

PROHIBITION ON ANIMAL SACRIFICE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *THE MAN FROM CHINNAMASTA*

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Abstract

Recipient of Jnanpith Award (2000), Indira Goswami is a well known name in Indian Literature. She has deep empathy for the marginalized sections of the society. She uses her pen as a tool to highlight the plight of oppressed, marginalized and powerless sections of the society. *The Man from Chinnamasta*, published in 2006, is the significant novel of her career. Set at the dawn of 20th century, it depicts the horrified and terrible side of the practice of animal sacrifice in the temple which continues to the present times. This research paper tries to find answers to difficult questions as why brutal killing of innocent animals is required for the worship? Do gods really ask for sacrifice? Is there any other alternative to appease a deity? The paper also focuses on the alternatives suggested by Goswami. She uses rationality to justify her stand. She uses old scriptures like *Kalika Purana* (an ancient text) to prove her point that worship of the goddess can be done with the use of flowers instead of blood.

Paper Identification



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Recipient of Jnanpith Award (2000), Indira Goswami is a well known name in Indian Literature. She is a prolific writer and has published various novels, short stories and a collection of poems. She has also written an autobiography titled, *An Unfinished Autobiography*. She started her career in writing, at the age of fourteen, with a short story published in Assamese newspaper. Along with English, her work has been translated into many languages –Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, and Urdu to name a few. She has won various prestigious awards including Sahitya Academy Award (1982), Bharat Nirman Award (1989) and Katha National Award (1993).

With her works, Goswami has broadened the horizons of Assamese literature. Her works depict the stories of oppressed and underprivileged people. She has deep empathy for the marginalized sections of the society. She uses her pen as a tool to highlight the plight of oppressed, marginalized and powerless sections of the

society. In her work *The Blue-necked God*, she shows the pathetic conditions of widows in Braja and how the greedy priests subjugate them. The setting of her novel *The Pages Stained with Blood* is in Delhi which is about the anti Sikh riots that happened after the demise of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Her latest novel *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* is the story of India's first female revenue collector in the colonial era. Besides her literary achievements, she also acted as a peacemaker between the Government of India and the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) leaders. In the words of Amrita Pritam, the celebrated writer, "Indira Goswami has become the shining star of Assamese Literature" (vii).

The Man from Chinnamasta, published in 2006, is the significant novel of her career. It is translated by Prashant Goswami. The novel is written with a social and political vision. It is against the very old ritual of animal sacrifice at Kamakhya Temple in Assam. She uses rationality to justify her stand. She uses old scriptures like *Kalika Purana* (an ancient text) to prove her point that worship of the goddess can be done with the use of flowers instead of blood. When it was first published, she was profoundly condemned by the Hindu orthodox people and priests, yet one can say, she was successful in her attempt to end the killing of animals in the name of religion by bringing changes in the outlook of the youth who stood by her.

Goswami writes this novel at the peak of her career. The story revolves around the Kamakhya Temple. The temple is 2000 years old and it had been the centre of attraction and mysteries since ancient times. Situated at the top of Nilachal hills in Assam, the temple has a history of shakti peeth (place of divine power) and tantrik worship. Set at the dawn of 20th century, it depicts the horrified and terrible side of the practice of animal sacrifice in the temple which continues to the present times. Through the protagonist Jatadhari and his followers she asks sensitive questions. Why brutal killing of innocent animals is required for the worship?

Do gods really ask for sacrifice? Is there any other alternative to appease a deity?

Animal sacrifice is a part of *nitya puja* or everyday worship at Kamakhya. Before opening the gates of the temple, an animal is sacrificed every day. Buffaloes, goats, doves, pigeons and ducks are sacrificed there. There was a ritual of human sacrifice in the temple which the Britishers banned. Animal and bird sacrifice does not come under the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals Act, 1960 because under Article 14 of the Indian Constitution, everyone has the right to practice their own religion. Some states like Kerala, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Telangana, and Karnataka have banned slaughtering of animals in any temple.

The story of the goddess Kamakhya is that Sati – the symbol of both love and mother- is the incarnation of Parvati and wife of Lord Shiva. According to the old scriptures and puranas, Sati married Shiva against the wishes of her father King Daksha. Once, the King held the yagna at his home and invited everyone except Shiva and Sati. Against the wishes of her husband Sati went to the yagna where her father insulted Shiva. Unable to bear the taunts of her father Sati sacrificed herself in the yagna fire. On hearing the news of demise of his wife Shiva slung her corpse over his shoulder and roamed the Earth. Lord Vishnu showed him mercy and cut the corpse into fifty one pieces. Fifty one pieces fell at fifty one places and called Shakti Peeths. Out of all these shakti peeths, the one at Kamakhya is considered as the most holy because her yoni (goddess vagina) fell here. It is considered as the symbol of fertility.

Devotees from all over the India visit the Kamkhya Temple. Some come for the blessings of the goddess, some for atonement of their sins, others for the betterment of their children and good fortunes. In order to ask something from the goddess, they sacrifice animals. The riches sacrifice animals and the poorest of the poorer give the flesh from their own bodies. "The *Kalika Purana* says that a devotee should not offer

more than four times the amount of blood that can be held in a lotus petal”(Goswami 33).

One of the most famous festivals at Kamakhya Temple is Ambubachi. It is celebrated in the month of Asadh. During this festival the temple is closed for three days as it is believed that the goddess is going through her menstrual cycle. The gates of the temple reopen on the fourth day. Before the opening of the gates an animal is sacrificed before the goddess. “A single stroke of machete. A spurt of red. A group of devotees smeared their foreheads with the blood. The tantrik with the mountain of matted locks lay on the ground to daub his forehead with it. People saw him lick the blood” (Goswami 92-93).

Pilgrims, devotees and tantriks come from distant places to please the goddess. It is believed that the power of the goddess is transmitted to human world in this festival and through animal sacrifice her devotees returned the blood to the goddess. As Hugh B. Urban observes in his paper *Matrix of Power*, menstrual blood has double significance in Hindu orthodox. On the one hand it is a symbol of sacred power of procreation on the other hand it is considered as impure. Hence, the doors of the temple remain closed for three days when goddess Kamakhya is considered as impure. But on the fourth day the door of the temple opens and the same polluting and impure blood is believed to bring life on the Earth. The devotee stand in the long queues the night before to get the red cloth from the temple which is believed to have goddess blood and considered as a mark of good fortune.

Apart from Ambubachi festival, another festival mentioned in the novel is Deodhani festival dedicated to Goddess Manasa (Serpent Goddess). The festival is celebrated in the month of Shravana. Tantriks dance during this festival and drink the blood of the sacrificed animals. “A mountain of beheaded doves and goats rose before the Goddess Manasa.” It is believed that the deodhas (shaman) are possessed by divine deity and they perform deodhani dance. Their bodies are

covered with the blood of the sacrificed animals and red vermillion and they dance to the beat of the drums. “A devotee pushed through the crowd and offered a dove to the deodha. He tore off its neck with his teeth and drank the blood, then threw the carcass into the crowd.” During this festival, lots of animals and birds are slaughtered. “Today, countless goats have been brought for sacrifice. The goats were tied up on the veranda of the house in front of the sacrificial altar. The blood from the goats that were sacrificed, spattered all over the living goats as well” (Goswami 157, 173, 138).

Through her work, Goswami shows that killing of innocent animals does not guarantee good fortune. A merchant sends five buffaloes to the temple for sacrifice hoping that he will survive tuberculosis but he still dies. A poor devotee from Coochbehar does not have money to buy an animal for sacrifice, so he donates the blood from his own body in order to save the life of his son but fails to do so and faints in the middle of the ritual. “If he had offered a tiny bit of the flesh – the size of sesame seed – from his chest, his prayers would have been answered within six months”(33).

Goswami shows the brutal and violent sacrifice at the Kamakhya temple from the starting of the novel. The suffering of the animals is depicted throughout the novel. “The animal tried to break free as it was being hauled away to the slaughterhouse. It wanted to escape the death that came in the form of pilgrims” (15).

The priests and tantriks use ancient texts and scriptures like *Kalika Purana* to justify their stance of killing of animals and birds for worship of goddess. One of the tantriks said to the devotees, “Deliverance comes only when sacrifice is offered. Sacrifice alone will lead you to heaven” (Goswami 93). Goswami uses the same ancient texts and scriptures to prove her point of worshipping goddess with flowers. One of the students from tol said, “The scriptures offer alternatives to sacrifice. We can also please the Mother with honey,

milk and yogurt. It doesn't say anywhere that the rituals cannot be performed without blood" (88). She raises the question if human sacrifice can be stopped, why not the animal sacrifice too?

Jatadhari, with the help of his disciple Ratnadhar, organized the meeting with the students who stand beside him in his mission of prohibition of animal sacrifice. Along with his supporters, he wanted to submit the memorandum to the head priest of the temple against animal sacrifice. He makes plans for the protest march too. He tries to bring down the thousand year old system and offers the worshipping of goddess with flowers, milk, yogurt and honey. He believes in respecting all creatures and can "not bear the sight of the blood at the goddess sacred abode"(180). Ratandhar is a sensitive painter who has painted a picture of ritual of animal sacrifice at the altar in Kamakhya Temple.

Everybody stared at the painting. Buffalo sacrifice. Six or seven men were pulling at the ropes. The collar around its neck had split. The animal was desperately trying to break free. It was emptying its bowels. The terrified eyes. Pitchers of water flashed on its neck. Tremors wrecked its body. (Goswami 100)

Ratnadhar is helping Jatadhari in his campaign to ban animal sacrifice in the temple. His duty is "to rally volunteers for the Jatadhari's protest" (49). In Jatadhari's absence he is visiting village to village getting signatures of the devotees who support Jatadhari's agenda. He works intensively and gets notebooks filled with them. "Signatures had already filled up the pages of the book" (86). People believe that he frees the animals that are tied for sacrifice at night. "People have seen him lurking around the shed where the goats for sacrifice are tied. A couple of days ago, someone released a buffalo" (81).

Bidhibala is a girl of eleven years who has to marry a forty year old man. When her little brother was ill, her father bought a buffalo for the sacrifice. Even after the

sacrifice, her brother died. Now her father wants to sacrifice the buffalo's calf to gain the blessings of the goddess. She loves the calf and does not want her father to sacrifice it. She had "seen the calf grow up before her eyes" (102). She requests Ratnadhar to save the calf. She shows her resistance towards animal sacrifice by refusing to read any scriptures that prescribes killing of innocent animals.

Dorothy Brown, a British woman, who adopted herself completely according to Indian culture asked, "Why was the buffalo being dragged off for sacrifice in the middle of the night? What sort of worship is this?"(42).She does not understand the violence attached with worship of goddess. She is extremely kind and helpful in nature. She gives money to poor drummer Pulu for the treatment of his child. She gives ointment to the women for applying on their burned hands.

In an incident in the novel, an elderly man has killed a cow and is atoning for his sin. A cord is attached to his neck just like the one used for tying animals and he is mooing like a cow. For the atonement of his sin, he has to beg "for alms with a rope tied around his neck, for twelve long years" (24). What the writer asks here is did he kill the animal intentionally or was it an accident? Is slaughtering of animals in the name of religion is also intentional killing?

Petition has been filed for years for banning of animal sacrifice like Jatadhari and his disciples submitted in the novel. But slaughtering of the animals continues. There are many reasons behind the continuation of sacrifice in the temple. Devotees and priests do not want to go against the traditions. It is a market to animal sellers. If the sacrifice stops then buying and selling of animals decreases. It will be the loss of revenue and tourism sector. Through this work, Goswami represents the voice of the innocent animals which are killed by humans. When a tantrik asked devotees to give their blood to the goddess, they all left the place. What does it show? We as humans are ready

to kill innocent animals and birds for our sake, for our wishes and desires. Jatadhari said to Ratnadhar, “Ask the householders, if they have found peace from having sacrificed another’s life for the sake of their own” (77). In the novel, author proposes alternatives to worship the goddess. “One who worships the goddess with a thousand karabi flowers and a thousand kundu flowers will find all his desires satisfied and wishes fulfilled”(172).

Indira Goswami is a humanist through and through. She speaks for the voiceless. In the novel, she never crosses the line and insults the traditions. She uses the traditional texts like *Kalika Purana* to justify her stance of worshipping the goodness with flowers. Jatadhari and his disciples become the voice of reason and her spokesperson in the text. She handles the sensitive issue of animal sacrifice with care. She insists prohibiting the cruel tradition of killing animals but at the same time she is being careful of not hurting the sentiments of pilgrims and devotees of Kamakhya. She believes in the young generation and approaches them through her work.

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