

Casteism as reflected in 'Matsagandha': A Discussion

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Biswajit Saloi

Gauhati University Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract:

Among the novelists who had given Assamese Literature a special status, Homen Borgohain is one of them. A studious person, his main source of literary practice is wishing reformations of society. The various shortfalls seen in social life have been given place in his novels. 'Matsagandha' is one of Homen Borgohain's novels with morals to know. The caste discrimination and how it has been disturbing social harmony is wonderfully picturized by Homen Borgohain in the novel.

Key words: caste, society, dom, koibarta

Introduction:

Homen Borgohain is an eminent literary figure in Assamese literature. He has been practicing literature since the 50's and has been successful in establishing himself in the field of short story, novels and others. The number of books published by him are 51. Among them 11 are novels which enriched Assamese novel literature. Most of the settings of Gohain's novel are the agro-based village life of Assam. The economically poor people affected by deprivation and exploitation are the main focus of his novels. He has in his novel clearly portrayed the violent and very sorrowful pictures of poor helpless people.

Caste discrimination is an age-old problem affecting lives in Assamese society. 'Matsagandha' by Homen Borgohain portrays a realistic picture of this caste problem.

Depiction of Caste- discrimination In Matsagandha :

The novel Matsagandha deals not only with thoughts and ideas of village life but also lives of the castes in a humorous way. The setting of the novel comprises two co-existing villages in upper Assam.

The central character of the novel, Menaka is a resident of Koibarta village. Crushed by poverty, she is a frustrated woman. The economic condition of most of the people of Koibarta village is also miserable. They cannot even earn their daily bread. Many of them have taken up fishing and wage earning at someone's home as their professions. They have no lands, so they are seen paying little attention to agriculture. In Assamese society, people almost hate the Koibarta community. The so-called upper caste Assamese people like Ahoms and Brahmins keep distance from them in public life. The upper caste people also avoid them in public.

The central character of Matsagandha, Menaka is a woman crushed to miserable life by the caste discrimination. In her childhood, she once went with her mother to a neighbour who was an upper caste. There were rice seeds spread on the front yard of the house of that woman. Unknowingly, Menaka stood by the rice seeds spread area and the shadow of her body fell on it. The woman was angry and gave a strong slap to Menaka. She reprimanded her so badly. The reason of this unexpected situation was at first not understood by Menaka. But when her mother made a protest and questioned the woman, only then Menaka understood that it was all because of her caste i.e. she is a low caste 'Dom'. The shades of her legs and body were regarded as an ill omen by the upper caste people. They even didn't mingle with any Dom.

The attitudes of the society to the people of the koibarta community is revealed through the words of the woman –

Ki koli? Ki koli Domorjat? Tor imantosah Domorjiyeror gar sa
pelaiepasikoidhannostokorileomoiekonamatimonemone
thakibolage?

Borgohain, Matsagandha, P - 636

“What?? What did you just say?? A Dom! How dare you make the rice seeds dirty? Should I shut my mouth having seen this?”

This event and the bad experience from it fires anger in Menaka for her whole life. Whenever she hears someone making fun of a koibarta or accusing them as a 'Dom' she gets upset. She expresses her protest against all the disrespectful treatment, with the scolding and shouts. Menaka is a victim of all the deprivation, disrespect and ignorance meted out to her as a koibarta. In the very

beginning of the novel when Menaka hears two pedestrians walking and talking about Dom village in a negative way, she roars out in anger to them-

Oi Khenkarkhoa, oi mukhotpoklaga.... Kak 'Dom Dom' buliso? Phata

Mekhelarekobainak much ekakarkori dim, burhinaraksinipowanai?

Borgohain, Matsagandha, P - 636

“Hello, mucus eater, hello worm eaten mouths, Whom do you call Dom? I beat you with my worn out 'mekhela'. Did you not know this aged-mother of yours?..”

Not only Menaka is upset about the hatred and ignorance meted out to the koibarta community but also her mother Memari expresses extreme annoyance at the lower position given to them. She very sadly tells Menaka about the identity of their caste –

Ami Dom, bujiso. Purbajanmarkibapaporsastirupei swareamak Nihkuli adomkorisristikorise.

Borgohain, Matsagandha, P - 636

“We are 'Dom' understand! It is a punishment upon us by a curse of a previous birth, I

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suppose, that we are made lower caste!"

Memari accuses herself for this inferior status given to their community. But this is not only her trouble, it is actually a collective sigh of all the Koibarta as that they cannot get out of that discrimination or protest against it. The road to progress of their community has been blocked their own poor economic status and poor education. The caste system created by ancient feudalism was so deep-set that it was unbearable for the upper caste to accept Koibarta student to go to school. The teachers even belong to upper caste and treat the Koibarta student as vile and poor.

The social set up is made strong by the marital relationship of people. There are so many rituals and traditional rules related to the making of marital relationships in Assamese society. In Assamese society the upper caste people don't build any relationship with lower caste people. Traditionally, a successful relationship is thought to be made only with the same caste and same religious groups of people. If any lower caste boy or girl happens to be in a relationship with another caste, it brings a big trouble for the people of their society. Because of this, the couple also has to face various unexpected adverse situations in life.

In the novel, a marriage between an inter caste couple has been prevented. Maniram is an Ahom boy, whose alluring words had made Kamala fall in love with him. But when the temporary emotions receded, Maniram became aware of his caste. He suddenly forgets everything he had done with Kamala and now intends to protect the dignity of his caste. When Menaka requests Maniram to marry Kamala, he angrily shouts out thus –

Moilagileaponghati hoi morimtothapi, tothapiajatiDomor
sowalikbiyanokorao.

Borgohain, Matsagandha, P - 669

"I will rather commit suicide than to marry a non caste poor Dom girl!"

As Kamala was a girl from lower caste, Maniram was not willing to get her married. This decision by Maniram put Kamala into big trouble in her life as she was already pregnant. This was the result of her blind faith in Maniram's sweet but cheating words. This was totally unimaginable and much more trembling and painful for Kamala that now he denies everything.

In Assamese society pre-marital relationships are totally unacceptable and prevented. The society is cruel towards someone who does this. So Kamala decides to commit suicide thinking that she would lose all herself respect and family honour. But eventually, Menaka happens to know her motive and takes responsibility to save Kamala's life. Menaka determines to show the right path to Maniram who has got an ego about his own caste. Menaka thus meets Maniram and tells him about his love relationship with Kamala. But Maniram again denies it strictly. He also says that he will never marry a lower caste girl like Kamala.

Of course, with the change of situation, Manaka gathers courage to live strong. She now has no fear of shame and dishonor. Knowing Kamala's situation, Manaka threatens Maniram saying she will tell his parents about his affair with Kamala. She also tells him that she will expose in public all the history of evil deeds of his family. Fearing this, Maniram immediately rushes to Kamala and

confesses his guilt so that he can protect his family dignity and status. He tells her that he is ready to accept Kamala and stay with her family forever as a son-in-law at home. On the other hand, the family of Maniram breaks all their relations with them as Maniram marries Kamala, a low caste girl. The novelist has brought out the Casteism in society through the words of two pedestrians thus:

EighororManiram bola loratoeajijatikulariaaibopaisokolokeparityag

Kori Dom gaonrDigambararghartgharjowaisapilegoimakbapeke

Seikaroneajijeisaruharidhui tar morasakamkoripelaise, thikeikorise! Ji
loraiajatirlagatsansrabkoriihakalmakbapekorgharatbhoridiyar

adhikarheruaise, taktomorabuliyebhabibopari.

Borgohain, Matsagandha, P - 672

“The boy of this family, Maniram, has married a Dom girl and has left all his kith and kins. The parents have therefore arranged a funeral party today. They have declared him dead while living. They Have done well! A boy who has lost his rights to set foot on parents home, must be declared dead while living.”

This makes Menaka very happy. The hatred and deprivation from upper caste people have been troubling her soul since her very childhood. The story of Maniram and Kamala at last won her heart and cooled her soul so much.

Conclusion:

The novelist has tried to lay bare clearly how the system of Caste-discrimination hampers the growth of a society. Menaka is made the focal point in the novel whose life events take the events of the novel towards its end. HomenBorgohain here shows his social alertness and reforming tendency by bringing forth to the reader all the mal-practices and shortfalls of the society which debbars growth of a good society.

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