

## **English Education, Modernity and City: A Study Through Fakir Mohan Senapati's *The Penance***

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### **Abstract**

In this article an attempt has been made to study the rise and development of early English educated city bred individuals who challenge the established values, norms and ethics of a tradition bound society. Their education at city centres has made them modern and reactionary individuals. As a result their sense of community has begun to break down. The urban community far from being cohesive was constituted by tension and conflict, exploitation and violence. These modern, urban elites formed their own groups in the city centres. They manoeuvred the public discourse with their dominance. The sudden and unexpected contradiction of principles of a tradition bound society by these new generation youngsters lead to a series of penance of both the generations of people who advocates change and who resists it.

The third-person narration of the novel chosen for my study, *The Penance*, offers much sharper insight into the life and thought processes of Gobinda Chandra the protagonist-the urban English educated elite. The image of the city in *The Penance* develops strictly in relation to Gobinda's maturation; the city's impression is taken directly from Gobinda's emotional and ideological expectations because of English education.

**Key Words:** City, English Education, Tradition, Modernity

### **Introduction**

*The Penance* is the last of the four novels of Fakir Mohan Senapati. Its narrative time is presumed to be the years between 1881 and 1920, a decisive phase that is treated as a major turning point in Orissa's socio-cultural history with the urbanisation process unfolding in full swing. The most significant character of the period was the appearance of 'public sphere'. Public sphere signifies the establishment of several socio cultural organisations like literary and debating clubs, political formations like Utkal Sabha, Utkal Samiilani, civil structures like marketplaces, river banks, gardens and parks, administrative institutions like law courts, jails, police stations etc to which the public had access.

Development of education in Cuttack received maximum attention as the city was the British headquarter. Until 1866, modern education was almost nonexistent. The great famine of 1866 made the government realise the need of modern education. The promotion of collegiate education began in Odisha in 1868, as college classes were opened in Cuttack Zilla School, and in 1876, by the initiative of T.E Ravenshaw, the commissioner of Odisha, the college department of the school was given a distinct status. With the spread of English

oriented educational system, the new generation of middle class young men, being aware of western enlightenment, became sceptical about the traditional value system of the province. They wanted to do something new, challenging the hegemonic order. To them, the traditional social structure was afflicted by prejudices and superstitions, and that needed to be uprooted. The circulation of novel ideas and knowledge took place through different associations and clubs they had at that time, like in the British coffee houses of 18<sup>th</sup> century. They also became conscious of the need to develop their native language.

By 1918 when Fakir Mohan Passed away, Orissa had somehow become ‘modern’ in many ways. It is presumed that the modern age in Odia literature started in 1872 with the publication of the *Kabitabali* written collaborately by Radhanath Ray and Madhusudan Rao. The Oriyas by that time were becoming conscious of what their race once was and what they should do to restore its lost glory. Exactly a hundred years after the British occupation of Orissa, the educated Oriyas, established Utkal Sahitya Samaj, the premier literary and cultural association in 1903 with the objective of preserving and developing Oriya language and literature. The luminaries associated with it were Madhusudan Rao, Radhanath Ray, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Gopal Chandra Praharaj, Mrutyunjay Rath and Gangadhar Meher. In the same year, the first conference of Utkal Sammilani was held at Cuttack. The aim of this organisation, which was founded by Madhusudan Das, was to develop Oriya literature and to amalgamate all the Oriya speaking tracts into a separate province of Orissa. To quote Sachidananda Mohanty, “Fakir Mohan spent a considerable part of his career in teaching, writing and journalism. He played a pivotal and pioneering role in the “save Oriya” movement for the preservation of Oriya language and culture.” (IIC Quarterly, 42) Senapati who grew up in Balasore, had witnessed the imposition of Bengali in Odisha school system marginalising Odia language. Odia language was at greater risk of disappearing so were the jobs of the Odia middle class;

He understood 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 courts-were going to lose even the few jobs that existed in their towns and cities....on them depended the fate of an entire generation of Oriyas, and indeed much of Orissan society. (S Mohanty 25)

So he realised the importance of saving the Oriya language. Oriya dailies were published to reinforce the lost glories of Oriya race. However, gradually Utkal Sahitya Samaj took the form of “Alochana Sabha” to discuss politics of Orissa.

However, social breakdown had already commenced under the impact of Western education which the new generation, middle class Oriyas were receiving both at Cuttack and Calcutta. The social binding factor, caste, began to lose its tight grip on the new University products. Reading Darwin’s concept of ‘natural selection’ the English educated Oriyas made demands to select their own brides. Alcoholism and independent sexual choices became widespread. The novel *Prayaschita* reflects this new awareness of modernity, the futility of English education as well as the need to assert a distinct Oriya identity.

The novel consists of forty five chapters. As Mayadhar Mansinha observes, it deals with:

Modern university products and upper class people in the last part of nineteenth century are its actors and actresses. A generation or two of Oriyas had at last come up with labels of Western enlightenment granted by the newly started universities and colleges. Fakir Mohan often admitted in half mockery that he was perfectly 'unenlightened' as compared with those shallow English-educated products with bits of unassimilated Western thinking. There was proneness now for defiance of parental authority and caste inhibitions. (Mansinha 70)

### Effect of English education in Odisha

19<sup>th</sup> century Oriya society was conservative enough to accept western education, which saw only disadvantages in it as the western educated people abandoned their religion and style of living and adopted western fashions, dress, speech and behaviour, and the habit of drinking. Those who pursue western education are excommunicated from society. Senapati is vocal about the evils of western education. For him western education only teaches how to despise one's own culture.

Western education had certainly made the Oriya youths scientific, logical and reasonable. Now they started admiring social equality, political freedom and patriotism and they have serious reservations about illiteracy, stupidity, prejudice and backwardness. The newly gained knowledge made the immature young men defy the traditional forces of authority in Orissan society, namely their fathers, elders and religious beliefs and let them commit stupidity in the name of reason.

Numerous examples can be cited from the works of Senapati, where the English educated youths have tried to tilt the social structure. In the case of *Daka Munsi*, a short story written by Senapati, Gopal Babu, once the virtuous son, became disrespectful and insolent toward his father after procuring a sub-postmaster job. The job of course is not a big one, but the newly acquired social and professional status, western dressing and English speaking made him feel superior to his rustic father. The difference made him embarrassed in public sphere and constantly reminded him of his humble background which he strove to forget. In this short story Fakir Mohan showed how English education had only snob value without morality, benefitted the Oriya materially but harmed them emotionally, thus clouding their judgement and confusing their value system.

Money squandering, became a habit of the young well to do Oriyas, who studied at a distance place from their home. We know how Prabhudayal Bhagat of *The Maternal Uncle* dissipated his entire father's property. In this chapter we find a similar character, Sadanand. The fault was with the utilitarian value the English education offers. On the pretext of study they enjoyed freedom from moral guidance and control but enough money to misuse.

The novel makes a series of veiled attacks on young English educated Oriya children who in their attempt to be civilised behave stupidly. Western education tended to distance the student from his own society and culture; it had only utilitarian value to offer.

Being persuaded by the lawyers, Baisnab Charan Patnaik though sent his only son Govinda Chandra to Cuttack for an English education.

‘your son is so handsome and intelligent looking- you must put him in a school at Cuttack so that he can learn English. One who does not know English is not counted as a respectable person these days even if he possesses immense wealth and recognisable social status.’ (*The Penance* 25)

He realised that learning English is essential to communicate with big officers that is why the lawyers are earning handsomely. Finally he sent his son Govinda Chandra with his adopted son Sadanand to Cuttack for studying English. The progress of the novel reflects their changing life style only after ten years of schooling, as they entered into college for higher education. The evil mind of Sadanand works properly then, to control the household at Cuttack. As a result he removed the old Karan caretaker as a measure of cost cutting. Sadanand, if not Govinda, organised lavish parties for his friends twice or thrice a week, resulting in monthly fund crunch and large scale credit.

Birds of the same feather flock together. The saying is never wrong as Rajiblochan, the evil doer, the nephew of Sankarsan Mohanty, became the confidant of Sadananda. Both of them were plotting a big conspiracy involving Govinda Chandra. He was studying in second year. Alochana Sabha, the discussion meeting followed by a banquet meeting, became the medium to trap Govinda.

### **Alochana Sabha, or the Discussion Meeting**

Senapati was the advocate for propagating Oriya language and literature. He saw disadvantage in Western education as the western educated young men abandoned their religion, caste and orthodoxy. In this prose fiction, he satirises the ill effects of Western education. Alochan Sabha in the novel is a realistic portrayal of ‘Alochana Sabha’ of Utkal Sahitya Samaja, headed by the reformer Madhusudan Das of 19<sup>th</sup> century Orissa of which Senapati was a member. The aim of the meeting was to advance the native Oriya language and literature.

As it goes in the novel, the students of the Cuttack College held the meeting in the Saturday evening in the first week of every month. The aim of the meeting is to instil love, importance and respect for mother tongue. The young people have understood that the progress of community depends on the growth of the mother tongue. Dr. Astosh Mukherjee has felt the importance of native language for nation building. “He had observed that true wisdom could never be acquired through learning of foreign language.” (35) The educated youths now have realised that the mother tongue is pleasing and has a glorious past than other language. They feel that English language might be rich and famous worldwide but worshiping the foreign language will not bring any glory to our mother tongue. Again, any discussion in foreign language is confined to a circle that knows the language whereas such discussions in mother tongue have widespread implications. So the patriotic youths have taken pledge to abandon materialistic interest and personal ambition for the sake of the mother tongue. To propagate the language, the group organises poem recitals and reading prose articles.

These ambitious promising educated youths who were supposed to sacrifice their personal interest for the sake of mother tongue, had used the forum for satisfying their narrow agenda. The victim is Govinda Chandra. Mansinha observes, “As he entered college, he was

accepted by his undergraduate friends as a budding poet also, and was looked upon as one of the hopes, not only of his family, but even of Oriya people as a whole.” (*Fakirmohan Senapati* 71) He was proved to be good poet with a fine poetic ability.

The friendship grew between Govinda Chandra and Rajiblochan, nephew of Sankarsan Mohanty, in the meeting. The malevolent Rajiblochan, both intolerant and jealous, expecting rich rewards from his uncle, tried to raise his uncle’s social status by arranging the marriage of Indumati, the daughter of Sankarsan Mohanty, with Gobinda Chandra, without the knowledge of Govinda’s parents. When everyone in the meeting was praising Govinda Chandra, Rajiblochan, the sadist, silently introduced his cousin sister Indumati who was good at phraseology, prosody and poetic spirit, making her a superior poet to Govinda. Rajiblochan was not altogether wrong as girls of well to do families receive informal education at home. As observed by Sachidananda Mohanty, “The rationale for this education was made clear: women from middle class cultivated families were perceived as the custodians and transmitters of cultural legacy.” (*IIC Quarterly* 45) Talking about a young woman in public was prohibited during those days but these English educated people violated the norm. Rajib was not even questioned about Indumati because of his rich heritage, although nobody knew about Indu’s poetic talent. They were made to believe in Indu’s education and poetic talent as she belonged to a well to do family. To make Govinda Chandra amorously inclined towards Indumati, Rajibalochan mentioned that his cousin-sister Indumati was not only supremely beautiful, but was also a budding poet.

The Western knowledge gained by newly educated youths was incomplete, unsubstantial and incomprehensible. Any attempt made by the youths to fabricate the Indian society and culture had serious consequences.

Instead of solving the problems of society, the Western educated youth Govinda Chandra, son of Baisnab Charan Patnaik, brought more misfortune to the family, caste and society. Reading some sceptical books in English, Govinda Chandra temporarily lost his religious faith, faith in the elders and became vulnerable to the malevolent Rajiblochan’s persuasion. Through Rajiblochan, Sankarsan was able to motivate Govinda in favour of marrying his daughter by hiring an English educated guy Kamalochan in a series of post dinner speeches. He was hoping that the marriage may put him at par with Baisnab Charan Patnaik, the hereditary head of Sri Karan community.

Kamalochan, bribed by Rajiblochan, prepared an excellent dinner speech on selection of bride, citing Darwin’s Law of Natural Selection. The law of natural selection was accepted in advanced Western countries but was negated in India. The Sastras which are considered illogical, superstitious came in the way of acceptance of it. So Kamlochan argued any inhibition in natural selection of partner will lead to its doom. Therefore, for the good of the society, it was the duty of educated young men to reject the traditional way of selecting mating partner where there is no necessity of a third party;

You must not forget or ignore the fundamental fact that since the union of opposite sex is an act decreed by Nature both the male and female are guided by their own individual taste/choice and discretion while participating in the act. Sexual union is not sin.’ (*The Penance*, 64)



Since marriages in Hindu society cannot be terminated like other communities, selecting bride on your own makes sense. We become selective while choosing a shoe that will be thrown after use but when choosing bride, we become careless.

The dinner speech was propaganda by Rajiblochan to put pressure on the group to make a final resolution favouring his intention. They agreed on three points first, they will not make any sub categorisation of Karan caste, second, they will never marry an ignorant uneducated girl, third, they will pick bride from the village where there is a school. The above unanimous agreement was made for Govinda Chandra to marry Indumati in principle. Govinda was reluctant to go against his father's will and village elders who will condemn such marriage.

Here came Sadanand, to persuade Govinda by his eloquence to marry Indumati. He pointed out that the progress and future of a nation depends on the youth's intelligent and reasonable decision, not on stupidity and prejudice. He projected Govinda as a reformer and patriot whose present modifies the future of nation and society. Division of caste retards the progress of society. Marriage to Indumati would be a wise decision towards egalitarianism in society which will mitigate the perennial rivalry between two landlords. Again Sadananda pointed out that Govinda would be financially beneficial as he has everything to gain from two estates. In the worst case he will ultimately inherit Sankarsan's rich property even if his father disinherits him.

Although Govinda was bent towards his father, Sadanand colours his father as a deterrent to national progress, danger to society and threat to son's happiness. So there was no reason why one who was educated would be bent to his father. Again the disadvantage of a traditional bride who was illiterate, repressed, and inhibited was that he could not satisfy an educated man. Indumati, on the other hand, was beautiful, intelligent, educated and talented.

Now Govinda became contemplative, his head turned. He remembered the teacher once cited in Mission school, "one may have to desert his parents to live with his wife." (75) He finally decided to marry Indumati, knowing pretty well that this union would break the hearts of his loving old parents. And when the news of this secret wedding was circulated proudly by Sankarsan Mohanty, it really did not only hurt old Baisnab Patnaik's complacent aristocracy, but his entire family life.

Henceforth, it was Rajibalochana's endeavour along with Sadananda to ensure that Govinda Chandra never again met his parents. Sadananda convinced him the message about his mother's illness was fabricated, no such case had happened, at the same time Rajiblochan made preparations to visit his village when he got the news at Cuttack of his mother's illness and her last wish to see her only son in death bed. Rajibalochan, however, moved quickly to foil Govinda's plan. He approached his uncle and apprised him about the consequence of the meeting on Indumati. Indumati was persuaded by her father to put her signature to a poem that she had not written, inviting her husband to be with her as soon as possible. This fine poetic piece brought romantic fancy in Govinda Chandra. Postponing his visit to his parents; he started at once to meet Indumati.

The consequence of this was a series of penance for all the characters of the novel except the genuinely evil ones like Rajiblochan and to Sadanand. Govinda Chandra was

thoroughly thrashed for his misadventure at night to spring surprise on his wife and landed in Cuttack general hospital, his wife dead, Sankarsan Mohanty and Baisnab Charan Patnaik became ascetics at Brindaban.

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