

Authority, Fear, and Moral Growth in Bhabendranath Saikia's *Maramar Deuta* (Dear Father) : Parenting and Punishment

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ABSTRACT:

Bhabendranath Saikia's Assamese adolescent novel *Maramar Deuta* (1998), translated as *Dear Father*, examines how a family and a community try to correct a defiant, violent boy, and what these attempts reveal about the adults who make them. Reading the novel through Diana Baumrind's work on parental control and Albert Bandura's social learning theory, this article argues that the narrative stages a series of corrective strategies, each of which manages Bipul instead of addressing him honestly, and each of which compromises the person who uses it. The father moves from material indulgence, through a ritual performed under an invented dream, to a concealed beating that injures his son's leg. The doctor exaggerates the injury to induce repentance, and the detective names an innocent boy to provoke a reaction. The article also argues that the novel's form reproduces the concealment its characters practise, since the narrative withholds the culprit's identity from the reader for most of its length. Bipul's remorse, when it comes, follows fear and exposure. Whether it marks lasting change, the ending leaves open.

Keywords: Bhabendranath Saikia; *Maramar Deuta*; *Dear Father*; parental authority; parenting styles; social learning; punishment; deception; remorse

Introduction

The family in Bhabendranath Saikia's *Maramar Deuta* (*Dear Father*) holds affection, authority, frustration, and responsibility in uneasy balance. At its centre stands Bipul, whose temper has made him a source of fear in his own home. Saikia wrote the book in Assamese as a children's novel, meant especially for teenage readers, and first serialised it in the children's magazine *Xophura*, which he edited himself. This article draws on Ashok Bhagwati's English translation, published by the National Book Trust, India, in 1998. All quotations come from that version, and

every claim concerns the text as it reaches an English-language reader.

The plot is simple to state. Bipul's father tries one remedy after another: gifts, a ritual, and finally force. Soon after the ritual collapses, Bipul is found beaten in the dark with an injured leg. Suspicion falls on an innocent shopkeeper. A police inquiry then identifies the culprit, and it is the father.

The English title takes the form of a salutation, yet no letter appears in the text. The mother considers writing to her husband and decides against it. Rani resolves to tell him everything when he next comes home. A further detail

points the same way. The parents have no names. They appear as “Mother” and “Father,” or as “Bipul’s mother” and “Bipul’s father,” while the children, neighbours, barber, and police officers all receive names. The novel defines its two central adults by their roles, and then tests what those roles demand of them.

The question it poses is whether a young person can be reformed through fear, concealment, or management by others. This article reads the narrative as an examination of the methods adults use to correct a child. Bipul’s behaviour forms only half of the story. The other half is the repeated, well-meant failure of those who try to mend him. After a short account of the theoretical framework, the discussion moves through the novel’s design, the household, the father’s absence and his remedies, the community’s response, and the hospital, and closes with the uncertain status of Bipul’s remorse.

2. Theoretical Framework

Diana Baumrind’s work on parenting styles provides a useful framework for examining the distinction between parental control and parental responsiveness. Her research identifies different patterns of parenting, among them the authoritarian, the permissive, and the authoritative. The authoritarian pattern relies on firm demands with little explanation or warmth. The permissive pattern offers warmth with little control. The authoritative pattern joins firm standards to reasoned explanation and emotional support. Baumrind’s work demonstrates that parental authority cannot be understood independently of the emotional relationship between parents and children (Baumrind, 1966).

Albert Bandura’s social learning theory offers a second perspective, since it emphasises the role of observation and social experience in behavioural development (Bandura, 1977). People learn by watching others, by noting what follows their actions, and by repeating what is rewarded. Behaviour is shaped by the models a

child sees and by the consequences that attend what the child does.

Both frameworks arise from empirical study of children and families, and applying them to a work of fiction calls for care. This article uses them as interpretive lenses, not as diagnoses of the characters. Two further limits apply. The father does not hold one parenting pattern throughout. He moves between them, and the movement itself becomes a point of analysis. And the narrator rarely enters Bipul’s mind, so a Bandura-based reading can identify what the text shows him observing and what outcomes follow his conduct. It cannot trace what he learns from either.

3. Narrative Design and the Withholding of the Central Act

The novel runs to seventeen short chapters, and its point of view travels. It opens in the kitchen with the mother, moves to Rani, then to the father alone in the hills, and later to the barber, the paan-seller Ganesh, the law student Kanak, and the detective Nikunja. It closes in a hospital room. This movement turns a private problem of discipline into a public question, and then returns it, damaged, to the family.

Bipul himself is the least accessible figure. The narrator tells the reader what the mother fears, what Rani resents, what the father regrets, and what Ganesh dreads. Bipul’s own thoughts surface only rarely. During the haircut he is “so lost in thought” (p. 31) that he pays no attention to the barber, and the text does not say what occupies him. His day with his friends is narrated from the outside. When he feels shame before Mrinalini, the narrator briefly opens his mind, and the moment stands out for its rarity.

The narrative also withholds its central act. The sixth chapter ends with the father on a train, looking out of the window and noticing nothing. The faces of Rini and Mukul, his wife in bed, and the barber’s bleeding leg pass before his eyes. The train stops with a jerk. He “remembered something, then quickly got up” (p.42). The text does not say what. In the seventh chapter, the

sound of a stick and Bipul's cries come out of the dark behind Ganesh's shop, and the attacker is never seen. For ten further chapters, the characters circle a crime whose author the narrative already knows.

The structure resembles that of a mystery, but it serves a larger purpose. The novel conceals the culprit from the reader as the father conceals him from the family and the town. Withholding is the book's method as well as its subject, and the reader, kept from the truth, stands in a position to judge the characters who keep it from one another.

4. The Household Under Bipul's Temper

The novel opens with the mother, not with Bipul. She tastes a gourd for bitterness, rescues boiling milk, and works out how to give Bipul a larger share of one egg without depriving the other children. The detail matters. Before he speaks, the household already bends around his preferences.

When she tries to wake him, he answers, "I'll get up when I like. Let me sleep now" (p. 6). She retreats. She fears his reaction, and the narrator presents her silence as learned behaviour. Later she asks herself whether he means to "hold the whole house to ransom" (p. 12). The scene over money confirms the pattern. Bipul demands five rupees and shakes the locked almirah. She sends him out of the room before she opens it, then throws two notes and two coins on the floor and says, "Today I will set fire to your books" (p. 14). She retires to her bed and weeps. The threat carries no force, and she knows it.

The incident with Rani follows the same logic. She arranges his books to help him. He cries, "How dare she touch my books" (p. 9), and throws a glass at her. When his mother asks whether he is a devil, he replies that he is. Rani stays home from school, though she wants to attend, because she will not leave her mother alone. Later, when their mother asks the children in turn to take Bipul some tea, each declines. The family has learned to protect itself by leaving him alone.

Bandura's emphasis on consequences clarifies what the household teaches. The text does not follow Bipul's thoughts, but it records outcomes with care. His demand for five rupees succeeds. His demand for shoes and a belt succeeds. His outburst against Rani ends with the family retreating. Each time he insists, the household yields or withdraws. In social learning terms, behaviour followed by reward tends to recur, and the novel shows a boy for whom demand and aggression have repeatedly paid.

Information also moves badly through this household. The mother hesitates to write to her husband, because she fears that such letters "unnerved" (p. 17) him. She shields him from the trouble. He, in turn, shields Bipul from the true purpose of the ritual. The doctor will later shield Bipul from the truth about his leg. Each adult manages another person's feelings, and the habit passes from one to the next. Before the father ever resorts to force, fear already governs the house. The adults who later try to correct Bipul through fear therefore work in a setting where fear has already failed to produce understanding.

5. Domestic Labour and the Cost of Management

The novel makes no explicit argument about gender, but it records with patience who absorbs the burden of Bipul's behaviour. The mother cooks, feeds, wakes, and soothes. Rani packs his books, brings his water, and serves lunch to her mother when the older woman refuses to eat. She pulls her mother out of bed by the shoulders because she knows that otherwise her mother would not get up.

Their cost appears in the sixth chapter. The mother "had tired herself out with all the cooking and arrangements for the puja" (p. 27), and she had gone on, beyond endurance, in the hope that the ceremony would change her son. When Bipul shouts and the barber bleeds, her hope collapses, and she loses consciousness. At the hospital she insists on staying through the night. Mrinalini, the girl whom Bipul once teased in the street, brings

rice and chicken soup. Those he has wronged are the ones who look after him.

The decisions follow a different pattern. The father chooses the remedy, and the mother carries it out. He explains the cure to her in the courtyard, and she feels “greatly relieved” (p. 25). When the doctor wants to hear the history of the boy’s conduct, he speaks with the father in the drawing room while the mother rests. The labour of managing Bipul falls largely on the women of the household, and the authority to decide how to correct him rests with the father.

6. Indulgence and Its Failure

Bipul’s father works at Borapani, in hill country about three hundred kilometres from home, and the novel gives his absence real weight. He walks for hours with a water bottle slung around his neck. He eats badly cooked rice. In the evening he sits on the verandah and thinks about a son he cannot supervise. When he returns home, he goes out among the neighbours, and his real purpose, the narrator says, is to look for Bipul, who is never there.

The father also holds a theory of how to treat the boy, and the theory is generous. After he sees Bipul tidy his study table and cover his books, he tells his wife, “He isn’t really a bad boy. If we could try to understand him, we might be able to guide him better. We mustn’t scold him all the time. He may have his own point of view which we must learn to respect” (p. 20). The sentiment is sincere and hard to fault. The next morning, Bipul asks for a pair of shoes and a belt, and the father takes him to the market that evening. The shoes cost Rs. 230 and the belt Rs. 40, “way beyond their means” (p. 20). The father buys them anyway, laughing. His theory of understanding has become a purchase within a day.

The belt then disappears. Mukul reports that Mayidul is wearing it and that Bipul sold it to him “for ten rupees” (p. 20). Bipul slaps Mukul in front of their parents and moves to settle the matter with Mayidul. The father forbids him to leave. Bipul warns Rani, “It won’t be such a good

thing if Father goes to meet Mayidul” (p. 22). The father has only three days at home and fears what Bipul may do once he has gone. He decides not to pursue the matter, and he never mentions the belt again.

In Baumrind’s terms, this conduct approaches the permissive pattern: warmth expressed through gifts, with little firm control. The father’s stated aim is closer to the authoritative ideal, since he speaks of understanding Bipul and respecting his view. But the authoritative style also requires firm standards that the parent explains and maintains, and the father supplies neither. His absence matters here. Baumrind’s work shows that control and emotional relationship cannot be separated, and a father who sees his son for three days at a time has no steady relationship through which control could work. Gifts and silence belong together, since both allow him to avoid confrontation while living elsewhere. He later admits as much: “by pampering him I was only spoiling him” (p. 109).

The novel does not blame affection as such. It shows an affection with no outlet except concession, one that gives way to anger when concession runs out.

7. Ritual as Displacement

The father confides his worry to a friend, Sadanand Datta, and receives an explanation in place of a method. Bipul, Datta suggests, must be under the influence of an evil spirit, as another boy once was, and the blessed Mother Bhagavati of Polasani village can supply a remedy. The father visits her himself. He returns with instructions: flowers of three colours, river water, a Brahmin to conduct a puja, a meal for three of Bipul’s friends, a haircut, and the floating of the shorn hair on the river.

Three features of the episode deserve attention. First, it relocates the problem. If a spirit is to blame, nobody in the family needs to examine their own conduct, and the mother’s relief on hearing the plan is vivid. Second, the plan depends on deception. The father fears that Bipul will refuse if he learns the true purpose, so he

invents a dream in which a white-haired angel promises strength, good looks, and courage on a motorcycle. The false dream is the first of several managed falsehoods in the novel. Third, the plan fails for a reason it never anticipated. Bipul takes great pride in his hair.

The ritual also repeats the pattern it hopes to cure. The father asks Bipul's friends what they would like to eat, and they ask for parathas with mutton curry. Kartik adds rasmalai, with a wink. The father is dissatisfied with so modest a list. "You are strange boys," he says, and adds kheer and sweet curd (p. 27). He rewards the friends whom Rani holds responsible for Bipul's conduct, and he does so with the same open-handedness that he showed his son.

The haircut brings the plan to ruin. Bipul sits unwillingly and tells the barber, "Just trim my hair a little, don't make it short" (p. 31). The father winks at Bharat, to signal that he need not obey. This is a second deception, practised in front of the boy. Bipul looks in the mirror and shouts, "What have you done to my hair?" (p. 32). He throws the scissors, which strike a chair and then lodge in Bharat's calf. His mother, who cannot bear the sight of blood, sits down in the courtyard with her head in her hands.

The narrator does not mock the ritual. The puja is described briefly and with some warmth, and the mother's hope appears nearly unbearable in its intensity. The failure belongs to the method, not to faith. A cure obtained from the patient by flattery, and then directed at his vanity, cannot succeed. The aftermath is worse. Bipul returns home and shouts, "When the old man goes back to work then you'll see what I can do" (p. 39). The father hears himself insulted in this way for the first time in his life.

8. Violence and Concealment

The beating that follows forms the novel's central act, and Saikia presents it with a double edge. The father boards the train, gets off at a station midway, and returns. He follows his son into the dark and strikes him hard on the leg with a piece of bamboo. These are deliberate steps. Yet his

own account insists on a loss of control: "When I saw him smoking, I lost my balance of mind" (p. 110). The text offers both a planned return and a claimed collapse of self-command, and it does not reconcile them.

His confession names the strain behind the act. He asks, "how much more humiliation could I bear?" (p. 110), and points to the insult of "the old man" and the threat to his wife's hair. And he says something that deserves more attention than it usually receives: "Sometimes, we even begin to feel that it is better not to have such a son. Yet, we couldn't stop loving him" (p. 110). Anger and love sit within a single sentence. The novel does not ask the reader to choose between them.

Baumrind's distinctions sharpen the point. The father's shift from indulgence to force resembles a move from the permissive pattern to the authoritarian one, and the manner of the beating shows why such force fails as correction. Discipline works as communication only when the child knows who is acting and why. Bipul does not. In the dark he tells the crowd, "Someone with a stick. I don't know who" (p. 49). The father strikes without warning, without explanation, and without being seen. His anger reaches the body but never reaches the boy's understanding. It is control cut off entirely from the emotional relationship through which, on Baumrind's account, authority acquires meaning.

Bandura's perspective adds an ironic symmetry. The father settles a conflict through force, and so does his son, who throws a glass at Rani, hurls scissors at the barber, and drags the barber up by his shirt. The text does not show Bipul observing his father's act, and it would overstate the case to say that he learned his methods from him. The symmetry belongs to the novel's irony, not to a demonstrated chain of imitation. Yet it leaves the reader with a plain observation: both father and son answer frustration with violence, and neither act produces the change it seeks.

The consequences extend beyond the injury. The father constructs an account of having reached Borapani, complete with a truck driver, Kasem

Ali, who is supposed to have brought him the news at night. No such driver can be found. At the hospital he asks his wife how the injury happened, although he already knows. He then sits on the floor and laments. His grief is real, but his question is part of the concealment.

His conscience nonetheless moves faster than his cunning. When Nikunja announces that Mayidul is the culprit, the father protests at once, "No, he hasn't done it" (p. 86), and then cannot explain how he knows. Nikunja's own verdict on him is that "he isn't shrewd enough to hide things" (p. 108). The father lies badly, and the narrative treats this as a mark of decency. The lie still does harm. It leaves Mayidul exposed, and it adds a second wrong to the first. An act meant to correct has become an act that itself requires correction.

9. Rumour, Class, and the Innocent Suspect

The investigation carries the conflict out of the family and into the street. Ganesh, the paan-seller, sold cigarettes to Bipul's friend Dulal with reluctance and then refused to sell more. He tells the boys, "I feel terrible giving you young children these cigarettes" (p. 47). The neighbourhood punishes him for this scruple. Within a night, the hospital verandah has agreed that he must be the culprit, and the logic runs in a circle. As Dulal's father puts it, "No one who had done such a thing would admit to have done it" (p. 57). Ganesh's denials therefore count against him.

He describes the damage himself. "Would I break a boy's leg without any rhyme or reason?" he asks Kanak (p. 59), and he adds that he has lost his peace of mind. The injustice also distorts his conduct. At the hospital he speaks harshly to an attendant in khaki, then wishes to run after the man and apologise. A false accusation reaches the accused man's behaviour before any court has heard the case.

The formal complaint comes from Dhananjoy Sarma, a wealthy contractor whose son Kartik was present, and his motive is protection, not justice. He hopes that questioning Ganesh will keep inquiry away from the boys. Ganesh escapes

the worst because Kanak, a respected young man with a friend in the detective branch, speaks on his behalf. The police officer Bijoy Dutt remarks to Kanak that "from outward appearances one cannot decide about a man's character" (p. 65). He means it as a caution about Ganesh. The ending applies it to the father as well. A poor shopkeeper without an advocate would have had no defence.

The same chapter shows how Bandura's emphasis on social experience applies beyond the family. Bipul's smoking is a group practice. Dulal buys the cigarettes, hands them to his friends, and lights them from his own, and the boys then sit together and talk of how to answer Ganesh. The father, searching for the cause of his son's conduct, places it in Bipul's company. Rani names Kartik as the cause. The novel lets this explanation stand without endorsing it. It shows a boy surrounded by peers who share his habits and who receive the same indulgence at home. Sarma's household offers a parallel. When the detective takes Kartik away, the family breaks into quarrel, and its members blame one another "for Kartik going astray" (p. 74). The scene recalls Bipul's own house under another roof.

10. The Detective's Method

Nikunja treats the inquiry as a performance. He presses the bell hard four times and turns a glass of water between his fingers "like a deft magician" (p. 76). He sends the boys into separate rooms and instructs the constable that they must not speak to one another. He tells Kartik and Dulal that he has sent an officer to find Mayidul, though he has done nothing of the kind, and then explains to the officer in the corridor that the story is meant to deceive them. His method succeeds because it is false.

His chief ploy is the naming of Mayidul. He announces to the family in the hospital that the culprit is a boy he knows to be innocent, and he watches who objects. The father objects. The police thus use a managed falsehood in the same spirit as the father's angel and the doctor's diagnosis, and for the same purpose: to produce

a change in someone else by controlling what he believes. The narrator draws no moral. The parallel needs none.

The evidence in the inquiry is thinner than its theatre suggests. Mrinalini reports a rumour that a wooden stick was found in Mayidul's house, and the father answers that the weapon was bamboo. Nikunja treats the remark as a slip, although the doctor had already given him the same opinion. The firmer evidence lies in the father's account of his journey. The truck driver Kasem Ali cannot be found, and a neighbour in Borapani reports that the father never returned there. The case rests on absences: on a driver and a journey that did not exist.

One speech reaches beyond the case. Nikunja tells the waiting parents that their sons are safe at the police station, and adds: "But when your children are not at home most of the day, from morning till late in the evening, you don't seem to bother" (p. 79). The rebuke fits Bipul's absent father at least as well. A man who works three hundred kilometres away cannot know where his son spends his days.

11. The Doctor's Deception

Dr. Choudhury states the novel's central problem more openly than any other character. In Bipul's room, in front of Rani, Mrinalini, Nikunja, and Bipul's father, he says, "Now we might have no other option but to amputate one of Bipul's legs" (p. 84). After the father has left the room, he tells Bipul, "Why, why do you need both the legs?" (p. 87). Bipul dissolves into tears and pleading. Later, before a larger gathering, the doctor explains that the injury was never so grave and that he kept the boy in hospital on purpose: "I decided I would keep him here as long as a change of heart did not come about in him" (p. 106). He states his aim plainly: "I wanted him to feel sorry and repentant for his acts of rowdiness" (p. 106). He calls his own diagnosis a "harsh lie" (p. 106) with a salutary effect.

His motives are mixed, and he says so. The father had arranged for Bipul to come to him for advice, and Bipul did not come. The doctor admits, "I

felt somewhat humiliated but I let that pass" (p. 106). Wounded pride sits inside the pedagogy. He is neither villain nor hero. He is a tired man with a grievance and a sincere wish to help, and he cannot separate the two.

His method depends on controlling what Bipul knows, and he concedes that the police inquiry has broken that control: "the whole matter has taken a different turn which I had not anticipated" (p. 107). The admission is revealing. A cure by fear needs a closed room, and the inquiry has opened the door. The text also leaves a gap. It records no reaction from Bipul on learning that his leg was never at risk. His tears come at a different moment, when his father confesses.

The moral difficulty remains. Repentance cultivated on false premises is hard to assess, and the person who cultivates it has made himself the author of another person's fear. In Baumrind's terms, the doctor's strategy is control without candour: it applies pressure while withholding the reasoning that would let the boy understand it. The novel keeps the doctor's reasoning in view, treats it with sympathy, and does not endorse it. The saying he cites, that "whatever happens is all for the good" (p. 84), sits uneasily beside the deception on which his strategy rests.

12. Remorse and Its Uncertain Meaning

Bipul's remorse arrives in two stages. The first is his plea to the doctor, "Sir, you must save my leg" (p. 84), with the promise that he would "never again be a rowdy" (p. 88). Fear drives it. It also coincides with the presence of Mrinalini, who wipes his tears and strokes his hair. The narrator observes that Bipul feels he does not deserve her sympathy. A nurse tells Mrinalini that he is crying not from the pain in his leg "but because he feels so repentant" (p. 98). Shame and fear are mixed from the beginning.

The second stage follows his father's confession. Bipul gets out of bed, with the doctor's help, and falls at his father's feet, weeping. The scene can be read as the only moment in the book when nobody is managing anybody. The father, after a

series of concealments, speaks plainly at last, and his son responds. This reading must remain tentative, since the narrator does not enter Bipul's mind. But the sequence supports it. The weeping begins when the father stops hiding.

Both frameworks bear on the scene. In Baumrind's terms, the confession comes closer than anything earlier to the authoritative pattern, because it joins an honest account of reasons to open feeling. It is not a full instance, since the father addresses the room as much as his son and speaks only after the injury. In Bandura's terms, the father now models accountability: he admits fault openly, and his son answers. The novel does not say whether Bipul will carry that example forward. It shows the exchange and stops.

The final scene takes place in the hospital corridor. The sound of weeping might suggest a death, and the attendant looks questioningly at the doctor. The doctor tells him that nothing is wrong: "The patient is recovering from his illness. Bipul is crying because he is repentant. He wants to be a good boy" (p. 112). The attendant smiles back. The doctor's words give the family's private ordeal a public label. Whether the label fits, the text does not say.

The ending does not prove that Bipul has changed. A reader may reasonably take the final exchange as hopeful. But the novel stops at the hospital. It shows a boy at the point of contrition and offers no evidence of how he will behave once he leaves. This article therefore reads the ending as an opening. It allows for growth, and it declines to certify it.

13. Conclusion

Maramar Deuta presents the correction of a difficult child as a chain of well-meant strategies

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that go wrong. Indulgence leaves the father without authority, and, in Baumrind's terms, without the firm and explained control that gives warmth its direction. The ritual displaces the problem onto a spirit and repeats the indulgence in religious form. The beating produces injury and then concealment, and it arrives without the explanation that would let it function as discipline. The doctor's deception rests on a falsehood that the inquiry exposes. Around them, the neighbourhood's rumour and the detective's ploy show that deception is not confined to the family. Each adult manages someone else's beliefs, and each pays for it in honesty.

Bandura's emphasis on observation and consequence helps explain why the household fails. A boy whose demands are met and whose outbursts end in retreat has little reason to change, and the adults around him model management and concealment more often than candour. Yet the text declines to turn this into a demonstration. It never shows Bipul learning from his father, and it never settles whether remorse will become conduct. No figure in the novel is simply condemned, and this gives the work its force. The father's love, the mother's exhaustion, Rani's patience, the doctor's anger, and Ganesh's scruple all carry weight.

The novel's attention falls on a hard question: how can one correct another person without managing him, and what does it cost the corrector when honesty is lost? By withholding the culprit from the reader, Saikia draws the reader into the concealment and then allows the truth to emerge through a father's halting confession. He leaves the permanence of Bipul's repentance unresolved. That question remains open at the final page.