

# Presenting the Problems of Rural Indian Peasants in *Six Acres and a Third* by Fakir Mohan Senapati

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## **Abstract:**

*Six Acres and a Third* by Fakir Mohan Senapati is one of the major novels of the Indian English literature. It is the portrayal of the life and sufferings of peasants and their exploitation in rural India under the reign of colonial and the zamindari system. It is the story of nineteenth century Odisha that is the representation of harsh reality of poor peasants entangled between poverty, subjugation, landlessness, caste discrimination and greed of the higher authorities of the village. Through the character of Ramchandra Mangaraj, an exploitative zamindar, Senapati exposes that how the dominance of higher authorities like landlordism misuse power, law and money to seize the lands of innocent villagers. Without knowing that what would be the consequences and outcome of such activity he usurps the lands of peasants. Bhagia and Saria, the weaver couple, become the victims of this inappropriate social structure which indicates the helpless condition of peasants during colonial India. The novel highlights the prevalent problems such as hunger, economic oppression, mental digression destructive lives of peasants, corrupt legal system and social injustice. By using satire, irony and realism Senapati has critically commented on the colonial administration and feudal suppression. The novel is a documentation of continuous struggle of Indian peasant's equality, survival and dignity.

**Keywords:** Rural, Peasants, Sufferings, Exploitation, Landlordism, Colonialism.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *The Discovery of India* states that, "The peasant of India is the most patient of the sufferers; he endures poverty and exploitation with a quiet fortitude that is almost unbelievable." India has long been known as a nation of peasants and farming. Historically, agriculture and rural life have been the foundation of socio-economic and socio-cultural structure of India. For centuries, most Indians have lived in villages and depended on farming for their livelihoods. So, the peasants hold the highest place in the story of a nation, but having such a significant place, they suffer the most.

Agriculture and the peasants are inseparable parts in the history of civilization; they are the backbone of society. Farmers are considered as the food providers of the country, but their own livelihood is suffering from poverty, hunger, and insecurity. For centuries, apart from the traditional values and culture of the Indian society, peasants have endured inhumane economic conditions, society's unfair treatment, and natural calamities and uncertainties. Their lives signify the irony that farmers nourish the world while they themselves wrestle to survive.

*Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (1896), translated into English as *Six Acres and a Third*, is a story of the peasants of rural Odisha, India. The novel reveals the hidden truths of society during the colonial period,

the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful, and of peasants by landlords. Ramchandra Mangaraj is the central character of the novel, a cunning, exploitative, and greedy landlord of his village. He used to mislead the innocent villagers and usurp their lands. He gives debt to people in need, and after a few times, compounded by interest, he seizes their lands forever. The greatest victims of this sin were Bhagia and Saria, who lost not only their land but also their lives by committing suicide. They lost everything of their possessions, like their cow Neta, who was very dear to them, their piece of land, six acres and a third, on which the whole story is based. The novel is a social satire, social realism, and social critique of the feudal and colonial systems. So, this is a clear representation of colonial rural India, the plight of peasants, and social criticism.

Fakir Mohan Senapati is an Indian writer, social reformer, poet, and philosopher. He is widely known as Utkal Vyas Kabi; he is a pioneer in promoting and shaping the Odia language and has given it a distinctive place in the nation. Senapati is considered as the father of modern Odia literature, Odia prose fiction, and Odia nationalism. He was born on 13 January 1843 in Mallikashpur, Balasore, Odisha (then part of the Bengal Presidency under British rule). He was born into a middle-class family to Lakhmana Charan Senapati and Tulsi Devi Senapati, both of whom were Khandayat Brahmins. At a very young age, Fakir Mohan lost his parents, and his grandmother raised him. His uncle did not allow him to pursue his studies because he was jealous of young Fakir Mohan. He began his studies late due to his own health. Since the childhood, Senapati lived in poverty and hardships, which later impacted his literary perception and empathy for the subjugated sections of society. Despite his poverty, he cultivated his interest in education and literature. He covered the expenses of his education by working as a laborer. Senapati dedicated his entire life to advancing the Odia language in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He has been called the father of Odia fiction.

*Six Acres and a Third* is a powerful representation of the struggle between the greed of power structure and its hegemony. It is one of the notable novels of rural India of the nineteenth century. The work provides a vivid portrayal of the socio-economic reality of villages during British colonial rule. The story of the novel revolves around greed, land, property, social injustice, and inequality. Lending money or debt to the poor peasants, the needy villagers, and when they are no longer able to repay the debt, then usurping their lands instead of the loan, constitutes a very significant theme in the story. In this context, there is a line from the book *Small Holdings in India and Their Remedies* in which B.R. Ambedkar says, "The Indian peasant is born in debt, lives in debt, and dies in debt," so land is the major concern for which Mangaraj killed innocent people. Until his own death, he was entangled in the struggle over land.

The most important aspect of village life is agriculture, through which the poor peasants strive to sustain their livelihood. So, the novel has portrayed the bitter reality of rural India, where peasants are entirely dependent on agriculture and their economic security is tied to their performance in cultivation. Lands are not just a property to acquire, but the life of peasants, and being a land owner from a marginalized class becomes a reason for suffering and loss. Manipulated by the landlords, rural people are deprived of their rightful lands. Criticism of the zamindari system is another major dimension of the novel that played a pivotal role in changing the lives of peasants during colonial times. Ramchandra Mangaraj is the epitome of corruption and greed; he is the exploiter of such innocent, illiterate peasants who are unable to defend themselves against the power, and their land is first mortgaged and then usurped by the rules of the new legal system. Furthermore, the novel throws light on the corruption and weakness of the legal system and the administration of colonial rule. To save themselves from injustice, the peasants have restricted access to the legal system.

The novel *Six Acres and a Third* by Fakir Mohan Senapati is a realistic portrayal of village life during the colonial era and British rule. The plot of the novel revolves around a piece of land, 'six acres and a third', which serves as the final destination of the novel and its destruction as well. It impacted every

major character of the story. Senapati has sought to expose the terrifying social realism of a suppressed and marginalized rural society, exploited by the new land and legal system fostered by British colonial rulers. The new system is a major weapon for the local elite of the village to oppress people experiencing poverty, like Ramchandra Mangaraj, and to exploit villagers. He can be called the protagonist or the anti-hero of the novel, the one who, by his tricks and manipulations, seized the lands of innocent villagers. The plot of the novel describes the peasant life on a smallholding, so land is the life for landless farmers; their lives are based on a piece of land for survival. The title of the novel underscores the importance of land to the villagers and the marginalized community during the socio-economic upheaval of colonial times. Mangaraj manipulates the uneducated villagers into mortgaging their property by alluring them with loans to secure their survival, hoping to secure the return of their lands.

Furthermore, the same situation occurred with the couple Bhagia and Saria; Mangaraj's main aim was to seize their land, 'six acres and a third.' The couple has no child, so Mangaraj takes advantage of their weakness and urges them to mortgage their land to raise money to build a temple of Budhi Mangla for the birth of a child. However, later, he deceitfully transferred their land into his own name and usurped it, and the couple died of grief. It showcases his cunning, greedy, and selfish behavior, which took the lives of the innocent couple. The psychological impact of suffering destroys a commoner's life, as seen in the case of the weaver couple in the novel. Suffering leads to emotional exhaustion, creating a silent, submissive and fatalistic outlook on life in the mind of a peasant. The poor peasants experience continuous mental agony due to poverty, debt, hunger, loss of land and the burdens of family, etc. Therefore, the plight of peasants not only affects individuals but also creates mental chaos that damages family relationships and social harmony. As a result, when a person loses his patience, sometimes, it promotes death, murder or suicide, which happened with Bhagia and Saria.

There is a description of the hierarchical system of village life, in which Senapati has painted a powerful, realistic picture of peasant life and presented an awful condition of farmers. Senapati has delineated a pragmatic and critical evaluation of the village and its innocent, ignorant, and uneducated peasants, who are mercilessly exploited by the superpowers. The portrayal of social dynamics, which describes a typical hierarchical Indian village structure, is also rendered in the story by highlighting a rigid caste-based hierarchy, an impoverished, lower-caste peasant society suppressed by powerful entities, which ultimately brings terrifying plights to their lives. It is not only the condition of Odisha, but this is the description of the overall peasants of the nation as well. In his book *Indian Narratology*, K. Ayyappa Paniker argues, "Senapati's fiction is rooted in the soil of Odisha but speaks for the oppressed everywhere." (Pg. 112-115)

The novel's establishment of the Karma factor is quite appropriate like 'As you sow, so shall you reap'. The ruthless actions of Mangaraj haunt him in his final days, and Champa and the barber's avarice and theft come back to haunt them. His brutal actions with Saria and his grumpy behavior with his wife recur in his dreams, depriving him of any sleep or peace. As he explains the specifics and mechanisms of Mangaraj, the author's tone is consistently caustic. As he manipulates the peasant couple, later, Mangaraj himself gets manipulated by the lawyer and loses all his property. The characters' avarice and brutality toward farmhands and other lower-caste peasants illustrate the ubiquity of human thirst for wealth and power. Fakir Mohan has painted a clear picture of the marginalized class in the Indian village, and the novel also exposes the chain of exploitation by colonial power and middle-class society through the lawyer and several other entities, showing how they collectively exploit people experiencing poverty. The last chapter of the novel describes the law of Karma, it states:

"No one can escape his karma; you will suffer or prosper accordingly. No one can see a seed in the soil, but who can fail to notice it once it grows into a large tree? You may think yourself very clever, and you

may imagine that no one can see what you do out of sight and in secrecy, but you will taste the fruits of the tree you have planted. And if you somehow escape, your successors will not. You are very proud of your might and your wealth, but you never know how someone you think is weak and insignificant can astonish you by his deeds.” (Pg. 211)

The novel offers a beautiful description of typical Oriya village life, including its culture, food, language, folklore, regional influences, superstitions, and more. The writing tone of Fakir Mohan Senapati is quite ironic, satirical and humorous, exposing the hypocrisy of landlords and the colonial system. He has used colloquial Odia expressions, proverbs, folk sayings and rural metaphors. With the use of such literary devices, Senapati has represented the social criticism and social realism of rural Indian life with a blend of moral and didactic tone. In *Six Acres and a Third*, Fakir Mohan Senapati attempts to offer a dynamic, truthful portrayal of rural Indian society. He paints a picture of a corrupt and confined legal system, the struggle of peasants, the oppression of landlordism, and the social evils and inequalities shaping village life. With a blend of satire, irony, and realism, Senapati not only exposes the land dispute but also spills the beans on the socio-economic and socio-political structures that brutally affect the innocent rural communities. Thus, the novel becomes both literary art and social document that invites readers to consider the historical reality of rural India, awareness of the deprived and marginalized, and the need for justice and reform in the village and peasant communities in the modern era as well. An article from *Journal of Human Values* Nuzhat Akhter explicates, “The plight of peasants represented by Senapati remains relevant even in contemporary India.”

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