

Rise of the Moneyed Class: Reading Fakir Mohan Senapati's Novel Six Acres and a Third

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Abstract

During the 19th century, Orissa was slowly transforming itself under British colonial rule. The feudal culture was gradually crumbling under the impact of colonial culture. A new hybridized 'bourgeoisie' group or middle class was coming up as a product of colonial encounter. With their preliminary English education, this group showed its solidarity with the British administration. Through their administrative connection, they were manipulating the properties of the rural poor and gradually becoming the potential ruling class.

This paper deals with the novel Chha Mana Atha Guntha (1902) (translated into English as Six Acres and a Third in 2005) of Fakir Mohan Senapati that is set in the backdrop of the developing city of Cuttack. It traces the insidious rise of a monetary dispensation and the effect it has on human character and relationships. The transition is possibly the outcome of the newly developed 'economic man' a class of humans who make the earning of money the prime principle of their existence.

Keywords: Economic man, Moneyed Class, Colonialism, City

There is a strong reason behind writing the paper as I feel this paper explores a new dimension of urban literature reflected through Indian writing in English translation. Again the paper aims to explore incipient form of the city in contrast to fully fledged urban centres.
Introduction

Most of the critics argue that the novel Six Acres and a Third compellingly depicts greed, deception, and exploitation of a zamindar in an agrarian society of colonial India. The novel is supposed to be set in an Orissan village in the early part of the nineteenth century. It is true of course that the setting is the countryside. But if one goes through the novel closely, one can find that the novel shows the onset of an urban mindset. Ramachandra Mangaraj, the hero of the novel, is a village zamindar who often visits Cuttack, the colonial urban centre in different court matters. He visited Midnapore of West Bengal where he met Seikh Dildar Mian and consequently bought his zamindari in an auction. Though he never lived in the city, his rise to power and prominence was made possible by the growth of urban and institutions like law courts, collectorate, and jail. He has acquired all evil urban

characteristics like greed, acquisitiveness, self-love, and lust. His thorough knowledge of the rules and regulations of the land revenue administration and native zamindari system helped him exploiting the peasants. Satya P Mohanty puts this in perspective by recounting the land revenue system in Orissa;

...Orissa was taken over by the British in 1803 and was soon thereafter incorporated into a transnational economic system. Village life was changed profoundly by the colonial system of rent acquisition, which installed a new relationship between the traditional landlord class and the peasantry. Over the nineteenth century, most of the zamindaris of Orissa were bought- often through deceit- by non-Oriya middlemen who had greater access to the courts and offices of Calcutta, the headquarter of the colonial bureaucracy. Absentee landlordism always produces its problems, and these problems were compounded by the fact that some traditional forms of manufacture in the cities were abolished by the British. (The Six Acres and a Third 24)

Mangaraj appropriated the property of poor, ignorant peasants by misusing the new legal system.

Rise of the acquisitive individual

The rise of acquisitive individuals in the context of Orissa seems to stem from many faulty British administrative policies. These were policies that far from benefitting the poor rustic villagers became their nemesis. The land revenue laws, police administration, and judiciary, which are beyond their reach, stand in their way of progress. The wise, educated, upper caste people in India got the scope to extract benefit from the faulty policies. These individuals were based either in the city or were frequently commuting to the city for work in the kutchery, police station, or law court. Ramachandra Mangaraj can be taken as an example of a city commuter as he frequents the city of Cuttack to appropriate his ill-gotten property.

Land Revenue Law Leading to Exploitation

The land revenue system in Orissa was unstructured when the British occupied it. During Mughal rule, the long strip of cultivated land from western mountain tracts to the seaboard marshes was called Mughalbandi as the conquerors derived their revenue from that fertile area. The Orissa chiefs uphold a semi-independent power over the land called Rajwara. But later on, the Marathas treated the Raja and other Khandayats as subordinate feudal chiefs and they pay 'quit rent' or nominal rent- it is a rent, typically a small one, paid by a freeholder instead of services which might be required of them. The Khandayats who were maintaining the killa were enjoying 'quit rent'. After British occupation, in recognition of their lineage, the Khandayats enjoyed permanent rent-free ancestral land on payment of peshkush, provided they continued their loyalty to company government, vide section 35 of the regulation xii, 1805.

The British made a land settlement in 1804. J.K Samal points out that, it was "an unfortunate record of assessment on insufficient inquiry and the enforcement of inelastic rules for the realisation of inequitable revenues." (Samal 32) In the early settlements, revenue was continually being enhanced on imperfect proportion. The British law was not sympathetic to the estates in collecting revenue if there was any crop loss in calamity; rather it was collected by force. It was enforced with severity. When the revenue was not paid on time the estates were put on auction in Calcutta. Many old Odia families were ruined by this law but the Bengalis were beneficial by buying the lands in an auction.

The novel *Six Acres and a Third* was published in book form in Oriya in 1902 though it was serialised in *Utkal Sahitya* from 1897 to 1899 under the pseudonym Dhrujati. The plot of the novel refers to the early nineteenth century Orissa after the British occupation in 1803. The owners of the estate who were unable to pay taxes were deprived of their property through an auction at throw-away prices. Sheikh Karamat Ali from Bihar who moved to Midnapur started his career as a horse trader who pleased the then district magistrate of Midnapore by selling him a horse. The magistrate offered him a job of thana daroga for his ability to write his name in Persian. For owning a zamindari no MA or BA degree is required, as in the case of Ali Mian, the money is what matters.

In those days zamindaris of Orissa were auctioned off in Calcutta. One time, while visiting the city in connection with a murder case, Mian sahib made a bid for the zamindari of Fatepur Sarsandha and was successful. (*Six Acres and a Third* 68)

Similarly, Ramachandra Mangaraj acquired the zamindari of Ali Mian, from his son Sheikh Dildar Mian by adopting devious means. After the death of Ali Mian, Dildar Mian became prodigal and spent money extravagantly. Drinking, smoking, and watching the nautch girl became his obsession. By that time no one lent him money as he had been bankrupt. So he ordered despondently, "Go mortgage whatever you like, Mian ordered his munshi, household goods or even the zamindari, but make sure you get the money for the party tonight." (73) In the meantime Mangaraj appeared on the scene with many gifts that made Mian pleased and in return, he rewarded Mangaraj as the rent collector of zamindari. Initially, Mangaraj collected the rent and gave it Dildar Mian. Although he collected the next installment of rent, he lied to Mian that no tenants paid the rent as Bagha Singhs prevented them from doing so. As the day of paying the rent was near, cunning Mangaraj signed a debt deed and loaned Mian the money, he collected from tenants. Latter on Mangaraj collected the interest from the tenants before paying to the government. Once he did a debt deed of thirty thousand rupees, which Dildar Mian signed in a drunken state. And later on Mangaraj got the zamindari by filing a case in Cuttack. Acquiring the zamindari was easy because of the faulty land revenue system made by the British;

The security of the government revenue depended upon the sales of estates for arrears of the revenue. Under regulation X of 1818, whenever installments were not paid up within the month in which they were due according to the settlement list of installments for each estate, the collector could issue a dustuk to the defaulter and proceed to attach and sell his estates to realise the overdue sums mentioned in the certificate, if the whole was not paid up before the date fixed for sale.' (Samal 50)

Ram Ram Lala the lawyer did not take much time to own the estate of Ramachandra Mangaraj. By simply assuring him to acquit him in the court case the lawyer mortgaged Ramchandra's zamindari. At the end of the novel, it was seen all of his property was auctioned at throw-away prices and the zaminadri was snatched by the lawyer. He became a victim of the same land law that he used aptly.

Police Administration: Effect of Bribery in Village

The police administration in Orissa was in hopelessly bad condition, in the early nineteenth century. A man robbed would never like to file a case for investigation as the demand for money by police was just double the amount robbed.

The policing of the province had hitherto been entrusted to a force, partly civil and partly military. They were inefficient and corrupt. The subordinate police officers were underpaid and exposed to temptations. The daroga was identified by the people with torture, extortion, and oppression. (Samal 123)

Because of the petty darogas, a large number of crimes that actually occurred did not come to the view of police and magistrate. Sometimes the offenders are absconded with the help of police officers. The police inquiry into a large number of cases taken up was fruitless and the disproportionate number of persons was acquitted. B.L. Gupta, the district judge of Cuttack, commented on police administration as such, "Many good cases were spoilt-nipped in the bud by a faulty erroneous or too brief record of a first information report." (Samal 126)

Even T.E Ravenshaw, the commissioner of Orissa, in 1873 said, "A native of Orissa generally makes an indifferent policeman, he is loose and perfunctory in his ideas and habits, and requires an immense amount of teaching to bring up to the standard of sharp active officer." (Samal 128) To Sir Frederick Halliday, the police system was a curse.

The miserable condition of the village police was also responsible for the deterioration of the police administration. The village chowkidars generally came from the lowest rungs of the society. They were mired by deep poverty and ignorance. Sometimes

they were looked down upon by the regular police officers who often used them for menial work. Broadly speaking the police did not have morality and their duty was void of integrity. Their only occupation was to give and take bribes. The village chowkidars, whose main duty was to report crimes, giving information, taking precautionary measures, and rendering assistance in the criminal investigation, were paid by the panchayat which was subject to revision by Magistrate. Throughout the province, they were underpaid.

The typical case of police administration, a corrupt cop, and its evil consequences are recorded in the novel, in the form of Gobara Jena, the village chowkidar. "Accepting bribes came naturally to Jena." (Six Acres and a Third 97) He comes from the lowest rung of the society, a pana, an untouchable, living in the slum at the periphery of the village Gobindapur. He was very much connected with Ramachandra Mangaraj, as he was receiving a salary from him, as a part of the decision made by the British. They often spent nights together discussing village affairs. His chief occupation was robbery and theft. He was responsible for selling out the stolen goods by using his influence. He never performed his duty regularly, not even patrolling in the village, and took no responsibility for village theft. The author is sarcastic towards Gobara Jena, calling him an honest cop as he accepts sheaves of corn from villagers as his right every year. When a marriage takes place, he receives a cloth and one rupee from the bridegroom. He was not different from other constables of nineteenth-century Orissa in accepting a bribe of one rupee when a case arrives in the station. His extortion extends to the poor people as well, as he receives a piece of bronze or bell metal to file their case. He is immune to arrest as he has bribed the entire police station along with the munshi, taking money from the villagers. He has forced villagers to feed him. If any villager disagrees with him, then he will take off and in the same night, the host's house would be burgled.

By amassing huge wealth, he became one of the richest men in the village. Once he was caught in a robbery case but was immediately acquitted by bribing the munshi. J.V Boulton observes; "he was a sly, cunning rascal who could be trusted by no one, and it was he who betrayed Mangaraj." (Fakir Mohan Senapati: His Life and Prose Fiction 361)

At the end of the novel, the court verdict came in the case of the government versus Ramachandra Mangaraj, Gobara Jena the village chowkidar was found guilty; "Gobara Jena who filed FIR is at the root of it all...it is clear that he made a great effort to pass falsehood off as truth, but that he has not been able to defend his case under hard questioning." (Six Acres and a Third, 179) To manipulate the case in his favour he has own over two witnesses who are his relatives. As a result, the criminal proceedings started against him. One year of rigorous punishment is accorded to Gobara Jena for giving false witness.

Another beautiful example of police corruption is seen in the case of Sheikh Karamat Ali alias Ali Mian, who was a horse trader and received the job of police daroga on a platter from British officials by only writing his name in Persian. During his thirty years of service, he accumulated immense wealth. Senapati narrates;

He acquired four zamindaris and built himself a big house; he owned farms and gardens and a large number of household goods. In those days zamindari of Orissa was auctioned off in Calcutta. One time while visiting the city in connection with a murder case, Mian sahib made a bid for the zamindari of Fatepur Sarsandha and was successful. (Six Acres and a Third 68)

A general notion runs in the mind of people that the job of police inspector is a plump position over and above other posts. They bless people to be a police officer. In the case of an ignorant Brahmin, he blessed a deputy collector to be a police inspector. "In the corrupt world of colonial society, with its many petty authorities, an unscrupulous police officer could make a great deal of money." (68) Take the case of Sheikh Inayat Husain, a top-class daroga in Cuttack district, who worked in Kendrapara police station for twelve years, was subject to transfer elsewhere which was because "he had failed to send usual gifts for the peshkar and sirastadar in the headquarters of Cuttack." (154) The corrupt police inspector took vengeance against Ramachandra Mangaraj, for not fulfilling his promise of giving one thousand rupees as a bribe in exchange for sending the doms of Ratanpur to jail. It shows all the police officials are prone to bribe-taking.

Another example of negligence of duty by the police officer is evidenced in the inquiry into the death of Champa. As it was a murder case, the police ordered four hundred suspects. The main suspect Gopi Sahu, who gave her shelter during the night, and Chandia the boatman, denied their involvement. Being irritated by the droppings of a kite on his beard, the police inspector ended the session of inquiry abruptly naming it a case of snakebite. It shows how irresponsible the police officers were.

Wily Lawyer and Economic Exploitation of the Poor

The head civil judicial officer in the province was the civil judge who had jurisdiction all over Orissa and is headquartered at Cuttack. Subordinate to the civil judge was Sadar Amin and Munshi. Each had its court. A suit in which the right to property or an office was contested was a suit of civil nature. The major drawback in the system was "a frightful amount of perjury and of forgery was affecting the administration of justice in civil and criminal courts alike." (Samal 163)

The law for landlord and tenant was confusing. But after passing Act x of 1859 the landlords can impose a fine on the defaulter tenants and can register summary suits before

Collector. The summary suit is a unique legal procedure used for enforcing a right in an efficacious manner as the court passes judgment without hearing the defense. In 1871, an inquiry was made which showed high-handed oppression and oppressive exaction made by the zamindars. The poor peasants of Orissa were not much acquainted with their rights and were little exposed to the protection of the law. Even where they might know the law, they were too weak, timid to complain. Ramachandra Mangaraj, the cruel moneylender, extracted the benefit of law; he mortgaged the six acres and a third of innocent Bhagia to him in place of hundred fifty rupees. After failing to pay off the loan, Mangaraj filed a case in the law court at Cuttack. He got the decree from the court to confiscate, the said land from innocent Bhagia. He also took away the house from Bhagia.

T.E. Ravenshaw observed; "Our laws, rules, act and penalties were known only to a few of the hanger-on about the courts, and to a certain degree among the more educated and advanced zamindars." (Samal 60) Senapati makes an observation of the judicial system in the novel;

Under this system, the clever and the rich get off, even though, in truth, they are guilty of hundreds of crimes; while the simple and the poor get into trouble and are harassed for their innocence in the law courts. The expense incurred in court cases today makes beggars of both parties since all sorts of worthless people thrive off their misfortune. (Six Acres and a Third 85)

Criminal justice was a clear-cut failure. The cognizable crimes reported by police were disposed of. It was seen that a disproportionate number of persons brought before the courts were acquitted. The court revealed the existence of defects both in police and judicial administration. One defect may be the insufficient number of magistrates who were overburdened, and the other major defect, as was pointed out by B.L.Gupta the judge of Cuttack; "that magistrates did not exercise a sufficient check on the police, but sent up to the sessions, in an incomplete state, perfunctorily investigated cases without summoning and examining for themselves witness when police had omitted to send up." (Samal 187)

The new judicial system gave rise to the profession of lawyers, who sold and bought law in exchange for money. The profession of lawyer became very much profit-making as they can twist and turn the cases in favour of them. Senapati as a critique of newly emerged lawyer profession said that the lawyers who are always hobnobbing in the court can ruin as many as twenty-five families for money, so the legal profession brings more fortune like a business, "commerce makes you rich; a bachelor's degree in law does too, though somewhat less so." (Six Acres and a Third 45) The British judiciary warns not to commit any crime, if found guilty, you would be punished. But the manipulation of the law can be made by the lawyer who brings him the cash; he can make black white and white black.

A friend in need is a friend indeed. Chanakya, the minister and advisor of Chandra Gupta, has iterated that the person who stands by kings court or law court or at cremation ground are true friends; (Senapati has compared king's court with law court in modern times.) "In other words, your true friends are lawyers in law courts and jackals skulking around cremation grounds." (172) Lawyers, like jackals, devour the clients whoever visits the court. Such a lawyer is Ram Ram Lala, with the traditional robe, who searches for the victim inside the court premises. With warm greeting, the jackal-like lawyer catches the prey in the net and makes a sumptuous feast. In this case, the victim does not arouse anyone's sympathy, as the victim is a money-eating zamindar being eaten up by another money-eating lawyer. Both of them complement each other in some way or the other in how much property they can acquire in their life. The two professions of land grabbing and law trading have begotten the moneyed class, who, like Mary Shelly's Frankenstein, is ready to take hold of the civilisation.

Ramachandra Mangaraj was taken by surprise, when somebody greeted him with honour, in the court. The person was introduced by the constable as Ram Ram Lala, the famous lawyer. With a lot of self eulogy, the lawyer said he was so busy in lawsuits that he had no time to go out but came to meet Mangaraj as he was a man of importance. Mangaraj without delay fell at his feet for rescue from jail, bursting into tears. With the false proclamation of meeting with the judge at his residence, he convinced Mangaraj of victory in the case and consoled him that the case will evaporate as it was falsely designed by daroga. Mangaraj, having relied on the lawyer, asked him for acquittal. Knowing the weakness of Mangaraj, the lawyer hyped the intensity of the case to obtain more money from him;

This case is serious, very serious. After all, it is a murder case. If you are not careful from the very beginning, you could go to the gallows. The evil-faced daroga is after your blood. You are a man of the world. Need I say more? You know everything about the ways of law courts. There will be expenses. You must not be afraid to spend money; you must not be close-fisted in this matter. Have you heard what daroga is telling everyone? He says you are almost surely going to hang. I am certain you agree that staying alive is what matters the most. Tell me whether you have earned money, or whether the money has earned you. Make your choice. (Six Acres and a Third 173)

The fearful Mangaraj was ready to make a deal with the lawyer and agreed to pay thousand rupees if he was released from prison. The constable Gopi Singh wondered that the serious case cannot be dealt in arrears, he has to make the payment right away. 'The client says wait, the lawyer says pay'; the constable does not want to be sandwiched between them, as he expects commission from the lawyer. He made a clear cut statement, "get the money if

you want to win the case. Get the money. Lawyer Sahib, I cannot allow you to talk to the accused any longer." (174)

The lawyer said, to win the case he has to have everyone on his side. For doing that money is wanted. Looking at the difficult nature of the case no other lawyer would dare to take it even if they are paid ten thousand rupees. Since Mangaraj had made him the godfather, he would not abandon the case but in return, "not a paisa less than ten thousand rupees will be required. Mortgage your zamindari to me. It is not as if all these rupees will be needed at one time. As soon as you are acquitted, I will give you a detailed account of expenditures." (174) Now Mangaraj is forced to mortgage his zamindari, the same way by which he has obtained the six acres and a third.

Conclusion: Judicial Heartlessness

The judicial heartlessness was seen at the court verdict. The inadequacy of the legal system was revealed during the trial. The court is convinced that Mangaraj was a scoundrel, who by adopting devious means, mortgaged the six acres and a third of the land of innocent Saria and Bhagia and later on appropriated the piece of land in his name by filing a court case. He is ultimately responsible for the tragedy that befell the innocent couple. The police reported that the accused was a man of bad character who is used to take away other people's property by clever and devious means;

Of course, it must be stated that mortgaging the land, winning the case, and auctioning the property were all accomplished through deceit. Nonetheless, all this is irrelevant in the present case. We have reason to believe that because the accused took away Bhagia Chandra's rent-free six and third acres, and looted all his belongings, Bhagia went mad with grief and Saria died of starvation. But all this is not enough to convict the accused of murder. (Six Acres and a Third 181)

But the court is unwilling to take cognizance in the murder case of Saria as she was not beaten to death by Mangaraj. There was no evidence that the accused used any unlawful act against them. The post mortem reveals that the death was caused by a long period of starvation and mental agony. So Mangaraj was free from the murder case and conspiracy for it. The court found the mortgage deed lawfully done and Mangaraj's occupation of the six acres and a third was legal. The only charge in which the court pronounced conviction of Mangaraj was the illegal snatching of the cow Neta;

The accused, Ramachandra Mangaraj, is absolved of the murder charge, but he is hereby sentenced to six months of rigorous imprisonment, and ordered to pay a fine of five hundred rupees for unlawfully taking away the cow. Nonpayment of the fine will result in an extra three months of rigorous confinement. (Six Acres and a Third 181)

Finally, all the property of Mangaraj got auctioned at throw-away price to recover the money fined by the honourable court. The lawyer Ram Ram Lala has also won the case against Ramachandra Mangaraj's mortgage of zamindari and will soon occupy it.

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