

Teaching about the Colonial India State and Society with *Six Acres and a Third*

By Peter Samuels

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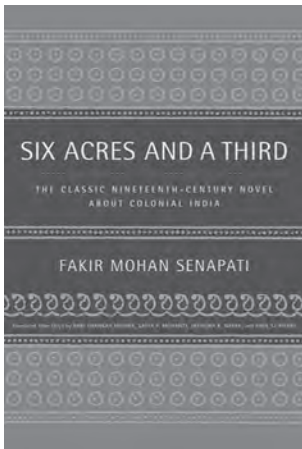
*The Classic Nineteenth-Century Novel
about Colonial India*

BY FAKIR MOHAN SENAPATI

TRANS. RABI SHANKAR MISHRA, SATYA P. MOHANTY,
JATINDRA K. NAYAK, AND PAUL ST.-PIERRE

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S*ix Acres and a Third* is an English translation of Fakir Mohan Senapati's 1902 Odia novel *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, a humorous satire set in early nineteenth-century British India. It tells the story of an exploitative moneylender called Ramachandra Mangaraj, who uses the colonial legal system to usurp the properties of people in his rural community, before being ruined by it himself.

Senapati (1843–1919) was from Odisha, a region on the east coast of India, which is home to the Odia language and people. Educated and employed in colonial institutions, he was concerned with

the damage that British colonialism had done to traditional Odia culture and society. Although better-known anticolonial figures such as Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948)—whose concerns were national, imperial, and global—might be regular fixtures in the history curriculum, students may benefit from Senapati's deeply local perspective on Indian life under British colonialism. Apart from exploring the relationship between the colonial state and rural society, *Six Acres* also presents rich portraits of women's lives and caste relations, important themes in the study of South Asian history. And the novel raises large questions about the nature of truth and evidence that are relevant to the study of history in general. Thanks to the labors of Cornell-based literary scholar Satya P. Mohanty and his colleagues, this English translation is eminently accessible to readers at all levels. Engaging but not intimidating, it spans a very readable 200-odd pages and twenty-eight bite-sized chapters. Mohanty's scholarly introduction provides literary and historical context, while a useful glossary at the end helps readers decode indigenous terms.

The story takes place in the three or so decades after 1803, the year in which parts of Odisha were conquered by the British East India Company and merged with the adjoining Bengal Presidency, a territory conquered by the British back in the 1760s. By the early 1830s, Mangaraj, once a smalltime moneylender, has come to dominate life in the fictional village of Gobindapur, located somewhere in British Odisha. His ascent has been fueled by land-grabbing, an enterprise that began when he became the *za-*

mindar of Fatehpur Sarsandha, the fictional *zamindari* where Gobindapur is located.

A *zamindari* was an estate that typically covered several contiguous villages. It was presided over by a *zamindar* (a landholder, usually a man). The *zamindar* did not own the land in his *zamindari* but, rather, the right to collect a share of the agricultural surplus from the cultivators who worked it, who themselves had various customarily recognized rights of usage to it. Some of this tax he kept, and some he passed on to the political rulers. In return, he was expected to be a fatherly steward to his community by maintaining infrastructure, keeping the peace, and so on. Certain castes—hereditary occupational classes such as *brahmins* (priests), soldiers, village watchmen, and other functionaries—were assigned service tenures (tracts of land that were exempt from the tax, as compensation for their services to the community). The British gladly inherited this system upon conquest but endowed it with sharp edges: *zamindars* could now use the new law courts to evict cultivators who failed to pay, and they themselves could lose their *zamindaris* at auction if they were late with their “revenue” payments into the state treasury. Although the *zamindari* right, like the rights to service tenures and usage, had been heritable or otherwise transferable before, the British invested property rights of all kinds with unprecedented portability.

Unlike many of the *zamindaris* that changed hands in the early decades of British rule by being auctioned for arrears, Mangaraj acquires his through a more efficient, though devious, strategy that the new colonial law courts have enabled. The existing *zamindar*, Chotta Mian, throws too many parties and ends up deep in debt. This is the perfect opportunity for Mangaraj, who supplies him with a mortgage that he duly defaults on. It is now a simple matter of suing him in court for possession.

In his role as *zamindar*, Mangaraj is no steward of the community. He exploits the peasants and forces the local market to privilege his produce. Although he lives in a large house with his extended family, he cannot even be a good patriarch. He is cruel to his kind and selfless wife, who is only ever identified by the honorific *Saantani*, or mother of the community (Mangaraj is never described as *Saanta*, father of the community). He has no interest in his indolent sons and daughters-in-law. A number of once-destitute women, at least some of whom Mangaraj seems to have lured into his household to exploit, work as maids. While many of these maids are transient members of the household, one named Champa has endured and become powerful; she has earned Mangaraj's confidence and become a party to his predatory schemes.

And what schemes are these? They involve using the mortgage trap to absorb yet more property. Ruination awaits those who succumb, and harassment stalks those who resist. The peak of Mangaraj's malevolence, and the climax of the novel, comes when he targets Bhagia and Saria, a kindly couple from the weaver caste who are happily married as well as universally liked. Mangaraj covets their relatively small tract, measuring six and a third acres, that Bhagia inherited from his father and which supplies the novel with its name. In cahoots with Champa, he comes up with a cruel plan. The couple is saddened by their inability to have children, so Champa persuades Saria that building a temple to Budhi Mangala, the

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local goddess, will help her conceive. To fund this extravagance, Bhagia mortgages his land to Mangaraj, who eventually takes possession of it. Destitution quickly destroys the couple: Bhagia has a mental breakdown, and Saria takes to crying outside Mangaraj's house, where she is found dead one day. Mangaraj's wife, the compassionate Saantani, who had sympathized with the tortured couple, dies of heartbreak.

Like all good tales of iniquity, this is one in which the villains get their comeuppance. The discovery of Saria's corpse on Mangaraj's property occasions a police investigation. Put on trial, he is acquitted of murder, but sent to prison for the lesser crime of misappropriating the couple's cow. In the meantime, his wily lawyer, whose services were secured through just the kind of mortgage that Mangaraj liked to inflict on others, claims his zamindari. Since there is no honor among thieves, Champa helps herself to the contents of Mangaraj's safe and decamps with the village barber who, bullied by her, slits her throat one night before himself falling afoul of the crocodiles while attempting a riverine getaway. Released from prison, a wounded Mangaraj returns to Gobindapur, where his fields lie fallow, and his sons having squandered his remaining assets. Writhing in pain and despair, he dies amid tortured visions of Saantani, Bhagia, and Saria, the innocents whom he has wronged.

The diverse range of female characters in *Six Acres* can stimulate classroom conversations about how Senapati, a male author, imagined women's lives in the early nineteenth century. Champa brims vocal with malice, while Saria and Saantani, who represent high virtue, are silent sufferers, vindicated only in death. Senapati himself supported the expansion of education for women and girls in his own time, and supplementary secondary readings, such as selections from Geraldine Forbes's *Women in Modern India*, may enable students to contextualize his portrayal of women in an earlier period.¹

Senapati seems to view certain castes as the guardians of traditional virtue, and the caste rivalry that simmers throughout the novel can certainly help students understand some of the nuances surrounding caste. The *khandayats* (Senapati's own caste) embody martial nobility, and we are told that they have a glorious history as retainers to the indigenous kings of old. Although they have lately been reduced to penury, they have retained their pride and still command respect in the community. Likewise, the weavers (Bhagia and Saria's caste) have also been hard hit by punitive British policies aimed at bolstering the global dominance of machine cotton. Yet although the weavers' quarter is no longer the prosperous village republic it once was, it is still a clean and well-kept neighborhood where they survive in simple dignity. On the other hand, brahmins do not come off well in the novel. For example, Shyam Malla loses his land to Mangaraj because he has to pay a brahmin to purify him after eating onions. While this, of course, reflects badly on Mangaraj, we are clearly meant to view the need for purification here as ridiculous in the first place. Elsewhere, the insinuation is that brahmins do not deserve their hereditary perks, including service tenures. In its idealization of a lost feudal utopia, *Six Acres* is therefore obviously not a work of anticaste literature. Yet in presenting a view of

caste rivalry, it can give students insight into the complexities surrounding caste, an important theme in the study of South Asia that can be difficult to teach in the abstract.

Most significantly, in *Six Acres* it is the colonial state, the entity that amplifies Mangaraj's venal propensities, that receives Senapati's sharpest opprobrium. Yet the novel is much more than a contrived morality play, where virtue and vice are aligned against each other. It is also a funny and sophisticated satire that is told by a witty narrator who persistently goads the reader into questioning the claims that people in authority, including himself, make. Questions about the nature of truth and evidence arise throughout, making the novel productive material for the history classroom. The British liked to claim that they had endowed India with rational institutions that enabled the impartial pursuit of truth and justice.

Senapati, who certainly had dealings with British officials in his own time, disabuses his readers of this illusion. In the novel, native officials, mainly the police, may just be corrupt. They bully the villagers into an investigation, partly because Saria had died in mysterious circumstances, but mainly because Mangaraj had fallen behind in his bribes to them. But British officials, with whom most Indians would have had very few, if any, direct interactions, and who really only appear in the novel during Mangaraj's trial, are shown to run a criminal justice system where legal truth is a function of racial privilege. The police investigation, which includes testimony from a large number of native witnesses, points to Mangaraj's complicity in Saria's death. But Judge Jackson ignores it and dismisses the murder charge because the opinion of Douglas, the civil surgeon who conducted Saria's autopsy, does not support it. When Isan Chandra Sarkar, the prosecutor, and Ram Ram Lala, Mangaraj's lawyer, question Douglas in court, both he and Jackson express outrage at the very thought that a European witness, and an expert one at that, could be subjected to scrutiny by native counsel. Apart from the courtroom scene, the relationship between authority and truth is thrown into question elsewhere in the novel. Doubt is cast on the authority of the Hindu scriptures and that of the brahmins to interpret them. European scholars who claim expertise on Indian history and culture are mocked. Frequent jabs are directed at the *babus* (Western-educated Indians connected to colonial officialdom), who are alienated from their own heritage when real, lived tradition can easily be found in the virtuous lives of simple village folk.

Six Acres has great potential to enrich the study of modern South Asian and world history because it can draw the attention of students to the fact that people in the past often cared most about their local communities, even if they lived at times of national, imperial, and global upheaval, as Senapati did. The novel's sophisticated literary attributes, along with the rustic earthiness of its characters and story, easily make it one of the most authentic and enjoyable indigenous writings on state and society in colonial India that one can hope to find in translation. ■

NOTE

1. Geraldine Forbes, *Women in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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