

SIX ACRES AND A THIRD AS A CRITIQUE OF THE BRITISH COLONIAL RULE

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Abstract

Colonialism is the establishment of power and control of one colony over the other. In *Six Acres and a Third*, Fakir Mohan Senapati gives a truthful account of the rural India which was under the clutches of the British colonial rule. It deals with the exploitation and harassment of the Oriyan peasants by the feudal landlords. Senapati ironically and humorously portrays the British power and the Indian traditional hierarchies. This study explores the colonial impact on the Oriyan society during the time when the zamindari system was fast flourishing. It also makes an attempt to show how the political forces have a great impact on the economic spheres. The insertion of India into colonialism is generally a change from semi-feudalism into capitalist subjection. Senapati takes us back to 1830's showing the loopholes of the British Empire through his work of realism. He skilfully balances the two realities of Western Empire, exploitation and enlightenment. The downtrodden, illiterate people now became 'babus' because they have mastered knowledge from their colonial masters. In *Six Acres and a Third* Senapati unveils the hidden realities and he voices for the marginalized. Senapati's every move in the novel is a critique of the British colonial rule.

Keywords: Colonialism, Feudalism, Exploitation, Marginalization.

Colonialism is the establishment of power and control of one colony over the other. "The term colonialism is important in defining the specific form of cultural exploitation that developed with the expansion of Europe over the last four hundred years" (Ashcroft 45). Colonialism is an encounter between the colonizer and the colonist. The colonial powers were interested in increasing their political power and in exploiting the resources of the colony. Consequently, most of the indigenous people of colonial territories were oppressed, enslaved and exploited by the colonial powers. Sometimes the native people were even deported from their fertile lands or massacred to make room for new alien settlements.

In *Six Acres and a Third*, Fakir Mohan Senapati gives a truthful account of the rural India which was under the clutches of the British colonial rule. It deals with the exploitation and

harassment of the Oriyan peasants by the feudal landlords. Senapati ironically and humorously portrays the British power and the Indian traditional hierarchies.

This study attempts to analyse the colonial impact on the Oriyan society during the time when the zamindari system was fast flourishing. It also makes an attempt to show how the political forces have a great impact on the economic spheres. Senapati takes us back to 1830's showing the loopholes of the British Empire through his work of realism.

In *Six Acres and a Third* Senapati unveils the hidden realities and he voices for the marginalized. "Language is power because words construct reality. The assumption by the powerless is that words are the signifiers of a pre-given reality, a reality and a truth which is only located at the centre. The colonial "mimicry" is thus a mimicry of the 'original' the 'true' which exists at the source of power" (Ashcroft 89). In this novel, Senapati with the power of language skilfully mirrors the colonial realities.

Four kaduakhumpi birds . . . are happy and excited because they are able to spear and eat the little fish that live in the mud. . . . Some sixteen to twenty cranes, white and brown, churn the mud like lowly farmhands, from morning till night. This is the third proof that there are fish in the pond. A pair of kingfishers suddenly arrive out of nowhere, dive into the water a couple of times, stuff themselves with food, and swiftly fly away. Sitting on the bank, a lone kingfisher suns itself, wings spread like the gown of a memsahib. Oh, stupid Hindu cranes, look at these English kingfishers, who arrive out of nowhere with empty pockets, fill themselves with all manner of fish from the pond, and then fly away. You nest in the banyan tree near the pond but after churning the mud and water all day long, all you get are a few miserable small fish. You are living in critical times now; more and more kingfishers will swoop down on the pond and carry off the best fish. You have no hope, no future, unless you go abroad and learn how to swim in the ocean. (103-104)

The physical environment, the Asura pond in the village of Gobindapur is picturized. The ordinary day-to-day action which takes place in the pond is compared to the human behaviour. Senapati uses the imagery of birds for his theme of exploitation under the colonial rule. The kaduakhumpi birds represent the poor peasants. They work hard to earn their bread. These proletarians are satisfied with their meagre earnings after being subject to hard labour. Since they lack insight, they allow themselves to be used like animals. Such people are subjected to easy exploitation in a colonial society. The novel revolves around the kaduakhumpi birds - Bhagia and Saria being exploited by the landlord Mangaraj.

The feudal landlords are compared to the cranes. These zamindars plot day and night to devour the helpless peasants and they succeed in their devious scheme. They are the bourgeois who grew huge by looting the proletarians out of their physical strength and property. But what happens finally is that these zamindars are trapped suddenly by a superior force. The English kingfishers flew swiftly and robbed the toil of their whole life. The English entered just to trade but finally mastered. They came with little but finally encroached upon all the riches of the colony. Senapati uses his literary creativeness to document the history of the colonial rule.

The next set of birds is the kites. "The kite is smart and clever; it perches quietly on a branch, like a Brahmin guru, and from there swoops down into the pond to snatch a big fish. That lasts it for the whole day. Brahmin gurus perch on their verandahs, descending on their disciples once a year, like the kite" (104). The Brahmins are compared to the kites. These people with their intelligence and insight fail to do any physical job for their living. Instead with their

scholarly skill they elevate themselves as gurus taking command over the lower class people. Every image is a critique of the British colonial rule and shows that the English kingfishers are the most dangerous of all the birds.

Senapati remarks that the English dominance was the cruellest when compared to the Brahmins and the bourgeois. The English with their mighty weapons of power and superior skill exploited the native people to a very great extent. “Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed and it is in their writing . . . that the day-to-day realities experienced by the colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential” (Ashcroft1). Through this novel, Senapati gives voice to the voiceless peasants. He condemns both the English outsider and the indigenous people - the comprador class and the Brahmins. So “the insertion of India into colonialism is generally defined as a change from semi-feudalism into capitalist subjection” (Spivak 330).

When the political and economical conditions in Orissa are analysed, it is clear that the British rule came as a liberating force for many. The Indians welcomed the British rule to free themselves from their previous colonisers, the Brahmins, the Marathas and the Mughals. It became a metaphysical compulsion for the natives to await and to accept a better superior force. For instance, “The Brahmins once owned five hundred acres of land, which they had obtained through a copper-plate deed from the Maratha Subedar on the condition that they bless him three times a day” (79). From this it is true that the people of Orissa suffered at the hands of the Brahmins and the Marathas. The Brahmins without doing any physical work acquired a great deal of property by simply blessing the Maratha Subedar.

These varied social forms probably explain the rather heterogeneous nature of the merging polities of the mahajanapadas, the rulers’ powers strongly circumscribed by powerful aristocracies and by the rising pretensions of the brahmana priesthood already in control over large areas of lands. The king was called ‘the devourer of peasants’, since it was the peasants alone, and not the great land owners or the brahmanas, who paid him the levy in grain. (Habib 119 -120)

In the novel all these superior powers suppressed the poor peasants - Saria and Bhagia and ruined their life, which persists till date. This psychological and the physical impact of the superior forces were so great that Orissa finds it difficult to spread out its wings to fly high in economy. The poor weavers Bhagia and Saria lacked insight because education was denied to them. Only the upper class were permitted to study and this is evident from the Brahmin quarter. Pandit Sibū was a great scholar. “He could recite all the five chapters of the Amarkosha dictionary, without ever looking at the text. . . . Twice a day, the Brahmin children came and did their lessons on the pandit’s front verandah” (80). Erstwhile the people of Orissa suffered at the hands of the Brahmins and so they were enthusiastic about the liberating force of the Occidents.

The colonizers by their superior civilization shaped the lives of the indigenous people. Colonial experience initiated rethinking of the living traditions of the natives. “Official documents of the British government of India and traditions of imperial history – writing – always portrayed colonial rule as being beneficial to India and her people”(Schwartz 469). It is true that British rule brought in order to a chaotic society. It changed the life style of the orient. Colonialism fostered India and freed Indians from the traditional oppressive hierarchies but on the other hand it created new oppressive hierarchies. It favoured the minority and robbed the majority. The loopholes of the colonial rule were used as instruments by the comprador class to

overpower the majority. This is of pivotal focus in the play – Mangaraj taking advantage of the poor Saria and Bhagia.

Dash and Pattanaik says that the government jobs in Orissa were manned only by the Bengali comprador class. They sub-colonised the state by appropriating the zamindari estates in Orissa. This was especially at its hype after the declaration of the ‘Sunset Law’ by the British Raj. The administrative posts that were not handled by the British were assigned to the Bengalis since the Bengalis were fast to adopt the colonizers language. The Bengalis were appointed in jobs from local police constables to school teachers but the Oriyas were neglected.

The princely zamindaris were viewed as serious threats to the colonial state. So the British Raj strategically devised government policies to weaken them. One such tactics was the implementation of the sunset law. “The first of the colonial impositions was a series of experiments in Bengal, starting in 1772 when the East India Company took direct control of the land – revenue system” (Blue 71).

The East India Company imposed heavy land taxes on the landlords. The landlords found it very difficult to pay the revenues to their British rulers. When they failed in their payment, their zamindaris were auctioned. This system of auctioning the zamindaris is called the ‘Sunset Law’ because it was held at sunset. From 1804 to 1816, nearly fifty two percent of Oriya landlords disinherited their royal zamindaris. “Surely, for a colonial power, land and revenue were the prime pillars of its continuity and sustenance” (Doshi 77). Thus the colonial powers increased their political powers by exploiting the colonized.

Senapati skilfully portrays this colonial impact. Mangaraj acquires his zamindari by cheating Sheikh Dildar Mian. Dildar Mian’s father Ali Mian also acquired his zamindari by the same corrupt means. Ali Mian, an inspector in the Bengal police grows to the height of a landlord within a short period. During colonial rule the zamindaris of Orissa were auctioned to the Bengalis. “One time, while visiting that city in connection with a murder case, Mian Sahib made a bid for the zamindari of Fatepur Sarsandha, and was successful” (68). The colonial loopholes were so big that a Bengali ‘thana daroga’ was able to climb the throne of the zamindari.

The protagonist Mangaraj is also one like Ali Mian. Like a hunter catching birds in the net by strewing grains under it, Mangaraj trapped Sheikh Dildar Mian by lending money to him. Dildar Mian and his party were “resurrected at the sound of Mangaraj’s tinkling the coins” (75). Like Clive getting the Bengal Subedari from the emperor of Delhi, Mangraj got the zamindari of Fatepur Sarsandha from Dildar Mian. Senapati beautifully portrays the colonial realities.

Saria and Bhagia are also victims of the colonial rule. The title of the novel, *Six Acres and a Third* throws light on Mangaraj appropriating the land measuring six acres and a third from the couples Saria and Bhagia. Senapati gives a deep historical background of the colonial rule to highlight the story of Saria and Bhagia. These childless couples were weavers and their main source of income was from their cow named Neta. Also they had a piece of farm land which produced a rich harvest of rabana rice. They were quiet happy with what they had and lived in harmony. It was not fate but the superior forces of the colonial rule that hit them to death and madness.

Like much of India, colonial rule had a devastating impact on the economic and social life of the Oriya people. Numerous categories of craft workers, especially weavers and dyers were bankrupted and reduced to abject poverty. The peasantry suffered under the burden of back-breaking taxes and forced unpaid labour. (“The History of Orissa”)

Ramchandra Mangaraj, the protagonist was actually a farmer who rose to the height of a zamindar within a short span of time. After attaining this position he was still not satisfied. His eyes fell on Bhagia's fertile land. Mangaraj devises a plan with his concubine, Champa. With his social power he manipulates the loopholes of the colonial rule. He hires the village priest and uses him as a weapon to covet Bhagia's property. According to Mangaraj's instruction the priest in turn exploits the poor couples who lack insight because of inadequate education.

At midnight when the priest was performing the pooja, Mangaraj's barber "Jaga answered from inside the hole, 'Oh my daughter Saria . . . build me a temple. . . . If you disobey me I will wring Bhagia's neck and kill him. Saria and Bhagia were trembling all the while in fear; they were unable to utter a word" (159). Then Jaga came out of the hole and laughed. The couples were fooled by the superior forces and mortgaged their six acres and a third to Mangaraj.

A land mortgaged is never returned, that was the condition in the colonial system. Thrown into a desperate situation, Bhagia goes mad and Saria dies by refusing to take any food. Senapati casts light on minute details of the social life and the economic conditions of the underprivileged. The critical vision underlying *Six Acres and a Third* is social reality of the subalterns during the colonial rule. The novel is thus a culmination of history and elements of realism.

While Mangaraj's crime against Bhagia and Saria are real and are morally as well as legally culpable, there is a gentle reminder that even the peasant couple are not natural owners of the plot of land either. Bhagia inherits the land from his father, Gobinda Chandra, as he does the post of pramanika, or headman, of the community of the weavers in the village. (Mohanty 10)

Gobinda Chandra was a good man and he was highly respected by the villagers. Also he did not appropriate the plot by deceitful means but bought it with his hard earned money. "When the fortunes of the family of zamindar Bagha Singh began to decline (94), their properties were auctioned. This is because the colonial land policies imposed heavy amount of land taxes on the landlords. The zamindars were not able to collect rent from the peasants at the old rates in order to meet the revenue demand of the colonizer. They had no choice but to sell their properties to other bidders. So a number of zamindaris were mortgaged and auctioned. This was actually not "a transfer of capital from commerce to land" (Habib 303) but an indirect annexation of the colony by the colonizer.

It was at this time that Gobinda Chandra purchased the land measuring six acres and a third from Zamindar Bagha Singh. A fertile land always ends up in the hands of the village headman, because he does not allow others in the village to purchase such best and cheap land. It is the village headman who dominates and gets the best of all. The colonial dominance in *Six Acres and a Third* is still clearer. That is the indigenous elite is transformed into an ordinary man and a village pramanika becomes a bourgeois nationalist. These are the ingenious means by which the colonizer broke the power of the colonist.

At the end of the story, Mangaraj is punished by the court. The 'Judge Sahib' ordered to cease his zamindari and all his properties. Mangaraj's own lawyer, Ramram Lala who fought on behalf of him deceived Mangaraj. Ramram Lala's eye fell on Mangaraj's zamindari. He used the same colonial loopholes as Mangaraj handled.

Mangaraj's property was sold to Ramram Lala and there was a news in the village that the lawyer would come in procession with ten palanquins and take possession of Mangaraj's zamindari. Hearing this, the villagers commented "Oh, horse, what difference does it make to you if you are stolen by a thief? You do not get much to eat here; you will not get much to eat

there. No matter who becomes the next master, we will remain his slaves” (205-206). From this context it is visible that the disempowered were silenced in the past from their material and political values. The subalterns underwent a great struggle because of the traditional hierarchies and the colonial structure which undermined their rightful representation. Senapati painfully concludes that the labouring world remains the same. Their masters may change but their life style does not change. They have to be slaves throughout their lives from generation to generation. Orissa has not come out from the clutches of poverty and till date it remains as one of the poorest state in India.

Finally in the concluding chapter Senapati hints that a man reaps what he sows. Justice is delayed but not denied. Mangaraj rose to power due to British colonial rule and the same was the cause for his downfall. Toynbee remarks that bribery, corruption and forgery were all prevalent and deep rooted in courts and all the public offices during the British rule. The collector in 1818 stated that it was a regular practice for the zamindars to bribe and obtain the settlement papers and documents. They also forged title deeds and other legal documents.

Like post colonial India, colonial India was also under corruption. Senapati’s novel is a realistic portrayal of the colonial rule. He balances the two realities of Western Empire. The British colonial rule at one hand oppressed, enslaved and exploited but on the other hand it helped. Senapati says, “Today in the nineteenth century the sciences enjoy great prestige, for they form the basis of all progress. See, the British are white-skinned, whereas Oriyas are dark in complexion. This is because the former have studied the sciences, whereas the latter have no knowledge of these” (83).

British shaped India through their scientific inventions, form of government and enlightened many people. It was the missionaries who liberated the native people from their superstitious beliefs and provided education to the downtrodden natives. This is visible in the words of Senapati, “Ask a new babu his grandfather’s father’s name and he will hem and haw, but the names of the ancestors of England’s Charles the Third will readily roll off his tongue” (84). It is evident that the British colonial rule was truly helping India by educating the lowly and deprived society. The downtrodden, illiterate people now became ‘babus’ because they have mastered knowledge from their colonial masters. In other words the natives were assimilated to the colonizers’ culture. The narrator is highly ironic in his words in conveying the realities. Senapati’s every move in the novel is a critique of the colonial rule. Every minute detail mirrors the British colonial rule in India.

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