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Lakshminandan Bora's Short Stories: A Reflection of the Destitute

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Abstract:

Since its emergence, Assamese short stories have been associated with journals, magazines, and newspapers. The socio-economic factors are the dominant aspects discussed in the works of the Assamese writers. Contemporary social issues are well-focused through their writings. Lakshminandan Bora was one of the versatile writers in Assamese Literature. His contributions to Assamese Literature are several collections of short stories, novels, dramas, books on popular science, travelogues, biographical sketches, and translated books. His literary contributions have elevated Assamese literature to a different height. Lakshminandan Bora had minutely observed the weaker sections. In most of his stories, he has portrayed the underdeveloped class of society. Keeping aside the spectacular scenes, he focused on the authentic picture of the rural folks and their hardships. He presented a wide range of characters through his works and most of his characters belong to the lower or middle class of society. The contemporary lives of the Assamese people, their living style, their struggling lives, pains, and agonies, hopes and aspirations, etc. are beautifully projected in his stories.

Keywords: Short story, rural folk, hardship, destitute.

Introduction:

The short story is one of the most popular literary forms. A gradual evolution is seen in the growth and development of this literary genre. A modern short story writer is an artist who observes life closely. Since its emergence, Assamese short stories have been associated with journals, magazines, and newspapers. The modern Assamese short stories found their expression in the pages of the Assamese magazine *Jonaki* by the avant-gardes of the times at first from Calcutta (1889-1895) and later from Guwahati (1901-1903). Magazines like *Orunodoi*, *Ramdhenu*, and *Awahan* played a vital role in the growth and development of Assamese short stories. Socio-economic factors are the dominant aspects discussed in the works of the Assamese writers. The chief characteristic of their writings is realism. The social consciousness is abundant in their writings. Contemporary social issues are well focused through the writings of the Assamese short story writers. Lakshminandan Bora is one of the versatile writers of the *Ramdhenu era* (a period in the mid-20th century influenced by the renowned Assamese literary magazine *Ramdhenu*, which means rainbow). He had started his career after India's independence. In the literary works of this period, the impact of World War II can be seen. The prevalent issues of the middle class or the lower middle class, the peasants, and the laborers were reflected in the writings of this period.

Lakshminandan Bora was one of the eminent writers of Assam. He contributed several collections of short stories, novels, dramas, books on popular science, travelogues, biographical sketches, and translated books to the Assamese literature. His literary contributions have elevated Assamese Literature to a different height. His short stories are significant because he projected common folk and their lives. Lakshminandan Bora's art of narration is noteworthy. He narrated his stories with every minute detail and could do this only because of his keen observation of all the aspects related to his subject.

Lakshminandan Bora was born in 1932 in the Nagaon District of Assam. He did his schooling here. Later, he studied at the Cotton College in Guwahati and got his B.Sc. degree. Lakshminandan Bora did his M.Sc in Physics from the prestigious Presidency College, Calcutta in 1954 and later did his Ph. D in Agricultural Meteorology from Andhra University, Waltair, Andhra Pradesh in 1977. He was a professor and head of the Department of Physics and Agrometeorology at Assam Agriculture University, Jorhat. In 1989, he was a visiting Professor at Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany. He was also engaged as a Project Director in an Indo-German Project on Climatology from 1990 to 1992. He was a highly respectable novelist and short story writer. He was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1986 for his famous novel *Patal Bhairavi*. His novel *Ganga Chilanir Pakhi* (1963) has been translated and published in 22 Indian languages by National Book Trust. It has also been translated into Hindi and other Indian Languages by Sahitya Akademi.

Lakshminandan Bora had a soft corner for the neglected and underprivileged class of society and this attraction was because of Haladhar Heera. During his childhood, Haladhar was a domestic help to the household of Lakshminandan Bora. Haladhar belonged to the Heera community, a socially backward class. In knowing the lives of the lower-class people, Haladhar helped him a lot. Bora wrote in his autobiography, *Kaal Bolukat Khoj*:

“I have realized that being a companion in my childhood, Haladhar Heera has benefitted me as a writer. Haladhar has occupied a special place in my literary life. The reason for my attraction towards the lives of the neglected, underdeveloped class of society and their lifestyles is none but Haladhar. I am indebted to him for some stories written in the initial stage of my literary career.”

(Bora 22)

Bora never missed an opportunity to realize the feelings and emotions of the laypeople. Again, in his autobiography he expressed it:

“I loved to travel by city buses---there I got the opportunity to get introduced to the hopes and aspirations of the lower middle-class people and their struggle. As a writer, I was very much benefitted.” (Bora 552)

Lakshminandan Bora had minutely observed the weaker sections. The lives of the common folk and their struggle to survive are beautifully delineated in his stories. In most of his stories, he has portrayed the underdeveloped class of society. Keeping aside the spectacular scenes, he focused on the authentic picture of the rural folks and their hardships. In his works, he presented a wide range of characters. His characters mainly belong to the lower class or middle class of society. The contemporary lives of the Assamese people, their living style, their struggling lives, pains and agonies, hopes and aspirations, etc., are beautifully projected in his stories.

Abakhyai (Decay) is a beautiful story of Lakshminandan Bora where the pathetic conditions of human beings are narrated. It is a story about Kalai Koch, a daily wage earner. He had five children. His financial condition can be visible in the rags of his children. Kalai Koch came to Nitya Hazarika, the compounder to borrow five rupees. Kalai was unable to find a job and provide food to his children. They were starving for the last five days. While describing his condition to Nitya Hazarika, Kalai could not go further. He started weeping. Hazarika observed his staring eyes and found them to resemble the eyes of a dead person. Compounder Hazarika could not bear this situation of Kalai. He became worried and gave him five rupees. A few days later, Nitya Hazarika came to Kalai Koch's house. His house was situated just near the hospital where Hazarika was posted. It was a small hut gripped under darkness. On entering the hut, Hazarika saw four children lying on a mat on the floor. Just near them, a girl of about 12 or 13 years old was sitting. The girl informed Hazarika that her father had gone out in pursuit of work. Looking at the other children lying on the floor, Hazarika asked the girl if the children were not well. He again asked her why they were lying

so. She replied that they were all well and they were accustomed to it. She also added that they had not taken anything from the day before. Hazarika offered her two rupees and asked her name and about her education. She replied that her name was Tilu. She had gone to school only for three years while they had farmlands. After that, she had to leave her education due to their poor financial condition. After the conversation, Hazarika left the place with a heavy heart.

After some days, Kalai Koch came to Hazarika to return the five rupees he had taken from Hazarika earlier. Hazarika asked him where he got the money. Kalai told him that he had sold his only cow. Kalai said:

“I have sold the cow, Sir. I had no other option. The cow was the Lakshmi of the house. We got a bit of relief by selling the milk. Sir, I wish to die. Since the demise of the mother of Tilu, havoc has come to the house. She was the Lakshmi of the house, Sir. After that the red cow was the Lakshmi of the house, now she is also gone.” (Bora 399-400)

One day, Hazarika saw a Punjabi man coming to Kalai’s house on a motorbike. He asked the chowkidar about the man. The chowkidar informed him that he was a contractor. At night when Hazarika returned from the village, he heard the voice of Kalai. He created a chaos in his house. Hazarika also overheard the children screaming. Kalai also shouted and the sound of beating on the walls and floors fell on Hazarika's ears. Then everything turned silent. A while later, Kalai started to sing incoherently and in an unpleasant voice. Later, from the chowkidar, he learned that Kalai had drunk wine. He also asked him if Kalai was addicted to drinking. The chowkidar informed that he had no such habit. However, that day, it was something different. He said:

“Today, Kalai has become a different person. That Sir, he has done an extremely filthy work. He is not a human being; he is a beast. Having seen the incidents,

I could not stop crying. In his eyes, however, there was not a single drop of tears.” (Bora 401)

On hearing this, Hazarika became more and more curious. He asked him to explain things in detail. The chowkidar then, with a sigh, started to brief:

“He sold his elder daughter, Tilu, to the Punjabi. He took one hundred and fifty rupees from the Punjabi. I was near him. I was shocked seeing his misdeeds.”

(Bora 402)

Hazarika became distressed. He could not think about it more. The story reflects the pathetic condition of the poor, like Kalai, who even sell their child to get temporary relief from their poverty.

Sei Bakasto (That Box) is another significant story of Lakshminandan Bora. The story is about a married couple, Bapdhan and Maisena, and their struggle. The beginning of the story itself describes the poor state of Bapdhan. The narrator said:

“The cultivation time arrives. However, there is no bullock in the house to till the field. The money he gathered by selling paddy vanished in the treatment of Maisena. He has even no resources left to mend the decayed thatched roof.”

(Bora 572)

Maisena, the wife of Bapdhan, was suffering from some unknown diseases for a long time, but Bapdhan was unable to make the necessary arrangements for her treatment. He was financially weak and could not take his wife to a doctor. At last, he arranged some money by selling her gold bangle and took her to Dibrugarh for treatment. All the necessary examinations were conducted, and Bapdhan was informed that she had been diagnosed with cancer. The doctor said:

“Immediate operation is needed. Cancer is in the intestine. The patient should not be aware of this right now.” (Bora 573)

As Bapdhan did not have enough money for the immediate operation, they returned home. Reaching home, Bapdhan brooded upon how to gather money for Maisena's treatment. Many things came to his mind. He was bewildered and finally decided to sell his only cultivation land, which provided his two-time meal. The narrator said:

“If the cultivated land is lost, what will he eat? He started thinking of other means. It will be futile to discuss things with Maisena. She is ready to accept death. She definitely will not allow me to sell the remaining ornaments.” (Bora 575)

The whole day, Bapdhan talked to Maisena. He tried to convince her, but she did not allow him to sell the ornament. She said:

“If you want to cure me, make arrangements for prayers, call some priests. Seeing them and listening to their devotional hymns, I will attain peace. Only God can cure my disease. No doctor or *kabiraj* can cure me.” (Bora 575)

Bapdhan became helpless. He wanted to make expensive arrangements for her treatment. It was unbearable for him to watch her waiting for death.

The story reflects the conditions of the destitute. The pathetic but accurate picture of the farmers who fail to undergo necessary treatment due to poor financial conditions is precisely highlighted. The dark yet real picture of society is beautifully reflected in the story.

Another notable story of Lakshminandan Bora is *Rashtrapati Ahibo (President's Visit)*. The sufferings of common people due to the visits of political leaders and the security measures associated with their visits are highlighted in this story. The story revolves around the main character, Sarbai Gogoi, a poor man who runs a bicycle repair shop. He was doing good business with his cycle shop. Gradually, his condition improved as he started his shop. He also employed Karuna, Hamid, and Benu in his shop. They were all earning their livelihood from the shop. One day, Sarbai got the news that the President of India was visiting the

Agriculture University, and the motorcade would take the route on which his shop stands. He felt delighted and overwhelmed with joy. He immediately planned to give his shop a new look and a name as it was a matter of prestige. The President of India would go through that road and notice his shop. He thought that things should be in a proper shape and tidy. He pondered upon the topic of naming the shop. After a long discussion with his friends, he finally fixed the name--Sarbai Cycle Service. He also made and hung a signboard on his shop with the letters in black. He ensured the signboard was visible from all three connected roads and a substantial distance. He also brought his wife, Tilu, to the shop and showed her the new look of his shop. Both the husband and wife were happy and excited. They believed that within a year, their shop would surely attain a new height.

Six months ago, Sarbai worked in Nirmal Dutta's cycle shop. However, he could earn only fifty rupees a month. One day, he thought that he could open a cycle shop independently. Instantly, Sarbai started the necessary arrangements for the shop. He selected a prominent place at the juncture of three roads. People from all three directions pass through this place. In no time, his business started to flourish. After that, his life ran smoothly.

Soon, the day scheduled for the President's visit came. Sarbai was very excited. That day, he went to his cycle shop very early and asked his wife to get ready by 10:30 in the morning. He told her that he would come and take her to his shop and they could look at the President passing. Accordingly, Tilu was ready and waited for Sarbai, but he did not come. She waited and waited and became tense with time. Later, she saw that two people carried her husband to their house. Tilu was shocked and started shouting. She asked the people what had happened to her husband. However, nobody directly answered her. She repeatedly asked them what had happened to her husband. At last, the happenings unfolded to her. Sarbai Cycle Service was evacuated for security reasons. As the President of India was going through that road, security personnel cleared everything from that road. Hamid says:

“We become beggars within this span of time--brother Sarbai, I, Karuna and Benu--we all.” (Bora 422)

The story highlights how easily ordinary people become the victims of such VIP arrangements and how helpless they are. People often encounter such harassment due to security bandobasts related to the movement of political leaders or VIPs. It is a common scenario that before the arrival of some heavyweight leaders or political figures, the surroundings of that location and the roads get a new look. During such times, construction and renovation works are carried out on a war footing and become beautiful and eye-catching. The dirty roads and highways become clean and coloured. Small shops, like Sarbai Cycle Service, are considered security threats or dirt to the scenic beauty and so wiped out. It is not a concern for the authorities what will happen to those small vendors or shop owners affected by these moves. It takes years of effort and hardship for the dwellers to establish their small businesses, but the authorities need just a few hours to get them down. The political or ruling system is created for the betterment of the common masses yet sometimes their actions are against the well-being of the people who entrusted them with the power to work for the welfare of the common people. It is often seen that once in power or a hierarchy, the leaders forget their responsibilities and fail to live up to the expectations of the common person. Instead, the common people have to suffer from these leaders at some point or other, directly or indirectly.

Conclusion:

Lakshminandan Bora has a unique place in Assamese literature. As a storyteller, he is very natural. Bora picked up the day-to-day incidents to unfurl the truths and facts of life. The pathetic conditions of the destitute are very realistically portrayed through his stories. An authentic picture of society is beautifully reflected through his short stories. He has presented a wide variety of characters in his stories. Most of his characters belong to the middle class,

the lower middle class, and the weaker section of society. The neglected and underdeveloped class of society is well portrayed through his works.

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