



Challenging Patriarchy and Casteism: Indranath's Progressive Stance in Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

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Abstract

The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker by Indira Goswami (2004) is a novel set in post-independence Assam. This novel is considered as one of the best to come out from this region. Indira Goswami has shed the light on the oppressive conditions faced by women as well as the marginalized groups of people due to their caste. Surrounding around the subject matter of women issues, culture, tradition, and religious customs, the characters of the novel struggle to persevere in a society where status and honour plays a vital role. The male protagonist, Indranath, sees the plight of women, both married and unmarried. His sister Giribala, his aunt Durga, Saru Gossainee, and even the girl he held affections for, Eliman. His status as the future head of the Sattrā requires him to thoroughly abide by the set of rules assigned to him. Despite that, he sympathizes with the marginalized groups of people irrespective of their caste, gender or religion. Indranath, in the novel, serves as a character that refuses to conform to and preserve the long forlorn customs that hinders the future of women and other marginalized people. This paper has attempted to analyse the non-conformist, progressive stance of Indranath in a traditionalist society.

Keywords: Society, Customs, Tradition, Widowhood, Patriarchy, Casteism, Progressive.

Introduction:

Indira Goswami, born to a Brahmin family, has seen the difficulties faced by the other castes of the society. As a young girl who was keen to learn about different religions, grew up to dig deep and explore different sections and cultures of the society. She was fascinated by the problems of the marginalized groups, felt it as her duty to serve as an interpreter and become their voice and disseminate it to her readers. Along with being an author she also served as a social activist. Most, if not all, of her works consist of elements of revolt, with characters trying to resist the orthodox beliefs. While her works lean towards feminism, she insists that she is instead a humanist, therefore, has tried to include the plights of the marginalized groups. In her novel, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, she vividly portrays various social issues related to widowhood, illegal opium trading and addiction, caste system, traditional Assamese society, religious rituals, and customs that bind the people of this community with oppressive restrictions.

Indranath, the male protagonist of the novel, is one of those characters of Indira Goswami who tries to resist the rigid practices implemented by the upper caste of the society. Set in post-independence Assam, where the caste system and gender role play a fundamental role in a person's day-to-day life, Indranath is seen as a beacon of hope for a lot of the other characters in the novel. It is predominately seen from his interactions with the female characters. Whether with his sister Giribala, his aunt Durga, Saru Gossainee, or with his love interest Eliman, Indranath remains as a trustworthy person they all seek help from. Indranath

serves as the “prime male character who closely observes the social and political environment of the society” (Talukdar and Nirmal, 136).

Indranath with the women characters in the novel:

The women in the novel struggle to free themselves from the shackles of the patriarchal norms. Set in a time period when women were forced to marry even before their first menstrual period in order to not be outcasted by the whole community, when a woman’s marital status defined her social reputation, unmarried women and widowed women alike were subjected to the orthodox practices that are compelled upon them. Giribala, Saru Gossainee, and Durga, all three of them practises widowhood and follows the restrictions imposed upon them. Indranath serves as a character these three women trust and confide in when they have nobody else to rely on.

His sister, Giribala, despite having desires of her own is forced to perform her duties as a widow. When she’s caught red-handed while eating meat, as it is considered “an unpardonable sin” for a Gossain widow to consume meat or even to go near the kitchen if meat is being cooked, her mother punishes her by beating her cruelly for committing the sin (p 139). Only when Indranath intervenes telling his mother that there are other ways to purify her, she stops her punishment. He says, “Do you want to kill her? Come to your senses! There are ways to purify her! Rituals for atonement! Why beat her so much?” (p 145).

Even though Indranath is a Gossain, the future head (Adhikar) of the Sattrā, who belongs to an orthodox Brahmin family, he doesn’t consider these rigid practices as absolute. The sin of a widow eating meat doesn’t hold much significance to him as it can be rectified through an atonement ceremony.

As a young girl, Giribala’s marriage was prolonged leading to her puberty, as Indranath considered it more important for her to gain worldly knowledge rather than to find her a husband. A priest criticized Indranath, “All this happened because of Indranath. He says, what will this girl do all her life? Let her remain immersed in books and scriptures!” (p 286). Disregarding customs and orthodox beliefs, he fought to safeguard Giribala’s desires in defiance of the moral principles accepted by the other elders of the community.

After Giribala returned to her paternal home after the death of her husband, Indranath insist her to help Mark Sahib, a Christian white man (firangi) researching on Assamese Sattrā culture, in finding and decoding ancient scriptures in hope that it would keep her occupied and she’ll acquire knowledge from Mark in return. In Mark’s company, Giribala is able to escape the restraints of societal norms temporarily. Giribala’s woes are detected by Indranath who himself wishes Giribala was married to Mark instead, as it was only with Mark, when she was able to serve her own interests. He says, “I wouldn’t mind if Giribala and Mark had reunited. Perhaps you won’t believe it, but Mark was the most truthful man I had ever met. I respect him a lot.” (p 311). Collecting scriptures for Mark became her diversion from the dullness of her life.

Another widow in the family, Durga, who is Indranath’s paternal aunt, waited for her in-laws to take her back to Chikarhati. Even though she is treated poorly by her in-laws, who accused her of bringing misfortune to her husband leading to his death, she believes she can atone for her sins by devoting herself to her late husband by performing her duties as a widow. Goswami successfully highlights how women who are restrained by regressive ideas uphold these ideas as ideal, like Durga who “passively accepts all and becomes a voiceless creature” (Talukdar & Nirmal, 136). She firmly believes it is her duty to die at her husband’s house much like what many other women in the novel holds to standard.

Indranath is the only person Durga trusts. Durga looks for Indranath wherever she is in need of help. As she has no children with her husband and therefore to rightfully attain her share of land she has to go to the court, which is considers a taboo for a Gossainee, she puts her faith in Indranath that he will help her as he has “great love and respect” for her (p 102). Furthermore, she entrusts him to perform her funeral rites if she dies.

Indranath holds deep compassion and is concerned about Durga's wellbeing. When she suffers from tuberculosis, Indranath tries to get her admitted to the hospital at Gauhati. But she refuses, crying in protest as she wanted to go to late husband's place instead.

Just like Durga, Saru Gossainee also is dependent on Indranath. The women in the family all relies on Indranath. In a patriarchal society where men hold control over the assets and land, a Gossain widow could hardly provide for herself if not supported by a man. Therefore, after her husband's death, Mahidhar assisted her in taking care of her land in Pathaldia. It was common for men to have more than one wife, but was considered a sin for a widow woman to develop romantic feelings for someone else. When Saru Gossainee developed feelings for Mahidhar, she herself felt shame for having sexual urges as a widow. At thirty years, a woman's entire identity is stripped away from her solely due to her husband's death. But unlike her and other characters in the novel, Indranath finds no fault in the ambiguous relationship between Mahidhar and Saru Gossainee. Indranath doesn't believe in the orthodox way of living and instead approves of the relationship. Taboos like a widow being in the company of a man who is not related to her, Indranath is often indifferent to these norms. He thus asks Mahidhar, to help Saru Gossainee as she has nobody else to rely on. Widows of those days were not only neglected but also were bounded by established religious doctrines. Once their husbands die, they ought to give up on their desires and stop chasing a happy, fulfilling life.

Indranath is empathetic towards these women who lived their lives in misery and couldn't seek out a better life outside of the four walls as "he had seen how the women in the *sattr* lived out their days. Certainly, they do not deserve to be buried alive in coffins of *urium* and teak wood walls and posts." (p 317).

Eliman, the daughter of an opium addict Brahmin priest and also the love interest of Indranath, is often reprehended because of her cheerful and buoyant personality. Being born as a girl, Eliman has to conform to certain norms. According to those religious norms, a Brahmin girl is to be married off before her puberty (Tulani), her coming of age. A woman is at the mercy of the male figure of her family for her entire life. Firstly, the father, who has the final say in who his daughter will marry. And then the husband, without whom a woman struggles to subsist. Whereas, Giribala was hastily married off to a promiscuous man, Eliman's father arranged her marriage with an opium dealer against her will. Indranath helps Eliman by getting her father and the opium dealer arrested for consuming and smuggling opium illegally. Indranath helped her not only because he was attracted to her and wanted to marry her, but also because he felt pity towards Eliman and regarded it as a moral imperative to save her from the ill-fated marriage.

All four of the women, namely; Giribala, Durga, Saru Gossainee, and Eliman all turn to Indranath when in crisis. Indranath too, is a lot more tolerant with these characters than other male characters in the novel. He openly opposes traditional practices and raises his dissecting voice against established dogmatic customs that only serves in favour of the patriarchal society.

Indranath with other marginalized people in the novel:

Indranath feels sympathetic towards the marginalized people and condemns the socioeconomical disparity based on a person's caste, gender, and social background. Caste system in India "operates at a very local level with each region having its own way of forming and sustaining caste-based societies" (Bhattacharya, 12). In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Goswami has shed the light on the discrimination faced by the marginalized people in Assam. The Gossains are at the top of the caste hierarchy and rule the Sattr. They are constantly on alarm of being contaminated by the lower caste and sees them with suspicious eyes. On one occasion, Durga shrieks in horror and runs to take another bath after the

shadow of a low-caste white man, Mark, falls on her body. The upper caste and lower caste, both alike, adhere to these values and practices

The old Gossain, Indranath's grandfather, once beat up a low-caste person "with his palm leaf fan only because he sat down thoughtlessly on a wooden stool in the Gossain's house!" (p 218). But Indranath, unlike the other characters, detaches himself from these caste hegemony practices. He spends his leisure time at Bolo's gambling den, mingling with people of lower caste. He befriended Bolo without concerning about his lower status. When a Muslim man died after being attacked by an elephant, the other Brahmins refused to touch the corpse of a lower-class man in fear of being contaminated. As nobody stepped in to help carry the corpse, Indranath fuming with rage yelled, "Shut up! Shut up! If nobody comes forward, I'll myself take away the corpse! We cannot let it remain here all night!" (p 204).

In another situation, when Indranath was studying at Gauhati, he witnessed a live fish enter a small boy's mouth and getting stuck in his throat. The boy, in pain, started vomiting blood. All of the other Gossains' sons hesitated to help him because the small boy belongs to the fisherman caste and because after touching the boy from a low caste they had to take another bath in the chilling month of December. Indranath shouted, "No religion left in this world! No righteousness or humanity left!" (p 312). He then, rammed his fingers into the mouth of the boy and pulled out the fish. The other upper caste people would rather adhere to the dogmatic ideology than have human compassion and save a child from dying.

Even as a kid, Indranath refused to comply with the social conventions and would play with other kids of lower caste. He would playfully climb on the back of a low-caste potter, as he watched with fascination, the potter skilfully shape clay into pottery on the potter's wheel. The potter would ask him to get down from his back with respect, given that the boy is the son of a Gossain and would grow up to become the Adhikar of the Sattrā, and Indranath would hence have to take a bath to decontaminate himself as he touched a low-caste person.

Indranath's rejection to following strict rituals led him to be criticized by other upper caste people. His friend Devdutt, reprimands him for his "strange lack of customs and traditions as required by our religion and high caste" (p 312). When he defends the relationship between Mark Sahib and his sister Giribala, confessing how he wished that the two had united even though Mark is a low-caste person, Devdutt cries out, "Strange! Strange! Blasphemy from a would-be *adhikar's* mouth? I've never come across such a heretical son of an *adhikar!*" (p 311).

Indranath has a deep love for animals as well, which can be concluded after witnessing his relationship with the elephant, Jagannath. An elephant, owned by the Gossains, has run away after being abused and now continues creating havoc around the Sattrā. The elephant is ordered to be gunned down for killing civilians. The looming death of the elephant keeps haunting his thoughts to the point of not being able to proceed with his chores as the future Adhikar. He wishes, "the rogue elephant has vanished into the forest forever and would not return", so that it cannot be caught and killed (p 253). This death of the elephant left him to lead a gloomy life until his death.

Indranath couldn't avoid the restriction and responsibility that was put onto him since his birth. Born to the Adhikar of the Sattrā, he has to comply by a lot of rules even if he wanted to not follow them, as he was next in line as the heir. He has no interest in managing his family-owned land, as he says, "No, no! I am not greedy about land! It's only for the sake of my father. He feels very strongly about it and takes it as a prestige issue for the family. I feel very helpless, really!" (p 320). He feels obligated to carry on his father's name. When the tenant farmers, who were instigated by the communist party, revolt against the Gossain as a result of the Land Ceiling Act, Indranath tries to appease the angry crowd by declaring that "the land will belong to those tenant farmers who have been cultivating it for so many years" (p 328). But before he could say so, he is attacked and killed by Indra, the leader of the communist party and the illegitimate son of Indranath's grandfather. Indranath, till his death, has the desire to help and change the rules and customs so that the marginalized people could benefit from it, but fails to make a difference.

Conclusion:

Through this novel, *The Moth-Eaten howdah of the Tusker*, Indira Goswami has perfectly portrayed the plight of women and other marginalized people. By adding in a character like Indranath, Goswami has presented the viewpoint of a progressive male character living in the feudal society, which is oppressive particularly to widowed women and other lower caste people. Indranath as a person is soft-hearted and sympathizes with people. He feels it as his duty to help those in need, irrespective of their background, gender, religion or caste. Unlike the other male characters in the novel who willingly acquiesce to rigid social and religious customs, Indranath rejects those strict orthodoxic practices. He feels deeply for the women in his family, who are constrained by the rigorous rules and custom. He also believes that every person should be treated equally. He feels disdain towards other upper caste people when they refuse to help someone of the lower caste because of the caste hegemony. Indranath, in the novel, serves as the prime example of a male character with progressive values while living in a conventionally orthodoxic society.

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