

VERNACULAR MODERNITY AND COLONIAL PRIMERS IN ORISSA

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ABSTRACT

With the introduction of British pattern of education in India, thereby Orissa, several changes occurred in teaching disciplines, subject matters and curricula. Introduction of English and westernization of textbooks came along with social movements such as 1857 and others and its aftermath witnessed serious changes in schools. This paper argues that in Orissa this pattern acquired a significant transition in the discipline of ethics. Taking school textbooks of the 1890s to 1920s this paper will explore how colonial ethics imparted through textbooks had the intention to civilize the native mind.

KEYWORDS: Teaching Discipline, Ethics, Literature, Vernacular Modernity, Colonial Primers

INTRODUCTION

Sahitya Patha, a 1918 Oriya textbook,¹ prescribed for Class V students anthologized a story entitled “*Dharmabuddhi O Paapabuddhi*” which may be translated as ‘Good Idea and Bad Idea.’ The story centralizes two characters—Good Idea and Bad Idea—who are symbolic of good and evil acts of human beings. Bad Idea, who is uneducated, thinks of earning money with the help of the educated Good Idea and persuades him to go for a foreign trip. A foreign trip, according to *Papabuddhi*, is to gain knowledge, money and understand modern technology. They undertake their voyage and succeed in earning a fortune. On the way back, Bad Idea persuades Good Idea to hide part of the wealth in a nearby jungle to avoid unnecessary expenditure by their family and relatives. One lonely night, Bad Idea digs the wealth out and brings it home. After some days, Bad Idea asks Good Idea to bring some wealth, and they dig the place find nothing. At this, Bad Idea blames Good Idea of theft and treason, demands his share and takes the matter to the king, and claimed that the Lord of the Tree is his witness. The king visits the spot next morning to verify the matter. As is planned by Bad Idea, his father accuses Good Idea of theft from inside the trunk hole. Good Idea understands the trick, puts some straw into the trunk hole and burns it. Bad Idea’s father comes out half-burned, reveals the truth and the king orders a death penalty to *Paapabuddhi*. At the end, the story indicates that one should think about the negative consequences of one’s evil act before executing it. The story is important for several reasons and raises numerous important questions on colonial education. First, the foreign against the locale—the locale stands for poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, where as the foreign stands for wealth, knowledge and scientific education. Secondly, in the 1920s, upon subjugation of the whole Indian Territory too we see a fictional king awarding the death penalty against the backdrop of British supremacy. Thirdly, imparting ethical education to children is significant to colonial primers that would discipline the children and control their thought against all evil acts. Ethics, as is well known, as a prosaic discipline of teaching, has been a colonial construct. Significantly, with colonial pattern of education, it makes a comeback in several other disciplines of teaching through

³ *Sahityapatha* by Jagannatha Mahapatra and Mrutyunjaya Ratha was prescribed for Class V in vernacular schools of Orissa during the 1920s. It contains chapters such as *Dharmabuddhi O Papabuddhi* (Good Idea and Bad Idea), *Tushara Khanda* (The Iceberg), *Bharateswari Victoria* (Victoria, the Empress of India) and sixteen other chapters on varied topics.

colonial textbooks. Written or translated by the native educated, the chapters and ideas—highly censored—transgress the old religious ethics to contemporary ethical principles. People, even in business, have to be ethical in principle—an age-old idea makes a comeback with a colonial touch.

A similar trend can be located in textbooks of the late 1880s, 1890s and early twentieth century. A list of such colonial books used in vernacular schools include: *Uriya Grammar* (1898), *Sahityapatha* (1918), *Sanjama Siksha* (1925), *Kindergarten Songs / Shishukhela Gita* (1914), *Dhanamalee* (1916), *Neete Nalini* (1925), *Odiya Shishu Bodha* (1924), *Sahitya Patha* (1918), *Model Uriya Reader* (1899) and *Sahityaprabha* (1936). These textbooks were intended to teach ethics and to provide knowledge on language, literature and socio-political issues of the contemporary period. An analysis of select chapters from above-mentioned books will help to show how they were intended to teach ethics and purpose of civilizing mission of colonial government was being served through vernacular education.

Vernacular education prescribes subject lessons and introduces the teaching pedagogy that suits the contemporary socio-cultural activities conformed by society. It intends to teach students according to the needs of the time. In a sense, vernacular education reflects vernacular modernity or in other words, both are inseparable from one another. It is evident from the subjects and curricula adopted in the colonial period in Orissa.

For instance, *Udiya Chaturtha Pathya Pustaka* (1901), a translation from the original Hindi version prescribed for Class-IV students in vernacular schools for instance, provides knowledge on ethics, gives idea on the British Crown and its “glorious” rule over India. For instance, the chapter, “Benefits of Indian State from the British Raj” praises British Crown for its disciplined and successful governance. British rule has removed all antisocial activities such as theft, banditry, injustice and violence from India. The chapter also presents that it has improved Indian social life with the introduction of education and medical facilities for all, improved communication system, new improved postal system, rail and road services and with the introduction of modern technologies. The technological advancements such as printing machines, cloth factories and sewing machines have made life easier and improvement in trade and commerce has improved the natives’ status. Like Tennyson’s writings, the chapter praises the British Crown and its governance to the maximum presenting as honest, brave and kind ruler with all the necessary skills and intelligence in them. This shows the intention of colonial education. It is to show all improvements: social, educational, judicial, medical, political and other ways during the British rule. This is to colonize the native minds, to trap them mentally, to make them inclined towards British rule. It tries to give a picture of British rule as the ideal one and it is for the overall developments of the natives. This is the instance of colonial educational practice to control the mind of the natives through education. The chapter reflects that British government was in the process of correcting and civilizing the natives through establishing disciplined governance. However, it is an exaggeration to represent the government as ideal. The chapter only presents the government’s developmental works for the natives and gives no hint of their colonial motif. This shows that text is not simple but with the political one. It is intended for the benefit of the colonial government in taming the minds of the native students.

The chapter *Aitihashika Bisaya, part-ix* projects the establishment of English Empire in India as astonishing and a famous event. It praises English people as superior among all the four categories of European people, Portuguese, Polish, French and English, who had come to India. The chapter entitled “Queen Victoria” praises the British Crown, the royal family, and their nobility. The chapter ‘English Rule in India’ begins how after defeating every power that existed earlier, the whole country is now governed smoothly by the English. It gives the idea of the twofold rule: government of India and the local government in state. It also shows the power distribution and hierarchy in the colonial government. It concludes

that the contemporary governance is the best one and people are satisfied and happy with it. The intention of all the chapters is to hypnotise the minds of the native students in favour of the colonial rule. The blending of the chapters on ethics that one should be loyal, truthful and helpful to the good governance and the noble kings and chapters detailing the nobility of the British crown and the praise of the English governance as a successful and able one has the only intention to colonize the minds of the native pupils. The chapter teaches to accept British rule for its ideal governance. Vernacular education here tries to bring a change in the mindset of the native students and acts as vernacular modernity. It tries to tame and hypnotise the minds of the students to civilize them. Thus, the colonial motives of civilizing mission are fulfilled through vernacular modernity in the form of vernacular education.

Another textbook, *Sahityaprabha* (1936), prescribed for Class VIII and Class IX in vernacular schools has a chapter entitled 'Prakriti' meaning nature, which presents the whole creation of God as nature. Human being also comes under nature. However, 'man' is considered different from nature on the ground that with the use of intelligence, 'man' has made his own civilization. 'Man' is proud of his technologies. But according to saints, these machineries are the cause of his plight and 'man' is no different from other animals in natural life processes such as eating, sleeping and other biological needs. Man can be healthy both physically and mentally in his natural livings instead of living in towns away from nature, which gives different diseases and ultimately premature death. The tribes in different *Garjats* are simple, and truthful, but modernity is polluting them. Modern city dwellers die early due to impure lifestyle, he has no faith in his neighbour, no natural consolation is there. Rousseau's naturalism is admired everywhere yet it is not used in practical life Modern civilization without man-nature relation is the prevailing norm. This chapter is ethical in the way of teaching pupils value of country life, truthfulness and being sociable. This chapter shows the bad impacts of city life and good impact of lives in villages. It teaches pupils to know the modern way of thinking the pros and cons (of modern living in towns and in nature's lap) rather to go by the norms in a traditional way. It helps to change the traditional mindset of the pupils, helps in building in them analytical power and make them think and act in accordingly.

Earlier traditional education intended purely to provide knowledge on tradition to the learners. The text *Chatasali Boli* (*Chatasali Poems*) deals with subjects on ethics in poetic form meant for moral lessons, with social situations and ritual songs. These moral lessons were intended not only to impart ethics and human values in the minds of schoolchildren but also to teach the societal order, social customs and religious themes and tried to fill the minds in such knowledge that lead a simple and peaceful life. Colonial education, on the other hand, intended to inculcate in the minds of the natives the virtuousness of the colonial rule, to convince them that British rule is the best one and is for the overall development of the natives. Colonial education was trying to hegemonize the natives and is the most successful weapon for the civilizing mission. Colonial Orissa the period of the British administration (1803-1947)—was the period of assimilation of the traditional education system and the projected modern English mode of education. With the new mode of education, the traditional education and its pedagogy got a shift from the indigenous to the projected modern system. The subjects taught earlier also got a shift along with the medium of teaching—from native Oriya or Sanskrit/Urdu language to that of the English or the dominating Bengali language. There existed the teaching of Hindu and Muslim religious texts in the traditional mode of education which included its purview to house Christian religious subjects. The teachings were chiefly in poetic form earlier, but the new system introduced the prose form. The poetic form of the traditional education system is evident from lessons such as *Koili* songs, *chatashali boli*, and *pahi-ana* number table for mathematical calculation. The neo-colonial texts chiefly patronized the prose form. The eligibility criterion of the teachers under the colonial education system became the training to teach in contrast to that of the caste, age and marital status in the traditional system. Earlier

desirous knowledge of Sanskrit or Urdu for a teacher shifted to that of knowledge in English and the local languages for teaching in a vernacular school.

There is a significant departure in the choice of subject and theme in the choice of textbook towards the beginning of the twentieth century. Textbooks used in schools during this period, included chapters that reflected nationalism. Subjects of European or British interests, which were being taught forcibly as part of the curricula, became centered on nativity—highly Indianised and slowly a native system of education—native in subject and approach came into existence. Subjects related to occupations according to castes of pupils took the form of the western modern system of education which involved western science and philosophy and western socio-political subjects. It can be seen clearly from school texts like *Oriya Chaturtha Pathya Pustaka*, where the chapters “Health and Hygiene”, “Pet Animals” and “Queen Victoria” are the varieties. Books such as *Sahitya Patha* (1918) and *Sahitya Prabha* (1936) were examples that contain chapters on nationalistic spirit. For instance, the chapter ‘Utkalaputra Madhusudana’ or ‘Madhusudan, Son of Utkal’ deals with the life and works of Madhusudan Das. It gives the details of his life, his acceptance of Christianity that helped him economically, to receive good English education and an esteemed position in society. He could be the first person from Orissa to go to Calcutta for higher study and he is the person to represent Orissa in the council of the colonial government. This inspires pupils in several ways—first to go for English education, second is to serve the government and then to serve people and the nation. The intention here is make the pupils feel the success of the educated people like Madhusudan was possible through English education and through the involvement in government service. Side by side, the story reflects the feeling of nationalism in the mind of the pupils. Hence colonial education, in a sense, provides knowledge and indirectly inculcates western modernity in the minds of the native children. This could blend the local and the western ideas and ideologies resulting in vernacular modernity.

From the first story of *Sahityapatha*, the intriguing speech of *Paapabuddhi* is worth noting. He says: “If man does not go for foreign tour, he will never gain technology, knowledge and wealth.” It represents the beneficial idea of travel as a mean to gain knowledge, new idea and to accumulate wealth was the lesson for schoolchildren in the colonial pattern of education. Colonial textbooks, like the modern-day textbooks, have been political to a significant degree. The inclusion of subjects and contents are crucial to colonial motif but has significantly helped in the formation of colonial modernity from which the idea of decolonization has been a trend. Choice of subjects and themes are indicators of the process of such a transgression.

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