

“Rebati” and the Woman Question in Orissa

SACHIDANANDA MOHANTY

The blindness to gender in Oriya literary history seems to follow the classic insight of the French feminist Luce Irigaray who in her *Speculum de l' autre femme* says that philosophical thought has always been dominated by the “uniquely metaphysical logic of dichotomous oppositions”¹ such as Presence/Absence, Being/ Nothingness, Truth/ Error, Some/ Other, and Identity/ Difference. Women must constantly define themselves in terms of one half of the repressed categories as the Other, Absence, Silence, Error, Nothingness and the Insane. In the case of Orissa, feminist historiography of the kind Elaine Showalter had in mind is compounded by the problem of covering wide gaps even in the newly retrieved areas of Oriya literary/ cultural history: we must routinely make inexplicable leaps from a sparsely populated female landscape, from isolated instances of early women writers to a more fecund region membered by those that wrote during the twenties and thirties of this century: Kokila Devi, Reba Ray, Narmada Kar, Pratibha Devi, Kuntala Kumari Sabat and others.

I suggest that one of the ways by which this fractured literary-cultural history can be bridged is by subjecting key literary texts of the late nineteenth century, including those by sympathetic male writers, to a closer study. More specifically, I shall be arguing in this paper that Oriya novelist Fakir Mohan Senapati's (1843-1918) early, acclaimed and much anthologised tale “Rebati”² (1898) could act as a valuable missing link in tracing the continuity of the female literary tradition in Orissa. Apart from the concern with the issue of woman's education that is clearly borne out by the content of this first short story written and recorded in Oriya literature, I contend that Senapati's larger historical and socio-realistic interest in dramatising the unique conjunction of feudalism, colonialism and ethnicity in Orissa is vital to understanding the woman question.

I

It is not that “Rebati” is a startlingly new discovery or that it has not received adequate attention. Indeed, it is hard to come across a tale in Oriya literature that can equal “Rebati” in matter of mandatory and authoritative citations in the genre of Oriya fiction and criticism. However, equally unfailingly has the story been treated as a touching tale of the universal female condition: Rebati's tryst with unmerited suffering in the world and her tragic and untimely end, thanks to a particularly ill-timed outbreak of

cholera. The tragicomic refrain of Rebati's grandmother recurrently chanted with a sense of Orestian doom has always reverberated in the classrooms of Orissa, and indeed become a recognisable icon in Oriya folklore. Yet the tale's real significance as an allegory for woman's education and identity politics, its contestation of the patriarchal discourse of the late nineteenth century, signalling the inauguration of an alternative tradition of women's writing has remained concealed as an interesting cultural subtext. Indeed, it is amazing to see how its significance as a feminist literary milestone could have been glossed over for so long, given the compelling factors and circumstances surrounding its composition and the life and times of the writer.

The facts themselves are revealing. A considerable part of his career, Fakir Mohan spent in teaching, writing and in journalism. He played a pivotal and pioneering role in the "Save Oriya" movement for the preservation of the Oriya language and culture. In his autobiography, he movingly chronicles the travails of physically carting the first printing press to Balasore from Calcutta.³ His insight into colonialism and its collusion with the native zamindari system that led to the pauperisation of the peasantry (brilliantly recorded in his *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*) and his account of the Great Famine of 1866 in Orissa⁴ sharpen his writings with a deep political consciousness. Historically, Prem Chand dealt with similar themes in Hindi literature after about two decades. In Bengali literature, social realism was not familiar before the twenties, and contemporary Telugu fiction was still largely romantic in character.

It is not hard to see the nexus between Fakir Mohan's life and art. He began his writing career at the incredibly late age of 53. Between 1862 and 1871, he taught at Barabati and the Mission School of Balasore. He married twice, the first time to Lilavati when he was 13. The marriage turned out to be a particularly unhappy one: "The deadly domesticity occasioned in me more pain than my prolonged childhood illness."⁵ Lilavati died early, leaving behind a daughter. At the bidding of a female relative, he remarks, he allowed himself to get married in 1871 to a girl named Krishna Kumari Dei who was just 11. This marriage was apparently a success. She, too, died in 1894 at the age of 36, leaving behind a son and a daughter. Fakir Mohan's autobiography was the first in Oriya, and it provides a sketchy account of his private life. In a middle-class feudal society, there would predictably be great reluctance to discuss in public intimate details of one's conjugal life. By the time Fakir Mohan published his autobiography in 1917, one year before his death, he had become a distinguished public figure and an eminent man of letters.

The educational and cultural gap between literary Fakir Mohan and his child brides remains at present an area of darkness and enigma. But the fact of the gap is certain to have shaped the novelist's thinking on the issue of woman's education and her place in society. Furthermore, only Christian girls went to the Missionary School in Balasore at that time.⁶ The difference

between the relatively advanced members of the Christian community and the more orthodox Hindu parents who confined their daughters to home was bound to be a matter of interest and concern for an educationist-novelist like Fakir Mohan. Education, especially female education, therefore, occupies a pivotal place in his life and art.

II

Nineteen years after the British came to Orissa, the first Missionary schools were set up in Cuttack in 1822. This was despite the fact that the British, even according to the East India Company's Act of 1813, Section 43, had officially taken up education as part of their administrative responsibility. Within the next one-and-a-half years after 1822, the missionaries took up the management of fifteen native schools in Orissa, including the English Charity School set up in 1823 in Cuttack, later taken over by the East India Company in 1841. Realising the near-total absence of Oriyas in the administrative set-up and its obviously harmful consequences, Henry Ricketts, Commissioner of Orissa, had sent a proposal to the Sadar Board of Revenue arguing that the apathy of the Oriyas towards the administration was chiefly due to their educational backwardness. Similarly, Lord Harding's Proclamation holding out English education as a carrot for job opportunities in government service also acted as a catalytic agent. In his poem "Utkala Bhramana," for instance, Fakir Mohan wrote:

All are foreigners – the babus and the lawyers
Even the post office clerk is not one of us!⁷

The educational situation was even bleaker. For the supervision of a handful of schools in the whole of Orissa, there was only one Deputy Inspector of Schools. Fakir Mohan therefore strove hard to spread education, particularly in the rural areas. With the help of the King of Balasore, Baikuntha Nath De, a school was set up in Remuna. Similarly, as the *dewan* in the many kingdoms of Orissa, Fakir Mohan assisted in the spread of education in Nilgiri, Keonjhar, Anandpur and Dompura.⁸

While public education in Orissa was pathetically dismal, education for women was more or less absent. Whatever education was traditionally given to them was private and confined to home. Even this was restricted, as the editor of *Utkala Deepika* astutely observed, to the female members of the royalty and the upper-class/ caste literati.⁹ For all others, formal education for girls was confined to a few members of the Christian community. For the first time in 1871, a school for Hindu girls was set up at Cuttack in the house of Abinash Chandra Chattopadhyaya. A school with a mere 13 or 14 students!¹⁰ Even by 1881, the school had registered practically no growth, nor could it catch the public imagination. The number of girls increased merely to 25.¹¹

This and the astonishing fact that even after the school had run for ten years at Cuttack City, only four Hindu girls were enrolled were much regretted by the editor of *Utkala Deepika* who drew the attention of parents and urged them to send their girls to school in larger numbers.¹²

Fakir Mohan's growing interest in the shifting of the site of woman's education from a less useful domestic/ private to the more productive public sphere is well manifest in the varied portrayal of pedagogy and the role of the female teacher in his literary works. In his acclaimed novel *Mamu*, for instance, the character Chandmani receives instruction in reading, painting and sewing, traditionally valorised as marks of cultivated breeding in females, from a private tutor, somewhat in the form of a Christian governess.¹³ The examples were drawn primarily from the Christian Missionary school in Balasore. Similarly in his *Prayaschitta* Indumati along with girls of her age is shown to receive education at home. The rationale for this education was made clear: women in the cultivated, middle-class families were perceived as the custodians and transmitters of cultural legacy. As a character in *Prayaschitta* remarks, "They realise that by being literate women at home can keep accounts and can read out Bhagavata and Purana to fellow women at home."¹⁴ Thus, while the education of Chandamani and Saraswati Dei in *Mamu* and of Indumati in *Prayaschitta* was confined to home, in "Rebati" Fakir Mohan makes a clean break from such a practice. The issue at the heart of "Rebati" is the desire of the adolescent girl to step out of home and seek education in the public domain. Clearly more than literacy is at stake here. What is also at issue is the very questioning of institutions, the stranglehold of feudalism and patriarchy and a whole gamut of responses through which the trapped female voice is articulated. Thus Rebati's act is ultimately an act of defiance against the dominant patriarchy and the feudal ethos of the village community of Patapur, most of whose members are indifferent and unsympathetic to her and her parents. The cruel hand of Fate that acts as a nemesis to her serves only as a transparent facade, a narrative device with its ironical tour de force, central to Fakir Mohan's ideological vision. Through the use of narrative irony and many parallel voices, the tale offers a counter politics to the dominant attitudes in late nineteenth-century Orissa.

III

To begin with, Fakir Mohan presents "Rebati" in a colloquial, earthy language, an informal tone, an economy with words, in short in a style distinctly different from the prevalent "literary" style of his time. Village Patapur in the Hariharpur subdivision of the Cuttack district is the place where the drama of Shymabandhu Mohanty unfurls. The choice both of the place and the caste affiliation of Shymabandhu are significant. Cuttack district is the area where the major cultural and political movements, including new schools for girls' education, took place. Similarly, Shyma-

bandhu is significantly Karan by caste. Karans or the Kayasthas of Orissa worked for zamindars as record keepers and accountants. Traditionally they served in the sphere of education as teachers, a moot point in a story related to the question of woman's education.

The family of Shymabandhu, we are further told, comprises four members: he and his wife, his mother, and his daughter Rebati of ten years. He is a God-fearing, kind-hearted man. Indeed, his name stands for Krishna the compassionate god. He is, for instance, never known to show overzealousness in collecting taxes for the oppressive zamindar.¹⁵

Right at the outset we are told that both Shymabandhu and his daughter are fond of singing *bhajans* or devotional songs. The narrative even includes an extract from a devotional song that Rebati regularly sings before him. Fakir Mohan cites this fact early enough in the text possibly as a contrastive argument to later on distinguish her real desire for education. For unlike the female characters in *Mamu* and *Prayaschitta* Rebati clearly seeks education for reasons other than learning to sing *bhajans*.

The metaphor of learning, suggested early in the tale, is taken up in the second paragraph with reference to the visit of the Deputy Inspector of Schools to the village two years ago (p. 2). Patapur, we are told, has an Upper Primary School which was opened at the request of the villagers. They are thus not against education as such; only they harbour reservation about educating the females. The school at Patapur now has a teacher aged 20, a product of the Normal School of Cuttack. He is significantly named Vasudeva, another name for Krishna, in consonance with the name of Rebati's father. Like the latter, Vasudeva is a benign presence. Like Krishna, this young teacher represents hope as well as symbolises possibilities of psychological and spiritual deliverance for Rebati. The advent of Vasudeva or Vasu into Patapur and then into Shymabandhu's home is shown as a particularly auspicious event.

It is from Vasu that Shymabandhu learns about a girls school at Cuttack. His natural desire that Rebati should read in a school finds quick support with the young teacher (p. 3). The father is keen, the mother willing, and Rebati is jubilant in her refrain: "I shall read! I shall read!" as she dances around the house. But the response of the grandmother is cool and on expected, orthodox lines: "What does a female need to read for? Is it not better for her to learn to cook, prepare delicacies and floral designs, and churn butter milk?" (p. 3).

The grandmoher's objections spill over to the dinner at the end of the day. It is clear that she as the matriarch, and not Shymabandhu's wife (significantly she is not given a name), is the dominant female figure and is shown to supervise many things, including the serving of food to Shymabandhu at the time of dinner, traditionally a time when major family decisions are made. Shymabandhu's effort is to mollify his mother. To her insistent question "Why must a girl child read?" his answer is to placate tradition and suggest that reading poses no threat to the establishment.

Rebati can learn devotional songs by going to school. After all, Jhankad Patnaik's daughters too know how to sing devotional songs of Upendra Bhanja, he explains to his sceptical mother.

Fakir Mohan does not present a merely naive account of the joy that a restricted girl child feels in suddenly encountering the world of reading. He shows the powerful effect images produce upon the learner. "Some feel happy to ride an elephant or a horse, our Rebi delights in seeing their pictures," the narrator tells us (p. 4).

For Rebati, images as icons are important. For they help her escape from her entrapment and mediate with the outside world. That way, reality and fantasy get blurred. Education becomes the primary means of empowerment. Rebati learns her alphabet on the day of Sripanchami, traditionally observed as a day dedicated to Saraswati, the goddess of learning. A compromise is struck between Shymabandhu and his mother. The possibility of marriage between Vasu and Rebati is broached and seriously explored. This is used as an argument by both Shymabandhu and the narrator to legitimise Vasu's recurrent visits home, and more important, for the lessons he imparts to Rebati. In reality, it is a compromise that Shymabandhu strikes with orthodoxy represented by the village community.

The intervention of cholera as an agent of destruction is introduced at this stage in the tale. The use of this device serves both a realistic and a symbolic purpose. Realistically speaking, popular superstition has traditionally attributed supernatural reasons to the outbreak of cholera as a dreaded epidemic that used to be a real scourge in early parts of this century. In the hands of Fakir Mohan it becomes a formidable symbol for retribution. This is visible as the narrator captures the account from the standpoint of the grandmother:

The old woman is no longer able to see. She has become practically mad. Nowadays there is less of crying and more of abusing Rebati. She has now come to the firm conclusion that Rebati is the root cause of all sorrows and all misery. Because Rebati read, the son died, the workers left them, cattle had to be sold and the zamindar's men took away the cows. Rebati is definitely inauspicious. Her habits are evil. She drives away Lakshmi. If the old woman is unable to see, Rebati's education must be the cause of it all. (p. 6)

The old woman considers Vasu equally responsible for this tragedy: "After all Rebati had not studied all this while. It's only Vasu who came and taught her" (p. 7). She is sensible enough not to drive away Vasu. For in the absence of any other men folk, only Vasu is capable of giving an account to the zamindar's man. Every other day the zamindar's man "asks for this or that account; if Vasu were not there, then who would check the records and answer him?" There is thus a progressive awareness of the value of education as seen through the eyes of the old woman. Vasu now gets virtually meta-

morphosed into the figure of Krishna, the supreme saviour.

Vasu's departure from Shymabandhu's house is again caused by the recurrent theme of education. He goes out, even if for a few days, because the Deputy Inspector of Schools happens to visit the village (p. 8). He would be inspecting the school, we are told, by talking to the children at the Haripur Police Station. A perfectly legitimate way of avoiding the epidemic in the village. However, Vasu's death, caused by the plausible cause of cholera, is attributed by the grandmother to the evil of education. "What a pity, said the old woman. You came from outside, and you were the cause of your own undoing!" The narrative voice drives home the point: "He died because out of foolishness, he taught Rebati. Or else, he would have never died!" (p. 8).

The tale thus leads to a progressive destruction of the whole family. The sense of psychic and physical isolation acts as an apt backdrop to the refrain of the old woman: "What is the remedy for this self-created evil?" (p. 9). And the narrator adds: "You fell ill because you dared acquire education. Surely it's no fault of mine!" The end of the tale shows everyone dead. The message is clear: Rebati was the cause of it all. She invited a wholesale calamity because of her desire for forbidden education. Symbolically, though the tale is a seemingly simple narrative, Fakir Mohan reveals to us the supreme power of learning and the complex trade-off that modernity has to make with tradition for the sake of female individuation.

However, several questions still persist. Why does Fakir Mohan not take Rebati physically to the school? Is he being realistic and telling us of the magnitude of opposition to female education shared by the villagers of Patapur? What would, for instance, have happened to the narrative had he situated Rebati in a school and then recorded the consequences? From this point of view, the choices that Fakir Mohan's narrator makes or does not make can only testify to his ideological predilection, his alleged ambivalence to Western education and his anxiety of female sexuality.

IV

However, Rebati's plea for education was not a cry in the wilderness. It had much earlier echoes in neighbouring Bengal too. The early narratives of many upper-caste Bengali women, the Bhadramahila for instance, offer interesting tales of women's education. Rasundari Debi, a woman from a respectable upper-caste background, movingly narrates her travails of learning the simple Bengali alphabet. In a milieu where education was a male preserve, even handling the alphabet was perceived a political act. And so it was with a furtive excitement that Rasundari managed to steal a page from a primer left behind by her son in the kitchen. She concealed it within the fold of her saree and thus began her arduous and heroic attempt to learn the alphabet.

Let alone voicing my innermost feelings, my heart used to quiver at the thought of anyone guessing how I felt: so much so that if I saw a sheet of paper which had been written on I used to look away. This was in case anyone accused me of wanting to study. But within my mind I kept praying to Parameswar, please teach me how to read and write.¹⁶

As if to answer Rasundari's prayer, several developments came handy. Already in 1854, Wood's Education Despatch had stressed the importance of female education and pointed out that "the educational and moral tone of the people" would be distinctly improved by undertaking the education of girls and women rather than only of men. Bamasundari and Kailashbasini were among the first in Bengal to underline the advantage of educating women.¹⁷ Bamasundari's long essay "Which are the superstitions that have to disappear for this country to prosper?" published in 1861 as a booklet and Kailashbasini Debi's *Hindu Mahilaganer Hinabastha* (Lowly Position of Hindu Women) were significant landmarks. Many such writings were to see the light of day only in the next century. For instance, Kailashbasini's *Janaika Grihabadhur Diary* (A Certain Householder's Diary) was serialised in the Bengali monthly *Basumati* for the first time in 1953.

Like Fakir Mohan in Orissa, many enlightened male writers in Bengal too aided Bengali women like Bamasundari and Kailashbasini. For instance, Loknath Maitra who recommended Bamasundari to the newspaper *Surya Prakash* declared that "it is my humble request to the people at large that after seeing the great achievement, they will become more alert about educating hundreds of such girls in all their homes."

A noble exhortation indeed that would find echoes elsewhere. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889), the first novel written in Malayalam, presents, for instance, Indulekha, the female protagonist opposing orthodoxy. The point made here is that her exposure to English education turned her into a rebel heroine.¹⁸ However, in Orissa at least, it took quite a while before Oriya women writers could find their voice. Rebati displays a forbidden desire for learning and thereby invites the furies. But her story also marks the beginning of a new tradition and inaugurates a new breed of women who learned to write and create a literature of their own: Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Sita Devi Khadanga, Sarla Devi, Basanta Kumari Patnaik, Bidyutprabha and others. In recording their moments of joy, sorrow, doubts and dilemmas in their poetry, prose, fiction and drama, they replicate Rebati's agonizing search for education. In effect, they become Rebati's sisters.¹⁹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Quoted in Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy," in *Feminism: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Drane Price Herndl (New Jersey: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1971), p. 7.
2. "Rebati" was first published in *Utkal Sahitya*, Vol. 2, No. 7, 1898. Most critical

- accounts of the work tend to be merely eulogistic and lack a theoretical rigour.
3. See “Balasore’s First Press in *My Times and I* by Fakir Mohan Senapati, trans. John Bolton (Bhubaneswar: Orissa Sahitya Akademi, 1985), pp. 32-36.
 4. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-31.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 43. The account of his marriages occupies just a page and a half!
 6. See “Working at Balasore Mission School (1864-71)” in *My Times and I*, pp. 21-26.
 7. From “Utkala Bhramana” in *Fakir Mohan’s Collected Works*, Part I, p. 202.
 8. See Prafulla Chandra Mohanty, *The Picture of Contemporary Orissa in Fakir Mohan’s Literature* (Cuttack: Friends Publishers, 1985), pp. 192-93.
 9. *Utkala Deepika*, Vol. 16, No. 44, 5 Nov. 1881.
 10. *Utkala Deepika*, Vol. 6, No. 38, 30 Sept. 1871.
 11. *Utkala Deepika*, Vol. 16, No. 44, 5 Nov. 1881.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. From *Mamu*, in *Fakir Mohan’s Collected Works*, Part II, p. 119.
 14. From *Prayaschitta* in *ibid.*, p. 373.
 15. The narrator takes pains to underscore Shymabandhu’s basically honest nature. See “Rebati” in *The Stories of Fakir Mohan Senapati* (Cuttack: Prachi Publishers, 1991), p. 1. All subsequent references are to this edition. The translations from the original Oriya are mine.
 16. *Amar Jiban* by Rasundari Debi, quoted in Malavika Karlekar, ed., *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (New Delhi: OUP, 1991), p. 114.
 17. A good account of the history of women’s education is in J.C. Bagal, *Women’s Education in Eastern India: The First Phase* (Calcutta: The World Press, 1956).
 18. The opposition is between Madhavan and Indulekha, the hero and heroine influenced by modern education, on the one hand, and Panchu Menon and Suri Nambudiri, representing tradition, on the other. P.K. Parameswaran Nair, *History of Malayalam Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1977), pp. 119-120.
 19. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Department of Modern Indian Languages, Delhi University. I am grateful to Professors Manoranjan Mohanty and Sisir Kumar Das of Delhi University, Meenakshi Mukherjee of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Probal Dasgupta of CALTS, S. Viswanathan, Chitra Panikker and others of University of Hyderabad for their helpful comments.