

Caste, Class and Gender: The Subalterns in Senapati's *Six Acres and a Third*

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Abstract:

The novel presents a plethora of social evils and conniving accounts of corruption, conspiracy and exploitation. It is about life in the Oriya village of Gobindapur, dominated by the exploitative zamindar, Ramachandra Mangaraj. He rises from a very humble background to become one of the richest landlords of Cuttack. Having received only two acres of land in the beginning, he succeeds in acquiring as much as eighty-six acres. *Six Acres and a Third* presents different subjects as subalterns placed at different levels in the social hierarchy. In this paper I would attempt to study the novel from the prism of the downtrodden, the suppressed and the exploited—the subalterns.

Keywords: Zamindari system, Subalterns, Gar/bahir, Brahminical patriarchy, Madi.

The novel is an astute social commentary on the nineteenth century Orissa in particular and the whole British Raj in general. It highlights the predicaments of adopting foreign land-tenure laws, the Zamindari system, the relationship between people of different castes, the corruption involved in the judicial process, the hegemonic imposition of English on an Oriya-speaking society, the creation of a class of English-educated middle class Oriya "babus". The Britishers tried to tamper with the centuries old belief of Indians regarding material wealth and through their administrative interventions imposed new concepts:

Senapati's *Six Acres and a Third* is a critique of the transfer of western legal concepts to India, which till then did not consider land as a negotiable asset. In Odisha under the colonial government land, like many other things, became a marketable commodity. (Das 21)

Among the three major land tenure system in colonial India, the landlord system (zamindari) introduced in 1793 was the first one.

Under this revenue pattern, feudal lords (zamindars) were declared as proprietors of land on the condition of fixed revenue payments to the East India Company (Blyn, 1966). Henceforth, the zamindars were handed absolute rights over the land, thus making the peasants their tenants who had no rights over the land they cultivated. (Meena 68)

At many occasions the poor peasants and the tenants had also to work in the houses of zamindars as farmhands without any return (*Begar*). Thus after independence, amongst the many urgent remedial measures, the abolition of such system was the first one. Therefore many steps were taken to undo the exploitative policies of the Britishers. Thus:

The zamindari system or the landlord-tenant system that prevailed in Orissa and other states, introduced by Lord Cornwall in 1793, was abolished in 1952 by an act of legislation in all the states of India, with U.P leading the way. The landlord can no longer be a mere provider of land getting a pre-determined share of the produce. (Jagannathan 11)

The subject position from which Senapati deals with the many problems rampant in his times and his attempt to lent agency of speech and representation to the disposed and underprivileged, is discernible in this novel.

Senapati who also worked in the colonial administration used an innovative approach in his writing. . . . The English educated post-colonial Indian would perhaps read this not merely as a literary text, but also because it gives voices to those from below, as a historical document. In that sense, it is also a subaltern text. (Kumar 4125).

In *Six Acres and a Third*, there are exploiters at every level, some foreigners and some Indian with different appetite for corruption and appropriation. RamachandraMangaraj is one such demon, as on one hand he is completely engrossed in the vices of greed, lust, theft; whereas on the other he is the heartless exploiter of the downtrodden and the underprivileged. In the very first chapter we get a glimpse of his cunningness. He usurps the property of Shyam Malla, his cousin, on the false pretext of repaying for the ritual of

expiation. Shyam, had to forcefully sell his fifteen acres of rent free ancestral property at a meagre price of two rupees per acre.

Mangaraj's victims(both men and women), in the novel, are compared to birds that must seek protection from the larger and more powerful predatory birds. The narrator tells us that the maid servants in the household flocked to Mangaraj's house "Like birds . . . seeking shelter in large tree" (54). And the zamindar thinks aloud, "Come, sweet birdies, step into my trap" (76), referring to labourers from other villages as small birds as he plans to usurp their property. These poor labourers are exploited without any benefit in return, as they, to people like Mangaraj are cheap commodities, goods to be used and discarded thereafter.

A close reading will, in fact, show allusions floating in at regular intervals in the novel to various forms of exploitative labour. We hear of the "free labour" extracted from the bonded labourers under the feudal social arrangement of Dewan Ganga Prasad Singh (chapter 2, p 43) and of bonded labour supplied by the lowly farmhands who work the fields of Mangaraj (chapter 12, p 101). . . . Like Darwin reading the social pecking order into the natural world, Senapati's wily narrator sees the exploitative structure replicated in the avian world (comparison of *kaduakhumpi* birds with gotipuas, of cranes with lowly farmhands). (Mohapatra 66)

At the heart of the novel is a crime: the appropriation of the landed property of a weaver couple named Saria and Bhagia and then their forced displacement. Mangaraj's devious plans do succeed temporarily, but soon his deeds return to haunt him which begins with the death of Saantania it heralds days of destruction and loss for him. In the dichotomy of the spiritual and the material, she represents the spiritual, thus her death brings disruption in the life of Mangaraj. This dichotomy is very beautifully explained by Partha Chattejee:

Applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day-to-day living separates the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain

unaffected by the profane activities of the material world—and woman is its representation. And so one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*. (120)

For harmony in the *bahir*, things in the *ghar* should be peaceful and free of tension. Hence the death of Saantani points otherwise, thus very rightly the villagers, on her death watching the cruel and inhuman landlord cry says, “Mangaraj’s days of prosperity are now over; from now on, his fortunes will decline (143).” As anticipated, soon after his wife’s demise he falls spectacularly from grace and loses his wealth.

Six Acres and a Third, display a whole variety of classes, a long list of a bureaucratic hierarchy, the eternally “unaccounted for” section of society, namely the untouchables, the lower classes and the gendered subaltern—the women and all of them comes under the wrathful and scavenging designs of Mangaraj. For him, these underprivileged classes and their properties are easy targets. In the novel many instances of subjugation and exploitation of the lower castes especially the untouchables and women (like Saantani and Saria) are present. Mangaraj in his mad rush and superlative greed for wealth, leaves no one unexploited. When faced with the shortage of seedlings for his one and a half acres of land, he doesn’t even think twice before robbing Shyam Gochhaita, a Bauri untouchable of his seedlings. He asks:

“Are you a fool, Shyama? . . . What kind of farmer are you? Why have you planted the seedlings so close together? There’s no room for them to breathe. You must thin out at least half of them.” . . . Shyam was trembling with fear. With his hands joined, he said, “Master, I plant my field like this every year. So does everyone else.”

[Mangaraj] turned to Gobinda, “Gobinda, dear boy, go and show him how it’s done.”

No sooner had these words been uttered than Gobinda and Pandia stripped the plot of half its seedlings, all this while Shyam kept howling and groveling at Mangaraj’s feet. . . [after that] he proceeded toward his unplanted acre and a half, followed by his farmhands carrying two loads of seedlings. (Senapati, *Six Acres* 50-51)

At one level, the novel it is the story of exploitation, hierarchy, oppression of Orissa's subordinate position and the progressive neglect of its culture and language under the colonial scheme of things. Yet at a different level, the narrator digresses many times to explain the many shortcomings in the Indian social order, namely the prejudices, the hypocrisies and the divisions. Discussing the history of the division pertinent to Indian society, Uma Chakravarti says:

The process of caste, class and gender stratification, the three elements in the establishment of the social order in India shaping the formation of brahminical patriarchy, took a considerable period of time to evolve into its complex structure. (580)

As we already know that caste and gender hierarchy are the organising principles of the Brahminical social order and yet, despite their interconnections a study of the relationship between the two was never attempted. Susan Bayly expatiates on the necessity and politics behind the caste system:

Caste as a 'system' was held to designate these people too as permanently unclean and impure by virtue of the defiling labour which they performed, not as free labourers, but as providers of obligatory service to landed proprietors. (193)

This division in the social structure has a very long history. Interestingly from a Marxist point of view the caste and class division can be interpreted from the material-production point of view.

Most [Marxist] have argued that caste is a feature of the superstructure of Indian society and ought to be understood in terms of its efficiency as an ideological system which reflects the basic structure of material (i.e. productive) relations, the latter of course being characterised in terms of class relations. Others have suggested that caste is in fact the specifically Indian form of material relations at the base, with its own historical dynamics; caste, in other words, is the form in which classes appear in Indian society. (Chatterjee 09)

Senapati very shrewdly uses the narrator as his mouthpiece to direct his criticism at the injustices prevalent in the society. There are myriad unequivocal statements in the novel criticising the way caste, the division into classes and the legal system benefited only the rich or the dishonest like Mangaraj. Referring to this disparity the narrator remarks:

Under this system, the clever and the rich gets 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. (Senapati, *Six Acres* 85)

The castes and the lower classes are exploited, their land appropriated and all they can do is to witness the horror unfold in front of their eyes and then unable to bear the loss, go mad or get killed. Bhagia Chandra and his wife Saria, the weaver couple exactly do so. Their six acres of land, come under Mangaraj's notice and he with his conniving partner (Champa) makes it sure that the couple is deprived of their ancestral property. Mangaraj's methods are full proof and he traps his victims into the vicious circle of debt and mortgage compelling them finally to surrender their property. Champa in agreement with the planning done with Mangaraj, very easily motivates Saria to bring Bhagia, her husband, at Mangaraj's Khacheri. The narrator tells us about their meeting:

Behind the banyan and the aswatha trees, sat two women, huddled together, talking about something. . . It was a meeting of opposites: a wily, wicked she-jackal, and a simple, innocent ewe. The former poured forth a stream of words, her jewelled nose turned up, her watchful face poised like a snake's hood. The latter had a pitcher placed near her. . . . She kept staring at the former like a ewe stunned by some terrible sound. (111)

Saria cannot fathom the hideous motives behind Champa's plan and unable to resist the maternal cravings for a child, meekly agrees. She very hesitatingly asks, "Whatever shall I do?" and continues "People say that once land is mortgaged to the zamindar it never returns to its owner (116)." Champa rubbishes Saria's apprehensions and says:

Don't think anyone is going to snatch your land away; it will be exactly where it has always been. The only difference is that there will be some

writing on a piece of paper. Once the temple is built, you will be so rich that you yourself will give loans to other people. (114)

Very soon we witness horrendous crimes committed by the zamindar and his concubine. They not only bereft the poor couple of their land but even destroys their house. By doing this, they very tactfully remove all the obstacles in their way and leave no option for the couple to redeem. Another motive behind the crime is the cow, Neta. Discussing the multitudes of benefits from Neta, the narrator tells us:

We do not know how much milk Neta produced daily. But the other day she was the topic of discussion in Mangaraj's durbar. Everyone present agreed with one villager's estimate that Neta produced no fewer than five seers of milk a day. Mangaraj heaved a deep sigh and thought aloud, "What! That wretched weaver owns such a wonderful cow!" (93-94)

Mangaraj unsatisfied with the loot, wants to suppress any resistance against him. Thus using his connections and familiarity with the legal system he entraps Bhagia into a legal battle and ensures with cunning felicity that he is never able to repay the loan. And in relation to Saria, who is terrified and shell-shocked to find herself departed from Bhagia, Neta and the home at one go; Mangaraj very mercilessly decides to kill her. We in the police inquiry of the crime, get to know the shocking manner in which he killed Saria.

Eight days ago, Ramachandra Mangaraj brought her here and hit her. He used this bamboo lathi (the witness held up a lathi). I saw Mangaraj hitting her at midnight on the twelfth day of this fortnight. He gave her twenty blows on her back. (165)

Mangaraj on asking by Champa about the couple, replies, "Which couple? Oh, you mean Bhagia and Saria? They havenowhere to go, and now they wander from door to door like unappeasedghosts" (122). Later during the investigation we find Bhagia in a very dilapidated and destitute condition.

Suddenly a madman appeared, a rag tied round his waist, his hair disheveled, and dust covering his body. In his hands, he held a drum. He broke into a wild sort of dance, shouting, "Saria, Saria!" The villagers were moved to pity, and

lamented, “Oh,Bhagia! Was this fate written on your forehead?” When themadman caught sight of Mangaraj, he lunged at him to bite him. (167-68)

Senapati’s overall critique of the unjust social system includes women among its victims and his vision for economic and social reforms empowers both women and men. In such a corrupted society and for a person like Mangaraj, how can women be spared. They either have to become partners in his crimes like Champa or stay as silent spectators and bear all atrocities without a word. Thus only cunning and cruel woman exists in his world, for pious souls like Saantani there is no place as such.

The idea of power and ownership of property is basic to the narrative framework of Senapati’s novel but in relation to Saantani it brings the question of equality and companionship. Mangaraj does have a wife (Saantani) but is not even acknowledged or treated as such. She is more like the unaccounted farmhands and the many child widows in his gigantic family. She is not even properly named but a very general code of ‘Saantani’ is issued to her, which could mean many things at many levels. At one level it means the equal and the partner of the Saant—Mangaraj, yet at another level it altogether means a progenitor or a producer of offsprings. Saantani like Champa does have strength but of a different type altogether.

[Her] strength is of the more traditionally feminine kind. She has inner strength and goodness, the kind necessary to withstand suffering and to deny herself for others. . . [she] restrains herself even when she is alone. She is also shown to be generous to a fault. . . Rather than fight her husband openly, the Saantani protests by not speaking. (Horan 4791)

She lives a marginalised and subservient life. The power and prestige Mangaraj enjoys are not available to her. Instead, a concubine matters a lot for the success of the conspiracies hatched by Mangaraj. For Saantani bearing all the trouble, helping everyone and to accept whatever comes her way is a part of her life, sanctioned by fate. She in these qualities, resembles *Phaniyamma*. The silence and forbearance with which she bears all, the super ready element to help the destitute and the sacrifice of her desires, are qualities addressed to her and having lived a simple and decent life, she like *Phaniyamma* dies a silent

death. In the chapter “Saantani” we get such a character sketch, that making connections of her with Phaniyamma is inevitable.

If anyone said anything harsh to her she remained quiet. . . . She never entered into quarrels with anyone, she never discussed anything with anyone, she hardly ever talked. . . . She always took care of the poor, the old, orphans, and widows. If she learned that someone had no food at home, she should secretly send them a measure of rice, some lentils, a little salt, oil, a slice of pumpkin, a few lady fingers, and so on. . . . It is said that many debtors and poor tenants escaped Mangaraj’s wrath thanks to her kindness She would suffer Mangaraj’s anger and abuse because she had come to their rescue. (144-45)

Phaniyamma spent a whole life without any reaction to the cultural and traditional atrocities; she lived a life of *Madi* and died as such. Similarly, Saantani here is devoid of any agency of speech and role to play in the highly corrupted and decaying world of Mangaraj. Her unquestionable conjugal loyalty in comparison to her husband’s illegitimate liberties is an example in itself.

Whenever the subject of devotion to one’s husband came up in the village, everyone would mention Saantani’s loyalty to Mangaraj. Her character was noble, and she was pious by nature. (143-44)

All these qualities are the male constructs, to control the rights and sexuality of the women. Women like Saantani and *Phaniyamma*, by living and silently accepting such constructs, attain an image of sainthood and thus exemplify as Devi-like Hindu woman.

Much attention has been focused in recent years on the ideological control upon women through the idealisation of chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest duty of women, reinforced through custom and ritual, and through constructions of notions of womanhood which epitomise wifely fidelity as in the case of Sita, Savitri, Anasuya, and Arundhati. (Chakravarti 583)

These qualities and wifely devotion are not even required in Mangaraj’s world. For him only an exploiter and usurper of property counts; someone who could assist him in exploiting the lower classes without moral judgement. For Saantani in return of her devotion and selflessness, she gets only reproach.

She leads a life of suffering and . . . represents an Indian ideal that casts women solely as wives and mothers who should emulate the honour and purity of goddesses. I would argue that this ideal is oppressive to any woman who does not fit this mould, and women should not have to lead lives of suffering and self-denial in order to be mourned at their death. (Haron 4791)

For Mangaraj, her existence is itself a question, as he enjoys the company of Champa. Saantani unmindful of her predicaments, continues to fight for the cause of others. She assumes saving the unfortunate lots from his grip, her duty. Thus when Saantani understands the case of the weaver couple, she does all she can to save them from such a formidable fate but fails due to the apathy of Mangaraj.

She ate nothing at night; she took nothing during the day, either. She wept all the time. She flung herself at Saant's feet, entreating him to give Saria back her land. Saant took no notice of her appeal. (Senapati, *Six Acres* 161)

Totally neglecting his legally wed wife, Mangaraj places Champa at the centre of affairs, while Saantani lingers at the periphery. Mangaraj and Champa enjoy many private moments together within the house and Saantani is a distraction, a digression in their communion.

We do know that they were looking at each other intently totally absorbed in their conversation, when the shadow of a woman fell between them. Startled, they looked up and noticed a silent figure. They suddenly fell quiet. The woman heaved a deep sigh, such as one lets out when a deep sorrow burdens the soul. No one uttered a word, or stirred; they were like wooden statues. Everything seemed still. (123)

In comparison to Saantani, the concubine, the scary and viscous partner of Mangaraj—Champa, has more authority and power in the house. She is the closest confidant and the flawless executor of his wily designs. The duo makes a complete circle, they are a team in the lookout for the weak and the vulnerable. In the chapter named 'Champa' the first words used to describe her appearance are words like "authority" and "power" (55).

All that can be said is that Champa wielded a great deal of authority in Mangaraj's household, while his wife's presence was hardly felt there at all.

Farmhands, laborers, the clerks in Mangaraj's office—everyone recognized Champa's power. (55)

After momentary prosperity and flow of wealth, soon Mangaraj is caught in the web of the police inquiry. He loses his zamindari and everything else and dies a pathetic death after being beaten in the prison. Similarly, Champa is murdered by her own accomplice. The response of the villagers to the news of persecution of Mangaraj and the transfer of his zamindari to the lawyer Ram RamLala, is not an exciting one. They as subalterns are forever to face the exploitation of merciless landlords and zamindars, thus on the change of the master, the villagers lament:

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. We must look after our own interests. (205-206).

Commenting about the reaction of the villagers, Jennifer Vargas remarks:

Importantly, this searing subaltern moral judgement, which gives the closing tone to *Six Acres and a Third*, is spoken not by one person in particular but by “the people of the village [who] reminded one another” of their cyclical plight of poverty ([*Six Acres*]p 205). Functioning as an epistemic collective, the village generates insight, insight mined by the narrator who uses their knowledge to put pressure on colonialist powers. (57)

In conclusion, answering Spivak's, Can the subaltern speak (?) is not easy in the context of this novel. First and foremost, these subalterns are not even given the agency of speech and the opportunity to represent their case. Secondly, even if they manage to speak out for their rights, they are not listened but are oppressively silenced. Even the voice they exercise, is choked, fragmented and doesn't make complete sense, like ‘My six acres and a third, my six acres anda third, my Neta, my Neta, (160).’ Thus, it can be said that there is no subaltern but ‘subalterns’ in *Six Acres and a Third*, they are of various kind and colours suffering from different forms of exploitation. Representative samples and tale of suffering and pain from all the dispossessed and exploited strata of the society are brought into question and presented for the scrutiny of the readers. The novel very poignantly raises the

issues of caste, class and gender in the Oriya society under the partial and exploitative British rule.

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