



Rise of the Oriya Novel : 1878-1897

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The fact that Padmamali by Umesh Chandra Sarkar, published in 1888, is the first full-length Oriya novel is no more debated today though it is also generally accepted that the first Oriya novelist is Ramshankar Ray whose novel Soudamini was serialized in a monthly journal Utkal Madhupa in 1878 and had to be discontinued after publication of about thirty chapters due to the closure of the journal in 1880. Soudamini was designed as a historical romance and dealt with Sultan Allauddin Khilji's invasion and seizure of Ujjain after killing the Rajput king and his wife Padmabati in the fourteenth century AD. Unable to face the forces of Allauddin, their son Jaisingh retreats to a forest where he meets Soudamini, his childhood friend. As Jaisingh is busy fighting against the adversaries, Soudamini is arrested and sent to the Delhi durbar. The agonized Jaisingh gets into a senseless state and is nursed by a woman called Anandamayee who is looking for her husband Chandrakala supposed to have been missing during the battle with Allauddin's soldiers. Anandamayee's friend Kusumakumari, the princess of Dangarpur, is so distressed by her friend's plight that she decides to remain a spinster until Chandrakala is restored to Anandamayee. When Jaisingh comes to know about the anguish of the two women, he sets out in search of Chandrakala. At this point the novel remained incomplete and Ramshankar Ray neither

completed it nor did he include it in his collected works published in 1930. The plot as well as its exotic setting was conceived in the manner of the epic-chivalric tradition of the Western classics and its themes of war and love were a part of the romance tradition. There seems to be no historical evidence to attest the reality of Soudamini's plot and characterization and thus it was a work of imaginative fiction that probably intended to weave a tale of romance into the politics of foreign invasion and native resistance. In 1893, Ramshankar had to abandon another attempt at writing a novel when Unmadini which was being serialized in the magazine Indradhanu could not be completed because of the magazine's closure. The emergence of Oriya periodicals in the later part of the nineteenth century led to a few other attempts at fiction-writing by some unknown authors, though all of them remained incomplete. One such work which deserves special mention is Anathini published in Pradeepa in 1885. The heroine of this incomplete novel is the daughter of a poor farmer. She suffers from acute poverty and yet she is so charming that the dewan is madly in love with her. This dewan who is tipped to be the king is torn between his love for a commoner and the lure of the throne. The novel also refers to the king Prataprudradev whose thirty two sons were all misfits for the throne. Anathini did not



have any scope to develop into a well-knit plot, but what was striking about the novel was its concern with the common folk and its daring to comment derisively on the royal personages. Another episodic novel entitled Mathara Sambada was also serialized in Pradeepa. Each of its six chapters is a satiric portrait of contemporary elite such as the lawyer, the doctor, the western-educated youth and the government employee. Both the unfinished novels, Anathini and Mathara Sambada, authored by Sri which must have been a pseudonym, seem to look forward to the fiction of social criticism and the fictional modes of satire, irony and burlesque that found perfect articulation in the novels of Fakir Mohan Senapati whose magnum opus Cha Mana Atha Guntha, was published in 1897.

The first full-length Oriya novel, Padmamali by Umesh Chandra Sarkar, was published by the Cuttack Printing Company in October 1888. In an editorial in Utkal Dipika in its issue dated 2nd May 1889, the editor Gourishankar Ray heralded it as the first novel in Oriya language and remarked that in view of the fact that both the author and the form of writing were totally new in the domain of Oriya language, linguistic lapses and the influence of Bengali language should be overlooked. In fact, there is a strong flavour of Bengali language throughout the novel, presumably because the author himself was a Bengali who confessed in the preface that "though we would be ridiculed for our lack of experience in the language of Utkal, we have embarked on this project" in order to please the people and to "enhance the glory of the literature of Utkal." Though Padmamali is aesthetically not quite satisfying, it is undoubtedly a significant landmark in Oriya literature not only because it is the first full-length Oriya novel, but also because it is a cultural discourse that reflects the history, social reality and feudal politics of Orissa during the mid-

nineteenth century. According to Dr. Natabar Samantaray, the novel narrates the events that occurred during the five months from February to June, 1835. The plot of the novel centres round two interrelated themes: the politics of feudatory power and the intensity of romantic love. The novel is set against political unrest and tyrannical rule in the feudatory state of Nilgiri where an imposter, Duryodhan Das, is the virtual ruler. He kidnaps Padmamali, daughter of the patwari of Panchagada and during his return to Nilgiri, he is intercepted by Parikhit Singh, the youthful ruler of Kaptipada who rescues Padmamali. They fall in love with each other. Through a series of villainous machinations, Duryodhan Das tries to win over Padmamali. This action leads to a series of violent encounters leading to the tragic death of the villain in the prison cell of Kaptipada and the triumph of love and righteous conduct over animal passion and vicious villainy. While the novel refers to the peasant revolt against the oppression of the Nilgiri ruler in the 1830s and the power struggle between two royal scions leading to a military encounter, the story of love woven into this political and military theme is described in the typical medieval manner of rhetoric with highly contrived devices of verbal embellishment and hyperbole as well as in terms of conventional frames of romance such as love at first sight, pangs of longing and separation, fall of the villain and culmination in happy union of two souls. Padmamali in this sense is a historical romance that weaves medieval romance tradition into contemporary political reality.

The next significant novel after Umesh Chandra Sarkar's Padmamali was Bibasini by Ramashankar Ray whose major achievement was in the field of drama. Bibasini was his only full-length novel which originally appeared in serialized form in 1891 in a magazine called Utkal Prabha. While Padmamali is set against the period of early



British rule in Orissa, the plot of *Bibasini* relates to the period of Maratha rule that spanned from 1751 to the British occupation of Orissa in 1803. The events of this novel take place between 1768 and 1770 when Orissa's virtual ruler was the Maratha subedar Sambuji Ganesh. The novel vividly narrates the agony and distress of the Oriyas caused by the tyranny and exploitation of Sambuji Ganesh and is a moving record of the death and starvation of people due to acute famine. The misery of people due to dire poverty and hunger that Ramshankar depicts in this novel may not be historically related to the mid-eighteenth century Orissa. It is said that Ramshankar's childhood experience of the great famine of 1866-67, famously known as Naanka Durvikhya, has actually been reflected in his portrayal of the wretched socio-economic predicament of Orissa during the Maratha rule. The novel also has a lot of references to the pernicious effects of Western education by way of contrasting them with the traditional attitudes and lifestyles of eighteenth-century Orissa. Despite these anachronistic references, *Bibasini* is a remarkable narrative of colonial oppression and native resistance in terms of Sambuji's misrule and the organized assault of the Sandha king of Kujang in collusion with Raghunath and his gang of robbers on the collaborators of the oppressors. There is also a parallel theme of unrequited love between Raghunath and Kalavati, a child-widow who eventually commits suicide. The novel is also an indictment of the native perpetrators of tyranny like Choudhury and Gobardhan as well as the anguished existence of child-widows who were socially stigmatized. The robbery of Raghunath and his gang is treated in this novel as an act of humanity because the money and food looted from the exploiters are utilized for the welfare and benefit of the poor and the destitute. Ramshankar's compassion for the suffering humanity is amply

reflected in the novel in terms of both the plot and the characters as well as in terms of numerous references to the palpable reality of hunger, pain and death. A memorable character in the novel is Das Khadanga who symbolizes the starving and famished people. Das Khadanga boldly speaks out his tormented condition to the subedar, despite the realization that his fearless articulation of misery would land him into torture and death: "The famine will, in any case, take away my life. So why hesitate to die by speaking out a few words for the good of the country?" Das Khadanga is sentenced to death for his audacity to tell the truth. But in his death, Ramshankar seems to have perceived the rise of the rebel struggling against oppression and injustice of the colonizer.

No significant novel was produced between the publication of *Bibasini* in 1891 and that of Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Cha Mana Atha Guntha* in 1897. Though Fakir Mohan's *Lachama*, published in 1901, was the only other important historical romance in the manner of *Padmamali* and *Bibasini*, this genre lost its popularity by the end of the nineteenth century, giving way to the novels of social realism. With the emergence of Fakir Mohan as novelist, there was a significant shift in focus from the feudal socio-economic order to power relationships between the landed aristocracy and the common man in the political ambience of British imperialism

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