

Rise of the Odia Novel : 1897-1930

Jitendra Narayan Patnaik

The trajectory of Oriya fiction from its formal beginning in 1888 to its movement through the first three decades of the twentieth century not only marked its development as a legitimate art form, but also brought into existence a number of significant landmarks that opened up wider perspectives and possibilities. Among the successors of the first two major novelists, Umesh Chandra Sarkar and Ram Shankar Ray, are Fakir Mohan Senapati, Chintamani Mohanty, Aparna Panda, Mrutyunjay Rath, Ram Chandra Acharya, Baishnaba Charan Das, Upendra Kishore Das, Gopal Ballav Das, Nanda Kishore Bal and Kuntala Kumari Sabat. With the emergence of these novelists, the focus shifts from the genre of historical romance to a deep concern with contemporary social problems such as those of economic exploitation, widowhood and widow marriage, political corruption, caste hierarchy, women's education, colonial power and agrarian tenancy system. All of them were ideologically engaged with a sense of social reform as well as resistance to evils, injustice and moral depravity.

The four novels of Fakir Mohan Senapati, written between 1897 and 1915, reflect the social and political conditions of Orissa during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Lachama*,

published in 1901, is a historical romance dealing with the anarchical condition of Orissa in the wake of Maratha invasions during the eighteenth century. *Lachama* follows the tradition of the first two Oriya novels, *Padmamali* and *Bibasini* whose plots were drawn from history. Most of the characters in *Lachama* are non-Oriyas and its narrative is governed by action relating to war and military diplomacy. Narrated in the epic manner of historical romance, its declamatory style, exotic atmosphere and heroic mode sets it apart from the colloquial style, local atmosphere and mock-heroic mode of the other three novels of Fakir Mohan. The urge to write this historical romance might have sprung from Fakir Mohan's preoccupation with history which had earlier led him to write two volumes of school textbooks on Indian history.

Fakir Mohan's first novel, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* written during 1897-1899 and published in book form in 1902, is considered as a revolutionary creation in Oriya language for two important reasons. Firstly, with the emergence of this novel, the language of fiction changed from that of the pundits to that of the common man. His deft handling of the spoken language of the Oriya rustics redeemed Oriya prose style from

the burden of Sanskrit and Bengali influences and provided a distinct literary identity to the native Oriya language and vocabulary. Secondly, this novel, as well as the two novels *Mamu* published in 1913 and *Prayaschita* published in 1915, was a pioneering attempt at producing fiction of social realism in Oriya language. Set in the colonial Orissan society during the early decades of the nineteenth century, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* is the story of an evil landlord, Ramachandra Mangaraj, who exploits poor peasants and appropriates their property. Exploitation of the poor villagers by the zamindars and the rise of a new class of exploiters among petty officials and clerks under the British government were the two dominant traits of the Oriya society during nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century. In the three novels of social realism, Fakir Mohan not only exhibits a sharp sense of observation of minute details relating to the social reality of rural Orissa but also makes incisive comments on the corrupting forces that threatened the erosion of moral values in society. While *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* depicts the suffering and agony of the common man caused by the tyranny of the zamindars, *Mamu* deals with the new class of exploiters in urban Orissa whose greed for wealth leads them to ruthless villainy and cruel action. This novel is a sharp indictment of the educated youth who grew up in the colonial ambience of power and wealth and ignored all traditional moral values in the selfish interest of grabbing wealth. In *Prayaschita*, Fakir Mohan presents the tragic effects of caste system on the family of a college-educated youth who defies tradition to marry a girl of his choice. Within the formal features of aesthetic form, Fakir Mohan's novels are a faithful representation of the historical,

social and political realities of colonial Orissa during the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. The three novels of social realism cover the socio-political conditions of Orissa from 1800 to 1920, which was a crucial period in terms of the dominance of feudal power in rural Orissa as well as in terms of Orissa's intense search for a distinct Oriya identity in the face of the overpowering influence of Bengali and Western cultures. Fakir Mohan's novels, in addition to being great works of art, are also authentic social documents that reflect the ethos of a crucial period of Orissa's socio-cultural history.

Among the contemporaries of Fakir Mohan, four novelists deserve special mention: Aparna Panda, Mrutyunjay Rath, Ram Chandra Acharya and Brajabandhu Mishra. Aparna Panda's *Kalavati* and Brajabandhu Mishra's *Basanta Malati* were both published in 1902, the year in which *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* came out in the book form. *Kalavati*, which came out from *Paralakhemidi*, is written in the fictional form of a travelogue. The heroine, a beautiful and educated young woman, describes her adventures and experiences as she travels through Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Madras and Bengal. The novel speaks of the spread of Brahmo Samaj in Calcutta, the corruption of the priests and monks in Nadia and Brundaban, the influence of western lifestyle in the city of Bombay and the conflict between the traditionalists and modernists in Orissa. Brajabandhu Mishra's *Basanta Malati*, which came out from *Bamanda*, depicts the conflict between a poor but highly educated young man and a wealthy and highly egoistic young woman whose conjugal life is seriously affected by ego clashes. Through a story of union, separation and

reunion, the novelist delineates the psychological state of a young woman in separation from her husband and examines the significance of marriage as a social institution in traditional Indian society. Ram Chandra Acharya wrote about seven novels during 1924-1936. Interestingly all his novels are historical romances based on the historical events in Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Orissa. Mrutyunjay Rath's novel, *Adbhuta Parinama*, published in 1915, centres round a young Hindu who gets converted to Christianity to marry a Christian girl. Though he becomes a father of two children, he realizes that his conversion was a blunder. Out of frustration, he tries to kill his wife and children by hurling them into the sea. The children die, the wife escapes death and the husband is sentenced to solitary confinement in a distant island. The novel is a fictional account of the actual acts of conversion that was engineered by the Christian missionaries in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Bhima Bhuyan of Gopal Ballav Das was published in 1908 and is considered to be the first Oriya novel dealing with a tribal community of Orissa. The plot of the novel took shape while Gopal Ballav worked as guardian to the king of Keonjhar who was a minor. During this period, he came in contact with the Bhuyan tribe of the area and studied their habits, rituals and customs. Based on his personal experience, Gopal Ballav constructed a plot revolving round Bhima whose love for a girl of his community remains unfulfilled and the love between him and a princess remains unrequited. This plot of unrealized love is contextualized in the ambience of tribal life and society as well as a royal court and family. The novel also reflects the tendency of the petty royal officials to exploit ordinary people. Bhima Bhuyan

thus amalgamates the elements of historical romance and fiction of social realism. Though Gopal Ballav authored only one novel in his lifetime, it remains a significant achievement and an integral part of Orissa's literary history.

Quite a few Oriya novelists emerged in the nineteen-twenties and wrote through nineteen-thirties. Chintamani Mohanty's *Jugala Matha*, published in 1920, speaks of the moral depravity of a spiritual person, the head of a math, whose indulgence in wine and women leads to his expulsion from the math. He eventually settles down at Puri and expiates his sins. Mohanty's *Tanka Gacha*, published in 1923, deals with the problem of migrant labour, the predicament of the poor Oriyas who run away to the tea gardens of Assam in search of work and livelihood. *Bula Fakira*, published in 1924, is the story of a prodigal youth who runs away to Calcutta and through trials and tribulations reforms himself and leads a happy life. This novel also depicts the state of misery and humiliation of young widows in traditional Oriya families. A common trait in all the novels of Chintamani Mohanty is his deep concern for the rural poor. His novels clearly reflect his missionary zeal for social reform and rural development.

The two novelists who may be treated as the most worthy successors of Fakir Mohan are Upendra Kishore Das whose novel *Malajanha*, published in 1922, is indisputably a modern classic, and Baishnab Charan Das whose novel *Manemane*, published in 1927, deals with an unconventional theme of love between a married woman and a young man. The plot of *Malajanha* centres round a young girl Sati who is forced into marriage with an ugly old man living with a

concubine. The marriage eventually ends in tragic separation and Sati finds shelter with Nathanana, her childhood friend. The relationship between Sati and Nathanana is one of strong emotional bond though neither has ever spoken out to the other about the intensity of love. Sati, unable to bear the scandal concerning her and Nathanana, finally commits suicide by jumping into the river. This poignant love story is narrated in the context of life in rural Orissa infested by superstitions, narrow caste prejudices and acute poverty. Women were like slaves with no mind and choice of their own and child marriages were widely prevalent. The agony and suffering of Sati may be seen as essentially related to the social evils that afflicted contemporary rural Orissa. Baishnav Charan's *Manemane* also narrates a touching story of love culminating in the death of the heroine. Like Sati of *Malajanha*, Kanaka, the heroine of *Manemane*, is forced by family pressures to forsake her lover Nilu and marry someone else. Nilu however remains steadfast in his love for Kanaka until the end though he relents to the wish of Kanaka who in her dying moment wants to see Nilu getting married to Rangi, her husband's sister. This plot is contextualized against the typical rural life of Orissa with all its landscape, customs, rituals and social relations. In terms of theme, both Upendra Kishore and Baishnav Charan continued the tradition of social realism pioneered by Fakir Mohan, while in terms of narrative strategies they lacked Fakir Mohan's penchant for humour and satire.

Kanakalata by Nanda Kishore Bal, published in 1925, is another significant novel of social realism. A substantial part of this novel was actually published in serialized form in *Utkal Sahitya* in 1913 and was widely acclaimed by

the readers. The plot of the novel centres round two pairs of lovers: Dhananjay and Kanakalata whose love-at-first-sight culminates in marriage after overcoming the hurdle of dowry dispute, and Rajendra and a child-widow named Uma whose passion and love for each other remain unfulfilled with Uma's tragic death and Rajendra renouncing the world and turning into a sanyasi. The plot is in fact an indictment of the evils of dowry system in rural aristocratic society and the predicament of the child-widows who were condemned into a life of anguish and suffering. The novelist's zeal for social reforms is clearly evident in the language and plot-structure of the novel. The novel also portrays a realistic image of the typical landscape and lifestyle of rural Orissa in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Kuntala Kumari Sabat, whose six novels were published between 1923 and 1933, is the first significant woman novelist in Oriya language. Her first novel, *Bhranti*, published in 1923, is based on the relationship between Sephalika and Anangamohan who undergo a series of misunderstandings and psychological conflicts and eventually get united in marriage. This love story is set against life in the rural setting in all its aspects of aristocracy, small villainies and conservative attitudes. Kuntala Kumari's *Naa Tundi*, published in 1925, reflects the contemporary political milieu shaped by a sense of nationalist sentiment as well as a zeal for social reform, particularly in the field of female literacy. *Ratani*, the heroine of the novel, is portrayed at the beginning of the narrative as tomboyish, quarrelsome and a dare devil. *Krushna Chandra*, the local zamindar who is interested in social reforms, is attracted by the uncommon nature of *Ratani* and takes her as his second wife. After marriage, *Ratani's* nature undergoes sudden

transformation and with the help of her husband she not only learns to read and write, but also gets into the mission of making the women of her village literate and educated. She shares the joys and sorrows of the poor rustics and helps them in their distress. Krushna Chandra, the rich zamindar, lives a simple life, spins on the charkha, wears home-spun clothes, establishes a spinning centre in the village, destroys the liquor shops and spreads the message of prohibition. The plot of Kuntala Kumari's novel *Raghu Arakhita*, published in 1928, is also based on contemporary social problems such as superstitions, dowry system and the pathetic predicament of widows in a rural conservative society. The plot of this novel centres round unfulfilled love between Sita, daughter of a rich person, and Raghunath, a poor orphan. Sita's father forces her to marry Dibakar Mishra, a dissolute zamindar, by exhorting money from him. Sita lives a life of misery and soon becomes a widow. Raghunath, by a strange turn of destiny, becomes a rich person and proposes Sita to marry him. Sita rejects the proposal and Raghunath dedicates himself to the service of the poor and the helpless. There is a pronounced element of didacticism and social criticism in all the novels of Kuntala Kumari. She wrote at a time when there was an upsurge of nationalist sentiment, and Gandhian ideals inspired the whole nation to fight against alien rule and to resist social evils. Kuntala Kumari's novels clearly reflect this socio-political milieu.

Apart from the novelists mentioned above, there were quite a few novelists in the nineteen-twenties whose novels were published in serialized form in such journals as *Utkala Sahitya*, *Mukura* and *Sahakara*. Among these novels are *Rana Pratap Singh* by Dayanidhi

Mishra, Ajati by Nabin Kumar Sharma and *Naibedya* by Jonathan Mohanty. A very interesting literary event in the nineteen-twenties is the publication of *Basanti*, a novel written by twelve writers and serialized in *Utkala Sahitya* between 1924 and 1926. All these writers were members of a literary society called *Sabuja Sahitya Samiti* and they included Kalindi Charan Panigrahi who turned out to be a significant modern Oriya poet, short story writer and novelist, and Annada Shankar Ray, who later established himself as a famous Bengali litterateur. *Basanti* was conceived on the pattern of the Bengali novel *Baroyari* which was also authored by twelve writers. The plot of the novel centres round *Basanti* and *Debabrata*, a couple committed to the mission of social reforms. *Basanti* came out in the book form in 1931, the year in which Kalindi Charan Panigrahi's novel *Matira Manisha* was published. With the publication of these two novels, Oriya fiction formally moved into the modernist era characterized by a new sense of freedom and an urban outlook that challenged traditional values and patterns of life.

Jitendra Narayan Patnaik, C-114 (HIG), Baramunda, Bhubaneswar -751003.