

Irreverent Reading: Humor, Erudition and Subalternity in the fiction of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Fakir Mohan Senapati

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This essay examines scenes from prose fiction in which two Indian novelists (Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Fakir Mohan Senapati) interrogated subalternity in colonial India by talking about books. It first examines narrators' frustration with books as acts of "irreverent reading" in colonial India, where the presence and scarcity of readable print produced anxieties about language and community. It then examines "reading" in the novels and compares how different kinds of irreverence allows narrators to introduce women characters as agents of very different kinds of violence in colonial India. Following insights of Gayatri Spivak, Elleke Boehmer, and Leah Price, and others, this article argues that Fakir Mohan Senapati's sensitivity to his readers' inability to access books enabled his novel to empower readers without books and emphasize how community in colonial India was constituted by the collective forgetting of women.

Keywords: India, postcolonial novel, South Asian vernacular literature, nineteenth-century literature, histories of reading, satire, early Indian novel, history of print, colonial public sphere, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Fakir Mohan Senapati

Almost a century after the first Indian book was printed, and half a century before the formal end of British rule in India, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, two novelists from the Bengal presidency talked about forms of inequality by talking about books.¹ Education, its colonial origins, and its modernizing impact on a traditional society was an important theme for almost all early Indian novelists.² However, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894) in his Bengali novels

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1 Robert Fraser, among other scholars, identifies Nathaniel Halhed's *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* published in 1778, as the "first Indian book." See Robert Fraser "A Tale of Two Cities," in *Book History Through Postcolonial Eyes* (London, England: Routledge, 2008), 3–7. British colonial rule formally ended in 1947, with the formation of the two nations, India and Pakistan.

2 See especially the chapters by Tridib Suhrud, Dilip Menon, and Udaya Kumar on Govardhanram Tripathi, Potheri Konhambu, and Chandu Menon, respectively, in Meenakshi Mukherjee ed., *Early Novels in India* (New Delhi, India: Sahitya Akademi, 2002). See also Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Pilgrim Prose," in *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*, (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Kamalakanta (1872) and *Anandamath* (1881) and Fakir Mohan Senapati (1848–1916) in his Odia novel *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (1897) employed uncannily similar strategies to describe, mock, and interrogate racial and gendered inequality in colonial India by describing narrators' and characters' dissatisfaction with books.³ Narrators alluded to books to complain that English and Indian literature misrepresented women and that educated men failed to recognize the suffering of less-privileged colonial subjects. The narrators then satirized books to introduce women who could not be described by books. These women characters themselves used books to inflict violence on foreign kings and native women.

In the series of autobiographical essays that became *Kamalakanta*, Bankim's narrator, an opium-eating Bengali man named Kamalakanta referred to English and Sanskrit books to justify colonial oppression and suggest that Bengali widows could liberate Bengal from British rule by immolating themselves. Bankim expected readers to see through such erudition, recognize the cowardice of the educated Bengali man, and laugh at the authority derived from books and colonialism. In *Anandamath*, Bankim used his own reading of an English book (W. W. Hunter's history of Bengal) and Kalidasa's Sanskrit verse to retell the story of a rebellion in eighteenth-century Bengal. In Bankim's novel, a Bengali Hindu woman, Shanti, uses her erudition and her martial skills to liberate Bengal from foreign domination.

In *Six Acres and a Third*, Senapati imagined two kinds of readers, one with and one without books, and this awareness produced a different tone of book-talk. Senapati's narrator staged "investigations" into village life guided by quotations from books. To one group, the narrator translated, evaluated, and explained quotations from English and Sanskrit books that they could not read. These explanations parodied both Oriental and Occidental knowledge systems, and empowered Odia readers to critically examine the social universe of colonial India despite their inability to possess or understand books. To the other group of "educated" readers, the narrator explained aspects of village life they would fail to understand: how land was inherited through the caste of one's birth, how, in colonial times, it could be mortgaged and lost to money-lenders, and villagers' piety toward goddesses in Banyan trees and demons who lived in communal ponds. The narrator uses this mode of double address to introduce Champa, describe how Champa talks about a book she has not read to kill another woman, Saria, steal "six acres and a third" of land, and finally, to describe how colonial law, run by educated men, fails to recognize the obvious signs of torture on the murdered woman's body. Instead of telling readers that educated men failed to recognize the suffering of an illiterate village woman, the narrator "explains" to them how an English court works, a lesson that mimics an English lesson in a village school.

3 I use English translations of all these texts: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, *Kamalakanta: A Collection of Satirical Essays and Reflections*, trans. Monish Ranjan Chatterjee (New Delhi, India: Harper Collins, 1997); Bankim Chandra Chatterji, *Anandamath, or, The Sacred Brotherhood*, trans. Julius Lipner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Fakir Mohan Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, trans. Rabi Shankar Mishra, et al. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006). Throughout this article I have used the new name "Odia" to refer to the language of the Indian state of Odisha. On September 6, 2011, the Indian parliament amended the national constitution to replace the colonial era names "Oriya" (language) and "Orissa" (land) to "Odia" and "Odisha." This makes for some confusion. Most publications I cite were prior to this change, and thus this article contains both "Odia" and "Oriya."

I argue that through a sensitivity to Odia readers' inability to access books, *Six Acres and a Third* empowered readers without books to laugh at the authority of colonial rule and acknowledge that communities in colonial India were constituted by a collective forgetting of the suffering of women.

I identify as "irreverent reading" this intertwined set of strategies: narrators parodying quotations from books, narrators mocking educated readers who have read books, characters burning books, or falsely attributing made-up quotations to books they have not read. I first examine "irreverence" in relation to the spread of print in nineteenth-century colonial India and the different anxieties it triggered in different Bengali and Odia literary cultures. These anxieties determined the subtle differences in the way Bankim's Bengali narrator and Senapati's Odia narrator talked about books. Both referred to books, but Senapati felt compelled to explain the meanings of books because he knew that Odia readers had less access to books. This difference has consequences for how these narrators introduce women, as I illustrate by comparing "Women's Beauty" in *Kamalakanta* with the chapter "Champa" in *Six Acres and a Third*. Finally, I compare how both novelists imagined their readers' knowledge of books to describe the starkly different ways in which women use books. I demonstrate that even as Senapati's irreverent narrator gave agency to readers without books to laugh at colonial rule, his characters illustrated how colonial elite oppressed the "third-world woman."⁴ Together, characters' and narrators' irreverence toward books produces humor and replicates the "non-recognition of agency" which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has defined as constitutive of subalternity.⁵

Irreverent Reading: Doing Things with Books in Novels and Theory

All reading is irreverent, but colonial rule makes each act of reading irreverent in its own way. The book historian Robert Darnton famously described that a "history of reading" would have to examine how "texts constrain readers" even as "readers take liberties with texts."⁶ In her life-long interrogation of how we read, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued even though postcolonial novels stage the impossibility of giving voice to the voiceless as "reading lessons," scholars cannot easily claim the figure of the native informant or the subaltern by close-reading scenes of reading in literary texts.⁷ In recent years several scholars have demonstrated that the linguistic,

4 Throughout this article, I follow Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak's critiques of Western academia's reification of the "third world woman." I am interested in examining novelists' imagination of the same figure only to understand how print culture enabled such imaginations by constraining and liberating the ways that novelists could talk about women by talking about books. See Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2* 12.3 (1984): 333–58; and Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity Through Anticapitalist Struggles," *Signs* 28.2 (2003): 499–535.

5 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular," *Postcolonial Studies* 8.4 (2005): 475–86.

6 Robert Darnton, "What Is the History of the Books?" in *The Book History Reader*, eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (New York: Routledge, 2006), 21–22.

7 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Literature," in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 113–97, esp. 191. Spivak refers to the last section of Coetzee's *Foe* as a reading lesson, but the entire book interrogates the anti-colonial and philosophical and cultural implications of "reading" as a strategy in literature, history and philosophy. In her theorization of postcolonial

material, and institutional consequences of colonial rule enabled the culturally disenfranchised to take new kinds of liberties with texts.

Moradewun Adejunmobi and Leah Price have suggested that scholars shift focus from “the English Book” to the “Native Book” and from “reception History” to “rejection history,” respectively. Price posits “rejection history” as a way of examining the things that “women, children, working-class or non-European men” did with books that were not simply reading, stories that are frequently buried under the “myth of textuality.”⁸ References to Indian and English literature in Bankim and Senapati’s novels qualify as “rejection history” because such parodic references are emphatically *not* signs of the influence or intertextual subversion of elite traditions through subaltern appropriation. Instead, these references and meta-commentaries, which I identify as “irreverent reading,” constituted a strategy by which novelists represented their *reception* of Western and Indian intellectual traditions as a *rejection* of the books that their readers lacked. Moreover, through a cautious and strategic parody of their education to address diverse readers, most of whom possessed either too much or too little Western education, these novelists also created a fictional space where their women protagonists staged other forms of “rejection,” as they inflicted violence on foreign and native subjects by their inability and refusal to read books. Novelists’ rejection, which in turn allowed them to represent women’s rejection, illustrates how, even as women disappeared from nationalist discourse, narrators and characters did things with books to turn the woman’s body into the “ultimate site of virtue, of stability, the last refuge of freedom.”⁹

In addition to describing how fictional women rejected books, these novelists also critiqued ways of describing women. Staging their reception of books as a rejection thus allowed educated male novelists to describe women doing nonreaderly things with books. Reading vernacular Indian novels as instances of “rejection history” thus allows us to understand how novelists talked about books to intervene in the politics of representation that made women subaltern subjects. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan reminds

reading publics, Ankhi Mukherjee follows Spivak in self-consciously worrying about the role of the “literary critic” who seeks to contextualize “singular acts of collective reading” and suggests that the postcolonial native informant who poses as a reader, too, must “die a little, too.” See Ankhi Mukherjee, “Introduction: Postcolonial Reading Publics,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 4.1 (2017): 8, 10. I follow both Spivak and Mukherjee and remain mindful of the limits of an Anglophone critic reading vernacular Indian novels in English translation, and examining women characters who are clearly more spoken about than speaking.

8 Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012) 16, and Moradewun Adejunmobi, “Native Books and the ‘English Book,’” *PMLA* 132.1 (2017): 136–37. Bankim’s widespread reputation as the “Scott of Bengal” is one such myth. Beginning with one of Bankim’s nineteenth-century reviewers, this monicker has proved remarkably long-lived. Bankim wrote historical romances as did Walter Scott, and Scott was one of the many writers whose words appear as epigraphs in Bankim’s novels. Instead of fixing the correct line of influence from Scott to Bankim, I consider it more productive to compare the different ways in which Scott, among other writers, found themselves used in novels by writers from cultures different from Bankim’s.

9 Tanika Sarkar, “Nationalist Iconography: The Image of Women in Nineteenth-Century Bengali Literature,” in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 265. Sarkar demonstrates how what Partha Chatterjee defined as the creation of women’s spaces as private, sovereign, and “already free” manifested in fiction. The evocation of women as goddesses and warrior-queens in fiction strengthened the confinement of women to the inner realm. As Sarkar puts it, “Kali reverts back to Durga, Durga becomes a household drudge (255).”

us that subalternity results not simply from disenfranchisement but rather the misrepresentation of women, irrespective of whether they were disenfranchised or not.¹⁰ Bankim's narrators present the unnamed widow and Shanti, women who liberate Bengal by inflicting violence, as women who cannot be described by bookish conventions of feminine beauty. Senapati appropriated this style of book-talk, but increased the satirical meta-commentary, keeping in mind Odia readers' lack of books. Following Price's idea that a materialist rejection history can bypass an intertextual reception history, I am disinclined to read Senapati's book-talk as the sign of intertextual influence of Sanskrit and English, via Bengali, on Odia literature.¹¹ Instead, I relate Senapati's rejection to the history of print and ask: How do these novelists' different strategies of staging their rejection enable their different imaginations of women's agency? In other words, how do novelists re-present (describe) the subalternity and agency of women by representing (that is, speaking for) the interests of reading publics constituted by unequal access to books?

Scholars of postcolonial literature have demonstrated that "reading" is intrinsic to the "postcoloniality" of both Anglophone and vernacular novels from former colonies. Elleke Boehmer has suggested the importance of examining both "postcolonial reading" and the "postcoloniality of reading," and argued that Anglophone postcolonial novels stage narrators' and characters' reading to interpellate readers and novelists into "global, national and local networks."¹² Working on vernacular Indian literature, Udaya Kumar, Sudipta Kaviraj, and Baidik Bhattacharya have demonstrated that Malayalam and Bengali writers satirized colonial education by showing how the products of such education, mostly elite Indian men, failed to read gendered and racial inequality.¹³

Udaya Kumar's examination of the early Malayalam novel's "accommodation of poetic cultures" demonstrates that Malayalam novelists borrowed from both English and *kavya* traditions to describe how educated men quoted from English and Sanskrit

10 Rajeswari Sundar Rajan, "Death and the Subaltern," in *Can the Subaltern Speak: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) 121–22. Rajan illustrates this point through the difference between Friday (from *Foe*), whose tongue has been cut off, and Bhuvaneshwari Kumari, the subject of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and suggested that despite his disenfranchised status as a slave, Friday is at best a "literal subaltern," one who "cannot—but also will not speak," whereas Bhuvaneshwari Kumari, the upper-caste Hindu woman, is the "figural subaltern," one who "cannot—but in fact does speak."

11 Such a claim could be made, given that Tilottama Misra has shown how similar were Senapati's descriptions of Mangaraj and Dildar Mian to corresponding characters in Barua's novella. See Tilottoma Misra's chapter in Satya Mohanty, *Colonialism, Literature and Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 118–22. See also note 21 for a detailed engagement with Misra and other scholars who have examined the satirical narrator of *Six Acres and a Third*.

12 Elleke Boehmer, "Differential Publics—Reading (in) the Postcolonial Novel," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 4.1 (2018): 12, 25. Equally inspirational for this article is Kortenaar's suggestion that scholars examine how "literacy has been imagined by the literary imagination" in Neil ten Kortenaar, *Postcolonial Literature and the Impact of Literacy: Reading and Writing in African and Caribbean Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2011), 21.

13 Udaya Kumar, "Unsteady Luminosity: Reading the World in Early Novels," in *Writing The First Person: Literature, History and Autobiography in Modern Kerala* (Ranikhet, India: Permanent Black, 2016) 120–64; Sudipta Kaviraj "Laughter and Subjectivity: The Self Ironic Tradition in Bengali Literature," in *Modern Asian Studies* 34.2 (2000): 379–406; and Baidik Bhattacharya, "Jokes Apart," *Interventions* 8.2 (2006): 276–94.

books to seduce educated women and explain the technological superiority of the British. The narrators invited readers to laugh at such uses of “reading” and thus expose the limitations of a colonial education.¹⁴ Baidik Bhattacharya reads the Bengali writer Raj Shekhar Basu’s satire on colonial education to argue that laughter was the “postcolonial prerogative to question” Oriental discourse. Basu describes an English teacher in a Bengali-Anglo school who teaches English boys to be “obedient and loyal subjects to the Indian government.”¹⁵ Basu thus exposes the racial arrogance at the heart of colonial education by irreverently reversing the political bias in the teacher. Postcoloniality thus emerges from an irreverent parody of colonial education. Sudipta Kaviraj demonstrates that Bankim Chandra inherited a long tradition of Bengali writers using the Sanskrit *alankara* of *vyajastuti* (“counterfeit praise”) but turned this satiric gaze on a new object: the educated middle-class Bengali, or the *babu*.¹⁶ Baidik Bhattacharya and Ulka Anjaria have examined the anti-colonial uses of humor in South Asian fiction by examining such irreverence as a mobilization of indigenous traditions of satire. Instead of theoretical frames of parody or the carnivalesque that originated in European cultural history, these scholars show how novelists “mobilized the rich cultural history of humor” and turned satire from a literary trope that “problematized the boundaries between truth and falsity, reason and unreason” into a powerful new idiom of disillusionment, dissent, and critique.¹⁷

Sumit Sarkar and Anindita Ghosh have shown that in addition to such educated natives who, like Caliban, “learned to curse” their colonial masters, a large underclass of educated Indians expressed their frustration with colonial rule through a denigration of book-learning and a valorization of unlettered piety.¹⁸ These approaches suggest that instead of asking how colonized natives wrote back (or laughed back), to their colonizing masters, it may be more productive to ask how attitudes to print were shaped by internal conflicts among communities in colonial society. Scholars have

14 See Kumar, “Unsteady Luminosity,” esp. 135–46. Kumar’s examination of “seeing” and “reading” in the early Malayalam novels directly inspires this article.

15 Bhattacharya, “Jokes Apart,” 282, 293. The scene is from Raj Shekhar Basu’s *Ulat Puran (The Reverse Puran)*.

16 Sudipta Kaviraj “Laughter and Subjectivity,” 385–86. Kaviraj defines *alankara* as “literary or stylistic embellishment” and a “combination of rhetoric and poetics” (385). Being a *babu* himself, Bankim’s parody of education emerged from a “darkly ironic sense of history achieved through reflection upon the benefits and impositions of modernity (384).”

17 Ulka Anjaria, “Satire, Literary Realism and the Indian State: *Six Acres and a Third and Raag Darbari*,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 41.46 (2006): 4799. Baidik Bhattacharya demonstrates the difference between parody’s European literary origins and its postcolonial implications in “Jokes Apart,” *Interventions* 8.2 (2006): 282. Bhattacharya’s deep commitment to a Saidian-Orientalist framework, however, forecloses a comparative examination of humor. Anindita Ghosh’s work, as cited later, opens that possibility, allowing us to compare Bengali with Odia.

18 Sarkar discusses how this community of “unsuccessful *bhadralok*” revered Ramakrishna Paramhansa, a Brahmin priest who claimed to not have read books. Ghosh examines how books aimed at this group described the ill-effects of reading. Middle-class housewives, upon reading novels, ill-treated their mothers-in-law and drove their husbands to economic slavery to earn money for their luxurious ways. Sumit Sarkar, “Kalyug, Chakri and Bhakti: Ramakrishna and His Times,” in *Writing Social History* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. 295–300; Anindita Ghosh, “Revisiting the ‘Bengal Renaissance’: Literary Bengali and Low-life Print in Colonial Calcutta,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37.2 (2002): 4329; and Anindita Ghosh, “The Battala Book Market,” in *Power in Print* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

demonstrated how the arrival of print spurred new forms of political imagination, galvanized linguistic differences among several languages (Urdu-Hindi, Hindi-Maithili, and Bengali-Odia) into political conflicts, and spurred demands for separate provinces, a process both older than and not always co-terminus with anti-colonial nationalism.¹⁹ One such conflict was the linguistic controversy between Bengali and Odia that began in 1863. Situating both novelists in a common history of the spread of printing from elite to minority communities will help me integrate and contribute to scholarship on these two novelists. Scholars have examined the significance of women characters and mined intertextual sources of humor, but not examined how social attitudes to print determined novelistic irreverence and enabled different imaginations of women's agency.

As mentioned earlier, Sudipta Kaviraj argues that *Kamalakanta* represents both "the greatest example in Bengali literature of Bakhtin's argument about laughter" and "an admission of defeat."²⁰ Similarly, scholars agree that *Six Acres and a Third* is one of the most important novels of colonial India because of the way its narrator mimics the languages of colonial power and cultural forms like *pala* that are older than colonial rule, and through this combination of old and new forms invites readers to laugh at disciplinary institutions that arrived with colonial rule: law, police, science, and a new literary "taste."²¹ Tanika Sarkar argues that by

19 The literature on this subject emerges from a sustained engagement with Benedict Anderson's causal link between "print capitalism" and "imagined communities," and is too rich to be summarized in a footnote. Two recent publications that summarize that vastness and spell out its implications for "world literature" and "comparative literature" respectively are Aamir Mufti's "Orientalism and the Making of Indian Literature," in *Forget English* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), and Sumanu Satpathy's "Wall of Words: Fakir Mohan Senapati, Premchand and Language Controversies in Colonial India," *Comparative Literature Studies* 53.2 (2016): 246–71. Mufti traces the genealogy of the Hindi-Urdu conflict, with its association of language (Hindi or Urdu) with communities (Hindu or Muslim) to the philosophical and philological work of Friedrich Schiller and William Jones, to conclude that Orientalism set the terms for what was later termed *Indian literature*. Satpathy surveys controversies from a wider geographical range, and while admitting that the "discourse of linguistic discord" was derivative, calls for scholars to examine how the connections between these controversies found their way into the fiction of individual writers. I follow Satpathy directly by comparing how prose fiction by Bankim and Senapati accommodated attitudes to books and reading, and Mufti implicitly by suggesting that "reading" illuminates richer worlds in non-Anglophone texts.

20 Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness* (Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27, 33.

21 *Pala* was a folk tradition of performance, involving satirical sketches, and Tilottoma Misra has examined *Six Acres and a Third* in relation to an 1866 Assamese prose sketch by Hemachandra Barua. Tilottoma Misra, "The Emergence of the Modern Subject in Oriya and Assamese Literatures: Fakir Mohan Senapati and Hemachandra Barua," in *Colonialism, Literature and Modernity: A View from India*, ed. Satya Mohanty (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 135–52. The scholarship on the satirical voice of the narrator is vast. In their essay "Writing Peasant Life in Colonial India," in *Fakir Mohan Senapati: Perspectives on His Fiction*, ed. Jatin Nayak (Jagatsinghpur, India: Prafulla Pathagar Publications, 2002) Jatin Nayak and Himanshu Mohapatra describe *Six Acres and a Third* as an "irreverent" re-creation of Lal Behari Day's English novel *Bengal Peasant Life*. In his "Introduction" to the English translation of the novel, Satya Mohanty observed that the narrator can be likened to a "touter," a "disreputable wit in Oriya culture" (6) and called Senapati's "analytical realism" a contribution to "anti-colonial and demystificatory social thought." In this same essay, Ulka Anjaria finds in *Six Acres and a Third* a kind of originary text of political satire, arguing that "Fakir Mohan set the stage for a further elaboration of the relationship between satire and politics by mobilizing the rich cultural history of humor" (4799). Following scholars who have examined *Six Acres and a Third* in relation to literary texts from Indian (Hindi, Assamese, Telugu) and global literary traditions (Spanish, English) I examine one aspect of the narrator's

describing self-sacrificing Hindu wives as agents of violence and anti-colonial change, Bankim laid the imaginative foundations of a Hindu nation.²² Rabi Mishra and Ulka Anjaria have argued that Senapati produced a critique of colonial society by interrogating both the silence of women in society and the forms in which fiction or other discourses could think about such silence.²³ I seek to understand how these loquacious narrators drew their authority to talk about women by talking about books, and to understand the tone of their book-talk, I turn to the anxieties produced by the arrival and scarcity of print in nineteenth-century India.

Reading and Its Discontents: Irreverent Narrators Describe the National and Local Ills of Reading

Between 1778, when Charles Wilkins printed the first Indian book, *A Grammar of the Bengal Language*, and 1897, when Senapati serialized *Six Acres and a Third*, print spread from elite to subaltern communities and produced a range of anxieties. Initially, traditional elites such as upper caste Bengali men feared that access and readability would dilute the Sanskritic aura of Indian languages, and later, Odia-speakers feared that without a culture of widespread simultaneous Odia reading, shared experiences could not translate into a politically recognized community. As pioneers of print and prose in Bengali and Odia, respectively, Bankim and Senapati believed that more printing, which led to more reading, was a good thing. Their narrators, however, balanced this enthusiasm by highlighting the ill-effects of reading. Bankim's narrator displays his erudition to laugh at the cowardice of the educated Bengali man, and Senapati's narrator, no less voracious a reader, challenges the educated Odia reader's inability to understand village life. The latter's sensitivity to his readers' lack of education and the local, as opposed to the national, ill-effects of education shows how the colonial spread of print inspired different kinds of irreverent book-talk, which in turn facilitated different imaginations of women's agency.

Historians of printing in India agree that although Jesuit missionaries cut Tamil type and did the earliest printing—parts of the Bible—in late sixteenth-century south India, the Serampore Mission Press, established in 1801 in Serampore, a Dutch colony

“irreverence” by comparing it with book-talk in a contemporaneous, Bengali novelist. See essays by Mahapatra, Misra, Rao, Vargas, and Sawyer in Satya Mohanty ed., *Colonialism, Literature and Modernity: A View from India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

22 Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

23 Rabi Shankar Mishra, “Chha Mana Atha Guntha: The Language of Power and the Silences of a Woman,” in *Early Novels in India* ed. Meenakshi Mukherjee (New Delhi, India: Sahitya Akademi, 2002) 240–60, and Ulka Anjaria (“Why Don't You Speak?: The Narrative Politics of Silence in Senapati, Premchand and Monical Ali,” in *Colonialism, Modernity and Literature: A View from India*, ed. Satya Mohanty (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 153–70. Mishra finds in Saantani, the silent suffering wife of the landlord, Senapati's nostalgia for a pre-colonial time when landlords cared for their tenants, against which the fictional landlord, Mangaraj, represents how colonial rule commodified relations among villagers. Anjaria argues that *Six Acres and a Third* is “a feminist text” because it interrogates silence on social and narratological levels, by representing the social silence of women like Saria and Saantani and the problem of describing such silence in fiction (154).

outside Calcutta, marks the beginning of printing in India.²⁴ The Serampore Mission Press was set up by John Carey, a pastor from the Baptist Mission at Moulton, who reached Calcutta in 1792.²⁵ Carey was soon made Professor of Sanskrit and Bengali at Fort William College and employed an army of pandits and scribes to write the earliest textbooks. Over three decades, the intellectual and material resources of the college and the Mission Press printed the earliest books in at least twenty Indian languages.²⁶ The traditional elites resisted this democratization of reading and language instruction. At the college, the Bengali Sanskrit scholars who Carey had employed to write textbooks produced Bengali prose full of Sanskrit words.²⁷ In the south of the Bengal presidency, the Inspector of Schools found that there were no Odia books or teachers, and thus recommended that the language of instruction in schools of the Orissa division be changed from Odia to Bengali.²⁸ Even as some newly started Odia newspapers opposed this decision, a few Bengali intellectuals who also published Bengali textbooks began arguing publicly that Odia was a dialect of Bengali and that Odia speakers should learn Bengali for their own best interests.²⁹ The indigenous Odia print culture effectively began as a collective effort to challenge this cultural hegemony.

24 The reason for this, according to Priolkar, is “the volume and variety” of the books printed at the Serampore mission. See Anant Kakba Priolkar, *The Printing Press in India: Its Beginning and Early Development* (Bombay, India: Marathi Shamshodhana Mandala, 1958), 70.

25 Sisir Das has a chapter on the foundational role played by Carey in *Sahibs and Munshis: An Account of the College of Fort William* (Calcutta, India: Papyrus, 2001). See pages 14–15 for Carey’s early life and 79–82 for the earliest printing, done in collaboration between the East India Company and the mission press.

26 Sisir Das, *Sahibs and Munshis*, 82.

27 Das, *Sahibs and Munshis*, 81–82 and Swapan Chakravarty, “Purity in Print,” in *Print Areas: Book History in India* (New Delhi, India: Permanent Black: 2004) 209–13. See Sudipta Kaviraj, “Two Literary Histories of Bengal,” in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 510–12, for an excellent and useful survey of the changing *tatsama-tadbhav* dialectic in early Bengali literature.

28 Several historians have described the lack of Odia printing, and many attribute it to the fear of caste corruption by upper-caste Hindus. J. K. Samal writes that even as late as 1860, there were only seven teachers in the Orissa division of the Bengal presidency. See J. K. Samal, *History of Education in Orissa* (Cuttack, India: Punthi Pustak, 1984), 237, and Jagananth Prasad Das, *Chitrapothi: Illustrated Palm-Leaf Manuscripts from Orissa*. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Arnold Heinemann, 1985), 29–30. Das argues that Odia speakers continued to use palm-leaf manuscripts for many years after print had become accessible and common. For a brief historical overview of the Odia-Bengali language controversy, see Panchanan Mohanty, “British Language Policy in 19th Century India and the Oriya Language Movement,” *Language Policy* 1.1 (2002): 53–73.

29 Rangalal Mitra argued that there were not enough Odia readers to justify the expense of printing books in Odia, and Kanticharan Bhattacharya argued that Odia was in fact a dialect of Bengali, and thus it was in their own best interest for Odia readers to learn Bengali language and literature. See John Boulton, *Phakirmohana Senapati: His Life and Prose Fiction* (Bhubaneswar, India: Sahitya Akademi, 1993), 70–72; Satpathy, “Wall of Words,” 256–57; and Animesh Mohapatra, “The Local and the National in the Oriya Public Sphere: 1866–1948,” PhD dissertation, University of Delhi, 2016, pages 58–59, for a cogent summary of the various positions on the Bengali-Odia language controversy. For the importance of textbooks, and the economic stakes of this political controversy, see Mohanty, “British Language Policy in 19th Century India and the Oriya Language Movement,” 53–73. For different arguments about how the literary and linguistic conflict was fueled by and created new forms of political imagination, culminating in the formation of “Orissa,” an independent province, in 1936, see Rabi Shankar Mishra, “Introduction” to “Divided Loyalties: Citizenship, Regional Identities and Nationalism in Eastern India: 1866–1931,” PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2008, University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy. <https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/99163>, esp. 19–20.

Odia-speaking teachers and clerks in the British government began printing companies and published newspapers, textbooks, and literary magazines to demonstrate that Odia was an independent language with a long literary tradition that conferred a unique identity upon its speakers. Soon these teachers began to circulate, in print, a teachable and venerable canon of Odia literature. Fakir Mohan Senapati was one such teacher; in October 1897, in the literary periodical *Utkal Dipika*, Senapati serialized the novel *Six Acres and a Third*.³⁰ In the “Bhumika” or foreword, to the first edition of the novel, Senapati hoped that this novel may provide Odia readers with much needed prose texts that were both entertaining and readable.³¹

Bankim, too, had posited the idea of readability as the prime criterion for all print and publication to reconcile the elite demand for difficult, Sanskritized Bengali with the more pragmatic, popular print cultures. In an article in the journal *Bangadarshan*, Bankim responded to a comment that a recently published book, Vidyasagar’s *Jibacharita*, was too “simple” thus:

The basic question is, what is literature for? What is the book for? For the comprehension of the reader. Writing has no other purpose but that the public should have its knowledge enhanced.³²

As a novelist Bankim certainly did not expect readers to learn “difficult languages”: after writing his first novel in English, Bankim switched to Bengali and wrote all his subsequent literary work in Bengali. The numerous references to European and classical Sanskrit books scattered throughout this work seem to compensate for the otherwise accessible prose and racy plots. In his first letter to the editor, Kamalakanta declares that he can supply the editor with all kinds of writing, based on Eastern and Western literary traditions, with any kind of “literary embellishments,” including writing “with or without footnotes.”³³ In return for an ounce of opium, the editor would get access to the entire “Kamalakanta machine,” consisting of Kamalakanta and an assistant, who could write everything from “Alphabet books” to “the history of Rome.” He stated further that he had already written a biography of “King Alfred Chitor,” as well as refutations of Comte, Herbert, Spenser, and Darwin.³⁴ Kamalakanta himself wanted to write a sequel to *Don Quixote* and *Gulliver’s Travels*, but unfortunately he had not read these books. He had read Macaulay’s essays, however, and would happily send an epilogue to those, if the editor could use it. By claiming to have read, known, and wanting to read such an eclectic range of books, Kamalakanta establishes his authority to write on a range of topics. The editor is convinced: he sends some opium and requests a column on “politics.” In his next letter, “Politics,”

30 *Utkal Dipika* translates as “The Lamp of Utkal.” *Utkal* is an archaic name for the geographical area today known as Orissa. It comes from “Uttar Kalinga,” or “the northern part of Kalinga,” referring to the king Ashoka’s Kalinga Kingdom from the third century BC.

31 Fakir Mohan Senapati, *Fakirmohan Granthāvalī* (Trutiya Khanda or Complete Works), ed. Debendra Dash, vol. 3 (Cuttack, India: Granthamandir, 2008), 124.

32 Quoted in Chakravarty, “Purity in Print,” 212. The negative comment on the Vidyasagar book was made by Ramgati Nyayaratna, a renowned Sanskrit Bengali scholar.

33 Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, *Kamalakanta: A Collection of Satirical Essays and Reflections trans. Monish Ranjan Chatterjee* (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997) 134.

34 Chattopadhyay, *Kamalakanta*, 136.

Kamalakanta displays his knowledge of European history, by two names “Bismarck” and “Gorchakov,” to irreverently mock the cowardice of educated Bengali men like the editor and the readers of the journal in which he was published.

Kamalakanta begins by declaring that Bengalis, being cowards who were conquered by “seventeen horsemen,” do not have politics: theirs was the politics of minstrels who went begging for alms, chanting the names of Hindu gods.³⁵ Soon, however, the opium kicks in, and Kamalakanta finds Bengali politics in a scene outside an oil presser’s home. A mongrel dog whines and wags his tail at the oil presser’s son, who is having his lunch. The boy throws some fish bones and rice at the dog. When the boy’s mother sees this, she charges at the dog with a stick, and the dog runs off with its tail between its legs. A few minutes later, a bull enters the compound and starts to munch on vegetables growing in the garden. When the mother threatens the bull, the animal simply lowers its head and points its horns at the woman, who promptly goes back inside. This, Kamalakanta declares, was politics: the dog represented the politics of the Bengali babu, and the bull represented the politics of European nationalists such as “Bismarck and Gorchakov.”³⁶ The chapter ends with these words and gives no further information on who these two were. Clearly, Bankim expected his readers to understand that Bismarck and Gorchakov were German and Russian statesmen without footnotes or annotations. Their success in nineteenth-century European nationalist movements threw into harsh relief the Bengali babu’s laughable failure. Instead of liberating Bengal from British, these men read books. This failure, Kamalakanta’s ability to expose it, and his confidence that readers would understand the gap between Bismarck and themselves, all depended on everyone having access to the books that colonial rule had produced.

The narrator of *Six Acres and a Third* also explained village life by talking about books, but laughed at the books he and his educated readers were familiar with. How Bhagavan Das, a weaver, came to inherit the six acres, and how he lost it, are all explained through references to books tailor made for readers with and without books. The narrator introduces the two characters who engineer the theft of land, Mangaraj and Champa, by talking about books. In the first paragraphs, the narrator is keen to prove that Ramchandra Mangaraj is a pious man because he fasts on every ekadasi.³⁷ Village gossip has it, however, that on these nights when he was supposedly “fasting” a large pot of milk was placed in his room, and taken out, empty, the next morning. To these rumors, the narrator responds:

We’re not absolutely sure what was meant by this, but our guess is that these men were slandering Mangaraj. Ignoring their intentions for the moment, we would like to plead his case as follows: Let the eyewitness who has seen Mangaraj emptying the pot come

35 Sudipta Kaviraj in “Imaginary History” identifies the “seventeen horsemen” as the Muslim rulers who took over Bengal and lost it to the East India Company. The expression reflected a common perception of Bengali cowardice, as compared with, say, Rajput or Maratha resistance to colonial rule. Bankim’s novels revise this perception by describing the Bengali Hindu as an agent, not a victim.

36 Chattopadhyay, *Kamalakanta*, 143.

37 Explained in notes provided by Satya Mohanty, as “the eleventh day of every fifteen day lunar cycle.” See “Introduction” in Fakir Mohan Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, trans. Rabi Shankar Mishra, et al. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006) 4.

forward, for like judges in a court of law we are absolutely unwilling to accept hearsay and conjecture as evidence. All the more so since science textbooks state unequivocally: “Liquids evaporate.” Is milk not a liquid? Why should milk in a zamindar’s household defy the laws of science? Besides, there were moles, rats, and bugs in his bedroom. And in whose house can mosquitoes and flies not be found? Like all base creatures of appetite, these are always on the lookout for food; such creatures are not spiritually minded like Mangaraj, who had the benefit of listening to the holy scriptures. It would be a great sin, then, to doubt Mangaraj’s piety or unwavering devotion.³⁸

Here, by applying the logic that “liquids evaporate” to argue that Mangaraj did not drink milk on fast days, the narrator invites readers to laugh at his own naiveté, and by doing so, to question the rumors in the village that the money lender was pious. This paragraph thus sets the tone for how Senapati strategically uses his knowledge of books to train readers to interrogate aspects of village life. An important step in this training is the narrator’s belief that despite lacking books, these readers could examine the unique mix of tradition and colonial modernity in the world they inhabited.

In “Village News” the narrator quotes from “the Bible” to explain why people of one caste, the weavers, did not have compost outside their houses. The narrator declares having read in the Bible that “a man cannot do two things at one time.”³⁹ Weavers could not raise livestock because they had to weave, and because they had no animals, they had no compost. The novel contains three references to the Bible as a material object and two references to the language and ideas in the Bible.⁴⁰ The narrator does not give the details, but a closer examination reveals that both of these instances refer to “The Gospel According to Matthew,” the first section of *The New Testament*, which was the first book to be printed after the Mission Press at Serampore cut the type with Odia fonts.⁴¹ By withholding this bibliographic information, the narrator lets readers believe that he has read the entire text, when in fact he may have read only the first part. Like moments in Bankim’s fiction, such a move continues the myth of textuality, situating novels in a universe of texts, without telling readers how that universe was constituted, and how the novel writer knew more than the readers about such texts. The narrator’s explanation of words and ideas from the Bible, however, suggests his awareness that most Odia readers could not follow an inter-textual conversation between an Odia novelist and European authors. Nonetheless, the narrator included these readers in a conversation that mocked the absurdity of caste-based hierarchy, which was older, but no more absurd, than the hierarchies produced by colonial rule.

38 Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, 36.

39 Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, 82.

40 Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, 37, 82, 176. The other reference is present in chapter 1, immediately after the passage quoted earlier, about Mangaraj’s piety. Here, the narrator compares Jesus Christ feeding “twelve hundred of his flock with only two loaves of bread” (37). The second reference to the material book occurs in a later chapter of the same novel, titled “Cuttack Sessions Court,” where an English doctor swears by “the Holy Bible” before testifying in court (176).

41 Graham Shaw, “Early Oriya Printing,” 37, for more on the Mission Press and how it printed *The New Testament*, the first Odia book at Serampore.

After inviting uneducated readers to laugh at his narrator's explanation of caste and the Bible, Senapati laughed *at* educated readers and explained how Bhagia Chandra came to own the titular "six acres and a third" of land. Such readers would consider Bhagia unintelligent because he inherited his father's "six acres and a third" along with his father's caste identity, simply by being born. These readers, however, had no right to make a distinction between the identity conferred by one's birth in a certain caste and the talents acquired by training. If they really believed that one's actions were a better marker of identity than one's caste, then they would not go to temples and bow their heads at the feet of Brahmin priests. While doing so, these educated people never ask if their priest possessed all the qualities of a Brahmin that are prescribed in the Vedas or if he occupied his position simply because his father, too, was a priest in the same temple.⁴² The narrator quotes a Sanskrit couplet that defines the ideal Brahmin as:

He who applies the balm of knowledge
And opens our eyes blinded by the disease of ignorance,
To a guru like him, we bow.⁴³

To emphasize the difference between a modern Brahmin and this ideal Brahmin, the narrator composes a short poem and uses the nine-syllable meter of the Odia *Bhagabata*.⁴⁴ This poem was considered sacred by many Hindus, and its words are to be taken as prescriptive of ideal behavior expected of people based on their place in the caste hierarchy. The narrator's poem is a parody, however, and describes a Brahmin who flouts all the norms of good behavior. The Brahmin of this poem, named Sundar Tripathy, eats "rice gruel with salted fish," "of learning he knows nothing," craves "curd and rice flakes," never chants "prayers or the Gayatri mantra," and never opens "his sacred books."⁴⁵ The narrator thus uses his accurate knowledge of this revered Sanskrit text to cut down to size educated readers who may believe that by reading books they had gained some kind of intellectual authority over other, less-educated members of colonial society. A poem that appeared to be pious and reverential toward the ideal behavior prescribed in the canonical texts of Hinduism actually exposed the reverence of educated readers as symptoms of hypocritical casteist bias. The narrator's irreverent re-creation of a revered Odia poem mocked the hypocrisy of educated readers and legitimized Bhagia's right to inherit "six acres" by being born in the weaver caste.

42 The four sacred books of Hinduism are the Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva Vedas. They lay down some rules regarding proper rituals corresponding to caste, including dietary and marital restrictions.

43 Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, 90. Not knowing Sanskrit myself, I have relied on Satya Mohanty's footnote, which explains that this was from the *Guru Gita*.

44 The Odia *Bhagabata* was a vernacular re-creation of the Sanskrit *Bhagavat Purana*. This is one of the eighteen Puranas (histories) of Hinduism. *Bhagavat Purana* literally means "History of the followers of the Lord." The poet Jagannath Das translated this into Odia in the fifteenth century, and in the centuries following, a vibrant culture of reading and writing developed around this text. Inscribing a personal palm-leaf manuscript with the text of the *Bhagabata* was considered an act of pious labor and inspired literacy because unlettered Odia-speakers learn the script simply to copy the *Bhagabata* for themselves. See Mayadhar Mansinha, *History of Odia Literature* (New Delhi, India: Sahitya Akademi, 1962), 97–101.

45 Mansinha, *History of Odia Literature*, 89.

The exemplary case of irreverent reading occurs in “Champa,” the chapter where the narrator introduces Mangaraj’s partner-in-crime Champa after complaining that all literary traditions that described women’s beauty were inaccurate, unethical, or obscene. In this sense, Senapati re-created Bankim’s strategy in “Women’s Beauty,” and it will be useful to examine Bankim’s essay briefly before Senapati’s. Kamalakanta lists a range of images poets use, and then discard, as they describe the beauty of their beloved: stars, the moon, birds, bees, insects, ferns, and so on. Some poets say that a woman’s gait is graceful like a swan’s, while others have compared it to an elephant’s. Utterly frustrated, Kamalakanta retorts that if women really walked like elephants, why has the British government not employed women in places where the railways had not yet arrived?⁴⁶ Opium cut through unrealistic conventions. In the clear light of opium, Kamalakanta declares that his “ears hurt” from hearing that “physical beauty is a woman’s most important trait.”⁴⁷ Instead of beauty he considered “endurance, devotion and love” more worthy of praise, and he provides an image to illustrate these traits. This image describes a woman who climbs on to her husband’s pyre and feels “only bliss,” no “physical discomfort.”⁴⁸ In such self-sacrifice lay the hopes of Bengal’s liberation from colonial rule:

When I think that it was not very long ago, when the women of this land, despite being fragile and delicate, could die thus, a new glimmer of hope is planted in my mind: I am convinced that perhaps the seeds of greatness are planted even in our hearts. Shall we not, with time, be able to demonstrate that greatness?⁴⁹

Tanika Sarkar finds in this comment evidence of Bankim’s belief that “the nation could be identified and rejuvenated by the most extreme form of violence a woman could exert on herself.”⁵⁰ “Champa” and *Anandamath*, discussed later, reveal that the tone of narrators’ irreverent comments on books determined the different ways in which writers imagined women as agents of violence. Senapati’s need to explain the references to readers makes his irreverence different from Bankim’s. In addition to citing, Senapati explains the meaning of quotations, and the parodic nature of these explanations introduces a woman who will inflict violence, not against a foreign ruler but against another native woman. In this way, talking about books to readers who were unlikely to have read them, allowed a novelist to implicitly question what kinds of violence, and directed at whom, qualified as expressions of a woman’s subaltern agency.

“Champa” begins with a problem: how to describe a woman in colonial India without appearing obscene or untruthful? In a time when modern taste (“ruchi”) was in vogue, classical Indian literary conventions appeared obscene. But modern Western conventions were highly unrealistic, as is evident in the work of some poets who describe the gait of women as galloping horses, even though horses have four feet and

46 Kamalakanta, *A Collection of Satirical Essays and Reflections*. Translated with comments from the original Bengali by Monish Ranjan Chatterjee (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 80.

47 Kamalakanta, *A Collection of Satirical Essays and Reflections*, 81.

48 Kamalakanta, *A Collection of Satirical Essays and Reflections*, 89.

49 Kamalakanta, *A Collection of Satirical Essays and Reflections*.

50 Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, 159.

women two. The narrator quotes Upendra Bhanja, who described a woman's thighs as "the trunk of a banana plant" and her buttocks "smoother than a plateau" but stops mid-stanza, fearing obscenity charges.⁵¹ Having "carried out a survey of the physical attributes of several women" in girls' schools in Cuttack, the narrator has found that none of those women had "eyes like a cat's" or any feminine attributes mentioned in "modern tasteful poems."⁵² The narrator then says that the great Sanskrit poet of the fourth century CE Kalidasa, too, suffered from writer's block. He got over it by following his literary forebears, and that is what our narrator does. He quotes the first line of a couplet in which, he claimed, Kalidasa had left a model for describing Champa:

Tanvi śyama śikharidaśana pakvabimbadharosthi⁵³

The narrator then admits that not all readers can understand Sanskrit and proceeds to translate each Sanskrit word into Odia: "Tanu" is body: Champa has a body, so she can be called "tanvi." "Syama" is "neither dark, nor fair," but a shade dark: exactly Champa's complexion. "Sikharidashana" is a compound of two words: "sikhar," meaning mountain, and "dasana" meaning teeth. The Sanskrit word refers to the woman's shapely teeth: they are so perfectly aligned that they remind one of a mountain range. Champa, our narrator says, has one front tooth growing on top of another. Together, they look like a mountain. Finally, "pakvabimbadharosthi" is another compound. "Pakva" is ripe, "bimba" is a fruit, and "adharosthi" is both upper and lower lips, meaning that the woman's lips are red, like a ripe red fruit. Champa's lips, too, are red, our narrator tells us, from constantly chewing paan, the red juice that leaks out of her mouth and stains her chin.⁵⁴

The narrator uses his knowledge of Sanskrit to creatively translate Sanskrit words, with the sole purpose of helping readers imagine a woman in nineteenth-century colonial India. He successfully demonstrates the explanatory power of Sanskrit verse, not out of any reverence for the greatness of Sanskrit, but its opposite, a poker-faced show of reverence that hides a more powerful and operative strategy of irreverence. Claiming to help readers understand Sanskrit, the narrator effectively shows that a knowledge of classical languages and literatures is useful only when used to take liberties with those compositions. Kalidasa's Sanskrit words were worth reading to the

51 Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, 58. Upendra Bhanja was a seventeenth-century Odia poet known for his verbal sophistry and eroticism. In the 1870s, at the height of the Odia linguistic nationalism, a bitter debate erupted between Odia nationalists, over the appropriateness of Bhanja's erotic verses. Some argued that Bhanja should be studied as part of the Odia literary tradition, while others felt that the erotic content of his verses was inappropriate for nationalist and community-building purposes. For more details see Rabi Shankar Mishra, "Fashioning Readers: Canon, Criticism and Pedagogy in the Emergence of Modern Oriya Literature," *Contemporary South Asia* 20.1 (2012): 135–48.

52 Mishra, "Fashioning Readers," 59–60.

53 Mishra, "Fashioning Readers," 60.

54 The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "A preparation of betel leaves chewed as a stimulant; *spec.* a mixture of chopped areca nut, slaked lime, and other ingredients wrapped in a betel leaf." <http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/Entry/135755?redirectedFrom=paan#eid>. I am indebted to Satya Mohanty's note in the English translation, which indicates that this translation is "literal, but the tone is not quite right," and to conversations with the renowned scholar of classical Indian literature, Professor Velcheru Narayana Rao, who helped me unpack the difference between the Sanskrit of Kalidasa's couplet and Senapati's translation. Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, 60.

extent that they could be creatively distorted to describe a woman like Champa, who lived in the colonial society the narrator and readers recognized. The narrator bridges the divide, on one hand, between Kalidasa's words and colonial India, and on the other hand between his educated narrator and uneducated readers by his irreverent translation, which claims to teach readers how to read Kalidasa, but at its heart, as this explanation has shown, does not really care for Kalidasa. Irreverence toward a "great" Sanskrit poet produces humor, but it is actually necessary to introduce a woman character to readers who lacked books.

Irreverent Women and Books: Burn after Reading, Kill without Reading

In *Anandamath*, Bankim also quotes Kalidasa to describe a woman. Shanti burns her Sanskrit books and disguises herself as a male warrior-ascetic *en route* to defeating Bengal's foreign ruler, Mir Jafar. Unlike Senapati, however, Bankim's narrator expects readers to understand the Sanskrit poet's verses on women's beauty. Like the mention of Gorchakov and Bismarck in "Politics" discussed earlier, here, too, an accurate knowledge of the meaning and relevance of unexplained allusions to English and Sanskrit literature was indispensable to understanding how a woman became an agent of anti-colonial violence. Champa, too, as I will demonstrate later in this section, is an agent of violence: she lies about an Odia book to kill an Odia woman. Through these characters, both novelists describe the agency of women as related to their use of books. Although both Odia and Bengali narrators' book talk amounted to "non-recognition of agency," however, the Odia narrator's sensitivity to characters who refused to read and readers who were unable to access books creates fiction that was reflexively aware of its failure to recognize women's agency and victimhood.

From the very first page, Bankim's *Anandamath* assumed readers' recognition of the importance of English and Sanskrit books to recognize the importance of his novel. The first edition began with two Sanskrit quotations. The first, from Kalidasa's Sanskrit poem *Kumarasambhava* (*The Birth of the War God*), voiced Rati's lament for her husband Kama. Kama, the God of Desire, had interrupted Shiva's meditation by sending a beautiful woman to distract him. Thus angered, Shiva the Lord of Destruction opened his third eye and reduced Kama to ashes. The third edition of the novel, published in April 1886, began with a "Notice" to the reader, which declared that *Anandamath* was based on a "true history."⁵⁵ Proof that these events were true and a "serious business" was attached in the appendix: an excerpt from "an English book," W. W. Hunter's *Annals of Rural Bengal*. Hunter described "a set of lawless banditti" known as "Sanyasis" or "Faqirs" in late eighteenth-century Bengal who went about "begging, stealing and plundering, as they pleased" under "pretense of religious pilgrimage." Even though "four battalions" of the East India Company's army were pressed into service, these "marauders" still "unhinged" the company's tax collections in Bengal.⁵⁶ Bankim rewrites this story with two key changes. First, the "banditti" were

55 Bankim Chandra Chatterji, *Anandamath, or, The Sacred Brotherhood*, trans. Julius Lipner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 128.

56 W. W. Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, qtd. in "Appendix C: History of the Sannyasi Rebellion," in Bankim Chandra Chatterji, *Anandamath, or, The Sacred Brotherhood*, trans. Julius Lipner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 295–96.

not pretending but genuinely pious. Inspired by their devotion to a goddess they called “Mother,” they changed the course of India’s history. Seeing the Muslim king routed, the East India Company was forced to take full political control of India. Bankim’s nineteenth-century novel thus described, in British-ruled Bengal, that the cause of British rule was not the cowardice but rather the bravery of the Bengali Hindu.

Second, Bankim’s novel attributed the success of the “sannyasis” to a woman’s devotion to her husband’s patriotic duty. Shanti’s husband threatens to quit the sannyasis because he could not follow their code of abstinence and longed to be with her. Shanti sends him back and decides to help him by joining the sannyasis as a co-warrior. As she conceals her femininity by cutting her hair, wrapping a portion of her sari around her bosom, the narrator voyeuristically describes her beauty by slipping in Sanskrit quotations into his Bengali sentences.

The narrator calls her a “new beknotted object in the black deerskin,” and if “any bard” were to see her now, “leave alone consigning the God of Love to destruction, he’d doubt if he’d ever be able to resurrect him again!”⁵⁷ Julius Lipner explains that the Sanskrit words in the Bengali phrase “beknotted object in the black deerskin” (*krsnatvacam granthimatim dadhanake*) are from *Kumarasambhava*, which Bankim alluded to in the dedication. There, as mentioned earlier, the God of Desire, Kama, had earned Shiva’s wrath by distracting him from his meditation to notice the beauty of Parvati, his wife. Here, Bankim’s allusion to “any bard” seeing the beauty of Shanti suggests that despite the fake mustache and shapeless clothes, Shanti would so powerfully distract a bard or meditating scholar that he would destroy Kama (the God of Love) many times over and ensure that he could never be resurrected. Before leaving, she opens a chest, takes out some cotton-pulp manuscripts, and burns them. Convinced that there was “no further joy in knowledge,” she consigns works of “poetry, literature, rhetoric and grammar” to flames.⁵⁸ The head priest at the monastery, however, refuses to allow her to join because it would distract the men to see one of their brothers’ wives with them. Shanti counters that Rama, Arjuna, and Bhima, male characters from Sanskrit epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, achieved military success not despite but because they were married. She joins, and the Hindu sannyasis begin winning battles. Thus, even as Shanti demonstrated that reading was useless unless supplemented with military power, Bankim’s references to Sanskrit verse ensured, at least for Sanskrit-literate readers, the recognition that the Bengali woman’s beauty and military prowess could together liberate Bengal from foreign domination. Senapati reversed such recognition. As we have seen, Champa is not “beautiful,” and her physical attributes are described in books that Odia readers cannot access. Later in the novel, she uses books to produce results that are as nefarious as Shanti’s are noble.

In a chapter titled “Words of Wisdom,” Champa persuades Saria to mortgage her husband’s six acres and a third of land to Mangaraj, the money lender, take a loan, and build a temple to propitiate the village Goddess. Saria hesitates because she knows that the money lender’s strategy is to increase the rate of interest and take over mortgaged land. Sensing such hesitation, Champa emphasizes how inauspicious it was for a

57 Julius Lipner, “Critical Apparatus,” in Bankim Chandra Chatterji, *Anandamath, or, The Sacred Brotherhood*, trans. Julius Lipner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 253.

58 Lipner, “Critical Apparatus,” 253.

woman to not have children by reciting four lines she “heard” read out by a priest from the *Bhagabata*:

Avoid the face of a barren woman in the morning;
 Virtuous is the woman who has borne three sons.
 A barren woman is a disgrace to her village;
 A woman without a child suffers greatly in this world.⁵⁹

In the original Odia, these are three rhyming couplets, and follow the aa-bb-cc rhyme of the *Bhagabata*.⁶⁰ Anyone hearing Champa recite it would think that the *Bhagabata* was really talking about fertility. A closer examination reveals, however, that instead of the nine-syllable lines of the *Bhagabata*, Champa’s lines have ten and eleven. Besides, the ability to compare rhyme and meter and thus verify the authenticity of what Champa claimed to have heard was possible only after literacy and access to material forms such as books. Just as the narrator irreverently composed a poem to expose the hypocrisies of educated readers and modern Brahmins, here, Champa, an illiterate woman, accurately reproduced the form of a revered Odia text, but insidiously modified its contents. In a predominantly oral culture, where Hindu community was strengthened by collective listening to a priest read out verses from a book, it was impossible to verify a quotation’s authenticity because few people possessed the “original” against which to compare quotations attributed to the same source. By describing Champa’s “quotation,” which is actually an act of “invention,” Senapati describes how the “community” that Hinduism created through the oral and public reading of books was deftly exploited by a woman to steal land.

Before Saria can protest, Champa asks, “Does the *Bhagabata* lie? Is it for nothing that everyone bows before the seat on which the *Bhagabata* is kept?”⁶¹ Saria is convinced, and later that night, visits Mangaraj with her husband, presumably to mortgage their six acres and take the loan. The narrator then reports two rumors. First, Champa was heard congratulating Mangaraj on finally having the six acres and a third, and Saria was seen “beating her head and wailing before Goddess Budhi Mangala.”⁶² Second, a few days after this, Saria’s body riddled with torture marks, was found near Mangaraj’s house, and the following day Mangaraj was arrested and tried for murder. Like earlier instances, here, too, the narrator faithfully reproduces colonial disciplinary discourse instead of believing village gossip. Instead of declaring that Champa and Mangaraj murdered Saria for the six acres, the narrator explains to uneducated Odia readers how an English court functioned. The narrator begins by declaring that the entire chapter is a translation. The trial and the judgment were in English:

59 See note 44 above for the widespread religious appeal of the *Bhagabata* and how inscribing it was a pious act. Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, 114.

60 Fakir Mohan Senapati, “Trayodasha Parichhed (Chapter 13),” in *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, in *Fakirmohan Granthabali*, vol. 3 (Cuttack, India: Granthamandir, 2008), 172. The Odia original reads: “Jahara Pilajhila nahi/ sakalu tara muha dekhiba nahi/ tini pua ti sulakhyini/ banchha barudi gaan niuchhuni/ jahara ghare pua jhia na thae/ sei maikiniea bada dukha pae.”

61 Senapati, “Trayodasha Parichhed,” 115.

62 Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, 122–23.

[b]ut we are Oriyas, and so are our readers, and the printing presses here have only Oriya type. Thus, we have translated everything into Oriya.⁶³

The narrator then mentions that the English judge usually read an English newspaper or completed a letter to his “dear lady” while the litigants argued. Today, however, the judge couldn’t do those things because the witness was an Englishman. This man was a doctor with degrees from London and was going to report his findings after his postmortem on Saria’s body. He appeared, lay his hand on “the Holy Bible,” and introduced himself:

My name is ABCD Douglas; Father’s name: EFGH Douglas;
Nationality: English; Age: Forty; Present Residence: Cuttack.⁶⁴

By using the first eight letters of the alphabet of the English language as the first names of the doctor and his father, the narrator suggests that reading an English doctor’s deposition in court had as much (or as little) meaning for an Odia audience as listening to a teacher recite the English alphabet. Just as Odia children were likely to associate the sound of the alphabet with the idea of a foreign, and powerful, culture rather than any collectively shared experience, so Douglas’s Englishness mattered more than his specific last name. Being English had given Douglas the power to examine Saria’s body, and thereby to determine how, if at all, villagers would remember her death. In his testimony he states that because there was no blood on Saria’s body, and because her stomach, bladder, and intestines were empty, her death was likely the result of starvation, not murder.⁶⁵ Mangaraj was acquitted of murder and sentenced to prison for the theft of land.

The narrator’s feigned naivety emphasized the gap between the rumors, which the villagers knew to be true, and the testimonies and sentences given the English lawyer and judge. The narrator’s desire to “explain” things that Odia readers would fail to understand because they could not understand English thus invites readers to laugh at Englishmen who claim the right to explain the visible marks of suffering on a woman’s body. Together, Champa’s “quotation” and the narrator’s “explanation” show that in a society where indigenous oral cultures were changed by literate colonial laws, women did not need to read books to oppress other women, but lawyers and novel readers, who could read, failed to recognize the ways in which women suffered.

Conclusion

I have examined how and why narrators and characters in nineteenth-century Indian novels talked about books. I have traced the difference between Bengali and Odia narrators’ irreverence to the slow spread of print in eastern India and the anxieties generated by the delayed arrival of print in certain communities. I have illustrated how a novelist used humor and erudition to talk about books to readers who could not access the intellectual form or the material contents of books. Finally, I

63 Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, 176.

64 Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*.

65 Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third*, 177.

have shown how different ways of talking about books to different kinds of readers allowed narrators to imagine women as different kinds of agents. Integrating narrators' and characters' engagement with books as strategies of "irreverent reading," I suggest that a novelist's imagination of what readers could not understand, and characters refuse to read, produces a more astute parody of colonial discourse. Instead of laughing at books that colonialism brought, such irreverent reading encourages readers to critically interrogate the meanings of education and to question how education blinded them to the suffering of other disenfranchised subjects.