Mamoni Raisom Goswami more famously known as Indira Goswami is a celebrated name in the Modern Assamese literature. She was born into a Brahmin family in Guwahati, Assam. She was a great poet, editor, scholar, professor and writer. She wrote numerous Novels, Short Stories and Poems. She has written fifteen novels and has published three collections of short stories. Her novels and short stories have been translated into various languages in India.

Her various works are, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, *The Chenab’s Current*, *The Blue Necked Braja*, *Shadow of the Dark God* etc. Her Short Stories Collections include *The Journey*, *Parasu’s Well*, *Dwarka and his Gun* etc. She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for her Assamese novel *Rusted Sword* in the year 1982. The writer is famous not only because of her writings where she dealt with the problems of her own state but she also transcends the boundaries and writes about the plights of the common man irrespective of the regional limits.

She suffered from depression since her childhood. In the opening pages of her autobiography, *The Unfinished Autobiography*, she mentions her inclination to jump into the Crinoline Falls located near their house in Shillong. Repeated suicide attempts marred her youth. After the sudden death of her husband, Madhavan Raisom Ayengar, in a car accident in the Kashmir region of India, after only eighteen months of marriage, she became addicted to heavy doses of sleeping tablets.
Once brought back to Assam, she joined the Goalpara Sainik School as a teacher and she claims that she wrote just to live and that otherwise it would not have been possible for her to go on living. She was encouraged by Kirti Nath Hazarika to write as long back she had published her first short stories when she was only thirteen years old in a literary journal he edited. Goswami’s writings focused on the suffering of the disadvantaged section of the society. She understood the joy and pathos of the common people. Her experiences in Kashmir and Madhya Pradesh, where her husband had worked as an engineer, is revealed in her novels Ahiron and The Chehnab's Current, respectively.

Today, she is one of the famous writers of the North East India, her writings unveil the facts deeply rooted in the social system. Malaya Khaund in her book Indira Goswami: a Critical Study of Her Writings says, “The greatness of a novel lies mainly on two points, - authenticity and familiarity of the Subject matter…..All her novels are products of intimate personal experience and familiarity of the subject matter.” Goswami is also well known for her attempts to structure social change and also brings out the sufferings of women in the society due to orthodox beliefs and practices.

She is honoured with various awards like ‘Bharat Nirman Award’ in 1989, ‘Sauhardya Award’ of Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan of Government of India.in 1992, ‘Katha National Award’ for Literature, ‘Kamal Kumari Foundation National Award’ in 1996, ‘Padama Shri Award’ in 2002 (which she refused to accept).

---

‘Principal Prince Claus Award’ in 2008 ‘Krishnakanta Handique Award’ and ‘Asom Sahitya Sabha Award’ in 2009. Goswami was also Awarded as the ‘Ambassador for Peace’ by the Inter Religious and International Federation for World Peace and she also got The International Tulsi Award from Florida International University for her book, *Ramayana From Ganga To Brahmaputra*.

Goswami’s concern for the society is clearly revealed in her works, she writes not just to state the social facts but with zeal to bring change. Her novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, published in 1988, brings out various social issues like the caste system and the position of women in the society and her sufferings as a widow. The novel is a concrete, detailed and authentic rendering of a *vaishnavite* household in Assam which heads a *Satra*. A *Satra* is a religious institution which looks after the spiritual well-being of the people who owe religious allegiance to it. *Gosain* heads a *Satra* and his wife is known as *Gosani*. The head of a *Vaishnavite Satra* is a Guru to his people and to his disciples and is considered as an incarnation of God himself. The novel deals with the state of a *Vaishnavite Satra* at the time of British Colonial rule. The novel looks back to the end of the nineteenth century and even earlier, but its main focus falls on the state of affairs at the *Satra* and the villages surrounding it.

The people of this household consider them superior and are considered as head of the whole village. In the novel we see that how the *Gossain* family demonstrates the operations of the caste theories within the *Satra* where steps are taken to maintain the purity from the lower caste people. The extensive feudal
land property gives the family economic and social authority over the people of Satra. The lower caste people within the Satra are subservient to the Gossain family and offer services in exchange of food and spiritual guidance. Goswami shows how the people of higher caste try to maintain distance from these lower caste people as they believe that their touch could pollute them. We see in the novel how all family servants and the workers in the fields do not have access to go inside the Gossain household as they belong to the lower caste. These people have to do penance for inadvertently committing heinous crimes such as standing close or accidently touching a Brahmin. As a Punishment, they are forced to give away their hard earned money to the temple priest.

Not only these people from Lower strata of the society but foreigners too were treated as untouchables. We see how Mark Sahib who came to conduct research work on Assamese Satra tradition was treated as untouchable by these people of Satra family. He was given a small hut in the elephants’ grazing ground. When he enters the Gossain house, he is made to sit on a wooden chair in the verandah of the house. Durga and Giribala come out to meet him and suddenly Durga finds to her horror that Mark Sahib’s shadow has fallen on her body. This polluted her as a firangi’s shadow fell on her and she took second bath to clean herself once again.

Like Durga, the other members of the family with the exception of Indranath and Giribala, both brother and sister, are proponents of strict caste hierarchy. Indranath, who is the son of Gossaine and is expected to become
Head of the Satra in future, finds it difficult to accept the laws and traditions of the Satra. Gossainee, Indranath's mother, supports Durga as she cautions Inranath, the future head, for mixing freely with the lower caste people. He falls in love with a girl Eliman of lower caste but due to his position and the rules of the Satra he fails to marry her. He is bound by his religion which does not take feelings or passions into account.

The caste discrimination goes beyond simple purification rituals and become rigid in many other forms that result in a sharp decline in basic human compassion. We see how a fisherman while selling fish, pours the live fishes on the floor, and one of it manages to get into a boy's mouth and got stuck in his throat. The boy was in intense pain, but due to the fear of bathing again in winter's chill after touching the boy, nobody came forward to help him. Indranath, despite suffering from Malaria and being bedridden, jumps out of his bed, put his hand inside boy's mouth and pulls the fish from his throat. Nothing could be more precious than a human life, but these so called upper castes seemed to be obsessed with the vanity and rigidity of their superior caste status and fail utterly as human being.

While describing Indranath's childhood days Goswami reveals how the caste constantly determines and distinguishes social boundaries within the Satra. During his childhood days, Indranath is unaware of his higher caste status and mixes freely with the lower caste children. He is caught by his aunt Durga to be purified from the touch of lower caste people. As Goswami writes,
Many times, he would dodge the rigid routine of a Gossain’s son

and run away to play with the children of Fisherman, Potters,

Cobblers and like the clad only in a Gamucha tied around his

waist.\textsuperscript{2}

The same happens to Giribala, Indranath’s sister, she as a child used to play in the lap of their cart driver, who belonged to a Potter Caste, Giribala’s mother drags her away to the house and scolds her for playing with a man of lower caste.

The caste discrimination is practiced not only by the members of the Satra family but the other higher caste Brahmins too are a part of this. Giribala, the widowed daughter of the family, once recalls how the Brahmins fought over the bhojan Dakshina at the first memorial service of her dead grandfather. The Novelist writes,

At the time of first shraddha of the old gossain, where land, urium, wood cots, rice baskets, endi chaddar were distributed, the Brahmins had started quarreling among themselves. After sometime it ended in fisticuffs and complete chaos. An arm of a Brahmin was fractured and he had to be admitted to a hospital in

Thus we see that Goswami brings out the class-caste conflicts in the novel prevailing at that time in the society. These incidents clearly bring out the harsh realities which are so prominent in our social system that they cannot be ignored and become a cause for suffering for most of the people, not only belonging to the lower caste but sometimes higher castes as well.

Another theme prominent in the Novel is status of women and their sufferings. We see how women belonging to all age groups are targeted and victimized. Unmarried teenage girls are held in contempt by the entire community. Old and married women are always on the lookout for unmarried girls who have hit the puberty as they believed these girls are akin to criminals who have horribly offended their Gods. As soon as they have located the offender, they brandish the girl and her entire family as an outcaste. Eliman is a twelve year old girl whose only escape from punishment of attaining puberty is to marry a Brahmin, who is in fact an opium smuggler. The girl is punished as she refuses to marry him or another man who has been married twice before.

The married women also are not able to escape the dark fate that the laws of community have assigned them. They are continually cheated by their husbands and abused by their in-laws. People like Brahmins acted as mouthpieces of their religion and constantly preached woman that a husband's house is like a heaven for her and if she tries to attempt to cross its boundaries,

---

she will not be accepted by the society. The fear of social censure and the absence of financial freedom forced these women to give their silent assent to their own victimization. Yet they felt that they were more fortunate than women who are widows.

Goswami has presented the pitiful existence of widowed women of the Satra, who were not allowed to leave their homes and are supposed to keep themselves hidden as it is believed that their sight or touch may bring troubles or misfortunes to others. Some customary rituals of widowhood are continuous fasting, following a strict eating regime which includes abstaining from cooked food, and surviving on raw food such as vegetables for days, sleeping on a bed of bamboo, wearing areca (the nut tree’s bark) as one’s shoes, bathing and undergoing more purification rituals if their body is touched even by a shadow of the low-caste man and so on.

Widowed girls are deprived of education as they believe that it is of no use to them because they have to remain enclosed in the four walls of the house. In the novel there are four widows, older Gossainnee, Durga, Soru Gosaini and Girirbala. All four belong to the Gosain family of the Satra. Beginning with the older Gossainnee we see she led a troubled life. Marriage to a rich philanderer brought grief in her life and widowhood has brought her more worries, be those in the shape of an indifferent son or a widowed daughter. She is burdened with the task of conforming to the prescribed religious rituals and making sure that people around her do the same.
Durga, a relative of older Gossainee is thrown out of her marital home after her husband’s death. Her in-laws seized all her property and abandoned her at the maternal house. However, Durga continuous to harbour the hope that her husband’s family will come back one day and escort her back home with respect. She does not even fight a legal battle to obtain her share of the property because her clan believes that respectable women should never step into the court of law as the gaze of thieves and criminals would make them impure. Living a cloistered life and fasting continuously eventually made her vulnerable to Tuberculosis.

Giribala, daughter of the old Gosseinee is also a widow and who is sent back to her maternal house. Even after her marriage she was not happy as her husband Latu Goswami did not care a bit for his wife and told her on the first night after marriage that he has relations with other women and he will not change his ways. As he tells her in the novel:

I love women. I like their company. When I roamed with the Jatra party through all these places- Bardowa Samaria, Dakhala, I had taken tea from the hands of low caste women.4

Total lack of love on Husband’s part has now resulted in her not having any loving memories to fall back upon. Her in-laws come to reclaim her after some time but she refuses to go because she realizes that her life would become even more miserable. Her brother Indranath however helps her cast off her

---

melancholy by getting her to be engaged in the task of helping an American philanthropist named Mark with his scholarly work. Giribala is unable to carry on with the restraints which the Satra imposes on her and feels an attraction towards Mark.

As Goswami writes:

For the first time Giribala noted that the eye of the White man were like the soft pulp of the ripe ‘Leteku’ fruit. His head full of curly golden hair like the hive of a honey bee.5

Her desire in life is to get love and she demands that love from Mark. But Giribala is forced to commit suicide towards the end of the novel, as she finds no way to break out of the shackles of the ruthless feudal Brahmanical system, which has suppressed the widows all along. She runs away to Mark’s hut, the village men catch them together and accuse them of carrying on a clandestine affair. They want to purify the girl through rituals by using water and fire. Giribala, however refuses to perform any ritual and immolates herself in the fire. Her death is a big proof that the suppression and suffering which these women went through was not only harsh but also inhuman.

The only woman, who fought against the male dominated Satra system and yet tries to survive within it, is Saru Gosani. She takes care of her lands with the help of Mohidhar Babu in order to be financially and economically independent. This makes her different form Durga, her sister-in-law, who leads a traditional life of a Gosaini and refuses to claim her land. Unlike Giribala, she has beautiful memories of her husband or her married life. After her husband’s death she again falls in love with Mohindar babu, who is a Brahmin but she cheats her at the end.

Thus we see that how Indira Goswami in her novel has revealed the various mal practices which infect the society and become cause of various social issues and problems resulting in suicides, murders and acts driven by lust and greed. Religious rituals too are imposed and made complicated and people are forced to follow them. Orthodox beliefs and lives of women due to it are made miserable. Caste and class conflicts are clearly shown by the novelist which act like a burden on every strata of the society. In an interview with Shubhajit Bhadra

In her other novel The Man from Chinnamasta, we see some other issues which come up and act as poison for the society and its people. This novel was published in 2005. In this we see how Indira Goswami speaks against thousand years old rituals of animal sacrifice prominent in Pre Independent Kamrup district of Assam. The story revolves around the old kamakhya temple where numerous priests used to participate in the practices like animal sacrifices, and supported it. They even believed in the practice of human sacrifice.
The title of the novel points towards the great ascetic Jatadhari, who worships Ma Chinnamasta like other priests and Tantriks with his full devotion. He is a well read person with knowledge of Vedas and Puranas and especially *Kalika Purana*. He meditates for long hours and during that he is unaware of every happening around him. His information related to his background reveals that he was once a student of history in Benaras Hindu University. Later he went to North Kashi after his initiation as an ascetic; he meditated for long time in a cave in Vindhyas. Since then he felt an urge to stop killing animals as the novelist writes:

> It was said that during this period he had lived one with nature.

> Venomous serpents had nested in his matted locks, wild birds had perched on his arms. Respectful of all creatures, Jatadhari could not bear the sight of blood at the Goddesses' sacred abode.⁶

In the beginning of the novel Jatadhari is introduced to us as a well learned ascetic who has several disciples and followers. Some of his followers used to worship him like God. One of his favourite disciples was Ratnadhar (son of a temple priest) whom Jatadhari brought out of a life where he was suffering from problem of fits.

---

Animal Sacrifice has been an age old practice in old Kamakhya temple since thousand of years. In fact, despite various efforts to stop these slaughtering of animals, even today these rituals are carried out. People and priests in this temple believe that the ten goddesses of tantric shakti needs to be worshiped with blood. As one of the tantrik from the temple says in the Novel:

Deliverance comes only when sacrifice is offered. Sacrifice alone will lead you to Heaven. Mark my words. A buffalo's blood quenches the Goddesses' thirst for one hundred years. And when a follower offers the blood of his own body she is satisfied for one thousand years.7

They support animal sacrifice strongly and any logical explanation related to this practise is unacceptable to these people. Thousands of Buffaloes, Goats, Ducks etc are sacrificed on the Goddesses’ altar. People with this superstition that their troubles and problems of life will be taken away by the Goddess, sacrifice these animals. Even in the marriages of their daughters and sisters, people bring animals to be sacrificed as by doing this they think that now Ma Chinnamasta will give them a happy life. People suffering from diseases also sacrifice animals so that they can be cured. The Tantriks even fooled people by demanding a piece of flesh from the bodies of people as we see in the novel,

7 Goswami, Indira. The Man from Chinnamasta. New Delhi: Katha Publications. 2006. 93. Print
The Kalika Purana says that a devotee should not offer more than four times the amount of blood that can be held in lotus petal. If he offered a tiny bit of flesh – the size of a sesame seed – from his chest, his prayers would have been answered within six months.

The sick child would have been recovered by now.\(^8\)

Jatadhari, who is totally against these practices, decides to protest against animal sacrifice with his disciples like Dorothy Brown and Ratnadhar.

Mrs. Brown was a British woman whose husband falls in love with a women of khasi tribe and has an illegitimate child. Dorothy brown breaks when she hears about this affair of her husband and comes to Jatadhari as a disciple in order to attain Peace. Jatadhari keeps her in a small house near Brahmputra known as Darbhanga house.

Jatadhari tried to give logical explanations to stop animal sacrifice from the Purana through which the other priests believe that Goddess needs blood to be worshipped. He says that Goddess is pleased to be worshiped with flowers and garlands instead of blood. He supports his argument through an excerpt from

\(^8\) Goswami, Indira. *The Man from Chinnamasta*. New Delhi: Katha Publications. 2006. 86. Print
Kalika Purana. He says, ‘Ma! Ma! Ma! You are glorious in your own blood, Ma! Adorn yourself in robes of flowers.’

The plight of animals is also graphically shown in the novel as they keep trying to escape their miserable fate. “The buffalo had freed itself from its tormentors. It charged straight into the gathering. In the chaos that ensued, the crowd scattered, everyone running helter-skelter.” Jatadhari decided to protest against this animal sacrifice and made a petition to be signed by the mass and then to be presented to the chief priest for his approval. He gave the responsibility of getting the petition signed to his disciple Ratnadhar, they invited students from Cotton College to be a part of their team and together stop the ritual. Jatadhari went away with Dorothy Brown and promised to come back on Deodhwani (a major festival where thousands of animals are sacrificed to the Goddess.)

Ratnadhar’s love Bidhibala came back to his town as her father was getting her married to a rich but old man. Bidhibala’s father brought a young calf to be sacrificed in the wedding of her daughter. But Bidhibala was deeply attached to that animal as it grew in her care only. She was extremely sad for this sacrifice and it stirred her soul when she thought that it will be killed because of...
her. She requests Ratnadhar to untie that animal and leave it in some safe place.

She says

Listen carefully. People say, you are the only who secretly releases the animals brought for sacrifice. Please let this buffalo go so I won’t have to watch it being sacrificed. I haven’t slept for nights at this thought. I’ve seen it grow up.¹¹

Ratnadhar, along with students and disciples, got the petition signed and many people supported this decision of stopping animal sacrifice as registers were piled up with the signatures of common mass. Despite these efforts in the festival of Deodhwni several animals were killed brutally in the name of sacrifice. Various tantriks and priests slaughtered these animals on the altar of Goddess. They drank their blood danced like mad people and were given the respect like God by the people. The novelist shows us this harsh picture as she describes:

A devotee pushed through the crowd and offered a dove to the deodhe.

He tore off its neck with his teth and drank the blood, then threw the carcass into the crowd.¹²

---

Dorothy Brown, who saw this brutality, was taken aback and remembers how Jatadhari told her that killing an animal or bird with bare hands is a cardinal sin. After the return, Jatadhari took the petition to the Chief priest with a huge crowd following him consisting of students, and disciples. On his way to the temple he was stopped and threatened by hermits. One of them came and started saying, “You fools! The Goddess Kamakhya has quenched her thirst for thousands of years with blood of both human and animals.”

But Jatadhari decided that he will sacrifice his own life today but present the petition to the priest. Petition said that innocent animals should not be dragged to the altar. If needed then devotees should sacrifice their own blood. When the petition was presented to the Chief priest, he demanded from Jatadhari to sacrifice his own blood by cutting a part of his body to prove his demand. Jatadhari sliced off his own flesh from below his navel. Thus Jatadhari made immense efforts to stop this practice. In the end, the novelist leaves us unanswered but with a hope that may be one day these practices will come to an end. As she says, “In the morning the sun rose once more. In the clear light of day, no one could see a trace of blood. Not a single bloodstain remained.”

---


13 Ibid. 182. Print

14 Ibid. 186. Print
Another prominent theme which emerges out in the novel is Women and their sufferings, we see that although Dorothy Brown was not an Assamese woman but her fate was similar to those women only. Her husband betrayed her and she was left alone to suffer, but she took shelter in Jatadhari’s camp to make her life easier. Dorothy was looked by town people as a characterless woman who has illegitimate relationship with Jatadhari. Men didn’t allow their wives to go near her. If a woman was seen talking to her, she was beaten by her family members. Not only the town people, but even her husband suspected her of having relationship with Jatadhari. Her husband Henry Brown sent men to rape her. But when he failed in his attempt, he ultimately murdered her by shooting her at the temple premises.

Bidhibala too suffers in the novel as her father was getting her forcefully married to an old man who had two children. She wanted to escape from this marriage but because of her father’s fear she could not protest. We see how she runs away with a group of prostitutes to save herself from that marriage at the age of eleven. Ultimately, she too dies as she abandons eating and drinking which took away her life. We are also told how the tribal women were used by the British officials for their physical pleasures.

We also come across Caste and Class division as we see how people of lower casts were unable to sacrifice animals and heavy taxes were imposed on them. Their whole property was often taken away by the British officials in return of taxes or the priests with a false promise of securing for them a happy future.
We see how Pulu, the Drummer, leads a miserable life as he is shown as very weak and suffering from mal nutrition and his son, who was suffering from Tuberculosis, was his another worry. Ultimately, due to lack of money his son dies.

Thus we see that how through this novel Goswami brings out the hard truth related to the orthodox rituals which advocate bloodshed and violence and ill treatment for women and low caste lot. After writing this novel the author was threatened by the various priests for questioning the age old rituals this way. We can trace through an interview where she herself reveals her experience which she went through after writing this novel. In an interview with Subhajit Bhadra when asked about the controversy which took place is revealed by thee writer as follows:

The novel created lot of unwanted controversy and some Complained that I had became an animal lover loosing my human concern. Some complained that I had been selective as I did not criticize the muslims for animal slaughter.

The sanyasis became and agitated and told that animal slaughter should not be stopped as it was an integral part of Hindu Ritualistic region. Kalika Purana supports animal
slaughter but it also says that baikuntha could be attained by offering a garland of flower also. There were also street protests demanding a ban of the novel.\textsuperscript{15}

Image of women which she presents in both the novels reveal the pitiful picture of women how is burdened under the weight of traditions and rituals. She accepts the fact that although she forms male characters too with much care and clarity, but her female characters are more realistic as the feelings and emotions which she brings out comes from her own experiences.

Autobiographical elements in her novels could also be seen as we see that in the novel \textit{The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker}, she brings out the facts and follies related to the \textit{Satra} tradition. Through her biographical details we can say that she herself belonged to the rich family of \textit{Satra} tradition there she experienced these discriminations on the basis of caste, and so it is clearly revealed in the novel. In her another novel too we see that the issues like animal sacrifice are brought up by the writer. She since her childhood was an animal lover and the ritual of animal slaughter used to take place in her family which used to pain her and this pain and agony clearly comes out in her novel. Her characters too are drawn from her real life experiences as we see in the novel \textit{The Man from Chinnamasta} the character of Dorothy brown is based on Mrs. Brown wife of Mr. Arthur Brown, as her father was a student of Mr. Brown she

knew the fact that Mr. Brown had an extra marital affair with a khasi woman like Dorothy’s husband in the novel had. So we see that her novels are a result of her own experiences and feelings.

Consequently, we can say that Goswami presents a realistic picture of her society where she brings out the facts and follies prevailing since ages. She not only simply states these problems but has tried to strongly appeal for bringing changes. Her efforts to stop the social evils have brought a revolution on the younger generations. She without any fear speaks against the social flaws. In both her novels we see how she supports the oppressed classes, brings out the image of women, their status and sufferings in the society and openly raises her voice against the issues like animal slaughter and other ills of society are also effectively revealed by her.