

Sachi Rautroy's Village Poems: (Locating) Interstices of Margin-Centre Dialectics

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Sachidananda Rautroy (1916-2004), known in the literary world as Sachi Rautroy, is one of the pioneers of modern Odia literature. His uniqueness lies in his futuristic poetry and revolutionary passion, sustained by a tender alarm, a loving conviction in humanity and an insightful trust in the heartening potential of literature in making a new civilization. Rautroy's corpus of writings is vast and his literary activities are wide-ranging; thus he is known as the architect of a new age in the historiography of Odia literature. A poet, critic, novelist, story-teller and progressive intellectual, he was hugely influenced by the French Symbolists. On his birth centenary, this paper is a tribute to him, attempting an interpretation of some of his poems where village life plays a vital role in discovering the place and paradox of human life, while answering to the age-old existential questions of life.

Odia poetry has a prosperous legacy which is centuries old, starting with its earliest form in the *Charyapada*, the Buddhist poetry collection from the 7th to 10th centuries. Since Sarala Das penned the *Odia Mahabharat* in the 15th century, Odia poetry has evolved to newer forms and movements. The 16th century saw the *Odia Bhagabata* by Jagannath Das and other poets of the Bhakti movement¹. In the medieval period, Upendra Bhanja wrote in a language that was inclined to the Sanskrit poetics, and the form was *Reetikabya*². Towards the later part of the nineteenth century, Radhanath Ray, the national poet of Odisha, and Bhima Bhoi, the saint poet, wrote the poetry of protest for the subaltern. In the first part of the 20th century, patriotic poetry was written by the *Satyabadi* group of poets, the pioneer being Gopabandhu Das, the freedom fighter and litterateur. Then, a group of romantic poets, known as the *Sabujas*, came to the forefront. The ultimate modern period in Odia poetry came post-independence, towards the 1950's, with a sea change in the approach to poetry, along with the shifting socio-cultural scenario in post-colonial India, with the influence of Western modernism. Sachidananda Routray, known as Sachi Routray, is considered to be the pioneer of modernism in Odia poetry, writing a poetry of transition from postcoloniality to the winds of globalization in the social order. His poetry has registered that impact with poems like *Baji Rout* and *Pandulipi*, which

¹ The Bhakti Movement refers to the theistic devotional trend that evolved in medieval Hinduism, originating in the seventh century Tamil South to spread to the North, reaching its zenith during the 15th and 17th century.

² Medieval Royal court-culture and poetry.

were hailed as milestones of progressive Odia poetry. In the 1950s, he rejected Marxism and took to Modernism. In his anthology '*Kabita 1962*', he has written a postscript where he talks of Modernism as a literary movement allied to Existentialism, Absurdism, Surrealism and Symbolism. In 1960, Odia poet Guru Prasad Mohanty wrote his long poem, *Kalapurusha*, which was inspired by T S Eliot's 'Waste Land'. This modernist approach to poetry was called *Prayogabad* in Odisha, and was experimented upon by poets like Ramakanta Rath, Sitakanta Mohapatra, Saubhagya Kumar Mishra and Kamalakanta Lenka. Sachi Rautroy started with his Marxist poetry, moved to the *Sabuja* poetry and then to the *Prayogabad* tradition, excelling in all three movements of Odia poetry.

Sachidananda Rautroy was born on 13 May 1916 at Gurujang in the district of Khurda, Odisha. His father, Prasanna Kumar Rautroy was a leading lawyer, a well-known political figure, and Congress leader of Khurda. Rautroy was adopted by his great uncle, Sadananda Rautroy, as the latter had no male child. Mukta Devi was his real mother, but he was brought up by his great aunt Hemavati, the wife of Sadananda. Sachidananda's grandfather, Madhusudhan Rautroy, was the *Dewan* of the huge state of Boudh. That someone coming from this elitist background could write the poetry of Nature, village being his narrative and rural hinterland being his locale, as he embarked upon writing poetry of village and dealing with themes as diverse as nature and subalternity, is phenomenal. Rautroy is one of the few poets to portray mystical states of existence and his poems hold similarities with the Buddhist and the Yogic scriptures. He subscribed to the idea of education of Man by Nature. In this he was to some extent influenced by Rousseau, Wordsworth, Jibanananda and Tagore. He says in his finest poem on Nature and life, *Pallishri*, that inclination towards Nature may teach one more of existence, of the sacred and the profane, than all the scriptures can.

It is a Herculean task to categorize Rautroy as a poet on a specific theme, as he has changed his direction more than once as a poet. He started his poetic career as a romantic poet, writing about love's magnificence and the beauty of country life. His second phase was that of a pragmatist, a progressive individual, displaying avant-gardism, a satirist, a modernist; and in his final stage, he became a poet with a complete vision, looking at humanity with prudence and wisdom. Juvenile romantic yearning, divine longing, conventional optimism, nationalistic dedication, artistic escapism, love of country life, dedication to the cause of the subaltern, anxieties of modern life, issues of nationality, nationalism and nationhood, and an imaginative zeal, while he was well-versed with humanistic thoughts—these were the prominent features of his poetry.

A thorough understanding of his work, vis-à-vis the centre-margin perspective as explained by postcolonialism, the dichotomy of the centre and the subaltern, will need an interpretation through tools like association, comparison, correspondence, isomorphism metaphor, resemblance, morphological homology, iconicity—the tools

closely associated with analogy. Ecocriticism can be the theoretical tool to understand the narrative of the village in his writings. Ecocriticism differs from other critical discourses in the sense that it is not just an abstract academic exercise where some accepted methods of criticism are applied to the interpretation of a text and evaluative opinions are formed. It is the exigent and demanding participation of the author and the critic with the subject that creates its distinction scrupulously. In fact, it is a form of Cultural Criticism. It is not an objective structure of criticism, which we can interestingly call 'The Linguistic Turn' (Literature, Ecology, Ethics) that heavily depends on widening the linguistic resources of a given language, and of Odia language in this case. Ecocriticism has the potential to save criticism from the edge of an ideological passion. It brings a coherent judgment to literary criticism. I do not suggest that there is no philosophy or political belief implicated in environmental writing; rather, by approving an absolutely argumentative and ideological position, ecocriticism will undeniably fall short to record the complications and pressures of the current ecological panorama. Rautroy's ecological concern was beyond any political or ideological standpoint, immersed in the *books* and *brooks*, thus above any one-dimensional approach via the theoretical tools.

Narrative of the village life is an interesting attribute of the poetry of Rautroy. His poetry touched upon issues like ecological balance, environment, village economy and sustainable growth. He is a poet who paints the spirit of human evolution. Freedom of the heart and soul plays a distinct role in his narrative. Adoration of Mother Earth in *Pallishri*, revolutionary thoughts in *Abhijan* and *Baji Raut*, and social realism in *Pandulipi* bring about his unique approach to literature. The distinctive idiom, experience and trends of Rautroy's writings may make one marvel, if his writings could be paralleled with Tagore's aesthetics, Jibanananda's village narrative, Eliot's sense of history, Nazrul's triumph of youth, Shelley's sensuousness, Coleridge's sublime, eternal time and Mallarme's use of the language of power. The arrangement of his poems can have two implicit sections—we have the issue based poems that introduce morphology, folk impact, village life as the designation of innocence, with poems like *Patheya* (Pathway), *Pandulipi* (Manuscript) and *Kavita* (Poem). Next, serious, focused writing, which is the transition of the first phase, maintaining a chronological progression of time, providing material for the reader's imagination to work, with poems like *Abhiyan* (Expedition), *Raktashikha* (Flames of Blood) and *Pallishri* (The Rural Beauty). For Rautroy, like Coleridge, "through time, time is conquered" (Kessler, 77). Like Coleridge, Rautroy did move forth and backward in time, maintaining equilibrium between time present and time past.

Sachi Rautroy's narrative of the village is concerned with village as a phenomenon, presented not in seclusion, but in an assorted milieu of narratology - a mirror of real countryside, transformation and revolution as modes of progress, as an epitome and interrogator, and as recollection which is a mode of redemption for the poet. His soul-searching narrative of life is concerned with the life of man, approached

holistically, projecting him as a trendsetter of poetic taste. Rautroy's tone is futuristic, when he writes:

“Poetry is no longer capable of expressing the whole of human life in the manner of an epic...There was a time, however, when an epic could express the...genius of a nation and the national character. But the age of epic is over. Poetry shall not take a turn towards ‘Romanticism’ either, at least in the present century. It is clearly visible. The movement is, obviously, towards classicism...What is the mission and ambition of new classicism? Even if it is not possible to express life as a complete whole, new classicism aims at symbolizing the ‘whole’ within a small fragment of the same life.”(*Kavita*, SRG, 179)

His village is located on the periphery, but still it vestiges the centre of the periphery, successfully undermining the perception of a city-centre, and dislodging the centre-periphery question of identity politics. Thus, I read Rautroy's centre-periphery equation of the village from the following points of view:

- Village life as a seminal understanding of the existential issues, the ethnographic literature emanating thereof.
- Village as an underdone object, interpreted as a reminiscence, nostalgic resurgence, or representation of subjugation, where, sometimes “one man assaults another.”
- Village as the nation, the Rajya and Nadu, where Rautroy is the representative to negotiate between national politics and rural development, using his pen as the sword.
- Village as shelter and exile -- a place of idyllic tranquillity for the Pantheist.
- Village as foundation of rebellion--a place where hegemonic authority is challenged.
- Village as the native soil.
- Village in conflict with modernity—though it is not necessarily anti-modern or inevitably anti-tradition.

Rautroy's first publication *Patheya* (1932) was an anthology of passionate and mystical lyrics. *Patheya*, literally means a journey, it signifies necessities of the intellect towards the literary voyage of the poet. At that time, Rautroy was still a student of Khurda High School; he was under the influence of the contemporary school of thought in the literary circle of Odisha, the *Sabuja* (green) group, which is more akin to the Romantic period in literary thought. The young poet with his heart full of energy and dreams geared up his ‘*patheya*’, the way, the literary sojourn, for a potential literary career. This collection is predominated by themes like his romantic thoughts, devotional feelings, and concern for the subaltern. In a romantic stopover, he sings of the dawn in the month of ‘*Faguna*’, the spring season. Dawn is compared to a maiden, the metaphor is powerful and heart rendering:

She has come
From a distant land of dreams
Smiling like a young girl.
O'Dawn
At whose ears
You whisper the words of youth
Playing on your slow and silent lyre?
My young poetic heart awakens
Hearing the immortal song of youth.

(*Patheya*, 37, *Sachi Rautroy Granthavali*, Part I, 156)

In every literature, woman has been treated as an object to be subjugated, devoted, restricted, restrained and controlled. The Earth is described in feminine vocabulary, and this graphic language is composite and loaded with ambivalence. Nature is rendered as prolific, fostering and caring, which is stereotypically motherly, sexualized, to be owned by the other gender; and untamed, mysterious, and perilous, to be tamed, if at all. If interpreted vis-à-vis the ecofeminist theory, this multifaceted illustration of woman and Nature as concurrently fascinating, fostering, and perilous, warrants the patriarchal authority and oppression of Nature all through the past. Within this masculinist dialogue, nature-woman is created as worthy of being possessed and cultivated by the more balanced and enlightened gender, that is, the male. Rautroy's approach to this woman-nature-man dichotomy is different in the sense that his poetry is a kind of social movement that considers the repression of women and nature as interrelated, as compared to Françoise d'Eaubonne, who established the Ecology-Feminism-Center in Paris in 1972, and in 1974 first used the term 'ecofeminism'. She connected green degradation and women's deprivation with a patriarchal way of life, and thought that a community structure depending on feminism can check the annihilation of human beings and planet earth. Rautroy also understood the doctrine of absolute egalitarianism and the abolition of subjugation of any gender. His feminism pointed towards solidarity. One can associate the mainstream nationalistic rhetoric of the nation as mother in his poetry. This makes the feminine vocabulary of Rautroy's earth vision more intensely village based.

Here, it is tempting to compare Rautroy with Jibanananda. Rautroy's poem *Banalata Sen* has been inspired by Jibanananda's poem *Alaka Sanyal*, Rautroy's book *Pandulipi* borrows its title from Jibanananda's *Dhusara Pandulipi*. Jibanananda's ecofeminism, to a large extent, finds its parallel in Rautroy's woman-nature association, prominently in these lines:

I know, yet I know
A woman's heart –love-a child-a home-these are not everything.

Not wealth, nor fame, our creature comforts
There is some other perilous wonder
Which frolics
In our very blood.

(*Jibanananda Daser Kavya Samagra*, 122)

In Song 3 of *Patheya* the poet sings about the magnificence of God and His love for the poet, using sensuous romantic imagery:

The Writings
In the waters
Of the muddy pond of life
Your love-lotus blooms
When I wander hither and thither
Straying from the right path of life
Out of love you come
To embrace me smilingly.

(‘Song 3’, *Patheya*, SRG, Part I, 135)

These lines remind one of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem, *Pied Beauty*:

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
...All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

(Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘Pied Beauty’)

In some of the songs of *Patheya* the poet vaguely laments the predicament of the helpless man and abuse of the weak and the poor in a society where power structure is so very dissimilar, like in the song I of *Patheya* he writes:

I have seen
The strong oppressing the weak
And the weak shedding tears,

I have heard the cry of distress
When one man assaults another.
(SRG, Part I, 115)

One finds an echo of these lines in Tagore's '*Pathey*', where he writes,

Pratkar hin shaktiraparadhe
bicharer bani nirabe nibhrite kande.

Which literally means, "when the weak is oppressed by the strong, s/he has no other options but to shed silent tears, and look for an outlet of the emotions". For Rautroy, literature should be that empowering factor to speak for the subaltern, to pave way for the margin to the centre.

Between the romanticized principles and the callous economic reality of contemporary India, for Rautroy there is still a very habitable world, momentous and vivacious, the Odia village. The village hearkens the Odia soil; it conveys a strong logic of fitting in the pan Indian developmental approaches and illustrates a rootedness. It counters with an extraordinary propinquity to its hinterland. In the country, no two villages are similar by nature. Setting, backgrounds and character of the villages vary. Developmental issues and rural management are other factors of concern for change. Pastoral lands, nationalised highways, woody terrains, elegant brooks and building of dams, all add to the way a village contours itself—and Rautroy's ideal village is a combination of all of these.

His next poetic work of significance was *Purnima*, a poetic drama based on the mythological love of Shiva and Parvati, while conveying the timeless union between man and woman. It was published in 1933 by *Sabuja Saitya Samiti* when he was seventeen years old. Love and passion once again dominate the theme of this volume, and it symbolizes the definitive aspirations of human life through three distinctive stages--in the first stage man is solitary, and his life is imperfect. In the second phase, he is married to a woman, leading *grihastha* life, and in the third stage, which signifies the culmination of man-woman relationship, they generate in the progeny, the next generation, to continue their stream of life. One cannot but remember Shakespeare's poem, *All the World is a Stage* while reading this poem, and marvel at the maturity of a boy of seventeen.

Rautroy's *Pallishri* (1942), a collection of poems depicting rural Odisha, uses the narrative of the village in its finest form. Spreading over a period of eight years, the poems focus diverse features of village life in Odisha. The title of the collection, *Pallishri* literally means the splendour of a village. The thirteen poems of the collection are 'Chhota Mora Gaanti' (My Little Village), 'Palli-Sakala' (Morning in

the little Village), 'Palli-Sanja' (Evening in the little Village), 'Bapa Bapa Pakaila Huri' (Father! O Father! He Shouted), 'Zamindaranka Sandha' (The Zamindar's Bull), 'Pahili Raja' (The First Day of the Raja Festival), 'Maluni' (The Flower Maid), 'Rangoon Jatri' (The Traveller to Rangoon), 'Shiva Puja' (The Worship of Lord Shiva), 'Mu Ta Bharatha Nahak Jhua' (I am the Daughter of Bhartha Nahak), 'Grama Sabha' (The Meeting of the Village), 'Bhuta Chhada' (Exorcising the Ghost) and 'Grama Smashana' (The Cremation Ground of the Village). The poems marvellously demarcate Rautroy's little village and its idyllic magnetism. Rautroy has imagined the narrative of the village with a novel implication and distinctiveness. Though the genres and themes are completely different from each other, Rautroy's *Pallishri* reminds one of *Palli Samaj* by Sarat Chandra, which is a cynical observation on the idyllic village life, where the villagers are portrayed as innocent, noble creatures, who are uncontaminated by civic vices, living a protected life in complete oblivion of human weaknesses like passion or jealousy.

The lyric poem *Chhota Mora Gaanti* is the poet's romantic assertion of love for his little native village and the nostalgia it brings:

I like my little village
Full of beauty and charm
Though no book of geography
Bears its name.
It's my heaven on east...
these will burn
my funeral pyre.

(*Pallishri*, SRG, Part I, 397)

William Wordsworth's poem 'Solitary Reaper' has a similar tone:

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! For the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

(William Wordsworth, 'Solitary Reaper')

Like Wordsworth, Sachi Rautroy uses space and Nature as spiritual concepts, and pantheism provides the undertone to his narratology, which is analogous to the Wordsworthian secondary imagination. Rautroy was called the ‘Poet of Man’. To Wordsworth also, the language of poetry is the language of the common man, of real life. For both, poetry touches all living things and it delights and inspires the living beings. Only when a poet’s emotions are “recollected in tranquillity” can he distance himself from the real incident and compose a sublime poem, as Wordsworth feels. This poetic distance can make the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” possible. Rautroy pays homage to his native village for being a source of his poetic inspiration, and for making him a poet, making recollection and a nonchalant lyrical and romantic detachment his tone and tenure:

Poetic inspiration I drew
From my village stream,
I beheld her images of beauty,
She flooded my heart of stone
With waves of dreams.
Into the stony heart of mine.

(*Pallishri*, SRG, 398)

The poem ‘*Palli-Sanja*’ gives a lively picture of the evening in a village--farmers going home with cartloads of ripe corn from the fields, and the villagers who assemble around a fire to warm up a winter evening. The dark night slowly creeps in, with the smell of vegetation, home and hearth, with flora and fauna at their best. In some homes little ovens are lit and the smoke from the kitchens reminds one of the *Journey of the Magi* by Eliot. The picturesque version of the misery and poverty of the villagers narrated in the poem is possible only from the poet of man. In a life of scarcity, dispossession and misery, the villagers still have a longing for the occasional pleasures and amusement. One can watch with wonder the passion of the village youth as they perform an opera in the *Akhada-Ghar* (Club Room). Odishan culture is prosperous with Jatra, Pala, *Dandanata*, *Dasakathia*³ and other such theatrical performances, which find ample references in the poems of Rautroy.

Religion plays a major role in rural life. The Poet writes about the *Gramma Devati* (the village goddess/ local deity) whose temple stands at the entrance of the village. She is hailed as the harbinger of power, peace and poise for the poverty-stricken villages:

I bow down a hundred times
At her feet,

³ Jatra is the Odia equivalent of theatre. Pala is a popular performance associated with the cult of a Saint. Danda Jatra or Dandanata is a traditional devotional dance festival of South Odisha, with theatrical components. The Dasakathia is a storytelling performance rendered by a pair, a singer and an accompanying artist.

She is the saviour
Of this little village.
If you take shelter
At her feet,
You'll receive her blessings.

(*Pallishri*, SRG, 410)

The poems of *Pallishri* are not simply romantic; there is an evolution from romanticism to realism. The idyllic charisma of the simple village scenes saturates each poem with pastoral tranquillity. Usage of varied rhyme schemes in the poems, effective use of personification as a figure of speech, gives a unique charm to the poems. Flora and fauna--including the village cremation ground – each object connotes a life in the craftsmanship of Sachi Rautroy. In the poetry of Rautroy, in general, the existential questions about the binaries of life act as the rich substance, and the means of exploring the universal truths:

Let us now discover ourselves
In the mirror of dead events
In the manifold images of scattered moments
In the dim kerosene lampposts of the city
Or in the underground tunnels with no opening
Or in the desolate lanes,
Come along (my fellow sleepwalkers)
Let us discover ourselves
On the same old broken corridor
On the deserted staircase.

(*Swagat*, SRG, 311)

Sachi Rautroy, the poet of Nature, gradually becomes the poet of Man. His poetry deals with issues such as overpopulation, the welfare of men and women, gender, nutrition, education, income-generating activities and division of labour—in general, peace and prosperity for the village, and for the planet earth. Sachi Rautroy seems to subscribe to the idea of the *Chipko movement*, whose slogan is “ecology is permanent economy”. It was one of the first environmentalist movements in India, though it materialized much after Rautroy. In his essay, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, William Rueckert defines ecocriticism as the function of ecology and ecological theories in the study of literature, because “ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for a human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world”. (*Literature and Ecology*, 107). Ecocriticism

shows how the flora and fauna must coexist in diverse ways, as the environmental question has become an integral part of our reality now more than ever. William Rueckert (1996) calls this concept as *literary ecology*. “The conceptual and practical problem is to find the grounds upon which two communities—the human; the natural—can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere.” (*Literature and Ecology*, 107)

Rautroy’s constant interaction with the reader, the use of the local dialects, and the poetic narration through story-telling are the elements of an oral tradition that he uses in his poetic medium most efficiently. What, exactly, then is the narrative of the Indian village, according to Sachi Rautroy? It is the idyllic superlatives that conjure up the village as an organic society, a place of synchronization and togetherness, with a poignant bonding and a sense of shelter for the susceptible, a place of permanence and of virtue with the temple and the banyan tree as the centre places for the village flock, though sometimes it can just be a romantic myth. The gender, economy and caste issues are reflected even in the fairy tale of an organic community, the village. Sometimes it is a broken community, where the individual is persuaded to adopt orthodoxy. Rautroy’s poems are not pastoral romantic poems, rather through literature he attempts to fix the fissures of the rural community life. His poems cannot be placed under any homogeneous group, but their main endeavour is, by working through nostalgia, ethnographic citations, and apt usage of stylistic dialects eulogizing Nature—aiming at the centre-periphery equation. In his poetry, rituals, ceremonies, community-gathering events, the village economy and sustainable growth are centrally positioned in the form of insightful monologues. And more imperative than all of these, is the fact that as a reviewer time-place continuum of the village narrative, counter-mythologizing space and territory, Rautroy accomplishes what he wants to, through poetry. It is the land and her people—the place and the paradox foregrounded in his poetry—that leads the reader to re-think about land, territory, belonging and nationhood.

Notes and References:

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