



## Unearthing Exploitation: Analysing the Peasant Plight in Six Acres and a Third

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**ABSTRACT:** Agriculture is the backbone of the Indian economy so are the peasants. But unfortunately, the peasants are not duly paid. The marginalisation of Indian peasants and their struggles with land ownership has long been pressing issues in the country. This research paper examines the theme of peasant exploitation as depicted in *Six Acres and a Third* by Fakir Mohan Senapati. The study delves into the socioeconomic injustices faced by peasants in colonial India and aims to shed light on the mechanisms that perpetuated their oppression. Through a combination of literary criticism, historical research, and sociopolitical theory, the analysis contextualizes the novel within its historical period and explores factors contributing to peasant marginalization and impoverishment. The paper also explores power dynamics, social hierarchies, and exploitative labour practices portrayed in *Six Acres and a Third*. By examining the novel's depiction of peasant exploitation, this study contributes to the existing scholarship on agrarian societies and the lasting impact of colonialism on rural communities. The research emphasizes the significance of literature as a medium for social critique and historical documentation, providing insights into the struggles faced by peasants and their resilience against exploitation in colonial India.

**KEYWORDS:** Colonialisation, Peasants, Exploitation, Marginalisation, Land, Social Hierarchy, Crime, Zamindari, Satire, Critique

### INTRODUCTION

The exploitation of peasants has been a recurring theme in literature, reflecting the historical and societal dynamics that have shaped the lives of agricultural labourers. One notable novel that delves into this subject is *Six Acres and a Third*. Authored by Fakir Mohan Senapati, a prominent figure in Indian literature during the late 19th century, the novel presents a poignant narrative that highlights the socioeconomic injustices faced by peasants in colonial India. Fakir Mohan Senapati considered the "Katha Samrat" and "Utkala Vyasa Kabi", is the first Indian novelist to incorporate vernacular language in his work as well as rural characters and dialogues. For his vast contributions, Dr Mayadhar Mansingh called Senapati the Thomas Hardy of Odisha. Many of Senapati's works including *Chaa Mana Atha Gunta*, translated into English as *Six Acres and a Third* reflect on the sociocultural condition of Odisha during the 19th century. It is an instance of the first progressive Indian novel and the first Indian novel to deal with the feudal Lord's exploitation of landless peasants.

*In the words of Satya P. Mohanty, "Fakir Mohan Senapati's classic Oriya novel is a marvel of 19th-century literary realism, complex and sophisticated. It seeks to analyse and explain social reality instead of merely holding up a mirror to it. The novel's literary innovations changed Oriya literature forever"*

*Six Acres and a Third* by Fakir Mohan Senapati is set in colonial India and depicts Indian culture in the early decades of the nineteenth century, depicting a story of money, greed, property, and theft. The novel encourages the narrator and reader to interact actively. With his distinct storytelling style, the narrator engages and retains the reader's attention throughout. The essential weapon of storytelling is humour, which demands the reader's participation in the critique of society. The four foundations of humour, satire, paradox, contradiction, and irony, are all evident throughout the story. Fakir Mohan used humour to attack and criticise the colonial social and political structures of the time. Thus, comedy, combined with wit and intellect, is used to reveal the novel's villain, Mangaraj's, oppression and deception. When incorporated into the narrative's allusive language, comedy acquires subversive aspects by criticising trickster-like behaviour and revealing colonial interactions and attitudes.

In this research paper, we aim to critically analyze the theme of peasant exploitation as portrayed in *Six Acres and a Third* and explore its broader implications within the context of the novel. By examining the historical, political, and economic aspects surrounding the lives of peasants, we seek to shed light on the mechanisms that perpetuated their oppression during the colonial era.

## THE ARRIVAL OF THE LAND REVENUE SYSTEM

The choice of *Six Acres and a Third* as the primary text for this study is significant due to its distinctive portrayal of the agrarian society of Odisha, a region that witnessed significant changes under British rule. Through the lens of the protagonist Ramachandra Mangaraj, Senapati weaves a narrative that reveals the multifaceted nature of exploitation faced by peasants, ranging from land-related issues to exploitative labour practices.

The Britishers' land revenue settlement is recognised as the primary and largest source of income collection for the East India Company to manage the administrative procedure in India. Lord Cornwallis launched the Zamindari system in 1793 through Permanent Settlement, which marked the land ownership of the partners permanently without any necessity for agreed rent or occupation rights for legitimate farmers. Following the implementation of the permanent revenue system, also known as the land revenue system, the Zamindar was compelled to pay the maximum amount of money earned by agricultural processes. The consequence of the land revenue settlement in India is detrimental to Indian farmers. The Zamindari system collected land tax from farmers through intermediaries known as Zamindars. The government's portion of total land revenue received by zamindars was fixed at 10/11th, with the remaining going to zamindars. West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh had the highest prevalence of the system.

Under this system, the peasants had to live at the mercy of the Zamindars who made them work at their lands without any pay. The marginalisation of Indian peasants and their struggle for land ownership is not only an economic issue but also a social and political one. The land has significant cultural and emotional significance for peasants, being intricately tied to their identity, livelihoods, and traditional farming practices. Dispossession from ancestral lands disrupts social structures and exacerbates socio-economic disparities, contributing to the perpetuation of poverty and social unrest. By examining the complex themes and narrative techniques employed by Senapati, we can gain a deeper appreciation of the experiences of peasants and their struggles against exploitation in colonial India.

## THE QUESTION OF LAND OWNERSHIP

Land-related issues emerge as a central concern in the novel, reflecting the precarious position of peasants. The title itself, *Six Acres and a Third*, alludes to the limited land ownership of the protagonists, Bagia and Saria and the subsequent hardships they endure. The story highlights the constant threat of eviction and displacement faced by peasants, as landlords and moneylenders exploit their vulnerable position, often through unfair land agreements and exorbitant interest rates. Both have a deep connection to the land, and their experiences highlight the significance of land ownership and its impact on their lives. The land in *Six Acres and a Third* represents not only the physical space but also the livelihood, identity, and social standing of the characters. It becomes a source of conflict, as different individuals and groups vie for control over land resources. The novel also explores the social hierarchies and power dynamics that perpetuate the exploitation of peasants. The zamindars and moneylenders exercise significant control over the peasants' lives, wielding their influence to maintain their dominance and economic advantage. The portrayal of social discrimination and unequal access to resources underscores the deep-seated inequalities faced by peasants, as their social status and economic opportunities are restricted by the prevailing societal norms.

For Bagia, his land is the representative of his pride, independence, and self-sufficiency. His six acres and one-third of an acre of land hold immense value for him, as it is his only means of livelihood and sustenance. Bagia's attachment to the land is evident in his constant efforts to protect and cultivate it. He works tirelessly, facing various challenges and hardships, in order to maintain ownership and make a living from the land. Bagia's aspirations and dreams are tied to the land. He sees it as a way to improve his social standing, secure a better future for his family, and escape the cycle of poverty. The land becomes a symbol of his hopes and aspirations for a better life. On the other hand, Saria, Bagia's wife, views the land primarily as a burden and a cause of suffering. She bears the brunt of the labour and hardships associated with cultivating the land. Saria is aware of the limitations and struggles that come with their small landholding. She sees how the land, instead of offering prosperity, brings debt, exploitation, and physical exhaustion.

The contrasting perspectives of Bagia and Saria regarding the land reflect the complex realities of rural life. While Bagia emphasizes the importance of land as a means of survival and progress, Saria's viewpoint highlights the challenges and limitations that come with land ownership in an oppressive social and economic system. Through the experiences of Bagia and Saria, Senapati portrays the multifaceted nature of land ownership. He sheds light on the power dynamics, economic pressures, and societal

constraints that shape the lives of individuals dependent on the land. *Six Acres and a Third* presents a nuanced exploration of the role of land in the lives of its characters, reflecting the broader social and economic issues prevalent during the colonial era in India. Moreover, the novel delves into the psychological impact of land ownership and its significance in shaping individual hankering and relationships. It explores themes of greed, power dynamics, and the desire for social mobility tied to the possession of land.

At its core, the central theme of *Six Acres and a Third* is the loss of Bagia and Saria's land that Mangaraj has set his eyes and heart on. Mangaraj is the prototypical exploitative coloniser who spreads his scheme and develops many more similar agents, one of whom is Champa, his maid. Bagia and Saria, the poor couple are childless and serve as a vehicle for Fakir Mohan Senapati to explore the broader themes of social norms, family, and inheritance in rural colonial India. In the traditional Indian society, bearing children is considered essential for a couple's social status and respect. Childlessness was often stigmatised and regarded as a curse or a sign of divine displeasure. Saria is desperate to become a mother Champa uses this as a tool to exploit the couple and trick them into selling their land. As per Mangaraj and Champa's plan, Champa convinces Saria to build a temple to please God so that they will grant them a child. The poor couple get tricked but as they do not have the humongous amount to build a temple, their last resort is to mortgage their land to Mangaraj.

## EXPLOITATION AND PEASANT PLIGHT

Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Six Acres and a Third* expertly depicts the socio-cultural situation of Orissa. Gobindapur is akin to Raja Rao's Kanthapura in that it represents a microcosm of Indian life under British control and exploitation. Mangaraj is a symbol of the exploitative ruling class that is headed by British colonial rule. The emerging modernism in laws and social structures fostered by the British forces traditional village life and religion, morals, mythology, and local identity into the corner. Mangaraj, who was initially introduced as a rural landlord and moneylender has a free hand now that the moral binding of old laws and conventions has been eliminated by the entrance of the most recent British laws and institutional setup, the flaws of which he fully exploits. On the surface, it is just a story of Ramachandra Mangaraj, an evil and corrupt feudal lord who uses the new legal system introduced by the Britishers as a tool to exploit the peasants and make money out of it. However, as the story progresses, several layers are unfolded and we see many other implications. The readers witness that only poor peasants, Mangaraj have exploited and tricked others too. Without sparing either the meekest or the weakest, Mangaraj has exploited almost every one of the Gobindapur village. Mangaraj's evil has no limits.

*"Our Mangaraj was never one to discriminate between his own property and that of others. According to the Shastras, only the small-minded make a distinction between mine and thine."*

Senapati uses a satirical and humorous tone to make the readers aware of the evil deeds of Mangaraj. The narrator's critique acts as a compelling lens through which readers gain insights into the nuances of rural life and the difficulties that ordinary people encounter. Senapati's tale encourages readers to focus on the need for reform and social change by revealing harsh truths and societal inequalities, leading to a larger conversation on social concerns and the pursuit of a more equitable society. By manipulating the court against Chhota Mian, Mangaraj easily misled and deposed him as Zamindari. Chhota Mian used to spend money overly and had quickly gotten indebted, making him readily exploitable by the cunning Mangaraj. Chhota Mian, due to his lavish lifestyle of throwing numerous parties is tricked into taking a loan from Mangaraj. But he is unable to pay back those. What is next? Mangaraj sues him. Also, we see Shyam Malla, Mangaraj's cousin being tricked by the latter. Mangaraj catches Shyam eating onion and as per the then Brahminical society, eating onion in a Brahmin household was strictly prohibited and even considered a sin. Shyam had to sell his land to Mangaraj to pay the Brahmins who purified him. This is ironical and one of Mangaraj's ways to exploit his cousin and get his land because throughout the novel Senapati in his satirical tone as a narrator aware the readers that Mangaraj also used to consume onion and order them through Champa, his accomplice in every crime.

Mangaraj takes advantage of the villagers and compels the local market to prioritise what he sells. Champa and Mangaraj are always devising exploitative schemes. And what are these schemes? They entail using the mortgage trap to absorb even more property. Those who capitulate face ruin, while those who fight face persecution. Moreover, *Six Acres and a Third* delves into the challenges faced by peasants in navigating a complex web of legal systems and bureaucracy. Peasants often find themselves entangled in legal disputes, struggling to protect their land rights, or facing injustices in the legal process due to their lack of resources and representation. This further exacerbates their vulnerability and reinforces their exploitation. Although Bagia and Saria take a loan from Mangaraj to build a temple dedicated to their local deity, they are unable to pay back the loan in the stipulated time. Again, Mangaraj plays his dirty politics and eventually possesses the six acres and a third land. Champa is also equally evil. She has set his eyes on the poor couple's cow- Neta. Having lost their land and cow, the couple is devastated. For Bagia, the land is not just his source of income, he has personal sentiments associated with the land. Bagia had inherited the land from his father, and losing it is equivalent to losing the last memory of his father. Saantani, Mangaraj's wife who is seen as a motherly figure all throughout the novel also warns Mangaraj of his evil deeds. But he pays no heeds.

Mangaraj exploited his agricultural employees in every manner imaginable, including their diet and nourishment. Those who did not conform to his methods, whims, and fancies were lectured by him on how beneficial his formulae were for the latter. No other farmer could sell his produce at the market until Mangaraj's farms had sold their whole yield. Several incidents in the novel deal with the implications of hegemony and submission. The subjection of the working class, i.e., peasants, small-scale land owners, and other workers, is the main victim of the *Six Acres and a Third's* catastrophe. After losing his land, Bagia is devastated and he suffers a mental breakdown. Saria, although not as attached to the land as Bagia was equally affected by this. Losing her cow was the last thing she ever imagined because Saria nursed the cow like her child. Saria falls into deep despair and is discovered wailing in front of Mangaraj's house. While the emotionless Mangaraj continues to torment them, Saria dies outside his house, dealing a crushing blow to Mangaraj's god-fearing and sympathetic wife, Saantani. Saantani likewise departs the earth devastated and disillusioned, dying shortly after Saria. After Saantani's death, the novel proceeds toward a chaotic climax. Because Saria's body is discovered on the premises of Mangaraj's house, the police initiate an inquiry, and Mangaraj is forced to battle a court case in which, although being cleared of murdering Saria, he is found guilty of violently and cunningly stealing their cow- their only hope.

Towards the end of *Six Acres and a Third*, the concept of Karma is established. Every bad character is punished for their sins. Although Mangaraj was not charged with the murder of Saria, he was charged with the illegal of Saria's cow. Mangaraj was forced to mortgage his own property to Ram Ram Lala, the astute lawyer who battled his case in court. Mangaraj loses everything to the lawyer, and the zamindari follows in Mangaraj's footsteps, usurping other people's land and possessions. Champa, who all throughout the novel seemed to be Mangaraj's accomplice and promised to be with him in his thick and thin was actually after his wealth. Champa, flees with the local barber, stealing the contents of Mangaraj's safe. While the duo was fleeing, the Barber, bored with Champa's constant banter and conversation, slices her throat as the narrative unfolds. When the barber falls into a river while crossing it after decamping with the contents of the safe from Mangaraj's household that Champa had stolen, he is devoured by crocodiles. After his bail, Mangaraj discovers that his sons have neglected his lands while he has been away. While the fields lay fallow, his sons have squandered away all his remaining possessions, and Mangaraj becomes a sorrowful sight, haunted by visions of his unfortunate wife, Saantani, and the couple- Bhagia and Saria, and all the innocent and meek people of his town whom he had harmed. Ramachandra Mangaraj eventually dies a similar death to that of Saria, in despair, dejection, and sorrow.

## CONCLUSION

*Six Acres and a Third* depicts a huge waste and death environment in which both the oppressor and the victim succumb to their own contradictions. After Mangaraj's zamindari is taken away from him and is sold to a lawyer, who, according to rumors in the community, "will come with ten palanquins followed by five horses and two hundred foot-soldiers" to take over Mangaraj's vast land. Ordinary villagers respond to this news by recalling an old proverb: "O horse, what difference does it make if you are stolen by a thief?" You do not get much to eat here, and you will not get much to eat there. We shall remain his slaves regardless of who becomes the next master. We must protect our own interests." This shows that Mangaraj's death was followed by the birth of a new Mangaraj, yet for the villagers, nothing changed. Senapati transports us to the 1830s, exposing the flaws of the British Empire through his art realism. Senapati's novel offers a voice to the silent peasants. He was through his labour and prolific writing in several genres, he was essential in bringing Odia literature and language attention. *Six Acres and a Third* sheds light on the fact that coloniser used fear and exploitation as their apparatus. Senapati's narrative humour is a widespread vehicle for exposing the horrors and limits of colonial power. It also invites the reader to fully participate in questioning colonial life and existing social standards. The tale unfolds along subversive lines, illustrating life in colonial India in general and Odisha in particular.

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