

## **Fakir Mohan Senapati: The Trend Setter of Everyday Speaking Language of Common Man.**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

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.

**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. 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 chalisa 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. 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.

**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." 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." To him, the "nation whose language is not developed is un-awakened. It lacks initiative and is unable to maintain self-respect." 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." 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. 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. Bengalis were trying to make Bengali the official language replacing Odia. Whenever there is a vacancy, the Bengalis would try anyhow to appoint their brethren. There was not a single Odia in the public offices and in the postal department. 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. 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. 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.

He writes in his autobiography, "For giving speeches in different meetings, for my writings in Samba 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."

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.

### **Narrator's art**

Central to this narrative mode is a narrator who actively mediates between the reader and the subject of the novel, drawing attention away from the tale to accentuate the way it is told. Until we become comfortable with this narrator and his verbal antics, join him in witty interchange, and ponder our own implication as readers in the making and unmaking of "facts," both narrative and social, we cannot say that we have fully engaged with Senapati's sly and exhilarating text

One of the underlying concerns of the narrator's discourse is the question: Who has social and political power? His parodic and humorous invocation of various forms of authority is not just a form of debunking, for it invites readers to engage in a form of moral inquiry as well. Behind the question about power lies a more radical question: what, if anything, justifies power? If social power derives from ownership of property and wealth, which are themselves lost (stolen) as easily as they are won, then both property and power seem insecure possessions, vulnerable to the vagaries of luck and historical accident. Ultimately, these questions lead to the suggestion that all property may be theft after all, and the only true owners are those who create social value, the labouring masses.

Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918) lived during tumultuous times. Orissa was taken over by the British in 1803, and was soon thereafter incorporated into a transnational economic system. Senapati's consciousness of being an Oriya developed in a politicized context where an Oriya cultural identity (like many other minority identities in history) was at risk of disappearing. What drove him was less a desire for literary fame than the need to save and protect the language of the people around him. There was a measure of idealism that inspired him, no doubt, but Senapati had a very clear idea of the strategic interests of the various groups at stake. He understood clearly that the future of at least the Oriya middle-class was bleak if Bengali instead of Oriya became the official medium of communication in Orissa: educated Oriyas who had learned Persian, the earlier language of the courts were going to lose even the few jobs that existed in their towns and cities. Senapati's concern with language as a social force its seductive power, its authority, its abuses clearly grew out of the struggles into which he had been thrust early in his life, the struggles to defend and save a language and a culture.

The linguistic innovations of *Six Acres and a Third*, Senapati's first novel, need to be appreciated in this wider context. These innovations changed Oriya literature forever, and inaugurated the age of modern Oriya prose, but they are based in a vision of social equality and cultural self-determination. Senapati was no romantic nationalist, and his conception of language was based on his progressive social vision. In his prose works, he sought to popularize an egalitarian literary medium that was sensitive enough to draw on the rich idioms of ordinary Oriyas, the language of the paddy fields and the village markets. If he saw the imposition of other languages like Persian, English, or Bengali on Oriyas as a form of linguistic colonialism, it is because he considered the interests of Oriyas much like the interests of any linguistic community to be tied to democratic cultural and social access to power.

Fakir Mohan completely discarded the traditional theme of romantic love between prince-princesses 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. He can be favorably compared with 20th century novelists like Premchand and Bibhutibhusan Banerjee.

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 Ramayana, Mahabharata 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 Senapati was intellectually restless and adventurous, and had the spirit of a reformer more than that of a writer in search of literary fame. He grew up in a part of colonial India that barely registered in the consciousness of the Viceroy and his officials. But it is from this particular vantage point that he created a unique synthesis of the traditional and the contemporary, a synthesis whose power and example are relevant even today.

Perhaps they are relevant especially today, when the lure of religious chauvinism and romantic nationalism seem to obscure the need for critique the critique of inequality, of dogma, of deep-seated social prejudice. These were Senapati's targets, and in order to attack them, he chose to fashion a voice that was both protean and self-reflexive. His critique was never merely negative, however. It was based on a vision of human equality and cultural diversity, of a radical humanism that was fed by a variety of religious traditions.

### **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."<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup> To him, the "nation whose language is not developed is unawakened. It lacks initiative and is unable to maintain self-respect."<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> According to him, prose, fiction, drama and lyrics are important in popularizing one's mother tongue.

### **Child as fakir**

Fakir Mohan Senapati was born Braja Mohan Senapati, which is a traditional Hindu name. In his autobiography, he tells the story of how he came to acquire an Islamic name like "fakir." As a child, he had fallen very ill, and his devout grandmother feared that she would lose him. After praying to "every Hindu God and Goddess under the sun," writes Fakir Mohan, she turned to two Muslim saints who lived in Balasore. She promised to give him up to their religious order as a fakir if he recovered.

He recovered, but then the doting grandmother could not bear to give up her young grandson. So she struck a deal with the saints: she would change Braja Mohan's name to Fakir Mohan and give him up "symbolically": "For the eight days of the Muharram each year ... I [had] to dress up as a fakir in knee-breeches, a high-necked, multi-coloured coat, and a Muslim cap, with a variegated bag hung on my shoulder and a red-lacquered cane held in my hand. Thus attired and my face smeared in pure chalk I would roam through the village morning and afternoon begging from house to house, and in the evening I sold whatever rice I had collected and sent the money to the saints for their offerings."

It isn't hard to imagine the child Braja Mohan, in the process of becoming Fakir Mohan, reveling in the new role he is asked to play. Masks and disguises are wondrous things, especially to a child, and perhaps the young boy was beginning to feel the sense of power that we get from changing roles, from transforming what seems to be natural and immutable. It is certainly this power that informs the rich explorations of Senapati's marvelous first novel. It is a novel that sees the whole world as acting out its assigned roles, roles that can nonetheless be rewritten even as they are being enacted. As we read *Six Acres and a Third*, we trace the steps of the young child who is still out, wandering from house to house in the village, dressed up as a fakir, daring to see the world with new eyes.

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