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THE TREND SETTERS IN MODERN ODIA SHORT STORY FAKIR MOHAN SENAPATI AND SIX GREAT MODERNISTS

Subrata Debangana

Although Odisha has a long tradition of storytelling, the modern Odia short story in its present form appeared on the literary scene in the last part of the 19th century. The advent of printing press and the gradually increasing number of magazines being brought out as a result of it created opportunities for writers of fiction to write short stories. The impact of Western education and Western literature and literary criticism which were gradually making an entry into the educational and cultural milieu of India also created a new taste for an interest in this new genre in Odisha. However, Fakir Mohan Senapati, who is considered to be the father of prose-fiction in Odisha, wrote without being influenced by the trends prevailing in the neighbouring states. Nor was he influenced by the Western trends. He was highly original and a trend setter himself.

'Rebati', 'Patent Medicine', Randipua Ananta (Ananta, the son of the widow) are some of the stories of Senapati that reflect craftsmanship of high standard and originality. They will always be considered as classics of Odia literature. The contemporary Odia society was the theme of his stories. It was the time when old zamindari system had been abolished to be replaced by the new zamindari system, and exploitation was at its highest. A reformer by spirit as well as sensitive and socially conscious, Senapati used his pen to criticize and correct the aberrations prevalent in the society. He wrote about the ethos of the time, and the opposition it faced by all hostile forces—corruption, exploitation, injustice, superstitions, misappropriation of others' property, the devious conspiracy, miserliness etc. He wrote about the various social institutions, customs and traditions that were under threat from the lustful and heedless people of the society. He tried to portray in his writings the social picture of his time truthfully and exactly as it was. In Rebati the cruel zamindar forcefully takes away

the milching cow after Shyamabandhu's death, although he has not owed anything to the zamindar. In some stories Senapati wrote about the shipping business of the time and the exploitation by the traders. In some others he showed the Odia custom of kanyasuna, conservatism, new education system and the impact of western life style on the Odia people. In this context one is reminded of his 'Madha Mohantinka Kanyasuna' (The golden girl of Madha Mohanti) and the famous 'Sabhya Zamindara' (The civilized landlord), 'Adharma Bitta' (The corrupt money). The last one gives a real picture of how one's greed leads one to be rich by wrong means, and makes the common man the victim of torture and exploitation. A touching story like 'Dakamunshi' (The post master) tells about inhuman humiliation and atrocity inflicted on a father by his son. As a reformer Senapati believed that the age old Indian customs and traditions had their own values and those should not be given up entirely but should be re-established with changes and refinements keeping the needs of the time in mind. He tried to show how men sacrifice the general sense of courtesy and sensitiveness in the name of modern education. He ridiculed the new generation which set new meaning of civilized behavior or rather treated their illiterate parents rudely and unkindly in the name of progress and being progressive. He attacked those who became alcohol addicts, hated to touch cow dung and despised the practices of rural Odisha for their urge for westernization. Senapati showed the hypocrisy, deception, adultery and immorality practiced by the self proclaimed holy and religious men which he witnessed around him. His 'Dhuliababa' is a remarkable story based on the theme. A socially alert and sensitive man, he used his long years' experiences in his stories.

Senapati was a trend setter also in the style he adopted in his stories. He freed Odia language from the clutches of Sanskrit, and kept it away from the impact of the newly introduced English, although he used English words often in his writings. He painted the infinite repository of his experiences in his own colloquial, idiomatic language. For the first time the tale of Odia soil, the tears and laughter of Odia men and women were told in the ordinary day to day speech of common man of rural Odisha. Senapati experimented with words and language. He played a leading role in establishing the distinct identity of Odia. He himself became a workshop of vocabulary.

Another important aspect of his stories was the element of humour. Using the tools of humour—and of irony, satire and ridicule—he brought out the pathetic side of human existence and arouses love and compassion for them. In Rebati, the grandmother's eternal cry for Rebati, the grand daughter," Lo Rebi, lo chuli, lo nian", which has become

a catchphrase, is as humorous as it is tragic. He was one of the leading writers who fearlessly attacked the British Rule through his sharp satirical remarks. He was one of the few to introduce social realism in literature much before the October Revolution of Russia.

Senapati's 'Rebati', widely recognized as the first modern Odia short story, became an epoch making event in Odia literature. It is a poignant story of a young, innocent girl whose desire for education is placed in the backdrop of a conservative society in a backward Odisha village where women education was attached with deep seated superstitions and indifference of the people. Rebati's father, however, made some arrangement to educate her at home and she was able to read and write much to the satisfaction of her father and her young teacher. Soon the village was hit by the killer epidemic cholera in which her parents and the teacher Basu along with other villagers died within a few days. The old granny put the entire blame on her. Her education was considered to have brought all misfortunes for the people, for the family, and for her as well. Before she died she had to bear the brunt of wrath of the entire community and suffered ignominy. Intensely powerful and satirical, 'Rebati' set a new trend for Odia short story enabling it to reach a milestone. It made women education and women emancipation to be recognized as important issues. As far as Odia literature is concerned, the character of Rebati became a symbol signifying women's fate. Later writers like Jagadish Mohanty have re-created the character in their stories to show issues related to women.

Since 'Rebati' Odia Short Story has made a steady and remarkable progress. During the last part of the twentieth century, in particular, Odia short story has come to be recognized as a great art, vital and important for the modern reading public. It is indeed difficult to make an assessment of the Odia short story of today, or to name all the writers who have contributed work of distinction within the brief scope of the article. However, with the exception of Manoj Das, Surendra Mohanty and Mohapatra Nilamani Sahu who are class by themselves, a few like Kishori Charan Das, Akhila Mohan Pattnaik, Chandra Sekhar Ratha, Shantanu Kumar Acharya and Jagadish Mohanty can be named not only because they share the claim of being the most original writers but also because they make it an art so rich and complex. A study of their work shows the changes they have brought about to the genre, and the trends they have set for the future generation of writers.

In fact, the pre-independence Odia short story gave more importance to collective voice than individual's, to national interests than individual preoccupations. Humanism was the dominant tone of the short

story of the time. It was after the Second World War and the Indian Independence that new vistas opened for Odia short story. Although the impact of the world war was not direct on the life in Odisha, it could not remain free from an indirect influence. The crisis in the affairs of the western world in the post war period caused an economic crisis in Odisha. Life changed and became many faceted: spread of higher education, rise of political parties, economic revolutions, establishment of different social and government institutions and communities, the growing urbanization, new employment opportunities, the end of zamindari and feudal systems, the rise of a new and complicated bureaucracy, the birth of the middle class; the advent of a new caste equation in place of the old, the grant of political rights and universal adult franchise, price rise and black marketing, the vogue of social democracy, an unimaginable growth of population and of the uneducated youth and the subsequent unemployment problem, the emergence of trade unions, the spread of regionalism and communalism, the power struggle and political instability, political deviousness, the degradation of social life, the disillusion of and by the intellectuals all this brought about remarkable changes in the society and made life diverse and complex. The disturbed sexual behavior of the youth of the time made the entire world re-think the meaning of the base human impulses. The nature of love changed. It no longer remained confined to the ideas of sacrifice, togetherness or separation or in platonic ideals. Freud's psychological theories changed the concept of love and family relationship. Joint families began to disintegrate rapidly. Men and women both became equally educated and employed. With women education came the concept of women liberation. The concepts of morality, spirituality, tradition and conservatism lost their meanings. A sense of isolation, helplessness, despair and uncertainty gripped human mind. The change was felt worldwide. The changing economic and political affairs of the world, the war of communist China with the premier communist country Russia and friendship with capitalist America, her hostility with India and friendship with Pakistan, the India Pakistan war, the creation of Bangladesh, the new awakening in the continent of Africa, the rise of new nations and new communities, the possession of nuclear weapons by nations, the grotesque trends of accumulation of wealth by some and the destitution of some others, increasing consumerism, the rise of the third world, globalization, the struggle between agricultural and industrial civilizations – all this led to more changes showing far reaching consequences. There was an encompassing distrust arising from cut throat competitions all around.

Science and technology, on the other hand, made astonishing progress. The area of knowledge expanded. New psychological theories, new discoveries of science came into being. The journey in the space, the mission to the moon and many such feats of science were recorded. But the conquest of science jeopardized individual existence. Man felt himself to be irrelevant and insignificant. His fear and apprehensions grew. The more he knew about the world the more ignorant he felt. The ancient man feared the unknown regions of Nature. But modern man feared and suspected his own neighbour, his friends, and his family. As a result man became helpless, friendless, and afraid and also felt a spiritual vacuum. His struggle was no longer with the society but with himself. His higher self was in conflict with his lower nature. He became intuitive and self analytical. This was the beginning of the theory of Existentialism in literature. Existentialism also influenced Odia short story. Instead of being confined to the regional issues, short story writers turned their attention to the philosophical, political, economic, social and cultural milieu of India and the world. They began to write about the new and changing circumstances from new perspectives. The diversity of situations resulted in mixed and opposite reactions. Like life the experiences of the writers became strange and multifaceted. New subject matter, new thought, new research, experimentation in structure, the impact of the Western theories of humanism, realism, surrealism, existentialism and symbolism – all this marked emphatic changes in Odia short story. It became so rich and varied that it is difficult to say something definite about the short story of post independent era in terms of time or type.

The modern writers have chosen characters from all sections of life –from aristocracy to middle class and lower middle class. They have delved deep into the mind of man, analyzed and unraveled its inner truth. Raising real issues through the use of symbols they have made Odia short story complex. They have been influenced by Sartre, Camus and Kafka, and introduced elements of the absurd. The ever mushrooming of magazines and journals, the availability of literary sections in newspapers have helped increase the number of story writers and the publication of stories as well. Scholars have shown interest for the study and analysis of short story. Translations of Odia short stories have taken it to international level. Similarly introducing the magnificence of western short stories through translations into Odia Literature writers have enlarged the premises.

Surendra Mohanty, one of the prominent Odia writers, has given a new dimension to Odia short story and taken it to a height unreachable by many. His writing career is stretched from pre-independence era to the late 1980s. This period of more than four decades shows the evolution

of his art of story telling. The impact of his stories of 1950s has been immense. There has been no definite or well constructed plots in these. He has written them following the stream-of-consciousness technique. His 'Australia', 'Vagabond' and 'Mahanagarira Ratri' (A Night in the Metrocity) are some of these. These stories of his early career have opened a new vista so far as plot, structure and style are concerned. He has brought about this change not as a conscious effort for experiment, but because he has found the existing medium inadequate to express the emotions, anxieties, agitations, and the intensity of the realizations of the original artist in him. These stories caused a stir in those days. In the later stories, however, has come a change. In the emotional and thought provoking stories of the collection *Sabuja Patra O' Dhusara Golapa* (The green Leaf and faded flower) he has brought back regular plot and character. His stories have become naturally shorter. Yet in these stories too his personal experience, his own individual perception of life cannot be overlooked. He has been as adept in adorning a Buddhist story or a mythological story with the richness of language and depth of vision as he has been in painting the complex life story of the contemporary man. In 'Mahanirvana' (the Ultimate salvation) he re-tells the story of the Buddhist disciple Nilotpala's passionate longing for the young beautiful widow Madhubrata, and his profound realization that comes while undergoing penance for having committed a sin by entertaining sexual desires. Salvation is the aim of the Buddhist which they believe comes by renouncing all that belongs to life and living – the source of sorrow and death. The spiritual preceptor Acharya Shantideva is waiting for the end of Nilotpala's penance and the realization supposed to come after it. His realizations of the futility and his negation of the pleasures of life centering on the flesh and blood of human body would make him worthy of beatification. But the story ends with Nilotpala running in a state of frenzy with the unclad dead body of Madhubrata to gratify his love and passion for her. Closely holding her body to himself he is proclaiming, living life to the fullest and realizing its deepest truth, not renunciation, is the ultimate salvation. The eternal questions – what is true, life or salvation, sex or renunciation – have always haunted Surendra Mohanty. He has found the appeal of life a reality, a profound truth.

'Shrikrushnanka Shesha Hasa' (The Last Smile of Srikrushna) is another powerful story of Surendra Mohanty. Re-creating a slice of the myth of Mahabharata in a grand epic style he tells how Srikrushna the divine and mysterious strategist of the Mahabharata War earns the curse of Gandhari and gets the fate of his clan (Jadu Vansha) written. Gandhari curses that the entire Jadu Vansha would be destroyed amidst the treachery

of his kinsmen the way he has strategized to destroy the huge Soma Vansha through family feuds. The story begins with some mysterious lines – the omniscient Sun had stopped his Chariot of light for a few moments on the path of his return as if to witness the last scene of the tragic drama of Mahabharata designed by Lord Sri Krushna (Page-178). But the Sun God saw a reversal of situation; a prophesy was made—the destruction of Jadu Vansha was prophesied. The story ends with magnificent ironic lines – the eternal mystery ridden lines of smile across the colored lips of Srikrushna was gradually fading as if like the thin rays of moonlight of the second day of the fortnight -fading in the infuriated darkness. And in the West, behind the Mountain ranges of Indraprastha, the omniscient Sun was setting too (Page-190). The philosophical significance of the story makes it one of the greatest stories in Odia.

In his stories based on the life of the modern man, he has tried to bring to surface the hidden truth in the subconscious of human mind just as he has delineated his outer self. He has shown that the hunger of mind is more intense than that the hunger of body. Fear, despair, loneliness, dilemma in which modern man suffers incessantly are the theme of his stories. In *Falgun Jyotsna* published in 1987 he tells the story of a man who has retired from his job since long, and lying crippled in bed. Struggling against his loneliness every moment of his life he invites an intruder who comes to steal in his house, to befriend him for the night in lieu of the only possession he has, a golden chain, the only memento of his dead daughter. The story ends with the discovery that the intruder leaves, after spending some time with the old man, but leaves the chain behind. The writer shows the human kindness and compassion as the appeal of life notwithstanding the eternal struggle between light and darkness, life and death, order and disorder, virtue and sin. He has shown the intellectual suffering, the internal vacuum of modern man, criticized the present commercialism, consumerism, the naked arrogance of the rich and the powerful, the deceit and corruption in politics, the petty lecheries of modern man; and at the same time he told of the importance of sexual experience in man's life in his innumerable stories. The new lyrical sincerity and extraordinary variety of theme, the innovation and sophistication of style, the quantitative and qualitative richness of Surendra Mohanty's stories are unique and unsurpassable.

Kishori Charan Das is a very successful artist to see and analyse the deep human mind with subtlety and precision. His stories are mostly devoid of tales, are self-analytical, and emerge from his introspective mind. Like the great literary artists and psychologists Freud, Yung, Emily Zola, Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Camu and Kafka, he has

also experimented with the mysterious human mind in his stories, and thrown light on the unknown and unexplored regions of human mind. That is why his stories are found to be obscure. In his own analytical style he has shown the mental dilemma of the complex modern man hidden behind the façade of happiness and contentment. He selects characters mainly from the middle class because he has no personal acquaintance with the lower middle class. Analysing his own stories in an interview with Professor Baishnaba Charan Samal, Das says, "I write about the ordinary lovers like me who are constantly troubled by their preoccupations with god, religion, society, sex, old age and death, taking shelter under falsehood and ignorance to love themselves and to live in peace. In this context his 'Bidharmi' can be cited as an example. It is a thoughtful and symbolical story. It describes in a wonderful way the strange emotions of human mind. The narrator in the story is a non-believer. He would love god if God were somebody like his acquaintance Abhiram Babu. The narrator loves animals. He loves children and people like Abhiram Babu. If that is not love of god then he should better be called an atheist, he thinks. Abhiram Babu, on the other hand, shows a kind of detachment which he claims is due to his surrender to God's will. When Abhiram Babu's daughter and the narrator's son are found on the verge of death, the latter thinks that death should come to the former but not to his son. To escape the sorrow Abhiram Babu could take shelter under his faith in god, but he has no such refuge. To his surprise things turn out as he wishes - Abhiram Babu's daughter dies and his son recovers from illness. The narrator has no regret. He is, however, surprised to see the grace and equanimity with which Abhiram Babu accepts the tragedy. The narrator finds it to be a mask, a pretension. The story ends with the narrator's introspection – how should he explain his own reaction at the moment of crisis. Is it barking in the luxury of sorrow? Is it pretension, too, on his part, to think that he cannot bear the pang of loss being a non-believer, and so must be spared the pain. The story has an open-endedness, characteristic of modern short stories.

Akhila Mohan Pattnik, another successful story writer who, like Kishori Charan, writes about the mysterious way the human mind acts and reacts to situations. His stories have tales but they are so powerful and different from traditional tales that they leave a strong impact on the readers. He creates an atmosphere of magic and drama, pathos and seriousness in many of his stories. In his stories sometimes man becomes a lamp post (Lamp-postra Itikatha) or at some other time becomes an embodiment of hypocrisy and deception ('Rubira Rubayat'). Again sometimes he is forced to play a role other than his own and in the

process bleeds, and suffers quietly without having anybody to see and sympathize, as it happens with a dimiri flower ('Dimiri phula'). 'Dimiri Phula' shows the sorrow and helplessness of a father who has lost his daughter in an accident, but hiding his deep sense of loss has to pretend to his wife as if nothing has happened to their daughter. She is just away for her higher studies. His wife, a mentally ill woman, unaware of the truth, has been waiting eagerly for her to come back from her studies. Years pass by, but the situation never changes for the couple. Closed in their own worlds of pretension and illusion, each inside the palatial building finds a torturing emptiness. The story touchingly portrays a situation that tells how the deluge of the subconscious drowns the subtle thread of the conscious. 'Hansagita' (the swansong), 'Gotie Hotelra Naqsa' (the map of a hotel), 'Gotie Lottery Ticket' (one lottery ticket) reveal the same story of helplessness in the face of the circumstances of life. 'Chandrara Abhishapa' (the curse of the moon) is a different story which creates a mysterious atmosphere showing the spirit of Seemadri, who has died accidentally long ago, wandering around to save his beloved who, he imagines, is imprisoned by some demonic spirit. Akhila Mohan believes in experimenting with plots by selecting new thrilling themes. As he says, if the work of an artist displays a fixed and static attitude or specific commitment it becomes boring and monotonous. (Akhila Mohan Pattnaik-*Shesha Sakkyatakara*, Page-37) Therefore, in 'Chandrara Abhishapa', the protagonist says, keeping life alive is the biggest art, and no one is a greater artist than the one who lives life afresh everyday. (Page-360)

A harmonious blending of compassion, intellect and wisdom, a quest for spirituality, insight into human subconscious, introspective characters – these are the characteristics that mark the stories of a powerful writer, Chandra Sekhar Ratha. Most of his stories are lacking in a plot. Sometimes the narrator speaks for the author. In 'Ashwarohi' (the horse rider), the writer shows that man is invincible and indomitable. Here the horse rider is an image, a mysterious soul. It is a fiery energy and carries the message of a revolution. In 'Samrata' (the emperor) the writer does not show a real or historical or mythical king but a poor helpless man who plays the role of a king. He charms his audience by his art. But the applause and award remind him again and again of the misery and unhappiness of his real life. He hides the unspeakable pain when the ants in his old and foul smelling king's robe bite him and make him bleed. The melody of words, the poetic language and style are Chandra Sekhar's characteristic features. 'Aneka Banya Pare' (after many floods), 'Janmantara' (life after death), 'Mukti' (freedom), 'Ashwarohira Tas ghara' (house of cards of the horse rider), 'Samrata o' Anyamane' (the emperor and others) contain his innumerable

stories that carry the eternal truth of man's failure, the story behind his tears, his misfortunes and his vulnerability. Aneka Banyas Pare (after many floods), considered to be one of his best, is an ironic rendering of the so-called civilized society – a criticism of its foibles, the extravagant behavior of the educated, urban and privileged people, their falsehood, hypocrisy, deception and propensity to violence and cold-blooded murder of fellow human beings on the slightest provocation. The distressing picture of a village under the deluge with carcasses of human beings and animals lying all around; the stupefied people who have lost everybody and everything they had; the crowding of political leaders with their efforts to gain political mileage even out of such heart-reminiscent natural calamities; the media men in their mad rush to sell sensational news and craze for commercial self-publicity; the NGOs and their involvement in self-promoting activities; the story is full of such real incidents that illustrate the helplessness of ordinary individuals amidst the collapse of a true civilization.

Shantanu Kumar Acharya has been playing an effective role in the contemporary Odia short story. Like all modernist writers he too looks into the mysteries of human subconscious. Therefore, the style he adopts in his stories is highly suggestive and symbolic. He collects fragments of experiences, creates a tale out of nothing, and analyses life in that tale less to create the myth of common man. His 'Pithi' is a case in point. The story is built on some ideas exposing contemporary reality and exploring the inner aspects of human personality. The story describes a strange bus journey during which the driver, the conductor, the young enthusiastic passengers, the apathetic onlookers find an old man trying to steal somebody's bag of brinjals. The old man claims to be blind and that he has not stolen anything. Angry and vexed, they throw the old man and his wife out into the darkness of a harsh winter night. The story depicts an inhuman, blind, deaf, insensitive, insensible people of a country that has recently won its independence. They are no way different from the English who once threw out an Indian from a railway coach who stood up to fight the injustice, and threw them out of the country. Here in the story there is a wish fulfillment, divine justice being meted out. The bus meets with an accident killing the cruel and apathetic passengers. The anguish and frustration, the hopes and disillusionment of a people at the failure of the nation that promised a utopia – with its vision of a reasonable world – are expressed brilliantly with a complex evocation of moods and a psychological interest.

Among the young Odia short story writers Jagadish Mohanty is a much acclaimed name. Many describe him as the most modern of all modern writers because he appears extremely modern in subject matter,

in technique and style and also in presentation. His stories are elaborate studies of personal relations, worked out with a deliberate and adult artistry. Like many of his contemporaries, he studies the subconscious to penetrate beneath the surface reactions in life. His characters appear strange in their thought, action and emotion. Yet they are real. They are very much like the people moving around in the society. The present social, economic, political and cultural set up force them to behave in the way they do. 'Albumre Ketoti Munha' (faces in album), 'Alaga Alaga Baitarani' (each in his separate world) are inhabited by characters who are familiar even in their strangeness. They are parts of families which were closely knit one day. Today these are disintegrating because each member has become self centered, trying to fulfil selfish interest, avoiding responsibility, confining life within the narrow limit of the nucleus family. Trying to fulfill the needs of their small families amidst the constraints of town life, they have forgotten the days when their parents were struggling to make both ends meet in their large families. Today they are flowing separately in their own Baitaranis against the unfavorable waves of life, each trying to save himself. The protagonists of Jagadish Mohanty's stories resemble the writer himself. They are from educated middle class; young and modern in their mindsets and their life styles. They spend their days almost doing nothing, but brooding on, analyzing family matters, relationships and people. Their life is uneventful, but mentally alert and always restless, they tell their own tales. The young men and women –Amitabh, Jayanta, Sandip, Arunav, Aniruddha, Goutami, Smita, Animani, Tanimani – have different names but they are similar in their mental makeup. They love Camus, Kafka and Sartre. They keep account of the cinema, sports, politics of the world. Boredom, loneliness are inseparable facets of their life. Jagaddish Mohanty observes the nuances of contemporary life accurately, and presents them vividly. His stories are set in a normal world where one finds a serious and adult treatment of complicated human situation. His method is usually to accept a plot which has a simple outline seizing upon minute details as they stream through the mind of his characters. His stories are like interior soliloquies, trying to capture the diffused thoughts and scattered way of life. His Rebati is a unique story in which he paints the love story of modern Basus and Rebatis setting them in contrast with Senapati's Basu and Rebati. Some of his stories have strong base of regular tales and some are experimental stories in which the story aspect is found in fragments. In fact, Jagaddish Mohanty has led modern Odia short story far ahead, and will remain a source of many young writers of twenty first century even after his early and tragic death.

Odia short story has hardly completed a hundred years. It

has gone through many evolutions in these hundred years, and is still evolving. Literature being a mirror of society will evolve as long as the society evolves. In the past the source of life in the society was confined to particular regions. Today the boundary has expanded to become a global society. Sometimes the picture of the society portrayed in literature is sharp and elevated, sometimes it is blunt and low. But taken together the picture becomes complete. The present literature can be judged in terms of that of the past, and the future in terms of the present. Hence, looking at the present status of short story it won't be incorrect to say that Odia short story has a long and promising future. The depiction of social and economic life of people in a small and poor state like Odisha has gradually diversified to incorporate the entire humanity as a whole. Now it is about one race and about eternal and universal human life. If translated into different languages of the world and exposed to the world readership the existing Odia short story has the strength to stand at par with world literature.

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