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Gopinath Mohanty



*Gopinath Mohanty*



WHEN Faber and Faber and Oxford University Press simultaneously brought out the English translation of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* in 1987, forty-two years after its first publication in Oriya, the novel received rave reviews. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Helen Harris hailed it as possessing "tremendous vitality and exceptional power". In the *Irish Times*, Marese Murphy observed "it is the old story of oppression of the weak by the strong, but in Gopinath Mohanty's simple, vivid prose, it acquires a new and harrowing dimension." But, writing in the *Times Educational Supplement*, Liz Heron found it "fictionalised ethnography", the village and landscape evoking "a sometime Eden". In the *Guardian*, Robert Nye said: "Gopinath Mohanty belongs to a generation of Indian writers to whom social commitment is second nature, but what we have here is a work of universal application—a story of materialistic civilization seeking to encroach upon and engulf an ancient

way of life." In yet another review in *Scotland on Sunday*, Tom Adair wrote "Gopinath Mohanty knows the virtue of restraint. He writes about India with the seasoned eye of the insider, eschewing the bombardment of the senses with the cluttered imagery which often nourishes preconceptions of that land."

Among his other remarkable novels of tribal life are *Amrutara Santan*, *Dadi Budha*, *Siba Bhai* and *Apahanca*.

*Amrutara Santan* portrays the life of the primitive Kuvi Kondh tribe. The opening chapter sets the tone, the passing away of Sorabu Saouta, symbolizing the end of an era and the advent of Pubuli from the plains the descent of "decadent modernism". The lyrical and philosophical quality of this epic novel of tribal world caught the imagination of the people and won for Gopinath Mohanty the first ever Sahitya Akademi Award for 1955, as the most outstanding literary work in Oriya since Independence.

Even when Mohanty shifts his eye from the tribal world to the town life, his chief concern is always for the oppressed. *Harijan* deals with the untouchables living in the dirty quarters of the town and their exploitation by the rich who drive them out of the town limits.

Mohanty's novels like *Mana Gahira Chasa*, *Sarat Babunka Gali*, *Rahura Chhaya* and *Dui Patra* reveal his intuitive insight into character. *Laya Bilaya* marks the peak of his novels written in this vein and delves deep into the human psyche, in a form different from any of his earlier works.

Mohanty's Jnanpith Award winning novel, *Matimatal*, runs into 970 pages and took

him a decade to write. Portraying the conflict of cultures, the novel envisions, in the words of J.M. Mohanty, a new way of life "more elaborately and vigorously" than *Paraja* where the "gloom was total" or *Amrutara Santan* which "breaks up with the glimpses of a new hope."

Gopinath Mohanty has introduced a new and vigorous style in Oriya prose. Words are carefully chosen out of the common living speech of villagers, combinations coined for abstract ideas or intellectual concepts, delicate shades of meaning, feeling or nuance. His prose has a rhythmic, musical quality, and the words become irreplaceable without hurting the line. Mayadhar Mansinha, the author of *History of Oriya Literature*, finds Gopinath Mohanty's Oriya "rugged and vital", "redolent of the furrowed land, the wild forests, the craggy hills and fast flowing hill streams ...a style stamped with the impress of a unique individuality, with its own ways of looking at things, and with the courage to say things in its own way...

Gopinath Mohanty is in every way a path breaker." Sitakant Mahapatra finds Mohanty's shorter fiction evokes "myriad pictures and sounds of Orissa's rural landscape."

Mohanty has been a pioneer in the field of research relating to the most backward sections among the tribes of Orissa. He was the first to codify the dialect of the Kuvi Kondh, to prepare its grammar, to collect the tribal human sacrifice song and other ritual songs, as also ballads. He discovered other tribes and recorded their patois. He established that gypsies of Europe originally migrated from eastern India. San Jose State University, California, USA, appointed him Adjunct Professor of Anthropology, a unique honour for one who held no degree in the subject.

His tireless research was not confined to tribal world alone: he tracked down old palm-leaf manuscripts and established the date and place of Sarala Dasa, the author of the Oriya *Mahabharata* and shed new light on the epic.



with D.P. Pattanayak, V.K. Gokak and D.R. Bendre, 1974



with family members in U.S.A.

Mohanty has also written essays, plays and verse, and enriched the Oriya literature with translations of classics from the West, and the rest of India.

Such prodigious literary and scholarly pursuit in itself is a lifetime's work, but Gopinath Mohanty combined it with the rigours of administrative work. After a brilliant academic career, he joined the Orissa Administrative Service in 1938. Two years later

he married Adarmoni Devi. He served the Government for three decades and his arduous work left him exhausted but writing acted as a "tonic" for him and he would often cut his hours of rest or leisure or put off or neglect personal affairs to find time to write giving himself wholeheartedly to it. Even today, at the age of seventy-five, he continues to write with zest and passion.

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- MANA GAHIRA CHASA. Cuttack: Man mohan Press, 1940. 144p. 18cm.
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- MATIMATAL. Cuttack: Aloka Sahitya Pratishthana, 1964. 970p. 21.5 cm.
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With wife Adarmoni Devi



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- RADHANATH RAY. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2nd edn. 1983. 76p.

## A Chronology

- 1914 Birth
- 1936 M.A. (First position in Patna University)
- 1938 Joined Orissa Administrative Service
- 1940 First novel, *Mana Gahira Chasa*
- 1945 *Paraja* (novel)
- 1947 *Amrutara Santan* (novel)
- 1948 *Harijan* (novel)
- 1950 Bishuba Milan citation
- 1951 *Ghasara Phula*, *Poda Kapala*, first short story collections
- 1955 Sahitya Akademi Award for *Amrutara Santan*
- 1957 Member, Oriya Advisory Board, Sahitya Akademi for five years
- 1964 *Matimatal* (novel)
- 1970 Soviet Land Nehru Award for translation of Gorky's *My Universities*
- 1972 Director, United Commercial Bank, as an expert on tribals
- 1973 *Kalashakti*, first essay collection
- 1974 Jnanpith Award for *Matimatal*
- 1976 D. Litt., Sambalpur University
- 1979 President, Oriya Writers' Co-op. Society; UGC Fellowship for Creative Writing in Oriya, Utkal University
- 1981 Padmabhushan
- 1983 Fellowship from Government of India for Creative Writing; Member, Oriya Advisory Board, Sahitya Akademi for five years
- 1986 Adjunct Professor of Social Sciences, San Jose University, USA
- 1989 Consultant, State Resource Centre for Adult Education, Bhubaneswar



Receiving Jnanpith Award from Niharranjan Ray, 1974