

## Fakir Mohan Senapati's "Rebati": The Modern Day Malala

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*"One Child One Teacher  
One Book and One Pen  
Can change the World" - Malala Yousafzai*

*"Father, I do want to study."  
"And so you will", Shyambandhu - Rebati*

### Abstract:

*Education, they say, takes us from darkness to light; from unknown to known and from ignorance to knowledge. Side by side, it is a gateway to world. It plays a vital role in reforming and changing the society. Radical changes of a society are brought by it. What Gandhi\* said, "By education I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man-body, mind and spirit". Needless to say, the importance of education in man's life cannot be described in words. In this regard, the following Shloka from an oldest Hindu scripture is worth quoting here: Mata\*\* Shatru Pita Vairi Yen Balo Na Pathitah, Na Shobhate Sabha Madhye Hans Madhye Vako Yatha [Meaning thereby: The parent who does not facilitate and guide their child for studies is like the greatest enemy of the child. The presence of an uneducated person in the company of educated people is like a goose in the company of swans.] But despite the multifarious role of education how the strong, passionate and burning desire of a young girl to study is shattered into pieces by her superstitious and narrow-minded*

*grandmother in particular and the conservative society in general is the matter of discussion of my paper. Through the study of the short story, I want to highlight how she has been neglected and reduced to a marginal status in the face of stiff patriarchy is another noticeable thing of my paper. Besides, the major thrust of my write up is to show how the hopes and aspirations of a girl in getting education in the pre-Independence Orissa is nipped in the buds and remains a mere dream. My paper also examines how the standing stigmas and taboos in the then orthodox society had neglected women and been bottlenecks in providing education to females. Rebati is such a young girl who falls prey to her tradition-bound grandmother and to the moribund society which denies facilities to her. The paper also reflects the tussle and tug of war between the progressive Rebati and traditionalist Grandmother who metaphorically represents primitive practices of orthodox society.*

*That way "Rebati" is of Pakistan's Malala Yousafzai but with a little difference. Means, Rebati up to some extent is of Pakistan's Malala Yousafzai, though not completely. Like Rebati, Malala also fights for championing the cause of education. While the former fights and suffers for SELF, the later suffers for the SOCIETY – inflicted with ruthless taboos, stigmas, blind beliefs and superstitions. Malala, the ten-years-old Pakistani girl, was fired at her head on her way home from school by a masked gunman on October 9, 2012. The assailant boarded the school bus Malala was riding in. Injuring two other girls, the shooting left Malala in critical condition. As a young girl, she defied the Taliban in Pakistan and demanded that girls be allowed to receive an education.*

*Born on July 12, 1997, in Mingora a town in the Swat District of north-west, Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai attended a school that her father Ziauddin Yousafzai had founded in Swat valley. Moved by her father's passion for learning, she became an advocate for girls' education. Notably, Pakistan has the second highest number of out-of-school children in the world.*

*However, the shooting resulted in a massive outpouring of support for Yousafzai. Means, the Taliban's attempt to kill Malala received worldwide condemnation and led to protests across Pakistan. In the weeks after the attack, over 2 million people signed a right to education petition, and the National Assembly swiftly ratified Pakistan's first Right to Free and Compulsory Education Bill.*

*Despite the Taliban's threats, her activism resulted in a nomination for the International Children's Peace Prize in 2011. That same year, the child activist was awarded Pakistan's National Youth Peace Prize. On October 10, 2013, the European Parliament awarded Yousafzai the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. And in October 2014, e. i. at the age 17, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.*

*Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and a host of other world leaders in their congratulatory messages showered applauds and accolades after her commitment to supporting education for girls around the globe.*

**Key words:** Fakir Mohan Senapati, *Rebati*, education

## **INTRODUCTION:**

If we browse the history, the time to which Fakir Mohan survived was the Dark Age in Orissa (now called Odisha). His birth in 1843 witnessed the rampant superstitious and complicated rules and ruthless rituals – witch hunting, magic, supernaturalism etc - of Hinduism. As part of it, women occupied a very low status in medieval and early modern society in Orissa. They were ignored and considered as 'other' and relegated to a marginal and subordinate position to men. They were regarded as 'chattel' (a corporal moveable property) with no rights. In brief, they had no personality of their own; did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men did. The reasons for this sorry state of affairs were mainly the conservative attitudes of the people and particularly the parents of the girls. In short, this ignorance and disregard to their status and their uplift was due to lack of education, awareness and consciousness among the masses. Profile of women education in the 19th century Odisha presents not a quite favourable picture of female literacy. The number of female school goers in different schools of Odisha compared to the males of school going age is a meagre 1.3%\* in their ratio

and this sordid and tell-tale statistics is the clear indication about our concern and social security for women.

Against this shambling backdrop, the British occupied Odisha in 1803. And the miserable condition of women got a facelift with the western humanism which came along with the introduction of English education. Thanks to Thomas Babington Macaulay's minute of 1835 and also thanks to the think tanks likes Henry Ricketts, A.J.M. Mills, G.F.Lockburn and T.E. Ravenshaw who have contributed largely towards the spread of education. With their ideas of liberalism and scientific attitude and rationalism, the age-old practices and customs were put to serious scrutiny. The growing emphasis and spread of education and teaching of western ideas and practices and moreover the activities of Christian missionaries helped the people of Orissa to re-examine and re-evaluate their superstitious beliefs, traditions and customs. Notably, the educational system in Orissa before the British rule was mainly oriented towards religion, philosophy, logic etc. But with the emergence of British rule in India, secular education was imparted and religious neutrality was maintained generally. With their coming, education received greater impetuous and it was felt that through education people in general and women in particular could be made to know the consequences of social evils and would develop an awareness about the magnitude of problem. So the first step in this regard (educating women) was taken by the Christian Missionaries. With their enlightened mind and reformative zeal, they revolted against the ruthless and obnoxious practices prevailed in the then society. So they opened schools to remove the disrespect meted out by the females. The missionaries spread the female education through the Zenana agencies. 'Zenana' implies visiting pupils' house and to teach. So much so that the lady missionaries entered into the inner apartment of the both girl students and ladies and taught them. History says, the first of its kind was initiated in Balasore in April 1869 then the move spread to the other parts

of the state under the supervision of missionaries. Side by side with increasing numbers of girls attaining schools, numbers of girls' school were set up and books for them were also published. For example, Balasore was to have a boarding school for native girls in 1841 followed by Pipili, a school for orphan in that year. Similarly, in 1871 Miss Crawford, an American Missionary, started a missionary girls school at Jaleswar. That year in September, Abinash Chatterjee founded Cuttack Girls' School at Balu Bazar. Subsequently, B. N. Dey published "Balikapatha" in Oriya to promote women education. Chaturbhuj Pattnaik added another feather by setting up girls' school in Bhadrakh and Soro in 1879 with twenty students.

The lists of school continue unabatedly to encourage women education. At Dhenkanal garh some girl students got admitted in the Madhyayubraj School. Another Hindu Balika Bidyalaya was established by some Bengalis at Cuttack with 45 girl students on the rolls in 1882 to promote women education. It was towards the end of the 19th century that Ravenshaw Girls' School was started at Cuttack. In yet another instance of progressive changes of women education, by 1897 a few more girls' schools had been established in Cuttack. In the same year in July 1897, two women students took admission in the Ravenshaw College.

The women activist too joined in the band to accelerate women education, besides literary front. The emerging and enlightened educated Oriya women played an important role in the general awakening of women in Orissa. It is due to their consciousness, female education became more intense, vigorous and meaningful in their hands during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Means, they were instrumental in making education as a tool. Several women organizations too started to be formed which worked towards female education, concerning eradication of literacy. The most laudable effort was the Utkal Mahila Conference held in Berhampur in 1924. This group of women including Reba Ray, Sailabala Das, Kuntala Kumari Sabat,

Sarala Devi, Rama Devi and Malati Devi made their efforts at reforming the society and raising the standard of female education through various means and methods. They came prepared to bear the brunt of the conservative fury in their attempts at storming the evils. It is not a case that they broke down the gender dichotomy or emancipated the depressed fellowmen from the ligatures of repression, but their participation certainly brought a new spate of flavour into social reform. Their emergence in this domain softened the rigour of social resistance and made considerable headway towards eroding subordinate and marginal status to women if not totally liquidating such long groomed ideologies of sexism and male chauvinism.

One such reformer is Sarala Devi who through her discourses created a new consciousness regarding the marginal and subordinated status of women. Her important articles containing the problems of women in India - 'Hindu Samajare Nari Samasya O Samsthit' (women problems in the Hindu society) 'Adhunika Yugare Odia Nari; (Oriya women in the modern age), 'Kana sunarkatha' (about the purchase of girls on payment for marriage) appeared in the periodical Asha, in 1929 and subsequently by 1935 she had composed booklets like 'Utkalara Narisamasya,' Narina Devi, Bharatiya Mahila Prasanga, Narira Jagator and Virangana. These discourses were bent upon creating feminist consciousness in Orissa.

That the place of women was dwindled and they were ill-treated and did not enjoy their status in society is evident from Sarada Devi who was crusade against age-old social evils that affected the growth of fair sex. With the purpose of activating the women and consciously engaging their attention to the constructive works in the society as well as articulating the neo-identity of the Oriyas, Sarada Devi ignited the feminization of social and political ideas and feminist consciousness in Orissa. The articles written by her were full of revolutionary and radical ideas and they were intended to attempt to reform

the patriarchal cultural set up prevalent that time in Orissa. From the above examples, thus, it was found that how the status of women had gone to dogs and their education was in a shambles; in a deplorable condition.

Written in 1898, *Rebati* gives an account of a ten-year-old rural girl named Rebati in the backward village of Patapur\*\*\*\* of the Hariharpur subdivision of Cuttack district. Her father Shyamabandhu Mohanty is an honest person who commands respect from the villagers for his idealistic way of life. He is also an enlightened and rational human being. Influenced by the Western humanistic values, ideas and scientific spirit, he is an educated and works as an accountant of Zamindar with a monthly allowance of rupees two, but he could earn a little more by adjusting rent receipts and land records. Over all, his monthly income is rupees four. The family can somewhat afford a good living by that. Nobody says a word about there being deficiency in anything. This apart, he is a simple, humble and compassionate person who is very much liked by the people. Under his jurisdiction and authority, all are happy and nobody complains over anything with his way of working. His family comprises four members including his wife, his nonagenarian mother and the teen-ager, Rebati. With the unraveling of the story, it is found that Shyamabandhu sings devotional songs, reads the epic Bhagabata and recites Krupa Sindhu's prayers. Rebati joins with her father and listens to all this with great sincerity in evening. She is well skilled in the *bhajans* now and attracts the passers by to listen to her sing. In the meantime, the narrator introduces Basudev, a young man who has come to the village as a school teacher. An orphan, he gains the sympathy of Shyambandhu's family and endears himself to them. He is a regular visitor to the family and as such becomes a catalyst in furthering the narrative. He, who always looks upon Shyamabandhu as his father figure, tells Shyambandhu about a "school at Cuttack where girls could study and also learn crafts". Shyambandhu, initiated in

Western rationalism, immediately sees hope for his daughter: "instantly, the desire to give Rebati an education welled up in his heart". Rebati is excited at this prospect and rushes inside to her mother and grandmother announcing that she was going to study, that she was going to learn, to read. The mother who is a part of the "New Generation" is agreeable to the idea of educating Rebati, her girl child, whereas, the grandmother finds it unacceptable.

The excitement, exuberance and euphoria of Rebati were not easily digested by her conservative grandmother. Means, she threw cold water on her idea to study. To her utter surprise, her grandmother was shocked to listen the news of Rebati being taught. So she very bluntly disapproves it saying, "What studies? Girls cannot study! Go learn cooking, making *pithas* and other household chores, what's all this fuss going on?" On the one hand, the grandmother implores her son not to allow Rebati to study: 'Shyam, is Rebi going to study? Why should she study, son? What good is that for a budding girl?' On the other hand, she (grandmother) wants her to be confined within the four walls of the room; discharge household chores and menial jobs and above all to be a kitchen queen. She wants her to be like the mythical Indian women – Sita, Draupadi, Savitri – and continue to be the beacon lights for them.

In a sharp reaction to his mother, Shyambandhu replied "if Jhankad Pattnaik's daughters can read and sing Bhagabata, even the Baydehisa Bilasa Chanda why can't our Rebati read and write."

Rebati was furious and loathed at her grandmother.

"You silly old fool!" she snorted. Turning to her father, she begged and pleaded him, "Father, I do want to study."

"And so you will," said Shyambandhu.

With the sanction of her rationalist father, and her teacher, Basudev, Rebati began her education. Much to the irritation of her grandmother, picture books were bought for her and on the



auspicious occasion of Sri Panchami, she formally began learning the alphabets. In two years' time she had progressed a lot. Though she loved Rebati, yet, the grandmother still harboured misgivings about Rebati's education. Instead, she is more interested in arranging Rebati's marriage with Basudev as he belongs to the same caste as theirs.

The old grandmother loved her family very much. The invasion of Western rationalism and all that it sought to revolutionize posited a threat to the familiar environment of the old lady in the narrative. Woman emancipation was a concept unthinkable in the then Odia society which was primarily patriarchic in nature. So her adherence to non-rationalistic social laws is exhibited in the character of the grandmother, who feels threatened by the pluralism of rational humanism. She would rather, her grand-daughter Rebati mastered the skills of homemaking and got married to a man of her parents' choice; in this case Basudev. Although it may appear sacrilegious today, it was a practice in Odia society to marry girls off by the time they were twelve to thirteen years of age. This phenomenon bore validity inside its own limited society and carried no conviction with outsiders from a more rationalistic world.

Tragedy strikes on one fine Phalgun day. Like a bolt out of the blue, cholera is broken out. Its tentacles are seen at Shyambandhu whose news of being down with the epidemic spread through the village like wild fire early in the morning. Consequent upon this, the rustic villagers immediately bolted the doors and windows to keep out of the demonic deity.

Shyambandhu's wife and mother were soon driven out of their minds by worry and anxiety. Rebati ran in and out of the house, crying for help... help was neither expected nor forthcoming (St Pierre 16-17).

Instead of being sympathetic, neighbours and people of the community rejected the family and treated them as pariahs. The epidemic generated fear of such dimension that people

became almost paranoid. Instead of helping their brethren they deserted even their own kith and kin in such adversity. Superstitious, people conceived of cholera as an evil old woman who was out with her basket and broom to sweep up heads. There was no awareness or education propagated about the disease to prove to the people that they were wrong.

The infection spread in the family like quick fire and affected Rebati's mother, the second victim. 'By midday the news of her death was all over the village'. Rebati's family was completely isolated; no help was forthcoming nor expected. The only loyal friend of the family was Basudev, the school teacher. After the epidemic, the isolated family was left with an old lady, a young girl, a few cows and the land that Shyambandhu had possessed. Misfortune calls upon the family of Rebati. 'Within three months of Shyambandhu's demise, the zamindar expropriated Shyambandhu's cows as he had not deposited the last tax collection'. Worse, he also took back the three and half acres he had given to Shyambandhu'. The pathetic plight of the affected family due to abject penury and economic devastation is visible:

Team of bullocks had already been sold off for seventeen and half rupees; with what remained of the sum after the funeral expenses, the grandmother and Rebati hung on for a month. In the month following they had begun to pawn household items – a brass bowl one day, a plate the next.

Basu visited them every evening and stayed with them till bedtime. He offered them money to waive acute financial strain, but they would not accept it. Sensing uneasiness, he has stopped pushing them. Rather, he takes 1 or 2 paisa for grocery shopping and with that they manage for more than 8 or 10 days. The house was falling apart, the straw roof was worn out. Basu couldn't get it rethatched; the bales of hay he bought with two rupees of his own money rotted in the backyard.

Basudev had promised Rebati's father on his death bed that he would look after the family. But the pathetic pride

exhibited by the grandmother evokes an imaginative universality. The reader is left to understand that after the death of Shyambandhu Basudev would take on the responsibilities of the family, perhaps even marry Rebati. But nothing like this happens; the narrator parodies the reader's expectation and purposely evokes certain responses in the beginning of the story only to frustrate them later on.

The grandmother, the only living relative of Rebati, instead of piling her love on the child in her moment of crisis vents her frustration on the child.

After death of her son Shyambandhu and his wife; and the action of the zamindar, the small world of the grandmother crumbles. Buckling under grief, poverty and frustration, she finds a scapegoat in her grand-daughter Rebati. 'The old woman's vision had declined and she had a wild look about her. She no longer cried as much and took to heaping curses and abuse on Rebati: the wretched girl was at the root of all her misery and misfortune; her education had caused it all – first her son had died, then her daughter-in-law; the bullocks had been sold off; the farm hand had left; the cows had been taken back by the zamindar; and now her eyes had gone bad. Rebati was the evil-eye, the hell-devil, the ill omen' (St Pierre 18-19). The grandmother's anxiety and frustration found release in abusing Rebati. Rebati's education was not the convention of the times, girls were only to be taught kitchen craft and how to take care of their family with subservience; anything otherwise especially, Western education was looked upon with suspicion and therefore she blamed Rebati's education for the misfortune that had befallen her family. Often irritable she would call out to Rebati "Rebati! Rebi! You fire! You ashes!"(9/ 27).

As an anti-colonial critique the narrative necessitates that the grandmother in Rebati becomes the police and the preserver or custodian of the essence of culture, representing the nationalist possessiveness about 'native women'. She tries to guard her grand daughter Rebati from the invasion of foreign

values in the form of education, which is supposedly demonic and poses a threat to the very contours of culture – mouthpiece and identity of a nation. For her, it (education) is inimical that destabilises the citadel of a society; it is disastrous that deconstructs the very matrix of society. Hence, though unreasonable, she blames Rebati, Basudev and formal education for all that has happened to her family. Education a 'profane activity' of the material world should not have been nurtured. Rebati, the girl child, the representative of the future of the nation, the carrier of the cultural identity should not have been enthusiastic about education. Now that she had been, it was her turn for retribution: her suffering and the abuse that she was subjected to was apparently justified. The grandmother tartly comments: "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 23).

Rebati could be termed as a 'gendered subaltern'. In her essay, "Can the subaltern speak?" while elaborating the term Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak states that the gendered subaltern is the figure of the woman who disappears between patriarchy and imperialism. (1988. p. 306). Similarly, Rebati disappears because we never hear her speak about herself. Rebati, the 'gendered subaltern' in context, is forced to become a 'third-world woman' caught in the teeth of tradition and modernity. Fakir Mohan's social critique 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. The vibrant girl who was once not afraid to voice her desire for education: "Father, I do want to study"(St Pierre 14); is suddenly muted. As a 'gendered subaltern' she literally disappears from centre stage and is relegated to the margins of her little world. She is violently shuttled between nature and culture and assumes the displaced figure of the silent 'third-world woman'. Accused and blamed for things beyond human control, Rebati shrinks away from life itself.

'Rebati's presence no longer filled the house; gone were the days when she would be heard mourning loudly. Nobody heard her voice, nobody saw her out of doors. Her large brooding eyes, awash with silent tears, looked like blue lilies set 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. Rebati is not allowed to disappear into 'pristine nothingness' instead lives in 'an aching void' as a victim of 'competing discourses' of the time till it finally kills her. The competing discourses in this historical context refer to Western humanistic rationalism and a non-Western Odia culture with its inherent orthodoxy. Rebati's death is definitely tragic; but the significance of what it expresses in plot and character, has an affective and moral effect on the modern reader.

The contradiction herein is that, Rebati abandons all her dreams of education and emancipation and willingly falls prey to an irrational prevalent system that she herself does not understand.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Thus the visions of "Rebati" and Malala are almost identical. They visualize that a society sans education and learning, heads towards Dark Age which embodies primitive practices. Rebati's grandmother is a case in point. Though Rebati and Malala are geographically separated, they are united mentally. They stand for a common cause and concern; they share a general purpose and perspective; they advocate basic idea, concept and view. Christened with 'Education for All', they carry the message of universalisation of education irrespective caste, creed, colour and sex. The motto and motive of the teenagers is to access one's fundamental rights – that is education, the gateway to world. With the theme of a study of SELF and SOCIETY, both the votaries of education bearing the

brunt bring home the message that it is the power of education which makes us aware and conscious of our rights and privileges. Revolving around a universal credo, both the girls promote that education, which is started with one's birth and ended in one's death, is the torch bearer and leads us from ignorance to knowledge. It is one's birth right and it emancipates. Moreover, it is a continuous process; a journey from cradle to graveyard. This is what Malala exhorts in her autobiography to the world leaders to invest in "books instead of bullets". Realising that education is the harbinger of social change, the duo, with this tone and tenor, take pain to aware the globe about impact of girls' education which facilitates prime rights and empowers them to raise their voices; to unlock their potential and to demand change.

Fakir Mohan's Rebati is a time-transcending feat. Her story became an allegory for female edification and liberation. She is an icon whose pathetic tone is beyond comparison. The grand old mother represents the old belief and tradition, whereas, the teacher Basu and Rebati represent modern generation. Though with her death, Rebati's hopes of getting formal education ends in a smoke yet she is an example for others who is punished for the contemporary moribund society.

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