



# Contextualizing Select Fictions Of Indira Goswami And Understanding Indigenous Subaltern Issues

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	<p>A contextual study refers to the set of background factors or the circumstances that provide a framework for understanding a piece of literature. Such study includes the social, political, cultural, economic and historical factors that represent the age, as well as the specific setting in which the plots and incidents are set. The fictional writings of Indira Goswami bear a number of contextual significances. Contextualization of the select texts raise the question of their relevancy of theme, character and other aspects. They remain relevant in terms of certain issues till many decades, centuries and sometimes forever. In many cases, the subaltern issues of the indigenous people and sometimes their subversive history get reflected in the fictional texts. The study attempts to analyse some select fictional texts of Indira Goswami to find their relevancy to the contexts. It also attempts to understand the indigenous subaltern issues reflected in the texts. However, it is found that most of her works have contexts to many late 20<sup>th</sup> century events, situations and ideas relating to history, politics, culture and socio-economy and subaltern issues.</p>
	<p><b>Key-Words:</b> Text, Context, Indira Goswami, Fictions</p>

## Introduction:

Indira Goswami as we know was popular in the Indian literary arena by the name Mamani Roysom Goswami which she used as her pen name in vernacular writings. She was an award winning writer of both Sahitya Akademy (1983), and the Jnanpith Award (2000). Contextual study of her works gives an opportunity for ruminating and better understanding her works. A contextual study may be of different types, such as, social, cultural, historical, political or economic point of view. Social contexts refer to the situational circumstances or conditions that exist in the individuals' social environments. Social context is a crucial factor that shapes our behaviours, perceptions, interactions and the surrounding world. By comprehending social context, we can communicate with human societies more effectively and appreciate the complexity and diversity.

Cultural context delves into the beliefs, customs, traditions, and cultural influences that shape themes and characters. It explores how cultural identities impact the beliefs, characters' interactions, actions, emphasizing the diversity of human experiences and the rich tapestry of global perspectives. Edward T. Hall in his 1959 book writes, 'The Silent Language' states, "culture is communication and communication is culture." Historical context is the awareness regarding the people who created such situations in the past that were current at the time of creation of those texts. The contexted or the referred age, people and events may have held different opinions and beliefs that are different from the 'normal'. Literature always gives vent to the context of its age when it is written. Valmiki's Ramayana, and the Mahabharata of Bedabyasha give context of many geographical places, politics, economy and a multi-cultural Bharat (India). In spite of being myths, these two are considered in India as important documents for many historical contexts.

## Objectives:

1. To analyse Indira Goswami's select fictions from social, historical, economic and political perspectives.
2. To understanding Indigenous subaltern issues

## Discussion

The fictional texts of Indira Goswami are relevant to their contexts of many late 20<sup>th</sup> century events, situations and ideas. The contextualization, however, involves a careful academic and historical activity trying to unearth many relations to relevant backgrounds. In this attempt, it is tried to give the study its required perspectives by offering citations of similar examples from history. This process of referencing involves analysing of plots, events, characters and situations in the social, historical, political and cultural contexts in which they were written. The expectation is that the contextualization helps the readers to understand better the author's time, situation and intentions behind creating the narratives. It also helps apprehending the indigenous subaltern issues authors have tried to address in the texts. Contextualization also allows one to make personal connections to the narrated incidences and situations. Contextualization of fictional texts enhances developing a deeper understanding as well as the reliability of the narratives. And by understanding contexts of fictional narratives, different perspectives and insights can be provided into the origins and root causes of issues concerned.

### Contextualizing Indira Goswami's Fictions

Indira Goswami's fictions reveal mostly the tales of sufferings of women and especially of widows. In her own life, after she had suffered from depression and had made several attempts for suicide gave them shape in her autobiography *The Unfinished Autobiography (Adha Lekha Dostabej)*. She mentions there her suicidal inclination of jumping into Crinoline Falls located near their residence at Shillong. She had the deep mental stress for the sudden loss of her husband, Madhavan Raisom Ayengar from Karnataka. Only after eighteen months of their marriage on April 15, 1967, Madhavan passed away in a tragic car accident in the Kashmir region of India. Since then Goswami had herself the first-hand experience of a widow with its peak during her days in Vrindavana as a researcher which she gave shape in her fictional characters.

Indira Goswami's educated and principled mind always longed for social reformation. Being an educator Indira Goswami wrote with her views for social reform through her poignant writings. A writer through his/her works having responsibility for his society always speak for society's good and always stand by them in need. Indira Goswami being a writer voiced her protest against the deeply established regressive norms of a patriarchal society. Her works tear apart the civilized layers of patriarchy by refusing to declare its distorted notions regarding women. As Aruni Kashyap aptly says, "When she speaks, Assam listens" (82). Her fictions can be contextualized from many different points of view.

### Cultural Contexts in Goswami's Fictions (Socio-religious)

In the state of Assam, like that of the entire nation, Hinduism is a dominant religion practised by majority of its people, though there are different sects. People follow different traditions of religion such as, Shaivism, Shaktism, Tantra, and Ekasarana Dharma, an indigenous form of neo-Vaishnavism. As per the 2011 Census, total practitioners of Hinduism constitute around 61% of the state population. Assam's Kamakhya temple, a shakteepeeeth situated in Kamrup district is the symbol of divine feminine energy. Since thousands of years, it has been a pilgrimage center for not only Hindus, but also for Buddhists, and other practitioners of different streams of Tantrism. Hinduism is also for global reach for its unique beliefs, culture and practices. Even foreign tourist are sometimes attracted by this culture. In "The Man from Chinnamasta" it is evident in the activities of Dorothy Brown. In order to attain peace of mind Dorothy Brown seeks help from Jatadhari.

### Widowhood and Patriarchal Convention

Widowhood is cursed state of a woman under patriarchal convention in Indian socio-religious context. The novelist Goswami had long personal experience of widowhood since a very early period of her life. She was sunk into deep despair after Madhavan's death and consequent cremation in Udampur, J & K. Her brother-in-law then encouraged her to move to Malleswaram of Karnataka, but soon she moved back to Guwahati, and had to sell her Malleswaram home eventually. She had also gathered the experience of a teacher at the Sainik School in Goalpara, Assam. To overcome her lonely state and grief after Madhavan's death Indira started writing her memoirs, began to carry sleeping pills in her vanity bag. She just accepted the reality of her widowhood. Indira was going through some hard and rough times. Being a depressed widow she also received a compassionate proposal to get re-married by a young Sikh instructor while at the Sainik School at Goalpara, Assam which she politely declined. The restless Indira did not get peace of mind and soon moved to Guwahati leaving her job at Goalpara in 1968. After Madhavan's death, when Indira was adjusting to her new life as a widow, (late) Prof. Upendra Chandra Lekharu and his wife Premada stood by her. By this point, Indira had made up her mind to continue her research in Vrindavan with Prof. Lekharu. Indira soon enrolls as one of Lekharu's students at Cotton College. Prof. Lekharu since then was in a regular correspondence with Indira, urging her to attend in Vrindavan the Oriental Institute of Philosophy and conduct her research there. After joining, Indira decided to study the similarities and differences between Goswami Tulsidas' Ramayanas of Ganga valley and Madhava Kondali Ramayana of Brahmaputra valley.

Goswami passed her days under strict dogma and in utter criticism. "When Hindu society discovered that she, a widow, was too self-respecting to take their pity as alms they condemned her for hauteur. Her insistence on living her life as a woman and not as a widow, made them hostile to her. Even her mother, who had, not long

ago, propitiated Goddess Vagala with the offering of a goat to guard her against the evil stars refused to stand by her side in the hour of crisis. It was only her teacher Dr. Upendra Chandra Lekharu and his wife's loving concern which gave her the much needed support to outlive the days of dark distress." (Harish, *Scrutiny of Self in Society: Indian Women's Autobiographies* 112)

### **Days in Vrindavana : Plight of Radhaswamis**

The time when Goswami pursued her research work on 'Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra' she had to visit Vrindavana of Uttar Pradesh, India. It was in August 1969 that Goswami decided to move to Vrindavan. Her family, however, did not approve of that. Her mother tried to keep her back from visiting Vrindavana. On her mother's assertion, however, she had applied for a post of lecturer in Assamese in the Department of Modern Indian languages at the University of Delhi. However, Indira decided to participate in a research study. A professor at Guwahati University had suggested to Prof. Upendra Chandra Lekharu that Indira may pursue her research at the Oriental Institute. As advised, she joined the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, namely the Shri Sankaradeva Chair soon as she reached Vrindavana.

Goswami witnessed in Vrindavana the plight of *Radhaswamis*, the women subalterns. They had to live in dire poverty and also as victims of sexual exploitation which finds expression in her novel *The Blue Necked Braja* (1976). Goswami daringly unveiled a bare reality of young widows' condition in Vrindavana's *Ashrams* which invited harsh criticism from conservative section of the society. This Vrindavana which was a city of Krishna in 'The Mahabharata' has been referred to in an uglier context of women's exploitation. She made such exposure thorough the female character of Saudamini, the protagonist of the novel "*The Blue-Necked God*".

It was in 1969 that her work *Chenabor Srota* (The Current of Chenab) first appeared in a issue of the Tribune Company's Assam Bani magazine. The novel *Shadow of the Dark God and the Sin* was published the following year in the same magazine about the plight of widows in Vrindavan.

Vrindavana is the religious capital for the Hindus as there is religious and mythological belief that Krishna passed his childhood there. This was a place where *gopis* in 'Mahabharata' were given love and honour. Goswami's novel, *The Blue Necked God*, however portrays an another picture of widows' plight. The novel addresses their plight, their destitution and exploitation, which is all the more poignant because she writes from her own lived experiences as a young widow and has seen the kind of prejudice and discrimination during her stay there as a researcher. It was a conservative society holding the widows in between belief and fear.

### **Goswami's Delhi Days : Sikh Killings**

On 20 October, 1970, Indira received a call inviting her for an interview in Delhi University for the lecturer post she had earlier applied. "Indira, who is nervous and hesitant, informs her teacher that she would prefer not to go to the interview and instead go with sannyasins in the Himalayas. (Anjali, 10-13) Many of Goswami's fictions were the creations of Delhi. After relocated in Delhi, she started her career as a Professor of Assamese in the Modern Indian Languages & Literary Studies (MIL) Department at the University of Delhi. While at the university, she wrote some novels and short stories using Delhi as the background, which include *Pages Stained with Blood*, *Hriday*, *Nangoth Sohori*, *Borofo Rani*. Her novels include *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, *The Rusted Sword*, *Uday Bhanu*, *Arihon*, *Dasharathi's Steps* and *The Man from Chinnamasta*. The context of Sikh killing of 1984 in the anti-Sikh riots is the main issue depicted in "Pages Stained with Blood". This was the post-effect of assassination of Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India which Goswami witnessed during her stay in the Shakti Nagar of Delhi. To complete her work she visited many other places, and to depict the lives of the prostitutes she visited even the G.B.Road red light area of Delhi. Based on the problem of Assam's insurgency "*The Journey*" (origin- *Jatra* in Assamese), her another major piece of fiction was published during the period.

### **Sattras Culture in Assam : Plight of Brahmin Widows**

Women's issues, especially of Brahmin widows are dealt with by Indira Goswami in many of her literary works which is very much contextual. Much of her works reflect the pains of widow. She herself has suffered much trauma in life, as she has lived and experienced the life of a widow. Indira Goswami had the rare gift of transforming her painful life into creative literature.

Sattras in Assam are the religious institutions since 16<sup>th</sup> century and centres of neo-vaishnavite culture run by the Brahmins. In those sattras, the plight of the Brahmin widows are brought to light through her novel "*The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*". The sociocultural milieu of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Assam with its customs and regional dialect give a separate identity to Goswami's works. Indira Goswami has beautifully upheld the distinctive flavour of her contemporary Assamese society in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*.

### **Animal Sacrifice in Kamakhya: A Religious Context**

The age-old convention of animal sacrifice in Guwahati's Kamakhya temple is depicted in *The Man from Chinnamasta* which soon turned to be a controversial novel. When the novel was first published in series in a popular magazine, She said in an interview, "I was threatened with dire consequences." However, an another local newspaper, *Sadin*, Shortly after this threat carried an appeal for banning animal sacrifice, which resulted in quite an uproar - the editor was gheraoed and a tantrik warned her. Really it was an overwhelming response,

when the appeal was published, in favour of banning animal sacrifice. On her first attempt to publish *Chinnamastar Manuhto* she had to contend with rejection from a publisher who was initially keen and had promised her a huge advance, but who later backtracked, offering instead to publish any other book of her. But the same later made history becoming a runaway bestseller.

Goswami's novel "The Man from Chinnamasta", an English translation of her *Chinnamastar Manuhto* was a critique of the sacrificial tradition of Kamakhya temple of Assam. Kamakhya is the mother goddess for Shakti where animal sacrifice is an age old practice. The idealism expressed in the novel hurt the sentiment of the hardcore *devi* worshipers, and the matter reached to the extent of threatening the author with dire consequences. What she idealized was already appealed to people to put into religious practice by Sankaradeva in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Like Sankaradeva, Goswami was fully against bloodshed of innocent animals in the name of worship.

At the backdrop of the violence of animal sacrifice at the Kamakhya temple where the blood red waters of Brahmaputra reek of the raw odour of butchered flesh, the protagonist Chinnamasta Jatadhari is like "an ancient landmass arising from the waters covered by an assortment of moss, creepers and grass". The ascetic Jatadhari's chants and meditation in the *Yoni mudra* transcend the human consciousness and represents all of divinity. This very 'inhumanness' of the protagonist and the deep communion which he has with the "Other" within him, makes him compassionate, and rise in protest against the ritualistic animal sacrifice at Kamakhya.

### Child Marriage

Child marriage in India was a serious issue since colonial days. It was first in 1860 that the British government defined and addressed it. They set 10 years as the age of consent. Later by an Act in 1891, the Age of Consent was raised to 12 for girls, and in 1929 it was increased to 14 for girls and 18 for boys due to pressure from social reform movements. After India gained independence, laws were further amended. In 1949, the age for girls was set at 15 under the Child Marriage Restraint Act, also known as the Sharda Act. Then, in 1978, the age was raised to 18 for women and 21 for men. Finally, in 2006, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act established 18 as the minimum age for marriage for women and 21 for men. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006 defines a child as a person who, if male, has not completed twenty-one years of age, and if female, has not completed eighteen years. In Assam, the prevalence of child marriage is primarily attributed to entrenched patriarchal mindsets and limited access to education, perpetuating gender inequality and resulting in significant effects such as health risks associated with early pregnancy. To tackle this issue, the Assam Government has implemented policies aimed at preventing child marriage and aims to abolish it by 2026. (Rahman, pp 149-150)

The act of child-marriage in the novel was the another fear of the Goswami's contemporary Assam. Bidhibala is on the verge of becoming child bride. Bidhibala's father, Singhadatta Sarma has fixed her marriage with an aged man of age forty years who have already two wives. The girl children became victims of social customs, beliefs and patriarchy. When there was Bidhibala's kumara puja, Shambhu priest argued about her attainment of puberty age with two other devotees and says, "The girl seems to have crossed her twelfth birthday. Let's check her hands, feet and chest" (Goswami 47). This reflects of a shameful patriarchy and of orthodox Indians. It was the reflection of child and forceful marriage in Indian society as Bidhibala does not want to get married with that old man that her father has fixed. Nor she wants the sacrifice of a buffalo which her father has promised to do.

### Insurgency: A Socio-Economic and Political Context

That outsiders of NE region were ill-impressed with and that their minds were filled with terror about North-East insurgency is evident from the following conversation and narrations in Goswami's *The Journey*. When they were on a journey on one evening the two professors of Delhi University were conversing on their way back to Guwahati as well as enjoying the journey. When in the moon spotlight a huge owl was seen sitting on a chatyan tree Mirajkar was worrying about terrorists. There was a cross reference of insurgency of other parts of the country viz the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front. Mirajkar remembers someone telling him that terrorists owing loyalty to Babbar Khalsa and the JKLF had somehow managed to infiltrate the jungles of Assam with a view to join local extremists groups.

### Subaltern context

The subaltern hierarchies in Indian social context are the layers arising out of class, *varna*, *jati*, untouchability, gender etc. which often draw thinkers' attention. Since ancient times, social hierarchy in India existed and it existed in Assam also. This social hierarchy was broadly divided into four major categories, such as, *Brahmins* (priestly people), the *Kshatriyas* (warriors, rulers and administrators), the *Vaishyas* (artisans, merchants, tradesmen and farmers), and *Sudras* (labour classes). However, one critic is of the view that "The division was not based on the power, but based on purity." (Sen, 121).

During the post-Mauryan period, a large number of *Jatis* came into existence because of *varnasamkara* or mixing of *varnas*. Critiquing some basic and dark realities of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century caste-ridden Assamese society Indira Goswami's through her short fiction 'The Offspring' (origin-*Sanskar* in Assamese) presents the subaltern issues arising out of rigid definitions of caste, purity and austerity in society in terms of caste, class and morality.



“So far the social hierarchy in the caste system is concerned, its presence is seen to a great extent in Indian context. Caste superiority is one of the main factors responsible for social marginalization prevailing in Indian society. On the other hand, irrespective of the caste or community, women have always been the marginalized and subjugated class. In this context, under such set up of caste hierarchy and patriarchy, the position of women becomes very complex.” (Bora 2020) Caste hierarchy in Assamese society becomes sensible in the following utterances:

Caste-Purification is a “region specific caste system”, and it is prevalent in many parts of the North East, especially in Indira Goswami’s Assam. (Anita Goswami, 2015) her story ‘*The Offspring*’ is the exploration of the disabilities and functionalities of region-specific caste system in India. The old discourses of ‘caste-purity’ and ‘othering’ are found in *Under the Shadow of Kamakhya* (Origin - Devi Pithor Tej) explores the disabilities and functionalities of region specific caste system prevalent in Indira Goswami’s Assam of India’s North East and reveals the contemporary nature of caste-affected society.

## Conclusion

20<sup>th</sup> century Assamese culture finds depiction in Goswami’s novel “The Man from Chinnamasta” through its various characters. However, Chinnamasta Jatadhari is her mouthpiece, whose fervent appeal is to save innocent animals from man’s selfish interest. Those who support animal sacrifice in the novel include the hermits and tantriks of the village Torsa, Haladhar Purohit, Singhdatta Sarma, and Shambhu Sikdar. Their job was to behead the innocent animals for sacrifice. Again, Ambubachi is celebrated every year in Kamakhya temple. We find expression of it when the hermit from village Torsa comes to Kamakhya temple during Ambubachi celebration every year and when the temple is closed for four days as there is the belief that during that time the goddess goes through her menstrual cycle.

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