

Six Acres and a Third: A Timeless Novel of Thematic and Stylistic Innovations

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Abstract

Timeless literature has eternal existence beyond time and space. It has a mighty theme, mighty characters, and mighty style. It explores basic or universal human emotions and experiences that transcend all barriers. It gives new insight to each generation as well. It makes the reader connect emotionally to the characters, situations and problems they encountered even without the knowledge of the society, times, beliefs, etc., of the time when it was written. The writings of Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Kalidasha, to mention a few names, are instances that have crossed the borders of time and space.

Six Acres and a Third is a translation of a classic Oriya novel *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, written by Fakir Mohan Senapati, the 'Father of modern Oriya literature. 'Set in colonial Orissa during the early decades of the nineteenth century, it not only explores the exploitation of an evil landlord in a rural Orissa but delves deep into questions like British and linguistic colonialism using stylistic innovations. This paper highlights Fakir Mohan's stylistic and thematic innovations which make this novel timeless.

Keywords: British, linguistic colonialism, stylistic, thematic, innovations

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Six Acres and a Third (Chha Maana Atha Guntha) is a 19th-century classic Oriya novel by Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918), known as the Father of Modern Oriya Literature. Fakir Mohan was one of the pioneering figures of modern Indian literature and an early activist who pioneered the

fight against the destruction of the native Oriya language. Apart from translating *the Mahabharata*, *the Ramayana*, *the Gita* and *Boudhavatar Kavya* into simple Oriya verses, he has contributed four novels and twenty-five stories to enrich the Oriya language and literature. The original Oriya novel *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* was serialized in 1897-1899 and was published as a book in 1902. It was written forty years before Premchand's masterpiece *Godan* or *the Gift of a Cow*. His classic novel *Six Acres and a Third* was translated from the Oriya by Rabi Shankar Mishra, Satya P. Mohanty, Jatindra Kumar Nayak, and Paul St-Pierre and was first published by the University of California Press in 2005 and India by Penguin Books India in 2006. It is a literary as well as a historical document. Set in colonial Orissa in the 1930s, it depicts a unique "view from below" of Indian village life under colonial rule: (Back matter). It faithfully records how the "unsavoury aspects" of British colonialism affected life of people in rural India. It was written long before the October Revolution in Russia, and is perhaps the first Indian novel to deal with the exploitation of landless peasants by a feudal lord in British India.

Fakir Mohan Senapati's novel *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, or *Six Acres and a Third* is set in colonial Indian society /village during the early decades of the nineteenth century. It is a saga of colonialism in Orissa which changed the face of rural Orissa. It depicts a tale of wealth and greed, of property and theft. On one level it is the story of an evil landlord, Ramachandra Mangaraj, who exploits poor peasants and uses the new legal system to usurp the property of others. But this is only one of the many themes of the novel: as the text unfolds, it reveals several layers of meaning and implication. Toward the end of the novel, greedy zamindar Ramachandra Mangaraj is punished by the law and the "Judge Sahib" orders that his landed estate, his "zamindari," be taken away. It is sold to a lawyer, who, it is rumoured in the village, "will come with ten palanquins followed by five horses and two hundred foot-soldiers" to take possession of Mangaraj's large estate (205). The novel is written from the perspective of the horse, the ordinary villager, and the foot-soldier, in other words, the labouring poor of the world. The ordinary villagers react to this news by reminding one another of an old saying: "Oh, horse, what difference does it make to you if you are stolen by a thief? You do not get much to eat here: you will not get much to eat there. No matter who becomes the next master, we will remain his slaves. We must look after our own interests" (205-206).

Six Acres and a Third is not only a critique of British colonialism. It is a powerful indictment of many other forms of social and political authority as well. The novel centers around the zamindar,

Ramachandra Mangaraj: his greed, his influence over the village, various deeds of his to appropriate other people's wealth and his eventual demise. The actual story starts when Ramachandra Mangaraj eyes the property of the weaver family Bhagia and Saria, a childless couple, and plots along with Champa, who is a servant maid in his house and his concubine too, to usurp their property. Mangaraj has an eye on the fertile six acres and third farmland—the eponymous six acres and a third-- and the milch cow of Bhagia and Saria. Champa takes advantage of the superstitious belief of innocent and rustic Bhagia and Saria as they are childless, and Saria is utterly despondent on account of her barrenness. She has to face the indignity in the society being barren and inauspicious. Champa convinces Saria, that she has received the command of goddess Budhi Mangala that Saria would bear a child and they will become very rich if she builds a temple for goddess Budhi Mangala. She further suggests that Bhagia need not worry about the expenses and he should take a loan from the zamindar Ramachandra Mangaraj for this purpose:

All you have to do is obey Goddess Budhi Mangala's command. Somehow, you must get the temple built. Why worry about the money? Who would not loan you money, once Budhi Mangala's command has become known? And you don't have to go anywhere else, not even in the dead of the night. Ramachandra Mangaraj will lend you the money. I will take it upon myself to arrange loan: you don't have to do anything. Building a temple will not cost much: only one hundred and fifty rupees. With that, a big temple can be raised, as tall and as wide as the Baladev Temple in Kendrapada. Just mortgage your six: it will be exactly and a third acres to Mangaraj, and I will get you the money. Don't think anyone is going to snatch your land away. (114)

The weaver family falls prey to the machination of Champa and zamindar Ramachandra Mangaraj and ends up losing everything to Mangaraj. Unable to bear the loss, Bhagia goes mad and Saria starves herself to death. The death of Saria brings the downfall of Mangaraj and his eventual demise. While justice seems to have prevailed in a larger sense, there is no justice for the affected parties. This brings up the question of what exactly is justice? Is it the punishment of evil or is it the success of good? In most cases, as here, we must settle for the first definition for the good people have already lost their mind and their lives. The perpetrators of injustice getting punished is the only solace we seek from the cruel world. Good people, like Mangaraj's wife and Saria, seem to influence dharma only after their death.

Six Acres and a Third stands out among all other realistic novels because of the “critical vision embodied in its narrative style” (Introduction 2). As rightly pointed out by Satya P. Mohanty, its narrative style is complex:

Senapati’s novel is justly seen as representing the apex of the tradition of literary realism in nineteenth-century Indian literature. But its realism is complex and sophisticated, not simply mimetic: the novel seeks to analyze and explain social reality instead of merely holding up a mirror to it. (2)

Fakir Mohan is regarded as the forerunner of Premchand. For the first time in the history of Indian fiction, Fakir Mohan depicts social realism through rustic characters and themes. In his *History of Indian Literature, 1800-1910*, Sisir Kumar Das points out that in modern Indian literature many plays and novels have ‘elements of realism’ in varying degrees, whereas in *Six Acres and a Third*, Senapati depicts in minute details the social and economic aspects of life that influence human relationships and “the variety of characters representing traditional occupational groups” (2). Senapati has adopted a method of analytical realism that probes deep into the underlying causes. He has adopted a “self-reflexive” and “self-parodic” narrative technique. The narrator does not remain aloof: rather he ‘actively mediates between the reader and the subject of the novel,’ putting emphasis on how it is told, not what is told. The narrator is neither ‘I’ nor ‘you’ but ‘we.’ He is like a village story-teller sitting with his friends and relations around him and telling them the story in the light of a lantern. This innovative method of story-telling makes it appear like an oral rather than a written story and enables the narrator to be an insider as well as an outsider of the story. In other words, the narrator immediately makes the reader participate in the narrative in the way of making his own interpretation of the ‘facts’ described in the novel and making comments. Besides, Senapati uses irony, humour and exaggerated tone which frequently shift to enable the reader to find out what he actually means. The narrator does not want the reader just to go through the novel, but to read it critically as well. Senapati describes that Mangaraj is a pious person who observes fasting in every ekadasi, and at the same time the way he narrates how Mangaraj secretly eats “a large pot of milk, some bananas, and a small quantity of khai and nabata” kept in his room is humorous:

Every ekadasi [mangaraj] fasted, taking nothing but water and a few leaves of the sacred basil plant for the entire day. Just the other afternoon, though, Mangaraj's barbar, Jaga, let it slip that on the evenings of *ekadasis* a large pot of milk, some bananas, and a small quantity of khai and nabata are placed in the master's bedroom. Very early the next morning, Jaga removes the empty pot and washes it. Hearing this, some people exchanged knowing looks and chuckled. One blurted out, "Not even the father of Lord Mahadev can catch a clever fellow stealing a drink when he dips under the water". We're not absolutely sure what was meant by this, but our guess is that these men were slandering Mangaraj... It would be a great sin, then, to doubt Mangaraj's piety or unwavering devotion (35-36).

This is just one instance how Fakir Mohan Senapati uses irony, humour, parody and satire to criticize contemporary society.

Fakir Mohan Senapati aims at accurately depicting a realistic picture of colonial Orissa. He achieves this goal by interweaving form and content of the novel. He intermingles the then society with the "ideological implications." His realism is based not only on the 'what 'is represented but 'how 'it is represented. The mediating layers shape the perception and judgment of readers. Senapati is a realist not only in a literary sense but in the socio-theoretical sense as well.

Senapati portrays not only an eastern Indian village but a complex account of social exploitation under colonial rule, though he never refers to colonial rulers directly. As Satya P. Mohanty rightly states: ". . . what we get is an unsentimental picture of the exploitative relations among Indian (or Oriya) peasants and landlords, the educated intelligentsia and the ordinary Indian (Oriya)" (16).

Senapati presents the story of "property, greed, and wiles of the powerful" in a new light and from a wider historical vantage point, and through the wiser eyes of the horse, the peasant, and the bonded labour (9). The tale of Ramachandra Mangaraj's appropriation of the six and a third acres land of Bhagia and Saria is less important than the chain of exploitation/ appropriation done in colonial India on account of new colonial land –tenure laws. Mangaraj acquires the land from Sheikh Dildar Mian by deceit. The same land was acquired by Mian's father through corrupt means. Ali Mian rose from a minor police officer to a landlord within a few short years. The new colonial land-tenure laws created a massive upheaval. The zamindaris of several generations were

bought and sold deceitfully using this new law, and Mangaraj was the only one belonging to this new class in colonial Orissa. Senapati slyly refers to East India Company while Mangaraj gets ready to acquire Dildar Mian's property and thus puts its power in historical perspective:

Historians say it took Clive less time to get the Bengal Subedari from the emperor of Delhi than it takes one to buy and sell a donkey. How long do you think it will take Mangaraj to get the zamindari of Fatepur Sarsandha from Mian? (76).

So, the witty and allusive discourse of the narrator reveals the real purpose of the novel than the primary plot. Thus, Senapati interweaves the two themes of power and the ownership of property.

Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918) was conscious of linguistic imperialism in Orissa. He lived during a crucial period in the history of Orissa when Oriya language and Oriya identity was on the verge of extinction because of linguistic domination and conspiracy of the neighbouring intellectuals to replace Oriya language with Bengali. He rightly perceived the imposition of other languages like Persian, English, or Bengali on Oriyas as a form of linguistic colonialism. He puts the situation nicely in the following words:

In the past, the Persian language had been held in high favor: it was the language of the court. With sharp and pitiless pen, God has inscribed a strange fate for India: yesterday, the language of the court was Persian, today it is English. Only He knows which language will follow tomorrow. Whichever it may be, we know for certain that Sanskrit lies crushed beneath a rock forever. English pundits say, "Sanskrit is a dead language." We would go even further: "Sanskrit is a language of the half-dead" (67-68).

Senapati was not hungry for name and fame. He was worried to save and protect Oriya language and Oriya identity. He was certain that the future of Oriyas, Oriya language, and Oriya culture would be sealed forever if Bengali instead of Oriya became the official language for communication in Orissa. So, Fakir Mohan Senapati started contributing to Oriya language and literature in order to save the Oriya language from extinction. His main goal was to protect the twin interests of protecting Oriya language and Oriya identity. He knew very well that the identity of a race depends on the survival and power of its language. His struggle to protect Oriya's language and Oriya's identity was later known as 'Oriya nationalism.'

Fakir Mohan Senapati deserves appreciation for his linguistic innovations in his first novel, *Six Acres and a Third*, and his other novels and short stories. These innovations changed Oriya literature forever and inaugurated the age of modern Oriya prose: these are based on a vision of social equality and cultural self-determination. Senapati was no romantic nationalist, and his conception of language was based on his progressive social vision. In his novels and short stories, he used and popularized the rich idioms of ordinary Oriyas, the language of “the paddy fields and the village markets”—the language of common Oriyas. It was a popular literary medium that was sensitive enough to the needs of ordinary Oriyas, the common men. He was worried about protection of the interests of Oriyas — much like the interests of any linguistic community. Satya P. Mohanty sums up Fakir Mohan’s contribution to Oriya language and literature in following sentences:

The Oriya prose he fashioned in his short stories, essays, and novels was the language of ordinary people, used for everyday communication, for creative interchange rather than the blind imitation of cultural authority. It was a language divested of the trappings of privilege and power, of the sedimented effects of social inequality. It was the natural vehicle for the radical social and political vision of *Six Acres and a Third* (Introduction 27).

U. R. Anantha Murthy, author of the famous novel *Samskara*, praised highly on the publication of this translation in these words: ‘A significant event for not only Indian Literature but world literature. *Six Acres and a Third* is a foundational text in Indian literary history’ (Back matter). Sonali Ganguli rightly states that Fakir Mohan Senapati can be compared with “Charles Dickens as a genial humourist and social critic and with Thomas Hardy as a great storyteller.” Dr. Mayadhar Mansingh regards him as Thomas Hardy of Orissa. Fakir Mohan is remembered for his immense contribution to Oriya as well as Indian literature through his thematic and linguistic innovations in his novels and short stories when Oriya language and literature faced the grave danger of extinction on account of linguistic colonization. He is the first Indian novelist to make use of vernacular language and rustic characters and dialogues along with irony, humour, allusions, and other figures of speech in the fiction. These innovations give a permanent place to this novel among timeless literature.

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