



## MAHENDRA BORTHAKUR'S PLAY *THE MAD ELEPHANT*: A CRITIQUE

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### ABSTRACT :

Mahendra Borthakur (1935-2005), a novelist, short story writer, theatrical producer and assistant moderator, Guwahati Radio Center, was one of the renowned playwrights of Assamese modern day theatre. A president of Assam Drama Sammilan for the year 2003, he won the Best Mobile Theater Award in 1989. A contributor of more than 70 plays in Assamese, he also published a good number of novels and short story books. This paper critically analyses Borthakur's play *The mad elephant* (*Bolia Hati*, 1996) as a critique on modern society and its redundant systems. It also unearths juvenile delinquency and its pathetic upshot on the easy-going people of the society. The paper, while making a deep probe into the theme of the play, examines how the dramatist portrays social realism in the post-independence periods in Assam linking to Indian context through characters and situations. Finally, the play is discovered as a post-colonial discourse.



**KEYWORDS :** Assamese theatre, elite suppression, bourgeois domination, social conflict, post-colonial discourse.

### INTRODUCTION:

Mahendra Borthakur (1935-2005), a novelist, short story writer, theatrical producer and assistant moderator, Guwahati Radio Center, was one of the renowned playwrights of Assamese modern day theatre. A president of Assam Drama Sammilan for the year 2003, he won the Best Mobile Theater Award in 1989. A contributor of more than 70 plays in Assamese, he also published a good number of novels and short story books. This paper critically analyses Borthakur's play *The mad elephant* (*Bolia Hati*, 1996) as a critique on modern society and its redundant systems. It also unearths juvenile delinquency and its pathetic upshot on the easy-going people of the society. The paper, while making a deep probe into the theme of the play, examines how the dramatist portrays social realism in the post-independence periods in Assam linking to Indian context through characters and situations. Finally, the play is discovered as a post-colonial discourse.

*The mad elephant* (*Bolia Hati* in Assamese) rocks viewers and readers just after its staging and publication in Assam mainly for its three targets. The play exposes spiteful mentality of the powerful individuals of society; hurdles and lawlessness created by the juvenile section; and cruelty and criminality of a section of people who intentionally close the eyes to the moral codes of a society.

Bishnu Kingkar Hazarika, a popular, honest teacher, is humiliated and ill-treated by Devabrat, son of a minister, as Hazarika expelled him for he was engaged in adopting unfair means in the examination hall. This incident creates agony, frustration and grievance in Hazarika's mind. On the other hand, Amlan, a

youth—obedient and faithful—tries to console his teacher and asks him to forget the behavior meted out to Hazarika. But Debabrat does not like it as to why Amlan supports the teacher Hazarika. Another youth Kamal, after being distorted and frustrated for not having any job anywhere, requests Debabrat to arrange an engagement as he belongs to minister's family. But Debabrat agrees to do it on condition that Kamal should take the responsibility to build a secret link with Amlan's beloved. But Kamal is killed by Debabrat as Kamal hesitates to do so. The situation takes a serious turn since a conspiracy is plotted to blame Hazarika and Amlan as murderers of Kamal. But finally police nabs Debabrat for his evil designs and puts to jail. The play, with a good number of spirited dialogues and situational anxieties, runs through the above storyline.

Strictly speaking, each of Mahendra Borthakur's plays conveys a message of love for life and morality. A follower of English British playwrights James Barries, J B Priestly, Borthakur reflects problems, disillusionments and realizations of common people. His plays, in other words, are attempts of scrutiny on inner desires of common people. Like these western theatrical thinkers, he dares to reject the ongoing nasty political and economical framings. Even a normal reader of his plays can witness that he deals with themes and the didactic strokes through very simple, coherent dialogues. *The mad elephant* proves children of those powerful and moneyed few have always short time to enjoy and gradually they, out of their irritating attitude, march towards doom. It also reflects that a section of people is still on the wrong track and away from value and goodliness.

At the initial phase of the play, the playwright shows that honesty begets cruelty when he treats the character of Bishnu Kingkar Hazarika from teaching profession. He has been victim to evil deeds of a cunning youth Debabrat who adopts unfair means in examination hall. Amlan also falls in the same category of characters that ruthlessly fall victim to so-called power players. If we observe deeply we experience that Hazarika plays the role of the dramatist's spokesman representing his ideals. This character also bears ethics and social morality as representative of a lesson plan to the readers. At times the dialogues of this character rise in such a momentum that we cannot but say that the play is, in some way or other, a bearer of a revolutionary ideal.

Our experience concludes, majority of the plays written by Borthakur during the 80s and 90s is entwined with thematic and structural pitfalls. But the later plays including *The mad elephant* are gradually getting free from these shortcomings since these plays treat the most serious themes in serious and skilled techniques. The overall ambiguity that normally irritates readers of his plays begins to create grounds in understanding and deliberations.

The play introduces a number of characters like police inspector and few belonging to judicial platform and they are none but masks and playthings of powerful people. Exceptionally the character Kamal is seen undergoing a kind of enigma in relation to morality questions. He stands between morality and cruelty whether he supports Devabrat or Hazarika. On the one hand he needs an engagement and on the other hand he has no option to take its advantage without Devabrat's influence.

Although the plays of North-East Indian literature written in respective vernacular languages truthfully contain local colours, trends and sentiment, yet it is not that these works emerge without universal appeal. deal with some of the core issues of the region, and at the same time, they have a universal appeal. Borthakur is one of them who sincerely make frantic efforts to talk of humanity throwing lights on human dilemma. The play, under review here, contains two types of characters—a section having a concern for social ethics and a section having reluctance towards general stream of life. With this paradoxical situation the playwright seems to juxtapose what is wrong and what is right.

Borthakur successfully shows that satanic deeds or activities that violate social morality never continue too long in human society. There is always a point of justice. The fundamental questions that create plaguing situation somehow get solved with interference of good people. Hazarika, in the play, is an evidence this culmination of success as he sees Devabrat in jail at the final stage.

Chadwick states: "Symbolism can therefore be defined as the art of expressing ideas and emotions not by describing them directly, nor by defining them through overt comparisons with concrete images, but by suggesting what these ideas and emotions are, by recreating them in the mind of the reader through the

use of unexplained symbols" (Chadwick, 2017). *The mad elephant* claims a symbolic representation in the same manner. The modern dramatists make use of this skill to concretize underlying thematic patterns of a play. It also adds depth to a dramatic work. The title of the play is clearly symbolic of a section of erring folk for whom ethics or morality has no meaning. They apply their money and power for their evil designs thereby creating a social havoc.

Cheer optimism also runs through the dramatic work; the playwright concludes the play with a justice that those who dare to resort to crimes at time face doom in the hands of common people.

Namrata rightly maintains that Mahendra Borthakur "talked about three important ingredients of performance, the first being social awareness; secondly they employ argumentative tone and ideas to drive home their central thought, and the last being a scientific perspective to minutely dissect things on the stage" (Namrata, 2015). In this context, we observe that as a playwright Borthakur is successful in shouldering his social responsibility detecting the 'mad elephants'. His awareness of social injustice seems to correctly necessitate unambiguous actions to battle those injustices.

A simple reader of *The mad elephant* can easily realize and resolve that our social spheres are gradually turning to a state of degradation. In the postcolonial period people suffer from various strains of frustration arising out of lawlessness, elite domination and class distinctions. Politics has also role to play in these affairs. The playwright, even though he brings a social problem to the centre of his creative work, exposes sidelights of nasty political happenings. He also never forgets to sincerely render pathetic human relationships. Hence, this study on the present play is expected to help those scholars who intend to have an insight into north-east Indian literature in vernacular languages and spread a message to those who are intentionally reluctant to subjects of moral values.

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