

## Indranath, a Young Sattradhikar: The Voice of Passivism

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### Abstract

The present paper tries to probe into the characteristic features of the male protagonist, Indranath through the lenses of a female writer. It also focuses on the weakness,

passivism, timidity and other human virtues of the young protagonist in the sattra society. Indranath is one of the finest male protagonists of Indira Goswami's novel, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. He experiences mental turmoil in a society, mainly dominated by the sattra rituals and feudal system of the pre-independence period of Assam. He faces a powerful picture of change and transition. Being a young Sattradhikar, he has to balance his role between the follies of sattra monastery and the phase of reformation.

**Key words:** Indranath, weakness, timidity, passivism, sattra rituals etc

### **About the Writer**

**Dr. Indira Goswami** (1942-2011) was a versatile writer in the realms of Assamese Literature. She was well-known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami and widely as Mamoni Baideo. She belongs to the period of the Twentieth Century during the transitional period of British Colonialism. At the tender age of twenty-five, she became a widow and experienced all the harsh realities of life. Her literary world deals with the theme of oppression and subjugation of the marginalized section of society, especially women and widows. She focuses on women and the cultural and political construct of the Assamese society. She also tries to change social structures through her literary endeavors. Because of her remarkable contribution to the literary world, she received many prestigious awards like the Sahitya Akademi Award (1982), Bharat Nirman Award (1989), Katha National Award for Literature (1993), Jnanpith Award (2000) and Padma Shri (2002).

### ***The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker***

*The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is a critically acclaimed novel of Dr. Indira Goswami. It deals with the issues of women, especially widows in Sattra culture society. It mirrors Goswami's own childhood miseries, her widow life and social deprivation of women by sattra system. The novel is originally published in Assamese in 1988, set in Amronga Sattra in the South Kamrup, during the pre-independence period of Assam. Dealing with the social issues of women suffering in a Vaishnavite Sattra culture, the novelist portrays a rural society of post-colonial Assam. She portrays a society which is deeply influenced by the Sattra monastery of Assam. In fact, she herself belongs to the same monastery and observes that the weaker and marginalized sections are the women. They have been treated so like the subaltern group in society. Ever since she observes such types of injustice and oppression,

she has become the voice of the marginalized class. The writer tries to bring out the follies of the sattra culture of Assam with the objectives of bringing about social change in the society. The novel revolves around lives of three female characters — Durga, Saru Gossaine and Giribala. They represent three generations of widows and their journey of life. They all belong to the sattra family and abide by the strict rituals and norms of the sattra society. Through the lives of three widows, Goswami focuses on women and the cultural and social structure of the sattra society. “The novel makes a lively description of the conservatism in the independence era. Goswami's pen tells us how conservatism destroyed all the emotions and feelings of a Brahmin widow. The burning examples of the victims of this system are Durga, Giribala, Shoru Goswami, etc” (Saikia 686).

### **Indranath, a Young Sattradhikar**

In addition to it, Goswami also created one of the finest male protagonists in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. Here I would like to quote, “The novel deals with the tragic tale of high-class Brahmin widows, belong to the Gossains of Sattra in South Kamrup in Assam. While narrating the traumas of the widows, Goswami also picturized a young protagonist with unique moral values” (Vanitha, T & R.Krishanveni 98). He is Indranath, the son of a Sattradhikar, a kind-hearted and sensitive youth, who is always concerned for his society and people. He fights throughout his life for the betterment of society and with the hope of reforming his society. In the process, he lost his sister Giribala, who had been the victim of his own Sattra rituals. He has to leave his paternal aunt in a pitiable condition. Finally, he lost his own life due to the conflict with the tenant farmers, who are already fed up with the existing feudal system.

### **Conflict Between Traditionalism and Liberalism**

Indranath and his sister Giribala are two major protagonists in the novel, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. They belong to the orthodox Brahmin family in Amjonga, a rural village of South Kamrup, Assam during pre-independence period. Their father was the Satradhikar of the social institution and he is the future head (adhikar) of the Sattra. The conflict between the norms of the old orthodox society and the phase of reformation of the new transitional ideas go through an extreme physical turmoil. The brother-sister duo of

Indranath and Giribala remain in the same side struggling and giving away their lives in tragic circumstances.

There is religious orthodoxy for the widows, who are treated as the subordinate group of society. The novel revolves around the desires and struggles of three widows. His sister Giribala, his paternal aunt Durga, and another aunt Saru Gohainne all belong to the family of Sattra monastery of Assam. Both Durga and Giribala have been living widow lives in their paternal home together. While Saru Gossainee is the third widow, being the senior member of the family, she has been living alone reconciling her lot. She is quite familiar with the social custom and rituals of the Sattra culture. She seems to have no issues at all with the culture and nicely maintaining her land and wealth. They all become widows at the early stage of their lives and suffer due to the strict patriarchal norms of society. Indranath is the prime male character who closely observes the social and political environment of the society.

### **Indranath's Concern for Widows**

Indranath seems very concerned about his own society and rituals of the monastery system. The sufferings of two widows - Giribala and Durga give him mental tension. Both belong to his own family, just as his own sister Giribala and his paternal aunt Durga. His mind is roused with pity for his sister Giribala and aunt Durga. Durga is a widow around forty years old who returns from her husband's house expecting that someone will come to bring her back to Chikarhati. Durga has been receiving some harsh treatment from her in-laws, mentally and physically. She has to go through various strict norms for being a widow. Besides, her mother-in-law accuses Durga that she brought the shadow of death to their house and killed her son. She even accused Durga's father, the Gossain of Amranga of manipulating his daughter's horoscope to get her married to her son. In this way, Durga passively accepts all and becomes a voiceless creature. She is also not permitted to attend auspicious ceremonies and occasions. But she never made any complain and accepted all peacefully. Neither Indranath nor his father could do and better her life. In this regard, Malavika Sharma rightly remarks, "The sufferings of Giribala and her aunt Durga at the hands of societal rules and customs reflects the selfishness, the meanness, and the insensitivity of the people in the society. Here, the author clearly points out to the dubious nature of the people who on the one hand are sympathetic towards women and on the other curb the freedom of the women." (23)

## **Indranath's Submissive Nature**

Durga's nephew Indranath took her to her brother's home to look at her physical condition. But no one came as promised from her husband's house to take her back and this made her mentally weak. She also feels very hurt and after losing her ornaments she becomes more disheartened as her dream has been shattered to offer her husband's funeral bones to the holy river. She kept all the ornaments to Saru Gossainee in her safe custody, but Mahidhar took them away. Thus, she lost her ornaments. Her last wish remained unfulfilled, and this made her mentally and physically weak. Slowly and steadily, she developed a serious disease in her that made her into a skeleton. Indranath tried to take her to the hospital at Guwahati but failed. Instead, she would prefer to die in her dead husband's house as it is her religious duty and gave her some dignity as well. In fact, she lost everything, lost her land and gold. As the ceiling is coming Durga's land from Chikarhati also sold way. Durga could do nothing but accept everything peacefully. She becomes a voiceless creature who does not know the language of rebellion. Her activities show how deeply the rituals patriarchal society is rooted to her mind. Her nephew Indranath, the future Adhikar of Sattrra, seems indifferent to her issues and could not do anything for his aunt. He never seems to take any initiative to back Durga to her husband's home on time. He could not take any action against Mahidhar, the companion of Saru Gossainee who stole Durga's ornaments. The submissive nature of Indranath very often makes him an action-less man.

Instead, Indranath used to blame his aunt Durga that she made a serious mistake leaving her in-law's house. He is even pessimistic that no one would come to return Durga back to her husband's house. He says: "Durga aunty, leaving your husband's house at Chikarhati was a serious mistake. Now you won't get even a single penny of your share of the property." (10)

## **Indranath's Passivism**

Mark Sahib, a philanthropist from a foreign country comes to do some research work on Sattrra culture of Assam. He collects some ancient manuscripts, but he finds it difficult to read the scripts as these are written on *sanchi* leaves and also, he has little knowledge of Assamese language. In order to lighten the sorrows of his sister Giribala, Indranath allows her to be the company of Mark in finding the manuscripts for his work. Indranath wishes her sister to live freely and change her tragic mindset. Giribala is also very happy finding a

company to express her sorrows and feelings that she stored for long in her mind. But young Giribala could not resist her physical desire and was slowly and steadily attracted towards Mark. But he becomes aware of Giribala's physical desire and tries to reconcile Giribala. He tries to pacify her saying that the desire that has no end, can't be fulfilled and it is better to leave it to God. Mark Sahib too tries his best to help Giribala to come out from the misery of life. He never wishes to let her live in misery. He discusses it with Indranath also and offers some suggestions to Indranath. He says: "Isn't it possible to arrange something for her? To occupy her mind? Such as reading and writing. Something that can help her to have a firm hold on her life? She is so young!" (260)

Society could not provide any better settlement for Giribala. Indranath too never allows Giribala to go with the Christian Mark Sahib as he cannot ignore the social custom of the sattrra. He seems to be concentrated on his ideas and has pain within and suffers silently. He chooses to think passively rather than doing actively. Indranath's passivism is well expressive in the following lines: "There are so many things which Indranath did not like. They were beyond the limit of his tolerance, beyond his ability to act. This too was such a pain, which he had to suffer silently". (261)

### **To Sum Up**

The novel, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* by Indira Goswami is a genuine record of finest human tendencies and traditions. Indranath is a fine example of an exploration of human tendencies. He is a compassionate and psychic youth who belongs to the last phase of the monastery of the feudal system. He closely observes the ill rituals of the monastery and its impact on women, especially widows. He has seen the victims of old orthodox society. Indranath is a man of Gossain family and was always concerned for his own people. His changed mind-set allows him to oppose the follies of society. He is against the evils of caste differences, social discrimination, oppression of widows and injustice. His language of protest seems to be passive, not active. Most of the time, he used to think about his ideas. He is unable to provide his sister Giribala a meaningful life and has to sacrifice her life in tragic circumstances. He is unable to fight for the right for Durga, when she needed it most. He could not save his own life and was unable to make the tenants understand his empathy for them. His passive thinking subdues his activity.

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