



A Sociological Study Of The Representation Of Social Life In Debendranath Acharya's Novel *Raktarag*

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Abstract:

Debendranath Acharya is a well-known novelist in the field of Assamese literature. Through four novels, he has enriched Assamese novel literature. Acharya's first novel is *Onyo Jug Onyo Purux*. It was published in 1971. Subsequently, he wrote three more novels — *Kaal Purux*, *Jangam*, and *Raktarag*. All four novels are based on historical contexts. Of these, the novel *Raktarag* was initially published serially in the magazine *Gariyoshi*, edited by Chandra Prasad Saikia. In our research paper, we will discuss the portrayal of social life reflected in this novel.

Index Terms - Novel, Raktarag, Social Life, Social Issue, Dowry system

INTRODUCTION :

As mentioned earlier, *Raktarag* is a serial novel published in the literary magazine *Gariyoshi* from the eighth issue (May 1999) to the twelfth issue of its sixth year (1999). The novel was written by Debendranath Acharya and has not yet been published in book form. Compared to the author's other novels, it is relatively short in length. The novel is set against a historical backdrop and combines elements of love, violence, revenge, self-sacrifice, reality, and imagination.

The narrative portrays the war between King Ajatashatru of Magadha and King Prasenjit of Kosala, depicting the tragic loss of hundreds of soldiers and countless innocent civilians. Alongside the account of war, the novel also presents Ajatashatru's intense love for Bajira, the daughter of King Prasenjit. Knowing that her cruel father would certainly bring about Ajatashatru's death, Vajira, cherishing the hope of being reunited with him in her next life, resolves to end her own life. The novel concludes with the poignant image of her walking towards the Sarayu River and disappearing into the forest.

Objectives :

The study has the following primary objectives:

- 1 . To examine how the contemporary social life is reflected in the novel *Raktarag*.
- 2 . To investigate the social issues depicted in the novel and explore the reasons behind their representation.
- 3 .

Methodology :

The study adopts both the sociological and analytical methods of research.

Sources of the Study :

The primary source of this study is the novel *Raktarag*, serialized in *Gariyoshi* from Volume 6, Issue 8 (May 1999) to Volume 6, Issue 12 (September 1999). Secondary sources include relevant books, scholarly articles, and information obtained from reliable websites.

Scope of the Study:

To date, Debendranath Acharya has authored four novels. Of these, *Onyo jug Onyo Purux*, *Jangam*, and *Kalpurux* have been published in book form, while *Raktarag* appeared serially in *Gariyoshi*. Considering the limited scope of the present research, the study is confined solely to an analysis of the representation of social life in *Raktarag*.

Analysis :

Every novel reflects the society of the period in which it is set through its events, characters, and narrative situations. Novelists portray social realities by blending factual history with imaginative reconstruction. Likewise, *Raktarag* vividly reflects the social life of the sixth century BCE during the reigns of Ajatashatru and King Prasenjit of Kosala. The following discussion highlights some of the major aspects of society depicted in the novel.

Festivals and Celebrations :

Festivals constitute an important aspect of social life, bringing together music, dance, drama, and other forms of cultural expression. *Raktarag* refers to several festivals celebrated during the reigns of King Prasenjit and Ajatashatru, including birth celebrations, the Spring Festival, and the Victory Festival. The novelist vividly portrays the Victory Festival celebrated by the Magadhan army after years of warfare with Kosala and the eventual victory of Magadha:

"For the past five days, the entire army has been engrossed in celebrating the Victory Festival, immersed in colour, joy, sports, and revelry. Everyone has surrendered themselves to an endless stream of luxury and sensual pleasure. This Victory Festival is a celebration of pure joy—free from all restraints and limitations—a festival of boundless delight, indulgence, and enjoyment." (*Gariyoshi*, Sixth Year, Ninth Issue, p. 71)

The novel also offers a beautiful description of the Spring Festival. It depicts soldiers celebrating throughout the night with dance, music, and dramatic performances. Dancers, singers, and instrumental musicians from Shravasti are also shown participating in the festivities:

"Tonight, Your Majesty, the Spring Festival has been arranged. Our army has made preparations to celebrate it throughout the night at the vast sports arena on the outskirts of Shravasti with dance, music, and dramatic performances. The finest actors, dancers, singers, and instrumental musicians of Shravasti will also participate in tonight's celebration." (*Gariyoshi*, Sixth Year, Eleventh Issue, pp. 85–86)

Furthermore, the novel mentions that Upadatta, who had long been engaged in his duties as the chief military commander of Magadha during the war, returned home two days after the festival of Makar Sankranti to celebrate the ninth birthday of his son, Ananta Vijaya. By incorporating references to various festivals and celebrations, the novelist not only makes *Raktarag* more engaging for readers but also vividly portrays different aspects of the contemporary social life of that period.

Dowry System:

The novel also includes references to the dowry system, a practice that has existed since ancient times, as reflected in the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and which continued to prevail in later periods as well as in many societies today. It was customary for kings to receive wealth, gold, precious stones, ornaments, and, at times, even territories or entire kingdoms as dowry from the bride's family. The novel mentions that King Bimbisara of Magadha received the city of Varanasi as dowry when he married Kosaladevi, the daughter of the King of Kosala. This indicates that the dowry system was prevalent during that period as well. In addition, the novel describes Commander Somadatta ordering vessels filled with wine to be sent to the military camp to welcome and entertain the guests, thereby providing another glimpse into the social customs and practices of the time.

Caste System :

In *Raktarag*, the novelist refers to the prevalence of the caste system during the period contemporary with the reigns of Ajatashatru and Prasenajit. Among the four varnas—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra—the Brahmins and Kshatriyas occupied the highest social positions, while the Shudras were assigned a lower status. The novel also portrays a hierarchical structure within the royal court, where priests, ministers, royal officials, and military commanders enjoyed a higher status than ordinary subjects and soldiers.

The practice of considering caste in matters of marriage is also reflected in the novel. Since King Prasenajit of Kosala did not belong to the Shakya clan, the Shakyas presented Vasabhakhattiya, the daughter of a maidservant, as a Shakya princess and arranged her marriage to him. This incident indicates the existence and influence of the caste system in the society of the sixth century BCE.

Dress and Ornaments :

Dress and ornaments constitute important markers of a people's culture. In *Raktarag*, the novelist describes the various forms of attire and ornaments used by both the royal family and the common people during the period of Prasenajit and Ajatashatru. Among the garments and accessories mentioned are gold-embellished sword sheaths, colourful silk garments, floral garlands, ornaments, and royal headgear. The

novel also mentions goldsmiths crafting a variety of ornaments, including earrings, bangles, forehead ornaments, and bracelets. In addition, it refers to the use of cosmetic items such as vermilion, white sandalwood paste, and tilak.

Beyond these aspects, the novelist presents a comprehensive picture of sixth-century BCE society by depicting its agricultural practices, trade and commerce, overall economic system, social customs, architecture, sculpture, weaving, painting, food habits, and prevailing traditions and rituals. Through the inclusion of these elements, *Raktarag* emerges as a significant literary reflection of the contemporary social life of its historical period.

Social Life Reflected in *Raktarag* from a Sociological Perspective :

The English equivalent of the term Samajattva is Sociology. Sociology is the systematic study of society and examines every aspect of human life as social beings, including human behaviour, likes and dislikes, customs and traditions, social relationships, social activities, culture, religion, and civilization through observation, analysis, and interpretation. In sociology, greater emphasis is placed on understanding "why" rather than merely "what."

In the present research paper, we have already discussed the various social customs, practices, and behavioural patterns portrayed in the selected novel. These discussions enable us to undertake a comprehensive sociological study of the Indian social system during the novel's historical setting—the sixth century BCE. Such a study provides insights into the social stratification and class structure, social dynamics, interpersonal relationships, social order, gender divisions, and the collective functioning of society.

With this broader sociological objective in mind, the novelist appears to have incorporated vivid depictions of different aspects of social life wherever appropriate. At the same time, this collective sociological analysis also makes it possible to undertake an individualistic study of the novel's characters. Subjects such as law, ethics, ideals, security, health, music, dance, beliefs, and other social institutions all fall within the scope of sociology. A sociological reading of *Raktarag* reveals the various social phenomena represented in the novel and helps us understand the collective social life of that period. Furthermore, it opens new avenues for future research on the social transformations and developments that took place in subsequent periods.

Conclusion :

A sociological study of any literary work enables us to understand the dynamics of the society it represents. The present research paper discusses various social aspects reflected in *Raktarag*, including festivals and ceremonies, the caste system, agricultural practices, music and dance, the use of alcoholic beverages, dress and ornaments, and the dowry system. It is hoped that this study will contribute to future research by opening new avenues for a deeper sociological understanding of the novel and the society it portrays.

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