

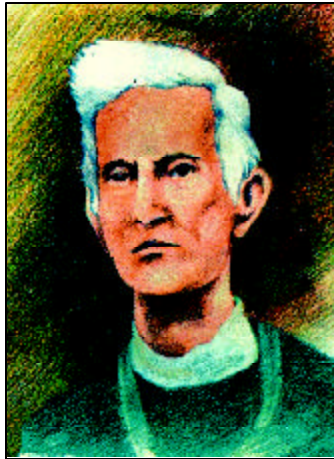
## Fakir Mohan : Father of Modern Oriya Literature

*Prabhu Kalyan Mohapatra*

"When there is the bustle of progress everywhere, will Utkal be still in slumber ?" This line from Fakirmohan's first original poem *Utkal Bhraman* (Tours of Orissa) not only epitomises his literary overview but also depicts his flare for Oriya nationalism. Fakir Mohan Senapati, regarded as the father of modern Oriya literature, dedicated his entire life for the progress of Oriya language. He also played a leading role in establishing the distinct identity of Oriya language and literature. So the story of Fakir Mohan is indeed the story of the "renaissance" in Oriya literature.

The name Fakir Mohan itself implies the fusion of both Muslim and Hindu communities.

Besides that, his life is also a glaring example of Muslim impact on Hindu culture. Born on 14th January 1843 at Mallikashpur village of Balasore district, Fakir Mohan lost his parents in early childhood and was left to the care of his widowed grandmother. At the age of seven, he had an attack of some unknown dreaded disease. Everyone except his grandmother Kuchila Dei had given up hope for his survival. Praying for his life, the desperate grand-mother made a promise at the Pir's Dargha that if he



recovers from the ailment, the boy would be turned a "Fakir" (Muslim mendicant). Miraculously, the boy originally named Braja Mohan recovered and become known as Fakir Mohan. Therafter, he was made a "Fakir" for eight days during Muharram of Ramjan month

every year and offered "Simi" at Pir Dargha with whatever he received as alms during that period. Thus Hindu God and Muslim Pir joined hands to keep alive Fakir Mohan, who latter emerged as a novelist of rare calibre not only in Oriya language but also in Indian literature.

Unlike his predecessors, Fakir Mohan completely discarded the traditional theme of romantic love between prince-princess and

wrote about common people and their problems in his novels. In contrast to the Sanskritised style of his contemporaries, he also used colloquial idiomatic Oriya in his writings with great skill and competence. If the works of earlier novelists seemed like prose renderings of medieval *kavyas*, Fakir Mohan's novels were realistic to the core. Fakirmohan can be favorably compared with twentieth century novelists like Premchand and Bibhutibhusan Banerjee.

Fakirmohan's educational career came to an end somewhere at middle vernacular level. Being deprived of formal education, he quenched his thirst by learning Parsi, Urdu, Bengali and English. His indomitable fighting spirit drove him to teach in a school, work as a clerk, act as a trouble-shooter, advisor, manager and *dewan* (administrator) in feudatory states. As an administrator, he came in contact with people from various walks of life, which helped him to collect materials for his fictions.

Fakir Mohan lived and wrote during the darkest period of Orissan history. Oriyas then had no state of their own and lived scattered in three neighbouring states i.e. Bengal, Central Provinces and Madras. Oriyas had little opportunity to develop their literature and culture. On the other hand, there was the onslaught on Oriya language from the neighbouring states like Bengal and the Telugu of Vizagpatnam Agency. British bureaucrats of the Central Provinces tried to hurt the feelings of the Oriyas which resulted in historic language agitation in the respective areas. Though all the three agitations were aimed at unification of Oriya speaking regions, the root cause of each agitation was different from each other. This '*Desha Mishran Andolan*' or the movement to bring all the Oriya speaking areas under one political administration took place during Fakir Mohan's time. It was felt that if Oriya language was to survive, then it was important to enrich the modern Oriya literature alongwith text books. In this backdrop Fakir Mohan began his literary career as a writer of text books. His writing of text books was prompted by his zeal of opposing the move to abolish Oriya from schools of Orissa. That is why, Oriya nationalism was a dominant theme in Oriya literature during late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Fakir Mohan is considered as the greatest prose writer in Oriya literature. But it is amazing to note that he hardly wrote any prose until he retired from administrative service. He translated Ramayan, Mahabharat and some of the Upanishads from the original Sanskrit for which he is popularly known as *Vyasa Kavi*. He wrote poetry too, but the themes of his poems were not considered conventionally fit material for poetry. He used colloquial, spoken and rugged language of the common man which no poet in Oriya had done for centuries. Fakir Mohan wrote four novels, two volumes of short-stories and one autobiography. Besides that, he mastered the art of writing short stories for which he is also termed as *Katha Samrat* (Emperor of Short-stories) in Oriya literature.

Fakir Mohan's autobiography '*Atma Jiban Charita*' is not only the first of its kind in Oriya but remains the best and most interesting in India languages. Moreover, it is as readable as any of his novels and exciting short-stories. *Vyasa Kavi's* novels are *Lachhama* (1901), *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (1902), *Mamu* (1913) and *Prayaschita* (1915). *Lachhama* is a historical novel set against the backdrop of Maratha invasion of Orissa in the eighteenth century. The other three novels are portraits of contemporary society of Orissa. All these four novels depict the social history of Orissa from the eighteenth to early twentieth century.

*Lachhama* is a story of the Maratha invasion of Orissa which depicts the suffering and the heroic resistance of an Oriya country girl in the face of invasion. '*Chha Mana Atha Guntha*' is a vivid account of the exploitation of poor village folk by *Zamindars*. *Mamu*,

again is a story of exploitation of village folk by petty government officials and clerks. "*Prayaschita*" portrays the predicament of a semi-educated youth who persistently defies the old order of things with an overenthusiasm for new western values.

Exploitation of the poor villagers by *Zamindars* and the rise of a new class of exploiters among the petty officials and clerks under the British Government were the two dominant traits of nineteenth century Orissa's social history and Fakir Mohan chose to write about them in "*Chha Mana Atha Guntha* and *Mamu*". In this last novel he studied the conflict between traditional Indian values and western values as understood by the educated youth of the time, which clearly suggests that he was neither a traditionalist nor an over-zealous advocate for the new wave of westernisation that was sweeping the country during his time.

Exploitation of the poor by the rich was a dominant theme in Indian fiction, especially in the Thirties and Forties. Fakir Mohan is perhaps the first Indian novelist to write about it, thus anticipating works like Premchand's "*Godan*". Though Fakir Mohan was almost a contemporary of the great Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, he was surprisingly different from Chatterjee about the choice of theme as well as language and style. Fakir Mohan's colloquial style is in sharp contrast to Chatterjee's high flown Sanskritised prose.

Fakir Mohan's sense of humour and irony have remained unsurpassed in Oriya literature

and it is his characteristic style which made him popular with a wide range of readers. He believed that Faith, Asceticism, Love and Devotion were four pillars that formed the base of '*Dharma*'. His faith was derived from Islam, asceticism from Buddhism, love from Christianity and devotion from Vaishnavism.

The formation of modern Orissa in 1936 as a linguistic province is certainly a landmark in the history of the evaluation of language-based states of the Indian Union. Formation of linguistic states which was accepted as a norm for re-organisation of the states of the Independent India, this idea had its genesis in the movement of the Oriya language which broke out in around the second half of nineteenth century. As such the Oriya language movement had an indelible imprint on the socio-political and cultural history of Orissa in which Fakir Mohan played a pivotal role. Due to his relentless efforts the first printing press of Balasore was established in the year 1868. That was followed by the publication of a fortnightly magazine titled '*Bodhadayini*' and daily '*Balasore Sambad Bahika*'. A great lover and the creator of a new era in Oriya literature, Fakir Mohan was the founder of an organisation called '*Utkal Bhasa Bidhani Sabha*' which was started in 1867 to create awareness among the people of Orissa and to propagate Oriya language. He passed away on 14th June, 1918.

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