

Representing Disabilities in Odia Fiction

This paper seeks to explore how the idea of disability can be understood within the specific social, cultural, and historical context of Odisha. Raising this question is particularly significant because Odisha continues to be regarded as a relatively backward state even after more than seven decades of India's independence, marked by persistent economic challenges and uneven access to education, healthcare, and social welfare. Disability in this context cannot be examined in isolation, as it operates across multiple levels—physical, legal, educational, social, and cultural—each of which shapes the lived experiences of disabled persons. The paper therefore asks how Odia society addresses disability through these intersecting frameworks and what kinds of attitudes, assumptions, and practices emerge from them. Recent survey data indicating that there are more than thirteen million disabled people in Odisha further underscores the urgency of this inquiry, highlighting a substantial population whose experiences remain underrepresented in critical and creative discourses.

Although there are numerous government policies and welfare programmes aimed at addressing disability in Odisha, there is a noticeable lack of sustained documentation that captures how disabled individuals actually live, negotiate everyday challenges, and cope with social and economic constraints. Official frameworks often emphasise policy implementation and institutional support, but they rarely convey the emotional, psychological, and cultural dimensions of disability as lived experience. It is within this gap that literature becomes especially important. Creative writing, particularly fiction, provides a space where disability can be narrated not merely as a problem to be solved but as a complex condition embedded in family structures, community relations, and cultural values. Odia literature offers several fictional representations of disability that reflect social attitudes, prejudices, compassion, and resilience, thereby enabling a more nuanced understanding of how disability is perceived and experienced in the region.

In this paper, I attempt to examine how Odia creative writers have represented different forms of disability in their fictional works, with particular attention to the ways these narratives shape and reflect societal understanding. Among the early and significant texts in this tradition is Laxmikant Mahapatra's *Kana Mamu* (1947), translated as *One Eye Uncle*, which stands as one of the earliest fictional works in Odia literature to focus centrally on disability. Through a critical analysis of *Kana Mamu*, alongside references to other relevant texts, the paper argues that Mahapatra's work sets a powerful precedent for narrating disability in the Odia context. The text not only foregrounds physical impairment but also reveals the social stigma, emotional vulnerability, and ethical questions surrounding disability, thereby establishing a narrative framework that later writers would revisit and reinterpret. In doing so, the paper demonstrates how Odia fiction contributes meaningfully to broader discussions of disability by situating it within the everyday realities and cultural imagination of Odisha.