety of musket – swords, spears, ‘dā’, ‘bathi’– can you see dear ‘Fām Bāi’s?’"

Everyone nodded saying “Yes, we can see.” Hardy and Elizabeth showed the boys the parade ground then. Possibly Thēn Fhākhṛī didn’t know who she had shown the barrack! – The boys were Gāro, Bodo and Rājbaṇṣis. They visited the barrack when Hardy Sahib was there. They came from Mansathikhanāi and Kumārsālī of Chirān and even from Pānbārī and Dīpkāī of Kokoṛajhar. They went to see the barrack playfully with their Thēn Fhākhṛī ‘ābai’. However, Thēn Fhākhṛī, Hardy Sahib and Elizabeth were at a loss to reply why four-five women with long veil were kept in a room with glittering curtains towards the rear of the barrack. They replied in short –

"The family members of the sepoys had come from the north side." It was not unknown to Hardy and Elizabeth who brought them to get the works of ‘munsiff’, Tankinvins Jama done. Thēn Fhākhṛī knew the women were very beautiful whose looks turn some sahibs into fishes in a net. Why were they brought and for whom? She had heard many stories from her gunners on this subject. Sometimes the women sat under the ‘bakul’ and teak trees with two-three ‘dhīpiōns’ chewing dried betel-nuts and tobaccos. Removing their veils they looked up to ‘jārul’, ‘ghugurā’ and jack-fruit trees. Some of the jack-fruits were burst open and the fleshy pulps of the fruits fell on the soil. Thēn Fhākhṛī remembered everything! Those chirping birds with their beautiful and variegated bodies! What were those birds with red, blue and black lips? Thēn Fhākhṛī narrated everything to her grandfather after coming back. Tribhuvan Bāhādur remembered another incident and he narrated it to Thēn Fhākhṛī: "One day many crows assembled in the house of Nīśārām Baruvā from North Śālmarā to eat the fleshy jackfruit seeds. A simple peasant Nīśārām was teased by the villagers this way – ‘Something great will happen to you! You will become the king.’ A great thing really happened. King Kumud Nārāyān saw Nīśārām’s daughter at her fishing activity with her bamboo scoop in one of his hunting expedition to Mahādev mountain. Charmed and impressed by her beauty the king married Nīśārām’s daughter.” Thēn Fhākhṛī screamed in excitement, “Is she our mother queen Abhayeswarī?” Tribhuvan Bāhādur wanted to warn Thēn Fhākhṛī on the day she went to the barrack with the group of boys. Why? He did not
know. It remained a mystery till today. If Them Fhakhri promised something she never dishonoured it. That was what had happened. How hard Tribhuvan Bähädur had tried? She was coming of age but was showing no interest to the men who were willing to stay in her house. Tribhuvan Bähädur gave up his endeavour slowly.

Tribhuvan Bähädur understood the wind of rebel was really blowing this side. Ten boys were caught at midnight just two days back when they went to make saltpetre and nitre with cowdung and cow’s urine. They were imprisoned in the small dark rooms of the barrack. Did Them Fhakhri hear about it? She must have. Why had she turned so grave after the death of Muşähârî? She did not want to talk to anyone.

She came out suddenly opening the door of her room. She had come out in her horse riding attire! With the hat on her head what ‘dokhnâ’ was she wearing on top of riding trousers? ‘Đāothu Ġādo’ or ‘Fārou Megan’? No, no, that was plain ‘Châlā Mâthâ!’ She had wrapped ‘Châlâ Mâthâ’ instead of other ‘dokhnâ’s on her riding breeches so that no part of her body could be visible! The hat on her head enhanced her personality in such a way that even Tribhuvan Bähädur could not believe that she was the same girl whom he brought up in his own lap. Tribhuvan asked her, “You haven’t called the gunners today. Where are you going?” She replied – “I am going to the barrack to ask Macklinson Sahib how Muşähârî uncle died.”

Sixth Chapter

It was rumoured that some youths living in Daraň, Kāmrup and on the banks of Campāvati river of Chirāh had entered the forests of Pānbârî in groups... It seems they had made gunpowder stations in the forest... These things were known to the inhabitants of Bānikhātā, Nâdānbârî, Kâloğârî of Bijnî and the people living on the bank of Mānas river.

They got the information that various jewels and jems had been gathered in the treasury of Govâlpara. Different precious objects which were there were collected in the attachment. The gunners got two receptacles full of ‘nārâyâni’ coins in the attachment of one family. “‘Nārâyâni’ coins?” – muttered Tribhuvan Bähädur within himself. The Āhom kings accepted ‘nārâyâni’ coins as tax. Tribhuvan Bähädur hung one ‘nārâyâni’ coin on Them Fhakhri’s neck tying it on a thread when she was small. When she grew up he told her many stories about ‘nārâyâni’ coins. He told how ‘nārâyâni’ coins were current in Sikkim, Tibbat and in Bhutan; how many parents hung ‘nārâyâni’ coins on their children to ward off evil spirit. Now not one but two copper receptacles full of ‘nārâyâni’ coins were deposited in the treasury. Besides it the invaluable assets of attachment were there too!

The unexpected event happened in the morning. Tribhuvan Bähädur went to the
district headquarter. When the gong rang in the office of district headquarter of Govālpārā everyone knew what was the time and when the barrack ‘beugal’ would ring. The rebels who were lying waiting broke the lock of the treasury in a clandestine manner when the sentries at midnight watch rang the gong. They broke the lock at such a time that the sound of the gong, beugal and the sound of the breaking of the lock blurred into one another. No one could fathom what the noise actually was. This drama occurred in the midst of sounds... a dreadful drama! Everybody saw deadbodies of two gunners and two sepoys lying on the ‘pāṭbāhār’ and on the patch of german grass nearby the treasury next morning... masses of people crowded the place. The treasury was plundered. Nothing was left. The treasury was totally empty. A tumult started in a moment. The sepoys of the regiment surrounded the place from all sides.

Tribhuvan Bāhādūr came to see the emptied treasury with some other people as he was in the district headquarter. He came in one of his friend’s buggy; but he could not remain there for long. The soldiers were already beating some two three persons! Tribhvan was shocked. He knew the two boys caught by the soldiers. When he reached the gateway of his house Tribhuvan Bāhādūr saw Macklinson Sahib and Them Fhākhri on the road at a distance moving ahead riding on their horses. He could hear the ‘khot khot’ sound of the hooves of the horses. He wanted to inform Them Fhākhri about the incident he witnessed; but he couldn’t. Why did Macklinson Sahib come at this hour? Uh! Had she forgotten about her dear Musāhārī uncle in such a short time? Was it possible? Tribhuvan could not believe himself. Although he was devoted to the British, the incident had caused some deep affliction in his heart.

She went to Unnikhurī port with Macklinson Sahib at midday. The distance to Unnikhurī port from this village, Khāmrīgurī was very short. She would have to stay at Unnikhurī port for two nights. Macklinson wanted her to see her tent once as she would have to spend nights there.

Macklinson examined the tent. Them Fhākhri noticed the digging of the drain of her tent was already over. The plinth of the tent was made tall and firm with the earth they got from the digging of the drain. They had used hook pegs and pill pegs in accordance to the right measurement. They had cleaned out the twigs and weeds from the adjacent area. Some workers placed the bamboo pole on the main peg and tied the pole with the peg. Then they stood up the tent and got busy in making adjustments. They built her tent intentionally nearby a mountain stream thinking she would like it. The British group would stay nearby. The gunners and the workers were busy making the other tents. They were making a narrow lane – that was probably for her toilet. They made her latrine and bathroom very carefully. Macklinson’s toilet was a little far off.
It seems Macklinson would send fourteen gunners with her this time because they had two cases of attachment in this area. She hardly talked with Macklinson on her way back. She remained staring at the migrated birds in the wetland. What are those leafy trees? Full of yellow flowers! As if a patch of morning sunlight had settled there! Those are ‘autengā’ and the red ‘bāhak’ flowers. The ‘bāhak’ flowers had set fire in the forest! The notes of a melodious song flowed down from the nearby village. Macklinson riding his horse beside Them Fhākhrī questioned her, “Will you tell me the substance of the song?” She replied, “Our Bodo men have to give money to the bride’s party at the time of marriage.” Macklinson laughed and said, “But I heard it the other way round.”

The shepherd boy tending the buffalos at their graze sang lamenting. The pleasant song reached their ears again:

“Where do the ‘Khalihā’ fish go in the water of the lake!
Hey ‘Mainā’ why is your compensatory amount so big?
Where will I get basket-full of money to marry you? Where will I?”

Both of them looked at each other. Then Macklinson Sahib became serious and said, “Them Fhākhrī! Do you know that our treasury is plundered? I have been here for so many years; but such incident never happened. It is unbelievable! Unbelievable!”

Them Fhākhrī could not make out anything – that someone could plunder the treasury at that time was incomprehensible even to her dreams.

Macklinson told her – “Listen, I came here with you for another reason!” Them Fhākhrī asked, “What is that?”

Macklinson continued, “You have neatly performed your duty so far – you have got promotion too, but this time the material condition of the area is not good. One draught has struck the place. Before that locusts created ravage in the paddy fields. The goods will be collected in attachment! The former ‘tahcildār’s were not successful. Listen, Them Fhākhrī my retirement is nearing. Probably I shall start for Switzerland shortly!”

Them Fhākhrī replied in a cry of pain, “You will also leave like Hardy Sahib!” A sigh came out by itself as if splitting her heart. “Will Macklinson too go like Hardy?”

Both moved quietly. Macklinson again said, “Them Fhākhrī! A radical current has started. I have figured that you will face troubles in collecting revenue this time. That is why we shall send Naken Clerk with you. Naken Clerk is skillful and clever. Moreover you will get fourteen gunners this time instead of ten. There’s no reason for you to fear.”

Them Fhākhrī said looking towards Macklinson, “Listen Macklinson Sahib! I never wanted you to get into the ship leaving this country.”

Macklinson got down from his horse and stood up near Them Fhākhrī’s horse as if
trying to console her, “I can understand them Fhakhri that Hardy’s death and my going back, these two things will perturb you! But them Fhakhri, life is nothing but a great river of separation!”

Thang Fhakhri did not understand what the Sahib said. Both of them moved on by the shore of another wetland.

There were tall grasses on the shore of the wetland and some tall adjutants were moving there. Them Fhakhri for the first time noticed the hanging bag on the neck of the adjutant. Some yellow and white lines became distinct on their grey coloured wings. Their legs appeared longer from the top of the horses. Both came together some distance and then Macklinson said extending his hand towards her for a handshake:

“Goodbye Them Fhakhri! I will go now but will come again once. We will make this green land of crops an eternal garden. Let me tell you something before I depart. Don’t devastate this beautiful land of yours. Today’s occurrence was horrible. They plundered the treasury killing three gunners. Don’t get frightened Them Fhakhri, you will have fourteen gunners with you this time. Moreover, Naken Clerk will be with you. He is good but dauntless. Remember, we will transform this land of yours into an ethereal garden. You will no more get the smell of burnt fleshes of women died as ‘sati’ because of our effort. You will receive education. Them Fhakhri! Your children will get enlightened through education; they will live like human beings.” She became silent totally. Something had happened to her – a conflict. She could not talk about it openly. Her heart was getting sundered in affliction and so she could not speak.

Them Fhakhri bowed down to Macklinson getting down from her horse and said, “Macklinson Sahib, I am not able to forget the sorrow of my uncle’s death. You tell me before you leave who killed him?” Macklinson was stupefied to listen to this; but did not reply. At last he said, “I will tell you this if I return safe. I will come back again.”

Macklinson disappeared galloping away on his horse on the road to the right. His voice echoed – I will come back again. She remained standing for sometime halting the horse. The robbery of the treasury, her uncle Musâhârî’s murder – her mind was ailing because of all these. The voice of her uncle again rang in her ear: “Take Them Fhakhri, take this soil on your forehead. The flesh and bone of our ancestors are enmeshed in this soil! Don’t let it get imprinted by the boots of the British. Take Them Fhakhri, take this soil on your head.”

Her uncle Musâhârî’s words hit her like the sharp strike of a sword till she reached her gateway.

Why was she in such a state? Why had she to wage a war with her own heart? Did it happen to anyone else? Was it happening to someone in her own land? Did it really happen?
Then her eyes moved further from the grass-covered wetland where the long legged adjutants were walking. What was that? Did the gunpowder making rebels set fire somewhere? Galloping her horse nearer she saw they were ‘bāhak’ flowers. The forest appeared to be in fire when the red ‘bāhak’ flowers bloomed. She looked at this unique land again and again. So many trees! Once Hardy Sahib and she enjoyed the view of the ‘pirāli’ flowers in this place itself. Hardy screamed in excitement – “Therī Fhākhrī! See those see those. Madagascar Periwinkle!” She giggled being unable to pronounce the word. He wanted to teach her so many things! Pointing to the ‘ketekī’ flowers bright in the midst of the leaves like pineapple leaves she asked Hardy, “Tell me Hardy. What are those flowers?”

Hardy smiled looking towards her and replied, “Therī Fhākhrī, those are Screw Pine.”

“No! No Therī Fhākhrī those are Screw Pine.”

Hardy Sahib possessed good knowledge on plants and tried so much to teach her English.

As if someone whispered in her ear, “Therī Fhākhrī, the clasp of the plough is grasped by the farmer; but the wife pulls the plough clutching the yoke. Losing everything in the seizure even the ploughing bullocks some families are in such predicament.” Therī Fhākhrī shouted, “No, no, she will never make anyone such unfortunate. Never!” She slackened the horses rein and tried to make it move fast in a very dejected mood. The beautiful birds, beasts and trees of her clean motherland disappeared from her mental world.

She saw her grandfather Tribhuvan in the gateway sitting in a dejected manner with his hands on his forehead without taking off his outdoor turban. He came forward and helped Therī Fhākhrī to get off from the horseback. Therī Fhākhrī noticed Tribhuvan Bāhādur’s face looked emaciated! She entered her room; but Tribhuvan Bāhādur said aloud addressing her – “Therī Fhākhrī! The four boys whom you took to show the barrack when Hardy was here, all of them are arrested.” Therī Fhākhrī rushed out and stood near Tribhuvan – “They robbed the treasury! Is it true?” “Yes, Therī Fhākhrī, they are arrested. They were involved. I have seen them with my own eyes.” –said Tribhuvan Bāhādur. Therī Fhākhrī remained standing rooted to the same place and speechless in wonder.

**Seventh Chapter**

Therī Fhākhrī started off with fourteen gunners this time to collect the revenue from Khāmariguri to Unnikhurī port. One horse carried Therī Fhākhrī’s luggage. She would need to stay there for four-five days; so she carried some ‘farou megam dokhnā’, ‘douthu gado dokhnā’ in the colours of dove bird and some flowery ‘sādar’s and boots. She would need
many dresses to change during her stay. The Sahib travelling with them would surely call them to his tent after the day's work. He did this in other places too. He gave two-three bottles of whisky to the gunners with a warning that they should not drink any other liquor. When she went to the festival of Lord Jesus for the first time she sat crouching in a corner of the barrack. Elizabeth and Hardy noticed her and led her from there to the party-crowd and offered her wine in thin glasses. They put pieces of ice brought in the ships from England in the glasses. She finished it in one sip. She felt sprightly. Elizabeth and Hardy enjoyed a hearty laugh. Colourful candles and flowers designed in colourful papers made the place lively. Yes, yes, it was the birthday of Lord Jesus. Ships were loaded with rum and whisky carried in barrels for the Sahibs.

The soldiers guarded the port for two days. Thēn Fhākhrī wore a multicoloured ‘dokhnā’ called ‘farou megan’ that day marked by the drawings designed like the pigeon's eyes. The ‘sādar’ she took too had variegated flowers. She had washed her long hair silky lathering it with the sticky liquid of ‘autenga’. She wore a ‘candrahār’ given by her mother, on her neck; on her ear was a hanging ‘talinglarā’ and on her nose was a nosepin, ‘ganthani’. There was only one festival in the barrack Jesus’ birthday – the new year which is called Christmas by everyone. People were reveling. She did not need to go on her horse that day. She went in the buggy sent from the barrack with some landholders.

The Sahibs and Ma’ams wore different hats on their heads. They danced in the rhythm of music holding each others’ waists. The sepoys from the north were right in their assumption: “The Sahibs hold the Ma’ams in such a way so that they cannot fly...” The fair-coloured Ma’ams really looked like fairies that day. Those old travelling soldiers said that the Ma’ams were born from fruits in the trees. Thēn Fhākhrī laughed. She laughed that day in the barrack too. That was the first time she went to see Christmas after becoming tahcildār. Some Sahibs of the barrack wanted to dance with her but Elizabeth and Hardy took her inside and sent her back with two gunners after feeding her heartily.

Thēn Fhākhrī headed towards the tent at Unnikhurī port with fourteen gunners. At the forefront was the Briton, Naken Clerk. Naken Clerk was not tall like Macklinson. He was short, sprightly and boyish. Thēn Fhākhrī could not halt that day to enjoy the beauty of the trees, birds and flowers. She had to be careful throughout the whole journey because Naken Clerk was with them. She thought of enjoying the view of the migratory birds near the wetland. Otherwise she would have some time spent in listening to the sweet songs of the women transplanters with the gunners. They could hear the songs of the women even now:

“Āhu lakhimi, sāli lakhimi
Lakhimi is our flesh and blood

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Lakhimi is our life.”

Them Fhākhrī liked the song of the women. This time she and her fourteen gunners heard the song of the lively young boys in the field:

“The calves in the field leap and run
Hither the villagers move, and thither
While crazy country maids hunt husbands in vain
And the field swarm with hopeless anglers
With the ‘Jakoi Khāloi’ they desperately swoop in
Oh, as they shout beating and shouting...”

They rode their horses slowly to listen to the entire song. Rupsirh, Them Fhākhrī’s favourite gunner, started to narrate an incident which he knew. He did not care about Naken Clerk’s presence although all the gunners were aware of the fact Naken Clerk too could speak their language like Hardy and Macklinson. By the time Rupsirh started Naken Clerk signaled them raising his hand to stop.

He told them to straighten up a little by getting down from their horses. He moved ahead with his body guard and two gunners. Them Fhākhrī and the fourteen gunners stood near the wetland for some time. This time Rupsirh Dāfādār started:

“Listen, it is true that gunpowder is collected in our area. I have seen some gunpowder stations. The Company spies cannot find out how cow dung gets cleaned from the cowshed before dawn; but the British are clever too. It seems the rebels have camped nearby Dararh. The kings here do not want to incite the Company. The Company on its part has not made public the incident of that day.”

The whole flock shouted: “What incident? What incident?”

“Why everyone knows Company has hidden the incident of robbery of the treasury.”

Them Fhākhrī hit the horse with her heel, pressed her knees and ran the horse towards Naken Clerk. The gunners too ran after her.

Naken Clerk smiled at her. He said, “Have you seen the paddyfield Them Fhākhrī?”

Them Fhākhrī tried to explain to Naken Clerk – “Our cultivation has failed since the last two years. There was draught last year! The year before last ‘kākatī farīn’ created havoc.”

“Kākatī farīn? What is that?”

She held the reins of the horse with her left hand and gestured with her right hand the movement of a locust. Naken Clerk was new to the place; that was why perhaps he had not seen the congregation of locusts flying in the sky. Yes, yes, he had not seen it.

He questioned, “Tell me Them Fhākhrī, and how are those locusts?”

Them Fhākhrī pointed towards the sky raising her right hand and told Naken Clerk,
"They veil the whole sky like dark clouds. People can hear a ‘bho bho’ sound. The lined designs on their feathers appear like drawings by a pen. Those lines on their feathers give them the name ‘kākatī farīn’. Naken Sahib! Officers are called ‘kākatī’ in our place."

Naken Clerk replied with a laugh, "Oh they are officer flies! Fantastic... so they pay a visit to your country!" He laughed again. "Do they frequently visit?"

Theyā Fhākhrī did not understand what he said as he spoke in English. She looked towards him. Naken Sahib asked again, "When did they come before last year?"

Holding the reins with her left hand she showed him three fingers, "Three years back."

Both of them moved ahead. They crossed a large paddyfield. They saw some robust and brightly clad Bodo women transplanting seeds. Naken Clerk questioned again, "What rice are they transplanting." “It's šāli.” Naken Clerk noted down something taking out the notebook from his pocket.

Theyā Fhākhrī reported to Naken Clerk with regret — “I don’t know what variety of šāli rice they are transplanting. That day my grandfather Tribhuvan Bahadur told me many varieties of rice had disappeared from the paddyfield.” She reflected counting in the fingers of her right hand, “Āmpākhi, Nengali, Bātāk Pāhi, Šīyāśāli, Hātiśāli and Āhomsāli rice are found no more.”

Captain Naken Clerk is no ordinary man. He got down from his horse and noted down the names uttered by Theyā Fhākhrī. Then he said, "We shall try to bring back these rice to your paddyfield again."

The procession of fourteen gunners, Naken Clerk’s guards, three ‘dihi peons’, two cooks and soldiers moved forward. The sound made by the horses and men resonated in the long distance. They came across two royal palanquins on the street. Perhaps they were on their return journey from some landholders’ place. A woman from the royal family tried to look at them removing the veil slightly. Theyā Fhākhrī noticed gold-bangles ‘āchān’ on her hand. She saw beautiful nose ring ‘ganthani bāli’ on the lady’s nose who tried to peep at Theyā Fhākhrī through the veil. The palanquin passed but the people continued staring back at Theyā Fhākhrī’s horse.

When the whole group reached Unnikhuri port Theyā Fhākhrī found all the tents ready. Bed-stead made of ‘urīām’ wood and some small tables were placed inside the tents. Theyā Fhākhrī got down from the horse and handed it over to her gunner. A temporary stable for the horses was made with grass and timber. Some soldiers were appointed to take care of the horses. Theyā Fhākhrī went inside her tent and changed her riding dress. Keeping her things in order on her bed she took the narrow lane to the temporary bathroom nearby the
It was getting dark and Them Fhākhrī would begin her work early next morning. She took out combs made of bamboo and elephant-tusks opening her ‘hatani pera’. Her hair was so long and thick that she could not comb it alone. Her grandmother always helped her in combing her hair and taught her how to comb it alone before she set out for revenue collection. She combed her hair after struggling for long and covered her ‘dokhna thaosi’ with a flower-adorned ‘sādar’ and wore her ‘tališlarā’ and ‘baulā’ on her ear and nose. Whenever she came for revenue-collection her grandmother always advised her earnestly to keep herself neat and orderly.

Unlike Macklinson Naken Clerk did not tell her to drink the liquor of their country with him. Macklinson liked the gravy of dry fish and tortoise made by the Bodos. The cook of the barrack used to prepare them. He took hot rice which was still steaming. Perhaps Naken Clerk was not aware of those food habits. The British did not let their soldiers to drink liquor from any other country.

Suddenly she heard someone calling her name “Them Fhākhrī! Them Fhākhrī!” She came out in a hurry. She could not believe her own eyes.

It was full moon night! The moon was brilliantly shining in the sky like a round dish of bell-metal. Them Fhākhrī never saw the moon in this appearance as if it was looking at her! The soothing light of the moon scattered everywhere. As if this illusive dish arrested everyone casting a net of light! That moving orb finds delight in clothing the trees with its silver robe. A bodyguard of Naken Clerk spoke to Them Fhākhrī from outside the tent – “Them Fhākhrī! Naken Clerk Sahib told me to ask if you need something. He told you to sleep peacefully, nothing to worry. The British have not spared a single man-eating tiger in this area. Two sepoys from Company Govalpara regiment are moving about around Bijnī. The inquilabis are assembling people from this side for the preparation of their great revolution. Listen Them Fhākhrī, the British claim they know this place from inside out. The king and eminent persons of the locality trust our Sahib. Nothing to be frightened of – nothing.”

After delivering the information the sepoy left the place in haste giving Them Fhākhrī a colourful bottle of liquor. It was whisky. Them Fhākhrī kept it carefully for her grandfather. Them Fhākhrī understood Naken Clerk was used to sleeping early. He did not have the habit of burning midnight oil like Hardy sahib. He must be engaged in study in the bright light of the lamp inside the tent. The Company sepoys brought rice with curries of dry fish and pork. Them Fhākhrī laid herself on her wooden bed and was dozing out of exhaustion of the day.

At midnight Them Fhākhrī woke up by the voice of a ‘pāthak’ who was singing a song loud addressing Them Fhākhrī. The song was repetitive – she was speechless. No one would
understand its meaning; but she could understand the meaning. “Come out – King Rāmendra
is standing in the shade of ‘gamāri’, ‘ghugurā’, ‘gandhasara’ and ‘jārul’ in the light of moon and
sun.” Then Fhākhrī got up suddenly. She could not believe her own ears – yes – the singer
was uttering her name.

She did not know fear. She took out her God-given copper sword which she always
carried with her during the time of revenue collection. She came out of her tent. The gunners
were resting in their own tents. They must have enjoyed the bottles of rum given by Naken
Clerk. She saw Rupsīn, the head gunner standing in the pose of a watchman outside his tent.
Seeing Then Fhākhrī outside he instantly came near her and spoke to her in whisper – “The
prince has come and wants to have some words with you. He will move towards upper Assam
after spending some days here.”

Then Fhākhrī was dismayed. It was the prince then? Noone knows which state he
adorns as the prince; but everyone knows the prince is uniting all the young folk for a grand
revolution. He mobilised gunpowder and youths as well from the dense forests of Chirarti,
Baladī of Bijnī, and the thick forests of Pānbarī. Everyone knows how he was gathering
youths from the bank of Āi river to Ranīkhātā. She remained wondering why such a person
wanted to meet her. She saw the prince coming forward and standing under a large fig tree.
Everything was crystal clear in this strangely bright moonlight as the silvery pieces of
moonlight falling on the tree leaves were getting spread creating daylight and making each
object clear.

Then Fhākhrī found herself nearby a man with a unique appearance. Was this the
song sung by the Rāmāyana reader on the bank of Tachā river in his melodious voice – the
eminent Śrī Rām addressing whom Bibhīshan asked – “Respected Rām! You have come to kill
Rāvan, but why are you with bare feet sans shoes? How will you win over Rāvan? You don’t
even have shoes!” The best among men Rām replied – “Dear friend listen, the chariot with
which I will win over Rāvan is with me. The wheel of my chariot is patience; my flag is
honesty and power of justification. Restraint of the passions is its horse; mercy, forgiveness
and equanimity to all are its reins. Devotion to the almighty is its charioteer, asceticism is my
shield and joy and satisfaction is my sword. Donation is its axe; intelligence is its most
powerful spear. I shall win over Rāvan with this chariot.”

Then Fhākhrī came back to reality – the voice of the Rāmāyana reader faded away.
She stepped back stride by stride. She moved towards her tent without looking backward. She
could hear the palpitation of her own heart. Whom did she see like a flash of lightening? Was
it right on the part of a revenue collector? She looked through the tent. Did Naken Clerk see
her going near that man? Was this the dauntless revolutionary man who killed two British in
the Ahom state? She has never seen such a man – incredulous! incredulous! She is a trusted
person of the British; but she stood in front of a dauntless murderer and revolutionary! Just
for a moment! Was it a crime?

No gunner had seen her talking to this revolutionary. Not even Rupsim, the head
gunner. She endeavoured to console herself. No, no, she had not committed any crime. But
that person was strange! Those bright eyes for a moment in this mysterious moonlight – the
brightness of the eyes could even surpass the moonlight! The door of the mysterious cave
inside her heart got opened. She was not aware of this cave. We do not know what types of
caves can lie discreet in our hearts. Sometimes we are fooled by our own hearts.

**Eighth Chapter**

The gunners served Them Fhakhri's breakfast in Naken Clerk's tent next morning
before going for the attachment. This was an entirely British food. Them Fhakhri couldn't take
such boiled meat, fish and porridge. The packets of porridge came for the British from abroad.

No – there was no change in the facial expression of Naken Clerk. Them Fhakhri
should consider the whole incident of seeing the prince as a dream. An unknown feeling filled
her mental world.

Naken Clerk did not ask any question to Rupsim, the head gunner...Except Naken
Clerk her grandfather; Tribhuvan Bāhādur too gave much information of that area:

"Them Fhakhri, collecting revenue for the company has become a dreadful task.
Perhaps you know one tahcildār was beaten by a staff and was hurt in the head while
collecting revenue for the Company. Them Fhakhri you are like our daughter – everyone
respects you. But keep this in mind that the wind of rebellion has spread to Khutāghāt,
Hāwrāghāt and Parganā. Matters have deteriorated. The king is unsuccessful in collecting
revenue inspite of all his attempts. The king has taken refuge under the Company and the
Company is under the impression that they would get things done through Them Fhakhri in
that area." Tribhuvan Bāhādur with an affectionate attitude for the company tried to conceal
his actual state – "You have the Copper Sword given by Devī Maa, Them Fhakhri, nothing to
worry. Don't be scared! The rebellious boys who visited the barrack with you robbed the
treasury. You could not even discern! The British did not question you for that, right?"

She said, "They did not; but I did not know they were revolutionary. You too did not
know."

"They understand your mind. They know what your mental state was after the death
of Hardy Sahib. They know we are not aware of the boys' involvement in the revolution.
Otherwise you could not have remained a confidant of the British. Two boys among them
accused in the treasury robbery case are in the barrack prison. God knows their end!"

Them Fhakhri became speechless after listening to her grandfather. Now when she would go home, would she be able to tell her grandfather that she met the prince!

She had come with fourteen gunners for the revenue collection of this area. This was the first time she had come for attachment of a family. Her work covered the areas nearby the Unnikhur port. Them Fhakhri heard when the company imposed eight rupees thirty two paisa for each plough in sali rice cultivation, two rupees for ahu cultivation, and five rupees fifty paisa per bigha for upland, the uproar started. It seems the king did not tax in this way. To save himself from the fierce temper of the peasants the king was taking shelter in the company. Them Fhakhri was not enthusiastic like the other days. She wanted to go again near Tribhuvan Bähûdûr and listen to more stories about kings and jamindars. Her grandfather told her the subjects of the state became poorer under the pressure of ‘abovâb’. The subjects had to bear the expenditure of Durga Pujâ, Daul Jatrâ and the pilgrimage of the royal family.” Tribhuvan Bähûdûr added with a pale smile – “It seems on the subjects of Khutâghât and Howràghât another tax was imposed – Whenever there was marriage in the royal family performing oblation, the subjects had to give tax. King Amrit Nârâyân married five times for an offspring. That means the subjects had to pay ‘abovâb’ for five times for performing oblation.”

The tinkling sound made by the hooves and brass bells of the horses made the street sonorous. Them Fhakhri’s procession moved ahead – at the forefront was Naken Clerk and the Nayeb who would announce the amount of unpaid revenue to the family to be attached. Both of them were flanked by two standard bearers holding the British flag with the union jack. The flag furled in the wind and the village folk left their work in the field and thronged the street to witness the procession.

Macklinson had some two months to start his journey. He wanted Them Fhakhri to become comfortable with Naken Clerk. That was the reason he sent Naken Clerk. Them Fhakhri found Naken Clerk pleasing, but she noticed he had more faith on Them Fhakhri than the others. He was simple too. It was proved on the very first day. She did not know why this black-dressed Nayeb came to read the letter of attachment. He was a good horse-rider too. It was the first time Them Fhakhri set out for the attachment – that was why perhaps Macklinson sent the Nayeb.

The road was surrounded by dense forests. The trees were known to her. Her grandfather told her about them – ‘gandhasarai’, ‘gamâri’ and ‘uriâm’ trees. The big sal trees made the place dark. Queen Bhâgyeswari’s soldiers found three chests full of horns of rhinos, ‘nârâyani’ coins and ‘bâdsâhi’ coins that day in this place itself. They found these invaluable properties when they came to cut wood in the forest. They were kept in the queen’s treasury. It is said people buried their properties overwhelmed with fear in the ‘Mân’ attack. Them
Fhākhrī and her companions could hear the song of the cicada at that time of day as the place was dark like night. There was no sound except the sound made by hooves and tinkling bells of the horses. Then Fhākhrī's mind was clouded with a feeling of dejection.

Naken Clerk, the Nayeb, Then Fhākhrī and the fourteen gunners stopped in front of a dilapidated house. A hue and cry was started in the family. A very old peasant of that area reproached Bholā Kachārī, the householder, “Our village did not have this infamy. Why are you in this state?” A skinny Bholā Kachārī, with a ‘dhoti’ wrapped above his knees came out with bare feet.

He entreated folding his hands – “Drought and locusts gave me blows leaving me bankrupt. Last year my old chest pain relapsed and I had to go to the town for treatment. I had to sell the pair of bulls for ploughing. I am helpless, I am helpless!” He remained sitting in the gateway grieving in disappointment. Listening to the uproar many people gathered in the place.

The Nayeb in his black dress read aloud the notice of attachment or in other words the notice of unpaid revenue – “He has not given revenue for four months.”

The Nayeb shouted at the end – “Bring out what are the other things you have. We don't have much time.” Then Fhākhrī was dumbstruck by the harsh sound made by the Nayeb.

Probably Bholā Kachārī kept certain things outside being aware of the attachment.

A senior person of the village went inside Bholā Kachārī's house and looked for a chair or a stool because Then Fhākhrī was still standing nearby the Nayeb. At last the man found a broken chair of ‘uriam’ wood. The chair was a proof that the house was affluent at one point of time. He asked Then Fhākhrī to sit on the chair.

The children of the village surrounded Then Fhākhrī. The gunners shouted them back. Then Fhākhrī felt uncomfortable to sit as all the others were standing; but all of them requested her to sit. Then Fhākhrī's horse was taken a little further by a gunner. Everyone was waiting there with a bestial curiosity to see what this beggar-family would give in the attachment. The eldest son of Bholā Kachārī was only fourteen-fifteen years old. He kept two water pots of brass in front of the Nayeb. The gunners looked at the pots and measured the weight by jerking them. One of them said, “The price of the pots will not be more than fifteen rupees.”

Bholā Kachārī's wife came out from inside wiping her tears. She belonged to Kāmrup; that's why her language was ‘Kāmrupī’. She spoke, “Alas! What a pity, I had to see this day – everything is gone – everything is gone.” She took out every utensil in the kitchen – the cooking vessels, ladles, plates, bowls, even the earthen utensils. The gunners measured their price. Inside the house Bholā Kachārī's children started crying aloud. Perhaps their
mother took out the bowls in they used to eat parched rice.

The people gathered in Bholā Kachārī's courtyard were busy watching Therā Fhākhārī out of wonder. Her dress and the hat on her head ignited curiosity in their minds. Their attention was distracted by the cry of Bholā Kachārī's children. They stared at the objects taken out for attachment. One of the gunners shouted - “Bholā Kachārī you have four hundred rupees as unpaid revenue. Bring what else you have.” Bholā Kachārī tried to bring out a bamboo tube which was thrust into a post in the inside of a room. His wife ran towards him with a heart rending scream. Both of them pulled the tube to one's side. The six 'nārāyani' coins inside the tube were left by the grandfather for the grandson's marriage. “Don't give! Don't give them away!” the wife screamed trying to grasp her husband's hand.

“Alas! Alas!” One among the public expressed his regret.

The Nayeb in black dress shouted, “Hurry! Bring whatever you have. We are getting late.”

Bholā Kachārī's son was sleeping inside with his 'eri' shawl drawn around him, in grief and displeasure. He heard the shouting and screaming outside. This 'eri' shawl was clean and newly woven compared to the torn winter clothes worn by Bholā Kachārī's children and wife. Once when the son had fever the mother gave this 'eri' shawl to him. Suddenly the boy got up and threw this 'eri' cloth towards the things for attachment.

Therā Fhākhārī was wonderstruck to watch this scene of attachment. She had never witnessed such a scene before.

When everyone was creating a hue and cry over the 'eri' cloth the boy, who was sitting, dragged out the only basket of rice in the house.

Again a tumult started. Bholā Kachārī's wife started lamenting - “We will have to fast after giving this rice - we will starve.”

Some women of the village who came to see the attachment tried to console Bholā Kachārī's wife. Unwilling to take solace she started lamenting again.

Therā Fhākhārī cast her head downwards hearing this heart rending lamentation. Naken Clerk deeply observed Therā Fhākhārī. “Will she say something?”

No, she did not make a single sound with her mouth. Naken Clerk remembered - once they went to bring objects of attachment from a village called Dokhonā near Chirāh. The public there beat the 'piyāda' almost thrashing him to pieces. This happened in front of his own eyes.

The gunners became busy counting the price of things in front of the nayeb. Again a bustle started. One among the children threw a hookah used by their grandfather towards the things kept for attachment.
One of the gunners cut the hookah pipe of bamboo with the knife tied in his waist — five coins fell on the ground. The group who came for the attachment became embarrassed seeing only five coins. The nayeb who was wearing black dress again shouted — “This will not do. Bring what else you have.”

Black fever had appeared as an epidemic in this area some days back. Many youth died. A boy somehow surviving this fever found place in Bholā Kachārī’s house. He was very weak and was sleeping shrunk on the ground on a sack. Being puzzled Bholā Kachārī went inside hurriedly and raised the boy holding his shoulders. He tied the ‘gāmochā’ which was falling off from the boy’s shrunken waist and took him outside. People outside were surprised to see the boy. The boy appeared like a skeleton who violently trembled seeing the crowd of people. Bholā Kachārī said, “If your reckoning has not met the target, then I give this with the things of attachment.”

The Nayeb shouted — “Who is this?”

Bholā Kachārī replied with dampened eyes — “In my good time I had two pairs of ploughs. I bought him from the market nearby the Tasā river for six rupees at that time. I got him cheap because the time I reached, the market was coming to an end. They brought ten boys to sell. Noone bought this boy because he was feeble. I went to the market to buy a cow, then I saw this boy garlanded and standing erect on a stool to be sold by a trader from Kochbihār.”

The boy was ill and probably Bholā Kachārī could not feed him well because of his economic condition. He could not remain standing. The people standing around him were astonished to see his distinguished bones jutting out of his emaciated body. Bholā Kachārī could not continue and started sobbing.

At that moment there was a tumult in the courtyard. Thērī Fhākhṛī who was observing the boy and all the happenings in Bholā Kachārī’s house fainted and fell down on the ground from her chair.

Ninth Chapter

Thērī Fhākhṛī did not move out from her house for two days. Tribhuvan Bāhādur explained her many things: “You will have to witness many cruel and dreadful scenes with your eyes as you are born into this world Thērī Fhākhṛī. I had to see so many deadly things with these two eyes! The job you are engaged in will compel you to see many such scenes; but you are blessed with the sword, a gift from the Devī Mā. Why will you be overwhelmed with fear?”

Thērī Fhākhṛī did not reply. She did not eat properly for two days. On the third day
Tribhuvan Bähādur forcefully took her to an enticing place nearby the lake. They saw a flock of strange birds chirping on four custard apple trees on the way. The trees were together as if clasping each other’s hand! Perhaps the custard apples were already ripe. The overtly ripen lumpy fruits were hanging like balls of black stones on the trees. The blue bodied birds with yellowed beaks ate the fruits cracking open the fruit’s chest; some left the fruits half-eaten. Those fruits hung on the branches taking an uncouth shape.

Tribhuvan Bähādur never saw so many birds together coming to eat the ripe custard apples. Looking at the extraordinary scene, Tribhuvan Bähādur told Them FHākhrī – “Come, let’s sit here!”

Them FHākhrī followed her grandfather like a machine. They sat on a three-cornered rock nearby the lake. Some adjutant storks were there in the lake. Some of them came towards them, peered at them extending their necks and went away. Her grandfather noticed she was not easy and comfortable.

Tribhuvan Bähādur decided in his mind – “Them FHākhrī’s mental suffering can not linger anymore. It should be settled down. She can’t be kept in at two minds.”

Both her eyes were swollen. To make it light Tribhuvan Bähādur said, “I told you the story of adjutant storks of our Bodo-Kachārī; do you remember? You narrated it to Hardy Sahib and he took it down in his small note book.”

Them FHākhrī’s face brightened up listening to the name of Hardy Sahib; but again tears filled her eyes.

Tribhuvan Bähādur continued, “Did you tell the story to Hardy Sahib in this way? — The adjutants with long back and long leg appearing like adorned with a long coat were human beings like us Bodo-Kachārīs. One of them knew to play ‘cerenjā’, a stringed musical instrument like our ‘dotārā’. His wife sometimes got irritated by the ceaseless sound of the ‘cerenjā’ played by her husband. One day when every memebor of the village went for fishing her husband remained at home playing the ‘cerenjā’. The wife abused him out of anger. Morose out of grief he played ‘cerenjā’ on the very road which was used by the fishermen. Charmed by the sweet tune of the ‘cerenjā’ the fishermen gifted him with fish. He got almost a basket full of fish. He poured down the fish in front of his wife. After that he clasped his wife’s lock of hair and beat her. The wife kept herself inside closing the doors. Later on, inspite of the wife’s earnest requests he refused to come down from the roof of the house. He flew down from the roof to the lake and turned himself into an adjutant from a man.”

Though she listened to the story Them FHākhrī’s mind was elsewhere. Tribhuvan Bähādur was released from all doubts. He did not need to know that a violent conflict was raging in her mind. Should he let her go on her own way or he should interfere? Advices?
question of advices did not arise because Tribhuvan Báhádúr knew her inside out.

At that time they heard ringing sounds of the horse bells and hooves. The sound approached them. Both of them saw Macklinson Sahib coming towards them. His bodyguard followed him on a black horse with a flag. Coming near them Macklinson Sahib told Then Fhákhrí – “Then Fhákhrí, I have been to your house just now. Your grandmother informed me you had come to see how many adjutants were there in the lake.”

Trying to add some more humour he told Then Fhákhrí again – “Tell me Then Fhákhrí how many adjutants adorning overcoat have come to the lake this time!” He failed to bring smile to Then Fhákhrí’s face.

Coming very close to Then Fhákhrí he said – “Listen Then Fhákhrí! It’s time for me to catch the ship! I should bid farewell to you now. I am sorry to know about your condition in the attachment. Did I not tell you before you are born as a general – a general should never wrap his heart with velvet.”

Tribhuvan laughed – “A beautiful statement! A beautiful statement! One should not wrap one’s heart with velvet.”

Then Fhákhrí too laughed. Then Fhákhrí was aging but she looked distinguished because of her healthy body.

Moving closer to Macklinson Then Fhákhrí greeted him once again and said – “I did not know what happened to me at Bholā Kachārī’s house. Please foregive me Sahib. But why is this condition of our people, Sahib?”

“We have thought over the matter seriously and are ready to attempt for their development.” – said Macklinson.

Tribhuvan Báhádúr and Then Fhákhrí never distrusted Macklinson. Both of them firmly believed that other British could lie but not Macklinson and Hardy Sahib.

Some four adjutants were moving around them coming from the lake. Looking at their long legs and grey coloured fleshy body one would think they were really wearing overcoats.

Tribhuvan Báhádúr appeared a little vigilant. He said looking at Then Fhákhrí – “What have the British not done! They are the largest power in the world. The sun never sets in the reign of Queen Victoria. Then Fhákhrí, keep this in mind! Otherwise half of the population would have been eaten up by tigers! The human tigers and the real tigers! The British killed many robbers. And those Bhutanese soldiers? Once they fled with the royal mint. Those tender-aged British soldiers – darling of their moms were the ones who fought with them. They died being hurt by the poisonous arrows and bullets! They met tragic death coming to this far away place crossing the seas. I served them long Then Fhákhrí!”
Looking at Tribhuvan Bähādur's attempt to console Thenū Fhākhri, Macklinson got down from the horse and told Thenū Fhākhri — "Thenū Fhākhri! I came to your house to give some important news. Captain Clerk left the dishes and bowls that day at Bhōlā Kachāri's place for their use... But I am extremely sorry to tell you Thang Fhākhri the boy, seeing whom you fainted, died last night. We could not save him after much effort. Probably he was starving for more than a month." Thenū Fhākhri's face stiffened. Her nerves on the forehead started throbbing.

Macklinson's bodyguard held the horse's reins and Macklinson told Thenū Fhākhri coming forward — "Thenū Fhākhri! I have understood. Perhaps I am the one who spent a good amount of time in this area after Hardy. I repeat one thing again to you — a captain can never be soft-hearted. Whoever you work for?"

Thenū Fhākhri controlled herself. She wanted to tell something from the core of her heart. Macklinson's statement rang in her ear. Why did he say — "Whoever you work for as the general? Yes, yes he was right for whoever you act as the captain." Macklinson then said, "Thenū Fhākhri I came near you for a special reason."

Tribhuvan Bähādur said, "What is that? She remains cheerless most of the time. The tune of the 'chiphum' rang in her ear all the time. As if someone was playing the 'chiphum' relentlessly. I think you know Macklinson Sahib, we Bodos believe that the sound of 'chiphum' can rot the snake's eggs."

"Can rot snake's eggs!" Macklinson expressed.

At that very moment Macklinson's bodyguard handed the reins to him.

Placing his feet on the horse's stirrup Macklinson said — "Thenū Fhākhri! Queen Bhāgyeswarī wants to meet me once and she wants to see you too. The queen has met almost all the British officers in the last two days. Her majesty is performing her state affairs unobstructed with the help of the British."

Tribhuvan Bähādur approved the idea in great enthusiasm — "That will be very good! Our Thenū Fhākhri has never met the respected the queen. She will be able to get the blessings of the queen."

The road to the royal palace was covered by different flowers and fruit trees. A sweet smell pervaded from the shrub of the 'tagar' flower. The little flowers of some fragrant lemon appearing like the teeth of the elephant were blooming somewhere. The road was neat and beautiful. Macklinson said — "The garden is more attractive than the garden of our barrack. Have you been to this place before, Thenū Fhākhri?"

She replied — "I came once with grandfather." Macklinson saw the royal palace from outside but never needed to enter inside. All the company works were performed by the agent.
of the government general. He saw wide and intractable canal along with rampart and tall surrounding wall of bamboo trees. The roof of the royal palace was of thatch made with ornament-like kneaded knots of thatch. The floor of the palace was of ‘cegun’ wood, the post of šāl wood and the ceiling was of jackfruit wood. He caught sight of the different-coloured flags flying on the roof of the newly built temple. They saw well-built thatch roofs while moving towards the royal palace.

Macklinson was surprised to see the nature of the boundary walls and how they were constructed. The walls were made of the post of šāl wood and kneaded bamboo appeared like enclosures made for catching the hunted elephants. They moved ahead by the road nearby the house of the watchmen and gunners. The gunners used ladders to come up and down from these hanging houses. The gunners of the palace were very alert. They were sent by the Company.

The standard bearer preceded Macklinson holding the Company flag. Suddenly the whole party including the gunners saw some boxes being opened in the queen’s treasury on the edge of the road at a distance – rusted boxes. The body guards of the queen with the bearer of the treasury were transferring things to the treasury in a hurry. Everyone noticed the soldiers carrying the strange-coloured objects. The elephants-tusks were heaped up at a place – they appeared not like tusks of elephants but like rounded arms of a woman! The pieces were lying. Some invaluable stones were piled up next to them – they were winking in the sunshine. The verandah was filled with the big horns of deer appearing like the thorny shrubs.

Macklinson and his entourage observed these objects for sometime. The company did not prevent these properties from being collected from the dense forest. Rathar Ford Sahib tried to get hold of it. The Company could not have the ‘nārāyani’ coins stored in the brass vessels. These were royal properties – who knows who buried these things during the time of Mān’s Invasion? The workers of the palace appeared like a triangular-shaped gate from a distance. Āchabdārs and Sitābdārs sat there. That was the meeting house of the king's sepoys situated at a distance of three ‘kros’ from the palace.

Thēn Fhākhri was moving ahead with Macklinson. A flag-hoisting gunner followed them along with four gunners. The place was filled with the tinkling sound of the horse bells. The Company flag was fluttering in the wind. Thēn Fhākhri’s face illuminated on reaching the palace. Thēn Fhākhri bowed down at the holy ‘bāthau’ pedestal before setting out. Cannons were fired instantly to announce the arrival of the Company Sahib to the inner apartment of the palace. Both of them got off their horses. Two maids arranged glittering ‘sarais’ with betel-nut and betel-nut leaves to welcome them inside. The smell of incense sticks and resins surrounded the environs. The queen's bodyguard showed them the path
inside. The pictures of the royal men in different postures were decorated on the wall. Tiger-skins with their large heads were laid on the way to the sitting room.

Macklinson and Theñ Fhákhrí stood in front of the well-decorated sitting room of queen Bhãgyeswarí. The maids informed the queen about their arrival. The queen was already prepared to meet her special guests. The sound of 'uruli' came from inside and the queen entering into the room gestured them to sit on the chairs of mahogany wood displaying excellent workmanship. The queen was wearing beautiful Bodo jewelleries—a big 'bichãhar' on the neck, gold 'áchãn muthi' on the hand and different 'ákhtán' rings on the fingers. She possessed an admirable personality. The Company entrusted her the duty to rule over Bijnî as the king was under age. She greeted Macklinson, the Company Sahib. Macklinson received the greeting bowing down his head. A maid from inside brought a silver tray and placed a book of complaint in front of Macklinson. Another woman placed a silver tray on the queen's hands decorated with flowers. The tray contained 'dokhnã thouisi' woven with different coloured workmanship! The dear garment of all Bodo girls! She gave the dokhnã to Theñ Fhákhrí and blessed Theñ Fhákhrí touching her head—"May your fame get spread! You are dear to all of us. Our pride! A new era is coming—You become the winner of the new age."

Macklinson could make out what the queen said to Theñ Fhákhrí. Then the queen ordered the maids and bodyguards to leave the place. They left one by one. Only the queen, Macklinson and Theñ Fhákhrí remained there. In the distance the sentinel gunners were alert as the Company Sahib was their guest.

Queen Bhãgyeswarí spoke addressing Macklinson—"The Company is aware of everything. Our prince is under age. Hence I perform the royal duties. You people are kind to me. Our king handed over the responsibility of collecting revenue on you. You are collecting revenue safely with the help of our Theñ Fhákhrí; but Macklinson Bãhãdur I sent for you for a special reason. The Company people know that our former kings were independent; they gave two thousand 'nãrãyani' coins to the Moghuls."

Macklinson said nodding his head—"We know everything about Bijnî your highness—our government trusts you. You must please speak without any hesitation."

Queen Bhãgyeswarí said in a very polite manner: "Sir! My subjects appeal to me under the pressure of tax. The 'kãchãdrãi' tax imposed by you on the owners of cows, buffalos and elephants on the bank of the Brahmaputra is very heavy on them. Please release the poor shepherds from that tax. I have heard that you have freed the 'adhikãrs' of Kãmrup from the tax on the grazing field of elephants. It seems Pũrniyã, Dínajpur and even the dairymen who come from Rampur to Govãlpãrã in boat for the grazing of the cows are in trouble under the pressure of tax—People are still coming to me with their appeals. Everyone
knows that the royal family has a good rapport with the Company. Macklinson Sahib I request you to submit my application to the representative of governor general. I am sure you are aware of the incident related to Rathar Ford Sahib. Don't you know Rathar Ford Sahib wanted to make Bijnī subordinate to British government?"

Macklinson said eagerly—"I know. I also know how he had to return back being unsuccessful later on. I know very well how much confidence our Company has on you. Your highness, I will surely inform the respected agent about your request. I believe as they have freed the adhikārs of Kāmrup from the tax on the grazing field of the elephants they should pass the same order in Bijnī too. At least they can free the grazing field from tax—they should also free the betel-nut trees from tax."

The queen greeted Macklinson Sahib once more. Delicious fruits and 'paramānna' were kept on silver dishes displaying different craftsmanship in front of Macklinson and Then Fhākhṛī. Sahib took only little. Queen Bhāgyeswarī went inside once again and her bodyguards remained standing in the same place.

After sometime Queen Bhāgyeswarī said to Macklinson forwarding him a sword kept in a crafted silver 'miyān'—"This is a small gift from my side. You have come personally. Then Fhākhṛī also has come—I am really delighted!" The queen again said, "Then Fhākhṛī has spread the glory of our state. Stories related to Then Fhākhṛī have got circulated everywhere. You are able to collect taxes from the places where earlier people refused to give tax with the help of Then Fhākhṛī."

The minister came and stood nearby the queen. No one could discern when he sat there. Everyone came to know about his presence when he spoke to Macklinson praising the Company rule—"You have saved our tradition by protecting us from Rathar Ford Sahib and bringing this Jamindary system under the 'court of wards'. This is a great honour for us; although Rathar Ford Sahib was put to great shame. He lost his honour and ran away from this place. This is true we have come under the rule of British Empire; but we have freedom in many aspects! You have given us that privilege and we bow our heads to you in gratitude."

The queen said in alarm, "My subjects make different complaints by speaking about their sufferings. That day one group came and said that some subjects were kept arrested in the blazing sun because they could not give revenue. They were given bail after being beaten by staff. Macklinson Sahib, please keep the requests I made to you in your mind."

The queen repeated—"Macklinson Sahib! You have lived in this area for a long time; everyone says you are quite sympathetic to the pain and sorrows of common people. People are grieving over the fact that you will say goodbye to this place; but you must please consider my requests before you leave."
Macklinson arose to bid goodbye to the queen and said—“Your highness, your invitation to us has given me the opportunity to bid farewell to you. Probably this is my last meeting with you. I shall surely try to fulfill the job you have entrusted upon me. I will inform everything to the agent of the governor.”

Macklinson thanked the queen once again and stood up. The sounds of the cannons were heard at a distance. The queen blessed Them Fhākhri once again keeping her hand on Them Fhākhri’s head—“Them Fhākhri! You are our pride. The company has collected revenue in this area peacefully with your help. Everyone has understood that you possess divinely power! A woman was never made an ‘ijārādār’ in this large land of ours ruled by the British.”

Them Fhākhri was shy to listen to her own praise by the queen. Everyone stood up to bid farewell to Macklinson. Giving a call to the people Macklinson said, “Some new people are moving about this place for some days. We have come to know they have taken shelter in some families as guests. We have already brought some battalions from Govālpāra, we will bring more battalions if needed! No one should be convinced that people in this area are sleeping.”

Everyone became silent listening to Macklinson. Reverend Minister remained totally silent. Macklinson looked at everyone turning back; all were quiet. They thought the minister would tell everything to Macklinson; even Macklinson was surprised at his silence. He again told, “Many of our company officers could build up agreeable relationships with the royal family in my period. I want that this remains in tact even after my departure.”

The minister came back leading Macklinson’s procession to some distance. He went to meet the queen to discuss some confidential matter keeping the door partially open—“Respected queen, the Company has come to know that the flame of great defiance has spread to our state. The Company is alert that the land which they achieved very easily could no longer be taken easily. Our subjects are discussing that the British are using kings like you as ‘śikhandi’ to ward off the rebellion. The subduing of rebellion has become easy in India because of the royal class. The cry of the people deprived of everything in attachment echoes everywhere both in lower and upper Assam. The administrators of our locality flattering the British demand tax from farmers who cultivated the farmlands with hard labour, risking their lives to tigers. Will the farmers ever be able to free these lands from the claws of the administrators? Not a single object is left without tax! They have imposed tax on betel-nut trees; they will impose tax even on the bee-hives in the trees. I have heard farmers from many places have fled to Bij̃nī being unable to carry the burden of revenue. We cannot be sure that the same situation will not exist in Bij̃nī, respected queen. It is a really good thing that you have told Macklinson Sahib to free at least the grazing field of cattle.” The queen listened to
the minister but did not utter a single word in reply. She knew that bricks and irons of the great rebellion can shake even her royal family as the uprising spread from distant places; but she did not open her mouth. That was why she remained mum with the dewan today. Queen Bhāgyeswari came out to see off the dewan. She saw Macklinson, Thēn Phākhri, the gunners and the flag-bearers had crossed the royal campus. The queen went inside the palace with her attendants.

Thēn Phākhri and Macklinson went back with open minds though silently. Again the ringing sound of horse-bells and 'khot', 'khot' sound of the horse-hooves filled the surrounding. The children and the old persons came out from the road-side cottage to see the flag-bearers and their flags. Macklinson said with a regret looking at the surrounding pleasing land –“Thēn Phākhri! Oh to leave this beautiful land of yours...”

“Make the guns ready! Make the guns ready!” The gunners shouted in chorus – “Some mishap will occur! We can sense the smell.” The gunners stood surrounding Macklinson. The forest in this part was so dense that if someone went inside they could hardly find the path to come out. This was known to everyone.

In a moment the bullet which was aimed at Macklinson hit the stomach of Macklinson's horse. The horse fell down and Macklinson was flung to a distance. The horse breathed out for the last time jerking its four legs and dilated its eyes.

Notes:
1. Śri Madhuram Bodo- Bodo Loka Sāhya Sādhu Kathā, page 90.

**Tenth Chapter**

Two battalions from Govālpārā and all the battalions in the barrack jumped down on Bijnī like locusts. They started moving around the forests and began to beat the persons whomsoever they suspected tearing their skins. The soldiers caught one unknown party red-handed which was making gunpowder in the area where the sabotage had taken place and carried them to the barrack tying their hands and feet. The dead horse of Macklinson Sahib was carried to the barrack the same night. Macklinson Sahib was very fond of this horse. The burial of the horse was arranged in the bare piece of land just in front of the window of Macklinson’s quarter in the barrack. No Company Sahib opposed it because everyone knew that the horse had saved Macklinson. From where was the seedling of the great revolution getting spread? Everyone said even the dead Hardy Sahib too said that the great rebellion could not reach this area. It could not come by the river, by the mountain or by the man-made paths in the forest; but what were these happenings?
Tribhuvan Bāhādur was cheerless for somedays. He used to wear his dhoti in an orderly manner with the loose-chested shirt earlier; but he had forgotten to wear his turban now-a-days. He sat in front of the ‘bāthau’ pedestal with someone or the other most of the time.

Coming from the market Thern Fhākhri saw her grandfather in front of the ‘bāthau’ pedestal with a well-dressed ‘Sūtradhār’. Stepping forward she saw a garland of flowers and ‘prasād’ on the ‘bāthau’ pedestal. Some devotees must have come. Thern Fhākhri went to see the market. Her aunt Lilāvati Daimār insisted that Thern Fhākhri stay in her place, Govālpara, for a few days. She wanted to show her the markets. That was why Thern Fhākhri went to Govālpara for a few days following the arrangements of her grandfather and sent back the fourteen gunners who came to take her. Her reputation as a successful ‘tahcildār’ was already spread to Govālpara. She expressed her intense desire to see the markets in front of her grandfather long back. Yet one question arose in her grandfather and in her aunt’s minds why was this sudden interest in her for the markets? She replied being asked by her grandfather – “The markets are so famous and just nearby us; but I haven’t seen them. That is why grandfather.” Her aunt showed her the markets in Ālamgaṇja, Barunbhānā, Milangaṇja, Kaimārī and Kāldor. She came back after four days. She had to come back in a Company buggy. The people in the main Company barrack in Govālpara heard her name but no one had seen her. So people crowded around Thern Fhākhri, surrounding her. She needed a buggy to come back to carry some pieces of mahogany wood and some iron instruments which she bought for her grandfather. She bought a mortar for her grandmother who chewed betel nut all the time and ‘Laksibilās’ oil, basket of ‘Kāndhān’, pills of ‘Laksibilās’ including pills for different ailments and ‘barkāpor’. It was difficult for her to lift up all the pieces of mahogany wood on the buggy.

The people sitting nearby the ‘bāthau’ pedestal went to the gateway hastily and took down the rice basket, wooden pieces, iron equipments and all the other objects. Her grandfather was very happy to see the pieces of woods and said, “Good job – I was thinking of making two ‘barpāra’s to keep in front of the ‘bāthau’ pedestal.” Then her grandfather introduced her to their respected guest Khargeswar Sūtradhār and said, “Thern Fhākhri, it is our great privilege that the great actor of upper Assam Khargeswar Sūtradhār has come to our village once again and has become my guest! He refused the job of ‘śiksānabTs’ in the court house of Nagaon town after becoming a theatre actor.” Thern Fhākhri asked their firm-bodied guest with big eyes and long hair, “You don’t want to work under the British?”

“No! No! It’s because of time constraint. That day only Queen Victoria had taken charge of the rule of India from the Company. So many celebrations that day! We showed ‘Rukminiharan’ that day. Normally everyone knows me as the most expert Sūtradhār in that area.”
The children and the farmers who were sitting in Tribhuvan Bähadur’s courtyard surrounding Khargeswar Sütradhār, said, “We have heard your name – our children are impatient to watch your ‘Sütradhāri’ dance. Look at them another party has come to see your dance.”

Khargeswar Sütradhār replied, “Respected public, I have not come to show ‘Sütradhāri’ dance this time. I have come with some heavy responsibilities; but I have brought with me my dance apparel. If needed I will dance!”

Then Fhakhri went inside to change her dress. She kept the objects carried by her from the market in order with the help of some farmers who came to their place to see Khargeswar Sütradhār. The children of the village came to see the Sütradhār and their courtyard was filled with them. Tribhuvan Bähadur did not forget to serve his guest well although he was a little downcast for some days. Khargeswar came many times to this area with the drama-group; that was why he was very popular among the children. As the crowd grew fat the farmers began to entreat Sütradhār. One of them said, “Which dance did you perform when Queen Victoria became the queen of our land too, respected Sütradhār?”

Sütradhār replied bowing down his head, “It was a big festival. At first the soldiers fired cannons and played ‘beugal’ at the same time and then the lined lamps which were lighted in respect of the Queen sparkled twinkling. The people living in the villages of Nagaon lined up to the town to participate in the celebration. The subjects had hardly any place to stand on. One was about to fall on the head of another— wailing started. The white sahibs were unable to control them. Phukan Sahib saved them from punching and falling on each other.”

One among the public was heard shouting – “Phukan Sahib’s greatness is immense. Don’t you know about the great famine in Lower Assam two years back? The cost of one ‘ser’ rice was four annas at that time. On top of that we heard there was squandering in Keñāpati which the British could not quell. The British called the name of God to save them. Phukan imposed firm rules and compelled the unwilling ‘Keñā’s to sell rice in the famine. He told them straight – “Take money and sell rice! Otherwise I will break your barns by the administrators of the government and give them openly to the starving people in the famine.”

The children, assembled nearby and around the ‘bathau’ pedestal, had no patience to listen to such talks. They shouted – “We will watch Sütradhār grandfather’s dance now.”

Though Khargeswar Sütradhār did not bring any goods with him, he had one bundle of clothes with him. He used this bundle as a pillow; but he had one cotton bag with him. Stopping his narration, the Sütradhār tried to open his bundle. He said, “The ‘cirastādār’s of collector and the army commander wore attractive dresses in the coronation of the queen. The ‘mahanta’s of Šalguri and Narovā performed 'bhāonī'. I acted as the Sütradhār in
Rukminiharan in the insistence of the ‘mahanta’s of Šalguri – I will show you a portion of that. I cannot perform the gestural dance without ‘khol-mrdarí’. I will deliver some dialogues from the drama wearing my dress.”

The children in the courtyard laughed boisterously. Khargeswar Sūtradhār went to the cowshed of Tribhuvan and changed his dress – the dress was composed of a shirt worn by Sūtradhār with folded sleeves and a white sheet of cloth to be draped on the shoulder. He folded it and let it fall to his knees and wrapped the other end around his neck and both his shoulders. He wore a pure white cotton ‘lāhañā’ on his waist and wrapped a cotton ‘tāñāli’ adorned with large figures of flowers on top of it. He even wore a turban. None could make out whether this was ‘moglāli’ turban or some other turban. He wore rattles on the feet and sprinkled some perfume of sandalwood on his body opening a pipe which he carried in his cotton bag. He came out with a dance-posture from the cowshed and bowed down in front of the ‘bāthau’ pedestal. The crowd surrounding the ‘bāthau’ pedestal swelled. The new battalions of the Company were moving about this area – they looked at the people surrounding the ‘bāthau’ pedestal of Tribhuvan Bāhādur to have a glimpse of the happening; it appeared as if the soldiers were examining them by tapping at each individual!

Khargeswar Sūtradhār got ready to perform his dance – “Well, we travel about the ‘bhaona’ field in ‘swastic’ posture along with the dance. We did the same thing in the celebration of Queen Victoria – but today I don’t have any instruments. Dance is not possible without musical instruments and we need twenty six musical instruments in this dance.”

The public apprised it with surprise – “Twenty six musical instruments!”

“So I am performing this dance without music. I performed this dance in the festival of the queen.” He performed the dance moving round uttering dialogues – “Šrī Kṛṣṇa became totally distracted listening to the praise of Rukmini from minstrel Surabhī.” He uttered another dialogue accompanied by a dance posture – “Šrī Kṛṣṇa sighed after listening to the description of Rukmini’s beauty and her qualities. He began to think about Rukmini by sobbing again and again. Kṛṣṇa became restless in his pangs of separation from his beloved and saw Rukmini everywhere lamenting and uttering the name of Rukmini.”

Tribhuvan Bāhādur stood up interrupting Khargeswar Sūtradhār and asked him – “Sūtradhār Sir, you please narrate the misery of the kings who came to the ‘sayambar’ of Rukmini. The people will enjoy the humour.”

Khargeswar Sūtradhār narrated the distress of the kings in Rukmini’s ‘sayambar’ who submitted herself totally to Šrī Kṛṣṇa. He composed the dialogues in his own language and tuned it – “Rukmini entered into the royal court with her friends at that time. Some of the kings in ‘sayambar’ shouted – ‘Cupid is laughing and looking at me by smashing my heart. I
say by biting straw with my teeth your arrows of cupid have pierced my heart. I lie at your feet and beseech you to give me life by the touch of your hand. I will show you by making all the other queens slaves.'"

The people in the courtyard laughed. The Sūtradhār then uttered dialogues performing dances in different gestural positions—"Rukmini with her friends Madan Mañjārī and Līlāvatī reproached the kings by kicking and beating them, who became mad in carnal desire after seeing her, and the women enjoyed their predicament."

The people in the courtyard again laughed looking at the gesticulations of the Sūtradhār. Some people from the nearby village also joined them.

The soldiers of the new regiment in Bijnī including some gunners of the barrack assembled in Tribhuvan Bāhādur's house. Tribhuvan Bāhādur went inside with two persons and hung another hurricane lamp on a post. The place became clear and splendid with light.

The Sūtradhār this time performed a different dance turning round and round and uttering 'dhindāu, dhindāu' with his mouth; but the people to their utter surprise discovered only Company soldiers around them! It appeared as if the soldiers were encircling the house and the crowd.

At that moment they heard the sound of firing of bullets and the people in the courtyard started to flee and got scattered. Tribhuvan Bāhādur took down the hurricane lamp from the post and rescued a bewildered Khargeswar Sūtradhār out of the chaos clapping his hand. He shouted out to the soldiers—"This is Khargeswar Sūtradhār. He used to perform dance in our place sometimes. Our people know him. He is not from the party of the great revolt as conceived by you." Khargeswar folded his hands looking at them.

Someone from the crowd shouted when some soldiers went near Khargeswar to search him—"Naken Clerk and two Company Sahibs have arrived." The soldiers stood near the gateway; but moved forward leaving that place following Naken Clerk's signal. The most surprising fact was Them Fhakhrī did not come out of her room inspite of such a hue and cry outside.

Tribhuvan Bāhādur helped Khargeswar Sūtradhār in opening the folds of his shirt and in packing his bundle. Then he arranged the guest-room nearby the cowshed for Khargeswar Sūtradhār to spend the night.

The grandmother cooked 'kavai' fish specially kept for guest with rice powder. She cooked 'Jaha' rice kept in the 'kalah'. The Sūtradhār had some two bowls of 'jumāi' before taking rice with Tribhuvan Bāhādur. Then they sat around the dining place. The Sūtradhār told many things to Tribhuvan Bāhādur while eating the meal: "I thought the great revolt against the British had not touched this area. I performed many 'bhāonā' s in different places during
the time of Queen Victoria's coronation – Kumarharan, Rukminiharan, Parijatharan. I decided to stay here peacefully for somedays and thought of going around Akhānāgār where I have some friends. I heard the king and the British have a good rapport but look what happened today? They were about to shoot me!"

Tribhuvan replied with a regret – “What to tell you Sūtradhār? The wind of rebel has blown here insidiously. Noone disrespects our Thērī Fhākhṛī when she goes to collect revenue: but do you what happened that day? They attempted to kill Macklinson Sahib in the presence of Thērī Fhākhṛī. Fortunately the bullet hit Macklison's horse. Listen Khargeswar Sūtradhār, I have enjoyed the salary of the British my whole life. I am their subject. We were not in a better condition before the arrival of the British. Did the Bhutanese not rob us? Who could subdue them? The Company is taking revenue; but what about the Mogul and the Bhutanese? They went to the extent of naming Kochbihār as Alāmghīr Nagar. Didn't they plunder the armoury and carry hundreds of cannons from the king's armoury? Goats, buffalos, cows could not remain in anyone's house. They plundered everything – everything! What did Mōyājām Khā Sahib do? Our grandfathers told he hung the heads of the dead generals in pegs and hence the place was known as 'Mundamāla'. I have not told you about the Bhutanese yet.

The British have taken but they have given too. More than half of the population in Pānbarī, Āgarah and Gācacā village were either eaten by tigers or trampled by wild elephants. The British killed so many tigers in order to make the paths passable. They saved the people by killing the oppressive 'bhattikholā' elephants. So many of our subjects are made soldiers which have provided them with a livelihood. Many boys were sold in the market earlier; they are made soldiers now. How can we forget their endeavour to remove the custom of 'safī' and to extend education! The missionaries have come now. They have come to spread education in the remote and impenetrable areas with the image of Jesus in their hearts. So many of them got drowned in Dolonī, Campāvatī and Barnādī river! So many were killed by wild beasts and so many died in black fever!"

Khargeswar Sūtradhār screamed back – “We will have to send the British back even if you praise them with a hundred mouths. Our country is ruined by them. They came to save us from the ‘Mān’ attack; but our defenders became our devourers. Haven’t you seen how they plundered us by making the tea-gardens? As if those lands were left to them by their ancestors! They have settled down there as easily as sitting down on a mat; not displaying any sign of getting off it. Where haven’t they imposed tax? It seems they will fix tax even on weavers' shuttles and on bee-hives in trees. Grazing fields of cattle's were taxed long back. People are made handicapped by the spreading of opium. The elephant keeper of Kāmrup’s
Gosāi died due to excessive opium consumption that day only! Can’t you see how the women have started to sell opium in the Tiniali? You will meet people on every road and household taking religious initiation in Christianity. Our brothers from the hill sides are disappointed. Can’t you see the Gāro people in front of you? Commissioner of Govālpārā Strong Sahib burned the Gāro village with some soldiers. These have all happened right near and around you.”

Tribhuvan Bāhādur was stupefied to listen to Khargeswar Sūtradhār. It did not take long for him to understand that Khargeswar Sūtradhār could no longer be taken frivolously.

Thēṁ Fhākhrī’s grandmother arranged a bed of ‘urām’ wood for Khargeswar Sūtradhār in the room nearby the cowshed. Tribhuvan Bāhādur told him – “It will be good if you leave tomorrow. Things were simple earlier! The bullet hit Macklinson’s horse that day. The treasury was plundered before that; these types of incidents never occurred before in this area. Small happenings did occur but incidents of this scale never did.”

Khargeswar said consoling him – “If you don’t mind I can go back in the boat tonight itself.” Tribhuvan and his wife replied together – “No, no, we cannot let you go at night.” Tribhuvan kept the hurricane lamp on the floor of Khargeswar Sūtradhār’s room and said, “Let the lamp burn the whole night. These lamps were shipped in. Hardy Sahib had given us two before he left. It is of good use for us.”

Khargeswar Sūtradhār was frightened from inside after the whole incident. Yet being unable to control his curiosity he asked Tribhuvan, “How much do the British pay Thēṁ Fhākhrī for acting as the tahcildār?”

Tribhuvan Bahadur’s chest puffed up in pride listening to the question; but he answered controlling himself – “They give some ‘nārayani’ coins for the expense of the horse-maintenance. Besides that they have given eighty ‘bigha’s of revenue-land to cultivate making them revenue free.”

One particular nerve in Khargeswar Sūtradhār’s forehead quivered. Tribhuvan Bāhādur could read Khargeswar Sūtradhār’s facial expression. He replied with a laugh – “You have thought we are enjoying that land ourselves. Don’t think like that. She gave those eighty ‘bigha’s of land to the farmers from the bank of Āgrāṁ river and Kānāmākarā to cultivate who had lost everything in attachment. There was such confusion over this matter too! Go, you sleep now – keep the hurricane lamp on.” Sūtradhār asked – “Did she give them the whole eighty ‘bigha’s of land?”

Tribhuvan replied – “Yes, she gave away the entire land.”

Tribhuvan woke up at midnight – he perceived a sound as made in the opening of a door. He woke up quickly and glanced towards the cowshed keeping the door partially open.
Tribhuvan Bähädur was surprised to his wit’s end— that was Them Fhakhir! He could see her in the clear moonlight. She was standing in front of Khargeswar Süttradhar. The Süttradhar was trying to explain something to her. Tribhuvan Bähädur trembled from head to toe. He realized everything at that moment. The Süttradhar must have brought some news from the rebel Rāmcandra.

Tribhuvan Bähädur submitted the appointment letter of Them Fhakhir as the ‘ijārādār’ including some other letters and Them Fhakhir’s horse to Naken Clerk next morning. All the people in the barrack were grave and serious. Macklinson advanced his London journey following the death of his favourite horse. He got into the ship heavy-hearted. The surprising thing was no one questioned anything when Them Fhakhir’s horse and the charter were given back. When Tribhuvan Bähädur reached the door with the horse submitting everything Naken Clerk rushed towards him through the back door of the barrack and told him— “One offender will be hanged tomorrow. You too come to see it. Tribhuvan Bähädur, we knew you would come to return this charter like this.” Naken Clerk again said pointing towards the horse, “You hand over the horse to the gunners in the gateway – they will keep it in the stable. Them Fhakhir kept the horse with great care, didn’t she?” Tribhuvan Bahadur did not reply.

Stepping forward Naken Clerk patted on the back of the morose Tribhuvan Bähädur and said, “Well, all of us know about your devotion to the Company. Don’t be sad – the wind of rebel has blown everywhere! We are aware of everything.”

Tribhuvan Bähädur crossed the main door and handed over the horse to the soldiers who were standing on the doorway of the firm wall made of Sal wood. They permitted him to come out freely. The door to the west side of the wall was full of people. The hanging scaffold was nearby that door. Tribhuvan Bähäur saw the rod, plank and halter made ready. The British intentionally made this hanging scaffold in a high place so that everyone could see and they could create terror in the beholders’ minds. People outside including Tribhuvan Bähädur could even see the rope made glossy by rubbing with wax and oil. The man will be hanged at dawn. Naken Clerk was seen coming out again. He saw Tribhuvan Bähädur staring at the hanging scaffold. Clerk said – “Tribhuvan Bähädur! You are still here. I think you do not know who will be hanged tomorrow.”

Tribhuvan replied, “No, Clerk Sahib, we don’t know anything about them.”

Clerk said, “Listen, we will hang the prince tomorrow. The prince came himself to meet Them Fhakhir that day when she went for the attachment at Unnikhur port. We got a good opportunity to catch him there.” Tribhuvan Bähädur did not utter a single word. Many people had already assembled there. The bee-line of people to the barrack was a sight of delight to the British. This was the first hanging case in this barrack. Someone whispered in
Tribhuvan’s ear, “Tribhuvan Bāhādur, some deception was there in the trial of the prince. No one could know it. It seems he came to meet Thēri Fhākhrī, is it true?”

Tribhuvan Bāhādur collapsed on his way home. Some farmers carried him home. Thēri Fhākhrī and her grandmother who were sitting on the floor took him inside and made him to sleep on the bed. Grandmother said, “There was no need to return the horse and the charter so fast. Khargeswar Sūtradhār gave her the news last night itself that the prince was caught. Khargeswar Sūtradhār came to discuss with Thēri Fhākhrī whether he could escape from the barrack or not. That was why he had his secret talk with Thēri Fhākhrī at midnight.” Thēri Fhākhrī stood up and touched Tribhuvan Bāhādur’s feet asking for his blessings. She said, “Don’t forbid me. I will go to see the hanging of Rāmcandra in the morning and will get into a boat with one party as arranged by Khargeswar Sūtradhār after that. This is my motherland. I shall come back again.” Tribhuvan Bāhādur sat up on his bed. He said touching her head, “I give you my blessings. Don’t forget to carry your copper sword. Victory will be yours.”

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