



## NILAKANTHI BRAJA- A STORY OF VRINDAVAN WIDOWS

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### Abstract

*Indira Raisom Goswami is an acclaimed Jnanpith awardee from Assam whose humanist views expressed through her poignant writing and social activism has made her a household name in the north east. Her debut novel Nilakanthi Braja (The Blue-necked God) published in Assamese in 1976 and translated into English in 2012 narrates the travails of the widows of Vrindavan.*

*The heritage town of Vrindavan also known as Braja or Braja dhām, has witnessed little Krishna's antics of growing up and equally endured continuous attack by Mogul invaders resulting in its five thousand temples reduced to ruins. The title Nilakanthi Braja has intrigued many as its Lord Shiva who is addressed as Nilakanthi. Indira Goswami seems to draw parallels with the mythical figures- while Lord Shiva swallows poison during the churning of ocean but keeps it in his throat in the process turning himself blue; Krishna too swallows the deadly poison of depravation- physical, emotional and financial, endured by Vrindavan widows.*

*Vrindavan's past glory and present ruins pervades in the background as it welcomes the widowed protagonist Saudamini along with her distraught parents. Her doctor father Dr. Roychoudhary hopes to restart the dispensary closed by his grandfather and her mother Anupama wishes her daughter would divert her young mind by seeking solace through these widows.*

*Since time immemorial the holy city has been a dumping ground for widows left uncared by families and Nilakanthi Braja took a brave stand in revealing their sordid lives through a brutally honest portrayal of their traumatic lives. The novel is semi-autobiographical as Indira Goswami had come to Vrindavan to do research on 'Ram Charit Manas' and strengthen her distraught mind after the sudden death of her second husband Madhavan Raisom Aiyengar.*

*Yet, like her heroine Saudamini, Indira too fails to gain solace in a place which despite its outward spiritual ambience inwardly exploits widows for its own selfish needs. These Radheshyamis as they are known in Vrindavan are forced to lead a life of deprivation-meager meals, white sari and working in the temples to seek shelter. The pandas or priests exploit them physically, mentally and financially to an extent that even their dead bodies are examined to gather 'hidden money'.*

*These sickening scenes disturb Saudamini as much as her own desire to lead a normal life like other women. Her parents hope that Vrindavan will help their Hindu daughter erase the attractions of a Christian boy and the story ends with an early morning dream (or is it a reality?) when her father wakes and takes her to the bank of the river Jamuna where her lover awaits. The reader is left with Saudamini's white cloth entangled with a married woman's colourful chadder (shawl like cloth). Does Saudamini gain liberation from social taboos or is death the only liberation for such women? While keeping her readers guessing, the writer succeeds in creating empathy about the plight of Vrindavan widows.*

**Keywords-** Vrindavan Widows, Patriarchy, Self-versus society, Liberation



**Introduction**-Indira Raisom Goswami (1942-2011) is popularly known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami and affectionately addressed as Mamoni Baideo. The Jnanpith awardee (2000) from Assam has gained acclaim as not just a great writer from north-east but one who strived for harmony in her homeland by negotiating continuous talks with ultras. She formed the People's Consultative Forum to bring peace in Assam and even rejected the coveted Padmasri award when she couldn't convince the central government of a suitable solution.

Indira Goswami's acclaimed list of works some of which are translated into English include *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, *Pages Stained with Blood* and *The Man from Chinnamasta* along with her autobiography titled *The Unfinished Autobiography*. Born into the Brahmin Sattara community in Assam, Indira published her first short story when she was just thirteen and her first collection of stories 'Chinaki Morom' when she was twenty.

Her disastrous first marriage soon ended in divorce but she found loving companionship in her second marriage to an engineer from Karnataka, Madhavan Raisom Ayengar. While working in Kashmir, Madhavan died in a road accident just eighteen months after their marriage and she took a long time to reconcile. Prone to depression since childhood, her husband's death got her addicted to sleeping pills. To divert herself from depression and suicide, she started working in Sainik School at Goalpara, Assam and found some solace in writing.

A scholar Upendra Chandra Lekharu, aware of her literary prowess and personal tragedy invited her to Vrindavan. While staying there for some years, Indira Goswami studied Ramayana from a book purchased for just eleven rupees which led her to explore further and compare Tulasidas' *Ram Charit Manas* and renowned Assamese writer Madhavdas Kandali's *Ramayana* which was published as *Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra*. She was the Head of Assamese studies in Delhi University and all her works reflect the culture and people of her beautiful homeland.

In her first novel *Nilakanthi Braja* Indira Goswami narrates the agonies of Vrindavan widows who are disowned, dumped and exploited. The *Radheshyamis* work to maintain the holy city's temples-wake up early to clean, sing bhajans and forced to lead a deprived life. Saudamini at first sympathizes and seeks solace that she at least has parents and financial means to lead a better life than them. While helping her father Roy Choudary in his dispensary her sympathy dries out as she cannot imagine spending her entire life caring for others and stifle her innate desires.

Saudamini's longing to live a normal life like any other woman with a loving companion and happy home opposes the ascetic existence she is compelled to lead. The more she interacts with *Radheshyamis*, the more determined Saudamini is not to be one among them. Their starved bodies resort to any means to survive, making them mere pawns under the *pandas* (priests) who mercilessly exploit them.

Most widows end up as their lifelong slaves enduring physical and mental hardships with nowhere to go and no one to listen to their woes. Such an unhealthy atmosphere breeds negativity and the outwardly white sari clad widows indulge in selling themselves to survive and satisfy their stifled selves. Erased of moral, ethics and troubled by the existential question of suffering for no fault of theirs, these widows are brainwashed to believe that they are



protected by Lord Krishna and can attain salvation by submitting themselves completely to the *pandas*.

Saudamini witnesses their thirst for the simple pleasures of life, constant bickering, rivalry and survival tactics which erases all the sacred feelings she had towards Lord Krishna's hometown. Not being judgmental towards these social outcasts, Saudamini once even fumes at her parents for wanting her to lead a life like them. Her husband's untimely demise made her crave for companionship which she sought in interactions with a young boy who belonged to Christian community. Her orthodox parents were concerned about her but anxious about societal norms, so they brought her to Vrindavan in the hope of diverting her young body and mind.

### **Conclusion**

Vrindavan made Saudamini realize that despite her attempts to stifle the simple pleasures of life she could never lead a life of a deprived widow, memories of her dead husband and young lover aroused her and she just couldn't be a hypocrite faking spirituality like those *Radheshyamis*. But would the world ever accept a widow's need to lead a life like others? The ending of the novel is ambiguous with Saudamini dreaming of her father waking her early morning and taking her to the river bank to meet her lover. Could it be real that Saudamini was at last liberated to lead life of her choice as indicated by the entangling of her white sari with a married woman's colourful cloth? But why are we left with Saudamini's sari and not her real self? Five decades after *Nilakanthi Braja's* publication, the plight of Vrindavan widows hasn't changed much except for lip sympathies and government policies. Indira Goswami's pioneering novel succeeded in creating a social awareness as it unraveled the real *Radheshyamis* behind the veiled widows of Vrindavan.

### **Bibliography:**

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