CHAPTER III
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Salvation for Agony: Indira Goswami’s *An Unfinished Autobiography*

This chapter focuses on a critical analysis of *An Unfinished Autobiography*, an autobiography by one of the most reputed and distinguished Assamese female writers of North-East India Mamoni Raisom Goswami, popularly known as Indira Goswami. It is her life story *Adha Lekha Dastabez* in Assamese (1988) which was later on translated into English in 2002 by P. Kotoky. A versatile writer over the last 20 years, she has received numerous accolades in the North-East. Only in recent years, after the translation of her works, she has begun to receive attention from other parts of India and beyond. Her contributions are much more than mere literary achievements. She incorporates in her writings her hope for justice and equality that reflect her deep connections with the society.

Indira Goswami’s writings, while narrating simple anecdotes, show her deep empathy for the marginals of society. However, critical works on Indira Goswami are few. Among the handful of critics who have written on her are D. K. Baruah, Hiren Gohain, Prafula Kotoky, Sisir Kumar Das, Gobinda Prasad Sarma and Rajul Sogani. Gohain appreciates her lucid prose and her depiction of reality with stunning clarity, while others like Kotoky and Das mainly explore her awareness of contemporary social issues. Sogani, Baruah and Sarma pay attention to some of the feminist elements in her writings including her representations of widow in her works, and her treatment of issues that include female sexuality, the body, and resistance to oppression.

Indira Goswami was also well known for her attempts to structure social change, both through her writings and through her role as a mediator between the armed militant group United Liberation Front of Asam and the Government of India. Her involvement led to the formation of the ‘People’s Consultative Group’, a peace committee. She referred to herself as an “observer” of the peace process rather than as a mediator or initiator. She has published several creative and scholarly works in Assamese and English. *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (2005), regarded as a classic in Assamese literature and excerpted in Masterpieces of Indian Literature (Sahitya Akademi) is a novel about the plight of Brahmin widows in Sattras of Assam;
The Blue Necked Braja (1976) is perhaps the first novel written on the plight of Hindu widows popularly known as Radheswamis in Vrindavan; Pages Stained with Blood (1994) is a first person account of the Sikh-riots of 1984 in Delhi; Words from the Mist is a film made on her life directed by Jahnu Barua. The Man from Chinnamasta (2005) is her most controversial and subversive novel which is a protest against the practice of animal sacrifice in the ancient Kamakhya Temple, in Guwahati, Assam; Pain and Flesh (2006) is her only published poetry collection in English.

Goswami is known as a sensitive creative writer who is unable to bear the brutality and intolerable oppression of human beings. Excessive pain and sorrow left a deep impact on her psyche which led her stand in support of the oppressed and the underprivileged. She has written originally in Assamese and many of her works have been translated into English which include Datar Hatir Une Khowa Howda (The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tuskar), Tej Aru Dhueire Dhusarita, (Pages Stained with Blood) and Chinnamastar Manuthu (The Man from Chinnamasta). She has been the second recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for the novel The Rusted Sword. She has written over hundred short stories and more than sixteen novels. Her novels have become immensely popular in Assam. One of her novels, The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker was made into an Assamese film by Swantana Bordoloi in 1996 starring Tom Alter – Adajya which won international awards. Several biographical films have been made on her highly turbulent life and notable among them are “Words from the Mist” by Jahnu Barua and “Aparajita” by Kuntala Sharma. In the arena of modern Indian literature, she is one of the most powerful voices and one of the very few who has attempted to use literary tool as a means for social change.

An Unfinished Autobiography makes a thought-provoking narrative. It is an account of the inner shaping of a personality. Indira Goswami was undergoing her personal grief and tragedies when a well-known Assamese writer, Homen Borgohain inspired her to write an autobiography on her life. Indira Goswami acknowledges this fact in the Preface:

In June 1968, the well-known Assamese writer, Homen Borgohain, wrote a letter, requesting me to write an autobiography of my life...because you are an inborn artist, and your creation is the only salvation for your agony, sorrow and even partial death (Preface).
Yet, there were some Assamese readers who criticized this attempt by a young girl like Indira Goswami writing such an autobiography. So she could not complete her autobiography. Indira writes about it thus:

I was even encouraged to start writing my autobiography- but I could not complete it. I left it unfinished, though many readers appreciated the part I wrote and got published. I was also discouraged by several quarters, mostly from Assamese readers, who were critical about a young girl writing her autobiography, however turbulent her life may have been. They expected autobiographies only by great men and women at the fag end of their lives. The Assamese literary scene at that time was not yet ready to accept the idea of an autobiography being written by a young girl (Preface).

And then after eighteen years, in 1986, the first part of her autobiography was published by a popular Assamese magazine, Asom Bani in their special Bihu issue, Shri Tilak Hazarika, one of the well-known journalists of Assam and the editor of the magazine, was so impressed by this issue that he himself wrote to Indira Goswami, “You have no ideas how great an impact this first part has made on our readers. You have made us also shed tears. You must promise me that you will give us the second part also for our next special issue…” (xvi).

Goswami says about her autobiography in her Preface:

The third chapter of this book would not have been possible without the request of the Assamese publisher, Bijoy Dutta, who was almost obsessed by the urge to publish my autobiography in Assamese.....Unfortunately, many nears and dears mentioned are not with me here today (Preface).

Indira Goswami confessed herself that she started a different life after 1970. It is a wonderful thing then for Indira Goswami that she was overwhelmed by the responses of the Assamese readers to her autobiography after it came out in the book form. She writes:

I received many fan letters from students and other readers. Some even wrote that they got courage and strength to face the hardships of life after reading the book...I was surprised and delighted when I was informed that one of my fans, Sree Raghabendra Deka, who was one of the members of the Antarctic expedition, exploring the frozen continent, had left behind on the Antarctic, one of my books on behalf of his wife, as a memory of his achievement there. It has become a part of the library in that frozen land.

She is so happy with the compliment that she writes, “For a writer, no recognition is more valuable than the spontaneous response of the readers.”

A genuine autobiography inspires and prepares readers to confront crucibles of fate with resilience. *An Unfinished Autobiography* fits into these parameters of an
autobiography. It recounts and traces the metamorphosis of a sensitive soul. Amrita Pritam wrote in the foreword to *An Unfinished Autobiography*, "Indira’s life story could well nigh be termed as, “Life is No ‘Bargain!’” It is, in fact, a testament of Indira’s life leading to its metamorphosis.” Indira’s life celebrates predominance of courage over calamities of fate and adventure over the love of ease. It is heroic to hug one’s sorrow and resolve not to be consoled. The best way to learn swimming in life’s tide is to plunge courageously into waves and be buffeted about by them.

When she shifted to Delhi, she took writing short stories once more. She writes,

Two of them were published in English translations. They were commended by several distinguished scholars and critics in different languages. They made me aware of the possibilities for me, through English translations of my writings. To cite a few instances, Mr. Gulabdas Broker, the famous writer of Gujarat, after reading my story “Offspring” in Indian literature, wrote to me thus:

23 May, 1986

I have gone through the story “Offspring” very carefully, and I have felt the power of compressed in it. The last part is devastating in its effect. It is a story one cannot forget for years. You are a bold woman and a bold writer. (*ibid*, 81-82)

Indira Goswami also received a letter of praise by Dr. Harbhajan Singh, the famous poet of Punjab. He wrote: “It is an eminently readable narrative, with profusion of lovely images weaved (sic) in. I have enjoyed both the story and the poetry. You have a sensitive mind and a competent pen... you will contribute handsomely to Indian literature.” (*ibid*, 82)

Shiv K. Kumar writes in *Hindustan Times*:

*An Unfinished Autobiography* reads like a fictional narrative with its dramas and suspense, its twist and turns, its portraiture of real men and women, who seem to be characters risen from the pages of a novel or a short story. A fascinating book to read, enjoy and preserve.”

(May 25, 1991)

The *Navabharat Times* comments:

As you go through this autobiography it leaves a pleasant feeling in you. All the ups and downs of her life come alive here in a translucent and fearless way. The way she has put across things also attracts attention. She has her own style which sustains interests. The language, too, is equally expressive and alluring. Readers should know the writer is the same Indira Goswami whose novel Mamore Dhora Tarrowal won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982. In fact, this autobiography has the traits of a novel and that’s why it sustains interest all through. It touches you in the
raw, as it has also uplifting effect. Autobiography writing is not an easy genre. It has its complexities. But Indira Goswami has turned it to her advantage by raising it to a higher pedestal from, an individualistic account to an universal account. It brings out her struggles in most vivid details. It, in fact, does proud not only to the Assamese literature but to the entire Indian literature.

The First Part of her autobiography is *Life is no Bargain*. Indira Goswami writes in the Preface of *An Unfinished Autobiography*:

Though, in the first part of my autobiography, I have written about my childhood and my days at Shillong, I have not covered my childhood days at Guwahati and at the Sattra (religious monastery) of South Kamrup, with various members of my family. My father dominated the world of my childhood, though I do not know whether he would have accepted the way of life I chose later on. My father had an exceptionally brilliant academic career and won several gold medals, including a coronation memorial medal from the British Government in 1937 (Preface).

Indira’s birth in a Brahmin family has certainly given her an enhanced status within the society. However, nobody can ignore what Spivak has mentioned in a different context, namely the gendered subalternity that Goswami personally experiences vis-à-vis the patriarchal society, especially after her widowhood within two years of her marriage. In her childhood, she was a melancholic girl and the thought of committing suicide crossed her mind often. Her fear of losing her near and dear ones always put her into a “sort of strange unease” (7) and she could not overcome it. As early as 1961, she had attempted suicide and after her survival she became a target of ridicule for her neighbours. Some of their comments towards young Goswami were distinctly “uncharitable” and some were “quite vulgar and too cruel to be forgotten” (14). Her biggest shock came after her husband’s death and the beginning of her widowhood. Her mother wanted her to read scriptural literature and lead the ascetic life of a widow. But, she saw how the rigidity of customs had taken a toll on her aunt and how she was considered “polluted” after her widowhood. As she refused to observe the traditions, she became more isolated and lonely. Thus, in her own life she stood in the periphery because of her gender, in spite of her birth to an upper class Brahmin family. Such was the undercutting of the set identity, in which she was isolated in spite of belonging to a superior hierarchy.

Indira Goswami suffered from perennial depression right from her childhood. In the opening pages of her autobiography *An Unfinished Autobiography*, she mentions
that she always had the inclination to jump into the Crinoline waterfall located near her house in Shilong. She was extremely attached to her father and was broken mentally after his death. Repeated suicide attempts studded her eventful life. After the death of her husband Madhaven Raisom Ayengar, just after eighteen months of marriage in a car accident in Kashmir, Gardinel sleeping tablets were what she kept herself alive with. Brought back home, she joined the Goalpara Sainik School, as a teacher in Assam.

In the first part of the autobiography, we find the seed of transformation, when she says, “The realization slowly dawned upon me that the justification of our life laid not in itself, but in our earnest endeavour to live for others” (25). The well renowned Punjabi writer Amrita Pritam, in her foreword to An Unfinished Autobiography, points towards this transformation too, when she says, “The astrologer had a reason to worry…. According to his predictions, misfortunes would come upon her thick and fast to bedevil her life…. He had not visualized the metamorphosis the girl would undergo after her baptism of fire engendered by her misfortunes” (vii-viii). Indira’s pangs and sorrows of widowhood led her to her transformation and her creative genius embarked her on her life’s journey. She could relate her pain with the sufferings of people at large and in comparison to them, she found her pain far lesser. In the foreword to the Autobiography, Amrita Pritam says, “Indira’s life story well nigh be termed as, “Life is No Bargain”.

According to Tiwari, Indira Goswami’s autobiography An Unfinished Autobiography has its assets. She says,

...we can say that Goswami comes to the problems of Indian women (thereby her own) in a roundabout manner. As the title suggests, it is an unfinished autobiography. It is divided into three parts (i) Life is no Bargain, (ii) Down Memory Lane, and (iii) The City of God. In my view the third part is most enriching and resourceful. (213)

An Unfinished Autobiography is divided into three parts and the reading of them comes out to be a very illuminating experience. First part is entitled as “Life if No Bargain” which covers Indira’s life since her childhood days spent in Shillong up to the unfortunate death of her husband. The Second part is entitled as “Down Memory Lane” which describes how she took to profession of teaching in Goalpara Sainik School to overcome the memories of her beloved husband. The third part of the autobiography entitled as “The City of God” is the longest and the most crucial one, which gives us a glimpse not only of Indira’s life spent in the unpleasant and unhygienic conditions of
the city of Vrindavan but also the filth and squalor, poverty and superstition at its peak which in reality contradicts the image she had formed about this "City of God" before her arrival there. In fact, Vrindavan emerges as the most suitable place to depict the "spiritual nature of her agony". CE Sujatha and R Ramachandra say, "Vrindavan in Indira’s autobiography tellingly enacts the drama of the unaging spirit’s sojourn in the wasting body" (87).

The First Part “Life is no Bargain” is further divided into four sub-parts. The first sub-part is about her childhood days. Her childhood was a strange mix of depression and delight. She herself tells in the beginning of the first sub-part:

Those were the days when I was quite young: a mere slip of a girl, who has no worries, living in a world of fun and frolic and happy abandon. Any girl, as happily placed, could be expected, naturally, to enjoy herself. But I was not destined to have a mind that remained at ease. A sort of vague fear and anguish somehow seemed to have settled on my heart, even at that tender age. (3)

The opening chapter of An Unfinished Autobiography speaks of her fascination, and intriguing involvement with another waterbody; the Crinoline waterfall near her house in Shilong where she spent her childhood. She says that she wanted to commit suicide with an ecstatic plunge into the deepest portion of the waterbody.

Indira Goswami interrogates several facets of women’s empowerment in India. The foremost among these are attitudes to girl children, marriage and widowhood. Indira’s life maps crucial transitions. Born in 1942 to Umakant Goswami, she had the good fortune to receive a high quality of education in Shilong. Married at a young age to Madhavan Raisom Ayengar, an engineer, she enjoyed happy matrimony for only eighteen months. At a young age, after just one year of a blissful married life, she lost her husband in a jeep accident in Kashmir where he was constructing an aqueduct. It was the end of the world for her as she was haunted by persistent thoughts of suicide; she buried herself in her lonely cell in a residential school in Goalpara. She found solace in reading letters, diaries and personal papers of her father, whose death was the first traumatic experience of her life. Her consuming preoccupation with the memories of her early childhood found creative expression in her novels, an affirmation of her spirit’s triumph over suffering.

She began to extend her sympathy to tribals, labourers and other oppressed and marginalized members of the society. She also started observing at close quarters the
systematic, institutionalized and cruel oppression of women who had lost their husbands and consequently their appointed place in their family and community. As an artist she brings into sharp focus the horror of their lives.

Indira recalls how she shut herself in a small room in Goalpara and contemplated suicide, and how her only sustenance was the memory of a carefree childhood and the letters of her father. In other words, the privileged past seemed over and widowhood began to cast a dark shadow on Indira’s self-image even more than on her external circumstances. In some confusion she accepted a suggestion to choose a life in Vrindavan, the most traditional destination of bereft Hindu widows. It is not that she had no other possibilities. She recounts in her memoirs that two paths were before her: she could have proceeded to London, “that land of ancient Western tradition and culture” or she could have moved to Vrindavan, “the centre of ancient Hindu tradition and culture.”

From early age Indira suffered from mental dejection. Several times she attempted to jump into the Crinoline waterfall, which is located near her house in Shillong. She mentions it in her autobiography. She got serious mental shock after her father’s death. Again she was mentally broken when her husband Madhaven Raisom Ayengar died in a car accident in Kashmir after eighteen months of their marriage. After that she returned to Assam and started teaching at Goalpara Sainik School. At that time she started writing again to avoid loneliness of her life. During this period she wrote two novels. These are Ahiron and Chenabor Srota. She shares her own experiences with her husband in Madhya Pradesh and Kashmir in these two books.

The fall of the two strong pillars of her life i.e. the death of her father and her husband left her shattered and she almost reached to the brink of madness when she started taking sleeping pills to kill herself. The untimely death of her father forced her to attempt suicide in 1961, but her fate brought her back to life. Her attempt of suicide led the hell fire lose upon herself. Another tragic event, which came as a shock to her, was the death of her loving and caring husband Madhu. She could not enjoy the blissful and happy conjugal life with her husband for a longer period.

Indira Goswami faced the life full of struggle and hardships courageously. Her fate challenged her to survive in the most pathetic conditions of her life. She plunged into the sea of suffering as a true fighter, struggled bravely with the strong waves of the
fate, and reached to the shore with a more experienced outlook towards life. The misfortunes of her life led her to be a more mature person and made her to look at life from a wider perspective.

Often, Indira Goswami is termed as a feminist for speaking on behalf of those women, who have remained on the periphery and have suffered under the patriarchal control. Preeti Gill says, “... to me she was very much a feminist writer stating her views strongly and effectively in story after story and engaging with the social injustices and the inequalities she encountered” (212). There are very few Indian women autobiographers who have given such a beautiful and intimate account of their life in their regional language. She has described her life, “... in such an absorbing style that once you open the pages you become impatient to go through the whole book as early as possible”, says Prasenit Goswami (82). By writing her life story, Goswami has critiqued the idea that an autobiography can only be written by a male writer.

*An Unfinished Autobiography* stands out as an important work for the one interested in the life history of the author. However, it is not a raw collection of facts. It is a very frank and an unbiased account of her life. Through her life narrative she discovers and recognizes her true “self”. It is a journey into the dark inner recesses of the soul. Indira does not overlook or conceal the weak moments of her life but confesses them with the courage of a warrior. It is an account of her aspirations and inspirations, triumphs and failures, heights and pitfalls, dreams and superstitions, beliefs and disbeliefs, affections and anguish. Indira’s autobiography covers her life span from early 1956 to 1970 and it describes her life up to her joining of Delhi University as a Lecturer in Assamese Language.

Indira’s growing up and her turning into a young beautiful woman becomes the major focus of the first part of the autobiography entitled as “Life is no Bargain”. Indira reveals her experiences of turning into an adult. Her physical changes made her conscious of her own “body” as well as her difference from the male members of the society. She becomes aware of others’ gaze and their gestures. This is the first stage leading to her metamorphosis where she had to confront herself with destiny. She confesses that she “... was obsessed with the thought of taking her own life”, even at this young age of her life (4). Her fascination with the image of Jesus and his crucifixation is symbolic of her obsession with death and the forthcoming calamity in her life. She had been such a sensitive soul that even the thought of losing her near and
dear ones was unbearable to her. She shared a very close and strong relationship with her father. He had been her companion during her childhood days. But the sudden death of her father made her cry her heart out. She could not dream of her existence without paternal care, affection and protection.

Amrita Pritam writes, "... She would become so agitated that she would feel like drowning herself in the lake...previously suicide had become a part of her mental makeup and had degenerated into an obsession...in 1961,...But as ordained by fate, her feet led her back to life." (viii)

Indira Goswami had to face so many difficulties in her life. About her baptism of fire, Amrita Pritam writes:

And then a time came when she had to face something much worse than the travails of the baptism of fire. It was the hell fire of society. People talked in whispers behind her back, “She must have conceived... Imagine an unmarried girl becoming a mother... That’s why she took such a desperate step... that’s why she wanted to commit suicide!” (viii-ix)

Indira Goswami writes about her problems she faced in her life and what people thought about her suicide:

Physically, I became a little worn out and lost some of my glamour after that attempt at suicide. Besides, facing the world outside became a problem for me. I hardly dared go out for fear of the spate of uncharitable remarks passed on me by passers-by. Some of the remarks were quite vulgar and too cruel to be forgotten. I still seem to bleed when I remember them, for they prick me like spikes even on this distant day. "She must have been with child...had an affair with somebody... otherwise why should she attempt suicide? (14)

However, she confesses having a number of boyfriends but denies having crossed the limit with any of them. She writes, “True, of lovers and admirers and well-wishers I had no end, but I had not been to bed with any of them.” (14)

The astrologers predicted very bad days for her. They further predicted that even worse days would follow. Then her mother consulted more astrologers, more tantriks. All agreed that her stars were indeed bad! They declared that the position of the stars in her horoscope was ominous. A pundit from Navagraha said, “Better to cut her into two and set her afloat in the river than give her in marriage.” (16) But the same astrologer later became a sort of favourite teacher to her and he would often say to her, “It’s in
your power to scale the heights. Your stars indicate tenacity of purpose. Yes, you'll ascend the height and…” (ibid)

She also remembered her childhood days at Goalpara room: “At about six years of age, I was admitted to the primary school of our neighbourhood at Latasil…Go and enjoy yourself!” (67-68)

Not only does she remember the little faces but also her teachers. She says:

Among my teachers, I remember in particular the Headmaster, one Mr. Choudhury, who was well-built, tall and sturdy, and fair-complexioned. Like Miss Neil of the Pine Mount School, he, too, flogged erring students. I felt awestruck at such a scene…So sweet to recall them now that they make me weep! (68-69)

She writes about the discrimination based on the caste among the students in those days. She writes,

“The particulars of the school and its surroundings are vague in my mind now. So are those of the teachers. The pupils carried their own seats, mats of different sizes, which they spread on the floor and squatted upon. My brother and I were escorted to this school by two servants, who carried our mats too. The two acted like our bodyguards, for they shouted at the knot of naked or semi-naked school children to keep away from us – the son and the daughter of the Gosain. We were a separate, exalted class, not to be touched by those who were our inferiors!” (69)

Indira then describes the deteriorating condition of the Sattra in her childhood days:

In my childhood, I saw the deteriorating condition of this Sattra…..Not Kaltu alone, but almost all other mahouts of the southern bank of the Brahmaputra in those days, were opium addicts. In 1927 itself, the number of the registered addicts was ninety-eight thousand. Those unregistered we numberless. In the Garo Hills, not far away from our Sattra, there was a flourishing opium market. (71-72)

Most of her childhood was spent in Guwahati and Shilong, but she says that the days which she spent at their Sattra, left a lasting impression on her mind that she wrote a voluminous novel on the background of the Sattra in which she received prestigious
'Basanti Devi Memorial Award' for the novel by Assam Sahitya Sabha. She also had an experience of riding on the elephant. She recollects:

At times, my brother and I rode our elephant to go round the villages of the neighbourhood. I still seem to sense the foul odour emanating from the deep wound caused by the iron goad on Rajendra’s shoulder. I also remember the foul smell of the wounds of wild elephants as they were being tortured to tameness. To me, a mere child then, it was a symbol of utter brutality. (73)

In one of the episodes, she tells about the widowed condition she saw in her childhood days. She writes, “The sad tales of many of the young girls of my age whom I knew, haunt my mind. They belonged to the Sattra. Who were they? Yashoda, Jayanti, Deh, Satari – merely names to me now…” (77)

The second part of the autobiography is entitled as “Down Memory Lane”, which is about the memories about her forefathers in Assam and the deteriorating condition of the Sattra. As she remarks:

In the second part of my autobiography, I have given an account of the Sattra, though not in great detail. It is mentioned here and there, only in flashbacks. Our forefathers originally came to Assam from Kanauj of Uttar Pradesh, and our Sattra, peculiar to Assam, was founded 470 years ago by the Vaishnava Saint, Sree Santa Deva. I saw the deteriorating condition of this Sattra. Most of the people became opium addicts. My father and others fought for de-addiction and rehabilitation of these opium-eaters. My father also donated land in the Sattra for building a hospital… My forefathers used to keep numerous elephants. Sometimes, elephants were sent to the forest for pulling out logs, and sometimes for catching wild elephants. Rani was the place in South Kamrup where elephants were brought for training and domesticating. I went with my father many times to this place and watched the training of wild elephants in progress. The agony of the elephants being forced to carry out the commands of the trainer left a deep impression on my mind, because I found it too cruel and a torture to a newly-captured animal. My brother and I used to play with Rajendra, the last elephant left in the Sattra. Later on, this elephant ran amuck and killed a man. He had to be shot dead under a proclamation of the Government. (85)

Indira Goswami is an outstanding writer who reveals the lived experience of ordinary people. Her powerful graphic descriptions and haunting images bring to light the centrality of the body in human affairs and the codifications of political, religious and cultural systems through the body: the bodily processes of life, the impact of gender and age, and the physicality of poverty, norms and conflicts. Indira Goswami herself is
the witness of caste discrimination and caste system in her childhood days. She writes in her autobiography, “In my childhood days, I was not allowed to play with low caste children. I rarely obeyed that rule. Very often, I was dragged to the well and buckets of water were poured over my head for purification.” (13)

Indira also throws light on the practice of ‘sati’ among the Hindus:

There was also orthodoxy ‘sati’ system. She writes,

It is said that one of my great-grandmothers was taken away by the Burmese soldiers in 1819, when they invaded Assam for the second time, and my father’s eldest sister was married in the family of “adhikaris” of Rajapukhuri, whose husband was the grandson of Bishnupriya Devi, who had immolated herself on the burning pyre of her husband and had become a sati. A concubine of the great king, Bhaskar Verma of Kamrup immolated herself after the death of the king. After that, the only recorded sati incident is that of Bishnupriya. (13)

Indira Goswami was against these social evils. She affirms, “I had the least consideration of caste or respectability. Nor did I think much of the social status of my family. My mind was eager only for an escape – any escape – from that terrible torment which flayed me day and night”.

. Writing in her Assamese mother-tongue, Goswami highlights the diverse cultural context of the remote region. She depicts contemporary political and social dimensions, avoiding romanticism and anthropological tendencies. Her intimate knowledge of community realities is closely woven into the narratives that tackle controversial subjects such as the plight of widows (The Blue-Necked Braja) and the experience of Sikhs in the anti-Sikh riots (Pages Stained with Blood), and examines the impact of the caste system, prostitution and ethnic strife on the human body and psyche. Her An Unfinished Autobiography is remarkable for its utter frankness. An important voice for the marginalized, she also writes about Madhya Pradesh, Kashmir and Vrindaban, bringing local issues to the core.

The second sub-part is about Indira’s happy married life spent with her husband. She lives happily at remote sites with her husband Madhavan, meets other men, receives their advances but never crosses the limit. Her husband was an engineering graduate from Mysore. He was well-known for his technical expertise of the superstructure of a bridge. And Indira Goswami was very happy after her marriage and

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felt free and released in the company of her husband for the first time in her life, she writes,

I used to visit the work-sites with Madhu. For the first time in life, I felt released from those nightmarish thoughts that had preyed upon my mind and spirit for long years of my childhood and youth. I felt in my pulse, the freedom of the open, blue sky above me. Each new day was now a glory, a revelation. The desert strips of Kunvarbet lost its barrenness, as it were. The old desperation that had gnawed into my vitals was gone. The constant death with that had oppressed my mind and body, was now a thing of the past. It was inconceivable for me to harbor any such thought, for how could this man do without me? The realization slowly dawned upon me that the justification of our life lay not in itself, but in our earnest endeavour to live for others. Who brought about that change in me? Was it love? I had little idea before I came into Madhu’s life, that love is such a tremendous power.” (24-25)

Her husband daily took her to Khavda village to show her the unique sun setting over the desert. She writes, ‘It was here that I enjoyed for the first time, the rare spectacle of sunset over the desert.’ He also took her to many other places of uncommon attraction like Bhuj, Okha, Dwaraka and Gandhidham. Indira Goswami observed the real condition of the workers and their poverty. In the same sub-chapter she describes the problems of the workers:

… Most of the workers who came to work on this project were piece-rate workers, i.e. they were paid according to the work done, and they had come with the contractors on their own. They hailed mostly from the Ganjam district of Orissa and Kathghora in Madhya Pradesh. The old workers of the company were permanent in a sense. They had to shift from one branch of the company to another, and change the sites too. The temporary or casual workers, who were brought by the contractors, had no guarantee of service. They were treated like old shoes. Their wages were very meagre, although the contractors got huge amounts from the company on this account. The life of extreme poverty that these labourers led, slowly emerged clear to me. They were paid a mere pittance of three rupees and fifty paise for a day-long hard labour, which included digging the soil, concrete-mixing, sieving sand, oiling the cranes, lifting headloads of concrete mixture, and reinforcement work like cutting and bending mildsteel rods and the like.” (26)

She also tells us about one of the workers, Hukum Singh, the crane driver, who has been served a short notice without stating the reason. Another crane driver from some other branch was replaced in his place as he was armed with a note of recommendation from some high-ups. Hukum Singh had once saved Madhu’s life by his presence of mind. Everybody was astounded at his alertness. But the same man had been treated by the company like a pair of worn-out shoes. No one would plead in
Hukum Singh's favour. None would help him to go to court to seek redress. Madhu was a kind-hearted man. So he asked his wife to give Hukum Singh, the needy man all the money she had with her and thus both helped him when he left the place.

The second part of the autobiography, entitled "Down Memory Lane", provides a flashback on Indira Goswami's miserable life after the death of her husband Madhu and the memories of her forefathers in Assam. Her biggest shock comes after her husband's death and the beginning of her widowhood. Goswami's mother wanted her to read scriptural literature and lead the ascetic life of a widow. But, she has seen how the rigidity of customs had taken a toll on her aunt and how she was considered "polluted" after her widowhood. As she refused to observe the traditions, Goswami became more isolated and lonely. Thus, in her own case Goswami is pused to the periphery because of her gender, in spite of her birth in an upper class Brahmin family. Such undercutting of set identity, in which Goswami is isolated in spite of belonging to a superior hierarchy, can also be traced in her writings.

Being a widow, and that too a young widow, Indira's life was not so easy. At this point she went back to writing. She claims, she wrote just to live; otherwise it wouldn't have been possible for her to go on living. Her experiences in Madhya Pradesh and Kashmir, where her husband worked as an engineer were used in her novels Ahiron and Chenabor Srota, respectively. After working in Goalpara Sainik School, she was persuaded by her teacher Upendra Chandra Lekharu to come to Vrindavan and indulge in research work for peace of mind. Her experiences as a widow as well as a researcher find expression in her novel The Blue Necked Braja, which is about the plight of the Radheswamis of Vrindavan who lived hand to mouth and carried money sacrificing their daily food so that they receive a decent, ritualized cremation after their death. But most of them were denied even of this and the bodies never received cremation according to Hindu rites and the money used to be snatched. Indira exposes this aspect of Vrindavan, the city of Lord Krishna, ruthlessly in her novel. It was the first novel to be written on this subject.

In Vrindavana she got involved in Ramayana studies. A massive volume of Tulsidas's Ramayana bought during her stay there for just eleven rupees was the source of this inspiration. Later this finds expression in the unparalleled comparative study of Tulsidas's Ramayana and the 11th century Assamese Ramayana, (the first Ramayana to be written in a regional language) written by SriMadhava Kandali in her work

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Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra. She joined the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literature in Delhi University and started her life again with the strong support of her teacher and family friend Upendra Chandra Lekharu. It was the beginning of one of the most glorious phases of Indira Goswami’s life. She wrote one of her best works. Several short stories like “Hidoy”, “Nangoth Sohor”, and “Borofor Rani” were written with Delhi as the background. Her two classics The Pages Stained with Blood and The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker were written during her Delhi phase. In The Pages Stained with Blood, she writes about the plight of Sikhs in the Anti-Sikh riots of 1984 after the assassination of Indira Gandhi which she witnessed herself while staying in Shakti Nagar in Delhi as a faculty member of Delhi University. She herself went to the sites to complete this novel. She even went to G B Road, the famous red-light area of Delhi to depict the lives of the prostitutes who lived there which forms a part of her novel. In The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker she describes the plight of Assamese Brahmin widows in the religious institutions of Assam called the Sattra. This novel had been anthologized in the Masterpieces of Indian Literature and was made into a film called Adajya which won international awards in various film festivals and also into two mini-series for the television. In one of them the famous actress Nandita Das acted in the role of Giribala.

For a long time Indira Goswami was obsessed with the desire to die. She was deeply inspired by Tulsidas. She felt strangely drawn to this legendary poet who led a life of misery and was abandoned by his father because of being born under an unlucky star. In the foreword to An Unfinished Autobiography, Amrita Pritam writes, “...I know nothing about the constellation of stars that had influenced Tulsidas’s life and much less about Indira Goswami’s. All that I know is that, like Tulsidas, her life had also undergone a metamorphosis. She has touched upon many social problems... but the intensive manner in which she has dwelt upon the problem of caste in one of her stories is unique...” In the same autobiography, Goswami admits that she was moved more by the life of the poet than his work and drew a kind of inspiration from it.

Indira Goswami suffered from depression since her childhood. In the opening pages of her autobiography, she mentions her inclination to jump into the Crinoline Falls located near their house in Shillong. Repeated suicide attempts marred her youth. After the sudden death of her husband, Madhavan, in a car accident in the Kashmir region of India, after only eighteen months of marriage, she got addicted to heavy doses
of sleeping tablets. Once brought back to Assam, she joined the Sainik School, Goalpara as a teacher. At this point she went back to writing. She claims that she wrote just to live and that otherwise it would not have been possible for her to go on living. Her experience in Kashmir and Madhya Pradesh, was used in her novels *Ahiron* and *The Chehnab’s Current* respectively.

After working at the Sainik School in Goalpapa, Assam, she was persuaded by her teacher Upendra Chandra Lekharu to come to Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, and pursue research for peace of mind. Her experiences as a widow and as a researcher find expression in her novel *The Blue Necked Braja*, which is about the plight of the Radhaswamis of Vrindavan, who lived in abject poverty and suffered sexual exploitation is everyday. One of the main issues that the novel touches the plight of young widow for whom companionship beyond the confines of the ashram and the fellow widows was impossible. Their urge to live and moral dilemma that they face vis-à-vis the order of precepts of religion in this regard are brought out with astonishing clarity and feeling in the novel. The novel exposes the ugly face of Vrindavan inviting criticism from the conservative sections of the society. It remains a classic in modern Indian Literature. It is autobiographical in character as she says the anguish of the main character Saudamini reflects what she had gone through after her husband died. The novel was based on her research on the place as well as real-life experience of living in the place for several years before she joined the University of Delhi as a lecturer.

Her failed attempt of suicide in 1961 caused a great clamour amongst the people. After that incident, marriage became a necessity for her rather than a choice. On account of the unlucky stars that governed her fate, one astrologer made a suggestion to her mother “Better to cut her into two and set her afloat in the river than give her in marriage”. (16) What that poor soul Indira was supposed to do in that matter or what was the fault on her part? To close the issue of her marriage, she married an Ahom (originally from the Shan tribe of Upper Burma region) in haste without informing anyone. The marriage devoid of love and emotions could not be consummated by her. She was torn by the conflict that arose in her mind. Finally the marriage got annulled and Indira thinks as if she was “transformed into an automaton”. (23)

Indira’s marriage with Madhavan Raison Ayenger in October, 1965 transformed her life beyond her expectations. After her father’s death, she received love and protection from her husband. The psyche of an Indian woman, whose entire world
revolves around her husband, gets reflected in her words when she says, “It is only in a man’s power to lead another from darkness to light. It is man alone who can bestow a new life upon another. For this, in love and understanding, lies the key”. (25) The calamity of her fate, her dejection and disappointment, didn’t allow her to be at rest anywhere. She was caught in the conflict between her “feminine self” and her “female self”. The ray of hope was extinguished and she had to strive to seek her own existence. Her decision to pursue her research under the supervision of her teacher Prof. Lekharu took her to the city of Vrindaban amidst the “Radheshyamis”. Her understanding that the suffering of the individual self is symbolic of the sufferings of the people at large takes place during her stay in Vraj. Stanford’s views on the “collective identity” of the women are significant in Goswami’s case. As she says, “Women’s sense of collective identity, however, is not only negative. It can also be a source of strength and transformation” (75). Here, Indira turns into a “feminist” when she recognizes her “collective identity” as a woman and as a widow. Her voice is sarcastic, satirical and ridiculing when she speaks on behalf of the community of the widow sisters not only those who resided in Vrindaban awaiting the end of their life but widows of the nation at large too.

In her life Goswami has faced the miseries which are expressed in her autobiography. Shubha Tiwari rightly points out in her article, “There are touching passages on sorrow—the nature and feel of real sorrow. Sorrow is tangible in these pages. Goswami’s struggles with bouts of thanatos obsession (wish to die) and her efforts to go on living are poignantly heroic.” (213)

Indira makes an honest confession of all the events of her life. Confidently, she talks of her excitement in the company of Major Sindhu, a young man from the nearby camp where Madhu worked. She confesses:

... Major Sindhu abruptly held me by the hand and pulled me towards a small hillock nearby.... The touch of the youthful Major gave me a thrill of excitement.... Major Sindhu’s valour and manliness, and his fond adoration for me, ruffled my mind for a short while. But it was only a bubble. My mind got its calm again, and treated to its safe haven in Madhu’s heart, for it was he who had possessed my entire mind and being. For me, his heart was the most secure abode, like a mother’s to a child. (42-43)
She calls it only an excitement of the moment and terms it only a "bubble" to hide her actual fascination for Major Sindhu, as a post-marital affair is unacceptable in a social milieu of a country like India. Though, while writing her autobiography, she reveals those secrets of her life, which due to the restraint of the society remain suppressed in one corner of the heart, yet she reminds herself, at the point of taking liberty that she is married and it is her husband who is her God and her world and it is a sin to think or talk about another man in glorifying words. Shubha Tiwari, in her article "Musings on the Life of The Indian Woman, And Indira Goswami's *An Unfinished Autobiography*, draws attention to this reality as follows:

Can Indian Women finally throw off the Sati Savitri shroud? Can they talk freely about their failings and fallings? That these women are not ideal Sati Savitries is a fact. Yet the model is very much there. The model dictates that a woman should never think of any man other than her husband. Marriage is a spiritual and religious bond. A woman's life is meaningful only in serving her husband in every sense of the word. She should pray to get the same husband in coming seven lives. (210-211)

Her journey to Kashmir with her husband brings disaster for her and her ill fate snatches everything from her when her darling husband dies in an accident. Her entire world collapses in a fizzy. Without a man's support and love, a woman considers herself lost. Moreover, she considers her existence meaningless in the world. Being a widow is a curse in the society and that also at such a tender age, it was an unpardonable crime. Her life changes completely. After her husband's death, she took to the habit of taking sedatives to maintain her calm and peace.

The second part of the autobiography also covers her life as a teacher in Goalpara Sainik School, where she took to the profession of teaching to kill her time as well as to overcome the grief and misery her fate had brought for her. A widow was supposed to follow a strict pattern of life, living like an animal and to pay the price for her widowhood. At the time, when a woman requires the emotional and mental support of her family and the people around her, the society makes her stranger than reality. Indira emphasizes here on her yearnings of the flesh and hunger for the sexual union that she expected from her husband day and night. She confined herself to a single room and renounced the world, which could not bring solace to her scorching heart. The dark isolated room symbolized the emptiness and vaccum in her life, which nobody could occupy without her will. Indira writes, "Who can determine how the abrupt end of a
happy conjugal life affects the poor wife? Most of the time, as I realized, a sense of endless, ruthless pain suppressed all the yearnings of the flesh". (54)

This was the period of widowhood, during which Indira progressed on the path of metamorphosis. Her loneliness and the separation from her beloved helped her find her way out of this agony and start anew. Recollection of the past and the feeling of nostalgia play an important role in the life of a “lonely woman”. The circumstances of her life take her back to the childhood days spent with her father and grandfather. Indira reads the letters and diary of her father and recalls all those happy memories, which even if she wants cannot bring back to her life. She started associating herself with the dead and lived in her own world. Her sense of “association” and “relation” to someone living was lost with the death of her husband. The presence of a male counterpart in the life of a woman is as important as water to the plant. This sense of “loss” compelled her to look back to her father’s protection. Throughout the second part of the autobiography, Indira Goswami goes through a kind of interior monologue. Her revelation of the outer world and her interaction with the people outside is of less importance at this point.

Being a widow means the loss of the charm and beauty of life for an Indian woman. The sense of being beautiful breathes its last with the last rites of one’s husband. Does her love for bindi and kumkum, kajal and lipstick blow away suddenly with the death of her husband or is it only a double life a woman has to lead after being a widow? Indira throws light on the various attempts made to “de-feminize” and “de-sexualize” (Sogani: 7) widows at that time. Their heads were shaven. They were supposed to be clad in white saris. They devoted themselves fully to the worship of the God and lived an austere life. They were considered inauspicious and were cut off from all the social and religious gatherings. Indira remembers the treatment of her widow aunt during her childhood that how the Brahmin widows told their daughters, “Touch her not, no, you must not! Only recently she is widowed. She carries in her the pollution of sin”. (56)

In search of inner peace and solace, Indira visits various saints and “sadhus". Her visit to Deboria Baba was one of them. But her visits to Deboria Baba, Mauni Baba and various others were all futile. The acute pain and constant thoughts of Madhu accompany her everywhere she goes. Instead of any remedy for her pains, she only finds the religious hypocrisy of these saints who exploite young helpless widows and
poor people in the name of religion. She flaunts the irony of the situation that on the one hand there are people who die due to poverty and starvation and on another we find the saints and the "sadhus" who remain busy with expanding their business.

Autobiographies are written by the writers with the purpose of exposing their suppressed passions and desires. Indira, too, talks of her passions and desires of the flesh but somewhere the "sati" "savitri" sorts of instincts meddle in her ways. Indira reveals her relationship first with Mr. Singh, one of her colleagues in Goalpara Sainik School, who proposed her for starting a new life with him, and later Munni Gautam's brother whom she meets in Vrindavan. However, she discloses that her "feminine sensibility" didn't let her surrender herself to the wishes of these young men. The reference to "snakes" and her fear for them in the last part of the autobiography is symbolic. The recurring symbol of snake reminds D. H. Lawrence's poem "Snake" and Indira Goswami's own conflict between her "feminine self" and her "female self" resembles the narrator's conflict between his "voice of education" and "voice of spontaneous self" (Chaudhuri: 13). Snake is "an embodiment of all those dark mysterious forces of nature which man ignobly fears and neglects" (Ibid). It is a sort of "female desire" which lurks larger within the self. It is symbolic of the sufferings of the people at large that takes place during her stay in Vraj.

As a young widow belonging to a high-born Brahmin family from Assam, life could have taken an unbearable ritualistic toll on Indira Goswami. Instead of securing an indelible place in Assamese literature, going on to become one of the most celebrated authors of India, conformist Hindu traditions would have compelled her to remain just another 'unfortunate' and 'ill-fated' widow. Quite unlike the Brahmin widows of Vrindaban characterized in 1976 publication, The Blue Necked Braja, Indira Goswami instantly became a controversial name in Vrindaban.

Indira Goswami had nuanced the widow's deprivation of body, passion, emotion, and woven it into a perceptive text much ahead of the rest. Hindu patriarchal traditions have often got away with justification about oppressive gender practice by claiming that women are worshipped as goddesses, so what is there to complain about? Indira probes the causes, rituals, the unquestioned "beliefs" which perpetuate oppression. She says that she tried from the direct experiences of her life and moulds the experiences with her imagination.

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"The Blue Necked Braja" is set in Vrindaban. The plot revolves around the plight, exploitation and miserable lives of the Brahmin widows who spend their remaining years in the holy city in the hope of 'mukti' (salvation). Indira says that the anguish and suffering of its main character, Saudamini, largely reflects "my own emotional state." It was there in Vrindaban that Indira Goswami began her research work and was awarded a Ph.D. in 1973 from the Guwahati University for her thesis on Comparative Study of Goswami Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas* and Madhava Kandali's *Assamese Ramayana*.

Indira was so nervous and desperate after the death of her father due to cancer that the mental turbulence finally drove her to attempt suicide. Indira writes, "And yet, I could bear the sight of my father languishing as a victim of cancer – the same person without whom, I was sure, I could not live!" (4) She adds further:

Father passed away –and my mind, which since childhood smarted under the constant fear that I would not be able to bear his loss, bore it calmly… many more near and dear ones also passed away – many of them my blood-relations, whom I had known closely…under the grip of that old sense of despondence and pain… my mind seemed busy counting the number of graves in the graveyard. What other wretched soul did ever feel like bearing the cross at the first flush of youth like I did? Oh! The suffering of my soul! Oh! The pain! … As for me, the two old persecutors of my soul – agony and despair – continued to inflict their lashes as violently as before. (12)

But still, marriage through the settled mode remains a distant dream. She writes, "Marriage, for me, still remained an elusive prospect. In desperation, mother started looking for a match even in such families of which I could not at all approve. I nearly lost all restraint." (20) The failed attempt pushed her further into melancholy, till she met Madhavan. "Many years have rolled by since but the colour of Madhu’s bones has not undergone any change. Only I have changed several of the caskets in which I have preserved them," ponders Indira Goswami.

Her only salvation was writing. She poured her gloom on paper, picking the sorrows of others and enmeshing them with her own to produce short stories at first. Wrote Amrita Pritam, "…But it was certainly a fateful moment when Nature herself made her take her first step towards metamorphosis, she picked up her pen to do creative writing. She turned out a spate of stories, all of which had the distinction of being published."

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Then she goes on to marry the man of her life, Madhu, who is a construction engineer. She remarks:

Once again I appeared before a magistrate in the court at Mangaldoi, where a number of my well-wishers accompanied me. I signed on the dotted line. I have no idea even to this day as to the kind of agreement I signed to annual Section 11 of the Civil Marriage Act... I was so depressed that I did not even glance at the papers. The heap of papers lay before me like a bundle of dry bones. After coming back home at Guwahati, I plunged for days into a well of dark depression. Again those sinister thoughts of self-annihilation haunted my mind! In retrospect, now I feel as if I was transformed into an automaton at that destined hour of my life. I could hardly raise my head to read the documents. The agony and shame of the entire episode made me insensate, as it were. Out of the court, I stepped into another world. (23)

The third part of *An Unfinished Autobiography* is entitled as “The City of God" in which Indira relates her experiences at Vrindaban. She writes in her preface: “The third part of this work contains my days at Vrindaban with my teacher, Professor Lekharu, and my various experiences while staying in a ruined temple.” The turning point came in Goswami’s life which is mentioned in the third part of the autobiography. About it, Tiwari writes:

The third part, *The City of God* has her experiences at Brindaban. Before we go on, we must pause to remember what *Vrindaban* means to a common Hindu. *Brij Bhumi* has tons of meaning for us. Vrindaban is the place where Lord Krishna spent his childhood days-the *gopi* days, the *makhan* days, the charming, naughty childhood days with Yashoda. The child Krishna forms a very thick and deep layer of the subconscious of every Hindu. In fact the Indian child utopia in its marked difference from Western concept of a child is much due to the story of Krishna and its intuitive acceptance by the Indian masses.” (214)

The first and foremost jolt is regarding the condition of *Radheshyamis* (widows) living in *Vrindaban*. It is believed, that widows living in *Vrindaban* can avoid their tragic lot in their next birth by devoting their widowhood days to the service of Lord Krishna, the universal husband. If this theory appears fanciful, its practical is equally horrifying. Many *Radheshyamis* from all over the country, particularly Bengal, stay in *Vrindaban*, not to improve their fate in the next birth but because they have no other option. They are helpless. They are destitute. They do not have money to pay for their last rites. They live with beggars and lepers, eating dirty crumbs thrown by devout pilgrims. Sometimes, their bodies are eaten by worms. These women are forced to live this hellish life devoid of any dignity, or peace. Indira Goswami writes:

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One day, while visiting Shahji’s temple situated at a corner of the market to have a look at the marble *gopis* in dancing posture, I came across another destitute *Radhesyami*, lying prostrate in a dark alley nearby. She was in rags and was clinging to some odd items picked up from garbage dumps. She looked more like a vulture with broken wings than a human being. (119)

Some cleverer, younger and smarter *Radhesyamis* surrender themselves to the lust of men and survive. All this happens in the city of child Krishna with a flute in his hands and peacock feathers on his head.

Indira Goswami also reports incidents where painfully saved money of *Radhesyamis* is taken away just like that: “The old *Radhesyamis* who had lost their all, could only bewail their lot. They could produce no written evidence of their deposits with the Brahmin from Uttarkashi, for they had kept none. Nor did they have any knowledge of the man’s whereabouts.” (152) The young *Radhesyamis* are exploited. One of her acquaintances, Lalita Dasi tells Goswami, “You must have observed the ways of these *munshis* (the secretaries). They engage these young widows for doing their household chores. Sometimes they force them to sleep with them”. (157)

Indira draws our attention to the behavior of the so-called saints, pandas, *babas*, and the whole lot:

They seemed to have only the skin of their bodies left to surrender to the pandas…. I saw with my own eyes, those pandas searching hapless pilgrims for money, like an old vulture prying closely about a dead animal, before it finally falls upon it and tears it apart. (135)

After losing her husband, she undergoes an acute sense of loss, worthlessness, and depression. She seeks spiritual solace. On such occasion when she is trying for peace of mind (through gurus) she comes across a fiery-eyed and robust-bodied holy man coming directly from the Himalayas. Well, at the end of her encounter, the holy man tells her:

I shall one day sit in meditation in that hove. You shall have to sit beside me for some time. But you must not have a thread on…. However, red garlands made of bamboo strips and leopard skin you can put on. There are pieces of such skins in our *godown*. Many do their meditation in this manner. A number of young girls like you also have gone through it. (138-139)

The monopoly and dictatorship of these religious men seem to be complete. “They throw their left over crumbs of food falling from their mouths to the devotees. Devotees on their part, received those crumbs with utmost reverence, put small bits on
tier heads and ate up the rest.” (145) In short, there is nothing spiritual, pure, inspiring or good about these harlatans who’s eyes, revet “more upon the fleshy curves of the youthful women’s bodies” (147) than anything else. All the practices of Vrindaban, sung all over, shown on picture post-cards, tourist brochures-Holi, makhanchori dramas, annakoot festival—all have lusty tinge. Our original makhanchor with childish mischievousness is missing in today’s Vrindaban. A huge structure of corruption has cropped up over the legend or myth of Krishna but the true spirit of devotion, religiosity, and spirituality is gone. One gets to know the dark side of Hindu practices through this book.

Indira’s husband Madhu was an encouraging companion. He had brought to her life charm, happiness and prosperity. An abrupt end of that state of togetherness caused a great blow to her. Tragedy plunged her into isolation. She confined herself to her solitary cell in a residential school at Goalpara and later in the crumbling basement in Vrindavan. She engaged herself in teaching, creative writing and introspection. She buried herself in her search for a distant and elusive spiritual beauty, connected with the divine. It was the thirst for the infinite, timeless that triumphs over the finite, even death.

In pursuit of her research project, she had to stay for two years in a dark, airless room teeming with snakes, totally bereft of any facilities. It was an uncommon step for an upper caste girl to live in a squalid dwelling. During her research, she witnessed the most sordid condition of the abandoned women and widows who crowded the state. Her keen observation of the miserable plight helped her to reconcile herself with her own grief. She found the essence of life in the realization of the life lay not in itself, but in our earnest endeavor to live for others.

An identification of her personal sorrow with the agony of mankind resulted in harmony of warring forces within her heart. A changed persona emerged and Indira was convinced of the healing power of compassion. She thinks that the humanity alone was the prime consideration and nothing else in one’s life. From a mere litterateur and scholar, she was transformed into a social crusader. That is one way of transcending the limits of one’s personal fate and personal circumstances.

The Third sub-part is about her days spent with Madhu at Chenab bridge project in Kashmir. Observing the life of the workers, Indira Goswami received the raw
material for writing her novel. She writes, “Living with Madhu in the camp on the bank of the Chenab, I started to write a novel on the life of the workers.” (35)

In the Reasi branch of the Chenab bridge project in Kashmir, three thousand labourers were working without a grumble. The red flag was nowhere to be seen. Nowhere was there any sign of protest. The walls of the quarters and the offices were bare and clean – not a single slogan was written upon them. The workers were resigned to their lot. They did not know how to protest, even when they were exploited. Indira Goswami writes about the exploitation of the labours:

The stark misery and exploitation of the labourers who came with the contractors as piece-rate workers soon became apparent to me. It came to my notice that the workers on daily wages were given only rupees two-and-a-half per day against the prevailing rate of rupees three-and-a-half. But no one dared utter a word of protest. Anyone who demurred was threatened with instant dismissal. There was some secret understanding between the contractors and the headman of the villages from where the labourers were collected. Advances were often made to the latter. The contractors also gave the workmen the allurement of an increase in wages. But it never came about. Always the same old excuse the company has not approved of it – and the credulous fools, the workmen, would readily swallow it. There, the matter ended. But did they really know what exactly the company had offered them? They did not have the courage to raise an objection for fear of losing their jobs. There was not even a local leader to give them a hint of the truth. None of them knew what the scribbling on their daily wage attendance cards really meant. This was the grim reality of the labourers engaged by the private companies in India in the early sixties. The huge lot of workers working without a labour union was actually no better than that of convicts in jails. (40)

In her sickness that lasted for several days, her husband took care of her. His anxious and tired look made her unhappy. He was sitting at the foot of the bed without sleeping till midnight. She writes:

The deep lines of care and anguish on his face filled my eyes with tears. I took his hand in mine and said in an agony of deep remorse, “Never shall I go out again without your knowledge... not even if the gates of heaven be kept open for me!” (39)

The Fourth sub-part is about her husband Madhu’s truly tragic, untimely, pathetically devastating Death. In the first paragraph of this forth sub-part Indira Goswami informs:

I rushed impulsively in, and what did I see before my eyes! Madhu was lying unconscious, in blood-besplattered clothes. There were big
blotches of blood all over his head and breast. Moving closer to him, I faltered. Softly, took his hand in mine; it was cold! Ice-cold it was…” (48-49)

Ayengar died in a car accident in Kashmir and Indira found herself mentally and physically destabilized. The failed attempt pushed her further into melancholy, till she met Madhavan. Her only salvation was writing. She writes in her autobiography, “Early in life, I thought I would be a writer. My experience of life and things was yet limited and vague; still, I started writing, and tried to render sensitively in words, my perceptions of life, however inadequate.” (12)

She poured her gloom on paper, picking the sorrows of others and enmeshing them with her own to produce short stories at first. Amrita Pritam observes:

…it was certainly a fateful moment when Nature herself made her take her first step towards metamorphosis, she picked up her pen to do creative writing. She turned out a spate of stories, all of which had the distinction of being published. (ix)

For a long time Indira Goswami was obsessed with the desire to die or to become a part of spiritual reclusively practiced by the ascetics somewhere in the Himalayas, had it not been for her teacher Upendra Chandra Lekharu in Vrindaban, the world of literature would not have had such exceptionally gifted Assamese writer. Indira Goswami says, “My teacher Upendra Lekharu inspired me to be neither a famous writer nor an eminent scholar but an individual possessing human qualities. Nothing measures up to humanity.” And humanity alone is her prime consideration when she sits to write.

About the third chapter of her autobiography, she informs:

The third chapter of this book would not have been possible without the request of the Assamese publisher, Bijoy Dutta, who was almost obsessed by the urge to publish my autobiography in Assamese. This work covers only some events and incidents of my life up to 1970. I have written mostly about all the persons connected with the incidents and events of my life in my autobiography. I have selected only those incidents which have left their deep marks on my life. Unfortunately, many nears and dears mentioned are not with me her today. (xvi)

Indira confesses that she started a different life after 1970, which she has not included in her autobiography. She writes in her Preface, “Sometimes in the life of a common man or woman, there are happenings which can be strung together and woven into a novel. This life is of that type.” (xvi) She is so happy with the compliments of the
readers that she writes: “For a writer, no recognition is more valuable than the spontaneous response of the readers.” (xvii)

Indira Goswami suffered from perennial depression right from her childhood. In the opening pages of her autobiography, she mentions that she always had the inclination to jump into the Crinoline waterfall located near her house in Shilong. It was the death of her beloved father, who she was extremely attached to, left her shattered. Persistent thoughts of suicide haunted her. Each succeeding bereavement left her in an ever-lengthening chain of tears.

Due to her husband's death, the members of her family and Madhu’s brothers were full of sympathy for her. They were all well-established in life. They had asked her to go and settle down at Malleswaram in Karnataka. But she was not so inclined. Then, she sold off the small property she had. Her mental and physical condition was not so good. Her life was so miserable. Though she hoped some sign of Madhu’s presence, she knew that that was all an illusion. She writes,

My mind was utterly distraught with grief. In the happy days gone by, I used to carry sweet-scenting attar in my vanity case. Now that Madhu was no more, I had sleeping draughts instead. I did not know how it would be possible for me to drag my days to the end of life....But I knew that was all an illusion. Nothing lingers of a man after death. Tear your heart to shreds, yet your beloved returns not to inquire why. Terrible, indeed, is this tale of the overnight separation of two beings, truly united once, in the depths of their being. But there is no help. (53-54)

Then she herself solved her problem and decided firmly not to cry but to write to overcome her grief. She writes about it:

Later, I resolved to face life boldly, and never to weep. An overwhelming sense of grief and misery and an uncertain future combined to disconcert me. I did not have the courage then to look up, literally, to the sky above my head. So, I often kept myself confined indoors. The sense of void that possessed my soul then, no words can describe. I engaged myself in rounding off, as much as possible, the half-done novels, which I had started while at the work-site in Kashmir. That was a kind of struggle, as it were, with my own self. A sense of overwhelming conflict, resulting in tears, and geyser of blood shooting up unseen in my heart, marked those moments of utter dejection. (54-55)

When she met Amrita Pritam, she regains her consciousness and the answer of her living in the life. Indira Goswami writes,
Many years later, having met the famous writer, Ms. Amrita Pritam at her Hauz Khas home, I asked her this question, “Suppose you are given to live this life all over again after death, do you think you’ll be happy?”

Amrita answered, “That’s rather an idle conjecture – this question of being happy or otherwise. What’s important is, I must have a pen in my hand. Then everything would be okay.” (55)

Indira was much impressed by Amrita’s reply which made her conscious of her own situation and she made up her mind for writing. She writes,

I continued to write as ever before. I finished in the narrow room, my novel *Chenabor Srot*, which I had started writing several years ago while I was at the work-site of the new bridge coming up over the Chenab (also named Chandrabhaga) river. The plot construction of the novel is rather weak. As I saw it to the end, my mind was in shambles. But its background was real. I kept it as I had seen it. The labour barracks, the shuttering plates, the vibrators and all the rest on the bank of the ancient river, gave the work its peculiar flavour. (55)

The attitude of women towards the widow is somewhat conservative as she had experienced. She says that there was a smouldering discontent in my heart. Once, on an auspicious occasion, a Guwahati family wanted to serve me separately along with the other widows. In protest, I walked out in a huff. On another occasion, a celibate *sanyasi* was invited by my mother to bless me. But, I could not even look him in the face, let alone touch his feet. Widowhood is certainly a rigorous traditional custom and she herself was its victim. She writes:

I have had but little faith in the rigorism of traditional customs and practices. I pin my faith in the sanctity of the heart alone. I remember to have seen in my childhood, several young Brahmin widows whose lives were steeped to the lips in misery for those stupid practices of age-old customs and beliefs. The case of an aunt of mine, who had lost her husband in her late teens, is still fresh in my mind. The Brahmin women, who had gone to console her on the day of her bereavement, had warned their own daughters to keep away from the widowed woman, “Touch her not, no, you must not! Only recently she is widowed. She carries in her the pollution of sin.” (54)

Being a widow, and that too a young widow, her life was not so easy. At this point she went back to writing. She claims, she wrote just to live; otherwise it wouldn’t have been possible for her to go on living.

A Sikh lecturer was the first of many, who, after Madhu’s demise offered her a new life. She writes,

It would be wise to accept life as it is. I should accept this man and dedicate my life to the pursuit of literature. …I was steeped in darkness.

(118)
Despair would sneak into my soul and bog me down. “How would it be possible for me to live now that Madhu is no more? I put the question to myself. It evaded an answer. It was several months since that fateful day, but I did not have the courage yet to look up at the sky. (58)

Sitting in that lonely room at Goalpara, Indira read a bundle of letters written by Arthur Brown to her father. Indira writes,

All these faces of my dearest relatives, who were no more, crowded my mind, and I started living more with the dead than with the living, in that desolate hostel room at Goalpara....I read my father’s diaries in my dark room. The past, as it glowed from its pages, impressed me. Even otherwise, my mind at that time was constantly roaming in the past. The diaries, then, offered me agreeable reading. I went back to those days when, as a child, I walked with my father in the rural surroundings of our Sattra. I even remembered some unforgettable moments.... (65-66)

Next, she writes about the principal of Sainik School, one Col. Sahney, who, for no reason, earned the displeasure of the local people. When Indira Goswami was at Goalpara, she was under misery and depression so she once more was haunted by the thought of the old obsession of suicide. She writes,

Every morning, I woke up to find my mind sagging under an acute pain of depression, so much so, that the old obsession of suicide, which haunted me from my early childhood but left me whole after I met Madhu, once more started nagging me in the secret recesses of my mind...In the afternoon, it was my wont to ride a rickshaw to the market. To purchase the ‘gardinal’ pills, which I did not take in regular daily doses of one or two pills, but kept the stock carefully so that I could gulp them all down together and thus put an end to my wretched life. (79)

The sudden loss of her husband was such a shock that she decided to swallow the sleeping pills and end her life. What she did was that she collected the sleeping pills instead of collecting lipstick or sweet-smelling attar.

After her husband’s death and working in Golpara School, a decisive turning point came in her life. One day she got a letter from her former teacher Professor Lekharu asking her to proceed to Vrindaban for her research studies. Immediately she made up her mind to leave the Sainik School. She wrote her resignation letter and got her luggage ready. As she was fond of the young would-be-soldiers, she took a last intent look but felt rather sad at the prospect of leaving her dear students. She writes:

How I congratulate myself that their memory is still fresh in my mind! Living with them, I discovered in these children their latent abilities and power. Some of them wrote stories and poems, which they gave me to read. I helped them to get those writings published in an Assamese magazine of the time, called Asomm Batori. Our close companionship

(119)
resulted also in their peculiar fondness for me. Some of them, in their late teens, visited me in Delhi for old time’s sake, and put me some childish questions too. (84)

Resignation letter in the hand, Indira Goswami was walking slowly along the road, skirted by jungle growths and shaded by teak and sal trees. She writes about what she had missed so far:

All this time after Madhu’s death, I had spent my time, so to speak, in the world of the dead. It seemed, I had little time even for a close look at that apparently familiar forest. ..... I felt a strong, abrupt attachment for the forest growing in me. Should I rather retrace my steps? I felt a little undecided with the letter of resignation still in my hand. (84)

Throughout her life she struggles a lot and in between she is nostalgic. She writes, “So, I left Goalpara, my soul full of apprehensions about an unknown future. Many dear faces I left behind – of colleagues and pupils. They now all swarmed around me – lovely faces, ever ready to console and consider.” (90)

Being a single woman and a struggling soul, many men tried to seduce her. She recalls:

They were all men — looking for a chance always to enjoy the company of a single woman. One of the men who had declared himself to be well-wisher of mine, left behind on my table some such vulgar pictures, which filled my mind with disgust against all males... then I was firmly convinced that the measure of animality in man was much more than in women. (83)

She was in dilemma and her mind was indecisive over going to Vrindaban because she had no idea about it. She writes,

I had no precise idea about that distant place. Fear and misgivings about an uncertain future almost unnerved me. A new, but faded, scroll seemed to open before my eyes. The sacred soil of Vrindaban, dear to Lord Muralidhar, the Divine Flute Player. I already had some knowledge of the precious wisdom, as enshrined in the Bhagavad Gita. It was wisely observed by the scholars that what continued to occupy the Indian psyche was not the Krishna of Kurukshetra, Arjuna’s charioteer, but the Krishna that was Radha’s consort, rather a plebeian image, surrounded by the gopis, and wielding the flute. (85)

There are touching passages on sorrow: the nature and feel of real sorrow. Sorrow is tangible in these pages. Her efforts to go on living are poignantly heroic.

While she was passing through the vicinity of the holy city, she sighted some saffron-clad sadhus and sanyasins on the road. They were visiting Vraj, to participate in the jhulan festival. They came from Uttarkashi, Barsana, Nandgram and Ayodhya.
There was the usual hordes of pandas (pilgrim guides) of the various temples, eager to grab as many pilgrims as possible. She says,

A horrible sight of half-naked lepers, sitting in a row reaching almost as far as the sanctum sanctorum, came into view. Their skins resembled a giraffe’s. Each of them was a mere bundle of bones. They presented a sight to suggest as if a dust-storm had just blown over their head...with crowds of lepers? After I started from Guwahati, I eagerly read whatever came my way relating to Vrindaban. But now, though I find the sacred doors of Rangaji and Govinda temples flung wide open. I feel little curiosity for them. How strange! Would it really be possible for me to live in this place for long, I asked myself. (107)

When her Tonga was caught in a traffic jam, she heard the prayers from the bhajan ashram which were chanted by the old widows to the accompaniment of “tal” and “khanjari”. She saw a glimpse of the dirty linen that draped their skeleton figures. They were not particularly attentive to their chanting but gazing the rows of greengrocers outside the temple walls.

On the way with Prof. Lekharu to the Institute, Prof. Lekharu told Indira that at Harabari, many destitute widows took refuge and at another bhajan ashram a number of widows were singing bhajans. The sight of a destitute and helpless man overwhelms her. She writes,

...my eyes were fixed upon a half-naked man, lying by a stagnant, open drain. He was more dead than alive. Rather, all skin and bones. He was making a desperate effort to raise up his hands. He wanted to say something, or so it appeared to me. A swarm of flies covered his lean body... The man seems to need water. I’m told there were several charitable organizations here. And yet, poor fellows are allowed to die in neglect. What an irony!” (113)

Professor Lekharu too knows the miserable condition of the men in Vrindavan. He informs, “Nobody picks them up. You will see much such men, who want to dissolve themselves thus on the sacred soil of Vraj. They have come from afar to lay their ghosts at Vraj.” (114) But Indira grew desperate and asked her teacher to get down and give that dying man a few drops of water. Then Professor Lekharu asked the man to stop the Tonga and both of them got down and went to the dying man to give him water.

Finding a woman there Indira asked her why she was lying there like that, she mumbled something which made little sense to her. Then a few more Radheshyamis gathered there on their way to their hovels from the Yamuna, where they had gone to

(121)
bathe. One of them explained Indira in Bengali, the dying woman’s situation. “She had put up with a certain person. For quite some time now, he was asking her to leave. Today, he dragged her out with all her belongings and left her here on the roadside.” When asked the reason she told that because she had no money to spend for her ousrdhadehik (last rites). She had a swollen leg. She had diabetes and a host of other ailments. Her death was very near. ‘Who would take the burden then?’ That’s why she has been thrown out today.’ Indira writes:

I could not believe my ears. I became motionless. I was struck dumb with horror at such inhumanity. Later I heard from many others that nobody wanted to provide shelter to the Radheshyamis unless they had money for their last rites. Who is obliged to pay for their funeral? Many a times, I saw wretched widows squatting on the roadside with their odds and ends, under the scorching sun as well as in heavy rains, soaked to the skin. (119)

Some cleverer, younger and smarter Radhesyamis surrender themselves to the lust of men and survive. All this happens in the city of child Krishna with a flute in his hands and peacock feathers on his head. One of the Radhesyamis was her maid, Lalita Dasi. She did Indira’s shopping and worked for Lekharu’s too. She worked the day long and would go to sing at bhajan ashram and collect half a rupee for half a day’s work. She also was begging in front of the Lala Babu’s temple. She told some strange stories of the lives of the Radheshyamis. By hearing such a miserable condition of Radheshyamis, Indira writes, “Indeed, the accounts that I heard from Lalita Dasi were too gross and vulgar to be put in print”. (121)

Indira Goswami also reports incidents where painfully saved money of Radhesyamis is taken away just like that. ‘The old Radhesyamis, who had lost their all, could only bewail their lot. They could produce no written evidence of their deposits with the Brahmin from Uttarkashi, for they had kept none. Nor did they have any knowledge of the man’s whereabouts.’ (152) The young Radhesyamis, are exploited. One of her acquaintances, Lalita Dasi tells Goswami, “You must have observed the ways of these munshis (the secretaries). They engage these young widows for doing their household chores. Sometimes they force them to sleep with them. (157)

Indira Goswami told another example of Radheshyami. In front of the temple at Brahmakunda, where she lodged, there was another temple, where some devout Bengali disciple started a trust in its name. A fair-complexioned Bengali was the priest of that temple. With him, in the same narrow room, there lived a Radheshyami, who was quite
old. She cooked his meals, as well as the boiled-rice offering for the deity. Indira Goswami writes,

Later, I heard that they were not formally married. Many people used to live like that. .... I had the impression that there was nothing improper for a woman like her to live with a man. I didn't consider such an arrangement to be sinful. It was rather commendable that one could be of help to the other. That was how I perceived this situation. (121)

In winter season, the severity of it increased and the temple domes were almost invisible due to fog. A cold breeze began to blow from the Yamuna. At that time the condition of Radheshyamis became worst. Indira writes, “The bony bodies of the Radheshyamis clad in rags, reeled under the cold.” (122)

To find some relief, they crowded the charitable hospitals attached to the dharmasalas, and the shops for indigenous medicine situated on the road leading to the temple of Bihariji and at Gopinath Bazar. Most of them had swollen legs. Indira says, ‘It was common for the Radheshyamis to suffer from this malady every winter.’ They were reluctant to spend their few, hard-earned farthings for their own treatment, which they saved for their ourdhadehik. They would, instead, be sitting for hours together at the hospital stairs for free medicine.

Indira Goswami was curious to trace the sign of the existence of Krishna. She writes,

Having lived in Vrindaban for a long time, my mind grew curious to trace any sign of the existence of this myth called Krishna. But again and again, my mind was inclined to accept only the historical Krishna. I was, by nature, inclined to adore only the souls of the great. About the existence of the soul also, I was skeptical. But I bowed my head at the great mystery of the soul, although steeped in grave doubts... (123)

She says that she read a great deal in those days only ‘to escape from a gloomy existence’, so much so that ceaseless reading became a kind of second nature for me. Yet she had mental grief and pain throughout her life. What she felt about the memories about Madhu at Vrindaban, she writes,

After getting up from bed early in the morning, I sometimes used to sit fixed at a place for a long time, pondering over my own misfortunes. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I asked myself the same, old question – how could I live like this at all? What was there in store for me? The memory of Madhu was like a severe mental and bodily pain. All my endeavours to get rid of it proved futile. How could I help myself with such a mind? Sometimes, at midnight, unable to bear my grief and pain, I came out of doors. On such occasions, I would find the vicinity of the
temple all deserted. Darkness seemed to reign supreme in the hovels. The bricks of the walls, their plaster coatings worn off, looked like heaps of bones of dead animals. And the night sky over my head? I somehow had the impression that the night sky alone was responsible for ruining all my happiness and throwing me into a cemetery. I went to one dark room after another. That is how I roamed about at the dead of night, a forlorn soul, afraid to face life. Sometimes, I ran up the stairs leading to my teacher's room. Unable to bear the relentless agony of mind, I thought I could possibly get some peace and solace if I would lay prostrate at my preceptor's feet. But I did not dare do a thing like that. So, I returned to my own dark hovel, smarting in grief and pain. (125)

One day, she tried to calm her mind and concentrate on her studies, she tried to suppress, as best as she could, the turmoil of her mind, which had kept her agitated. She used to hide, as it were, from public view. Yet her teacher was aware of her state of mind. He came and stood beside her and stroking her hair softly, he said, "Don't read all the time. You should mix with the children now and then. Today, in particular, you need not read. We are going to the other side of the Yamuna to have "darshan" of His Holiness, Deboria Baba." (125-126)

Drawing the attention to a few sanyasins on the edge of the kunda, Professor Lekharu said:

Look there. Those sanyasins are presenting some odd images of Brahma for sale. Some pious soul are also bowing to them and offering coins. A large number of bogus temples have cropped up this way. Earlier, it was believed that there were five thousand temples at Vrindaban; now, the number has perhaps risen to ten thousand! (127)

Indira Goswami came across a Radheshyami' hailing from the Bankura district. She used to sing, in her melodious voice, devotional songs to the tunes of a harmonium suspended from her neck. Now and then, 'she came to my hovel and sang me songs celebrating the deep grief of Radha at her separation from Krishna.' Among the Radheshyamis who sang bhajans in the portals of Bankebehari or Sevakunja or at Kesighat or Chirharanghat, ever adorned by the flow of the Yamuna, there were also some elderly prostitutes. Goswami relates:

Without the least reservation, these women narrated the tales of their lives. What appeared rather surprising to me was that some kind of grace was still left on their person, which gave me the impression of a worn-out temple. Like the setting sun, impaling through bamboo groves and spiky bushes, lending a semblance of glory to the dull earth, the lingering grace also seemed to add a kind of charm to the aging women. (127-128)
She also tells that in the month of May, giant turtles could be seen coming out of the depth of the water and crawling over the sand. They proved to be a real menace sometimes. She remarks, “I heard that some of the Radheshyamis, descending to the river for an early morning bath, had their toes nibbled off by these turtles.” (128)

Specific amount of donations were given to other bhajan ashrams of Vrindaban. But Indira Goswami’s mind was heavy with the thought of helpless Radheshyamis and their exploitation. She laments:

My mind was heavy with the thought of the poor and helpless Radheshyamis. Since the pilgrims offer substantial donations, why should it not be possible to start a hospital for the Radheshyamis and other poor people of Vrindaban? And voice a protest, and demand their dues? Was it in the power of those feeble women on the threshold of death, ever to shout in unison that their exploitation must end? (156)

The articulation of subliminal depths of a woman’s psyche adds fascination to this autobiography.

Indira began to concentrate on her work. But she was swallowed up by the aching gloom of her heart. She decided to go out to buy some sleeping draughts from the Sindhi doctor’s store. She was assured that they would bring her relief. She writes:

Having lived in the city of God, many a stricken soul accepted the pearls of wisdom that could be gathered there. This is what the holy men had to say, “Why escape from this world? This world itself is the garden of heaven, and these trees and shrubs are the wishing-trees. Work without attachment, work without the desire for the fruit of your action. Know that whoever is averse to work, invites ruin upon himself.” (158)

She knew everyone tried to overcome grief. But she never gave herself to despair. She reports:

Even the illiterate, ignorant, neglected dregs of humanity, the Radheshyamis, have picked up these pearls of wisdom. They have accepted life as it is. They have not jumped into the Yamuna. They’ve accepted life with all its pitfalls, all its struggles. I’ve seen their splashes of blood, but never seen them surrender to despair. (158-159)

Indira Goswami was waging a kind of daily war with dejection, and yet devoting most of the time to her research work and to the writing of the novel. She became anxious and she was frightened because that was the time for Mrs. Lekharu to walk down the stairs. If she found her there in the company of a young man, she would form a very wrong impression about her character without her fault. She became nervous and lost her sense of decency and cried in desperation. And asked her to leave (125)
the place and leave her alone. As he left, he said, “It would have been better for me to
drown myself in the Yamuna than to have come to seek you here.” She followed him to
a distance. He walked away and did not look back. She writes:

I returned from the crossroads and sat on the steps of the temple. My
mind was deeply agitated over the incident. Tears rolled down my
cheeks. I took my thoughts back to the Sainik School days and tried to
recall if I had ever given ground for hope to the young man, but I could
not recall any. I didn’t show much enthusiasm when he had proposed to
me at Goalpara. I treated him only as a friend and a well-wisher. It’s not
natural for a woman to feel hurt at a man’s advances within limits of
decency. (161)

The city of God had been destroyed time and again, in succession, by Sikandar
Lodi, Jehangir, Nadir shah and Ahmedshah Abdali, but each time, like the city of Jesus,
Son of God, it rose from its ruins. There were many ruined temples and towers in
Vrindaban. But none knew their history.

Indira Goswami says that in her novel Nilkanthi Vraja, she wanted to depict
much of the life of Vrindaban. She writes,

I wanted to present a realistic account of the life and activities of the
place. Close observation was essential for the purpose. So, to observe
men and manners, I often took a seat, in the company of Manu, on the
stairs of their temple facing the market. A busy scene would come to my
view. In Harabari, in front of us, we saw the Radheshyamis, in their
tattered clothes, come and go. There was brisk sale at the greengrocer’s.
pilgrims followed the staff-wielding pandas in quick steps. Now and
then, there would emerge a flute-playing idol of Lord Krishna, taken by
priests, in procession in a well-decorated tonga, to the Yamuna for a holy
bath. Young boys with painted faces followed them. They acted as gopis
in the performance of the festival of rasa. Not that only devotees passed
by. There were quite a few scoundrels also loitering suspiciously near
about Harabari, in the expectation of coming across some young
widows. The heart-rending accounts of helpless widows, declared
adulteresses consequent upon men’s brutal assaults upon them, and
finally abandoned to their fate at Vraj, were known to people all over the
country. (173)

The thought that she could possibly be mistaken for a profligate widow
abandoned at Vrindaban was very painful to her.

It was during her stay in Vrindaban that she learnt the general truth and principle of life.
She puts it thus:

…all things come to an end one day. Nothing abides. Not even one’s
closest companions keep one company for ever. They, too, take their
turn, and disappear. Only a lonely, mysterious path lies before all of us.

(126)
A person can be said to live, in the full sense of the term, only those few days when the people who are tied to his heart-strings, are still around him. (181)

In those miserable days, Indira's friend Manu had to sell her gold watch when her teacher said to her, "A person in distress is often forced to sell of his treasured possessions. But my mind doesn't allow me to buy them cheap." (184) So Manu's pride of possession of a gold watch was sold off in a trice. Indira comments: "In that city of God, there is no dearth of self-seekers to take advantage of people in a terrible plight. There are quite a few who are always ready to pounce on people in distress." (184)

In one of the episodes, Indira Goswami tells about the day of Radha Ashthmi. She writes,

I had been to Radhabag, accompanied by my teacher. That was a place of rare, scenic beauty. Many holy men gathered there. No one was quite certain as to wherefrom they came. I had never seen such a huge congregation of sanskars before. Most of them had smeared themselves with the dust of the place, almost beyond recognition. Some of them sat by the sacred fire and recited hymns from old manuscripts. I could not determine what the texts were. Sitting under an ancient banyan tree, I was closely watching their peculiar ways. (190)

Once Indira laid bare her heart in front of her teacher by saying:

Sir, you must be quite aware that ever since my childhood, I've been suffering from a strange sense of despondency. I was free from it for a brief while after my marriage with Madhu. I could then overcome this obsession with myself and would partake of other people's joys and sorrows. I even thought of taking up some work for the good of the lowly, the lost and the neglected. But once again, I am in the grip of my old depression. I don't know how to escape from it. Could you, Sir, show me some way out? (193-194)

Her teacher remained silent for a while. Then, he got up and went into his room. After a while, he returned with a piece of tin foil in hand. Sitting close to her, he said, "I silently address you as Aparajita (the undefeated one). Today, I'm giving you an amulet. Its name also is Aparajita. It has a charm put into it." (194)

Then, he recited the charm in her ears. She recited that along with him. Then, he wrote the charm and put it into the amulet with his own hands. Then looking straight at her, with a sense of deep faith, he said, "You'll recite this charm a hundred times daily. You would, I suppose?" (194)

One day, her teacher asked her to draft a letter for a lady. The lady was a prostitute. Indira remarks:
To my utter surprise, without the slightest hesitation, she began to recount to me the details of her experience of a journey by train from Guwahati, in the company of two males. What she said then was too vulgar to be expressed in print. (200)

Indira read somewhere that about 80 % of the prostitutes take to the degrading calling under actue economic compulsions. Only 20% join it by choice. It was obvious to her that in the case of the woman who came to her, the choice was voluntary. She says:

Earlier, on the banks of River Chenab in Kashmir, I had seen a prostitute...But this one, I met in the city of God itself. The former was perhaps compelled by her situation to take to this path, but the present one adopted this course of self-abasement of her own will. (200)

Indira says that more than a year and a half since she arrived in Vrindaban, she developed a kind of attachment with the place and she began to like it more and more. She tells about the incident on 20th October, 1970 that of the offer letter brought by the postman for the post of a lecturer in Assamese, in the Department of Modern Indian Languages of University of Delhi. It was in response to an application sent by her to the University from Guwahati, about a year earlier, on a brief visit home. She had done it not out of her own will but at her mother’s behest. She was told that a lecturer’s post was vacant in the department. Indira says that she did not know what her mother had in mind when she spoke of her capacity. Then her maternal uncle, Sri Subho Chandra Barua, drafted the application, got it signed by her and posted it. She writes,

I put the offer letter from the University in my purse. I showed it to my teacher only after boarding the tonga. Before he could express his opinion, I said, “It’s no use my appearing at the interview. I would only be inviting embarrassment upon myself. For one thing, I’ve yet to complete my research here; for another, many bright boys and girls will appear in it. I don’t stand a chance! (207-208)

At the time of interview, she could not give satisfactory answers to the first few questions for she was shy and nervous. But soon, she overcame all her fears and hesitations, and felt confident. After the interview, on the return journey she expressed her sincere regret to her teacher that she could not answer properly a few questions on Tulsidas’s Ramcharitmanas. In later years, she was invited to different places like Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Patna, Bangkok, Thailand, etc. by different universities and colleges at several seminars to deliver talks on the Ramayana. She was honoured at each seminar. She writes, “I do not claim to be an eminent scholar of the Ramayana literature. I had a mind to pursue further studies on the subject, but could not do so for want of time.” (216)
Indira is sensitive about the problems of the downtrodden people in the society. In her autobiography, she tells about the ill-fated untouchables who were in group of devotees. There were objections against entering the temple. But the Indian Constitution had declared in no uncertain terms that untouchability was abolished, and that to practice it in any form was a cognizable offence. She writes,

To the best of my knowledge, another law was enacted in Uttar Pradesh in 1956, bestowing upon these people many more, privileges to offer prayers in the temples. Yet, they were too ignorant of their rights and privileges to assert themselves. They could not be easily persuaded to do so. They would rather resign themselves to their fate. I saw number of these people also increasing almost daily. They would be singing devotional hymns in the yards of the temples that come up overnight, but not at the old, established ones. The cunning pilgrim guides exploit them in all possible ways. They would advise the ignorant devotees to have the names of their parents or other near and dear ones engraved on marble plaques to be cemented on the temple floors. As a result, the floors presented a pattern grotesque beyond belief. (217-218)

On 2nd November, 1970, she joined the Department of Modern Indian Languages of Delhi University as a lecturer in Assamese. She buried herself in her search for a distant and elusive spiritual beauty, connected with the divine. It was the thirst for the infinite, timeless that triumphs over the finite, even death.

Indira Goswami describes a series of actions of man’s cruelty to his own species with exceptional mastery. Her autobiography conveys a sense of the pain, the restlessness and the suffering that she has undergone in various phases of her life. Writing was her way of overcoming these. With indefatigable energy and incessant effort, she rose above the circumstances that mould her, but never lost her profound sense of identification with those who continued to suffer in the river of pain.

Indira Goswami’s autobiography and her fiction offer a carefully drawn continuum of social change in Indian society. There are many more aspects to Indira Goswami’s “womanism”. As a young woman she found tragedy and pain whereas she was born to happiness and privilege. Performing an act of self-withdrawal, she came out stronger with the realization of a map of social problems relating to women. The restlessness springs from an urge to speak out her commitment to the causes of equity and justice. In Delhi, too, Indira Goswami was engaged with civil concerns, when the anti Sikh riots brought the city to shame in 1984. Her personal and professional life was caught in turmoil. Her novel *The Pages Stained with Blood* captures the brutality and
the distrust in the cityscape where the fugitives from justice and the perpetrators of crime are difficult to distinguish. So to understand the complex nature of mercenary agents of crime, Indira even visited the infamous GB Road and spoke to the sex workers. The common thread in her immensely diverse and rich oeuvre is the concern for women. In her person and in her work this is echoed multifariously.

In *An Unfinished Autobiography*, Goswami writes: “I loved writing about the lowly and the lost. My sympathy went to those who were denied justice and were victims of oppression”. (20) Although Goswami was born in a Brahmin family, as a woman, she experienced the restrictions and constrictions of her conservative society. Her widowhood after only two years of marriage, and her subsequent sufferings, intensify her sensitivity towards the victims of social and individual oppression. Due to her personal sufferings, she understood the plight of those living in the periphery and her sympathy for such victims is seen through the life of the people in and around her life.

The theme of “rebirth” and “resurrection” is also associated with her references to the City of God Vrindavan. Indira Goswami associates herself with Vrindavan, the city of God, as she says, “Vrindavan is a city that rose up like Phoenix, again and again, after it had been razed to the ground with every attack by Muslim invaders” (162). She gets motivation and the inspiration from it that how in spite of filth, squalor and the complete destruction of it by the Muslim invaders it stands with its own splendor and magnificence, and gives shelter to so many poor and destitute. Indira confesses that after a very long time, she had been able to accept the life full of misery and magnificence, gloom and glory, adversity and prosperity. At this point of her life, she is able to derive spiritual strength and vigour from the memories of Madhu. He is no more a reason of her misfortunes but her inspiration and moral support.

Her attitude towards life gets changed. The sky, which is symbolic of one’s “consciousness”, “thinking”, “wisdom” and “spiritual vision”, (Guerin: 185) is a recurring metaphor in her autobiography. After the death of her husband Madhu, she has not been able to look up at the sky and confront it, which meant she could not confront her own self. Often she says that “At a time when I was so steeped in despondence that I could not look up at the sky” (79). While working at Goalpara Sainik School, she often faced this situation and questioned “Has anyone else ever faced a situation like mine so that he cannot look up at the sky overhead?” (80) Even
after a long gap of years, she could not do so, which shows her lack of vigour and her ignorance. However, her journey to Vraj brings her face to face with her own consciousness and makes her understand the bitter truth of life that it is not a bed of roses. One has to live as much happily as one can even during the worst circumstances of the life. Her “wisdom” and “spiritual vision” is reflected in her perception of the outer world at this stage and she could look up at the sky too, when she says:

For a long time after Madhu’s death, I had not the nerve to look up at the sky above my head... But on that day, the sky above my head, on the bank of the Yamuna at Chriharanghat, had a rare splendor. A soft, reddish glow, much like that of the radiant lips of a youthful girl, pervaded the sky.... At the touch of the glory radiated by the sky at the moment, all the ugliness and cruelty of the city of God seemed to evaporate instantly. I fell into a deep contemplation on the grandeur of the sky and the transience of life and love. (211)

She considered her “Guru” and mentor Professor Lekharu a great help in coming out of her miseries of life. It’s a father-daughter relationship which she shares with him and she confesses that after Madhu’s death, he had been her mentor, guru, her father and a strong pillar of moral support. She says: “My teacher inspired me to be neither a famous writer nor an eminent scholar, but an individual endowed with all human qualities. Nothing measures up to humanity. For my teacher, humanity alone was the prime consideration; and nothing else”. (220)

Thus, Indira Goswami’s autobiography, very beautifully, brings out those aspects of her life which might have been burnt on the pyre with her corpse. However, the purpose of putting life into words is best served when somebody grows up through it and uplifts himself/herself above the common human being. Indira Goswami, too, decided to lead life on her own terms and conditions instead of adhering to the social conventions, traditions and values.

Indira Goswami’s task of writing her life story helped her in creating a distinguished place for herself amongst the other Assamese women writers. Also, she could look at herself and confront her inner self from which she had kept running away most of her life. Her obsession with death turns into her love and zeal to live for others. It is a journey from ignorance to knowledge and from darkness to enlightenment and while enlightening the others, the cultural ambassador of Assam, breathed her last on 29th November, 2011, at the age of 70, leaving her story unfinished forever!