

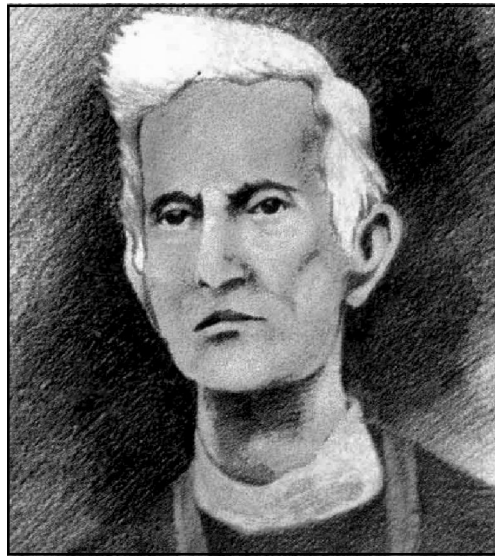
## Life and Times of Fakirmohan Senapati

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A versatile genius who wrote novels, short stories, poems, essays and school textbooks as well as translated a number of Sanskrit classics into Oriya, Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918) is an integral part of the cultural history of Orissa. His relentless struggle to assert a distinct Oriya identity in the face of the growing dominance of Bengali and western cultures and his immense contribution towards the shaping of modern Orissa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have turned him into a legendary hero of the Oriya race.

Fakir Mohan Senapati was born on 13 January 1843 in Mallikaspur of Balasore town. Forty years before he was born, the British colonized Orissa. About two decades before his birth, the Christian missionaries had already begun their proselytizing activities in Orissa. Thomas Macaulay's famous 'Minutes on Education,' seeking to form "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect," was endorsed by the British in 1835. The English Charity School,

established in Cuttack in 1823, was taken over by the East India Company in 1841. Thirteen years before Fakir Mohan was born, the Brahma Samaj was established and by the time of his birth, many eminent Bengalis such as Michel Madhusudan and Debendra Nath Tagore had joined this reformist Hindu organization. These were a few significant events that preceded Fakir Mohan's birth and he grew up in an environment shaped by these socio-political realities.



The Orissan Empire, which once upon a time constituted the vast land from the Ganga in the north to the Canveri in the south, was already disintegrated when the British occupied the state in 1803 and was reduced to the three districts of Cuttack, Puri and Balasore. The Oriya-speaking tracts were scattered over the Bengal Presidency, Madras Presidency and the Central Presidency. The Oriya race was reeling under the oppressive rule of the Moghuls and Marathas by the time the British took over Orissa from the Marathas in 1803. As L.S.S.O'Malley observed at that time in the Bengal

Gazetteers, "In justice to the Oriyas it should be remembered that for ages they have been a conquered nation, and that within the last few centuries they suffered first in the hands of the Moghuls and then of Maratha conquerors. From the end of the 17th century they were continually harried and oppressed, and miserable as their lot had been under the Moghuls, it was worse under the Marathas." But contrary to the expectations of the Oriyas, things turned even worse after the British occupation of Orissa. Many bureaucrats and ordinary citizens of Bengal turned rich overnight as they bought huge estates in Orissa in throwaway prices, taking advantage of the sunset law. Frequent changes in tenancy and land revenue laws led to socio-economic misery of the people that had caused the famous Paik rebellion against the British in 1817-1818. The worst consequence of the oppressive rule of the British was the great famine of 1866, known as Na'anka Durvikhya, so named because it happened in the ninth regnal year of the then Gajapati king of Puri. Thousands of people died of starvation. Fakir Mohan has given a vivid account of this famine in his *Atma Jivan Charita* (autobiography): "As many as three million people died in the space of one year. Nearly six million people became homeless....Husbands and wives, fathers and sons all were separated. They would go from house to house begging for alms. But who had a handful of rice to spare?" (English Trans: Jatindra K. Nayak & Prodeepta Das, *Story of My Life*. Bhubaneswar: Sateertha Publications, 1997, pp.25-26). The famine led to the migration of hundreds of poverty-stricken Oriyas to cities like Calcutta and Rangoon. Many Hindus converted themselves into Christianity because, as Fakir Mohan observes in his autobiography, they were not accepted by the Hindu society as they had been eating in the mercy camps organized by the British. Fakir Mohan was twenty-three at the time of this great famine.

The establishment of Calcutta University in 1857 opened up opportunities for the Bengalis to obtain the benefits of English education. These educated Bengalis were appointed as high placed government officials in Orissa and neighbouring provinces. They dominated all aspects of Orissa's life as doctors, professors, engineers, lawyers, bureaucrats and traders. The Oriya race had to face the agonizing experience of identity crisis. The conspiracy of the Bengalis to oust Oriya language and introduce Bengali as official language in Orissa can best be revealed by the report of a lecture by the famous Bengali scholar Rajendralal Mitra published in *Utkal Deepika* of 13 March 1869: "Whoever is a well-wisher of Utkal will try to substitute the language of Utkal with Bengali language, because as long as the language of Utkal is not abolished, the development of the state is impossible." There were strong protests from people of all walks of life in Orissa against the views expressed in the book *Udiya Swatantra Bhasa Noi* (Oriya is not a separate language) written by Kantilal Bhattacharya, a teacher of Puri Zila School. The two vociferous defenders of Oriya language at that time of identity crisis were Gouri Shankar Ray, Editor of *Utkal Deepika*, and Fakir Mohan Senapati of Balasore. Fakir Mohan's organized defence of the distinct status of Oriya language antagonized him to the Bengalis. As he recalls in his autobiography, "As a result of my public lectures, writing in the periodicals and my open criticism of these developments I became an arch enemy of the Bengali establishment. I aroused in them so much hatred that they would not mention me by name; instead they would refer to me as bastard ringleader" (*Story of my Life*, p.38). As a result of the tireless efforts of Fakir Mohan, the British government, on the recommendation of the Commissioner T.E. Ravenshaw, had to rescind its decision to withdraw Oriya language from the schools. With

the introduction of Oriya medium in the schools, there arose an urgent need for Oriya textbooks. Earlier, the missionaries had got a few Bengali textbooks translated into Oriya. Fakir Mohan himself wrote a few school textbooks in Oriya including a book on arithmetic, another on Oriya grammar and two volumes on Indian history that were published by the Balasore Utkal Press in 1869-1870.

Though Fakir Mohan's ancestors belonged to Cuttack district, his forefathers had shifted to Balasore where Fakir Mohan was born and brought up. He lost his father Laxman Charan and mother Tulsī Dei in his early childhood. His paternal grandmother, Kuchila Dei whom he called Thakurma, brought him up. Fakir Mohan, whose name was originally Braja Mohan, was an ailing child, and his grandmother took an oath that if he got cured of his illness on the blessings of a muslim pir for whose offerings the child would go begging as a Fakir (a muslim mendicant), she would name him as Fakir Mohan. He joined the village primary school, which was called Chatsali, at the age of nine and then moved on to a free Parsi school at Balasore, which had three Muslim teachers and an Oriya Pundit who taught how to write letters to the relatives and petitions for submission to the courts. As Fakir Mohan remembers those days in his autobiography, "No printed books other than the Bible were available in Oriya those days. The Mission Press at Cuttack was the only printing press in Orissa. The missionaries ran a school at Balasore, but only the Bible was taught there. No Hindu student went there for fear of 'losing caste' by reading printed books" (Story of My Life, p.10).

Fakir Mohan grew up in the face of dire poverty, and circumstances forced him to give up his studies to work as an apprentice in the sail-stitching business of his uncle. Those days,

Balasore was an important centre of shipping trade. As Fakir Mohan recounts, "About five to six hundred ships were at sea, seventy-five percent of these carrying salt, and the rest carrying cargo, to places such as Rangoon, Madras, Colombo and islands in the sea." (Story of My Life, p.11). Fakir Mohan was engaged to supervise the work of hundreds of tailors who were employed to stitch the sails, and in his spare time, he himself had to stitch some of them. When the shipyard was closed down, Fakir Mohan's uncle got him engaged in a salt-manufacturing unit. During that time Balasore thrived on the manufacture and marketing of salt. In the office of the salt unit where Fakir Mohan worked, Bengali, Parsi and Oriya languages were used. But this unit too was wound up soon.

In 1862, Fakir Mohan joined a school in a neighbouring village named Barabati where he topped the class at the end of the year and was promoted to the next higher class. But he had to leave the school after about five months because he could not afford to pay the paltry amount of four *annas* as school fees. Thus that was the end of his schooling. He mentions in his autobiography about the Oriya Pundit of the school who was "in the habit of explaining extremely simple statements in Oriya in terms of very difficult Sanskrit equivalents" (Story of My Life, p.14). Soon after leaving the school, he was appointed as a teacher in that same school in 1863 on a monthly salary of two and a half rupees which was raised to four rupees after two months. That year, Radhanath Ray who later turned out to be a pioneering modern poet of Orissa, passed the entrance examination, which he took at Calcutta. Since he was the first boy from Balasore to have passed the entrance examination, "the day the news reached the Balasore *cutcherry* it created a sensation. For the clerks it became a topic of conversation" (Story of My Life, p.16). In 1864,

Rev. A. Miller, the secretary of the Balasore Mission School, appointed Fakir Mohan as the headmaster on a monthly salary of ten rupees. Miller had to appoint Hindu teachers because Christian teachers were not available, though he believed that Hindus, the idol-worshippers, were incarnations of devil, liars and wicked. In meetings in public places, he would speak of Lord Jagannath as a mere piece of wood and declare that by worshipping him, one would go to hell. Whoever protested was lashed out with a whip. During the eight years of his tenure as headmaster of Barabati School, Fakir Mohan had many encounters with British missionaries and bureaucrats, but the most memorable one was with John Beams about whom he writes in his autobiography, "All my worldly prosperity I owe only to John Beams. I shall remember his holy name to my dying day. He used to tell everyone that I was a patriot and I would contribute a lot to the country" (Story of My Life, p.23). Beams was a learned man who knew eleven languages and was liked by both the Englishmen and the natives. At that time he was engaged in writing a book entitled Comparative Grammar of Indian Languages and Fakir Mohan assisted him in the compilation of this book. During his tenure as headmaster of Balasore Mission School, Fakir Mohan worked for the spread of women's education and for the preservation and development of Oriya language and literature. During this time he came in contact with two other illustrious sons of Orissa: Radhanath Ray, a native of Balasore and Madhusudan Das, who was then a teacher in Balasore Zila School.

Fakir Mohan married Leelavati Devi in 1856 when he was only thirteen. She died when he was twenty-nine. About Leelavati, Fakir Mohan says, "She was cruel, conceited and was always opposed to me... The bitterness of my domestic life gave me more pain than my childhood

illness." (Story of My Life, p.41). In summer 1871, he again married Krushna Kumari Dei about whom he says, "It seemed as if God had sent me Krushna Kumari to relieve me of all my miseries and bring me happiness and prosperity. She was endowed with truthfulness, loyalty to her husband, and all virtues. She felt it her uppermost duty to take loving care of me and respect every wish of mine. She was only eleven at the time of our marriage. When she died in 1894 leaving behind a son and a daughter, my life became empty" (Story of My Life, p.41).

During his tenure as headmaster in the Balasore Mission School, Fakir Mohan and five other friends including the poet Radhanath Ray founded an association for the development of Oriya literature and in 1868, with Fakir Mohan's initiative, a printing press named P.M. Senapati & Co Utkal Press was set up at Balasore. Earlier in 1837, the Mission Press at Cuttack had been set up and in 1866, the Cuttack Printing Company had been established. Initially, Fakir Mohan bought an almost defunct machine from the missionaries of Midnapur and later replaced it with a Super Royal Albino printing machine brought from Calcutta. The press ran smoothly and the executive of the company decided to bring out a fortnightly. "It would be called Bodhadaini eban Balasore Sambad Bahika," Fakir Mohan writes in his autobiography, "the former part would be literary and the latter would carry news" (Story of My Life, p.34). Earlier in 1866, the Cuttack Printing Company brought out Utkal Deepika, a literary magazine. The magazine from Fakir Mohan's press could not continue for long because contributors were hard to find and Fakir Mohan could hardly afford enough time to look after his job, the press and the magazine. The establishment of a printing press was however an exciting event in and around Balasore. As Fakir Mohan remembers in his autobiography, "People

from afar kept coming for two or three months to see the printing as if it was as exciting as the Car Festival. Zamindars came in palanquins from remote villages to see our press" (Story of my Life, p.33). The press also won appreciation from the Commissioner Ravenshaw Sahib and the Collector Bignold Sahib.

In 1871, Fakir Mohan joined as Dewan of the princely state of Nilgiri on the recommendation of John Beams, the Collector of Balasore and thus embarked on a long career of about twenty-five years as an administrator in different places. On Fakir Mohan's performance in the post of Dewan, John Beams commented, "The Mission School was conducted by one of the best specimens of an Oriah I have ever seen, Baboo Fakeer Mohan Senapaty. He has, however, left it for the better post of dewan to the Rajah of Neelghery, in which capacity I am glad to see he is carrying out improvements introducing those principles of honesty and justice which he has imbibed from the teachings of Mr. Smith" (General Administrative Report, Orissa Division, 1872). During his service in Nilgiri, Fakir Mohan introduced a number of welfare measures such as construction of a road, setting up of a market and a Sanskrit school. But in 1875, following a mass rising against the king and because of the king's displeasure for disagreeing with him on the question of succession to the throne, Fakir Mohan resigned. After a brief spell as auditor in the Collectorate at Cuttack, he joined as dewan of Dompara state in 1876. The state was plagued by a mass rebellion against the king on the issue of tax on the lands and the king had almost left the state and lived in Cuttack and Calcutta. Fakir Mohan was able to bring about a compromise between the king and the people. After an eventful tenure of about one year, he was appointed as assistant manager of the Dhenkanal state in 1876. The king of Dompara was reluctant to relieve him,

but the commissioner did not relent. On the eve of his leaving Dompara, the king presented five thousand rupees to enable him to construct a house in Cuttack. The king also presented him with a special inkpot about which he wrote many years later, "The special inkpot is still with me and will remain with me till the last day. I am using the very inkpot now. All my poems and novels have been written with the ink from this inkpot" (Story of My Life, p.62).

In 1877, Fakir Mohan joined as assistant manager of Dhenkanal state. As he confesses in his autobiography, "While in Dompara I was successful in everything, in Dhenkanal just the reverse happened" (Story of My Life, p.63). With transfer of Beams Sahib from Orissa, those who were jealous of his intimacy with him hounded him. The manager of the Dhenkanal state fabricated false charges against him and many anonymous letters were sent to the commissioner accusing him of bribery. Fakir Mohan resigned his job at Dhenkanal in 1883. He was taken ill while at Dhenkanal and he recovered slowly by the time he joined as dewan of Daspalla state in 1884. By that time he had completed translating the seven cantos of the Ramayan and had started translating the Mahabharata, which was completed in 1902. Fakir Mohan left Daspalla in 1886 and worked in the Pallahada state for about a year before he joined as manager of the Keonjhar state where he had the terrible experience of being held captive by the rebel Bhuiyan tribes. Fakir Mohan left Keonjhar in 1892 and joined for the second time as dewan of Dompara in 1894. During this second spell of service at Dompara, his wife Krushna Kumari passed away. He was forced to give up his job at Dompara in 1896 following grave charges of financial irregularity against him.

The most creative and eventful phase of Fakir Mohan's life began after he settled down at Cuttack in 1896. He wrote most of his last poems

during 1896-1905, published a translation of the Upanishads and Rebati, the first story in Oriya language. He wrote two of his four novels-Cha Mana Atha Guntha and Lachama-during this period. In 1898, Fakir Mohan attended the Madras convention of the Indian National Congress as well as the monotheist convention of the Brahma Samaj as a delegate from Balasore. During his stay at Cuttack, he had developed an intimate relationship with two of his contemporary literary luminaries: Radhanath Ray and Madhusudan Rao. In 1905, Fakir Mohan returned to his native house at Mallikaspur of Balasore and lived there for the rest of his life. Though he spent a substantial part of his life in various places for earning his livelihood, he always felt nostalgic about his native place. After he returned to Mallikaspur, he set up a beautiful garden and called it Shantikanan. Fakir Mohan spent the last years of his life in utter loneliness with no close relative to look after him while he suffered from acute physical pain and ailments of various sorts. During this last phase of his life, he wrote most of his short stories, the last two of his four novels, Mamu and Prayaschita, and a long poem entitled Boudhavatara. He completed writing his autobiography, Atma Jivan Charita, in 1918 and it was published posthumously in 1927. This is not only the first Oriya autobiography, but also a faithful document of the social and cultural ethos of his time. In 1916, Suratarangini Saraswat Samiti of Bamanda honoured Fakir Mohan with the title Saraswati. During the last days of his life, Nandakishore Bal, the renowned poet, who was posted as headmaster of Balasore Zila School,

stayed in his house for a few days and such eminent Oriyas as Utkal Gourav Madhusudan Das, Pandit Nilakantha Das and Pandit Godavarish Mishra met him at his residence.

In 1917, Fakir Mohan presided over the annual conference of Utkal Sammilani, which was set up to fight for the unification of all Oriya speaking tracts into a separate province of Orissa. In that same year he presided over the annual conference of Utkal Sahitya Samaj at Cuttack, and spent three days in the company of teachers and students in the Satyavadi Vana Vidyalaya founded by Utkalmani Gopabandhu Das. Earlier, towards the end of 1915, as Fakir Mohan recalls, "Gopabandhu Das, who was a member of the Bihar-Orissa Council, spent two days with me on his way home from Calcutta. When he was about to take leave, I noticed that he stood still, looking at me, tears rolling down his cheeks. He collected himself moments later and said, 'After two days here, I can see that you are very weak, helpless and lonely'" (Story of My Life, p.122). Fakir Mohan breathed his last on 14 June 1918 after a prolonged illness. There was no close relative beside him at the time of his death. It is said that the pallbearers performed the funeral rites. Even the place of his cremation was not known until one of his contemporaries identified it in 1983.

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