



Animal Sacrifice in Indira Goswami's The Man From Chinnamasta

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KEYWORDS

At the peak of her literary career Indira Goswami wrote the controversial novel *The Man from Chinnamasta*, the tantric who is the protagonist, constantly discusses the ancient Sanskrit Scriptures and substantiates his demand to stop animal sacrifice. He demonstrates various alternatives that Debi Bhagavati, Yoginitantra and Kalika Purana pertaining to animal sacrifice. The novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* published in 2005 was set in pre-independent British Assam. It was written with a specific political vision: to exhort her readers to protest against the practices of animal sacrifice in the ancient Kamakhya Temple in Assam. Once published it took Assam by storm because of its subversive nature. The Brahmins especially took offence for her frank demand to remove an ancient practice prevalent in the most important Shakti temple of the world. Set in the times of unrest and turmoil at the turn of the twentieth century, the novel paints the hoary history of Assam's most famous temple of Shakti cult, Kamakhya.

The novel tells the story of Chinnamasta Jatadhari, a hermit who leads the effort for change in the cruel ritual of animal sacrifice, and others around him — notably Ratnadhar, the sensitive youth who falls to the ground and sobs when he sees a buffalo being dragged for its slaughter., Her prose is marked by compassion and humanity.

(www.katha.org/site/book-view?book_isbn=9788189020385)

Another Critic remarks:

The novel also depicts the relationship of Dorothy Brown, a British woman in Assam and her relationship with a tantric of the Kamakhya Temple in Assam. Ratnadhar, son of a renowned priest and Bidhibala's the child widow's story runs parallel to this narrative. Ratnadhar organizes a signature campaign with the help of Cotton College students against the practice of animal sacrifice and faces many troubles in the process. ([katha - bethechange.blogspot.com/ 2010/ 08/ man-from-chinnamasta-by...](http://katha-bethechange.blogspot.com/2010/08/man-from-chinnamasta-by...))

In writing *The Man from Chinnamasta* the novelist draws heavily upon myth and history, religion and folklore, rituals and cultural practices. "Armed with such exterior and interior wealth she is able to resolve all disequilibrium's - her own and that of her readers. She is able to actualize herself to put intensely creative novel. The central theme of the book is that of blood sacrifice in the temple of Kamakhya in Assam" (Chakravarthi 25). Steeped more in legend than in history Kamakhya, situated between the airport and Guwahati city in Assam, there is the hillock, Nilachal, to the left of the road where the Kamakhya temple stands. It is said that Daksha organized a big yaga to which he did not invite his daughter Sati and her husband Shiva because she had married against the wishes of her father. Sati turned up at the ceremony and Daksha used very humiliating words against Shiva. Unable to bear it, Sati consigned herself to Yaga fire. An angry and aggrieved Shiva started a dance of destruction with the dead body of his wife on his shoulders which horrified all the gods. Vishnu was entrusted with the task of calming down Shiva. He followed Shiva and began to cut the dead body into pieces with his weapon, Sri Chakra. Those parts fell at some fifty one

places which later came to be recognized as holy. The genitalia fell at the Nilachal or Kamagiri hill and a temple came to be established there on. "The sanctum sanctorum of the temple is a cave with a small hidden spring of water which constantly moistens a stone with the structure of female genitalia, yoni" (6). For three days, each year, the water turns reddish known as Ambubachi or the period of the Goddess's menstruation. A brief description of Ambubachi Fair is given in *The Man from Chinnamasta*. The Ambubachi Fair is organized every year during monsoon in the Kamakhya temple. The fair attracts thousands of devotees all over the country and abroad. It is believed that once in a year Mother Earth becomes impure, this impurity is the same as the impurity of women due to menstruation. For women it is once in a month but as she is Mother Earth once in a year. It lasts as in the human world for three days and the temple doors are closed for devotees during these days. "For Ambubachi Mela the door of the temple has closed" (92). This is a time of rigorous fasting for Brahmin widows. The goddess in the temple of Kamakhya is imbued with legendary powers making the site a renowned place of pilgrimage especially during Ambubachi. The doors are flung open on the fourth day and the pilgrims gathered for the occasion, are allowed a darshan. "Tomorrow is the pure day in Ambubachi lots of sadhu sanyash---" (91).

It is also mentioned in *The Man from Chinnamasta* that Devadhani festival is observed in Kamakhya temple. In this festival, Mother Goddess Manasa is worshipped. Manasa is a Goddess of snake. "Two snakes are present on the shoulder of Goddess and other two are on the head of Goddess of Manasa" (159). Animals such as buffalo, goats, pigs and birds are sacrificed to propitiate the goddess. "The buffalo, which was taken to sacrifice, did not want to go; he tried to come down" (10). And "The scarified heads of goat make a hill on the feet of Goddess Manasa" (165). It is also believed that human sacrifice is of more avail than anything else. Blood drawn from one's own body may be also offered. If devotees sacrifice their own blood, even if it is equal to a till (sesame seed) then his all desire will be fulfilled within six months.

Come forward. The scriptures say that all you need are two drops of blood on a lotus petal. Just two drops on your own body. Come, come. Anyone who offers a bit of flesh, the size of a sesame seed, from his chest will have all his desires fulfilled within six months. A tiny scrap of flesh from the chest (94).

Indira Goswami, born of a long line of powerful and wealthy Brahmins of Assam, has first-hand knowledge of Kamakhya lore. And because of her knowledge, spring perhaps from deeply imbibed cultural memory, the horror and cruelty of animal sacrifice; of human suffering and shocked conscience are delineated with thoughtful analysis and a complete absence of the judgmental. Her characters are drawn from many different streams of life. There are the common folk who sell their lands and homesteads and travel miles to the temple with a goat or a buffalo in the hope of divine intervention in their lives. There is frenzied priests intent on perpetuating the age old ritual of blood sacrifice, both an-

imal and human, in the belief that the Goddess thirsts for blood will not be appeased with anything else. "There are those who argue that offerings of fruits and flowers are sufficient propitiation. This polarization is seen in the form of a signature campaign against blood sacrifice started by the students of Cotton College and the violence it sparks off" (Chakravarthi 25). Animal sacrifice was and is not limited to the Hindu pantheon and tantric practices alone. It exists, equally and more significantly, in Judaeo- Islamic traditions.

The Old Testament tells about Man's earliest ancestors Cain and Abel. Cain was a farmer and Abel a shepherd. Cain offered God the best crops from his fields, Abel 'the firstlings of his flock'. And God 'loved Abel' and welcomed his offerings. Thus the Bible carries the implication that the blood sacrifice ranked highest with God. We also know of God's testing of Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his son Isaac, an event commemorated, to this day, in the Islamic Id-ul-Zuha (25)

Aruna chakravarthi has miss interpreted that Abel has offered the best and Cain offered the best present. Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.'

One of the criticism on the novel *The Man from Chinnamasta*, As Dr. prafulla Kotoky, stated in the Preface to the original Asomiya Chinnamastar is quoted by Manuhto that:

It is difficult to categorize it under the genre of the novel in the strict sense of the term. It can at best be described as a loosely woven web of Kamakhya lore. Lacking a consistent

story line it is a mélange of narratives, scenes and events that took place around the temple of Kamakhya during the nineteen thirties-----the last few years of British rule in India."It is under the influence of British education that the students of Cotton College start the signature campaign (Aruna 25).

In *The Man from Chinnamasta* religious intolerance becomes more apparent in the persecution and harassment of the novel's protagonist Jatadhari, the Hindu tantrik. Jatadhari antagonizes a large portion of devout Hindus and fellow tantriks through his plea to end the age-old practice of animal sacrifice in front of the Mother Goddess. As it is traditionally believed that the Mother Goddess or Shakti can be easily pacified and satiated with blood, Jatadhari's overtures to replace the practice of animal sacrifice with the veneration of flowers to solicit the Mother Goddess's blessings makes him a target and he is subjected to ridicule and hatred.

Perhaps religious exploitation is rooted in people's indifference. For instance, when some less literate people, who pretend to be the clergy, exploit people under the aegis of religion, then people judge religion through their practices and stay far away from such faith. It is not religion which chains the people. The truth is that religion is the lifeblood of a society. It intends to motivate humanity towards prosperity. Moreover, what makes the religion an opium is the religious person who practice and preach the religion wrongly. They make effort to keep people in dark so as to exploit them. This is the current experience in Indian society. In our society, religion is manipulated for the benefit of other groups. For example, the religious radicals interpret it to their own advantage, scholars in their own points of view and so do the politicians. People are murdered, insulted and exploited mostly by such groups under the mask of religion. In short, religion is a selfish tool in the hand of all the groups to use it for their benefit. Hence it is the root cause of people's backwardness.

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