

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

14 Years of Open Access

Vol. 14 Issue-III June 2023

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Historical Short Story and Early Odia Fiction: A Study of Dayanidhi Mishra's Writings

Dr Prasenjit Sinha

Lecturer in English,
Govt. Women's College,
Sambalpur, Odisha.

Article History: Submitted-28/04/2023, Revised-26/06/2023, Accepted-27/06/2023, Published-30/06/2023.

Abstract:

This paper highlights a less-discussed author of the pre-independent era i.e. Dayanidhi Mishra. He was one among the few authors who contributed the most to the Odia fiction after Fakir Mohan Senapati during the early phase of modern Odia literature. His acceptance as historical fictionist has been established since long. But at present, he is a lesser known author and is rarely discussed in the academic and public sphere. Hence it is necessary to bring him into scholarly discourse and this paper is an attempt in this regard. His five historical short stories namely *Milana*, *Shanti*, *Aruna*, *Rupara Mulya* and *Pradeepa Nirbana* have secured him a significant place in the history of Odia literature. Both from aesthetic point of view and technical perfection all these stories can be categorized as the epitome of literary excellence and the author can definitely be addressed as the pioneer of historical short story writing in Odia literary history. Different critics of Odia literature have opined the same regarding Mishra, yet much more research need to be done in this direction. Including these stories in syllabus, conducting seminars on these, and translating them into English can revive such timeless creations and can make them available for new and wider range of readers, scholars and critics.

Keywords: Dayanidhi Mishra, Odia literature, history, short story.

A short story is generally regarded as a piece of fiction that can be read in one sitting. It basically focuses on a self-contained incident or series of linked incidents, with the intent of evoking a single effect or mood. To quote Badri Prasad, "The short story is not merely a greatly shortened novel. It sources, of course, the usual constituent of all fiction – plot, character and setting – but they cannot be treated with the same detail as in a novel. Each has to be reduced to

the minimum in the interest of the impression they are together intended to convey.” (164) The modern short story as a literary genre developed in the early 19th century in Europe and gained popularity in India during the colonial era. Modern short story writing in Odia started with the publication of *Rebati* in 1898. Fakir Mohan Senapati, its author, is thus regarded as the father of Odia short story. Moreover, his *Lachhamania* could have been the first ever Odia short story, but due to its unavailability *Rebati* possesses the credit. Moreover, prior to Dayanidhi Mishra – a significant author and the focus of this article, no definitive historical short story in Odia was available. Senapati's *Kamala Prasada Gorapa* and *Kalika Prasada Gorapa* are based on the incidents of history, but from literary point of view they don't exactly fall into the category of short story. Thus Dayanidhi Mishra can be regarded as the pioneer of historical short story writing in Odia. Celebrated Odia novelist, short story writer and literary critic Surendra Mohanty has remarked:

In the decade following Fakir Mohan, Chandrasekhar Nanda; the creator of *Chitra*, Dayanidhi Mishra, Divyasingh Panigrahi, Lakhshmikant Mohapatra and Reba Ray etc. had kept the fading flow of short story alive...Dayanidhi Mishra's stories are historical and social in nature. These stories were included in *Katha Kadamba*. (232) (My Translation)

Total five historical short stories of Mishra have been found till date; all available in *Dayanidhi Kathasamagra* – namely *Milana*, *Shanti*, *Aruna*, *Rupa Ra Mulya*, *Pradeepa Nirvana*. These stories are divided into many sections. Few short stories of Fakir Mohan Senapati too have such divisions. These stories express the courage of the creator in reflecting free thought and patriotism during the peak of colonial rule in India. Mishra's historical short stories are based on Sambalpur and its glorious past. He himself hailed from Sambalpur and wholeheartedly tried to give Sambalpur its due in the literary history of Odisha. He can be regarded as one of the foremost as well as most successful writer in doing so. During a period Gangadhar Meher represented Western Odisha in Odia literature through poetry and Dayanidhi Mishra represented it through fiction. Gangadhar Meher got his due place in both literary and public sphere of the state and Dayanidhi Mishra has been almost forgotten due to lack of efforts by researchers. To quote Kumud Ranjan Panigrahi, “The setting of few stories by Dayanidhi has been big cities like Cuttack and Calcutta, but the base of them has been Sambalpur. The place for historical stories

has always been Sambalpur. No other writer of that era has described so lively his own place with so much devotion.” (96) (My Translation)

Milana (The Union) was first published in Utkala Sahitya – the then most popular Odia magazine, in 1914 with the pseudo name ‘Shree’ and it was later included in *Dayanidhi Kathasamagra*. It tells the story of Kudopali war and the glory of Veer Surendra Sai. The story, for some reason was not included in the *Katha Kadamba*’s first two editions and later it was placed in the enlarged third edition in 1972. Then it was included in the *Dayanidhi Katha Samagra* in 1991. Due to the title it seems to be a pure love story that literally means union, but actually it is a historical romance. Another interesting and engaging aspect about this story is highlighted by Kumud Ranjan Panigrahi. According to him this story must have been written as a counter to Chandrasekhar Nanda’s essay ‘Sambalpur’ in which he categorized Surendra Sai as a *lootera* and portrayed the British as upholder of peace and prosperity. Mishra has countered Nanda for such descriptions through his story *Milana* and wrote, “Being influenced by some cunning fellows of our country they think Surendra Sai was a dacoit or a lootera.” (10) However at the end of the story Mishra too has glorified the British rule in a way. There can be two reasons behind this: firstly, to avoid a direct tussle with the then colonial rulers and secondly, to prove how the Maratha *bargis*, who were the fellow Indians, were causing more trouble for the Odias than the foreign invaders. This can be, to some extent, compared to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s strategy used in *Anand Math* – avoiding conflict with the colonial rulers and to achieve the goal of spreading patriotism and bravery among the readers. Moreover as per Baishnaba Charan Samal *Milana* is the first historical short story in Odia. Prior to *Milana* Fakir Mohan Senapati’s *Kamala Prasada Gorapa* (1913), *Kalika Prasada Gorapa* (1913) and Chandrasekhar Nanda’s *Pratisodha* (1907), *Bheela Balaka* (1907) were published. But when judged on the basis of historicity these stories don’t match the historical facts. Though fiction serves a different task than history, yet affinity to facts is a definitive attribute of a historical fiction. *Milana* serves this purpose pretty well and the reason behind it could be Mishra’s love for history as well as his stronghold in the subject as a student.

Shanti, Aruna and Rupara Mulya – these three stories contain the same theme and highlight the cruelty of Maratha *bargis* in Odisha. The *bargi* issue was no less devastating in nature and challenging to tackle with than the Mughal invasions. These stories critically

highlight the fact that religion is not the only deciding factor in politics and how Hindu powers were fighting among each other instead of fighting together against the invaders. Prior to Dayanidhi Mishra, Ram Shankar Ray's *Bibasini* and Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Lachhama* had presented this theme in Odia literature; but these are novels. Hence Dayanidhi Mishra is regarded as the foremost author who presented it through short stories. The narrative style of Fakir Mohan Senapati has been reflected in these stories as quotations are used at the beginning of each chapter or as per requirements. Further, like Senapati, Mishra too expresses his mind through his characters at times.

Shanti (Shanti) was first published in Mukura, an Odia magazine in 1914 and with the same pseudo name i.e. 'Shree'. The locale of the story is that of a rural area of Sambalpur. The cruelties caused by Maratha *bargis* in Odisha and the counter given by Ajit Singh, the son of Hirakhand Chhatrapati Maharaj Abhay Singh, Shanti's change of heart and her union with Ajit Singh – this is the basis of the story. The objective of the story is to spread patriotic feeling among the Odia readers. The time period highlighted in the story was a turbulent phase in Odishan/Indian history. The Maratha *bargis* were causing severe destruction of property, peace, and people throughout India and Odisha was no excuse. The Hindu faith could not prevent them from exploiting other Hindu states or citizens and the independent identity of different states were in danger and Odisha was no excuse. Mishra has attempted to spread awareness among Odia readers about this in a subtle and appealing manner. Similarly, he too has described the glory of Odisha in general and Sambalpur in specific by highlighting the heroic tale of resistance and victory through fearsome battles. Moreover, the story too attempts to study the psychology of the characters that makes it greater than simply being a historical account of the then political scenario. It can also be categorized as a historical romance as it beautifully portrays the equation between Shanti and Ajit Singh.

Aruna (Aruna) was first published in 1914 in Mukura. The beginning of Maratha attack during the reign of Abhay Singh, the sinking of Maratha weapon ship as per his minister Akbar Ray's advice, Maratha commander Raghuji Rao and his daughter Aruna's arrival near the Sinhaghora mountain pass, the prison life of Aruna due to commander Prithvi Singh, the defeat of Raghuji Rao in the war and Aruna's intervention during the killing him, the defeat of Raghuji Rao and his offering of Aruna to Prithvi Singh – these are the main incidents portrayed in the

story. The story basically sings the glory of the heroes of Sambalpur and its presiding deity Maa Samaleshwari. Moreover, like all other creations this too is an attempt of the author to inspire and ignite the flame of patriotism in the hearts of the contemporary Odia readers. But the unique aspect of this story is its technical perfection and balanced narration which other stories lack to some extent. To quote Padmalochan Nayak, “His five historical short stories will remain ever significant in Odia literature. Aruna is the best among all. Dayanidhi Mishra would have been equally regarded in the world of Odia short stories, had he created this short story alone.” (247)

Rupara Mulya (The Value of Beauty) was first published in 1914 in Mukura. The use of Sanskrit, English and Odia quotations have been done in the beginning of the chapters to enhance the artistic effect. This can be seen as an impact of Fakir Mohan Senapati as mentioned earlier. Independent king Jayant Singh’s commander was Bireshwar Singh. Bimala and Udit were his adopted daughter and son respectively. Udit Pratap’s conspiracy to get Bimala, Bimala considering him as brother and rejecting any romantic association with him and expressing her love for Prasanna Kumar, Udit Pratap’s joining hands with Maratha to get Bimala, Bimala’s intervention during Prasanna Kumar’s murder, the defeat of Odia soldiers and Bimala stabbing a knife on her chest and her dying body falling on Prasanna Kumar’s dead body – *Rupara Mulya* depicts the creative storytelling technique of the author like the earlier stories. Personal desires and physical appearance always come second as nation is always first – the storyteller has tried to convey this idea to his readers through this story.

Pradeepa Nirvana (The Fading Away of Light) was first published in 1920 in Utkala Sahitya. It is the only story where the tale begins from eastern Odisha; though ends in Sambalpur. And in comparison, with other stories it has more resemblance with historical facts. Further, it also highlights one major element of Indian history – the author has mentioned here about the necessity of rewriting and conducting research on topics related to Indian history by Indian authors and Indian scholars and to present facts from Indian perspective. The existing depiction of Indian history written by foreign authors and their Indian followers has been rejected by Mishra. Kalapahada’s attack on Odisha, Mukunda Deva’s defeat, the queen welcoming Kalapahada in Jajpur, the great escape by the queen and other ladies of the fort and the sacrifice of their life by jumping into river Baitarani – like this *Pradeepa Nirvana* displays

the unmatched character of Odisha's last independent Hindu king Mukunda Deva, along with his queen and fellow Odias.

Dayanidhi Mishra began his literary career as a poet. And the influence of his poetic genius is always reflected in his short stories including the historical ones mentioned above. The five historical short stories discussed above have secured him a significant place in the history of Odia literature. The glorious history of Odisha and the patriotic fever of the rulers and subjects have been used as a tool by him to instill nationalist consciousness among the readers, other than providing joy. One significant element of his writings is his novelettes display Indian nationalism through the tale of warriors like Prithviraj Chouhan and Rana Pratap Singh; whereas his short stories display Odia nationalism and its heroes like Surendra Sai, Ajit Singh and others. This indicates about his clarity of thought and the idea of maintaining both the 'Indian' as well as 'Odia' identity simultaneously. Mishra, being himself a freedom fighter, was a man with a mission and has used fiction as a medium of revolt against the colonial rulers by writing the tale of valour of indigenous heroes of the past to spread the idea of patriotism and sense of devotion among his fellow countrymen. It may be noted here that unlike many other freedom fighters who followed the non-violent path of Gandhi and preferred his technique of passive resistance as a tool to fight the colonial masters, Mishra however glorified the direct battle and great warriors like Surendra Sai and others for the sake of gaining independence; even though he himself was an ardent and practising Gandhian. His short stories are the clear depiction of his conviction and inclusive approach in this regard.

All of these short stories were together published in *Dayanidhi Katha Samagra* in 1991 by Cuttack Students' Store with the efforts of his son and author Amulya Krushna Mishra. Noted Odia critic Natabara Samantaray in his book *Odia Sahityara Itihasa* has given due credit to Mishra for his valuable contribution to Odia literature. Samantaray writes:

Other than the social stories Dayanidhi Mishra has attempted writing some historical stories. These are his greatest contribution to Odia literature. *Shanti*, *Aruna*, *Rupara Mulya* and *Pradeepa Nirvana* – the content, form and narrative technique of these four stories are entirely new in Odia story-telling history.... The presentation style of such courage and romance, classification of subject matter, dramatic beginning, sequential arrangement of topics, the composition of emotion and excitement in different contexts

are the artistic perfection of these stories. It could be said that this perfection is almost rare in most of the contemporary stories. (537-538) (My Translation)

To conclude, Dayanidhi Mishra's contribution to Odia literature remains unparalleled till date for writing these five historical short stories even though it remains less discussed. Including his stories in syllabus and conducting seminars on them is very much required to do justice to this author. Moreover, translating the stories into English can make them available for a wider range of readers, scholars and critics. Continuous focus and research on few selected authors have resulted in neglecting such a pioneer like Mishra which need to be altered soon. As a humble attempt in this regard all the historical short stories of Mishra have been translated into English by me and are ready for publication.

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