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From Witch-hunting in Bodo Society to Lapses in Bodo Novel Writing

ABSTRACT

Bodo literature emerged with a need felt within the Bodo community to establish their history and culture. It soon became a force that created space for intellectual debate within the community. This article discusses a novel, *Daini?* by Manoranjan Lahary, and how his work reflects the desire of the early Bodo writers to dwell on their rich past. At the same time the article traces the development of Bodo novel writing as an art, highlighting Lahary's skill in depicting nature and identifying what needs correction in society. It also discusses the lapses in writing style that plagued the early writers, and the discontinuities in the "realism" that was being promoted by them.

Keywords: Bodo, Literature, Manoranjan Lahary, *Daini?*, Witch Hunting

Manoranjan Lahary's (1936–2009) stories are arguably one of the most widely-read works in Bodo literature. In 2009, his novel *Haina Muli* (Potion of Beauty) was adapted into a movie with the same name that received great reception. He belonged



to a generation of writers who were at the forefront of the Bodoland movement, who rose with the establishment of the community's literary society, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, and those who concerned themselves most with the progress of Bodo people, individually and as a community. These writers, such as Chittaranjan Mushahary, Dharnidhar Owary, and Katindra Swargiary, often referred to the Bodo community with an analogy of being asleep, leading them to assume the responsibility of breaking their slumber and revealing to them their new reality. Lahary writes, "Bodo *maharikhaw gwdanwi danphinnw gwnang jabai*" (It has become a necessity to build the Bodo race anew).¹ He suggests that before undertaking such a task of reconstruction, the "identification" of ills, undesirable habits, and internal disputes prevalent amongst the Bodo people must be accomplished. Only then can the process of rebuilding take place.² Manoranjan Lahary's novel, *Daini?* (2005), fits as a perfect illustration of his endeavor in the "identification" of the ills within Bodo society. *Daini/Daina* is a male/female who practices tantric magic, often with malicious intentions. *Daini?*, a novel about witch-hunting, exposes the blindness which guides the public towards brutal prosecutions of innocents. The title of the novel, *Daini?*, is followed by a question mark which raises a question. The author, however, does not provide any reason behind doing so, but one may guess that it was meant as a direct interrogation addressed to the Bodo people. Since it is the communal consensus that marks one as a *daini*, by adding a question mark, the author can ask the public to reflect on their decision to mark a person as one. The question mark might also be addressed to the readers, whether they would agree with the popular opinion based on the events depicted in his novel.

¹ Manoranjan Lahary, *Manoranjan Laharini thajim rebgon (Selected Writings of Manoranjan Lahary)*, (Gwalpara: Bodo Sahitya Sabha, 2009), 54.

² *Ibid*, 54.

The *Oja* in Bodo Society

The protagonist of *Daini?*, Durmaw, forced into penury after the death of her husband, uses her knowledge of herbs and traditional medicine to become an *oja*, in order to support her family. An *oja* is a person (man or woman) who specializes in the treatment of ailments using traditional methods. Unfortunately, this knowledge also makes her a potential candidate for demonic practices in the eyes of many villagers. If she knows how to save, why would not she know how take lives? The power to cure, moreover, can often bestow upon one a superhuman status. Thus, the plot of *Daini?* revolves around the villagers getting divided into camps of supporters and opposers. Eventually fear comes out victorious and Durmaw is butchered publicly. The brutality exhibits the dominant mindset prevalent in Bodo society and the direction its people were taking as whole.

What was the source of hatred towards the *oja*? The development of the plot is cleverly directed towards answering this question. The answer lies in the message of Lahary's novel. As the reader journeys through the pages, he is shown glimpses of both irrationality and reason, on one side is jealousy, and on the other is kindness; there is the growth of love relationships and parallelly a build-up of animosity. Until the very last page such dichotomies cycle in a back-and-forth motion, at one moment the reader is made to question if irrationality will prevail, but the very next moment he is shown some hope and glimmer of light.

The story begins with a supernatural sighting. Driving on an empty road, Bilasu, an illegal dealer of timber, who lives in the same village as the protagonist, comes across an apparition. The moment of fright for Bilasu marks the doom of Durmaw. He is sure that the ghost he saw spoke to him in Durmaw's voice. He sticks to this justification, believing that Durmaw meant him harm. He spreads his story across



the village until he achieves his goal. Bilasu had no other obvious reason to hate her; it could only be pinned down to his fear.

Durmaw, however, is a kind woman who works hard to support her family and is dedicated to finding cures for all those who visit her with myriad ailments. She treats them with care and at the same time accepts what payment is affordable by those who come to her. She is eventually butchered to death mercilessly at the hands of the public, despite her kindness and love. Her death is described gruesomely and most graphically. Lahary's intentions are clear: to highlight the irrationality of public (Bodo) judgement, and to "identify" the immorality, both of which call for reform.

But not all is gloom and doom in Lahary's world. Humankind may have gone astray but nature continues to nurture with her beauty and love. Lahary's stories are most often set against a rural backdrop. He spends significant amount of time in building such a world through picturesque descriptions. Bodo villages are always surrounded by tiny hills alongside huge spreads of forest land, and agricultural fields engulfed within river strips. Lahary's writings paint an imagery of such rural life. As an illustration, the opening words of his novel describe the sunset, "*Swnabthingjaini gamiphwrni dongphang-laiphanghwrni khoro arw bijwphurni sa sa sonathi gabni san rwdaphra abir sarnanwi zaphob hwnai badi zaphobhwdwng*" (The golden sun rays spread like a *rangoli* on the edges of canopies and branches of the villages lying on the west).³ And also,

Nathai, dwima-dwisa, lwithwmwnha mengnai gwiya, thadonai gwiyah. [. . .] jaiga jaiga agrwmse ar jaiga jaiga hanthuse gwthow, gwthow bobawba bobawba bala damwnla arw

³ Manoranjan Lahary, *Daini?* (Kokrajhar: Onsumoi Library, 2005), 1.

badamali. Hasumuthra, eleng, phithikhri, thuri arw baidishina na mwnha dwini daharao geledwng. Khangkhraiya gudungniphrai wngkhardwng arw phir habphwndung. Hagramaya Samokhainiphrai bwlw mwnw. (However, streams and brooks are tireless, they never rest. [. . .] At places they are bottomless deep, and somewhere else they rise only till the knees; at places you can feel the sandy riverbed and somewhere else the algae. *Hasumuthra, eleng, phithikra, thuri* and many other fishes play in these streams. Crabs emerge out of their burrow, and immediately run back inside. The forest is blessed by Samokha [name of the river].⁴

Weaknesses in Lahary's Plot and Style

One must not get carried away by the poetic messages and scenic depictions. The novel is located in a period that marked the early days in the development of Bodo novel writing. *Daini?*, published in 2005, Manoranjan Lahary's fifth novel, comes only thirty-three years after the first Bodo novel (*Jujaini Or*, by Chittranjan Mushahary) was published and eighty-one years after the first written Bodo literature, *Bibar*, a magazine, was published. Not the just novel, the idea of written literature itself was still at a nascent stage. Since he was a forerunner in the field, it is not surprising to find vulnerabilities in his writing style. The plot development in *Daini?* is left wanting, certain moments in the novel feel almost forced, leaving the reader unconvinced. For instance, it was already known to Durmaw and her children the night before that they were going to be murdered the next day. The psychological weight of that night felt underexplored, the night passed by too swiftly, there was no conversation between the mother and her

⁴ Ibid, 10.



children on the foreseeable future. The next day, while Durmaw was being butchered by the public, Birphung, who had received her help in the past, loans his bicycle to her son and helps him elope, and at the same time her daughter's lover runs away with her without anyone noticing them. Durmaw is completely unaware and so are all the villagers. The children themselves do not know that their sibling has escaped, they do not even look back towards their mother. There are many such moments in the novel that just pass us by without much convincing, which can make the reader feel as if they were merely planted conveniently to further the author's message. As a reader, one can be left with many unanswered questions.

Other than holes in the plot, we also see some inconsistencies in the standpoints that the writer wants to take. To illustrate what I mean, Lahary intended to write a "realist" novel that would depict Bodo society as is. "Realist" would mean presenting life in its plain factual form with an absence of surreal elements such as fantasy, magic, and the supernatural, which were a popular choice among the Bodo writers of that period. A news-report like "realist" genre allows for a better tool to "identify" the ills in a society, it bares open the hidden follies, and makes it easier for the reader to understand the writer's message without having to dissect through thick layers of symbolism. Lahary's "realism," however, is porous to the surreal elements that it so tries to get rid of. It begs the question as to whether the seepage of surrealism in his "realist" writing was due to the writer's failure to notice it (which is difficult to believe), or due to his belief in the supernatural as "real."

It is simpler to understand these contradictions with some examples. The initial sequence of events where Bilasu comes across an apparition could have been justified as a figment of his imagination, but one cannot do so because the same ghost is also spotted by multiple

other men. In fact, these other men were the ones who made Bilasu aware that the woman sitting behind him is a ghost. In another instance, when Birphung gets bitten by a snake, Durmaw is asked to come over and treat him. Surprisingly she is able to summon the original snake that had bitten Birphung and makes it extract all the poison to save his life. Moreover, when Bilasu blames her in front of the *gaubura* (village chief), she does not try to defend herself by stating that she is just a traditional healer who uses herbs as medicines. Instead, she puts the blame on a different *oja* who, she found, was the one haunting Bilasu. It is as if neither Durmaw nor Lahary want to deny the existence of black magic. Instead, the embedded message is that black magic exists, but she was the one who practiced it. It is as if all Lahary wanted to say was that witch-hunting is wrong because people easily give in to rumors and fear, instead of saying witch-hunting is wrong because there are no witches or black magic.

I have presented in this essay a snippet from the timeline of Bodo literature. Manoranjan Lahary's *Daini?* is a representative sample of late twentieth- and early twenty-first century Bodo literature. It showcases what writing literature meant to a generation of novelists, what the dominant ideas were, and what stage of development novel writing was at. Novelists contemporary to Lahary were also a part of the larger Bodoland movement for autonomy and their writings reflected the sentiments of that movement. Such novels, therefore, provide a key to understand the roots and meanings behind the movement. The dominant style preferred by Lahary's generation was a "realist" representation of society. Most of the writers engaged in what Lahary called "identification" of ills in society. The "realism" in Lahary's novel, however, is not a mirror image of Western "realism." The plot in Lahary's novel had underdeveloped moments, a lapse also seen in other Bodo novels that belong to the same period. These



observations demonstrate that the novel as a genre was at a nascent stage in Bodo literature, and help us to imagine the journey of Bodo novels.

Note on the Author

Milan Narzary grew up in Bongaigaon, a small town in Assam. When the state got embroiled in violent uprisings, he went to a boarding school in Rajasthan. He then obtained a Bachelors' Degree in English Literature at St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. He holds an M.A. in Comparative Literature from Jadavpur University, Kolkata. He worked for the Centre for Translation of Indian Literature, Jadavpur, as a Translator and Resource Person translating Bodo short stories into English and Bengali. Recently, he completed a second Masters in Cognitive and Neural Sciences from University of Hyderabad. He has presented a research paper on a comparative study of indigenous communities in Canada (Inuit) and India (Bodo) at an International Conference at the Centre for Canadian Studies, Jadavpur. His research article, "An Aversion to 'Savage' Culture: Rectifying Popular Misinterpretations of the Bodoland Movement," appeared in *Rising Asia Journal* (Vol. 1, Issue 1, January 2021). At present, he is working on his own short stories and preparing to enter a doctoral degree program.

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