

**DISCOVERING BIRGWSRI: READING THE POLITICS OF  
BODO IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY TIME**

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## CERTIFICATE

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This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “**Discovering Birgwsri: Reading the Politics of Bodo Identity in Contemporary Time**” is the result of research work of Dharmendra Baro, carried under my supervision and guidance and submitted to Bodoland University for the award of Degree of Master of Philosophy in English. He has fulfilled all the requirements under the M. Phil regulations of Bodoland University. His dissertation is the result of his own investigations and this dissertation as a whole or any part thereof has not been submitted to this University or any other University/institutions for the award of any degree or Diploma.

This dissertation conforms to the standard of M. Phil Dissertation under Bodoland University including the standard related to plagiarism and has a similarity index not more than 2 % excluding the bibliography.

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## CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

I, Dharmendra Baro, hereby declare that this dissertation entitled "Discovering Birgwsri: Reading the Politics of Bodo Identity in Contemporary Time" is the result of my own research work which has been carried out under the guidance of Dr. Manab Medhi, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bodaoland University. I further declare that this dissertation as a whole or any part thereof has not been submitted to this University or any other University/Institution for the award of any other Degree or Diploma.

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## ABSTRACT:

Though the Bodos are a distinct race with their own language, literature, culture, traditions, belief systems, oral history etc., since the long decades, they have come through the long lived experience of existential and identity crisis. They have undergone through many phases of social mobilization and revolutions for the reconstruction and reclamation of their identity. In the absence of the written history of their past, the collective oral expressions of the Bodos, have played a crucial role not only for the retrieval of history, but also for the purpose of identifying them from the historical perspective. Though many of them are found in fragmented and distorted forms, their oral literature have been able to create a significant link with their past. In this context, the discovery and the emergence of Birgwsri through literary space, who was a much forgotten heroine among the Bodos, have been able to transplant the cultural and the historical identity of the Bodos to a significant level. It is through her character that the participation and contribution of the Bodos in Indian freedom movement, which was not placed or recorded in state or national history, has come to be noticed in a wider extent. The discovery and emergence of such a significant historical character has now been of enormous importance for strengthening the sense of Bodo nationalism and in transplanting their identity.

The main objectives of the dissertation are specially designed to interpret the relationships between orality and the history of the Bodos, to highlight the significance of the discovery of Birgwsri and other historical characters in the formation of Bodo identity and to interpret the Bodo nationalism through the emergence of Birgwsri's character in literary space.

The research work is done based on both the primary and secondary sources. Close reading, and descriptive, analytical methods are used in doing the research. Moreover, field visit as well as interview schedules are also performed in order to find out the primary information. The focus of literary theory has been drawn specially from the perspective of New Historicism and the theory of Cultural Studies.

The first chapter of the dissertation gives an overview of the area that it undertakes to study. It briefs on how oral literature, in the absence of written history, has been crucial in exploring the forgotten historical characters for the Bodos and

their mediation in the process of Bodo identity formation and assertion. Second chapter interprets the evolution and construction of Birgwsri's character from the available oral expressions of the Bodos. In this regard, special emphasis has been laid in finding out the available oral and written accounts of Birgwsri and its subsequent impact on their society. Third Chapter focuses on the importance of discovering historical characters in the formation of the Bodo identity. It seeks to redefine their identity specially, with the discovery of Birgwsri and some other important historical characters of British colonial period. In redefining the Bodo identity, the contribution of such historical characters possesses great significance. Fourth Chapter describes how the rewriting the narratives on Birgwsri and her reemergence in literary space has contributed towards the growth of the Bodo nationalism. The primary texts undertaken to deal in this chapter are Bidyasagar Narzary's *Birgwsrini Thungri* (English Translation: *The Sword of Birgosri*) and Indira Goswami's *Thengphakhri Tehsildaror Tamor Tarowal* (English Translation: *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*). The concluding chapter highlights the key findings of the research. It is the oral literature through which the unknown facts and history of the Bodos gets exposure. It has played a significant role in reconnecting the Bodos with their glorious past and helped their identity get transformed. It has worked as an agency to tackle the contesting history of the Bodos.

## CONTENTS

	PAGES
CERTIFICATE	I
DECLARATION	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	III
ABSTRACT	IV-V
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1-23
CHAPTER II: BIRGWSRI: ORALITY AND HISTORY	24-47
CHAPTER III: BODO IDENTITY: REDISCOVERING BIRGWSRI AND OTHER HISTORICAL CHARACTERS	48-79
CHAPTER IV: REWRITING THE NARRATIVES OF BIRGWSRI AND BODO NATIONALISM	80-110
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION	111-130
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	131-141

**CHAPTER 1**



## Chapter: I

### Introduction

Identity of a race or community gets constructed and projected through the interaction of individuals, society and the history. As a human entity, it cannot be considered to exist as fixed for it keeps on fluctuating along with the transition of time. According to Stuart Hall, cultural identity "undergo constant transformation" and that is why "they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power."<sup>1</sup> It is fact that, if the integral ingredients of an identity confront certain threats for many reasons, then, there arises the issue of identity. The due course of policies and actions undertaken to be implemented for the promotion and reformation of the identity is the politics of identity. Politics of ethnic identity in the North-East India and particularly in Assam primarily occurs due to the ethnic assertion on the basis of linguistic and cultural differences. Most of the ethnic groups in the region have come demanding either for autonomous region or separate state, as they feel it will grant power, autonomy and security in order to maintain their socio-cultural identity. Therefore, the process of ethnic identity formation always involves struggle for achieving political power, economic benefits and social status and so on. Moreover, in identity politics, there always exists the tendency among the groups to identify themselves as separate and distinct than others. In order to strengthen such process, gathering of every possible history and cultural legacy becomes pertinent. Such ideology imbedded with the formation of identity can be regarded as exclusive identity as it seeks freedom from any external interference. It is always in the comparison with others that certain group begins to consider themselves as other for various reasons as according to Florian Coulmas, "identity is based on "sameness"

and "difference".<sup>2</sup> The idea of our existence begins through our reasoning and rationality. Consciousness and self-awareness have broadened the question of identity among human beings as it is closely connected with personal identity or racial identity. Such ideology always comprehends for renewal or configuration of culture and identity.

Manuel Castells introduces three types of identities-legitimising identity 'introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination', resistance identity 'generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/ or stigmatized by the logic of domination' and project identity 'when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure'.<sup>3</sup> In considering his statement, the ethnic assertion of different communities in the region, including the Bodos can be categorized under the resistance identity and project identity.

Assam, one of the North East Indian states, is a land of multi ethnicities, languages, cultures, belief systems and history. With the existence of multi ethnic and cultural groups, along with various socio-cultural and political issues of them, Assam has been a land of complexity and tension filled since long. There had been many phases of social unrests and uprisings among the different tribes in the name of ethnic identity assertion. Denial of due recognition and failing to provide political safeguard in contemporary socio-political set up was one of the primary reasons of those movements. Such transitions make us understand that, identity politics occurs when an ethnic group or community feels that they are marginalized and socio-politically subdued, for which their distinctive characters like language, culture, sense of security

are under certain threats. It is also a politics of recognition and the politics of differences.

The Bodos are one of the largest tribes in Assam and they believe that they also had glorious civilisation in the past. However, due to various responsible factors, specially, with the loss of self-rule, after their kingdom got annexed under British East India Company, they gradually faced collapse in it and with due course of time they became scattered and marginalized. Though they are a distinct race with their own culture, traditions, belief systems, language, literature, oral history etc., they still feel that their identity as a race is not secured and safe. Although Bodos possess rich culture and traditions, they do not possess their own written history of the past. There are some references about the Bodos even in *Mahabharata* and in the books written by other modern writers and historians like Bryan Houghton Hodgson, Edward Gait, Rev. Sidney Endle, J.D. Anderson, Sunithi Kumar Chatterji and so on. Such books, though of great importance for them, are not sufficient enough in tracing and understanding the Bodos from historical perspectives. Most of them are records of some socio-cultural history and linguistics structures of the Bodos of that time. No recounts of the Bodo historical figures, specially, of British colonial period, are placed in those writings. Therefore, they are still undergoing with the process of construction and reconstruction of their history, culture and identity. In this regard, Stuart Hall rightly observes that "cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being".<sup>4</sup>

It is fact that, the Bodos witnessed a long-lived experience of existential crisis in their society since the long past. They came to reveal the need for bringing social reformation and rescuing their society, during the beginning parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which was initiated under the leadership of Kalicharan Brahma. Their assertion of

separate identity began when they realized that their social members were scattered and under the wave of massive conversion and cultural assimilation, which revealed the complete racial extinction in near future. Here, the statement of Francis Fukuyama becomes relevant as he writes, "Identity grows, in the first place, out of a distinction between one's true inner self and an outer world of social rules and norms that does not adequately recognize that inner self's worth or dignity" (10). Since they could realize their racial threats and sensed insecure, the Bodos came forward with the aim of reviving and reforming their society and identity. In such process, since the long past, they have come through many phases of social movements and revolutions. Moreover, the new aspiration of attaining the political arrangement of a separate homeland for them got germinated after they were encouraged by the declaration of Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister of India, on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1967 that Assam would be reorganized on the basis of Federal structure. This resulted the formation of different social and political organizations such as All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA). Since then, their demands and struggles for achieving political autonomy continued. The main motive behind such social and political agitations of the Bodos is to attain the sense of security and freedom. Their prolonged unfulfilled demand and struggle for a separate state of Bodoland is still a metaphor to express that. With their strong determination and strategy, they have been able to reach the status as they are now. The gradual transformations among the Bodos can be realized through the political arrangements of accords such as BAC in 1993, BTC in 2003, and BTR in 2020.

A community is defined not by just what they have and what they are, but also with the attachment made with what they discover. Since time immemorial, oral tradition has been playing a significant role in the history and civilization of human

beings. The Bodos also possess rich oral repository through which their past history, culture, and society can be understood. However, due to the lack of proper preservation process, the Bodos' past glorious historical records have almost come to be lost and distorted. Their oral literature is a source not only to explore the past forgotten history, but also to have a better outlook in understanding their culture and traditions. However, along with the realization of the racial crisis, the remembrance of their past glorious history also played a crucial role in inspiring and encouraging the Bodos to fight for their common cause. In the absence of a written history, the collective oral expressions of the Bodos, have played a crucial role not only for the sake of regaining the past history, but also in bringing a new identification to them from historical perspective. It is only through their oral expressions that the prominent historical characters like Birgwsri, Gambari Sikhla, Jaolia Dewan, Sikhna Jwhwlao, Swmdwn Jwhwlao, Jwhwlao Dwimalu, have come to be noticed among them. Though many of their oral accounts are found in fragmented and distorted forms, their oral literature has been able to create a significant link with their past, which in return, made them motivated and encouraged to be stronger in achieving their racial aspirations and hopes. In fact, narrating the past story of their great historical figures such as Jwhwlao Dwimalu, Jaolia Dewan, Sikhna Jwhwlao, Swmdwn Jwhwlao were told and retold, and became the part of their songs for strengthening their movements. Therefore, along with the emergence of identity political movement among the Bodos too, folklore has been used as a medium to sensitise the minds of the people and it has been playing a significant role in promoting the ethnic consciousness and in strengthening the sense of cohesion. The elements of folklore have worked significantly in integrating the community in order to reach their destiny. In this regard, Anil Boro writes, "The elements of Bodo Folklore as well as their oral history

embedded in the oral tradition have proved to be effective assets of the ethnic and cultural identity of the Bodos. These assets have strengthened their nationalistic cause and prolonged demand for autonomy.”<sup>5</sup> Thus the discovery of historical characters can also bring a better understanding upon the culture, traditions, and history of a community.

The Bodos remain largely unknown from the perspective of their history. Therefore, revisiting and exploring the past forgotten history of the Bodos become pertinent for configuring the present context of their identity. The discovery of the unknown and forgotten historical characters is a cultural property, and it helps a society and culture to be identified in a wider extent. In this context, the discovery and the emergence of Birgwsri’s character through literary space, who was a much forgotten heroine of the Bodos, have been able to transplant the cultural and the historical identity of the Bodos significantly. Her story changes the outlook of the Bodo identity as the Bodos’ participation and contribution in Indian freedom movement has come to be noticed. The evolution and formation of such a significant historical character has been of enormous importance for strengthening the sense of Bodo nationalism and for the assertion of their identity. Her character stands as cultural signifier and represents the past glorious history and has become important in present discourse of Bodo identity politics. Besides knowing her character, she has also made it realize that the Bodos also contributed in Indian freedom movement, which in return has broadened the scope of Bodo identity. Therefore, according to Stuart Hall, identity is “a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation”.<sup>6</sup>

Although no such record of Bodos participation in Indian freedom movement is placed in national or Assam history, there is still some self-account of Bodo people

participating significantly in Indian freedom movement against the British domination. Some of their distorted stories still remain in the memory of some old Bodo village men. The account of Birgwsri, a forgotten heroine among the Bodos, who fought bravely against the British atrocity, is also one of such examples. Based on that, the rewriting of Birgwsri's story, specially, Bidyasagar Narzary's *The Sword of Birgosri* and Indira Goswami's *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*, has been a significant moment for the Bodos that seeks to transplant their history, culture, identity and also for occupying a position in the mainstream Indian literary and cultural space. Her story stands as a symbol of strength and reminds the glorious past of the Bodos, which is of enormous importance for strengthening the sense of Bodo nationalism and thereby to propagate their identity. The revival and reconstruction of such unexplored past glorious history is a treasure for a nation or a race as it works as an agency that produces a relation between the past and present and becomes essential ingredients for the process of formation and recreation of better identity.

#### **Objectives of the Study:**

The dissertation deals with the interpretation on the significance of exploring the forgotten historical character of Birgwsri and its subsequent interaction in the discourse of Bodo identity formation. Emphasis will also be given on the importance of discovering Birgwsri and other historical characters towards the growth of Bodo nationalism. The main objectives of the dissertation are to bring out the importance of Oral literature of the Bodos for the process of construction and reconstruction of their History, to highlight the significance of the discovery of Birgwsri and other historical characters in the Bodo identity assertion and to interpret the emergence of Birgwsri in literary space and its contribution to the growth of Bodo Nationalism.

### **Methodology:**

The researcher has used close reading, descriptive analytical method for the study. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*, translated by Aruni Kashyap from Indira Goswami's *Thengphakhri Tehsildar or Tamor Tarowal*, and *The Sword of Birgosri* translated by Krishna Dulal Barua from Bidyasagar Narzary's *Birgwsrini Thungri* are used as the primary texts. The researcher has also collected the primary data through interview schedules and field visits. The researcher met the novelist Bidyasagar Narzary and inquired about the relevant information on the study such as source and purpose of writing the novel, about the future development of the story as it was selected for the telecasting programme under Doordarshan, New Delhi etc. Discussion and inquiry about the relevant information was also done through telephonic conversations. Besides him, an interview schedule with Rupnath Basumatary, the author of the book *Baidi Bithing* was also conducted in inquiring about the character of Birgwsri and other historical characters. A discussion was also done with the present working president of the Thengphakhri Preservation Committee, Bijni, Mr. Rupnath Hazowary in order to collect the primary source on Thengphakhri.

As Secondary sources, relevant information is collected from print books as well as e-books. The focus of literary theory has been drawn from the perspective of New Historicism and theory of Cultural Studies. New Historicism as a method emphasizes on the 'parallel' reading of both literary and non literary texts and in producing a meaning discourse, both literary and non literary texts are brought into front to inform or interrogate each other constantly. American critic Louis Montrose defines New Historicism as "a combined interests in the textuality of history, the historicity of texts" (Barry 2014: 166). Stephan Greenblatt's interprets the history as



"changing" and filled with "shifting interests" and "jostling of orthodox and subversive impulses". Michel Foucault too in *The Order of Things* shows that "history is brought into existence, as a discipline, as a time, in response to the rise of a discourse of the present". Some of the key ideas of theory of Cultural Studies applied in the chapters are Stuart Hall's statement that cultural identity "undergo constant transformation", and "cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being". Raymond Williams' ideology of "dominant, residual and emergent" has also been used. Hans Bertens also says, "Self is always construction, (that) our identity is never given, but always the product of an interaction between the way we want to represent our selves". Basic theories on nationalism are taken from Adrian Hastings, Benedict Anderson, Steven Grosby. Hastings's argument, as he writes, in his book *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, "As something which can empower large numbers of ordinary people, nationalism is a movement which seeks to provide a state for a given 'nation' or further to advance the supposed interests of its own 'nation-state, regardless of other considerations" is used. In interpreting the idea of Bodo nationalism, a reference was made on some of Anderson's interpretation on nationalism from his book *Imagined Communities* as he writes, it is an "imagined political community" and "it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion". And "it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship". Besides these, an understanding on the concept of 'nation' is important to interpret the nationalism as Steven Grosby says that

“nationalism refers to a set of beliefs about the nation” is also applied in interpreting the idea of Bodo nationalism.

### **Review of Literature:**

Some of the main information that authors have explored and focused through their writings on the character of Birgwsri are undertaken to be discussed herewith. The critical analysis on the importance of the character of Birgwsri has taken place since the publication of the two novels specially *Thengphakhri Tehsildaror Tamor Tarowal* in 2009 by Indira Goswami and *Birgwsrini Thungri* by Bidyasagar Narzary in 2004. Whatever, available books or chapters are being written on her, most of them record the available biography of the forgotten heroine which are primarily collected from the fragmented and distorted oral expressions.

Indira Goswami, in the ‘acknowledgment’ of her novel *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsilder* published in 2009, writes that only some distorted oral account of Thengphakhri is available among the memories of some old Bodo people. Based on such available information, she has produced the novel. She came to Bijni and met Batiram Boro from Bagidora village, an old man who could see and met Thengphakhri or Birgwsri. He told her that Thengphakhri used to come riding horse in order to collect taxes from the village men along with some British officers. The author states that Thengphakhri was the first lady tax collector in India working with the British colonial officers. With the aim of collecting some information, the novelist came to Bijni in 2007. She states that her novel covers only three years of duration about Thengphakhri’s life from 1857 to 1859.

Aruni Kashyap in the “Introduction” of the translated novel *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsilder* writes, “that the publication of *Thengphakhri* was a significant cultural moment for the Bodos is attested by the fact that Indira Goswami

was awarded the 7<sup>th</sup> Upendranath Brahma Soldier of Humanity award by the Upendranath Brahma Trust". According to him Goswami is transplanting Bodo life and culture, their contribution to India's Freedom struggle into the center of India's literary and cultural imagination. He also writes that Goswami's novel is an exploration of the silent and hidden history of a Bodo heroine, Thengphakhri a powerful tax collector of Bijni kingdom under the British colonialism in India. She worked with the British officers as a tax collector who rode horse, wore a hat and had knee-length hair in such a time when learned Indians, social reformers and the British Government were jointly trying to fight against certain evil social practices such as sati, child marriage and 'purdah-system' which is assumed to occur during her life from 1857 to 1859. He is also in the opinion that since long, her story just remained in the memories of some old people and was told and retold as stories. It is also stated in the book that no such record of the powerful kingdom of Bijni or characters like Birgwsri or Thengphakhri can be traced in *Buranjis or Asaam Buranji*. In such situation, Goswami's fictional creation on Thengphakhri's character has explored the much forgotten character of her and also drawn interests on underrepresented region of Assam history.

Anil Boro in his book *Folk Literature of Bodos* regards Birgwsri a legendary heroine among the Bodos, who once fought a heroic battle against Moghul general Ram Singha. He states that local oral history is the only authentic source for the narrative of Birgwsri's character. He is in the opinion that Birgwsri was also known as Thengphakhri, and was very courageous and straight forward. Based on the available oral accounts of Birgwsri, he also writes that the present temple "Bageswari", located at Bongaigaon is derived from the name of the legendary heroine Birgwsri. In her later part, while serving as a tax collector, Birgwsri stoutly

stood against British exploitation done through heavy taxation upon the common Bodo people.

Kameswar Brahma in his book *Raithai Bidang* (An Anthology of Essays) writes that Brigwsri was a tax collector of Bijni Kingdom under British Regime. She was also known as Thengphakhri. She was very courageous and straight forward. She fought bravely against British soldiers for the freedom of the Bodo people.

Kameswar Brahma in his another book *An Introduction to the Myths and Legends of the Bodos* states that the current name of the temple 'Bageswar' possibly originated from the name of Birgwsri as Birgashri → Birgaswar → Bargeswar → Bageswar. The area surrounding the temple is named as Birjhara, which is also believed to be the resting place of Bodo heroine Birgwsri.

Rupnath Basumatary's anthology of prose *Baidi Bithing* contains two articles on Birgwsri entitled as "Additional information of Thengphakhri" and "Lady Birgwsri of Baagduar". In the former article, the author writes that he could listen his father, late Ishan Basumatary, telling a story about Thengphakhri. His father told him that Thengphakhri's original name was Bagesri and she was also called Bage in short. From Bagesri it got transformed into Birgwsri. For being courageous and filled with valour like that of men, Birgwsri was also called Thengphakhri. According to the author, Birgwsri can be compared with the Indian freedom fighter Queen of Jhanshi for having such character and quality, who also could ride horse and fight with her enemies. The author also states that the temple Bageswari is established based on the life and story of Birgwsri and it is a symbol of never-ending power of a Bodo heroine. The author states that Rupsing Dafadar was one of the most appreciated soldiers of Birgwsri and he has met Hor Kumar Goyari (Hongla), the grandson of Rupsing

Dafadar. He heard from him that Birgwsri used to wear a white-coloured turban like towel.

Bidyasagar Narzary's *Forgotten Heroes: Bodo Freedom Fighters*, published in 2004 provides some basic information about the past heroes and freedom fighters of the Bodos. There is note on the character of Swmdwn Kochari and Sikhna Jwhwlao. He states Swmdwn came to be regarded as "Jwhwlao" (Hero) among the Bodos soon after he could defeat Major Boyd, who came to punish Swmdwn at Maibong on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1882. Thereafter, Swmdwn Kachari continued fighting against the British to regain the lost territory. He united the local people for that purpose and fought bravely till he was injured and caught. He died in the year 1883. On the other side, the author also mentions that David Scott, the political agent to the Governor General of British India Government recommended the permanent annexation of lower Assam under them in the year 1827. Accordingly, under the command of Captain Richard, the British troops came to attack the Bhutan Duars which compelled Sikhna Jwhwlao to fight against them in order to protect and save the Duars and his people. However he was killed by the British soldiers and as a result of it the Bhutan Duars got annexed under the British. The author is also in the opinion that, history has been silent about those freedom fighters among the Bodos from the last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Moreover, in *Bijnini Jarimin* (In English: *History of Bijnini*) published by Bijnini District Bodo Literary Association in 2005, it is mentioned that Birgwsri was contemporary to Jaowlia Dewan<sup>6</sup> and had a good relationship with him. Both of them rebelled against the exploitation of the British East India Company as well as the Bhutanese who imposed over taxation upon their people. However, both of them were killed in the hands of the British soldiers in 1864. Both of them jointly planned and

fought against the British intrusion till they were killed. The authors of the book also write that "another name of Birgwsri was Thengphakhri". Along with the narration about the character of Birgwsri, the book also consists of the narration about the character of Jaolia Dewan, who was also a hero and freedom fighter among the Bodos.

Katindra Swrgiary in *Bodoni Jarimin arw Somaosarnai* Published in 1992, records that there was a place called Baagdwar at greater Bijni area and it was made as one of the Mouzas (Revenue office) by the arrival of the British colonizers. He also states that Birgwsri was the collector of that area. Although her name was Thengphakhri, she was better known and called as Birgwsri as she could ride horse like men. Her skill of riding horse could astonish the British colonisers. However, Birgwsri decided to revolt and expel the foreigners from their land, as the imposition of taxation rule by the British colonizers burdened the common people of the area that made them impoverished day by day. As she revolted against them, the British colonizers declared her as traitor. Later on, being tired of fighting, she hid at Birjhora hillocks and one day, while she came to drink water in a river she was killed by the British soldiers. The author also writes that Birgwsri is not a character of folk tale rather she is a legend and real character of reality.

Anjali Daimari in her article "Collective Memory, Oral History and Identity: Retrieving the story of Thengphakhri/Birgosri." (pp. 22-32) states that Birgwsri's role as the first tax collector during the British rule, prior to the independence, is memorable. Her character, not being figured out in written history of modern Assam is one of the most prominent absences. The author also points out the need to retrieve this woman from the silences of history. The emergence of Birgwsri's character in literary space has brought back the name of the forgotten heroine, hidden in Bodo oral

expressions to historical discussions. This has resulted the invocation on Birgwsri's character among the Bodos, through whom they seek to legitimize their dreams and aspiration. The character of Birgwsri has occupied a space in the Bodo imagination. The fictional recreation on her character, specially, by Bidyasagar Narzary and Indira Goswami is an attempt to preserve the collected memories of the people, and it seeks to restore a space denied to her by written history.

In *Mugani Sakhi* (22<sup>nd</sup> Issue) a Mouthpiece of All Bodo Students Union of 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference held in 2018 states that All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) has adopted honey bee as its mascot as the unique division of labour is found among the honey bees . It conveys a special message to the world as a representative figure, a symbol and a communication tool to help them stand united in the crowd. The same mascot has been christened as "Birgwsri", commemorating one of the great heroines of the Bodos. Birgwsri stands as symbol of strength and unity in uniting and taking the Bodo race ahead. She is also a symbol of heroism, the great Bodo warrior, who sacrificed her life fighting for the cause of her people.

The edited book of Sunil Basumatary and co. *Raithai Bihung*, published in 2006 is a collection of prose in Bodo language. Two articles of the book entitled as "Bodos in Freedom Movement" by Jagendra kumar Basumatary and "A Hero forgotten by us" by Prasenjit Brahma are informative and relevant to the dissertation. Brahma in his article points out that since the time immemorial Bodos had the tradition of Hero worship. However, with the transition of time Bodos have forgotten such noble tradition. He further states that the Bodos worshipped their heroes even through the "Kherai Puja", an integral religious ceremony of the Bodos. His article is mainly based on the life and history of much forgotten hero of the Bodos known as Swmdwn, who was a true revolutionary against the British exploitation.

Ajay Roy's *The Boro Imbroglia*, published in 1995 reflects the history of the Bodos. The author states that the decline in the socio-economic condition and the problem of land alienation during the last decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century are the sole reasons and background for the Bodo movement in Assam. He also writes that the deprivation of constitutional provision of granting 6<sup>th</sup> schedule status to Bodos and the chauvinistic language policy of Assam Government are also the reasons for the rise of Bodo movement.

#### **Chapter Division:**

The dissertation consists of five chapters. The first chapter "Introduction" which forms this part, gives an overview of the area that the study is supposed to deal with. This chapter, besides providing basic theoretical analysis of identity, also gives brief overview of the Bodos and different transition of them in the process of their identity formation. It also highlights the importance of exploring the forgotten historical characters for the sake of identity formation, achieving the political purpose, and in widening the identity. It also discusses the idea of identity and the issues of it and emphasis has been given on the context of contemporary Bodo identity which can be configured taking the help of some of their past glorious values imbedded with historical characters. Through the discovery of much forgotten heroes of great values, the present state of Bodo identity can be reconstructed and transformed to a significant level.

The second chapter "Birgwsri: Orality and History" discusses on the evolution and construction of the character of Birgwsri from the available oral expression of the Bodos. It also highlights the importance of exploring the forgotten historical characters for the sake of their identity formation. In this regard special connection is drawn through available oral and written accounts of Birgwsri. Oral expression



among the Bodos has tremendously helped the process of construction and reconstruction of their history even though it is still in an ongoing process. It also highlights the importance of oral literature as a treasure of exploring the forgotten history and the identity of the Bodos. The oral repository or memory of some old Bodo people has been a great source in finding out the unknown and forgotten historical characters of the Bodos. Such memories have now been part of politics of racial representation as it did not get a presence in the past.

The third chapter is "Bodo Identity: Rediscovering Birgwsri and other Historical Characters". This chapter deals with the analysis of the Bodo identity along with the discovery of some of the much-forgotten Bodo historical characters of British colonial period-such as Birgwsri Sikhla, Gambari Sikhla, Jaolia Dewan, Sikhna Jwhwlao and Swmdwn. In redefining the Bodo identity, the discovery of such historical characters possesses great significance. The rediscovery of such forgotten historical figures, besides making the Bodos understood from the historical perspectives, also strengthens their identity as they are still under the process of identity assertion.

Chapter four of the dissertation is entitled as "Rewriting the narratives of Birgwsri and Bodo Nationalism". This chapter discusses on how the publication of the novel *The Sword of Birgosri* by Bidyasagar Narzary and *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* by Indira Goswami has contributed to the growth of Bodo nationalism. The publication of the two stated novels has not only retrieved the much forgotten heroine of the Bodos but also explored and highlighted the contribution of the Bodos in Indian freedom movement. Besides this, their writing has made the Bodos connect with their glorious past and served the political purpose of reclamation and reconstruction of their identity. Goswami projects Thengphakhri as the first lady a

tax collector in India, working with British colonial officers, and also who could ride horse and use sword, during such time when other Indian social reformers and the British Government were fighting against anti-social practices such as sati, child marriage and purdah-system. Existence of such a figure among the Bodos not only highlights their history but also attracts in seeking to understand their culture and specially the position of Bodo women in their society. Moreover, Bidyasagr Narzary also sensitised the history and identity of the Bodo people reviving the historic significant evidence of Birgwsri's character before the community.

Fifth chapter of the dissertation is "Conclusion". This chapter highlights the key findings of the research. It is found that the collective oral expressions of the Bodos have been very crucial in restoring the lost and unknown history of the past. It has also helped the formation and propagation of the character of Birgwsri and the subsequent discourse in the recreation and identification of the Bodos from historical perspective. It has also served as an agency to fulfill the political purposes of the Bodos. The emergence of Birgwsri's character in literary space has contributed a lot in translating her character and the glorious past of the Bodos into the minds and understanding of the people. It has also impacted in resulting a series of activities of many live stage performances in some of the Bodo inhabitant villages, documentary visual shooting for telecasting through Doordarshan, and so on. This becomes a symbolic manifestation in reminding and percolating the glorious past of the Bodos, and remains significant in strengthening their national sentiment and identity as a whole.

## Notes

1. See Stuart Hall "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". Jonathan Rutherford. Ed. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. pp. 225.
2. See Florian Coulmas *Identity: A very short Introduction*. pp. 1
3. See Manuel Castells *The Power of Identity*. pp. 8.
4. See Stuart Hall "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". Jonathan Rutherford. Ed. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. pp. 225.
5. See Anil Boro *The Flute and the Harp: Essays on Bodo Literature and Culture*. pp. 83.
6. See Stuart Hall "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". Jonathan Rutherford. Ed. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. pp. 222.

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