

Reading Characters: A Perspective on Early Oriya Fiction Jatindra**K. Nayak¹**

Modernity in the colonial context, it has been convincingly argued, was mediated through print culture. More than any other factor, the printed word has been responsible for a radical shift in colonial India. Exposure to the printed word had far-reaching consequences in a society dominated by orality and scribal production of texts. Print culture threatened to undermine existing hierarchies based on caste and religious prescriptions and the monopoly of knowledge that rested on the association of writing with certain forms of sanctity. Early responses to the arrival of print culture therefore help us understand in significant ways the nature of colonial modernity.

In my paper I shall focus on early responses to the printed word in the context of Orissa under colonial rule. I will pay particular attention to the role of what I would like to call “Reading Characters”, characters who engage in the act of reading the printed word in early Oriya fiction and the ways in which narrators respond to them. Before I do so I will dwell for a time on ways in which the printed word was received in Orissa in order to establish the context in which the printed book emerged in Orissa.

Autobiographies in Oriya are replete with hilarious accounts of early responses to the arrival of the printed book. Fakir Mohan Senapati tells us how Hindu children in Balasore would not go to study in schools run by Christian missionaries for fear of losing their caste by touching printed books. Barrister Biswanath Mishra had to go to a school which lay ten kilometers away from his village near Puri to conceal the fact that he was reading printed text-books. Brahmin students would not attend schools set up by Pandit Harihar Das for fear of losing caste. A school set up by Radhanath Ray in a

village near Puri was closed down for this reason. The reason for all this was that earliest printed books in Orissa happened to be Oriya translations of the Bible. The resistance to the printed book can therefore be easily understood. I shall refer to an interesting anecdote recounted in Nilakanth Das in his autobiography. When he was a high- school student, a friend of his dissuaded him from using paper and urged him to write on palm leaves instead. He asked him to undertake a simple experiment: Weigh a palm leaf, note its weight, write a few words on the palm leaf and weigh it again. You'd find that, Nilakanth's friend asserted, the palm leaf has grown heavier. The reason is that goddess Saraswati now sits on the palm leaf and adds her weight to it.

Instances of early resistance to printing can be multiplied. This resistance followed not only from a terror of conversion, or contact with Christianity but also from a fear of influence of unacceptable western ideas which printed books all too often conveyed in the early nineteenth century. There was another fear associated with the dissemination of the printed word: wrong kinds of writing reaching the masses and corrupting their taste. In other words, a growing suspicion of popular culture, forms of culture associated with lower orders of society, getting strengthened through the print culture. I'll return to the last, two points later in the course of my discussion. I shall now discuss shifts in the attitudes towards print culture which came to be discernible in the second half of the 19th century in Orissa.

As time passed, a western-educated middleclass in Orissa gradually overcame its resistance to the printed word and began discovering its many possibilities. A sense of menace associated with the printed book now gave way to a willingness to surrender to its magic. Particularly after the 1866 famine, printing ceased to be an activity dominated almost entirely by the missionaries and became an enterprise enthusiastically embraced by the native Oriya elite.

This dramatic shift in attitudes to print culture has been presented vividly in Fakir Mohan's autobiography. The day printing began in Balasore all the shops in the bazaar were closed. Zemindars came riding bullock carts to watch this magical event unfold. When the machine failed to produce a legible printed sheet, Fakir Mohan explained to the waiting crowd that they should not feel disappointed as the blotches of ink on the sheet of paper would in a day or two turn into words.

Very broadly speaking, early Oriya fiction embodies varying, conflicting and contradictory responses to modernity. Since this modernity is mediated through print culture it would be interesting to see how early Oriya fiction dramatized complex negotiations with this modernity. It is here that 'reading characters' prove particularly helpful. Now the question suggests itself: when did the first reading character make his or her appearance in Oriya fiction? I think it is in *Padmamali* published in 1888 that we first come across an attempt to define a character in terms of what she has read. The learned, garrulous narrator, feeling conscious that discerning readers might find the sixteen year old heroine unpleasantly precocious explains her precocity by reference the texts she has read:

Readers may feel surprised at such a reply from a sixteen-year old girl. In order to remove their doubts, I must therefore say a few things about Padmamali. She was the only child of Jagabandhu Pattnaik, who was quite well to do. ... Before she was ten, Padmamali had read a good number of books such as *Koyili*, *Gopibhasha*, *Rahasha*, and the *Bhagabata*. At the special request of Purushottaama Vidyaratna, the family priest of Jagabandhu Pattnaik, who had noticed the intelligence of Padmamali, her father had made her read many lyrics and plays and books such as *Kaumudi* and *Amara*. Besides these, she had also gone through classics like *Labanyabati*, *Rasa Kallola*, *Prema Sudhanidhi*, and *Vidagdha Chintamani*. Jagabandhu Pattnaik used to take pride in Padmamali's ability to understand and appreciate these literary texts. (Sarkar 27)

The other instance of a character reading a printed book we come across in *Chha Mana Athagunth* (Six

Acres and a Third), where in the trial scene, the British Judge spreads an English newspaper and reads it deliberately ignoring the natives assembled in the court. However, it is in his story “Rebati” that Fakir Mohan dramatizes the resistance to reading and articulates fears associated with literacy. The reference to a printed Oriya primer occurs in this story. Possibly this may be the first time one comes across an explicit reference to the printed book in Oriya fiction. Rebati’s grandmother holds Rebati’s learning to read responsible for all the misfortunes that overwhelm her son’s family. This association of literacy with death has never been fully or satisfactorily explained. Bipin Chandra Pal seeks to provide an explanation for this: child widows in zemindar families had to teach themselves reading, writing and how to keep accounts so that they could order the affairs of their estates. This led many to associate death and widowhood with literacy.

In Fakir Mohan’s *Mamu* there is an interesting reference to the printed book and the reference conceals the anxieties of the new educated middle classes about the consequences of the exposure to print culture. While describing the quarrel between a maidservant and a destitute old woman Fakir Mohan desists from repeating the obscenities they mouthed while engaging in a bitter fight. Suddenly the narrator turns to the readers and mentions printed books like *Natuchori* and the deleterious effect it might have on public taste:

It is a pity that the author feels totally unable to record the expressions used at the time of this quarrel. Some of these expressions may be found in books such as *Natu Chori* (The Theft of a Top), *Bhuta Keli* (Play of Ghosts), *Aai Natuni Rahasya* (Conversation between a Grandmother and Her Granddaughter), books which our printers have brought out to improve the condition of the Oriya language. But these books will not give us all the expressions. We hope other books will supply this deficiency. Our attempts to look these words up in dictionaries such as *Amara Kosha*, Madhusudan Rao’s *Dictionary* have proved wholly unsuccessful. We had at last to discontinue our search under these circumstances. (*The Maternal Uncle* 79)

However, it would be wrong to suppose that Fakir Mohan's response to print culture is always negative. In the same novel, an enlightened young zemindar reads 'books in English'⁴⁹ and collects information on the productivity of soil in other countries in an attempt to improve the economic condition of his tenants. The point I would like to make here is that the emergent middle-class in Orissa was not only scared of losing caste through contact with the printed word, it was equally worried about the democratization of culture that printing technology had brought about.

These anxieties lead the narrators in Fakir Mohan's fiction to distinguish between good reading material and the bad, between the influence of what they considered good books and that of destabilizing, corrupting texts. It is in this context Fakir Mohan's last novel *Prayaschita* assumes special significance. The central character in this novel marries the daughter of his father's enemy under the corrupting influence of his college friends, who quote Darwin's theory of natural selection to persuade him to marry an educated woman. In the course of the narrative the young man pays a terrible price for this act of defiance and rashness. But when he reflects upon his past deeds he blames the influence of western philosophical texts for the fate that overtakes him. He regrets his neglect of Hindu scriptures. In a letter to his doctor the hero of the novel writes:

True, although I had a lot of friends in Cuttack, only you gave me advice on the principles of religion. On occasions you got fed up with me and told me that atheists think they are omniscient and listen to no one's good advice. I used to laugh your words away at that time but now I have realized how right you were. I lost faith in god by reading a few philosophical texts in English. (342)

Here one can see a fictional character evaluating himself through his acts of reading, and his choice of texts. It is almost as if a character can be read in terms of what he chooses to read.

Characters as readers or reading characters make their appearances in Fakir Mohan's

celebrated short story “Patent Medicine”. In a way it presents in a synoptic form the plot of *Prayaschita*, but, unlike the novel, it has a happy ending. One of the chief characters in the story has been led astray by his exposure to English education. Modernity in this instance is equated with an amoral hedonism, an abdication of social responsibilities and an unbridled, irresponsible individualism. In the end, the errant husband is brought to his senses after receiving a thorough beating with a broomstick from his wife. The welcome changes in his character are now presented by the narrator in terms of the choice of the trading material he now goes through. The printed works quoted with approval by the narrator are the *Utkal Sahitya*, a magazine edited by a Brahmo and other journal’s associated intimately with the project of Oriya nationalism.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that responses to print culture embodied in early Oriya fiction enable us to glimpse the contours of an indigenous modernity negotiating a difficult path between the destabilizing influence of the west and the threats presented by a popular culture democratized to some extent by access to printed books. Early Oriya novelists, especially Fakir Mohan, sought to dramatize this negotiation by reading characters in terms of what they read.

Notes

1. The author teaches English at Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, and is a well-known and award-winning translator, critic and translation activist. He has published extensively both in India and abroad. He won the Hutch-Crossword English Fiction Translation Award in 1984.

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