Utilitarianism at Home and Abroad: A Comparative Study of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* and Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*

Jatindra Nayak, Sambalpur University
Himansu Mohapatra, Utkal University

Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) is often cited as the prime example of a nineteenth-century English novel that criticizes its utilitarian context. As Melvyn Haverman pointedly remarks, "*Hard Times* interrogates a society quickly growing industrialized, a society organized, maintained and sanctioned to a large degree by a philosophy Dickens considers obnoxious."[1] The novel does indeed launch a frontal attack on the cult of fact, but it has little thought to spare for the colonies of England which actually bore the brunt of the utilitarian reordering of native and indigenous societies along rational, factual lines. For knowledge of this ugly face of English utilitarianism one need only examine those works, produced in the colonies, which look at the fact of utilitarianism from the other side; from the perspective, that is to say, of people who were at the receiving end of the imperial process. One such work is *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (Six Acres and Thirty-two Decimals of Land, 1897), a novel written by Fakir Mohan Senapati, the Dickens of Orissa, as one English critic has rightly opined.[2] Although unlike *Hard Times* not a declared critique of utilitarianism, this first major novel in the Oriya language carries on an implicit dialogue with the discourse of utilitarianism. Moreover, the novel allows us to understand better than other novels of the time Gauri Viswanathan's illuminating point about the "reflective subject" of English literature being but an idealized version of the "rapacious, exploitative and ruthless actor of history."[3]

By bringing together Dickens's *Hard Times* and Senapati's *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* on the basis of demonstrable historical interconnections, the present paper contends that Senapati's perception of the tyranny of fact, and, hence, of his vision of an alternative to the fact-based order, is far more acute and authentic than that of Dickens. This is because Senapati, writing as a colonial subject at the end of the nineteenth century in Orissa, was of necessity alive to the communal-rural-oral tradition that the English utilitarians in India were engaged in destroying in order to propagate their own ethos of individualism, property, and what Javed Majeed has intriguingly termed "letters."[4] Dickens lacks this perspective and thereby falls back upon a vague and nostalgic model of preindustrial, organic life. Moreover, Dickens's text in a sense colludes with utilitarianism insofar as it articulates no criticism of the use of the colonies as a test site and a safety valve on the part of the master society. As a matter of fact, it perpetuates this way of seeing through its peculiar plot resolution, endorsing the idea of emigration to the colonies. Thus it would seem to be the case that Terry Eagleton's remark about *Hard Times* being a novel about "base, the social relations of class society"[5] is more readily transferable to *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* when the two novels are read together, but from within a perspective informed by the discourses of imperialism and colonialism.

---

[1] Melvyn Haberman, "The Courtship of the Void: The World of *Hard Times*," in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed., Jerome H. Buckley (1975; rpt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976) 37.

[2] John Boulton, "Nationalism and Tradition in Orissa, with Special Reference to the Works of Phakirmohana Senapati," in *Tradition and Politics in South Asia*, ed., R.J. Moore (Delhi: Vikash, 1976) 250.

[3] Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989) 21.

[4] Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 166.

The problem with utilitarianism, as critics have rightly pointed out, lies in its outlining of a purely quantitative approach to the question of human happiness. The extent of reductionism represented by the Benthamite doctrine is surely indicated by the famous "felicific calculus" which could blithely equate pushpins with poetry. Besides, as utilitarianism developed in close conjunction with capitalism and imperialism, it began to define itself in progressively narrower and more exclusive terms. As Dickens rightly perceived in *Hard Times*, factuality, valorized by the utilitarians, became a cover for money relations. Fancy, which Dickens opposes to fact as "the one thing needful,"[6] operates as a metaphor in the novel for those uncommodified and nonalienated practices and values being marginalized by the rational, factual ordering of society.

The opening chapters of *Hard Times* sketch the bleak picture of Victorian boys and girls blowing before time (a major motif in Dickens's fiction) by being subjected to the forceful apparatus of Gradgrind. Of especial importance is Chapter Nine, where the narrator makes manifest the linkage between Coketown capitalism and the system of education practised there. The issue is focused, as such issues usually are in Dickens, through an apparently innocuous conversation in which Sissy confides to Louisa about her educational/intellectual inadequacies. Sissy cannot get the facts right, the facts concerning "Natural"/"National" (66) prosperity and the way in which it is the product of an exploitative structure at home (capitalism) and abroad (colonialism). Moreover, the conflation of national and natural in Sissy's discourse is deeply significant, pointing as it does to the role of ideology in naturalizing bourgeois social relations. What needs to be grasped is the fact that this ideology draws heavily upon the developing discourse of statistics, as mediated in the novel by Gradgrind and McChoakumchild. Mary Poovey has pointed out that "statistical representation was sufficiently codified by the 1830s to constitute a discourse in the Foucauldian sense," and that its hallmark was "frightful empiricism."[7] Dickens, as Poovey argues, felt concerned about the dehumanization inherent in the process of aggregation, and *Hard Times* surely shows him at his scathing best about the "sanctimonious moralization with which statisticians lard their deadening numbers."[8]

---

[5] Terry Eagleton, "Critical Commentary," in *Hard Times*, ed., T. Eagleton (London: Methuen, 1987) 314.

[6] Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed., T. Eagleton (1854; rpt. London: Methuen, 1987) 1. All subsequent references to this work are inserted parenthetically into the text.

[7] Mary Poovey, "Figures of Arithmetic, Figures of Speech: The Discourse of Statistics in the 1830s," *Critical Inquiry* 19:2 (1992): 269.

[8] Mary Poovey 270.

The Dickensian critique, however, loses its force as the novel proceeds by being posed in terms of the need for a good heart. The figure of Sissy is important here. She functions, as Cynthia Northcotte Malone observes, "as the principle of moral reclamation."[9] If all a social system needs is a little human warmth, as Dickens seems to be implying through the various statements and gestures that attach to Sissy, then his criticism of that system is not especially penetrating. To quote again from Malone, "*Hard Times* ranges just far enough from the usual Dickensian marriage plot to register the operation and effects of a system that induces conformity to bourgeois codes of sexual behaviour."[10] Even Michael Wheeler, for whom *Hard Times* is much more than a "social problem" novel, is critical of Dickens's attempt to make "Sleary's horse-riding counterbalance utilitarianism in the dynamical-versus-mechanical debate in the novel."[11]

The whole idea of culture as mere window dressing is, of course, "very utilitarian in conception,"[12] as Eagleton has sharply reminded us. And so indeed is the fact-fancy dichotomy, which is central to the novel. Malone has justly argued that in *Hard Times*, "Fancy complements Utilitarian programs of Fact by easing their intolerable rigidity."[13] Just as there is no marshaling of "hard facts" in the novel to shake to its very roots the Victorian gentleman's belief in the blessedness of facts, likewise there is no suggestion whatever in the novel that the valued alternative, fancy, is as radical a category as the Romantic imagination which, in the hands of a Blake or a Shelley, demanded nothing less than the wholesale transformation of the bourgeois social order. The Dickensian fancy might be said to be marginal to society, much in the same way in which the circus which is its locus in the novel is on the fringe of Coketown. In ways that F.R. Leavis has failed to perceive in his essay on *Hard Times*, Dickens tends to mystify the daily lives of the circus people by dressing them up as culture. And Dickens's alignment of trade unionism with the hated utilitarian cult of fact is a flawed piece of reasoning which even Leavis complains about: ". . . it is a score against a work . . . that it should give the representative role to the agitator, Slackbridge, and make the trade unionism nothing better than the pardonable error of the misguided and the oppressed, and, as such, an agent in the martyrdom of the good working man."[14] The essential point, however, is that the moral vision of *Hard Times* is tainted (it is a far greater "score" against the work, as far as we are concerned) to the extent that the novel can conceive of the colony in no other terms than as a safe haven, a refuge for the misfits of the Home Country.

The novel's critique of utilitarianism founders at the point when Tom's involvement in the bank robbery case is made known, and he has to be "swiftly despatched" to a South American colony in order to avoid a scandal. "How is he to be saved from justice? Thank heaven, he may be got abroad yet" (270). The words are spoken by Thomas Gradgrind at the precise moment when he is supposed to be waking up to the evil consequences of "Gradgrindery." He has, that is to say, few qualms about sending a disreputable character to the colonies where he would probably pass off as a heaven-born sahib. Dickens's credentials as an antiutilitarian are further damaged when the angelic Sissy aids this project of saving Tom from justice: "We had our fears . . . I went to him when no one saw, and said to him, 'Don't look at me. See where your father is. Escape at once for his sake and your own!'" (269). In fact, Sissy helps in a more fundamental way, as Malone has argued, for "she sends away the two threatening bodies, Hearthouse and the Whelp."[15] Dickens's collusion with utilitarianism is revealed in his inability to think beyond the national/imperial culture. *Hard Times* draws on a discourse of British overseas expansion which sets up the colony as the "not-said" of literature.

---

[9] Cynthia Northcotte Malone, "The Fixed Eye and the Rolling Eye: Surveillance and Discipline in *Hard Times*," *Studies in the Novel* 21.1 (1989): 14.

[10] Malone 16.

[11] Michael Wheeler, *The Art of Allusion in Victorian Novels* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989) 72.

[12] Eagleton, "Critical Commentary" 298.

[13] Malone 22.

[14] F.R. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist*, (1970; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 273.

This "not-said," the colony, however, speaks volubly if we attend to it in its historical context. In his recent book, *Ungoverned Imaginings,* Javed Majeed has argued that the emergence of utilitarianism as a new political language in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England can be understood only by examining the role of colonial India in providing a testing ground for the various legal, social, and educational theories of the period. Similarly, Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest,* a seminal study of the relationship between the teaching and learning of English literature in India and colonial rule, has highlighted the ironic fact that English literature appeared as a subject in the curriculum of the colonies long before it was institutionalized in the home country. This vast legal, educational, and literary edifice did, of course, serve as a mask of conquest. To quote from Eric Stokes, "the British power in India after 1800 came to be regarded as an instrument for ensuring the necessary conditions of law and order by which the potentially vast Indian market could be conquered for British industry."[16]

It is interesting that in nineteenth-century British fiction, Dickens's own included, "the potentially vast Indian market" is often translated into a consumable image of exoticism and opulence. India figures as a kind of dreamland, a view that Dickens captures in his *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) when he refers to "those salubrious climates which enchant Europeans so much that when they get there, they can hardly ever prevail themselves to come back again."[17] The shifting of the empire eastward, "to the diseased and rich and waiting lands of Asia" came in the nick of time, as V.S. Naipaul has shrewdly observed. It averted the crisis caused by the closing down of the eighteenth-century British empire of the sugar islands and slave plantations by giving, as Naipaul puts it, " a new chance to men who otherwise have considered their careers over."[18] India was, in actual fact, the site of rehabilitation of the riffraff of English society, and it was represented in such terms in nineteenth-century English fiction.

The English utilitarians did, of course, have a field day in India. It was their mentor, James Mill, who encouraged them, as Majeed points out, to conceive of India as "a tabula rasa where the British were to create the right environment to perpetuate those grand sources of utility."[19] The right environment for the utilitarians was one which fostered the growth of private property, defined in the Western capitalistic sense. According to Stokes, "The British mind found incomprehensible a society based on unwritten custom and government by personal discretion; it knew of only one sure method . . . the introduction of a system of legality, under which rights were defined by a body of formal law equally binding upon the state as upon its subjects."[20] Accordingly, the utilitarians embarked on a ruthless program of bureaucratization. The utilitarian attitude, as Stokes has informed us, hardened after 1832 (significantly, the period covered in Senapati's *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*). The upshot of this hardening was the consolidation of an authoritarian and bureaucratic form of state whose raison d'etre was "the uprooting on speculative principles of an immemorial system of society."[21]

---

[15] Malone 22.

[16] Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (1959; rpt. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982) xiii.

[17] Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (1837; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1982) 432.

[18] V.S. Naipaul, *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 371.

It follows, therefore, that for Senapati, writing as a colonial subject towards the close of the nineteenth century in Orissa, the losses were real and compensations few. For Dickens, by contrast, the losses were not concretely visualized (except as a vague pain somewhere in Stone Lodge), and there were always compensations to be had in the form of colonies into which the refugees from the excesses of the cult of fact could be safely despatched. For all its comic vitality, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* is a poignantly tragic novel. Senapati's world, that of nineteenth-century Oriya society, had been transformed beyond recognition by the utilitarian ideas imported through "enlightened" British civil servants. A predominantly communal-rural-oral life started disintegrating under the pressure of a body of written laws and the alien values of an English education. To the British, this form of life had come to represent an anachronism, "a crude form of socialism, paralyzing the growth of individual energies and all its consequences."[22] The continuation of such a state of society, they felt, was "radically inconsistent with our rule both in theory and practice."[23] *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* can be read as a passionate and moving rejoinder to the attitudes and programs of action enshrined in these remarks. For its characters, paralyzed by the "flood-like onrush"[24] of English civilization, the utilitarian agenda practically meant the harsh imposition of unfeeling authority.

The action of the novel concerns a series of displacements affecting owners of land, with the nature of ownership subjected to constant definition and redefinition. To take the one central example of the *zemindari* (estate) of Fatepur Sarasandha, we note that it was initially in the hands of the traditional Oriya military aristocracy. Senapati uses Sanskritized Oriya, a kind of Latinate diction, in describing them, thereby establishing the link between language and a way of life. This aristocracy loses its title to land because it fails to cope with the new utilitarian dispensation which renders its benevolent paternalism and belief in personal valor obsolete. In the course of time the *zemindari* passes into the hands of a Muslim trader (the ruling language is now Persian), who had bought it at an auction in Calcutta. This estate is then seen passing to an upstart Oriya moneylender (the protagonist of the novel). In trying to defraud a poor weaver couple of a small parcel of land, six acres and thirty-two decimals, to be precise, this moneylender-cum-*zemindar* gets into trouble with the law, and loses his estate to his English-educated urban lawyer.

---

[19] Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings* 144.

[20] Stokes 82.

[21] Stokes xi.

[22] Stokes 32.

[23] Stokes 33.

[24] Senapati, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, (1897; rpt. Cuttack: Pustak Bhandar, 1987) 18. All subsequent references to this work are inserted parenthetically into the text. All citations are from the English translation of the text made by R.S. Misra and J.K. Nayak, soon to be published by Seagull, Calcutta.

One point should emerge very clearly even from this bare summary of the action of the novel, namely that the novel is about the impersonal process of displacement of land and the forms of Oriya life associated with it. Land in *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* can be said to behave almost like the floating signifier: it will not stay still or in place, much in the same way in which forms of life related to it tend to shift and perish. If, as Wittgenstein has remarked, to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life, then the passing away or emergence of a language in *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* signifies the demise or rise of a social order, a whole mode of life. The rise of English as the new court language signals, for instance, the emergence of a new, English-educated ruling class. The point about English, as the novel has firmly grasped, is that it brings about a steamrollering and railroading of the crowded, many-voiced Oriya folk life by introducing the culture of written record and cold print.

Senapati's description of a police investigation in Chapter Nineteen might serve as a supreme illustration of the point made above. Faced with the law-enforcing agents of a colonial state (who take down every word that is uttered), the villagers of Gobindpur lapse into incoherence and silence. These are the same people who had a little while ago shown such remarkable resilience, pluck, and resourcefulness when they made the story of Mangaraja's crime circulate with a lightninglike rapidity through the word of mouth. The very same people cower in fear because their depositions are "pen-imprisoned" by the investigating officer.

The expression "pen-imprisoned," or *kalambandh* as it is called in Oriya, recurs in the novel, suggesting a kind of fear of writing which contrasts tellingly with the "pleasure of the text" lying at the heart of the Western literary-critical tradition, with, we might add, Dickens's fiction as its major exemplar in Victorian writing. If textuality is what is at stake, then, of course, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* is easily the rival of *Hard Times*, and surely the equal of other dialogic novels of the West. It is truly polyphonic with its graphic echoing, miming, and parodying of the dialects that are jostling in society. Senapati is a past master in the art of creating comedy out of the jostling of various languages such as Persian, Sanskrit, standardized Oriya, and Oriya officialese, as the report of the investigating officer shows to advantage. The implication of *kalambandh*, to return to it, is that the written word is a source of terror for those like the illiterate villagers of Gobindpur, who have no access to it. By the same token, of course, writing is a source of power for those like Mangaraja, the protagonist of the novel, who can effectively control it. Mangaraja is able to dispossess the weaver couple through, among other things, his control over the written word. In the end, however, he loses out to an even more coherent, English-speaking/writing urban lawyer (Ram Ram Lala), a more finished product of the colonial/utilitarian order, who might be compared with Bitzer of *Hard Times*. The shift from Mangaraja's Oriya to Ram Ram Lala's legal English denotes a transition from country to city.

Chha Manna Atha Guntha is not, however, only an elegy on the gradual disappearance of a communal-rural-oral tradition. It also vigorously mobilizes resistance to the fact-based, rational order by raiding the resources of the same tradition. Unlike the circus in *Hard Times*, this tradition is not on the edge but at the hub of the world presented in the novel. Nothing illustrates this better than the scene, just alluded to, in Chapter Nineteen where the news of Mangaraja's arrest telegraphs itself through the length and breadth of the village of Gobindpur through the mechanism of oral transmission: "Ghusuria met the untouchable Makara Jena on the way and left after whispering a few words into his ears and advising him to keep quiet about it. Then he met Danai Sahu, Binodia, Natabaria, Bhima's mother by turns and repeated his whisper and his advice. Gopalia stopped working instantly and ran to Sahu. Hari Sahu mentioned it to Sama Sahu, Hatia passed it on to Natia, Jema's mother breathed it into the ears of Sama's mother, Srimati whispered it into the new bride's ears; the entire village started to talk about it" (110). There is a deliberate foregrounding here of the gossipy, meandering quality of village life, whose habitual motions are rhythmic and circular rather than linear. It is this irrepressible vitality and vibrancy of life which is being smothered under the onslaught of single-voiced English culture. Senapati's whole effort in the novel is geared towards rescuing this vibrant oral tradition from oblivion by giving it formal representation. Therefore, paralleling, or rather countering, the "flood-like onrush" of the crudely homogenizing English culture in the novel is the carnivalesque parade and recital of Oriya rustic names, of songs, jokes, parodies, and formulary sayings which, as Walter J. Ong has perceptively observed, are so characteristic a feature of orality.[25] *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, we might say, is a literate performance, using various literary strategies to suggest the tradition of orality which is embedded in writing.

Community and orality in the novel constitute the vantage point from which the novelist interrogates the vocabulary and phraseology of utilitarianism in which such terms as reason, evidence, law, and democracy occupy a central place. The inadequacy of these terms and the value system of which they are a part is exposed when they are placed alongside forms or ways of life receiving their sanction from custom and tradition. The privileged term "evidence" is liable for a decentering when it is subjected to Senapati's irreverent scrutiny. Here Senapati's strategy is to invoke a many-layered idiomatic life, nourished by legends, gossip, rumors, and hearsay as a way of undermining the authority and objectivity of colonial historiography, supposedly based on evidence. To show what a mockery colonial historiography has made of evidence, Senapati refers ironically to Mr. Todd's triumphant assertion, made on the basis of his sighting of the image of a single female nude somewhere in Rajaputana, that women in ancient India moved about naked.

The most withering sarcasm of the novelist is, however, reserved for the way in which justice was dispensed in the law courts of British India. The English utilitarians had of course prided themselves on their creation of a comprehensive legal system. They subscribed to the Benthamite view that "justice should be swift, cheap, certain and readily intelligible."[26] This view of justice was, of course, impelled by the utilitarian urge "to reduce a body of customary law into one of statutory law, and to survey the 'trackless wild' of the field of legislation," which, like everything Indian, was the "offspring of a wide ungoverned imagination."[27] That utilitarianism was the ideological ally of imperialism is amply suggested by this identification of India with wilderness. What the utilitarians completely ignored in their ardor to rationalize justice was that the indigenous institutions such as the *panchayat* (the rule by the five elders of the village) did embody an alternative conception of justice, one that was intimately linked to the idea of collective welfare. This alternative conception of justice, and the way in which it came to be travestied by the new legal system erected by the British, emerges clearly in the famous trial chapter of *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*.

---

[25] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).

[26] Stokes 279.

On the day of the trial of Mangaraja everything in the courtroom has been "Englished" (134), as the novelist archly remarks. English law, in this instance, has turned literally English, thereby completing the alienation of the native Oriyas from a legal system designed to give justice to the individual members of an open, competitive society. Even the novelist is obliged to step into the role of a translator here, for the court proceedings on this day are conducted entirely in the English language in deference to the British civil surgeon who is present in the court room to give his testimony. Thus the entire trial becomes an awesome display of colonial might, aimed at intimidating the native witnesses into submission. Mr. H.R. Jackson, the white judge, at one point threatens the Oriya defense lawyer with the cancellation of his lawyer's license if the latter does not come to the point. Coming to the point, itself a thoroughly utilitarian prescription, means, in this instance, an unquestioned and unreserved acceptance of the authority of the British civil surgeon, A.B.C.D. Douglas (the son of, as the novelist playfully remarks, E.F.G.H. Douglas).The irreverent wordplay on the English name here is part of Senapati's wider purpose to defeat the language of power by the power of language.

Senapati's language derives much of its power from its allusive and allegorical qualities, the two main attributes of a rich and vibrant oral tradition. The culturally and historically coded allusions of *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* do actually authorize a reading of the novel as a profound allegory on colonization. The following representative passage leaves the reader in no doubt about the persistence in the novel of a deep and pervasive anticolonial subtext: "A dozen or two cranes are plodding wearily and unsuccessfully through the mud like menials. . . . Two water crows flew in from afar, gorged themselves on the fish, and flew away. One water crow is drying its white wings on the tank's shore like mem sahib's gown. Oh! the cranes of Hindu religion: take a look at the English water crows, who flew in with empty pockets from a remote place and feasted themselves on your food. You belong here, yet you are starving. The critical hour is at hand. Hundreds of English water crows will land on our shores. You are really done for unless you learn swimming and cross the seven seas" (60-61). In this highly coded representation the cranes that plod wearily, and often unsuccessfully, through the mud in the hope of a stray fish, stand for the wretched, colonized Oriyas, while the smart white water crows which, flying in from afar, walk away with the best catch, stand in for their white colonizers. And Asuradighi, the tank where this scene of expropriation unfolds, comes to symbolize the nation as a whole. Senapati's narrator, by exhorting the Indians to fly and swim, and thereby to beat the English at their own game and on their own ground, is implicated in an act of anticolonial, and therefore antiutilitarian, resistance.

---

[27] Majeed 164.

It can be asserted in closing that Senapati offers in his novel a more incisive critique of the utilitarian order than Dickens does in his. As the foregoing analysis reveals, it is the interrogation of the terms of the dominant discourse together with the mobilization of the resources of the residual oral tradition which accounts for the comprehensiveness and acuity of Senapati's novelistic vision. One can say of *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, by way of reversing Eagleton's judgment, that it is a novel about the "base" (and not about the spirit of an age as *Hard Times* is), the social relations of the colonizers and the colonized within the increasingly intricate class relations of a colonial society. Such a conclusion is the outcome of a comparative approach that, in so far as it allows for a movement back and forth between the discourse of the "director society" and the counter-discourse of the "object society," enables us to relativize the dominant by juxtaposing it with the marginalized.