
Drawbacks of Indian Democracy in Homen Borgohain's *Pita Putra* And Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and *Between The Assassinations*: A Comparative Study

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Liberty and equality are two major boons of Democracy. These two vital aspects of human life are instrumental to sustainable development and Enlightenment. But unfortunately there are innumerable evil forces that destroy human liberty and equality. Those evil forces which we call 'corruption' exist in countless forms. India is a sixty two year old Democracy. Arising out of centuries of imperial captivity and foreign rule, the Indian nation aspired for radical change under democracy. But it could not achieve perfection. That is why it is imperative to examine the drawbacks of Indian democracy.

The article seeks to reflect on these drawbacks of Indian democracy in forms of maladministration, citizens being deprived of liberty/equality, prevalence of injustice, and widespread corruption.

For analysis of the drawbacks of Indian Democracy, an Assamese novel entitled *Pita Putra* by Homen Borgohain, recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award (1978), (translated into English by Ranjita Biswas), that depicts Indian democracy during the earlier years; and *The White Tiger* and *Between The Assassinations* by Aravind Adiga (recipient of Man Booker Prize 2008), that depicts the Indian democracy of current years, have been chosen. The comparative analysis aims at focusing on how over the years the state of governance in democracy has deteriorated.

The appropriate vision of human liberty is demarcated to “the inward domain of consciousness”. Human liberty comprehensively comprises of “the liberty of conscience, liberty of thought and feeling, absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment of subjects, practical or speculative, scientific, moral, or theological” (Mill, 1967, p.108). This principle of liberty requires liberty of tastes and pursuits, of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character.... Subject to such consequences as may follow, without impediment from our fellow creatures.... even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong (Ibidem). According to the American Declaration of Independence “...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”(Dahl 2001:65). John Locke is of the opinion that all men are equal by nature and they have equal right and their natural freedom and can not be harmed by the will or authority of any other fellow being (Dahl, 1991, p. 85).

Democracy through its principles of liberty and equality helps people to protect their own fundamental interests. The democratic government assures maximum opportunities for persons to exercise freedom of self determination and moral responsibility (Dahl 2001:60). Democracy also allows the citizens general freedom like rights to free expression, political organization, opposition, fair and free elections, etc.(Ibidem, p.:88).

Homen Borgohain's *Pita Putra* (1975) which presents the implementation of democratic principles into the Assamese society that was controlled by the landlords and the rapid social changes that brought turmoil and provided the youth with the open mindedness as to the principles of democracy and self determination and the Gandhian and Marxist ideologies. Starting from the pre-Independence era and even the peoples' ideas about the stern rule of Queen Victoria, the novel depicts two generations of the Assamese society caught in the tumultuous wake of India's transition to independence. Of the two generations, the first generation protagonist, Sivanath Phukan (born 1895/1896), a prosperous landlord of Mohghuli village, the father of three sons and two daughters, was a principled man, who was

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honest and truthful to his core and who did not tolerate corruption, but was orthodox and aristocratic, proud of his status and rank as a landlord. Though believed to be liberal, he was eccentric and tenacious. During the pre-Independence era, he was aware of corruption and ill-doings of Reba Mahajan and the village surveyor, Keshab Mandal and did not like them. He wanted his three sons Gourinath, Kalinath and Lakshminath and two daughters Rambha and Savitri to always remain submissive and faithful to him and not to act according to their own will. They were not allowed equal claims to life, liberty and happiness. His sons could not enjoy the liberty of thought and feeling, freedom of opinion, sentiments, tastes and pursuits. His youngest son always complained against his negligence and blamed that it was his father's negligence of him that he turned a drunkard. He was always quarrelling with his father and asking for his share of the property. He was again provoked by the contractor Kanakdarji (who wanted to marry Sivanath's eldest daughter, Rambha) to attack Sivanath. Sivanath was not allowing Rambha's marriage with Kanakdarji as Kanak who had become rich later, was very poor and his father was a servant in Sivanath's house. So Sivanath neglected Kanak and did not consider him his equal. Sivanath even did not allow the choices of his sons, Gourinath and Kalinath for marriage commenting that "marriage was not just a personal choice" (PP, p.89). He even disowned his eldest son, Gourinath. He believed in untouchability and the villagers belonging to the fishermen community were not allowed seats in his house as they were considered untouchables. He even disrespected the *Huchari* party as they decided to start visiting the houses from one end of the village in stead of visiting his house first. The novel unravels other agents of corruption, who were supposed to be the saviours of law. The corrupt MLA Biswa Hazarika, excise official Suren Mahanta, the corrupt OC of the Police Station , the Congress president Keshab Handique, who was the former village surveyor, Reba mahajan, the grocer turned village panchayat chairman and the school sub-inspector, who were supposed to be the guardians of liberty and equality were all involved in corruption. This is how Indian democracy from the beginning has not been functioning appropriately .It mimics the

modus operandi of the corrupt colonial masters. The ideology and sacrifices of the freedom fighters like Gandhi could not completely effect radical democratic manoeuvring/change in Indian society to justice, equality and liberty of the citizens.

The idealism of several self determined youths also failed due to their waywardness and due to lack of proper monitoring by any mentor .So a character Dr. Mukherji, father of Soumitra attacking the youthful dream of his self determined son comments: " Wasn't it Nirad Choudhuri who said that the idealist young Indian starts his life as a disciple of Marx and ends up in later life as a disciple of Ramkrishna Paramhansa"(Ibidem, p.193).The comment of Kalinath , son of Sivanath is also remarkable: "These rebels who came alive in liquor parties are false idealists...We Indians want to make shortcut to everything. But there is no shortcut to revolution"(Ibidem, p.197). Soumitra, the self determined romantic idealist also shouts his democratic ideology, " But a democracy that gives birth to a crude animal like Biswa Hazarika, a democracy that does not allow punishing the greatest enemies of the society is not the one I believe in. I want a democracy where those trampled by the society will rule. I want a democracy that will free these poor people from economic and political slavery. And to achieve it the only path is revolution through an armed struggle. We will fight in the hills, in the forests and the lanes of the cities. Come, join us. You have experienced enough of the justice doled out through the democratic process....Come along with me"(Ibidem, pp.198-99).

Pita Putra exposing the drawbacks of Indian democracy has also unraveled people's awareness of the democratic principles. Situations have changed, but not towards a better humanist approach. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and *Between The Assassinations* explore horrible practices in Indian Democracy in the current years. *The White Tiger* which presents "the Autobiography of a Half Baked Indian" (TWT, p.10) is set in the backdrop of the economic boom in India that has created a great chasm between the haves and have-nots. Balram Halwai , who is presented as a modern Indian hero, in the midst of the economic prosperity of India in the recent past, has been able to climb the ladder of success by murdering Mr. Ashok, his employer, and stealing

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his bag full of money-Rs.7,00,000/-,based on a philosophy of revenge, ambition and corruption. This philosophy of revenge, ambition and corruption is also a game called *democracy in our time* (italic ours). Balram is representative of the poor in India yearning for their “tomorrow”. Balram was schooled in crime. His revenge sprang out of his master Mr. Ashok and master’s wife Pinky Madam’s constant ill-treatment to him. Mr. Ashok and Pinky recurrently made fun of Balram. Balram even had to suffer humiliation in the hands of his master with ever increasing menial duties which climaxes in his being blackmailed when Ashok’s wife Pinky kills a man in drunken driving. But Balram was forced to sign a statement accepting full responsibility for the accident. He was fully aware of the corrupt practices of his master, Ashok, who was enjoying life with girls, frequenting malls and hotels.

Balram was frustrated and over-reactive for his master’s corrupt practices. His going to the red light area in search of a prostitute is to satisfy his suppressed revenge. He searches for strands of golden hair of women who frequently traveled with Ashok in the car and had sex. He takes pleasure in collecting every strand of female hair.

The Rooster Coop obsessed him and as such he broke out of it. He was trained by his master in the corrupt ways. This training provided him the courage to steal and kill his master. Through his criminal drive Balram becomes a businessman and runs a car service for call centres in Bangalore. Balram wanted freedom / liberty. But that liberty is not the liberty that democracy advocates. Really it is very difficult to achieve that liberty. “...Indians are the world’s most honest people...(Ibidem, p.175). The masters exploit the trustworthiness of the servants and they exploit them: “...Masters trust their servants with diamond in this country!...why doesn’t that servant take the suitcase full of diamonds? He is no Gandhi, he’s human, he’s you and me. But he’s in the rooster coop” (Ibidem).

Even the master many times confides his secret to the servant .Ashok confesses to Balram about his filthy life: “My way of living is all wrong, Balram. I know it, but I don’t have the courage to change it. I just don’t have...the *balls*.... ‘I let

people exploit me, Balram. I've never done what I've wanted, my whole life"(Ibidem, pp. 237-8).

Balram subscribes to the principle of 'robbing them of what they robbed us wouldn't hurt'. Following this principle he takes law into his own hand setting in motion a state of anarchism whereby he plans to have a school full of White Tigers unleashed on Bangalore to hold the city ransom. He seems to pursue the principle of Mikhail Bakunin, one of the strongest believers in anarchism, that "The urge to destroy is also a creative urge." He often used violence and terrorism to bring about revolution (Anarchy). How safe would be our society with such psychopaths if they unleashed a reign of terror? People like Ashok and Balram-are they not sociopaths churned out by extreme poverty, injustice and inequality in our democratic system enveloped in rampant corruption and nepotism?

The novel is a social commentary and a study of injustice and power in the form of a class struggle in India that depicts the anti-hero Balram representing the downtrodden sections of the Indian society juxtaposed against the rich. "*The White Tiger* protagonist exposes the rot in the three pillars of modern India - democracy, enterprise and justice – reducing them to the tired clichés of a faltering nation... that the West is holding *The White Tiger* as a mirror to us. It is telling us that India is not shining and, despite its claims of a booming economy, it is still "the near-heart of darkness", which it has been since time immemorial" (Saxena, 2008, p. 9).

The novel is centred on the crime Balram commits and he goes on to recount how he became an entrepreneur coming into the 'Light' of prosperity. Born in a tiny hell-hole called Laxmangarh in northern India, his impoverished parents merely called him 'munna' -- 'boy' and they raised him in the world of darkness of their extreme poverty. While at school, Balram was spotted by the inspector of schools who offered to get a scholarship for his education:

You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In

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any jungle, what is the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along only once in a generation?’

I thought about it and said:

‘The white tiger.’

‘That’s what you are, in *this* jungle’ (TWT, p. 35).

Balram considers himself "half-baked" as he was deprived of schooling like most children of his age group in India. His parents preferred him to work in a teashop; however one of the feudal lords took him to Delhi, where he began to experience the world of light. He learned driving and was employed as a chauffeur by Mr. Ashok at Dhanbad.

Life in Bangalore has to be that of a fugitive as “White Tiger keeps no friends. It’s too dangerous”(Ibidem, p.302). But he has to keep in touch with the world of the road and the pavement where he received his education to freedom. Speaking of the socialist leaders in Bangalore on whom people placed their hope of revolution he says:

Keep your ears open in Bangalore – in any city or town in India – and you will hear stirrings, rumours, threats of insurrection. Men sit under lampposts at night and read. Men huddle together and discuss and point fingers to the heavens. One night, will they all join together – will they destroy the Rooster coop? ...May be once in a hundred years there is a revolution that frees the poor (Ibidem, p.303).

The novel exposes the ferociousness of the man who after bloodletting through murder will turn out to be a man-eater himself. What guarantee is there that he will not commit murders for reasons of rivalry in his entrepreneurial world of cut throat competition? Revenge murder is no solution to bring about social justice. Subscribing to his principle of taking law into his own hands, will lead only to anarchy and escalation of violence, as W.B. Yeats points out in “The Second Coming,” in the background of Russian revolution as well as the Irish troubles.

However, *The White Tiger* should make every right thinking citizen to read the signs of the times and be socially conscious of the rights and duties of each one, irrespective of caste, creed or economic status, to prevent creating the types of Ashok and Balram in our society.

In his second novel, *Between The Assassinations*, Man Booker Prize winner Aravind Adiga portrays character sketches of ordinary Indians in a small town of Kittur in South India. The novel probes into the sense and sensibilities of the people during a seven year period in Kittur's history from 1984 to 1991 – between the two tragedies that shocked the nation with the assassinations of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi. Through a series of stories, the author deftly chronicles the growth and transformation of Kittur, a microcosm of India. The novel opens with a roadmap “How to get to Kittur,” mesmerizing the readers with his magic realism like Gabriel Garcia Marques and Salman Rushdie. Adroitly placing Kittur in between Goa and Calicut, on the south-western coast of India, he invites his readers like a tourist guide to spend at least a week to observe life in its multifarious shades. He says, “Given the town's richness of history and scenic beauty, and diversity of religion, race and language, a minimum stay of a week is recommended” (BTA, p. 1).

Balram is representative of the poor in India yearning for their ‘tomorrow’ (Ibidem, p.6). Shades of Balram, *The White Tiger*, is an amalgam of characteristics found in the varying characters Adiga has created in the many stories in *Between The Assassinations*, written in 2005. These stories are a perfect foil to the *The White Tiger* published recently. It is a social criticism focusing on the poverty and misery of India and its religio-socio-political conflicts, encapsulated in humour and irony.

Adiga has chronologically arranged some important landmarks in the history of Kittur between the two great assassinations on 31 October 1984 and 21 May 1991. The seven years in between these tragedies are punctuated by several other fictionalized events in the stories narrated. History and fiction are so well knit in a realistic manner with first and third person narration.

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Adiga's portrait brings out multitudes of people of Kittur belonging to different castes, creeds and economic status. Life goes on in the township despite riots, corruption, injustice, poor-rich divide and terrorism that raise their ugly heads time and time again.

Through the novel Adiga wants to portray the growing gap between the poor and the rich which flares up in the form of violence and terrorism. These are eye-openers to law makers and administrators to deliver justice to the poor and marginalized, rooting out corruption.

Borghain's *Pita Putra* and Adiga's *The White Tiger* and *Between The Assassinations* provide samples of gross malpractices in Indian Democracy. Mohghuli and Kittur are the microcosms of India. Gross violation of people's liberty and equality, poor-rich divide, untouchability, utter sufferings of the subalterns and anarchism are the common themes in both the authors. Sivanath Phukan and Mr. Ashok are similar in their attitudes with a few differences only. Both the authors represent the essential drawbacks of Indian democracy.

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