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**Female Education and Empowerment: A Detailed Study of Fakir Mohan Senapati's
"Rebati"**

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Abstract: Fakir Mohan Senapati's excellent short story entitled "Rebati", published in 1898, holds up a mirror to the abject and dismal condition of female education in the late nineteenth century Odisha. Set in a little village in the district of Cuttack, this story depicts how the dreams and aspirations of a ten-year-old girl named Rebati were simply shattered to the dust because of an orthodox society, steeped in superstition. Being prompted by western humanistic values, Rebati's father, Shyambandhu and the young village teacher, Basu dev thought of giving Rebati an education, breaking her free from the age-old superstitious belief that educating a girl might prove disastrous for the family. The little girl Rebati was extremely happy to know that she would be educated. Her mother also supported her but her grandmother was opposed to this idea. This paper is a detailed study of how Fakir Mohan Senapati seeks to throw a flood of light on the much-needed empowerment of women through education against the backdrop of the nineteenth century conservative society.

Keywords: Female education, emancipation, orthodox society, empowerment, western values.



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Introduction

Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918) was doubtless one of the most remarkable and pioneer writers of Odia literature. His short story "Rebati", which was brought out in the year 1898, was a seminal text of rich significance. This short story presents a scathing critique of contemporary conservative society of colonial Odisha. Fakir Mohan Senapati blazed a new trail and broke fresh grounds in his treatment of the importance of female education for the all-round development of the then society. His story "Rebati" bears a glorious testimony to the fact that women empowerment will never ever be a reality without providing women education. He shows in the narrative how the orthodox Odisha society gives a backward pull to female education. In fact, the tragic predicament of Rebati is a sharp pointer to the fact that the society, which is based on conservatism, superstition and orthodoxy, needs to be completely revamped. It has to be admitted that Fakir Mohan Senapati was "a social realist par excellence ... [and his] realism flowed from his sympathy and sensitivity to changes of Oriya society, brought about in the wake of colonialism – imperialism." (Behera, 3505). If we go through his fictional and non-fictional writings, we happen to find that his primary focus has always been on the contemporary issues concerning peasantry, education, poverty, superstitions which are eating into the vitals of society. Mention must be made of his untiring efforts to persuade and inspire parents to realize the necessity of providing formal education to all girls in Odisha. In this connection, it may be pointed out that Sachidananda Mohanty has rightly remarked that "Rebati" testifies to Fakir Mohan Senapati's "larger historical and socio-realistic interest in dramatising the unique conjunction of feudalism, colonialism and ethnicity in Orissa." (Mohanty, 42). Central to this short story are Rebati's pursuit of education and the unfortunate deaths of her parents and the teacher, Basu dev within two years of the beginning of her education. The epidemic Cholera claimed the lives of her parents and Basu dev but she was held responsible for their deaths by her grandmother.

Discussion

A close reading of the text "Rebati" makes it abundantly clear that Fakir Mohan Senapati through this short story gives us a microcosmic panorama of the sorry state of affairs with regard to female education in colonial Odisha. By placing one Rebati on the centre-stage, he seeks to highlight the tragic and hapless predicament of so many Rebatis in the late 19th century rural India. The conservative, male-dominated society did never think of allowing women to get educated and empowered. Ironically enough, the age-old, narrow patriarchal views of the society have been represented by Rebati's grandmother within the framework of the narrative.

As the story unfolds, we find that Rebati, who is an adolescent girl of ten years of age, lives in a little village named Patapur in the subdivision of Hariharpur under the district of Cuttack. Her father Shyambandhu Mohanty, who was an educated and enlightened man, was "the Zamindar's accountant, ... responsible for collecting taxes. His salary was two rupees a month, but he could earn a little more by adjusting rent receipts and land records; all told, this added up to at least four rupees. ... he was quite comfortable. His family never complained of wanting for anything." (St Pierre, Mohapatra, Leelawati, Mohapatra, K.K. 204). There were four members in his family — Shyambandhu himself, his wife, his adolescent daughter, Rebati and his aged grandmother. Everyone in the family loved the young girl, Rebati.

Shyambandhu is introduced in the story as a very simple and straightforward man who was greatly respected and liked by the tenants. He was honest to the core. Being an accountant of the Zamindar, he was never accused of collecting an extra paisa from anybody. He was a man who took a fancy for formal education. For his daughter, Rebati he had an abundant love. Returning home in the evenings, he used to sing prayer songs and read passages from the Bhagavata. Sitting next to him always was Rebati who listened to her father attentively and at times she would sing songs so melodiously that passers-by would stop to hear her sweet voice.

The author at this point of the story focuses our attention on the introduction of a young school teacher, Basu dev who was twenty years of age. From this point the story takes a new turn. He was polite to a fault. At an early age he had been orphaned and brought up by his uncle. The writer presents him to us as a truly fantastic human being. Within a very short period of time he becomes very popular with all. Shyambandhu takes a special liking for him and Basu dev becomes an unfailing visitor to Shyambandhu's family. Both Basu dev and Shyambandhu were of the same caste. What is more, both of them had great affinity in matters of education.

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It would not be an exaggeration to say that Shyambandhu's meeting with Basu dev proves to be of crucial importance in moving the narrative towards a positive direction. It was Basu dev who first apprised Shyambandhu of "a school at Cuttack where girls could study and also learn crafts; instantly, the desire to give Rebati an education welled up in his heart." (St Pierre, Mohapatra Leelawati, Mohapatra K.K., 206). Shyambandhu, who was liberal-minded and free from the superstitions and conservative beliefs of the society, instantaneously made up his mind to provide formal education to his little, lovely daughter.

Having heard the conversation between the teacher, Basu dev and her father regarding her education, Rebati was happy and excited so much so that she at once rushed to her mother and grandmother inside the room and expressed her great pleasure to them by saying that she was going to study and she was going to learn to read. Her mother, who had some sort of liking for education, welcomed her daughter's desire for education but her grandmother reacted sharply to Rebati's fascination for education.

At the heart of the short story "Rebati", indeed, is the conflict between women emancipation through education on the one hand and the parochial attitude of the orthodox society towards female education, on the other hand. Fakir Mohan Senapati has represented through Rebati's grandmother this narrow outlook of the society towards women in general. On hearing that Rebati is going to be educated, her grandmother comes out with a sharp reaction: "What good will it do you? How does book learning help a girl? It's enough to know how to cook, bake, churn butter and make patterns on walls using rice paste." (St Pierre, Mohapatra Leelawati, Mohapatra, K.K., 206). She could not at all accept the idea of educating Rebati. When the whole family was at dinner, she argued with her son, Shyambandhu about the necessity of educating a girl child. This angered Rebati and she spoke her mind: "Father, I do want to study." "And so you will", said Shyambandhu. (St Pierre, Mohapatra Leelawati & K.K., 207)

Despite the strong opposition of her grandmother, Rebati started her journey from darkness to light through education, thanks to her father and the young school teacher, Basu dev. Rebati was given "a copy of Sitanath Babu's First Lessons" and she was delighted to see the pictures that were there in the book. Then on the "auspicious day of Sri Panchami" her formal education began with the learning of the alphabets. The progress of Rebati's studies over the next two years was remarkable indeed. During this span of two years everything went on smoothly. No great misfortune befell them. In the meantime, Rebati's grandmother discussed with Shyambandhu about Rebati's marriage with Basu dev. However, she could not overcome her doubts about Rebati's education. Here the writer has very subtly indicated that in the then Odia society it was customary to marry off a girl attaining the age of twelve or so. Rebati's grandmother like a typical old woman wanted to know from her son if Basu dev belonged to the same caste as theirs, since intercaste marriage was unheard of in those days. Thus various drawbacks of the society of his times are ironically reflected by Fakir Mohan Senapati.

Extremely shocking and touching is the depiction of the pathetic condition of Rebati and her grandmother after the unfortunate deaths of Rebati's parents and the young teacher Basu dev as a result of the epidemic cholera. The narrative brings to light how these two hopeless and hapless women fell a pathetic victim to the vicious, inhuman customs of the then Odia society which was deeply steeped in superstition. The writer seeks to indicate through this part of the narrative how people in those times had to die premature death due to lack of proper medical treatment as well as the indifference and unsympathetic treatment of the society. Fakir Mohan Senapati has rightly pointed out that strange and inscrutable are the designs of God.

One fine morning there was an outbreak of cholera which took an epidemic proportions. This outbreak of cholera was sudden and unexpected. The writer shows us how the neighbours of Shyambandhu reacted to the news of his being attacked with cholera

"Early in the morning the news of Shyambandhu coming down with cholera spread through the village. As always, the immediate response was to bolt the doors and windows, and keep out of the path of the demonic deity, as though the evil old hag was out with her basket and broom sweeping up heads." (St Pierre, Mohapatra Leelawati & K.K., 208)

Shyambandhu's wife and mother were completely at a loss, unable to find out any way to cure Shyambandhu. Rebati was desperately crying for help. Nobody in the locality came forward to help the family in times of crisis. On the contrary, the entire neighbourhood shunned the family of Shyambandhu. No help, no sympathy, no fellow-feeling was shown. The writer hints at the ignorance of people, having no knowledge of the cholera epidemic, which was why these superstitious people just shut their doors and windows to keep out of the harm's way of cholera as a "demonic deity", out to sweep up heads with her broom and basket.

Having juxtaposed the educated and enlightened Basu dev with the thoroughly superstitious and benighted people of the society, Fakir Mohan Senapati emphasizes that Basu dev played a lone hand in providing some sort of relief to Shyambandhu at this hour of crisis, by sitting at his bedside, "massaging Shyambandhu's hands and legs and forcing drops of water between his parched lips". (St-Pierre, Mohapatra Leelawati & K.K., 208). But all his efforts were in vain, Shyambandhu's death was imminent. He died of cholera, leaving the family in deep distress. Just before his death he asked Basu dev stammeringly to take care of his family when he would be no more. His last words are charged with pathos. The family was plunged into deep sorrow.

The readers are exposed to the inhumanity of the then caste-ridden society as the writer narrates how the two sorrowing women and the grief-stricken Basu dev "had to carry the body to the cremation grounds and perform the last rites". (St-Pierre, Mohapatra Leelawati & K.K., 2009). One tragedy followed another in quick succession. Rebati's mother died of cholera the following day, leaving the young girl, Rebati destitute and the whole family in deep crisis.

With the death of Shyambandhu and his wife, all hopes of Rebati's education were foiled. Her parents' death left a tremendous impact upon the prospects of her education. Her very existence was threatened. With her grandmother continually accusing her of the untimely death of Shyambandhu and his wife, she felt devastated. She was broken physically and mentally. To add salt to injury, as it were, the writer goes to the extent of condemning the exploitation meted out to the bereaved family : "Within three months of Shyambandhu's demise, the Zamindar expropriated Shyambandhu's cows — apparently he had not deposited the last tax collection. This was hard to believe, however, Shyambandhu had always regarded depositing the money as sacred and would not rest in peace until every paisa of the collection was in the Zamindar's treasury." (St-Pierre, Mohapatra Leelawati & K.K., 2009).

Fakir Mohan Senapati has given us a very agonizing picture of the ruthless exploitation of the Zamindars who were the agents of the colonial British rulers. It was for a long time that the Zamindar had been trying to grab the cows of Shyambandhu and take back the three and a half acres of land which had been in possession of Shyambandhu. To meet the funeral expenses the team of bullocks had already been disposed of at seventeen and a half rupees. Now the grandmother and Rebati had been facing extreme poverty. The young teacher, Basu dev, who assured Shyambandhu on his deathbed that he would look after his family after his death, would visit them every evening at this hour of crisis. He always wanted to provide some sort of financial assistance to them, but the grandmother refused to accept any kind of monetary help from Basu dev. What was worse, the house was in a dilapidated condition, with the straw roof getting thin. It needed badly to be rethatched. Thus the narrator depicts the social and economic devastation caused by the sudden and unexpected death of Shyambandhu and his wife.

The situation consequent upon their deaths came to such a pass that the grandmother out of frustration and tremendous sorrow would continually heap curses and abuses on Rebati. As a representative of the conservative and orthodox male-dominated society, she had the misconception that her granddaughter, Rebati was responsible for the death of her parents.

Her desire for and keen interest in education was, in her opinion, at the root of all her misery and misfortune. She went to the extent of calling Rebati "the evil eye, the she-devil, the ill-omened". (St. Pierre, Mohapatra Leelawati & K.K., 210). When the grandmother started abusing and cursing Rebati, it was really very unfortunate for Rebati to face up to such uncalled-for curses and abuses. She would at such times hide herself in a corner of the house and cry bitterly for her lot. The adolescent girl who had high hopes of education was now an object of scorn and ridicule, albeit for no fault of hers. The grandmother also thought that Basu dev was to be held responsible for the calamity that befell her family as it was he who had showed his eagerness to teach Rebati. The society at that point of time did not sanction or approve of a girl opting for education, instead of acquiring the necessary culinary skills and the other related crafts to run the family. Rebati just did the otherwise and invited the troubles to her family. This absolutely irrational idea would often irritate her grandmother so much so that she would call her angrily : "Rebati! Rebi! You fire that turns all to ashes," (St. Pierre, Mohapatra Leelawati & K.K., 213)

In the second half of the story we have the touching description of the slow and gradual withering away of the adolescent girl, Rebati. In the first half we find her as a very exuberant and lively girl eager to be educated. The entire household was vibrant with her smiles and enthusiastic conversations with one and all. But tragically enough, the unexpected demise of her parents turned her life into a desert where there was no promise of an oasis. The girl who displayed her abundant desire for education has now lost her will to live any longer. The occasional flickerings of her interest in life are shown whenever Basu dev used to visit their house. She developed a weakness for him and vice versa. One fateful morning the schoolboys coming back from Hariharpur broke the news of Basu dev's death by cholera. The whole village mourned his death. The grandmother shed her tears, blaming Basu dev himself for his premature death since he sought to teach Rebati. Rebati herself on hearing the news of his death was plunged into despair. The following morning Rebati was found to be suffering from high fever, lying unconscious. Her old grandmother, who loved Rebati, was very restless and puzzled, with anxiety and fear gnawing at her heart. After a few days of suffering Rebati died of fever. The grandmother remarked: "What medicine can there be for an illness of one's own making! Rebati had brought the fever on herself by daring to study." (St-Pierre, Mohapatra Leelawati & K.K., 212).

The whole story revolves round the adolescent girl, Rebati. The narrative maps out her journey from her firm declaration of pursuing education to her complete silence, having lost the very instinct to survive. In this context, we can recall the famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri

Chakraborty Spivak. In her essay, Spivak writes : "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernisation." (1988, p. 306)

Following her argument in her essay, we can go the extent of saying that in our present story, Rebati appears to be a "gendered subaltern". Dr. Shruti Das in her essay "Past Significance and Present Meaning in Fakir Mohan Senapati's Rebati" has very aptly summed up :

"Fakir Mohan's social critique in the narrative posits Rebati as caught between modernization and a tradition that grudges her aspirations and holds her responsible for defeating her spiritual duties as an Indian woman." (Das 35)

Indeed, in the concluding part of the short story "Rebati" the depiction of the central protagonist i.e. Rebati evokes her image as a "gendered subaltern", as a pathetic and lone figure who has been chained and bowed down by a heavy weight of orthodox and conservative norms of the then Odia society. She has fallen on the thorns of life and she bleeds profusely. Her heart no longer throbs with the desire for education. She has been silenced into a lone, pathetic girl. The writer describes her present predicament touchingly : "Nobody heard her voice, nobody saw her out of doors. Her large brooding eyes, awash with silent tears, looked like blue lilies floating in water. Her heart and mind broken, day and night were alike to her. The Sun brought her no light, the night no darkness; The world was an aching void." (St-Pierre, Mohapatra Leelawati & K.K, 210)

Conclusion : -It becomes amply clear that Fakir Mohan Senapati's Short story "Rebati" stands out as a glorious specimen of a classic text, fraught with a rich significance. It is undeniable that through this deceptively simple narrative Senapati seeks to focus on the frustrated attempt of an apparently simple-minded rustic Odia girl, Rebati to be enlightened by the light of education. This text serves as an eye-opener to each and every percipient reader. Fakir Mohan Senapati's message is loud and clear; female education is the key to women emancipation and empowerment. The rural Odia Society which gives a backward pull to female education has been portrayed in a lurid light by the writer. Revealing indeed is the far-sightedness of Fakir Mohan Senapati who happened to realize, profoundly enough, that the all-round advancement of Society would remain a distant dream without attaining the goal of female education on a Comprehensive level.

Herein lies the glory of the present text "Rebati" which precisely maps out the road to the upliftment of the Contemporary orthodox late nineteenth Century Odia Society. There is little doubt that for this thought-provoking and revolutionary text Fakir Mohan Senapati will be remembered for all times to Come.

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