Life in Colonial India: Reading through Fakir Mohan Senapati’s Six Acres and a Third
(Chha Mana Athaguntha)

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Abstract:

Fakir Mohan Senapati’s famous novel Six Acres and a Third is set in colonial India describing an Indian society during the early decades of the nineteenth century, telling a tale of wealth, greed, property and theft. The novel invites an active relationship between the narrator and the reader. The narrator engages and holds the attention of the reader throughout with his unique style of narration. Humour forms the basic tool of narration demanding the reader’s participation in the critique of society. Satire, paradox, contradiction and irony which are the four pillars of humour are abundantly evinced in the narrative. Fakir Mohan uses humour to target and criticize the then colonial social and political institutions. Thus, humour along with wit and intelligence comes in handy to expose the oppression and chicanery of the novel’s villain, Mangaraj. Integrated into the allusive discourse of the narrative, humour attains subversive qualities in critiquing trickster-like and exposing colonial relations and attitudes.

Keywords: colonial India, humour, satire, contradiction, oppression, allusive discourse, subversion.

Article:

“Fakir Mohan Senapati’s classic Odia novel is a marvel of 19th century literary realism, complex and sophisticated. It seeks to analyse and explain social reality instead of merely holding up a mirror to it. The novel’s literary innovations changed Odia literature forever” says Satya P Mohanty, a noted critic.

Senapati’s novel Six Acres and a Third (Six Acres henceforth), is set in colonial India describing an Indian society during the early decades of the nineteenth century, telling a tale of property, wealth, greed, chicanery and theft. We know that Colonialism is the establishment, exploitation, maintenance, acquisition, and expansion of colony in one territory by a political power from another territory. It is a set of unequal relationships between the colonial power and the colony and often between the colonists and the indigenous population (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonialism). The colony operates through certain agents of colonial power, natives who are induced into different modes of exploitation, and the situation is viewed as a microcosm of imperialist domination. ‘Colonialism can be defined as the conquest and control of other people’s lands and goods’ (Loomba 8). Nineteenth century India was a saga of colonial contact which historically changed the face of rural society and enacted the capitalist drama of unequal power equations. Exploitation became the norm. Senapati’s Six
Acres narrates realistically the socio-cultural state of Odisha in the nineteenth century, where the Odia population was about to lose its linguistic and cultural independence through historical contact with both the British and the Bengali. The Zamindar, Mangaraj, in Six Acres is shown to be the prototype of the exploitative colonizer who propagates his ideal and creates many more such agents, one being Champa, originally a maid and then Mangaraj’s mistress and ally in crime. It is the story of an evil landlord, Ramachandra Mangaraj, who exploits poor peasants and uses the new legal system to appropriate the property of others. But this is merely one of the themes of the novel; as the text unfolds, it reveals several layers of meaning and implication. Toward the end of Mangaraj’s story, he is punished by the law and we hear how the “Judge Sahib” ordered that his landed estate, his “zamindari,” be taken away. In the society depicted in the novel one sees the narrator’s concern with pollution of morals and language brought about by a contact situation. Senapati understands language to be a social force with which conscience raising can be done towards self-respect. Therefore, Six Acres invites an active relationship between the narrator and the reader. The narrator employs a unique style that engages and holds the attention of the reader throughout with the narration.

For Senapati humour forms the basic tool of narration demanding the reader’s participation in the critique of the then colonial society and its prevalent norms. Humour, its causes and its effects, have inspired thousands of pages of speculation from the times of Plato and Aristotle to the present day. Humour has been used multifariously in narratives dating from Fielding’s Tom Jones to recent writings of both fiction and non-fiction. In this article I shall illustrate by reference to Fakir Mohan Senapati’s novel Six Acres and a Third, a novel which has been amply recognized as an excellent exponent of the humorous genre in Odia literature and thereafter in its English translation, how the type of attitudinal positioning and cognitive processing inherent to the appreciation of jokes can influence the narrative structure of humorous novels and serve the purpose of criticism. Satire, paradox, contradiction and irony which are the four pillars of humour are abundantly evinced in the narrative. Fakir Mohan uses humour to target and criticize the then colonial social and political institutions. In this context it is relevant to discuss Toni Morrison’s theory of narrative. In her description of the relationship between reading and writing, Toni Morrison writes in Playing in the Dark.

The imagination that produces work which bears and invites re-readings, which motions to future readings as well as contemporary ones, implies a shareable world and an endlessly flexible language. Readers and writers both struggle to interpret and perform within a common language shareable imaginative world. And although upon that struggle the positioning of the reader has justifiable claims, the author’s presence—her or his intentions, blindness, and sight—is part of the imaginative activity (xiv).

Thus, humour along with wit and intelligence comes in handy to expose the oppression and chicanery of the novel’s villain, Mangaraj. Integrated into the allusive discourse of the narrative, humour attains subversive qualities in critiquing the trickster-like characters and exposing colonial relations and attitudes, thereby, performing a counter-narrative. In this context it is relevant to discuss humour and analyse the text.

Researchers on humour, namely, Koestler (1964), Suls (1972 and 1977), Schultz (1976), McGhee (1979), Raskin (1985), and more recently, Jodlowiec (1991), Goatley (1994) and Curcó (1995) have opined that the basic mechanism which underlies a joke is the triggering
of a two stage process provoked by the presentation of a fairly straight-forward line of narration which is suddenly interrupted at or near the end by the introduction of an element of apparent incongruity (the “punch-line”). The reader processes the narration in the normal way, according to the most usual and accessible scripts for each of its elements, but on coming to the element of incongruity, he is brought up short by the problem of finding what relevance this new information may have to what has gone before (stage one). This involves him in a “problem-solving” activity by which he is made to re-read the main body of the joke and to re-interpret it in a new light provided by the ending (stage two). The reader perceives a situation or idea in two incompatible frames of reference. The situation or idea, in which the two intersect, is made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths, as it were. While this unusual situation lasts, the idea or situation is not merely linked to the context associated. In the first Chapter of Six Acres, Senapati gives a very benign description of the moneylender/ landlord Ramachandra Mangaraj. He fits into the metanarrative of colonial Indian society, a man of plenty, adept and influential in business and a typical land grabbing landlord of British times. The narrative presents Mangaraj as a pious man who observes all the religious fasts, namely, each of the twenty-four ekadasis in the Odia religious calendar. The narrator says,

This is indisputable. Every Ekadasi he 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 barber, 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 next morning, Jaga removes the empty pot and washes it. (35).

The narrative progresses normally, depicting Mangaraj’s practice as the regular practice of religious people on a fast. But the introduction of the incongruity or the ‘punch line’ at the end reveals that the narrator has been joking and the new information points at the true nature of the fraud. The subversive humour in the narration is evident as the narrator pleads for Mangaraj:

... our guess is that these men were slandering Mangaraj. ... Let the eyewitness who has seen Mangaraj come forward, for like judges in a court of law we are absolutely unwilling to accept hearsay and conjecture as evidence. All the more so since ... “Liquids evaporate.” Is milk not a liquid? Why should milk in a zamindar’s household defy the laws of science? Besides, there were moles, rats and bugs in his bedroom. ... Like all base creatures of appetite, these are always on the lookout for food; such creatures are not spiritually minded like Mangaraj, who had the benefit of listening to holy scriptures. It would be a great sin then to doubt Mangaraj’s piety or unwavering devotion.(36).

The idea and the narrative situation are made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths. The narrative situation playfully narrates the evils wrought about by omnivorous insects that keep Mangaraj company in his bedroom and further expands upon Mangaraj’s piety and benevolence in feeding the poor Brahmans on the day following his fast and also enlightens the readers to his wisdom and managerial skills. He had actually, given ‘one acre of land to a grain dealer and another to a sweetmeat seller’(36); who were bound to provide rice flakes and jaggery twice every month to the twenty-seven Brahmin families that he invited. The intention and idea here is in an incompatible frame of reference. It is merely linked to the context associated. The ‘moles, rats and
bugs in the bedroom’ are the sycophants of Mangaraj. He benefits by listening to them and taking their advice. One of his chief accomplice and advisor is the servant Champa, with whom, he has an illicit relationship. Later on in the text we find that it is Champa, who connives with Mangaraj to grab a cow and the land of an innocent and peace loving couple, Saria and Bhagia, amounting to six acres and a third (from which the book takes its title). The other frame of reference that operates covertly here is the exploitation of the poor landowners induced by Western land reform system introduced by the British colonizers in late nineteenth century Odisha. Senapati’s Six Acres is a critique of the transfer of western legal concepts to India, which till then did not consider land as a negotiable asset. In Odisha under the colonial government land, like many other things, became a marketable commodity. A discussion of the colonial attitude would make the sub-text of Six Acres more comprehensible. Gunner Myrdal observes:

In its approach to land, European policy was largely guided by the view that a system of private property should be encouraged and enforced by law. Essentially, this amounted to an attempt to superimpose on South Asian societies Western type of tenure arrangements as they had evolved in fairly recent times, even if it meant riding roughshod over the distinctions drawn in the traditional system between rights to occupy land, to receive tribute from it, and to dispose of it. Often these distinctions were not perceived by European rulers, . . . Europeans tended to disregard them for their own reasons, or to view them as symptoms- if not causes- of agricultural backwardness.(1033).

This reform and settlement system transformed the rural society of the then Odisha. Greedy moneylenders like Mangaraj grabbed land from unsuspecting people and took law into their own hands interpreting rules as it suited them.

Senapati’s narrative progresses with apparent humourous digressions from the central theme that catches the reader unaware and renders the associative idea of the narrative stark. The bissociative nature of narration in Six Acres become clear when we understand humour as a discourse and Victor Raskin’s theory. He says that a joke-carrying text must fulfill two conditions: a) the text must be compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts, and b) the two scripts with which the text is compatible must be opposite (1985: 99). Humour is a form of discourse which simultaneously refers to two frames of reference, or associative contexts. Therefore, humour is a bissociative form of discourse and seriousness is a form of discourse which relies on a singular associative context. It is noteworthy that the legally and socially instituted rules which govern everyday life use serious discourse as a matter of practical necessity. Ambiguity, transgression and deviancy are problematic to serious discourse (and therefore the official culture in which it circulates), but they form the conventions of humorous discourse. Humorous discourse then, challenges the singularity and totality of the official discourses which govern everyday life. Life does not occur within a single frame of reference and no single discourse can offer anything other than a partial description of the world. As humorous discourse refers to two or more discursive realities simultaneously, it could be said to be a more substantial mode of communication than its serious counterpart, as it quite literally conveys more information. It is in this sense that we can say that humour is not merely nonsensical or unreasonable; it is a form of discourse that differs from seriousness in important and useful ways. One fundamental difference is that serious discourse involves ‘vertical thinking’ and humorous discourse requires ‘lateral thinking.’

In Six Acres the narrator seeks to destabilize the totality of the meta-narrative of
colonial Odisha of the time not directly and loudly criticizing the prevalent system, but laterally, through ambiguity, transgression and deviancy that are problematic to serious discourse addressing an anti-colonial agenda. The discursive humour in the narrative exposes Mangaraj’s exploitation of the poor peasants and also takes cognizance of his promiscuous relationship with his lady servant Champa who is a stooge in all his misdeeds and crime. ‘Asura Pond’, the twelfth chapter of the book, offers a fine example of the ‘lateral thinking’ embedded in the narrative’s humourous discourse. It seems like a complete digression from the line of central narration as it is the history of a pond in the village told by ‘Ekadusia, the ninety-five-year-old weaver’ (Senapati 101). The pond was built by the demon Banasura, who had ‘ordered that the pond be dug, but did not pick up shovels and baskets to dig it himself’ (101). The pun continues as the narrator seeks to reduce the gap between the narration and the reader and requests them ‘English-educated babus, do not be too critical of our local historian, Ekadusia Chandra. If you are, half of what Marshman and Todd have written will not survive the light of scrutiny’ (102). Senapati’s criticism is directed at the colonizer’s attitude, logic of operation and imposition on local history from a colonizer’s point of view. The Western concept of deductive logic and legal system was imposed on the people in complete evacuation of any indigenous argument, whatsoever. The description of the pond and the argument drawn in favour of existence of fish in the pond is a case in point.

There were fish in the pond. You might well remark, “Of course, where there is water, there is fish. There is little need to note this.” But your objection is not, strictly speaking, logical. Although sugarcane and jaggery, body and bone, always go together, there exists no such necessary relation between water and fish. If there did, you would find fish inside the water pitchers in your houses. (102).

Senapati subverts the seriousness of the exploitation of the British legal system which was apparently based on logic of evidence. The narrator digresses from the original line of argument of the text, that is, the story of Mangaraj who takes advantage of the illiteracy and innocence of the poor peasants, Saria and Bhagia, and acquires by fraud the fertile piece of land and a milchy cow thereby rendering them homeless and insane. The legal system supports Mangaraj against the peasants since his arguments are based on evidence. This primary and serious frame of reference is replaced by a completely different frame, that of the Asura pond and the fish therein. Senapati writes:

It is not in our nature to base what we write on vague guesswork. We shall provide irrefutable proof that there were fish in Asura Pond. Consider, if you will, the three long-beaked crocodiles. ... Why were they in the pond? What did they live on? Did anyone see them grazing in the fields like cattle? Or did they follow the path of non-violence like the Jains? Needless to say, since they were alive, they must have been eating something ... Someone might contend, “True they were eating fish, but they could very well have been getting fish from somewhere else.” Of course, fresh and salted fish were in fact sold in the market, but no one ever saw the crocodiles carrying money and going there ... we can swear under oath that we never saw crocodiles obtaining fish in exchange for rice. Thus it is proven beyond doubt that there were fish in Asura Pond. (102-103).

Humour in the narration cited above challenges the singularity and totality of the official discourses which govern everyday life. Life does not occur within a single frame of reference. Humorous discourse of evidence of fish in the pond refers to the more discursive realities
simultaneously, it is a more substantial mode of communication than its serious counterpart, as it actually conveys more information about the system of coercion and fraud in colonial Odisha. In another place Senapati explores the same bissociative nature of narrative humour, uses satire and irony as tools to point at the immorality and negative values of authority.

The birds are happy and excited because they are able to spear and eat the little fish that live in the mud. Some might remark that these birds are so cruel, so wicked, that they get pleasure from spearing and eating creatures smaller than themselves! What can we say? You may describe the Kaduakhumpi birds as cruel, wicked, satanic or whatever else you like; the birds will never file a defamation suit against you. But don’t you know that among your fellow human beings, the bravery, honour, respectability, indeed, the attractiveness of the individual all depend upon the number of necks he can wring? (103)

The reader finds a direct association of the birds with the exploiter because Senapati involves her in active participation using direct speech in addressing her. The reader engages in a form of moral enquiry.

Senapati’s narrative demonstrates a subversive ‘meta-knowledge’ of nineteenth century Odisha and the prevalent system of justice. He exposes through humour and mockery the process of production of justice. Since Mangaraj was accused of the murder of Saria, the weaver woman an inquiry was instituted by “The Mighty Government of the Company” (156) and the case was noted as “The murder of Saria, the weaver woman, the unlawful possession of her cow, Neta, and other valuables from her house” (156). The seriousness is doused in mockery of the search, the inquiry and the evidence thus collected. The male inhabitants of the village were so scared of the machinery of law that they went into hiding and the women provided excuse that was easily accepted: ‘From what the women said as they peeped through doors open only a crack, it was gathered that half the men in the village had left to visit relatives, half of the remainder were busy looking for cows that had wandered off, half of those left had gone to Puri for darshan of Lord Jagannath’ (156). Senapati refers through lateral narration to the coercion used by the power in obtaining its objective. Humour subverts the terror induced by the colonial system into the hearts and minds of the subjects. The narrative reads:

Since the villagers did not come out in droves, the daroga lost his temper and called them idiots, donkeys, fools, worthless fellows, and so on. This stream of invective sent shock waves through the village. The Chowkidars swung into action, broke open doors, and beat people up. A man close to death’s door might manage to save himself from the hands of Yama, the god of death, for a day or two, by lying swaddled in blankets, but no one can escape a policeman. One after another, all the men filed out of their houses. The testimony of thirty-two witnesses was recorded over two days. (156-7).

The episode cited above is more than just a parody. It exposes the agencies of terror and exploitation through which colonialism was operative. Its focus is on the production, content and agency of colonial power subjugating rural India in the nineteenth century. Senapati’s use of humour in the narrative is a pervasive medium for communicating the evils and limits of colonial power. It also engages the reader in complete participation in critiquing colonial life and the prevalent social norms. The narrative performs itself along subversive lines effectively depicting the life in colonial India in general and Odisha in particular.

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