

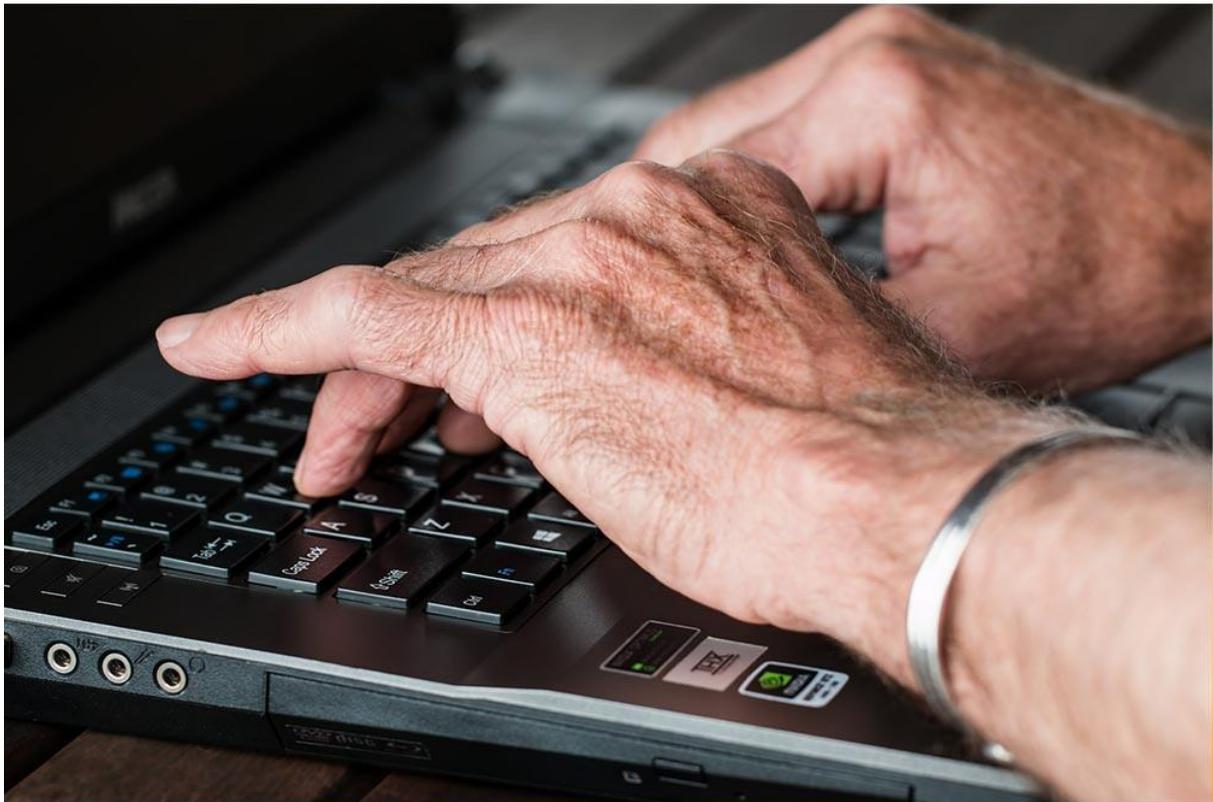
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### Post-Colonial Socio-Cultural Decadence in Assam: Reading *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*

The *Moth Eaten Howdah of The Tusker* one of the most prominent novels penned by Indira Goswami, popularly known as Mamoni Roysom Goswami. When her life itself had been a kaleidoscope of interesting events, she is able to paint a realistic picture of the world around her through her works. Social systems, post-colonial trauma, plights of women, etc. are the main themes found in her works. However this paper is intending to bring the societal complicities faced by the people of Assam which is represented through the people of a small place in lower Assam precisely in South Kamrup. The skeletal form of the place and the people induced with opium and the decaying aristocracy of the religiously superior and economically prosperous people of the society with the advent of communism. Another redundant practice that is criticised in the novel is the plight of the widows through the religious boundaries set for them. Dr Gobinda Prasad Sharma says “the novel is an elegy on the fall of an age-old, well established family bearing the old tradition. At the same time, the novel shows the on-going irresistible socio, economic forces that are going to wipe out the old feudal and religious social order” (1994:59). The social realism laden with regional flavour makes the novel an interesting read. This paper focuses mainly on the issue of opium addiction and the dawn of communism in Assam through the aforementioned novel.

The history of the introduction of opium in Assam is a long way back during the Mughal-Ahom conflict where references are found about the use of poppy though the exact date is not known. It is believed that the Mughal invasions have aided to the starting of opium use in Assam. In Assam histories have the mention of the gifts from the Mughal *Baadshah* which also included opium. However it was considered a vice to consume opium and its use was limited to only the rich households of the society. Historian S.K. Bhuyan also mentions cultivation of poppy and consumption of opium may have been acquired from the neighbouring tribes of China. (1951) During the colonial rule too it was one of the most commonly discussed issues. People used to grow opium for own consumption in their own lands. It is only during the British rule the commodity was made available for universal consumption. East India Company had the motive of maximum revenue collection in Assam and used the knowledge of the weakness of Assamese people towards opium as an advantage and made it a popular and easily available commodity. Opium smuggling also became a thriving trade during that time. Opium or *Affeem* is popularly known as *Kanee* in Assamese. It is obtained from the sap of the poppy flower and smeared on strips of clothes and dried. It is usually consumed by frying with betel leaves by the common people and evaporated and smoked by the richer lot. Even though there were sporadic instances of opium addiction among people of Assam, it was after the malaria epidemic known popularly as *Kala-Zar* people began to take it as medicine for pain relief and got addicted to it. In an enquiry and survey Sir Andrew Moffatt Mills found out that 75% of the Assamese population is addicted to opium. (1903, 24-25). Mills wrote,

The use of opium has with many almost become a necessary of life, and in a damp country like Assam it is perhaps beneficial if taken with moderation, but experience has shown that to allow every man to grow the plant and manufacture

the drug unrestrictedly is almost injurious to the morale of the people. Opium they should have, but to get it they should be made to work for it. (1954, 75)

Literature in Assam has portrayed the problem of opium addiction in various ways. Apart from the research based documents plays like *Kaniyar Keertan* by Hemchandra Boruah were written using humour, wit and satire. The emergence of new english learning class was becoming aware of different forms of literature and progressive thoughts. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy were inspiration in fighting redundant social orders, customs, hypocrisy of religion and working towards social reform. Opium was undoubtedly one of the major causes of the degrading health of most of the Assamese people. A social crusader that attempts at social reform and urge the government to provide with quick and effective remedies. This play had taken up the task to pull the society and its people up from the quagmire of superstition and opium addiction fuelled by religious hypocrisy. The ruthless satire of Hemchandra Boruah is without any sympathy and the witty dialogues are set in contrast to the serious problem it unravels.

The novel begins with another evil apart from opium, gambling. Baloram Das is famous because of his well-known status as a great host of such gambling parties. The surname indicates that he belongs to a lower caste yet people from all over the place flock in his house including a group of skeletal souls, the opium addicted ones of Amranga *Satra*<sup>1</sup>. The novel is set in and around Amranga *Satra*. Written in Kamrupi dialect the novel is a true picture of the time and place the author has tried to emulate. In the very beginning the other evils of the society like superstition about ghosts, treatment of widows etc. are also hinted. While the government was profiting from the opium trade, people were going bankrupt. It was difficult for some to balance both the trade and the addiction. Jokram Bhagawati in this novel is one such example. Goswami writes,

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<sup>1</sup>Vaishnavite monastery headed by the Satradhikar which is a hereditary title that is passed on from generations.

There is nothing to be surprised. Until very recently it was the revenue collected from opium trade was second in the government's budget. Indranath remembers his father's words that the moment one applies for it within a mile there used to be a shop for selling opium. Assam's opium was precious in the markets of Rangoon too. (2007,4)

The protagonist of the novel Indranath is the would-be *Satradhikar*<sup>2</sup> but one can clearly recognise his progressive thoughts about all superfluous customs in the society. He also belongs to the emerging English learning/speaking class. When the revenue collected from opium was decreasing, government was showing concerns for it through show cause notices. People were arrested and imprisoned and Opium Prohibition law was passed in 1947. The added new act to section 38 was,

Section 39, Notwithstanding the provisions of section 497 of the code of Criminal procedure, 1898 no person accused of non-bailable offence under this act shall be released on bail by any court without hearing the prosecution of which due notice will be released on bail by any court without hearing prosecution of which due notice shall be given; provided that all orders shall give reason for which bail is given. .... Provided that an accused is found an evidence to be smuggler of opium or seller of opium shall not receive a sentence of less than two years rigorous imprisonment and fine. (2007, 5)

The hospitals have provided with the centres for treatment of the opium addicted people. They spend a few days there and repeat their indulgence with opium. The village that is so close to nature is changing, the strong smell of elephant dung is now overpowered with the smell of fried betel leaves and opium. Another problem of that period is hinted at in the

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<sup>2</sup> The head of a Sattra.

beginning is the spread of communism. The system of the *Satras* and the *Goxai*<sup>3</sup> are feudal. They own all the land where other cultivate and provide them with the products. The system of land ownership was changing. Indranath being the aware citizen is attentive towards the fact that their fate is changing. With another progressive thought he praises his aunt for her courage to fend for herself when his mother criticises it. He says,

Why do you keep poking at the young *Goxani*? Can't you rather be like her? You could have settled the matter with the communists who have occupied land. You have knowledge about land, use it.....Times have changed. Like our great grandmother you don't have to die without ever seeing the entrance of your house. Grandmother died with her wish to go on pilgrimage to Jagannath. You even have to attend ceremonies from inside four walls through the window. Do you have to remain that remote? (2007, 7)

His family has two more widows apart from the younger *Goxani*<sup>4</sup>, his own sister Giribala and his aunt Durga. While Durga's husband was the victim of the malaria epidemic, Giribala's husband abandoned her for another women who was an opium seller and he found more solace in her arms. Another conformist idea about marriage of girls is that a Brahmin girl cannot can't marry after puberty. The *Goxais* are considered above Brahmins in the Varna system and marriage between Brahmins and *Goxais* are not heard of during that period. Though is clearly mentioned that there are lots of incidents where the *Goxais* have illicit relations with Shudra girls but never marry. (2007, 48) Indranath gives example of the abolition of *Sati Pratha*, talks about the remarriage of his widowed sister, her education and he himself loves a Brahmin girl who has passed the marriageable age, i.e. her menstrual circles have started. He talks to the Englishman Mark Sahib who is a hermit for the local people and he is considered untouchable. Even his shadow can pollute it touches anyone.

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<sup>3</sup> A community in Assam, believed to upper caste, mostly associated with the religious positions of the *Satras*. Also another word to address God.

<sup>4</sup> Wife of a *Goxai*, also a goddess.

Indranath allowed his sister to assist Mark sahib despite his mother's warnings of losing their reputation. His ideas were always for the benefit and happiness of people and progress of the society. His character can be scrutinised as the epitome of progress that the society is slowly moving towards. In a very remote place he is like a ray of hope and he plays his part quite satisfactorily. He even remembers to remember lines from the bible after his sister sacrificed herself in the sacred pyre which was lit to prove her sanctity if she emerges from there unburnt. This is because she went to Mark Sahib's room alone at night. He recalls, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (2007, 226)

Indranath is that element of the society who finds goodness in everything even if that is not accepted by anyone in the society. His respect towards Mark Sahib and his knowledge despite everyone's apathy towards the Englishman. Mark's attitude towards the untouchables, his mingling with them and eating together had influenced Indranath's views towards the wrongs in the society. He was insulted by his friend when he said he didn't see any wrong in his sister's wish to be with Mark Sahib because he is an honest man. His progressive attitude is considered to be uncivilised and uncultured. His effort to end the opium addiction among his people by helping the police also shows his concern about the people. He is criticised for the fact that he saved the life of an untouchable boy choked on a fish. He ruined the name of his family as well as he became impure was the concern of the people around. He remembers how opium is also connected with the Sati Sacrifices. It was used to sedate the woman so that they don't protest or run when they are burnt alive. He remembers a speech given by the local police officer quoting two historians Wilson and Mills about how many women are sacrificed like this in India from 1815 to 1828. (2007, 44)

Another turning point of the society and the feudal system was as mentioned above the probing communists who are educating the common people about their lands and equal distribution and what is wrong with the feudal system that is suppressing them so far. Here one needs to pay attention to the title of the novel. Elephants are signs of prosperity. Indranath's family boasted of many but now it's difficult to maintain them. The pride of the family the great tusker goes rogue and had to be exterminated. This tragic incident is symbolic of the decaying pride and prosperity of the aristocratic feudal family. Before being executed the tusker Jagannath came home searched for his howdah and smashed it. While inspecting, it is found that the four corners of the howdah had four prickly points that may have always pierced his back. There are the other scars that never heal on head because of the poking with the goad. The sudden outburst of the elephant is also symbolic of the oppressed people who are learning to stand up for themselves. The notice for the feudal lords came with the Fixation Ceiling on land Holding Act. It says,

Notwithstanding anything to the contrary in any law, customs or agreement, no person shall be entitled to hold as owner or tenant, land which exceed the limit of fifty bighas in the aggregate, and this limit of fifty bighas shall be applicable to the aggregate of the lands held individually by the members of a family or jointly by some or all the members of such family...(2007, 211)

While all the other landowners were selling their land with hand-notes as proof Indranath was unwilling to deprive his tenants through such a measure. He was criticised, accused of not having the qualities of a *Sattradhikar* and much more. He remembers Mark Sahib's bible again, "Look I am sending you out like a sheep among wolves; therefore be a shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves." (214) Even under the pressure of peoples' accusations and expectations Indranath did not bow down. Because of oppression, blind faith, lack of education and ages of persuasion and coercion it is believed that the *Goxais* do not

cultivate themselves. It is believed that they are representatives of God, or incarnations. *Goxai* is also the term used for God and it is used synonymously in this context. With the intervention and information of the communists the common people wanted lands to be handed over to them. It was believed that if Indranath descends on the field and start ploughing, out of respect people will kneel down in front of him and forget about the madness that has driven them to be demanding lands from their lords. The idea was to dress him up in the best way possible and send him riding an elephant to add the touch of superiority. The repaired howdah is fixed on the young elephant which Indranath didn't think it to be flattering, yet he complies with the request of his elders and goes on the visit. The farmers only saw the negative aspect of pomp and show in front of the hungry people. Stone pelting by these people took Indranath's life and this tragic incident adds another symbolic notion. Indranath represents those people who are too progressive for their contemporary society to be accepted, yet there were various constraints in the way one could take a step forward towards change. No one realised that Indranath went there to hand over the land to the farmers apart from his friend Balo. Only because of his identity as a *Goxai* and use of the materials that betray their position the untimely tragedy occurred. Balo *Goxai* confronted the farmers explaining that the howdah which they considered a symbol of superiority was actually moth eaten. It was only for show, from inside all the *Goxai* families were living in a void including Indranath's. It was difficult for people to realise that among all the oppressors someone will be thinking for their betterment. The years to follow saw intercommunity marriages, people from outside of Assam started trading there, and they even got married with the local girls. Balo *Goxai* tells the farmers these are the things people used to consider taboos, yet Indranath foresaw it. His last words were, "Whatever I experimented on is becoming successful now." He saw progress in the act of his death that people were fighting for their rights and it is only a proof of it. Balo *Goxai* exclaimed, yet no one is self-dependent, the smell of fried betel leaf

and opium still hangs around the village. The fact that Balo Goxai knew the howdah was moth eaten and despite that he himself tied it on the elephant indicates that all the *Goxai* families are aware of their hollow existence.

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