

Female Identity and Conduct Book Tradition in Orissa

The Virtuous Woman in the Ideal Home

Feminist critics and historiographers have studied the place of 'advice for women' texts vis-a-vis female identity formation in Bengal during the late 19th and early 20th century. Regrettably, however, little or no work has been done in the context of Orissa. This essay focuses attention on a three-volume work *Gruha Laxmi* by Jagabandhu Singh published during the late thirties and early forties in Orissa.

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I

Structured in the form of a dialogue between an educated husband who diligently coaches his unlettered wife regarding the ideal wifely conduct, works like *Gruha Laxmi*, the three-volume work by Jagabandhu Singh published during the late 1930s and early 1940s in Orissa were widely circulated and received popular acclaim and sanction. They enjoy a great deal of popularity in parts of rural Orissa even today.

Judged against the backdrop of a widening interest among women in female education and their desire to participate in public space, *Conduct Books* such as those by Singh may be seen as an ambivalent male response at best or an attempt at outright patriarchal control at worst. The conflation between Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of benevolence and prosperity, and the wife who allows herself to be shaped as an 'ideal' woman (read "self-effacing") by a 'superior' spouse is obvious; it is a frequent and insistent trope that exploits popular mythology and iconography for a largely regressive agenda.

I shall also underline in the essay the prevalent male reservations about western education for woman recurrently voiced in contemporary journals. Finally, I shall invoke the pioneering role of early literary women in Orissa whose writings stand out as an effective contrast to the 'conduct

books' like *Gruha Laxmi*. These contributed to consciousness raising among women in the state.

II

A number of features seem to mark the coming of female education into the state of Orissa. Education for girls was initially confined to a few members of the Christian community. In 1871 for the first time a school for Hindu girls was set up at Cuttack in the house of Abinash Chandra Chattopadhyaya (*Utkal Deepika*, Vol 6, No 38, September 30, 1871). Even by 1881, the school had registered practically no growth; nor could it catch the public imagination. The number of girls had increased to a mere 25 (*Utkal Deepika*, Vol 16, No 44, November 5, 1881). Even after the school ran for 10 years at Cuttack city, only four Hindu girls could be enrolled. This fact was much regretted by the then editor of *Utkal Deepika* who drew the attention of parents and urged them to send their girls to the school in larger numbers (*Utkal Deepika*, ibid). Similarly, the *Utkal Deepika* in its issue of September 21, 1871 published a notice by Sri Abinash Chandra Chattopadhyaya, the secretary of Cuttack Hindu Girls' School. The announcement is an effective commentary on the state of female education in Orissa:

A school has been set up in this (Cuttack) city for the education of Hindu girls. Till the construction of a separate building,

instruction will continue to be imparted in my house. The school shall remain open from 10 am to 3 pm. Some may find it hard to send their daughters due to lack of escorts. Please note that a maid-servant attached to the school will pick up girls from their respective homes and drop them back after closing hours. Only young girls from respectable families can be admitted. More details can be had by writing to the undersigned.

-Sri Abinash Chandra Chattopadhyaya
Secretary, Cuttack Hindu Girls' School.

Both men and women championed female education in Orissa. Many men wrote letters in *Utkal Deepika* in support of the cause. Similarly, writing in another journal *Mukura* a contributor, Ramesh Ch Mohanty went on to ask in his essay entitled 'Women's education': "Most of the arguments that we offer in the context of Stree Sikhya have a single source, namely, fear. We all fear that by the spread of such education, the dominant position of men will go. However, the age of domination is over. It is time for equality now. Once women are educated, they may not look up to you, but certainly they will treat you as fiends. Will that relationship not be more endearing?" (*Stree Sikhya, Mukura*, No 9, Pausa, 1333 Sala, pp 219-220).

Despite this apparently sympathetic attitude, the approach towards female education remained traditional in many quarters. For instance, presiding over a prize-giving ceremony held on November 12, 1871, commissioner T E Ravenshaw declared, "the purpose of female education was not to teach the girls European manners, but to make them good mothers and efficient housewives and enable them to maintain family accounts. He regretted that the Oriyas were in this sense lagging behind the Bengalis." This fact is clearly borne out in the following table:

Year	Oriyas	Bengalis	Others	Total
1871	2	10	—	12
1881	2	20	—	22
1884	15	30	—	45

Source: Tabulated from *Utkal Deepika*.

A number of primers were produced for the use of girls of different religious

backgrounds. They include *Dialogue Between Mother and Daughter* (Christian Literature, 1869), *Sabitri (Girls' Reader)*, Dey's Utkal Press, Balasore, 1872, 'Basanta' (a story for women, written originally by Leslie, translated by Reverend J L Philips, 1873), *The Duties of Husband and Wife* by Reverend J Philips, 1876, *Balika Patha* (first part) by Baikuntha Nath Dey, 1877 and many others.

Despite these developments, opposition persisted vis-a-vis female education in the state. At times, the voice of a concerned girl gives rise to a cry of despair as we see in the poem of Sushila:

What use is schooling for girls?
Our countrymen ask:
Isn't women's lives meant
for family duties alone?
If learned they shall not go
for sure
to "Kutcheries" for service.
But will roam around
in unkempt hair.....

- 'A Girl's Cry'
By Sushila, a student of Mission Girls'
School, Cuttack
Utkal Deepika, June 13, 1885
(My translation)

The anxiety of Sushila was not unfounded. A great deal of male reservations was expressed in various columns of newspapers and periodicals. The tendency throughout was to portray female education as an unmitigated source of western waywardness, a gateway for chaos. It was also viewed as destructive of family values and social cohesion. The discourse often came disguised as a humorous account where female bonding was pictured as a dangerous trade union activity. This was a refrain that continued right up to the middle of the last century. Enlightened social legislation in favour of female equality and empowerment was generally viewed with antipathy. For instance, the journal *Kumkum* published from Bombay by Litho Press and edited by a progressive literary couple: Deba and Nuru Mahapatra featured in its issue, No 6, 1949, a letter entitled 'Only for Men' by Prafulla Kishore Pattnaik, Puri:

From the pre-historic days, woman has always identified herself as the wife and mother of such and such person. There is always the need of a medium for the sake of her identity. That is a law that distinguished the difference between man and woman. However, a male is always known by his manhood. There is no need to highlight his identity. Because he

inhabits the outside world everyone knows him well,....

Similarly, *Kumkum*, No 7 and 8, June 1950 has a tongue in cheek article entitled 'Nikhila Bharata Patni Sangha' ('All India Wives Association'). There is occasionally a response to such articles in the form of banter. For instance, the article 'Akhila Bharata Swami Samiti' ('All India Husbands' Association') seeks to take sweet revenge on patriarchal pretensions (*Dagara*, 14th year, No 3, 1950, pp 5-8).

III

It is in this context that we may now assess the role of Advice for Women Texts. In Bengal for instance, didactic texts such as *Gruha Laxmi* and *Ramanir Kartavya* focused on the desirable conduct of women before and after marriage. These attempted moral instructions, especially wifely obedience, through elaborate conversations between a much younger and admiring wife and an older husband, carried out at night. Judith Walsh's well-documented essay 'The Virtuous Wife and Well Ordered Home: The Reconceptualisation of Bengali Women and their World' (Judith Walsh, *Mind Body and Society: Life and Mentality in Colonial Bengal*, Rajat Kumar Ray (ed), Oxford University Press, Delhi: 1995, pp 331-63) brilliantly records the 19th century 'advice for women' texts in Bengal. These texts had many parallels in Orissa as well. They enjoyed a wide currency. For instance, the 1946 issue of *Gruha Laxmi*, by the famous Jagabandhu Singh, had gone through an impressive five imprints. In contrast, Sarala Devi's 'Narira Dabi' ('The Rights of Women'), *Hindustan Granthamala*, Cuttack, 1934, a pioneering text, had a single imprint. The iconography of the cover picture of *Gruha Laxmi* provides an eloquent commentary on the agenda of the author. The cover shows the picture of a benevolent Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity. Saree-clad, she is shown wearing a crown, emerging from the placid waters. On her right we see a young elephant, with its trunk raised in an act of salutation. The elephant here symbolises the ritualistic presence of wisdom and auspiciousness. The presence of swans and flowers add to the overall aesthetic appeal. Goddess Laxmi carries in her two hands lotuses while the other two, pointed downward, signal an act of benediction.

The picture cleverly conflates goddess Laxmi with the ideal housewife. The

underlying idea, reiterated at several times inside the text, is to posit her as the source of a desirable wifely conduct. In *Gruha Laxmi* Part III, dated 1940, Singh explains his mission in the following words in the introduction to the book:

Indian women are generally described as creatures confined to home. We see before our eyes the nature of education for men; female education is decidedly worse. ... education in the schools and colleges is confined to a few. Beyond the textbook and the syllabus, there is very little knowledge available. Girls in our country do not remain in formal institutions of learning beyond the age of 14. Therefore, they should be given such texts where by they can enhance their general knowledge. They must know many things in order to be a good housewife. To fill such a need *Gruha Laxmi* has been composed (*Gruha Laxmi*, Jagabandhu Singh, Part one, first edition, Cuttack Trading Company, 1940, p ii). (All translations of passages from *Gruha Laxmi* are by me.)

This note of hope is soon followed by an appropriate and inspiring invocation. The underlying note here is that by the reading of *Gruha Laxmi*, the heroic women of India, the great 'Ramani' of Bharata, would give birth to noble souls. May they fulfil the lofty task expected of them so that a new Bharat would be born again!

In the preface to the volume, dated 1946, the author after duly elevating the lady of the house to spiritual heights of a goddess Laxmi, holds out an appropriate warning:

It is true that Hindu women so far have not succumbed to the lure of *Alaxmi*. One must ponder, however, whether higher education currently imparted to women would make the continued worshipping of Laxmi possible. The day the Hindu woman refuses to accord respect to the household ideal, that will surely be the beginning of *Alaxmi* (Singh 1946: 3). (*Gruha Laxmi*, Jagabandhu Singh, Part I, fifth edition, Cuttack Trading Company, 1946, p iii). Another fear of Singh is the unwillingness of a newly educated wife to enter into the kitchen. As he asks pointedly: "to relax in bed and read novels is not the duty of the wife. Alas the modern educated wife, a veritable terror at home, has begun to hate cooking. Cooking is the most important duty among all activities. For without cooking, what shall we eat? And without food how shall we survive?" Singh's exhortations for the ideal wifely conduct soon reaches an apex. For instance, what should an ideal wife do in the absence of her husband? Singh is forthright in his message:

There should be the use of no make-up

when the husband is away. Equally should she refrain from eating well or dressing well in his absence! She should find no use whatsoever in luxury items at such times. This is the 'Dharma' of all devoted wife, for such women the husband is truly the source of all joy and fulfilment! His joy and sorrow are hers as well (ibid, p viii).

Jagabandhu Singh is clear that his words are not a matter of moral sermons but are meant to be implemented in life, especially by housewives. As he explains in his *Gruha Laxmi* Part II: "Be a well-deserved Aryan woman by performing the right action, and get worshipped in the world. Nothing will be achieved only by the reading of books!... women who have the noble task of bringing forth children into life must acquire the right kind of knowledge. It is not enough for them to pass only BA or MA. The knowledge that will make them the ideal wife, mother, daughter and the Laxmi of the house, is what must be cherished!" (*Gruha Laxmi*, Jagabandhu Singh, Part II (year not given) pp 23-24).

There are many such episodes in *Gruha Laxmi* that affirm the value of the right 'education'. For instance, chapter 3 of *Gruha Laxmi* Part II alludes to the unfortunate suicide of Swarnalata from the neighbouring Bengal. The wife suggests that "perhaps it would have been better for Swarnalata to remain unmarried and safe. She could have studied further, educated girls and made them ideal wives and daughters." The husband has no answer to this and quickly closes the discussion.

At times, the husband offers a number of statements as self-evident aphorisms. Many of these clearly promote patriarchal thinking. For instance, in chapter five of *Gruha Laxmi* Part II, we see the following: "the moon looks beautiful because it is in the midst of planets and stars. The wife looks beautiful in the company of the husband. The king looks beautiful in the presence of the people. However, knowledge looks beautiful everywhere" (p 47). Similarly, "those with nails, horns, and arms are not to be believed. Equally untrustworthy are women and princes" (p 48).

There are other conversations equally worth noticing from the gender point of view. The following serves as an interesting example.

"Husband: Ramachandra was born long ago! Today everyone chants his name. He is worshipped as a living God!"

Wife: Yes, indeed! I feel a sense of unease however when I think of Sita!

Husband: You might feel bad if you think

of this fact alone. But you need to take a larger view of the matter!" (p 60)

In another sequence, the husband suggests that the songs children sing ought to be meaningful. These, in his opinion, ought to cater to the specific gender needs since boys and girls are meant to carry out different tasks in life. Predictably enough, the song meant for the girl child urges upon her to get up early, to be an efficient manager of home and the kitchen, to be a *Gruha Laxmi* who is a "property of others" and to be a Sita, Damayanti, Laxmi or Saraswati. For only then can Bharat and Utkal wake into a new life!

On the other hand, the male child must leave early for the school; he must concentrate in studies so that he could be a Pandit. For, is there a greater jewel for a boy, than knowledge? He must not play with ordinary pupils. He must get up early without delay, listen to heroic lores and join the generation of the brave! (pp 78-79).

IV

Thus, it would be seen that the *Conduct books* by Jagabandhu Singh create and promote a discourse, which advances a largely male-oriented agenda. It is an interesting response to westernisation and female education. In the process, it often takes recourse to intelligent and skilful means for pushing in an ideology of female containment. Many of the rhetorical strategies employed look, on the face of it, innocuous enough. However, presented in the conversational mode between an older male figure with authority and power and a younger spouse "willing" to learn, the outcome is left little in doubt. It must be remembered that the internalisation of the secondary status for the woman/wife takes place at a domestic site, which is probably one of the few private spaces for the young wife. The space contains simultaneously an outlet for carrying out intimate intellectual, emotional and physical/sexual interaction between the spouses. Thereby it becomes a vital site for shaping the 'rightful' female behaviour and wifely conduct.

Significantly enough, while the *Conduct books* continued their mission, Oriya literary women around the same time were voicing an alternative rhetoric of female empowerment. For instance, the celebrated *Utkal Sahitya* regularly carried a column by Suprabha Devi called *Nari Prasanga*. Suprabha was the illustrious daughter of

Biswanath Kar, the editor of *Utkal Sahitya*. She along with her sister Narmada Kar consistently fought for female education and empowerment. For instance, volume 30, 1927, issue of the journal carried, (pp 244-45) among other items, an account about Miss Gertrude Bell, a highly educated woman whose career was held up as a worthy of emulation. Equally exemplary, according to her, was the exploit of Miss Banu Matwala, a Parsi woman, who had excelled in physical culture and had just returned from Denmark. "We hope", says Suprabha, "that may Indian women will now get trained in the gymnasium to be set up by Miss Matwala. For it is absolutely essential for women to take part in physical culture along with mental education. No longer can a woman afford to be a delicate creature! Today she aspires for freedom and therefore she must build her body and mind. Or else she can never have the boon of full freedom (p 244)

Similarly, other issues of the journal talk approvingly about 'woman of ancient Greece', 'a conference of Muslim women', 'women in the field of science', 'the military training of American women' as well as 'legislative assembly and the demand of women' (pp 207-08). The 1928 issue, under the same column (pp 207-08) offers

a flattering portrait of a woman magistrate and a woman barrister. There are also favourable accounts of a Hindu-Muslim marriage and the achievements of women in education. Likewise, 'Nari Prasanga' of 1927 (pp 550-51) informs the reader about Nari Mangala Samiti of Calcutta, a new woman's periodical from Bengal entitled *Banga Lakshmi* and the report of All-India Women's Conference.

In addition, literary women like Reba Ray ('Nirabe' *Utkal Sahitya*, Chaitra, 1304, Sala, (1897) pp 51-53), Kuntala Kumari Sabat ('Adhunika Dharma Samasya', *Utkal Sahitya*, 1391, 31/9, 10 Pausa, Magha, 1331 Sala, pp 391-94), Sailabala Das, 'Janasadharanare Stree Shikhya Bistarara Upaya' ('Ways of Spreading Women's Education'), *Utkal Sahitya*, No 2, Jyesta 1323 Sala, pp 73-80), Bilasini, Kokila Devi, *Utkal Sahitya*, No 20/5, Bhadra, 1323 Sala, (1915), pp 231-34), Sarala Devi ('Narira Dabi' ('Rights of Women'), *Hindustan Granthamala*, Cuttack, 1934) and others wrote extensively on women's issues and contributed to a new thinking on the participation of women in public space. Issues like widow re-marriage, women's participation in the national freedom struggle and the trade union movement, etc, were all taken up.

The exact nature of the impact of literary feminism in Orissa is yet to be assessed fully. Similarly, very little attention has been devoted so far by the critics to the relationship between this body of women's writing vis-à-vis the conduct book tradition. Serving mutually antagonistic goals, the two traditions seem to meet rarely, although the two dominant discourses do show an awareness and critique of each other. Of the two, it is unfortunately the advice for women texts that clearly have had the upper hand. Their legacy continue till today and their looming shadow is still felt in many of the educational, literary and cultural institutions of contemporary Orissa; clearly a fact to be noted by those attempting to bring about gender justice and equality among the sexes in the state. 

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Proposals along with CV are invited from staff of University departments/Colleges/Research Institutes of the following States to write a paper on State Finances in their respective State. Under an umbrella programme of *Capacity Building in Budgetary Analyses at the State Level* funded by the World Bank, this Institute will provide for each accepted proposal financial assistance of Rs 30,000 (thirty thousand only). The States are:
Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

The authors will have the entire responsibility for obtaining necessary permissions and collecting necessary information. A draft paper will have to be completed and submitted latest by March 30, 2004. The draft papers will have to be presented in a conference to be organised at Delhi, for which separate funding will be available. In the next stage the draft papers will have to be finalised incorporating the latest available information, if necessary with guidance from established researchers as determined by the Steering Committee for the umbrella programme. The finalised papers will be published in an edited volume. The papers should be concise (about 20-25 pages) but comprehensive, covering all major issues in State finances.

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The proposals may be sent to the following address by February 4 at the latest:

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