The Essays of Chitta Ranjan Das on Literature, Culture, and Society

The Essays of Chitta Ranjan Das on Literature, Culture, and Society:

On the Side of Life in Spite of

Edited by

Ananta Kumar Giri and Ivan Marquez

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

The Essays of Chitta Ranjan Das on Literature, Culture, and Society:
On the Side of Life in Spite of

Edited by Ananta Kumar Giri and Ivan Marquez

This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-4558-X
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4558-8

For U. R. Ananthamurthy, Mahasweta Devi, Tomas Tranströmer, and Kailash Satyarthi

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part Two: On Literature, Odisha, and Beyond

Part Three: Asides at Large

FOREWORD

JOHN CLAMMER

The work of Chitta Ranjan Das spans many genres – sociology, fiction, literary criticism, diaries and collections of letters, essays on political and current topics, and treatises on education – and was produced in a number of languages including his native Odia, English, German, and Danish. His oeuvre spans fifty years of output and could of course be approached through a traditional biography of the writer or a conventional literary history. But a more fruitful approach, I would suggest, is to begin precisely with the border-crossing qualities of Das's writings, and to build from there an appreciation not only of his role in Indian literature, but equally of the fundamental questions that his writing raises when seen from the broader perspective of literary theory and the relationships between literature and society, and in particular its role in promoting social transformation. It is from this angle that I will approach his work and life since it allows us to ask questions that are at the heart of Das's work, including the role of the writer in society, the place of "indigenous" literature in the wider literary canon, and the place of the imaginative life in the wider economy and ecology of culture as a whole.

In the contemporary world, with its multiple environmental crises, conflicts, and violence, persisting poverty, and social exclusion, the question of the role of the arts in general, and of literature specifically in the context of this essay, in such a world must inevitably arise. Do they have any positive role other than entertainment and distraction, or are they merely the icing on a rapidly decaying and disintegrating cake? Without naming the problem in exactly this way, much of Chitta Ranjan Das's work was devoted to implicitly answering this question, for he clearly recognized that a merely functionalist approach to trying to identify the role of the arts in society would be totally inadequate and theoretically shallow. Rather, to answer the question more fully, we should ask what constitutes a society's self-understanding, its modes of self-representation, and its internal hermeneutics, and how, methodologically speaking, we can gain access to this deep cultural grammar of a society. Das's original professional career was as a rural sociologist and teacher of the subject in Agra and elsewhere,

and as a sociologist he would have been aware that such questions arise not only in the sociology of the arts, but equally in relation to such intractable subjects as religion, suicide, and the emotions.

A successful answer to these questions cannot be gained through questionnaires and the other technical apparatus of social inquiry, but requires a much more interpretative and sensitive approach, one that points us to an understanding of the role of the arts as a society's deep and least ideological grammar – its modes of expression, its paramount way of structuring its relationship to the spiritual, and its vehicle for forming, exploring, and managing its emotional dynamics. The arts are not separate from life, they are both its expression and its means of self-exploration. Das recognized this profoundly in his own writings, as revealed in his comments on the role of literary criticism in society:

> The new critics are critically aware. They are beginning to adapt themselves to the new fact that literature is not a special pursuit and cannot be cultivated away from life, that it is very much a part of life and society. And what is more, it not only has to interpret life and society as they are, it has to probe deeper to find out why they are, what they are, and in that context to suggest new directions and impetuses. This new criticism will not simply destroy: it will fulfil and provide us with the next insights. (Das 1982)

The role of literature is both analytical and prophetic. It can, at its best, both critique and expose the patterns of existing society and provide guidelines to future possibilities by nurturing the imagination, that most powerful of all the human faculties, and the role of the literary critic is to act as a kind of midwife to these two dialectically linked processes. Das is not alone in this vision of the arts, and many examples can be found of a parallel kind of thinking. The artist and art theorist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger advances the same idea in a different language:

> Artists continually introduce into culture all kinds of Trojan horses from the margins of their consciousness; in that way the limits of the symbolic are transgressed all the time by art. It is quite possible that many work-products carry subjective traces of their creators, but the specificity of works of art is that their materiality cannot be detached from ideas, perceptions, emotions, consciousness, cultural meaning and that being interpreted and reinterpreted is their cultural destiny. This is one of the reasons why works of art are symbologenic. (Ettinger 1992, 196).

The arts thus both interpret existing cultural symbols and create new ones – the imaginative repertoire of a culture is constantly enriched and expanded

by the images, ideas, visions, symbols, and representations introduced into it through the creative process.

These themes can be seen running through Chitta Ranjan's work, which can be summarized under four analytical headings (not necessarily actually distinct in the writings themselves): (1) Critique: but in the forms specific to literature and the arts (as distinct from those of critical theory in sociology, or overtly political analysis, say); (2) The exposure of subjectivities in the unique form that the novel, as opposed to social science texts, can achieve. As the novelist Yann Martel, author of the prizewinning *Life of Pi*, puts it in one of his later works: "Fiction, being closer to the full experience of life, should take precedence over non-fiction. Stories – individual stories, family stories, national stories – are what stitch together the disparate elements of human existence into a coherent whole"; (3) The role of imagination, perhaps the most important human faculty, in interpreting the world and formulating alternative futures. The role of the critic and historian of literature becomes paramount here. Over half a century ago, the art historian and cultural critic Ananda Coomaraswamy proposed the concept of the "creative critic," whose role is not to negatively deconstruct the creative writer or painter's work, but to assist in drawing out and explicating the original vision that moved the artist to create in the first place (Coomaraswamy 1948, 69); (4) The creating and nurturing of local or "indigenous" literature. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has rightly pointed out that all knowledge is actually local or indigenous, but because of the historical mechanisms of colonialism and globalization, certain forms (such as Western scientific knowledge) have become hegemonic, although there is no special evidence that they are superior to other forms of local knowledge (Sahlins 1996).

Many forms of literature already embody alternative realities in one form or another, such as utopian writings, science fiction, fairy tales, and fantasy. It is significant, however, that Chitta Ranjan did not pursue these genres – the first two certainly being only weakly developed in Indian writing where realism still predominates – but drew instead on more familiar sources – history, including the history of Odia literature especially, oral literature of the kind still to be found in rural India, the songs and poetry arising directly from the experience of local peoples, especially the socially and ethnically excluded ones, and myth, the Indian and specifically Hindu cosmos being richly populated with stories of gods and goddesses, supernatural events, and heroes and villains, many of whom now show up not only in local literatures, but in film, especially in the south Indian Tamil movies. These expressive forms are not only of interest in their own right, but embody forms of social knowledge, ecological practices, and modes of

interpreting and managing the external world and its inevitable problems. So-called indigenous literature (i.e. literature not yet discovered by the global arbiters of taste often due to their linguistic inadequacies) is most likely to be closer to these local realities than "global" (usually Western) literature. The literature of the "margins" (defined geographically, not in relation to its quality) may in fact have a deeper significance than the literature of the "centre." The French cultural theorists/philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari coined the term "minor literature" to refer to literary productions that, rather than engage directly with ideological issues or personal symbolism, turn to a different form of radical practice of transforming the limitations – their lack of economic resources, invisibility or marginality in society, and lack of access to the literary and intellectual resources of metropolitan writers – into its strength (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). While Das's literary output can hardly be termed "minor" in either its volume or range, it does have two important parallels with this concept of "minor literature" (in which category Deleuze and Guattari tellingly place Kafka, hardly a minor writer by any standards, but yet one distinctive in his "methodology" and the range of his writing) – notably its eclecticism on the one hand, ranging over and drawing on sources from sociology, myth, folk tales, the work of other Odia writers, and a considerable range of international literature, and on the other its independence of any explicit ideology, leading to a distinctive aesthetics and a form of social critique quite different from conventional political analysis. In this respect, Das recalls the Nobel Prize-winning French author Albert Camus, who also developed a non-political critique of society drawing on his own childhood experiences as a sibling in a poor family in what was then French Algeria:

> Poverty, first of all, was never a misfortune for me: it was radiant with sunlight. Even my revolts were lit up by the sun. These revolts were almost always, I think I can say this in all honesty, revolts on everyone's behalf, aimed at lifting up everybody's life into the light. Quite possibly my heart was not naturally disposed to this kind of love. But circumstances helped me. To correct my natural indifference, I was placed halfway between poverty and the sun. Poverty prevented me from thinking that all is well under the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history is not everything. (Camus 1979, 18)

Deep critique can in fact come not only from the resources of Marxism and other by now conventional critical methodologies or bodies of theory, but equally from a turning to the realities of actually existing societies and the lives of those least privileged within them on the one hand, and to nature on the other.

It is perhaps these insights and the distinctive body of writing that emerged from them that have prevented Das from being categorized in the now rather timeworn category of the "postcolonial writer." In a temporal sense he largely is, but yet has, by the range and distinctiveness of his output, emancipated himself from this category of the "subaltern" writer. This he is not, but rather a distinctive and original voice addressing the ills of society as he saw them (and indeed the shortcomings of its leaders such as Gandhi and Tagore, or rather perhaps the narrow interpretations placed on their immense contributions by many of their no doubt well-meaning followers), a position that transcends the language of "schools" and "tendencies" so frequently imposed on literature by its scholarly commentators, who are themselves rarely also producers of literature themselves. Das's work in fact raises other and in the long run more significant issues: the in-principle equality of knowledges, exposed by the very relativization of knowledge brought about by globalization; the uncharted relationship between development and social change (and forms of social injustice) and aesthetics; the relationship between literature and social theory; and the means by which we can imaginatively chart our desired futures and theorize the means to attain those futures. Das would certainly have agreed with Pablo Picasso, speaking of his celebrated anti-war painting *Guernica*, that the role of the arts is not to be merely decorative or entertaining, but to be a weapon of struggle against the inhumanity that brings about acts of violence and injustice (Picasso 1945, quoted in Read 1997, 160).

Any engagement with the work of Chitta Ranjan must then agree that he is not just an "indigenous" writer, producing literature in a not widely read language in a neglected corner of a developing country. On the contrary, his work contains a model for an engagement with the world – one that crosses the boundaries of literature as conventionally understood, sociology, literary history and criticism, social criticism, philosophy, and folklore. It is clear that the objective of these interventions is not simply critical, but more one of affirmation, of encouragement, and of drawing attention to the rich imaginative and creative resources inherent in almost any society, and certainly in his native Odisha. The object then is not "art for art's sake" but the transformation of life, culture, society, and literature itself. In Das's work this proceeds through a number of steps that could well be emulated by the wider literary world: the bringing to light of "local" literatures and their associated cultural history, the promotion of what might be termed an aesthetic education in readers and young people, and the deconstruction of dehumanizing traditions, however sanctified by time and convention, dialogue with other major thinkers, and a commitment to a

moral and social position that would be uncomfortable in fashionable Western social and cultural theory with its alleged "value freedom."

The result is a new model of literature – one beyond postcolonial criticism, identifying with the victims of development and in this specific context with the betrayed social revolution of post-independence India that has enriched a few while leaving caste, poverty, and corruption fundamentally unchallenged, an aesthetics of courage willing to fight against ugliness in all its forms, the recognition of translation as a true and valuable literary activity, the understanding of poetry not as a minority hermetic taste but as a social activity, and the understanding of art as social struggle, as part of what might be termed an integral aesthetics in which beauty and truth are no longer separated. Das's work then represents a new form of cosmopolitanism in an age when that term is being increasingly widely used, but usually in the context of a globalized, wealthy, jet-setting group whose lives rarely touch the realities of the great majority, whose only function, if any, in their world is as servants and labourers. Rather, as Imtiaz Ahmed has rightly said: "Writing empowers, but it ought to empower the disempowered, not the already powerful" (Ahmed 2010, 3). That statement stands as an excellent epigraph to the work of Chitta Ranjan Das.

References

Ahmed, Imtiaz. 2010. "Introduction," in Ashis Nandy, *A Very Popular Exile.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1–15.

Camus, Albert. 1979. *Selected Essays and Notebooks.* Edited and translated by Philip Thody. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda. 1948. *The Dance of Shiva.* Bombay: Asia Publishing House.

Das, Chitta Ranjan. 1982. *A Glimpse into Odia Literature.* Bhubaneswar: Odisha Sahitya Ekademi.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1986. *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature.* Translated by Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Ettinger, Bracha Lichtenberg. 1992. "Matrix and Metamorphosis." *Difference* 4, no. 2: 176–96.

Read, Herbert. 1997. *A Concise History of Modern Painting.* London: Thames and Hudson.

Sahlins, Marshall. 1996. "The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology." *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 3: 395–428.

PREFACE

> By their capacity for the immortal deed, by their ability to leave non-perishable traces behind, men, their individual mortality notwithstanding, attain an immortality of their own and prove themselves to be of a "divine" nature.
> —Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1959, 19)

> A dynamism would have been the norm and routine of our life. To tell you the truth, that spontaneous dynamism is the health of our life … With our sacred conservatism if we bound ourselves only to what is there then there would be lots of mud in the pond of our life. So there should be a continued process of cleaning up mud which means we would have to continuously widen the paths so that new streams of waters can enter there. Nothing would be rotten. It means in our mortal body everything would remain as immortal. Yes, we would realize that in an integral healthy reality, which is continuously being reborn, where nothing is dying.
> —Chitta Ranjan Das, *Yoga Samanyaya: Prabeshika* (2010, 2–3)

> I must make it plain that this means a lesson not in simple life, but in creative life. For life may grow complex, and yet if there is a living personality in its center, it will still have the unity of creation, it will carry its own weight in perfect grace, and will not be a mere addition to the number of facts that add only to go to swell a crowd.
> —Rabindra Nath Tagore, "Poet's School" (1961, 57)

Chitta Ranjan Das (1923–2011) represents a moving creative dialogue with life and transformations. *The Essays of Chitta Ranjan Das on Literature, Culture, and Society: On the Side of Life in Spite of* brings together some of his essays written in English on literature, culture, life, and the human condition. In India and around the world, our terms of criticism and conversations are still predominantly metropolitan. There is very little discussion on creative strivings in different mother-language spaces, be it of India or the rest of the world. Chitta Ranjan mainly wrote in Odia, but he also wrote in English. I hope this book will enlarge and deepen our universe of discourse on literature, philosophy, and world transformations.

We dedicate this book to U. R. Ananthamurthy, Mahasweta Devi, Tomas Tranströmer, and Kailash Satyarthi. Ananthamurthy and Mahasweta Devi, like Chitta Ranjan, were great experimenters in literature, and also

courageous fighters against the old systems of domination, which made one critic comment that their literature is animated by "luminous anger." Chitta Ranjan shares with them this luminous anger as the title of one of his book of essays, *Brahma Tatilani Para* [*The Brahma Has Heated Up*], clearly shows. Tomas Tranströmer is a great poetic seeker from Sweden who received the Nobel Prize in literature. His deep voyage of the inner realm, part of an integral seeking, also touches the depths of Chitta Ranjan's soul and seeking. Kailash Satyarthi is a fellow Nobel Peace Prize winner who has given his life for the blossoming of children at great personal risk. Chitta Ranjan, in turn, had a deep commitment to children and children's literature. I hope that the immortal soul of Chitta Ranjan comes alive as he finds his work dedicated to these great seekers and fighters of humanity.

One of us, Ananta Kumar Giri, first started assembling some of these essays in the fall of 2002 together with Chitta Ranjan. Finally, this work is seeing the light of day. We are grateful to Chitta Ranjan for his generosity and to Bijaya Bhai – Mr. Bijaya Kumar Mohanty of Cuttack, Odisha – for typing the manuscript. We are also grateful to Professor John Clammer for his foreword, which first appeared in another book that one of us edited – *A New Morning with Chitta Ranjan: Adventures in Co-Realizations and World Transformations* (2012). We also thank Manoj Bhai – Shri Manoj Parida, a friend of both Chitta Ranjan and ourselves – for editing this work. We thank Vishnu Varatharajan for his help with editing and especially preparing the index. We are grateful to our friends at Cambridge Scholars Press especially Rebecca Gladders and Amanda Millar for their kind interest and support. We would also like to thank Texas State University for providing financial support to complete copy editing of this book. We also thank the final copy editors of this work.

Finally, we hope this work sparks interest in seeking souls everywhere, across disciplines and cultures, and cultivates and explores new pathways of creativity and commitment in life, literature, philosophy, and education in this fragile home of ours.

Ananta Kumar Giri
Ivan Marquez
Maha Shivaratri, February 21, 2020
Madras Institute of Development Studies
Texas State University, San Marcos

References

Arendt, Hannah. 1959. *The Human Condition*. New York: Anchor Books.
Das, Chitta Ranjan. 2010. *Yoga Samanyaya: Prabeshika* [*Synthesis of Yoga: an Introduction*].
Tagore, Rabindra Nath. 1961. "Poet's School."

INTRODUCTION
LITERATURE ON THE SIDE OF LIFE AND THE *TAPASYA* OF TRANSFORMATIONS: A GLIMPSE INTO THE CREATIVE WORLDS AND WORKS OF CHITTA RANJAN DAS

ANANTA KUMAR GIRI

> Writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed. It is not the first two persons that function as the condition of literary enunciation; literature begins only when a third person is born in us that strips us of the power to say "I" … *To write is also to become something other than a writer*.
> —Gilles Deleuze, "Literature and Life" (1997, 225, 230, emphases added)

> The genuinely committed writer is never on the side of the Establishment. His voice is always a powerful protest against arbitrary power. He is always on the side of man, of the future and of truth in spite of the pretensions that seem to rule all around … A writer is always on the side of affirmation, on the side of love.
> —Chitta Ranjan Das, *A Glimpse into Odia Literature* (1982a)

> Thoreau's copy of Homer is open on his table at Walden. So far as philosophy is a matter of caring about texts, meditation is its mark before argumentation …
> —Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981, 13)

Prelude

Reflections on literature, culture, and society in contemporary India and various initiatives in literary and cultural criticism as they have been carried out in the academic portals of our land have deliberately chosen not to have a dialogue with movements of criticisms and creativity emanating from the soil and spaces of India, especially the non-metropolitan ones. Our theorists of literature and culture and our academic

interpreters of life who have always claimed a larger-than-life role for themselves have almost always looked up to the West for direction and inspiration. Whatever emerges there – whether it is modernism or postmodernism, structuralism or post-structuralism – immediately arrests our attention. We rarely make an effort to rethink these theories and methods, nor are we interested in a dialogue with the reflections on the human condition emanating from different non-incorporated and non-metropolitan spaces of India. While discussing contemporary interlocutors, such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze, and old masters such as Jean-Paul Sartre, we do not feel an urge to bring in some of the creative and critical interlocutors from contemporary India for a dialogue with these thinkers and thoughts, and thus widen our universe of discourse. Even the so-called moves of postcolonial criticism as they have come to pass in the institutional corridors of India and the West are part of a metropolitan reflection on the human condition, and embody very little desire to talk to people in their languages and have a dialogue with creative litterateurs and critics who choose to write in the local languages (despite the temptations and the imperial gaze of the global). In this context of the hegemony of the global and the decimation of the local, this book presents the works and worlds of a non-metropolitan and non-systemic thinker who has been a seeker of literature as a *tapasya* (striving with a spiritual touch) of transformation. This interlocutor is Chitta Ranjan Das (1923–2011). Born on October 3, 1923 in the village of Bagalpur in the undivided district of Cuttack in Odisha, Chitta Ranjan was part of many experiments, explorations, and *tapasyas* aimed at the multidimensional transformation of the self, culture, and society, and for cultivating literature on the side of life, in spite of.

The present book, *The Essays of Chitta Ranjan Das on Literature, Culture, and Society: On the Side of Life in Spite of*, brings together Das's engagement with and reflections on many important issues in life, culture, society, literature, history, and sources of perennial affirmations. The first section of the book, appropriately titled "The Perennial Affirmations," presents Chitta Ranjan's insightful reflections on Christ, Gandhi, Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Janus Korczak, and issues of materialism and spirituality. The second section, "On Literature, Odisha and Beyond," includes essays on the cultural development of Odia literature, and important pioneers such as the Panchasakhas (the five poets, such as Achyutananda), Bhima Bhoi, and Fakir Mohan Senapati. This section also includes Das's critical reflections on development in Odia literature, such as the essay "The Paranoid Sensibility in Odia Literature." The section also has insightful reflections by Das on folk culture and literature for children. The final

section, "Asides at Large," contains Das's reflections on our unlived lives and unrealized potentials, and pleads for cultivating multidimensional processes of becoming, as suggested by the title of the last essay in the volume, "To Write and to Be."

With this brief invitation to the book, let us look at an overview of the life, works, and many-splendored worlds of Chitta Ranjan Das.

Chitta Ranjan: an Invitation to the Adventure of Ideas and Relationships

Chitta Ranjan Das is a creative seeker, experimenter, and perennial traveller who left his mortal body and undertook a new journey on January 16, 2011. Chitta Ranjan started writing at a young age, but from the beginning his concerns were critical and embodied a deep seeking. One of his earliest writings is an essay on Socrates that he wrote in Odia when he was a student at the Ravenshaw Collegiate School, Cuttack in the late 1930s. His last book, which was in press when he breathed his last, is on Spinoza in Odia, which follows his earlier work on Spinoza in English. He had first written this as an undergraduate thesis at Shantiniketan in 1948, and in this Chitta Ranjan tells us:

> Rejection reduces man to the chrysalis cave of the Diogenian type of individualism; politically to his own interested group, and in morals, to his pet dogmas. The excellence, in the eyes of the modern age, lies in assimilation and acceptance, acceptance of the whole of existence as it is. And Spinoza lives eternally as a minister of this spirit of reconciliation. (Das 2009e, xii)

Chitta Ranjan started writing his diary at the age of nineteen in 1942, and continued until the end of his waking life. His diaries are intimate doors into his life and works. What is probably unique in the whole world of self-reflection is that his diaries have been published as they are, without any changes whatsoever, in twenty-four volumes under the title *Rohita\a Diary* [*The Diary of Rohita*]. Rohita is the name in the Upanishadic lore for one who is continuously drawn by the ideal "Chareibeti, Chareibeti" ["Move On! Move On!"].

As a young student at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, Chitta Ranjan participated in the Quit India Movement of 1942 and was put behind bars for three years in different jails, including in Bangalore where he learnt Kannada. In jail he translated some works of Gandhi, wrote a book about India called *Ei Mora Desha* [*This is My Country*] (2011), and also took to writing poems which were later published as a collection

entitled *Dui Adyaya* [*Two Chapters*]. After his release from jail in 1945, he realized that the freedom of the country was in the offing and went on to continue his learning at Shantiniketan, the abode of Gurudev Tagore's *sadhana* and dreams. After his studies he plunged into research on the history, culture, religion, and literature of Odisha. He wrote three monographs in the early 1950s at Shantiniketan: *Studies in Medieval Religion and the Society of Odisha*, *Odishara Mahima Dharma* [*The Mahima Dharma of Odisha*], and *Achyutananda O Panchasaka Dharma* [*Achyutananda and the Religion of the Panchasakhas*] (1951, 1952). These explorations helped Chitta Ranjan discover himself anew and, at the same time, reinforce his convictions. These works also helped to build the department of Odia at Visvabharati, newly established in the late 1940s. His perspectives on literature, culture, and criticism were very much deepened by his dialogues with the two main protagonists of these studies: the tribal poet Bhima Bhoi and the saint poet Achyutananda Das. Bhima Bhoi challenged all of us with these lines: "Praninka arata dukha apramita dekhu keba sahu/ Mo jeevana pachhe narke padithau jagata uddhara heu" ["The life of beings is full of so many miseries and who can tolerate this on seeing/ Let my own life be rather in hell and let the world live in happiness and escape from this misery"] (Das 2001c). The aspiration of Chitta Ranjan is similar, with one addition – he believes that transforming the world is possible while making one's life a heaven of freedom and joy; and while striving to transform the world, one is not condemned to a hell. Achyutananda Das, in turn, argued in the sixteenth century that one's primary responsibility is to be a *Shudra*, a servant, rather than a *Brahmana*. Achyutananda Das's ideal of servanthood as our primary identity before God and society was another deep influence on Chitta Ranjan (Das 1992a). As he tells us in one of his last *Rohitara Diaries*, to be a Shudra is to be a hero and of use to others, contributing to the evolutionary transformation of the world.

After his research at Shantiniketan, Chitta Ranjan went to the University of Copenhagen in Denmark in 1951 for further studies in psychology. During his stay there he took an active interest in the folk high-school movement, which was a unique movement in popular education. It was inspired by the visionary poet and pastor N. F. S. Grundtvig and education pioneer Kristen Kold. Chitta Ranjan later wrote a biography of Kold in Odia, which has also been translated into English (Das 2007e). He not only learnt Danish but also Finnish, and had a close association with students and teachers of folk high schools in Finland. During my last visit to Finland in 2004 I talked to participants of folk schools where Chitta Ranjan went, and where he helped to build some of

these schools. His letters from Denmark were published as *Denmark Chithi* in the early 1950s and have enkindled the hearts of a generation of Odia readers (Das 1990).

Upon returning from Denmark, he started a school in an interior area of Odisha at Champatimunda in the district of Angul, which was an effort to bring together Gandhi's *nai taleem* [basic education] and insights from the Danish folk high-school movement. He was there for four years, and everything he wrote there for students has been published as *Jeevana Vidyalaya* [*The School of Life*] (Das 2002c) and *Jangala Chithi* [*Letters from the Forest*] (Das 1971). Its translation in English and Hindi has been published by the National Book Trust, Delhi (Das 2007f). Chitta Ranjan did not want this school to be part of the governmental school system, and wanted an autonomous process of evaluation for students rather than being forced to take part in the Government Board Examination. Initially, the government promised *Jeevana Vidyalaya* autonomy, but with the change of ruling power configuration the education department of Odisha backtracked. Chitta Ranjan resigned from the school and came back to his village. After a while, he got an invitation to teach at the Rural Institute in Bichpuri, Agra, in the late 1950s and was there for fifteen years. He also spent a year as a visiting professor at the International House in Sonnenberg, near Göttingen, Germany in 1962–3, where he learnt German. The International House offered him a permanent position, but realizing that he was needed more in India he came back to the Rural Institute in Agra. Some of his works from this period are: a collection of essays called *Taranga O Tadit* [*Waves and Lightning*], *Samaja: Parivarthan O Vikasha* [*Society: Change and Development*] (Das 2004f), and *Shilatirtha*, an epic work in prose describing Chitta Ranjan's journey through the Himalayan peaks and to places of pilgrimage such as Badrinath and Kedarnath. This epic mountain journey follows his earlier heart-touching descriptions and letters from his seafaring travels in such works as *Sagarajatri* [*Traveller of the Sea*]. He also presented his travels across the hills of Ganjam and Nepal in *Ganjam Malare Satadina* [*Seven Days in the Hills of Ganjam*] and *Nepala Pathe* [*On the Way to Nepal*] (Das 1984; 1999c).

The perpetual wanderer that he was, Chitta Ranjan left Agra in the mid-1970s and came back to Odisha to devote himself full time to the emergent movement of integral education in Odisha, inspired by the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. He travelled around Odisha and spent time with community leaders, teachers, and students in integral schools. He was also a great public intellectual and orator of Odisha. But he did not believe in speaking from the pulpit and spoke as a friend in circles of

dialogues in colleges, literary meets, *pathachakras* (study circles), and public meetings. He also wrote regular columns in newspapers such as *Pragativadi* and *Sambad*, and reflective essays in journals such as *Nabarabi*, *Eshana*, and *Bartika*.[1]

Upon his return to Odisha he wrote some of his best works, such as *Jatire Mu Jabana* [*I am an Outsider by Caste*], *Ma Nishada*, *Gandhi O Gopabandhu*, *Pashyati Dishi* [*Looking All Around*], *Odia Sahityara Sanskruika Vikashadhara* [*The Cultural Development of Odia Literature*], *A Glimpse into Odia Literature*; *Santha Sahitya* [*The Literature of the Saints*], *Nakha Darpanena* [*Through Nails as Mirrors*], *Sahitya O* [*Literature and …*], *Ebam* [*And …*], and others. In the first twenty years of his return to Odisha he also gifted us books on China and Israel based on his travels to these countries. *Eretez Israel* is the title of his book on Israel, which he visited in the early 1950s on his way back to India from Denmark, and had a meeting with Martin Buber, the great seeker and philosopher of dialogue. He also visited and taught in the kibbutz schools. He was happy to come back to Israel after thirty-seven years in 1991, and his book brought these two journeys together. He was for peace in the Middle East, and was greatly pained by the violence unleashed by the Jewish state as well as militant groups. In his book on China, *Bharataru Chin* [*From India to China*], the perpetual questioner that he is, he asks us, given that Hiuen Tsang came to India to study, crossing the Himalayas, how many Indians went to study in China? (Das 1998). His book came out in 1988, just a year before the Tiananmen Square protests, but he was somewhat uncritical in his description of and praise for China. During a recent discussion we had, he continued to look at the issue of Tibet from the Chinese standpoint.

In this period, he also produced moving and critical biographies of political and spiritual leaders such as Nabakrushna Choudhury and Swami Vivekananda, respectively entitled, *Shri Nabakrushna Choudhury: Eka Jibani* [*Nabakrushna Choudhury: a Life*] (Das 1992e) (this work is being published in English translation by NBT, Delhi) and *Vinna Jane Vivekananda* [*A Different Vivekananda*] (Das 1995).

---

[1] *Eshana* is the mouthpiece of *Odisha Gabeshana Parishada*, which Chitta Ranjan had co-nurtured for thirty years, and in its pages he wrote many essays on such important themes as aesthetics and existentialism. Similarly, he published regularly in *Bartika*, and his last essay in the October 2010 issue was "Gautama Buddha O Odisha" ["Gautama Buddha and Odisha"]. Even in his advanced age he not only wrote on his philosophy but published critical essays in appreciation of fellow seekers such as the poet Brahmananda Das and essayist Baikunthanatha Ratha in the pages of *Bartika*.

Literature as a *Tapasya*: Chitta Ranjan's *Weltanschauung*

Chitta Ranjan believed in *tapasya* as a mode of being in a world, where we are patiently labouring to take the existent reality to a new evolutionary height as well as make the ascent to a higher level of consciousness and a more dignified and qualitative relationship with the existent self, culture, and society. One of his inspiring interlocutors in Odia literature is the poet Gangadhara Meher, a weaver like Kabir, and the writer of a heart-touching poem on Sita of Ramayana called *Tapaswinee*. In one of his critical works, Chitta Ranjan calls Gangadhara a *tapaswee* (1983). One can look at the strivings of Chitta Ranjan from the same vantage point.

Literature as *tapasya* makes possible many new beginnings. First of all, it enables us to blossom, to grow, to become capable of more sharing, giving, and love. The *tapasya* of literature is a *tapasya* of self-transformation. In literature, we are usually familiar with experimentation with styles and techniques, but most important for Chitta Ranjan is to experiment with one's life, to carry out manifold "experiments with truth," as Gandhi, another creative interlocutor of our times with whom Chitta Ranjan carried out a lifelong dialogue, urges us to realize. But self-transformation and world-transformation go together. Literature must contribute to the transformation of the world – from its ugliness and many indignities, literature must help the world be a more dignified place. The institutional moorings of the world – its politics, economy, and education – must be changed in order for the dignity of the human person to be at the centre of our scheme of things. Literature must contribute to the building of such a world and the transformed consciousness that makes this possible.

As a *tapasya* of social transformation, literature has to take part in people's social, cultural, and moral struggles. It has to give expression to people's creativity and aspirations, including people's deconstruction of the existing dehumanizing systems. For this, the poets and writers must write in the language of people without unnecessary ornamentation. The dominance of ornamental language as it happened in the era of *Ritikavya* of medieval literature, and as it happens in certain fields of modern poetry, is a sign of decadence for Chitta Ranjan. One of the animating chapters in Chitta Ranjan's magnum opus *Odia Sahityara Sanskrutika Bikashadhara* [*The Cultural Development of Odia Literature*] is called "The Conflict Between *Reeti* and *Preeti*." Chitta Ranjan is for life-affirmative love in literature, a love which gets expressed in the clarity of one's language. Writing in a socially powerful language as an aspect of social conformity, whether it is Sanskrit in the medieval world or English in contemporary

India, is an expression of our alienation from the vibrant links with the people around us.

But to write in the language of people requires courage. The hero of such courage for Chitta Ranjan is Sarala Das, the maker of Odia *Mahabharata*. In the fourteenth century, when poets were writing in Sanskrit, Sarala Das chose to write in Odia. This was a protest as well as a creative affirmation. Similar courage is shown by Achyutananda and the *Panchasakhas* – the five famous friends of the sixteenth-century Odisha: Balarama Das, Ananta Das, Yashovanta Das, Jagannatha Das, and Achyutananda Das – who refused to write in Sanskrit and translated many epics and *puranas* into Odia. Chitta Ranjan helps us to understand that the *Panchasakhas* were the people's leaders and chose this wider calling for themselves, instead of the more secure one of being a court pundit. For Chitta Ranjan, as writers we must have the courage to be on the side of the people rather than sing ballads for the kings and queens and loiter in the corridors of power.

Chitta Ranjan believes that the written language in literature derives nourishment from the spoken language (Das 1982a). The debate on the written and the oral has had a contentious history and, recently, Derrida argued that while the written fixes and binds our thought, the oral gives unrestricted freedom to it. But Chitta Ranjan is not obsessed with the issue about the comparative significance of the written and the oral. His main point is that the users of the written must have the humility to realize that the written is nourished by the oral and the readiness to learn from it. Later, Chitta Ranjan's meditation on language and literature went beyond the conventions of the written and the oral. For Chitta Ranjan, literature must be a *mantra* in life. Taking inspiration from Sri Aurobindo, another seeker who was a constant companion of Chitta Ranjan in his life's pilgrimage in his last quarter of a century, Chitta Ranjan believed that the language of literature should be a language of *mantra*. It must have the elocutionary power to transform. Chitta Ranjan also suggested that alternative literature must have an alternative language because the existing language is inadequate for describing and expressing the horizon of emergence. Therefore, when Chitta Ranjan argued that we must write in the people's language, it was not an exercise in populism alone. In the evolutionary unfoldment of a writer, there has to be moments when they present a new language to the people in order to describe the emergent world they envision, strive to create, or have created.

For Chitta Ranjan, literature must have commitment, but this is not necessarily expressed through commitment to political parties and ideologies. As the noted sociologist Andre Beteille (1982) argues, commitment does

not mean commitment to an ideological orthodoxy alone; it also refers to the moral commitments of the actors. Chitta Ranjan's concerns are similar to Beteille but go further, as he urges us to realize the ontological depth of moral and social commitments. For Chitta Ranjan, one cannot be committed to society if one is not committed to oneself. But self-commitment here does not mean commitment to one's ego-aggrandizement but to the calling of the universal self within us. Chitta Ranjan makes a distinction between ideology and devotion to an ideal life (Das 1992b). Ideal life is not just a romantic utopia for Chitta Ranjan but the design of an ideal relationship of dignity which one continuously seeks to realize in the life of the self, other, culture, and society.

However, what has happened to the devotion to an ideal life in post-independence India? Chitta Ranjan is pained by the death of the ideals in this period and looks at it as an era of *Prabanchita Biplaba*, a "Betrayed Revolution." The Indian freedom movement wanted to realize both political freedom and social revolution. But after the realization of political freedom, the agenda of social revolution was hijacked by the powers that be. Chitta Ranjan condemns the writers of the country for so easily and willingly becoming a party to this political conspiracy. For Chitta Ranjan, the poets and litterateurs quickly forgot the dreams of the freedom movement and sang eulogies for the holders of power, even surpassing the court pundits of the medieval world. They forgot the language of *tapasya*, *sraddha*, social struggle, and social transformation. Thus, the so-called modern era in a field like Odia literature is for him one of decadence, in which the writers became clinically preoccupied with styles and techniques. As Chitta Ranjan writes: "the so-called modern movement in literature soon came to mean the movement for new styles and techniques, not often harping in a bizarre sort of way, on new lethargies and therefore also new eccentricities" (Das 1982a, 242). While "literature could have given leadership and provided an alternative," it compromised and declared its "insolvency" (1982a, 245). Furthermore, "when there was this fundamental incapacity to face the real issues and the real privations, the writers ran away and took refuge in gimmicks and skills. One can say without exaggeration that in Odia poetry at least there was a regression to the *reeti* phase of its history in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries where the poets of the courts overdid the structure of poetry to conceal the fact as it were that they had nothing more important to say. Thus, as far as range is concerned, the poets remained very closed and cornered in spite of the avowed modernity of their styles" (1982a, 243).

For Chitta Ranjan, literature in post-independence India should have been a literature of protest and seeking of new affirmations. The burgeoning body of postcolonial criticism has not really embodied this sensibility deep enough. Literature should have confronted the brutality of the postcolonial state and its dehumanizing configuration of power with love, courage, and *sraddha*. These days, critiques of modernity, under the rubric of varieties of postmodernism, are still confined to the safe institutional corridors of modernity, but Chitta Ranjan's critique of modern literature is inspired by an identification with the pangs and hopes of ordinary people who have been victimized by the processes of modernization. In a poverty-stricken society such as India, modernization has been the other name of elite domination. In another context, liberation theologian and critic Felix Wilfred (1997) argues that the critique of modernity should be attempted, taking into account what processes of modernization and the condition of modernity have done to many of its victims. Chitta Ranjan's critique of the modern phase of Odia literature is guided by similar concerns. Modern literature has forgotten that it is a dialogue with people and is a partner in their pangs, aspirations, and many strivings for a more dignified future.

On Poetry, Literature, and Criticism

Now we can come directly to a discussion of Chitta Ranjan's perspectives on poetry, literature, culture, and criticism. For this, I shall confine myself to a few of his texts, namely an essay on the new horizons of poetry called "Ethara Udiba Neta" ["Now the Flag Shall Fly"] and his collection of essays called *Sahitya O* [*Literature And …*] (Das 1989a; Das 1989b). It must be mentioned that his theoretical statements on literature are also presented in some of his other collections of essays, such as *Ma Nishada*, *Jatire Mu Jabana*, and *Pashyati Dishi*.

"Ethara Udiba Neta" is a unique and inspiring meditation on poetry and poets. It is a long essay written with another inspiring poet of contemporary Odia literature, Srinivasa Udgata. In this essay, Chitta Ranjan begins by stating: "Poetry is not primarily a *kruti*; a work: this is a *drusti*, a vision, a perspective, a way of looking at oneself and the world" (Das 1989b, 2). *Drusti* gives rise to creation, *srusti*. This creation is fundamentally meant to take us from what we are to what we might be. But poetry is not meant to take us away from reality. Poetry makes bridges, and establishes many threads. In the evocative words of Chitta Ranjan, which are difficult to translate into English: "Poetry makes bridges, it conquers hopelessness by making bridges; by itself becoming a

bridge, it establishes victory over all *asammati* (hesitation for consent) and *anamaniyata* (stubbornness). After this everything looks beautiful here … Once the ladder is there, loneliness departs and the unreachable reaches us as our very own" (1989b, 7).

Poetry establishes a bridge between time and timelessness, history and eternity, and reality and possibility. It is also a creative and transformative link between *bhumi* and *bhuma*. A poet stands on the ground but is continuously after a *bhuma*, a beyond. For Chitta Ranjan, *bhuma* is such a constant attraction that while standing in the present and the past it continuously draws us to a future. For Chitta Ranjan, to live with the poetic sensibility is to live in continuous contact with what psychologists call the peak experience of one's life. Peak experience is a spiritual experience, an integral experience which makes the poet a traveller. In Chitta Ranjan's words: "The real poet never situates himself at the centre. He does not hide himself for a catch like the spider of a web and does not wish to sell his *tapasya* and get the fortunes of an *Indra* [King of Heaven]. He traverses his path with all his sufferings, sympathy and determination, the path which connects the ground with the peak" (1989b, 10). For Chitta Ranjan, to touch the peak while standing on the ground is called *utkranti*, of the Indian Upanishads, and poetry is an embodiment of this *utkranti*.

Chitta Ranjan again urges us to understand the distinction between the language of power and the aspirations of a poet. With Nietzsche and Foucault, it is the human will to power which has dominated the way we think about poetry, literature, criticism, and society. But Chitta Ranjan provides us with an alternative language and an alternative world. While the man of power runs "to bring the entire world inside his closed fist," the urge of poetry (*Kabira basana*, as he calls it) brings our consciousness to an intimacy when we feel at home with the entire world. At that time all our fears vanish, and there is no hatred. The Upanishadic aspiration, *Tato Na Bijugupsate*, then becomes a way of life. In the poetic words of Chitta Ranjan: "[At that time], the bird inside comes out silently with all the achieved aspirations and urges of one's life. Once she starts coming out, the door which had remained closed for years is spontaneously opened" (1989b, 7).

But for Chitta Ranjan, the man of power does not want to open his doors. He is afraid of expansion. He is afraid that he would be lost in the process of expansion. In the words of Chitta Ranjan: "The man of power is not able to give himself. He is not able to open his many knots. The knots open and hesitations go away only when we discover the poet within us; we are then able to realize that our greatest way and *dharma* is to expand

ourselves. When we look at the world through the eyes of a poet, we realize that our threads are connected with all this (with everybody in the world)" (1989b, 10).

Thus, for Chitta Ranjan, poetry is coterminous with the expansion of consciousness which, while establishing a bridge between the outer nature and inner nature, takes both to a new height. Taking inspiration from Biswanath Kaviraj, the great theoretician of poetry, Chitta Ranjan calls this *chaitanya tanmayata*, the expansion of consciousness. The creative imagination which is the mother of this expanding urge knows no bounds, and accepts and acknowledges no limitations. For Chitta Ranjan, this is the stage of "self-creation" in one's life, where one strives to continuously create and recreate oneself.

In his earlier reflection on poetry and prose, shared with us in his *Jatire Mu Jabana* (1979), Chitta Ranjan looked at poetry in a narrower way. For him, modern prose is much closer to reality than poetry, and thus he declares the present age as an age of prose. But in the present treatise, Chitta Ranjan shows no such parochialism.[2] Rather, he challenges us to realize the blurring of genres between prose and poetry in our creative works. In this essay, Chitta Ranjan also urges us to transcend the distinction between the poets and critics. In the integral unfolding of one's life, while a poet goes up step by step and is worthy of critical observation, presenting the picture of a possible world as a critic of the existent world, a critic in the same trajectory of integral unfoldment is capable of touching deeper and deeper, and able to look at the world through the eyes of a poet (1979, 43).

Hence, central to overcoming the distinction between prose and poetry and poetry and criticism is the creative travel, creative immersion, and creative evolution of the maker of literature. In fact, Chitta Ranjan establishes an intimate connection and transformative link between criticism and creativity, and deconstruction and reconstruction. He demonstrates this link in both his life and letters. In fact, we can use this issue of creativity to move to a discussion of another of Chitta Ranjan's treatises on literature, *Sahitya O*, which is a collection of sixteen essays on literature. All these essays have the connecting term "O" ["and"] existing in the middle, such as "literature and commitment" and "literature and creativity," which is probably meant to bring home his conviction that to

[2] Though it must be noted here that when Chitta Ranjan exclusively writes on prose – on its nature and possibilities – such parochialism continues to haunt him, as is evidenced in a series of essays he wrote on prose in the famous Odia literary journal *Jhankara*, now part of his essay collection *Prabanhara Pruthivi* [*The World of Essays*] (Das 2006a).