

**A SAGA OF SOUTH KAMRUP: ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE ASSAMESE NOVEL  
UNE KHOWA HOWDA BY INDIRA GOSWAMY-A CURSORY STUDY**

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Mamoni Raisom Goswami, also known as Indira Goswami, is an eminent and bold woman writer of Assam and her novel, *Une Khowa Howda*, originally written in Assamese blatantly portrays the social problems deep rooted. The meaning of the title is 'The Moth Eaten Saddle(Howda) of the Tusker'. She has later translated it into English as *A Saga of South Kamarup* the backdrop of which is a Vaishnavite Sattrra. The writer focuses on many issues among which the miserable status Brahmin widows were subjected to in an orthodox Brahmin set up stands out. The gradual deterioration of the feudal institutions which were the strongholds of power and glory for a long period continuing up to the emergence of the independent India, a growth in social consciousness and communist revolt against the established system of feudalism in Kamarup, a remote district in Assam, also appear as the major themes. Parallel run other motifs like an attempt to unite the East and West through a love story, depiction of the underprivileged inmates of sattrra and villagers, superstitions, animals offered in sacrifice, bonded labour, the threat of opium addiction, gender bias-discrimination of girl children and their education, *Sati* and the clearly demarcated divisions in caste system.

The presenter aims to explain how the author captures the societal concerns in her lens and vividly deals with them in the post-colonial context. The author may not have suggested solutions for the persistent evils but certainly awakened the sensibility of readers towards the moths eating up the society furtively by her detailed analysis.



Indira Goswami, one of the most eminent women writers in India, hails from Assam and her is also known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami to readers of Assam. She declared boldly, "My two main subjects are migrant labourers and widows." It is so ironical that though she was born and brought up in an orthodox Brahmin background, she transcended the religious and social barriers in matters of her own life. She married out of the her Assamese community into a South Indian Iyengar household, to Madhavan Raison Iyengar, and involved in issues barricaded to a woman writer during her times and paved the way for writers with a similar vision. She was a relentless crusader for human values and social justice, according to Amar Krishna Pal (pg.1). Despite her elite milieu she remained with the underprivileged groups.

Her marriage in to the South Indian community was the consequence of a number of sudden turn of events in her. She suffered from bouts of depression since her childhood and had a desire to end her life often. Her father's death plunged her in to deeper depression as she was much attached to him. She attempted suicide and even her stars reversed and astrologers predicted very bad days ahead of her. But her husband gave her a new lease of bright and happy life and as Fate willed it he died in a car accident after two years of marital life. Therefore, once again her life became terrible and she was dependent on sedatives. She noted her bitter experiences as a widow in her *An Unfinished Autobiography (Adhalekha Dastaveja)*. Her Professor Upendra Chandra Lekharu at Cotton college motivated her to take up research work in Vrindavan and wriggle out of her cell of solitude and sadness. She was torn between opting for death or ascetic life and finally decided to articulate her anguish and concern related to many social mores. She narrated her experiences of a widow in her novel, *Neela Kanthi Braja*. She took up Ramayana Studies and started a fruitful phase of her life by involving herself fully into teaching and writing besides focusing on the marginalized sections of the society. Nevertheless, she had to receive bouquets and brickbats for her forthright style and courageous voice through her writings.

*A Saga of South Kamarup* was translated by the author herself from the original Assamese *Une Khowa Howda* (1988) in 1993. The meaning of the original title is *The Moth Eaten Saddle (Howdah) of the Tusker*. The novel touches upon many issues like the oppression of the Brahmin widows in a traditionally conservative society, the decadence of feudal lordship socially and economically, the flux of life between pre-independence and post-independence India, communist activists' revolt against feudalism in Kamrup, a remote district in Assam, love between the East and the West, misery of lower inmates like the disciples, tenant farmers, the mahouts, the bandhas and other villagers in satras or feudal institutions. Besides these are found social beliefs in superstitions like sacrifice of animals, Sati, and other decaying factors of civilization like bonded labour, illiteracy, ignorance, servility, prevention of girl education, general gender bias, patriarchy, addiction to opium and caste system hampering the progress in diverse ways strongly. "There are many possible ways of seeing the narrative of South Kamrup - as the story of widows, as a saga of the ryot-landowner conflict, as a spectacle of the relationship between man and woman with all the attendant complications of caste and social hierarchies. Indira powerfully exposes the hypocrisy of Brahmins, their greed and their lopsided values, and the many ambivalences of their attitudes towards the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak." (Basu, Nandita)

#### **THE OPPRESSION/REPRESSION OF WIDOWS**

The writer mainly focuses on Brahmin widows in Assam as she had personal suffering in that aspect. She delineated the what-to-do and-not-kind of orders imposed on the widows who were confined to an austere regime of life style in all domains like dress, food and the general behaviour. Their very presence seemed to be inauspicious and were not even to be touched by the married women with husbands alive.

It has to be borne in mind that not only widows but all women were treated in a humiliating manner. While spouses controlled wives even unmarried girls were under constant monitoring by



their own womenfolk who wanted to keep their virginity under check.

#### **THE DECADENCE OF THE SATTRAS OR THE FEUDAL INSTITUTIONS:**

The Adhikars were opulent land owners of Assam who were powerful and held in high esteem. They had tenant farmers who had to pay taxes through their nose. Rich merchants and Adhikars maintained elephants and indulge in elephant poaching too. They were worshipped by people and treated as incarnations of Gosai (Lord Krishna) or Gossains. Gradually the scenario shifted to that of a protest due to the awakening of tenant farmers by the Communists and taxes were not paid by them and the sudden change of mindset not only brought down the glory of the Adhikars but also made the working class poorer but richer in awareness of times around. The Revolt of the Peasants thus led to a major change against the bourgeois set up.

#### **FLUX BETWEEN POST-INDEPENDENCE AND POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA**

The story set in the backdrop of 1948, there could be seen many changes in a nation granted self governance. For almost one and half centuries many people in India had become addicts to opium eating and lost health, wealth and wisdom. The post independent India witnessed the vice and many Congress volunteers undertook a house to house visit to identify opium addicts and rehabilitate them to the main stream of life. The Amendment of the Opium Act 1949 made it possible for the volunteers.

#### **ATTEMPTS BY MISSIONARIES FOR CONVERSION**

The author spoke about the American Baptist Mission which came to Assam in 1836 with a purpose of converting people of Brahmaputra into Christianity, in vain. People were loyal to Vaishnavism and so the missionaries engaged themselves in collecting the ancient Tantrik manuscripts.

#### **DOMINANCE OF PATRIARCHY**

The Assamese women were trained to treat their husband as a deity even after his death. They had no say in property matters and a quite a number of Gossainees passed away into the eternal world without even stepping out of their domestic world.

#### **FUSION BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST**

The novelist attempted to fuse the East and the West through an episode of love between Mark, a young Christian missionary and Giribala, the widowed daughter of the Gossain and though the latter wanted to convert for the sake of her lover, her attempts were futile and ended in her death eventually.

#### **PREDICAMENT OF THE SATTRA**

Indira Goswami explained about the bonded labour system prevalent and the labourers were transferred from one Adhikari to another. Respectable farmers turned out to be opium addicts and landed up in penury. A picture of total degradation on all fronts.

#### **DEPICTION OF CULTURE**

The writer brought out the rich cultural tapestry of Assam along with the bleak economic and stifling social set up. Various angles of human life were caught in her lens like traditions, religious beliefs, food habits, attire, housing style, ornaments to mention the major ones. Festivals like Chandi Puja, Basanti Puja and rituals like Amoti were observed and Assam remained a place of Tantrik practices till Saint Srimantha Sankaradeva ushered in a reformist movement. Child marriages were in practice and girls were married off before attaining puberty. Amoti was a frightful ritual for widows during which they were forbidden to attend even calls of nature. Similarly, the process of sacrificing animals and burying them in an inhuman way. During the death ritual live goats were offered in sacrifice, buried with head first so that they died of suffocation. Illiteracy, ignorance and backwardsness were in the forefront simultaneously giving place to the related superstitions. Caste system and the feeling of superior or inferior castes existed resulting in untouchability.

#### **A BRIEF GIST OF THE NOVEL**

In the first, Indranath Gossain, the successor of the Amranga sattra in Kamrup, is introduced as meeting a leper begging for food and shelter, on his way back home from the gambling point. At home two widowed women, his mother—the old Gossainee and his paternal aunt Durga wait for him eagerly. Here itself many restrictions laid on widows



come out-they are not allowed to venture out of their house nor claim any share in the property of their dead husband. In the next chapter the issue of opium eating and the activities of the Communists are described. He comes across Eliman the daughter of the host of the opium den and feels an irresistible attraction for her beauty. The third chapter brings Giribala, the widowed sister of Indranath, back home after her husband's death. Callous women from the neighbourhood gather not to sympathize but derive satanic pleasure out of her calamity by probing into her personal affairs much to the displeasure of Giribala. Her reluctance to yield to their pseudo concern evokes more sarcastic comments from them till she shouts back at them.

In the fourth chapter Indranath comes across volunteers from Congress party motivating drug addicts to quit opium. He passes by Eliman's house and on his way he is met by the old caretaker of Eliman who pleads with him to rescue the girl from being declared as an outcaste on the grounds that she is not married as she has attained her puberty. Indranath entertains the idea of marrying her himself but is advised not to by his uncle. In the next chapter, Mark, the young Christian missionary comes in to the plot. He collects data of the history of the sattras. So he collects manuscripts and gets Giribala's help for the translation of the scripts and in the process they like each other.

In the sixth chapter details of Saru Gossainee, the thirty year old young widow and the paternal aunt of Indranath are given. She depends on Mahidhar who is her disciple. The instance of Giribala being bitten by a snake while searching for manuscripts and Mark rushes to rescue her. Chapter seven describes how a woman, especially a widow is expected to behave. In the eighth chapter the arrests of opium smugglers take place. In chapter nine, Giribala is tempted to eat mutton curry on the day of her grand father's annual death ceremony and gets beaten by her mother because non vegetarian food is prohibited for widows. She is asked to get purified through some rituals. The tenth chapter shows the revolt of peasants against the tax collector. The next chapter shows Giribala's confession of her love for Mark and her disgust with

the customs. The mad elephant Jagannath spares Giribala by not attacking her.

Chapter twelve reveals the true wicked nature of Mahidhar who pretends loyalty to her but usurps her property. The next chapter sees Giribala as a sad figure ready to leave for her husband's house without him. Mark is distressed on hearing this but is helpless. The fourteenth chapter describes Mark still in a daze. To his shock, Giribala comes to his hut and shares her sorrow and her desire for him. People find them and suspect they have an illicit affair and ask her to go through Agni Pariksha to cleanse herself. Giribala remains in the hut set on fire and burns herself. In the last chapter, Mark leaves the place. The novel starts again in 1981 when things have changed remarkably in the external world as well as the mindset of the people.

This is how Indira Goswami presents Assam in the post-colonial perspective, taking a gamut of deep rooted evils in those days and how they continued even after independence. Political freedom is not adequate; there must be open mindedness and psychological maturity to create a peaceful and harmonious coexistence of men and women irrespective of barriers of any kind.

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