



Fakir Mohan Senapati and His Contribution to Odia Language

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Fakir Mohan Senapati known as the father of Odia nationalism played a significant role in shaping the language especially at a time when its distinctness was questioned. A prolific writer, an ardent lover of the language, a reformer lived a life on the face of consistent adversity. This article reads his autobiography in the pretext of Odia language agitation. It looks at his life narrative to understand the time and the context of the language movement.

Life and Time (1843-1918)

Born in 1843 in Mallikashpur village of Balasore, with very little education Fakir Mohan Senapati joined as a teacher in the same Barabati School where he studied.¹ Though he topped in school could not continue his studies as he could not give the required fee and had to leave his studies. Senapati had a troubled childhood as he lost his parents at a very young age and was brought up by his grandmother.² He got married at the age of thirteen to Leelabati Devi and he gives a brief account of how his marriage caused him more pain than his childhood suffering.³ He worked as a Dewan in many Feudatory states in Odisha Division under the government of Bengal.⁴ He also worked as an assistant manager in Dhenkanal and as a manager in Keonjhar.⁵ He was born in a time when Odisha was under colonial domination. He has seen the great famine of 1865 and the language movement and actively

participated in the promotion of Odia language and literature.

Senapati is known as the Father of modern Odisha. He is often seen cited as the literary figure for the vast writing he has accorded the Odias with. But restricting him only to the literary zone would be incorrect. As Sartre argues “literature is not an innocent and facile lyric capable of accommodating itself to any sort of regime, but by its very nature confronts us with the political problem: to write is to demand that all men are free.”⁶ And simply because Senapati was writing at a time when not writing was questioned and seen as a problem for one’s identity as number of literature available in a language became one of the yardsticks to measure the greatness of the language in modern times. Senapati’s Autobiography is the first autobiography written in Odia. Along with autobiography he also introduced writing short story and novels to Odia literature. His writings were on varied subjects covering feudalism, and women’s education, challenging the superstitious conservative thinking, reflecting that was happening around then. He is referred as a social realist. He is considered as the Premchand of Odisha though he was writing before him.

Writing

Writing was a deliberate action on the part of Senapati. He started writing in the context

where Odia language was questioned by the Bengalis on its distinctness and he was of the view that by reading and writing the language only one can serve their language.

In the year 1866 he established a printing machine in Balasore in the name P. M. Senapati and Co Utkal Press.⁷ Two newspapers published by the aforesaid press were 'Bodhadayini' and 'Balasore Sambad Vahika'.⁸ The former was literature oriented while the latter was news oriented. Both of these were published irregularly due to lack of writings.⁹ Senapati states some forty to fifty people were its consumers and hardly ten people used to pay the price.¹⁰

Senapati wrote novels, short stories, autobiography, school textbooks, grammar, and dictionary and translated religious texts. He believed writing is corollary to the development of language and development of language is corollary to the nation.

Senapati's literary career began as a poet. He translated the Ramayana (1884-1895), the Mahabharat (1887-1905), and Gita (1887). Additionally he wrote a number of short lyrics or poems on personal theme and emotions, which were later collected on volumes such as Pushpamala (Garland of flowers, 1894), Upahar (Gift, 1895), Abasare Basare (In Retirement, 1908), and Pujaphula (Flowers of Worship), Prarthana (Prayer) and Dhuli (Dust) which were published in 1912. He also wrote a long poem entitled Utkal Bhramana (utkal travel, 1892) which was a literary, cultural and political account of Odisha. He also wrote a Kavya called Baudhabatara Kavya (1909) based on the life and preachings of Gautama Buddha.¹¹

But his real strength in literature for which he has been noted as a pioneer, was in novel, short story and autobiography, all the three genres in Odia literature were introduced by him in Odisha, which gave a distinctively creative shape to Odia prose. The novels he wrote were

Chhamana Athaguntha (Six acres and a third, 1902), Mamu (The Uncle, 1913), Lachhama (1914) and Prayaschita (Penance). He had written a group of 20 short stories, which were collected together in 1917 in a volume entitled as Galpaswalpa (stories: a few) and an Autobiography called Atmojivan Charita which was published in 1927 that was more of like a description of public life rather than a personal writing because it provides 200 years history of the socio-economic condition of Odisha.

De-Sanskritization of Odia Language

The most distinguishing part of Fakir Mohan's work was his use of language. He contributed to the de-Sanskritization of Odia. His novels and stories and to a large extent his autobiography set a new and strong trend towards the portrayal of social realism.¹² His writings bridged the gap that was there between the earlier writings and the common mass since earlier writings were highly sanskritized for the common people to read. Rather he considered the common people like peasants, artisans and chose the common everyday speaking language that is the *chalita bhasa* keeping in mind to preserve Odia as a separate and independent language. Probably the association of Fakir Mohan Senapati with John Beams made a deep impression which made him to write in the 'Chasa' language.¹³

He started writing to save the Odia identity. By doing so he served two purposes. Firstly, he was trying to establish the colloquial Odia used in the coastal belt of Odisha as the real language and sought to prove that this is where the real distinction between Odia and Bengali lies and secondly, he was trying to construct a history to bring a sense of pride and consciousness among the Odias and to establish an Odia history.¹⁴

Equating Language with Nationalism

For Senapati, nationalism and language are interlinked because he believed that nationalism was determined by language. He says



“I possess strength of both neither body, nor mind, nor learning, only a constant and ineffectual desire to serve Sahitya.”¹⁵ He suggests four means should be taken by the educated people to promote the national literature and that is; “Read it and induce others to read it; Write and induce others to write it.”¹⁶

To him, the “nation whose language is not developed is unawakened. It lacks initiative and is unable to maintain self-respect.”¹⁷ He further says “no nation has ever progressed by losing its mother tongue. The decline and decay of any nation which neglects its mother tongue is inevitable.”¹⁸ For him, for the advancement of any nation, the development of its language and literature is fundamental. For Fakir Mohan, a nation is identified by the name of its mother tongue and national prestige, therefore, depended upon the prestige of the nation’s language and literature.¹⁹ According to him, prose, fiction, drama and lyrics are important in popularizing one’s mother tongue.

Reflection on Odia and Bengali Language Conflict

While talking about the then time, Senapati says then Odia-Bengali conflict was going on. That time in all the government offices, the head officials were Bengalis.²⁰ Bengalis were trying to make Bengali the official language replacing Odia.²¹ Whenever there is a vacancy, the Bengalis would try anyhow to appoint their brethren.²² There was not a single Odia in the public offices and in the postal department.²³

Senapati also gives a brief account of a head landlord named Brundaban Chandra Mandal. He talks about how the Bengalis met every day in the evening and continued the meeting till 9 O’clock in his house. The sole purpose of the meeting as Senapati claims how to replace Odia with Bengali in different government offices.²⁴

Narrating an incident of his life Senapati says there were seven members in the Barabati

school committee out of which six were Bengalis and he was the only Odia. One day the committee was called and accidentally Senapati was not there. Brundaban Babu, one of the Bengali colleague proposed before the committee that Fakir Mohan should be removed otherwise he will walk out of the committee. There occurred an intense situation. The school was running through charity by both Odias and Bengalis equally. If he walks out the Bengalis would stop contributing and if Senapati would be removed the Odias will stop donating. Brundaban agreed to give all the required amount to run the school and hence Senapati was removed from the school. After this the Odias stopped contributing. After few months of giving, Brundaban Babu stopped contributing and then the school got closed.²⁵

Senapati also says the nation (referring to Indian nation keeping in mind the various language movements especially the Odia-Bengali) is like a Tanpura having several independent and interdependent strings comparable to various regions and languages of India. When these strings put together they make melodious “Vande Mataram” but if they interfere with each other, there will be no music.²⁶

He writes in his autobiography,

“For giving speeches in different meetings, for my writings in Sambad Vahika and for debating out in the open, I have become the major enemy of the Bengalis. They hate me so much that they do not call me by name and named me as *salaa* ring leader.”²⁷

He fought on the face of language imperialism despite personal attacks and humiliation. He had been referred as ‘salaa ring leader’ and had to bear the hatred of the Bengali people. His love and dedication for the mother tongue did not let Odia submerge with other prevailed neighbouring dominant language and kept it alive as an independent language.

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Manjali, Franson (2007)., “ Language, Discourse and Culture”, Anthem Press, New Delhi.

Footnotes :

1. Fakir Mohan Senapati, “Mo Atma Jivana Charito”, Friends Publishers, Cuttack.
2. Ibid. p. 5.
3. Ibid. p. 48.
4. Worked as Dewan in Nilagiri from 1871 to 1875 (p. 49), twice in Dompada in the year 1876 to 1877 and 1894 to 1896 (p. 55 and p.130.), in Dasapalla in the year 1884 to 1886 (p. 80.), in Pallahoda in the year 1886 to 1887 (p. 95).
5. Worked as an assistant manager in Dhenkanal from 1877 to 1883 and as manager in Keonjhar from 1887 to 1892.
6. Manjali, Franson (2007)., “ Language, Discourse and Culture”, Anthem Press, New Delhi.

7. Fakir Mohan Senapati, “Mo Atma Jivana Charito”, Friends Publishers, Cuttack.
P. 36. He gives a brief account of how the money has been collected to establish the press and the difficulties he went through especially physical suffering.
8. Ibid. p. 40.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Satpathy Sumanyu, “The History of Odia Literature”, Rawat Publication, p. 287.
12. Senapati, Fakir Mohan, “Six Acres and a Third”, University of California Press, ed. Mishra, R.B, Mohanty, P.S., Nayak, J.K, p.15.
13. Ibid.
14. The example can be seen in his writings “Lachhma” and “Utkal Bhraman”
15. Ibid. P. 465.
16. Ibid. P. 460.
17. Boulton, John V “Phakir Mohan Senapati- His Life and Prose Fiction”. *Orissa Sahitya Academy*, 1993. P. 440.
18. Ibid., p. 443.
19. Raut Nathan, “Intellectual Origins of Nationalism in Orissa (1870-1930)”
20. Ibid. p. 44.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid, 45.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Pritish Acharya, “The Linguistic Movement in the 19th Century Orissa”, *Odisha Historical Research Journal*, Vol. XLVII, No.1. p. 87.
27. Ibid.

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