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WRITING HISTORY: EMERGENCE OF CUTTACK TO ODIA LITERARY CONSCIOUSNESS
IN LATE 19TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Creative writers always search for a locale to locate their literary creations, to that space they lament, scorn, rejoice or celebrate. Some writers like Thomas Hardy (Wessex), R K Narayan (Malgudi) and William Faulkner (Yoknapatawpha) take refuge to a fictional place where as some others like T.S. Eliot (London), James Joyce (Dublin), and Balzac (Paris) situate their plot in a real city. Moreover the specified location construes the creative mind of the writer and helps in producing timeless works. Similarly Cuttack, which inhabits and nourishes major 19th century Odia writers, impinges into the Odia literary consciousness and helps in formulating undying literature. The paper explicates how the millennium city- Cuttack with its antique Barabati fort, glorious history, scenic beauty and great culture has influenced great writers and thereby has emerged as an epitome of Odia literary habitat.

Key Words: Cuttack, city, influence, emergence, habitat, history

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Before writing a literary paper in which the city Cuttack plays a prominent role, the absence of description of its origin and development makes the work inarticulate and incomplete. I should trace the history of Cuttack in a nutshell, not allowing it sound like a history thesis, for my purpose of literary study. The essence of studying Cuttack in connection to Odia literature is important as it can be compared to places like Calcutta, Bangalore, and Benaras, which grew up a cultural centre for Bengali, Kannada and Hindi/Urdu writers respectively and enthralled largest numbers of writers of the concerned area. Cuttack can be said London of Odisha, where all Odia literatures concentrated and flourished by bringing together large numbers of writers around a single city like London. My work will run parallel taking textual evidences from my selected pieces of literature and will test its aptness in sociological and historical context in the formation of Cuttack as a literary Yoknapatawpha.

Situated in Mahanadi delta between the river kathajodi and Mahanadi, Cuttack is the oldest city of Odisha and is associated with history, culture and politics of the state. Unlike the new cities, the history of Cuttack is mysterious. As presumed by historians, Cuttack perhaps developed from the word "KATAK" etymologically means the army cantonment and also the capital city. Its origin goes back to the days of King

Nrupa Keshari who made Cuttack his capital in 989A.D. on the levees of Mahanadi with the strategy to make it free from floods and help it in trade in water. The location of the city is often compared with the religious city of Varanasi which is situated between the river Barun and Asi, hence being called as “*Abhinab Varanasi Cuttack*” or new Varanasi Cuttack. The credit of constructing the stone embankment on the left bank of Kathajodi goes to Markata Keshari, who built it in 1006A.D. to protect the city from floods. Later on it was dismantled for the construction of Ring Road which became essential to protect the city from fury of flood and other natural disasters. The Ring Road was able to connect the city of Cuttack by providing approach roads on either side of the city.

The introduction to the historical city will be incomplete without any description of the Barabati fort which has witnessed many political upheavals in the city. As observed by the English historians of Odisha; John Beams, Stirling and Leckie, the fort had a rectangular area and the walls were defended by square sloping bastions. There were strong bastions at three angles, and a round bastion on the north east angle. From the centre of fort rose a huge tower supporting a flagstaff. The fort was strongly built of double stone walls. Behind the main gate way there were two gate ways with a narrow winding passage between them. The main gate ways were flanked by two lofty towers. The fort was surrounded by wet ditch full of alligators, form the chief line of defence. For communication there was a narrow bridge across the ditch to the fort. Not only from the above historical sources are the facts found but also from literary sources.

The details of the fort have also been described by the writers. The poet Chintamani Mohanty (1867-1943) in *Mukunda Dev* describes the nine storied fort Barabati. The activities in each storey have been given a detailed elucidation. In the first floor the entire all the animals involved in martial art like camels, horses and elephants were tied. The first floor was the armoury, the second floor was barracks for soldier, the third floor was the warehouse of precious jewels, the fourth floor was the royal kitchen and the fifth floor was king’s court. Secret meetings were held in sixth floor. The seventh floor was queen’s bedsit following Kings Compartments at eighth and ninth floor. To the fancied poet this nine storied building excels the five storied building of God Indra, the king of Gods. In fact these descriptions about Barabati are not fictional but true as they were validated by accounts given by Col. Motte for whom this palace resembled the Windsor palace of English King. In the long poem ‘*Durbar*’ the poet Radhanath Ray (1848-1908) has given a picturesque description of the river Mahanadi and the fort Barabati;

Utkal’s ancient glory, the memory-son,
The Barabati, today, adorns,
This historical Barabati fort,

Whose foundation is built in warrior’s life and blood? (*Durbar*)(Radhanath, 2000, 163)(My translation)

Evidences also suggest the origin of Cuttack to the time of Bhauma dynasty. Since 989A.D. Cuttack witnessed eight successive regimes. During the rule of Sama, the Ganga, and the Surya Dynasties Orissa’s political power and military might touched its pinnacle, leading to the extension of its boundaries from the river Ganga in the north to the river Godavari in the south and beyond. Under the rule of Bhoi dynasty there occurred the decline of medieval Odisha and finally inevitable downfall took place due to external invasion followed by the rules of Afghans, the Mughals, the Marathas, and lastly by British.

In the observation of Prof G.S Das “as Calcutta grew out of three villages Govindpur, Sutanati and Kalikata, Cuttack also developed into a city out of seven villages existing in this area at a distance from one another”(Cuttack One Thousand Years, section ii ;50). These signs of development to city have been portrayed in literature of colonial period, particularly in the later part of 19th century by many Odia literary geniuses like Radhanath Ray and Madhusudan Rao (1853-1912), Nilakantha Das (1884-1967) etc. The possible reason may be; the writers have mostly been fascinated by the city or the early cityscape formed a literary motif in the psyche of the writers. Radhanath travelled all over Odisha and wrote on all parts of Odisha, but the reference of Cuttack in his poetry is a few. The earliest reference in Radhanath’s poetry to Cuttack is probably *Chandrabhaga* (1886) where the poet mentions ‘*Cuttack Chandi*’, the goddess who was fair complexioned, had a ‘white flower in her dark tresses’ and looked like a sportive woman in the town. The next reference is in

Nandikesori (1887) where the poet describes the joy and celebration of the city, in the evening from the rows of lamps, and arches to music and sweet incense, when the sun sets in the western sky over the hills in Cuttack.

Even the indication of the Cuttack city in the work of Madhusudan is used in a lighter vein in the first line of the poem 'Sarat Prabhat' (Autumn Morning) where the poet along with his friend wants to escape from the din and bustle of the city, like the Irish poet W.B Yeats who wants to escape from the city where there is no place for old men and sail to Byzantium. Madhusudan Rao's pronouncement of "*Kataka Nagar, Dhabal Tagar*" regarding Cuttack's beauty and cleanliness is still haunting in every Odia's memory.

Apart from the above there are many other literary giants of Odisha who have mentioned Cuttack in their works. Pandit Govind Rath (1848-1918) is one among them who in a poem called "*Katak Darsan*" (1884), has described the city of Cuttack and praised the construction of stone walls of the Kathjudi River with which the water dashes and makes whirls. In his words;

"Water thinks, - I will break the wall of stone,
The stone wall replies in terms of a blow
Thy pride is nothing but pretention,
I am guarding the lakhs whose lives flow"

...

"The place stands on the bank of the river,
The head of the district Mr Collector,
Plays his role as administrator,
Here is the court of the king of men and king of water"

(*Katak Darsan*, 1884) *Nagar Cuttack and Pancha Cuttack* (Section iv, 223)

Pandit Rath also tells in the above poem that how the treasury of Odisha has been guarded by the guards. In the locality stands the citadel of learning, the Ravenshaw collegiate school and college in the same campus where there were many professors busy in teaching English. Pallikavi Nandakishore Bal (1875-1928), who was brought up in Cuttack also describes the Nature and dawn in Cuttack in his poem "*Prabhat Abakash*".

Pandit Utkalmani Gopabandhu Das (1877-1928) was enchanted by the evening scene at the bank of Kathajudi in his "*Bandira Swadesh Chinta*" or "*Patriotism of a prisoner*";

"O Kathajudi, gazing at the beautiful scene at your bank every evening,
Tell me, is there any such person whose mind would never be sublime?
Beholding such pictures everyman now and then,
The heart of cruel atheist would change again" (*Bandira Swadesh Chinta*) (226)

Unlike Shelly whose address to west wind is to propagate the message for change in society, the poet Gopabandhu invites the southern wind to disseminate his reminiscence of Cuttack;

"Under the open sky on the Khandagiri,
You have taken new steps
But on the way you were stopped by maiden Cuttack,
Being covered in her blue water clothes of the river Mahanadi". (226)

Cuttack with the confluence of two rivers has always stimulated the poet's imagination. Mayadhar Mansingh (1905-1973) while lamenting the glorious past and old order: "Leaving behind only a prestigious past, A cruel mockery of the despondent present" (version of Lalit Mansingh), of Odisha eulogises the beauty of moonlit night on the river Mahanadi. On the other hand Faturananda (1915-1995) gives a unique account of the streets and the people living in it with vivid zest and power in his *Sahi Mahabharat* (1987).

Not only in poetry, Cuttack is also witnessed in the novels; the pioneering Odia novelist Fakirmohan Senapati vividly describes the Cuttack city in his Novels like *Mamu* (1913) (translated as *The Maternal uncle* in 2007) and *Prayaschita* (1915). In those novels there is ample of evidences of different places of Cuttack, like-Tulasi Pur, Sahabzada Bazar, Dargha Bazar, Bakhrabad, Cuttack General Hospital (presently Sriram Chandrabhanja Medical College) etc. The first highly educated character of Odia literature Gobinda Chandra

“was studying at Cuttack Mission School and completing his matriculation over there then was studying at college” (*Prayaschita*, 17) (My translation). The educated youths like Gobinda Chandra realised that in order to keep the head of a nation high, the mother tongue should be improved. So “the students of Cuttack Collegiate School have started a meeting- called discussion meeting. The sitting of the meeting starts on every month’s first Saturday evening” (*Prayaschita*, 11) (My translation). Again this Gobinda Chandra is the first patient who has taken admission in the Cuttack General Hospital. The common proverbial saying about Cuttack is that it has 52 markets and 53 streets which have been stated by Champa of The Maternal uncle. To her “Yes my lady. This is exactly what I thought I should do. He is new to the place after all. Unless someone led the way he will get lost. Roads in the Godforsaken city of Cuttack make strangers go round and round” (Senapati, 2007, 173)

Many modern Odia writers like Guru Prasad Mohanty in his *Kalapurusa*, Gopinath Mohanty in his story *Ghara* and novel *Danapani*, Kanhu Charan Mohanty in his *Jhanja*, *Parakiya*, Godabarisa Mohapatra in *Utha Kankal* have lauded as well as criticised Cuttack. Apart from them the contemporary writers like Jayanta Mohapatra, Sitakanta Mohapatra, Rabi Singh, Jagannath Parsad Das, Debdas Chhotray have mentioned Cuttack in their writings.

Cuttack has always been a source of inspiration for the writers and geared up to provide innumerable ideas for the budding writers. On this occasion the modernist writer Guruprasad would aptly be remembered for his acute analysis of the city.

The Cuttack city dreams under the dim moon light

I have heard many times standing on the rain water and vegetable skin

The Dilruba voice of Yash Raj on radio

I have heard many times standing on the mid of the road

The call of Muazzin and Ram Naam of Khan Nagar.(*Kalapurusa*, *Guruprasad Kabita*, 2005, 72) (My translation)

So Cuttack is a dream vision for the Odia writers which entered into the consciousness mostly in 19th century.

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