

Mysteries Around the Sanctum with Special Reference To *The Man From Chinnamasta* by Indira Goswami

Mrs. T. Vanitha, M.A., M.Ed., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Abstract

Indira Goswami is one of the most talented writers of the Assamese Literature. She has been celebrated for her genuine expression of human values. Though she is not with us she has left her foot prints by interrogating boldly the threadbare customs of the Indian Hindu Society. (1942-2011) She has used simple narrative style and there is no exaggeration. Some of her Assamese novels had been serialized. Her novels are not mere records of past. They express her aspirations and ambitions to get a healthy change in the condition of the society. Nilachal in Assam is a hill locked place. There is situated the Kmakhya Temple. There are various stories about the origin of the temple. The sanctum of the temple is in “yoni shape” It has become the centre of the fertility cult. It has become an important place of worship for tantrics. The temple has devotees from all over India. Ratnadhar, a kind youngster, the son of Manmohan Sharma hates animal offering in the altars of the Kamakhya temple worship. Dorothy Brown, a desperate British woman has also joined with Jatadhari. The Kalika purana gives an explanation for the use of real sacrifice. The heroine of the novel, Bidhibala also opposes animal sacrifice. The poor girl was abducted by a group of whores. Dorthy was killed. Ratnadhar was seriously wounded. Atlast Jatadhari's efforts were diluted by a group of selfish tantrics. He and his followers offer their own flesh and blood to the deity. The author presents her views. She also Tantrics hated animal sacrifice. Her pain over the worst treatment of ladies in India is also expressed in the novel.

Keywords: Indira Goswami, animal sacrifice, patriarchal traditions, women's oppression, Fertility cult, Black magic, tantric practices, The Man from Chinnamastha

Indira Goswami is one of the reputed literary celebrities of India. As a gifted writer she spoke out boldly about the ambitions and aspirations of upper class families and the uncared-for and down-trodden. She spells out the voices of silenced, powerless and unfortunate women. She was a woman with striking features, very affectionate, sympathetic, generous and out spoken. Being the daughter of Assam, she was a rare combination of exceptional talent and genuine empathy. She used her writing as a tool to spotlight the threadbare Hindu patriarchal traditions and oppressive gender practices. She was a brought up of traditional Vaishnavite family who owned a satrn (monastery) in Assam's South Kamrup. In 1966 She married Madhavan Raisom

Ayyangar, a young engineer and travelled along with him in his work. But her married life prolonged for only eighteen months. Madhavan Iyyanger met with a fatal death leaving her a young widow.

She often said, “I couldn’t dare to look up at the sky above my head”. Though life gave her terrible challenges, it also provided her opportunities to come over all her sufferings. Once she said “I become ready to stand against all these curses of destiny. This task was like being drenched with blood after having peeled off one’s skin and robe oneself in another skin”. (p.126)

Her well known novel “Neelakantha Braja” picturizes cruelty, inhumanity and horrifying poverty. A feature film ‘Adjaya’ based on ‘The Moth-eaten howdah of Tusker’ brings tears to the eyes of the spectator. She boldly stood as a peace- maker between the ULFA terrorists and the Government of India. Her literary works are revelation of her distress at the bloodshed, violence, bomb blasts, suppression against women and abuses against human rights. She was always aware of her role. When she was hospitalized in 2011, there were hundreds and thousands of people all across the country, praying for her recovery. Though she is a feminist she never called herself a feminist. She was generous enough to let her books to be translated by anyone who asked to do it.

Nilachal in Assam is a hillock place. It is where the Kamakhya temple is situated. It is roughly at 260mts above the sea level. It is one of the most significant places of Sakthi worship in India. The origin of the temple is rooted deep in mythology rather than historical. It is said that Daksha, the father of Goddess Sakthi organized a big yoga. Lord Shiva was not invited for the yoga. Sakthi turned up at the ceremony for Daksha and humiliated Lord Shiva. Unable to bear it Sakthi consigned herself to the yoga fire. Lord Shiva got angry and grieved for his dead wife with her dead body on his shoulders. Lord Vishnu was entrusted with the task of calming Shiva. He followed Shiva and cut the dead body of Sakthi to pieces with his Sri Chakra. Those parts fell at some fifty-one places and later to be recognized as Holy Sakthi Peeths. The genitalia fell at Nilachal or Kamagiri Hill and a temple was established there.

The sanctum of the temple is a cave with small spring which constantly moistens a stone with a structure of female genitalia (yoni). It is also said in legend that the demon king Narakasura fell in love with Goddess Kamakhya and proposed to marry her. Concealing her disagreement the Devi put a condition that she would marry him if a temple and a road could be built for her overnight. Narakasura almost completed the task. Devi got a cock to cry doodle– do which indicated daybreak. Narakasura’s desire remained unfulfilled. Through centuries Kamakhya temple became an important place of Hindu and Buddhist tantric activities. Kali purana which was written around 1000 A.D proves this.

There are several other opinions regarding the existence of the temple...Assam is considered the birth place of astrology. The word Kamakhya is from Austro-Asiatic word ‘Khmouch’ or ‘komouch’ which means some one’s dead body. From the Bodo community of Assam comes the word ‘kham-maikha’ means ‘eater of raw flesh’. Perhaps in ancient times it would have been a site of tribal fertility rites. The temple was destroyed in the middle ages and

was reconstructed by King Naranarayana. He was the most famous monarch of the Koch kingdom that comprised a large area of this region in 1565 A D.

From the fertility cult of the past and tantric worship in the Middle Ages it comes to the Ambubachi and other ceremonies that are prevalent even today. Devotees from all India visit this place. Animal sacrifice is common here. In the past there were human sacrifices too.

The author introduces Chinnamasta Jatadhari, an ascetic with the matted locks. In the smoky haze he takes bath in the river Brahmaputra and chants the hymns to the sixty-four goddesses. Chinnamasta Jatadhari is the protagonist of the novel. Ratnadhar a youth and the eldest son of Manmohan Sarma a renowned priest of the sacred Kamakhya mutt is also introduced. He is an artist who had delicate hands. The crown of thick black hair complimented his aristocratic bearing.

Ratnadhar had become a loyal disciple of Jatadhari. There is an interesting anecdote behind it. A year ago, it was said that he had lost his mind. The doctor's attempt to cure him became futile. It was because of Chinnamasta Jatadhari he took his painting brush again. He soon became the ascetic's dutiful disciple. Every day he meticulously laid out everything for the morning prayers of Jatadhari. He brought sprigs of durba grass, blood red hibiscus flowers and sandal wood for Jatadhari's rituals.

Chinnamasta Jatadhari had been encouraging the artist to paint something unusual. He suggested that Ratnadhar paint Captain Welsh arriving with his troops at Kamakhya, paint the huge army of six battalions led by the captain to free Gauhati from the Burmese who had infiltrated the eastern borders and overrun the territory for years. Both Ratnadhar and Jatadhari have the same taste. They disliked animal sacrifice in the Kamakhya temple. He even requested the devotees to spare the animals from the sacrifice. On one such struggle he failed. It was Jatadhari who brought him back to his senses by making him understand that individual effort would never help. He often chanted the Goddess' name in an audible voice as

“Ma Chinnamasta! ... Ma Chinnamasta!” (p.10)

His devotees echoed it. Meanwhile Dorothy Brown the wife of Henry Brown principal of Cotton College had come to meet Jatadhari with great hopes.

Mr. Brown was involved with a Khasi woman when Dorothy went to London for treatment for her sterility. She was unable to bear the injustice caused by her husband. She came to Nilachal much against her husband's wish. A faithful Munshi named Vepin was entrusted with the chore of helping Dorothy help by Mr. Brown. Dorothy Brown had come to live in the abode of mother Goddess.

The character of Ratnadhar is revealed with the telling of lots and lots of mysteries. Jatadhari's character is more complicated. William Smith from the steamer company had once told Dorothy that one couldn't look him in the eye. A sort of fire consumes the body. He also said “He was floating on the river, the locks spread out. Extraordinary! A poisonous snake was

all tangled up in his hair. I saw it with my own eyes. Yellow with black stripes. A strange poisonous snake twisted happily around his matted locks.” (p. 30) Jatadhari used to sit before the altar with his eyes closed and fingers tracing gestures in the air. He murmured ‘Bhairav! Bhairav!’ to invoke the fearful form of Shiva. He put the yoni mudra which must not be revealed. Ratnadhar watched it with fear. There was a hermit from Torsa. He pointed at Jatadhari and said it was forbidden for an untouchable to become a disciple. Jatadhari answered that he had no disciple and he did not initiate any one. He said he lived in solitude. He said that he was also aware of the five rules of initiation as

“Do not initiate a sinner, an evil-doer, a person with no respect for teachers and one with stained soul.” (p. 15)

Every day people gathered in hordes in front of Jatadhari, touched his feet and exposed their problems. They humbly waited for his answer. Dorothy also came there to find how to get peace of mind. He said

“Look no one is happy. No one is happy in this world. People manage to string together to pieces of flesh and move around” He raised his hand sharply, asking the crowd, “Do any of you have peace of mind?” (P.13)

One of the devotees asked if Jatadhari had seen human sacrifice performed. He replied that he had no faith in such beliefs. He said “Today this terrible history has been confined to the deep recesses of dark caves. We will bury this past in a tomb of flowers”. (p. 26)

Jatadhari’s pragmatic thoughts lessened the people’s fear of superstitious beliefs. But some of his devotees puzzled at his origin and existence. Some said he was a brilliant scholar from Benaras. A few others said that he had been educated in Tanjore district of South India. His knowledge of history was extensive, the languages he knew were many. He did not like animal sacrifice like Ratnadhar. Ratnadhar once begged the devotees to spare the animals from sacrifice He said “Stop! Stop! Don’t you see? It’s terrified, it doesn’t want to go with you See how it defecates in fear. Look at its eyes. Have some mercy on the beast. It wants to live and play on Ma’s Earth. Stop. I say! Stop!” (p. 10) But he was belittled as a fool by the on-lookers. The arrival of Dorothy became an interesting anecdote for the hermits roaming there. A hermit from Torsa said that Jatadhari would misuse the woman for his experiments. He would even touch her yoni for his experiments. The hermit was curious to know about Dorothy. He was lurking around the Darbanga House where she stayed. He put some sendur, turmeric powder and sandalwood paste from the bag on his shoulder in to a small copper bowl. He saw a devotee with his three year old child and a goat. He blocked their path and asked for blood.

“Will you give me blood?” Take it . Take the bowl.” I need blood.” (p. 32) The devotee’s wife took the bowl and proceeded.

Why these hermits are very particular about blood? Whether the Goddess really wants blood? If not, who consumes the blood? There is no basic evidence for all these beliefs. Most of these activities are done by the hermits to expose themselves as if they had some supernatural

powers. These are the ways and means through they exploit the innocent people. Instead of devotion, fear reigns in their hearts.

Meanwhile Henry Brown comes to Nilachal to convince his wife. On his way he sees a strange scene. He sees a palanquin carrying a wounded man with blood-stained clothes. The Munshi explains that he was a pilgrim from Coochbihar. His eldest son was sick and he had no money for treatment. He couldn't offer to sacrifice a goat or a buffalo. So he offered his own blood. Another voice said,

“The Kalikapurana says that a devotee should not offer more than four times the amount of blood that can be held in a lotus petal. If he had 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 recovered by now.” (p. 33)

There is no limit for the foolish beliefs of the people. They are exploited by the pot belly priests of the temple. Here the author vividly portrays that modernity helped man to get progress in various fields. On the other side, a section of people is constantly deprived of the primary necessities of life. They have almost lost their fundamental right of speech before the exploiters. They accepted life as an inevitable curse. They are accustomed to subjugation, exploitation, agony, pain, betrayal, deceit, poverty and dishonor. Dorothy didn't yield up herself even after Henry Brown's earnest request. He said

“Dorothy listen to me. This is not the place for you. They are different ... please try to understand.” (P34)

His anger turned towards Jatadhari. He said “So that rascal put a spell on you. You slut! Mother of all whores! That's what you came for? To fornicate with that godman fellow?” (p. 35)

At the same time Jatadhari rose from the river bed stark naked. Water dripped from his dread locks. He seemed to be emerging from some deep trance. Brown's eyes met the Jatadhari's; He shivered. Something inside him seemed to crumble. He leaned heavily on Munshi Vepin. As Mr. Brown feared one night Dorothy was disturbed by the midnight worship at Chinnamasta temple. A buffalo was dragged off for sacrifice in the middle of night. The buffalo refused to move It was frothing at the mouth and emptied its bowels. She heard Jatadhari's chanting slowly and steadily she was drawn towards the cave. Only a patch of red cloth covered his genitals; his raw odour wafted to her. She felt a gentle tremor.

Another day she went softly towards Jatadhari's cave. The author describes that she became a prey, like a helpless fish ensnared in the boatman's net She helped Pulu the drummer safe-guard his son from tuberculosis. She invited William Smith and prepared a will.

She made arrangements to make the khasi woman's child her beneficiary. Though William pointed out that Brown had not married the woman, Dorothy said firmly that even if the Child is a bastard, she would make the will. Ratnadhar's heart is full of pity for Dorothy. He took a silent oath to protect this English woman. One night Dorothy's Darbanga house was crash-

opened by some ruffians. Two of them tried sexual assault. She was lying half naked, scrapings of human skin and blood under her finger nails. In the next few days a complaint was lodged. Dorothy was accompanied by William Smith and Ratnadhar even though Mr. Brown came to help her. In the identification parade Dorothy got angry because the police caught some innocents instead of the ruffians. She got angry and said that it was all her husband Mr. Henry Brown's plan to persuade her to leave Nilachal. Jatadhari considered Durbanga house is not safe for Dorothy and took her along with him. He said to Ratnadhar that he would stay for a while in Maligarh and Chakrashila before travelling further up. He entrusted Ratnadhar to organize a big rally using the students of Cotton College against animal sacrifice. He advised him to hold a meeting at Bhairavi crematorium in the west. He also advised Ratnadhar to go from house to house canvassing against animal sacrifice. Ratnadhar's concern about animal sacrifice shows that the people have been exploited by the name of religion from generation to generation. Ratnadhar said "Prabhu I remember many things. Haladhar not once but twice trying to behead the sacrificial animal. The merchant from Shekhadari had sent five Buffaloes for sacrifice for he was suffering from tuberculosis. He did not live six months." (p. 77) Jatadhari advised Ratnadhar to continue his painting work. Also instructed Ratnadhar to sit at the veranda of Darbanga house and draw his pictures. He promised to return at the time of 'Deodwani'. He consoled Ratnadhar by saying

"Life is a passage of separation; a heart-less journey of disunion. Be prepared. Don't ever forget death. Only then you can live." (p. 76)

The temple doors were shut for three days, every year on the seventh day of the month of Ashad. It is believed that the mother Goddess is menstruating. Her loins are covered with red cloth. Ratnadhar, s father sends pieces of red cloth to the devotees of Kamakhya temple who availed his service the previous year. Ratnadhar helps his father in his work. But this year he is busy with Jatadhari's instruction.

The author shows that the major number of priests of kamakhya temple is discontented towards the growing publicity of Jatadhari. Naturally their anger turns towards Ratnadhar for his close association with Jatadhari. Meanwhile animals offered for sacrifice are often freed or found missing. They complained to Manmohan that Ratnadhar was lurking around where the goats for sacrifice were tied. Couple of days ago someone released a buffalo. Someone said it was a suckling calf. Haladhar purohit thundered,

"Scoundrels! You will burn for your impatience. The sacred texts very clearly state that the blood of a deer satiates the almighty goddess for eight months. The blood of a black bull or boar appeases for twelve years." (p. 81)

Manmohan discussed with his wife Bishnupriya about the campaign of Ratnadhar against animal sacrifice. He had been collecting signatures for "stop animal sacrifice. Ban animal sacrifice." He also said that Bidhibala the daughter of Singhadata is coming there. Bidhibala is Ratnadhar's childhood friend. Manmohan's family is their official priests'. She lives in Sualkuchi. Ratnadhar also had been to Saulkuchi. He was mesmerized by the golde muga silk

threads. Once the girl was selected for kumari pooja. But a fellow priest suspected that she might have attained puberty and so not fit for kumara puja which is usually done to girls below thirteen. Her father denied that. He even laid his head on the sacrificial altar and swore that she had not attained puberty. Her skin was like fresh milk. Now her marriage has been arranged. The groom is from the north bank and owns four or five granaries. Someone said that the groom might be a forty year old man. But the girl is like a mermaid. Someone started rumors that the girl had already attained her puberty. So her family was frantically looking around for a groom. Bidhibala's family reached Manmohan's house and sheltered there. The buffalo which they brought was safely tied by the tank. The next day the temple will be opened. The temple campus was filled with hermits and ascetics. The Mother Goddess enshrined in the cave was in the form of red stone. Touching the stone grants freedom from the cycle of rebirth. The entry from eastern side assures wealth.

On the eve of the third day during night a few curious devotees peered over the temple wall to catch the glimpse of the Divine glow; they tried to make sure if the goddess was really dancing naked. They were cursed by the cleaning authorities; the past three days rain washed the altar clean. Plump black goat was led to the altar. It was beheaded in a single stroke. The devotees smeared their foreheads with hot blood. A tantric with matted locks lay on the ground to daub his forehead with hot blood. People saw him lick the blood. A dog ran to join him. He stood on a mound and addressed the devotees by stimulating them to kill Jatadhari. He said" ... stab the man from Chinnamasta who tries to rob the Mother of her share of blood. Who will volunteer to stab him! Speak up". The devotees chorused, "We will stab him . We will." (p. 93)

The tantric said that deliverance comes only when sacrifice is offered and sacrifice alone would lead them to heaven. He also said that a buffalo's blood quenches the goddess's thirst for one hundred years. The offering of human blood from one's own body could satisfy the goddess for one thousand years.

The police arrested tantric who were eating out of human skull. A student from the tol explained the devotees as, "The scriptures offer alternatives to sacrifice. We can also please the mother with honey, milk and yogurt. It doesn't with honey, milk and yogurt. It doesn't say any where that the rituals say cannot be performed without blood" The students even explained everything to Shambhu Sikadar whose job is to behead the animals for sacrifice. To get better practice, he cut the grape fruits with his machete.

Bidhibala remembered how the buffalo was brought to her house. It was a flawless buffalo. It was beheaded in the altar for the sake of her brother who suffered from tuberculosis. She had stood for one full day and one whole night before the goddess, an oil lamp was lit in the skull of a sacrificed buffalo in her hand. But her brother died. Now the calf is going to be beheaded, so that she would get a better married life. She requested Ratnadhar to save the buffalo calf from the altar. Students from both upper and lower Assam and from various colleges had gathered at the crematorium to discuss ways and means to stop the practice of animal sacrifice.

Bidhibala's buffalo was lost. Singhadatta was so disappointed and got angry. Bidhibala expressed her discontent to marry an elderly man. Singhadatta's anger knew no bounds. He made such a violent attempt to beat his girl. Ratnadhar offered to marry her. Singhadatta at once left Manmohan's house with his servants. Bidhibala who wanted to escape from the unsuitable marriage was abducted by a group of prostitutes because of her extraordinary beauty. Singhadatta suspected Ratnadhar and almost beat him to death. He was taken to Gowhati hospital for further treatment. Jatadhari came back with Dorothy and warned her to be safe for some time. The white men's guards were all over the place hunting down the freedom fighters. He told Singhadatta, Ratnadhar is his disciple and he won't do such things. He also said one of his disciples saw Bidhibala was in the company of prostitutes from North Shekadari. Hearing this Singhadatta fell down in a dead faint. Jatadhari was on his way to the temple. The idol of Goddess Manasa looked fearsome; a pile of lifeless goats' heads lay at the goddess' feet. There was a sudden bedlam, and the students quickly led Jatadhari through Hanumandwar.

The news of Dorothy's pregnancy spread everywhere. Disregarding Jatadhari's warnings Dorothy came with a student to watch the celebration. She stood under a wood apple tree and was mesmerized by the dance. The wood apple tree is the target for white men's shooting sessions. Jatadhari once told that the wood apple tree is the embodiment of Lord Shiva's matted tresses. Suddenly they heard sounds of bullets from the forest down below. Students ran helter-skelter. Dorothy brown's bullet riddled body rolled down the slope. At last the chief constable guessed that it was Mr. Brown who had targeted Dorothy, because he was roaming there the previous day. The British soldiers ransacked Dorothy's possessions. They found out neat stacks of signature books. Many of the students signed in their own blood to abolish animal sacrifice in Kamakhya temple. They threw Ratnadhar's paintings carelessly. Jatadhari was taken to police station at Bharulu.

Jatadhari was once a student of History at Benares University. He had roamed around North Kasi and meditated for a long time in a cave in the Vindhyas. Though he renounced the world he found it difficult to accept that Dorothy was dead. His cries of anguish shook the very foundation of the goddess abode. Jatadhari said, "Man is God's creation. Man has many a thing to learn from animals. Only when men and animals live in harmony will the world become a paradise." (p. 180)

After Dorothy's death Jatadhari had taken a vow of silence. All the students from the tol reached the temple. A student from the tol read the petition. Suddenly a priest in red robe asked with relish, "You have written this in consultation with the students from the tol? You have asked why dumb harmless animals should be dragged to the altar. You said if it is blood that required devotees should offer their own. Haven't you?" (p. 185)

At last the tantric persuaded Jatadhari to slice off a piece of his own flesh below his naval and offer it to the altar. So also the students did. The sacrificial altar was drenched in the blood of young men. People stared in horror. The early morning rain washed away everything.

Though Jatadhari had molested Dorothy his ideals were lofty. His efforts to stop bloodshed was diluted and misled by the greedy tantriks. They wanted to maintain the horror mingled with and superstition in the students' heads.

Then it would be easier for them to exploit innocent people to fulfill their stomach.

Kamakhya temple, the holy land where a female deity is worshipped with so many celebrations became an important place of Sakthi worship. Even her yoni is considered sacred; the goddess' menstrual period is considered sacred. The question is whether women of the holy land are treated with even a little courtesy? Singhadatta hurt his daughter with his wooden slippers when he was anger personified. He never bothered about her wishes, or about the pain he caused his own daughter. He even grabbed his daughter's hair and kicked her viciously. It is amazing that worshipping girls in the name of Kumari pooja also occurs in the same land. The priests' wives hands have become coarse and dry. Their palms are shriveled up. They cook for sixty to eighty people every day. They are not allowed to take any medicine. They were not even aware of such healings. They are suppressed and kept ignorant. This is the country where Buddhism and Jainism flourished. In both these religions animal sacrifice or human sacrifice is strictly forbidden. People who do tough jobs started to eat non-vegetarian food out of necessity. As they wanted to legalize their principles for animal sacrifices that were related with temples and various deities, the tantriks who wanted to maintain their superiority carefully execute some shows and exploit the people. The conditions of the poor and down trodden like Pulu, the drummer, are neglected both by the tantriks and by the society in which they live.

Animal Right Activists have tried to stop the practice in the past but were not successful. Gowhati Municipal Corporation Mayor had replied the 'FIRSTPOST' that he hadn't yet received any order to implement the ban on buffalo sacrifice. He said "If sacrifice of buffaloes at the kamakhya temple is to be stopped by this new rule 'Qurbani' of cows during Eid has also to be stopped the law is equal for everyone." The prevention of cruelty to animals Act 1960 does not prohibit animal sacrifice at religious places. As a result, animal sacrifice continues even today. The devotees also know very well that animal sacrifice alone will not put an end to their sufferings. But it has been encouraged by the tantrics as they believe without animal sacrifice the land will be cursed and will become dry. So, the age-old foolish belief prolongs.

Indira Goswami, who belongs to powerful and wealthy Brahmins of Assam, has first – hand knowledge of Kamakhya lore. As per astrologer's suggestion the author herself was taken to the temple during animal sacrifice for her sake. Her forehead was daubed with the blood of the animal. She confessed her guilt, disgust, pain and anguish in her book THE UNFINISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY. She confirms that the colonials followed a policy of non –interference in native affairs in their own self interest. They encouraged each community in India to maintain its own tradition. She humbly expresses her view that animal sacrifices are unnecessary. She also understands that it is difficult to put away age-old customs. Religion is not the only a way to attain peace when people are in distress. Logical thinking and wise decisions alone can help the people to come out from their distress.

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Mrs. T. Vanitha, M.A., M.Ed., M.Phil., Ph.D.
P.G Assistant, English
K.S.C. Govt. Hr. Sec. School
Tirupur-641604