Modern writings on the history of Odisha, as in the other regions, began with the colonial encounter and the foundation of the Asiatic Society. The British administrators and scholars started taking interest in the visible antiquities of the region from the early part of the 19th century. Andrew Stirling was the first to publish a history of parts of what constitutes Odisha today. His account in the Asiatic Researches in 1825 largely focused on Cuttack and Puri districts drawing on a Sanskrit Vamshavali and parts of the Madala Panji. This was soon followed by Kittoe, Princep and Fergusson’s engagement with the region’s antiquities. In one of his papers Kittoe published the sketch of the caves at Udayagiri. Udayagiri-Khandagiri, Dhauli, Odishan art, architecture, including the temples was brought to the notice of the scholarly world through the pages of the Journal of the Asiatic Society. Beglar, the assistant of Cunningham, in the early 1870s conducted archaeological explorations in various parts of Odisha, including the western hinterland. Almost simultaneously W.W. Hunter’s Orissa, in two volumes, provided a history of the region based on Sanskrit works, a traveller’s account and medieval chronicles, besides the archaeological remains in the Cuttack-Puri belt. These works in addition to opening up possibilities bequeathed a legacy to the next generation of historians.

Towards the last quarter of the same century Indians started taking interest in their own history and heritage, and an important byproduct was the writing of regional histories. In the aftermath of the Bengal Renaissance Odisha attracted the notice of quite a number of historians from Bengal. Rajendralal Mitra’s *The Antiquities of Orissa*, in two volumes (1875), M.M. Ganguly’s *Orissa and Her Remains* (1912), and B.C. Mazumdar’s *Orissa in the Making* (1925) provided an extensive analysis of the material in large parts of the coastal districts. Monuments, sculptures, cave and temple architecture, together with the socio-political and cultural life of early Odisha engaged their attention. R.D. Banerji’s *History of Orissa*, again in two volumes, was an exercise in detailed chronological history. For the first time the Stone Age cultures were taken cognizance and presented in a synthesized form. The incorporation of the archaeological material represented an advance in regional history writing. The appendix on the origin of the Rajput families in the region was an eye opener, though quite in advance of his times. What Banerji suggested as a reasonable possibility others almost forty years later confirmed. The period also witnessed a full translation of the Hathi-gumpha inscription by K.P. Jayaswal and R.D. Banerji, admittedly though it was first noticed by James Princep and Kittoe.
Odisha has inscriptions spanning more than two millennia, from the Asokan Special Edicts at Dhauli and Jaugada to those dated to the 19th century. S. Tripathy’s monumental Descriptive Topographical Catalogue of Orissan Inscriptions (2010) has brought together about 1500 inscriptions, an invaluable heritage of the region.

The formation of the linguistic province of Odisha provided the necessary stimulus for the growth of the discipline, though the genealogy of the early local practitioners of the craft can be traced to B. Misra and P. Acharya in the 1930s. The 1950s and 60s were a turning point in the flowering of indigenous scholarship, which interestingly coincided with the expansion of higher education, best manifested in the growth of new universities, in the state. H.K. Mahtab’s History of Orissa shed light on the little known dynasties of the region by relying more on the inscriptive material. He not only discussed the cult of Jagannatha but also the other contemporary religions of the region. Here it may be mentioned that A. Stirling in his article mentioned above had already captured the essence of the Jagannath cult when he alluded to its generally integrative character best manifested in the art and architecture of the temple complex at Puri. The Kalinga Historical Research Journal and subsequently the Orissa Historical Research Journal, brought out by the State Museum emerged as the vehicles of communication of indigenous research. The works of K.C. Panigrahi, N.K. Sahu, S.N. Raiguru, K.N. Mahapatra, P. Mukherjee, K.B. Tripathy and B.C. Ray covered different facets of the precolonicial history of the region. The publication of the series Inscriptions of Orissa edited by S.N. Rajaguru and S.Tripathy by the Orissa State Museum was an important milestone laying the foundations for future research. Looking back from the vantage point of what we know today about the history of the region it emerges that state, society and culture were mostly perceived in a traditional way, largely bereft of their economic and socio-political moorings. Besides, in these writings usually the littoral zone was privileged. However, it needs to be recognized that these historians laid the basis for progress in the future decades, both in terms of providing a coherent political framework and unearthing primary material for piecing together the pasts.

The next two decades witnessed the movement of a sizable number of Odia students for higher studies to the University of Delhi and Jawahar Lal Nehru University. The period coincided with Odisha being the focus of historical studies by the German scholars. The first German Orissa Research Project was launched during 1969-75 and it had its bearing on history writing since the late 1970s. These processes at one level integrated Odishan studies with conceptual debates and issues at the national level and on the other brought in interdisciplinarity and new sets of questions to engage with the pasts of the region. It led to the gradual evolution of a new socio-cultural discourse centred on the autochthonous inheritances of the region, protracted local and sub-regional state formation and the making of a regional tradition, represented in the cult of Jagannath but drawing on varied influences. These writings influenced an entire generation of scholars within and outside Odisha. Many of these historians also benefited from their association with the Orissa Research Project II (1999-2005). While Jagannath, Brahmanas, and the Cuttack-Puri belt constituted the focus of the ORP I, ORP II moved away from these dominant concerns and tried to see the region from the perspective of the peripheries and those on the margins, and their relationships with the ‘core’ and the dominant.
The other significant aspect of historical studies in Odisha is its exploration of varied themes and issues pertaining to colonial society. The historians specializing on the study of modern Orissa, after independence, continued to explore institutions, practices and policies of the colonial society mostly following the framework laid down by the colonial historians. The trend however underwent a refreshing departure as interest to understand ideas of region, nation and nationalism perceptibly grew in the early years of independence under the intimate influence of the nationalists. The study of nationalism and national movement in the context of Odisha not only highlighted the course and events leading to anti-British struggle but equally also underscored the exploitative character of colonial rule. The above approach was often characterized by romanticisation of the role played by the regional ‘leaders’ in leading the people against the British rule to the conspicuous silence on the nature and extent of participation of the ‘led’. Later on, since 1980s onwards, historians sought to deal with the themes of national movement by focusing on the people in the margin. In the process, the world-views, perceptions and culture of such ‘marginal’ sections of the society like peasants and Adivasis were taken up for study in relationships with the twin ideologies of nationalism and colonialism in an integrative way. Such efforts on the part of historians simultaneously also saw the critical researching of archival sources at the regional and state levels including re-reading of sources, field study and use of oral history.

The above shift in approach can be seen in terms of engagement with peoples’ concerns and voices in the context of nationalist politics and popular movements in the colonial period. This has significantly led to new critical interests being evinced by scholars in the last decade to explore social history, popular culture, local history and study of contemporary history of the region since independence. What is crucially noticed in the shift is the interest to understand the present society on the basis of a critical reading of the past in a long duree.

The tradition of history writing in Odisha, would continue progressively to catch up with and participate in the critical debates concerning historiography at the global level, in years to come.

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