

Origin and Evolution of the Name Odisha

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The origin of the geographical name 'Odisha' is shrouded in mystery. In ancient time Odisha was more famous as Kalinga and Utkala. But surprisingly a lesser known geographical unit 'Odra', the home land of a tribe, called by the Greeks as Oretes i.e. Odia has given the nomenclature of modern Odisha to the entire glorious tracts of Kalinga and Utkal country of hoary fame. In ancient India most of the countries (geographical units) have been named after the stock of tribes that inhabited the land or the ruler that ruled the state. In the Bhagavata Purana¹ it is stated that the progeny of Ila-Sudyumna, Dirghatamas and Sudesna had six sons namely Anga, Vanga, Kalinga, Pundra, Sumha and Odra. Odisha portion was ruled by their sixth son after whom the country was said to have been named as 'Odra'.

Medhatithi,² the commentator of Manu has described that 'Odras' were a tribe who flourished in various parts of Odisha. The country probably owes its origin to them. Rajendralal Mitra³ opined that 'Ods' were an agriculturist community. They lived in many parts of Odisha with concentration in the region around Khurdha. This race represents the original tribe of Odisha after whom the province has been named.

Extent of Odra

According to the Mahabharata⁴ traditions the territory of the Odras lies along with those of Utkala, Mekala, Kalinga and Andhra. Manu on the other hand places the Odra people alongwith Pallavas, Kiratas, Chinas and Khasas etc. However, these statements do not specify the location and extent of the country. The 'Natural History' of Pliny mentions that Oretes as a race inhabited a country where mount Meleus is located. The Greek word Oretes is rendered in Sanskrit as Odras. The mount Meleus has been identified with Malayagiri near Pallahada, now situated in the district of Angul. Further, mount Meleus is associated with a people called Monedes and Sharis in the 'Natural History'. The Munda and Savara tribes have been identified with the Greek Monedes and Sharis by many scholars. This identification seems plausible because this region of Odisha is even now inhabited by the Mundas and Savaras.

The earliest epigraphic reference to Odras is found in the Soro copper plate grant of Somadatta from which it is clear that Uttara Tosali with its visaya 'Sarepahara' identified with Soro of Balasore district was part of Odra Visaya. The inscription is dated to 7th century A.D. Uttara Tosali then forming parts of modern Medinapur and Balasore districts was a part of Odra Visaya.

This reference amply indicates that Odra was a big and powerful territorial unit.

Hiuen Tsang⁵ who visited 'Wu-cha' i.e. Odra country in 636 A.D. has given a graphic account of Odra which was very probably the Odra Visaya of Soro copper plate grant. He described the country as 7000 li in circuit with its capital city spreading over more than 20 li circuit area. N.K. Sahu⁶ writes that 7000 li of the Chinese pilgrim spreads over 1400 miles circuit area. Cunningham has located the country of Odradesa on the basis of Hiuen Tsang's account in the whole of Mahanadi valley and the lower course of Subarnarekha river. N.K. Sahu⁸ has given a very precise extent of Odra country and has written that Odradesa during the period of circa 700-1100 A.D. was more or less bounded by the river Mahanadi in the north, Tosali (Dakhina Tosali) in the east, Kosala (Dakhina Kosala) in the west and extended to the south west in irregular lines as far as the modern Paralakhemundi region.

Muslim geographer's account of Odisha

Ibn Khurdadhbih in his 'Geography' of 846 A.D. has referred to Kudafarid, Kaylkan, Kanja, Samundar and Ursfin etc. Russian scholar V.Minorisky⁹ has identified Kudafarid with Godavari, Kaylkan with Kalinga, Kanja with Kangoda and Ursfin with Odisha or Odradesa. Dr. N.K. Sahu accepts this identification. In another Persian Geography of 10th century A.D. called 'Hudud al Alam' means 'Regions of the World' we find reference to Urshin which may be same as Ursfin, identified with Orissa or Odisha.

Muslim historian Alberuni (1025 A.D.) in his book 'India' has mentioned to a territory called

'Urdabishau' to have been situated 50 farsakhs (about 200 miles) towards the sea in the south from Prayag. This Urdabishau has been identified with Odda Visaya of Tirumalai Inscription of Rajendra Chola (1025 A.D.), because Alberuni has referred to 'jaur' country i.e. country of Cholas (of the time of Rajendra Chola) that started from the end of Urdabishau.

It is pertinent to mention that Chodagangadeva conquered Odisha and assumed the Sovereign title of 'Lord of Sakala Utkala'. In his Vizag copper plate grant of 1126 A.D. it is mentioned that he unified Utkala, Kalinga and Odra. His capital was at Yayatinagar which has been identified with modern Jajpur. It is interesting to note that this Yayatinagar or Jajpur was famous as Jajnagar in the Muslim chronicles like Tabaquat-i-Nasiri, Tabaquat-i-Akbari, Riyadus Salatin and Tarkhi-Firuz Sahi etc. Perhaps Muslim historians named the country as Jajnagar after the name of its capital Yayatinagar even when the capital was shifted to Abhinava Baranasi Kataka (modern Cuttack) in 1212-1213 A.D. Blochmann has identified Jajnagar mentioned by Muslim historians to be Odisha H.C. Ravetry¹⁰ has defined the boundary of Jajnagar based on his study as spreading over a vast area, apparently over the vast territorial domain of Chodagangadeva and Anangabhimadeva during the period from 1112 to 1212 A.D. Often we find confusion in the accounts of Muslim historians when they mention Jajnagar and Udisa as separate territories. It appears to us that when the Ganga capital was initially shifted to Cuttack from Jajpur, the two regional units were palpably called as two separate geographical entities namely Odisha and Jajnagar. In course of time both the regions found to be mentioned as one geographical entity called 'Jajnagar-Udisa' in the accounts of Shams-i-Seraj-Afif by the end of 14th century A.D. It apparently meant the unified and consolidated

Ganga kingdom under Anangabhimha III with Varanasi Kataka i.e. modern Cuttack as the capital. Sarala Dasa in his Odia Mahabharata has described Jainagar as part of Odrarastra in the 15th century A.D.

The Evolution

The term 'Udisa' used by Shams-i-Seraj-Afif is an improved version of the word Wucha of Hiuen Tsang of 7th century A.D. Ursfin of Ibn Khurdadhbih of 9th century A.D. and Urshin of Hudud-al-Alam of 10th century A.D. The original name was Odra or Odradesa which found mention in ancient literature and mediaeval epigraphs. It was mentioned as Odra Visaya in the Soro copper plate grant of 7th century A.D. Alberuni described it as Urdabishau in 1025 A.D. In the Tirumalai Inscription of Rajendra Chola of circa 1025 A.D. the word Odda Visaya is met with. Further the term evolved into Odivisa or Udivisa in the accounts of Lama Taranath. In the Tantric literature of late mediaeval period we find still slight variant of the term as 'Uddisa'. The 'Tantrasara' mentions God Jagannath as 'Uddisana' while 'Jnanarnaba' speaks of Uddisa as one of the Sakta Pithas.

The Culmination

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that by 15th century A.D. the word Uddisa or Udisa has already evolved. For this, Sarala Dasa made Odrarastra synonymous with Udisa or Odisha. His Odrarastra Odisha found mention as Odisarajya in the royal proclamations of Gajapati king Kapilendra Deva (1435-1467 A.D.). In the Jagannath Temple Inscription of Kapilendra Deva dated 1443 A.D. we find conspicuous mention of Odisarajya. The Tarikh-i-Akbari of Nizammuddin exclusively mentions Odisha as a

geographical entity. From this time onwards the geographical term Odisha stood for the entire Odia speaking tract. Through ages the word has been used by various authors in ethnic, linguistic and geographical paradigms. Phonetic evolution of the term from Greek Oretes i.e. Odra, through Odravisaya-Oddavisaya-Odivisa and Udisa, the term Odisha seems to have been finally culminated. Similarly through phonetic metamorphosis Odra became Odriya and finally Odia.

References :

1. *Bhagavat Purana* - IX, XXIII-5, Gaudiyamath Edition. (Jagannath Das who has rendered the Bhagavata Purana into Odia in 15th century A.D. has also mentioned the name Odra).
2. N.K. Sahu-*Utkal University History of Odisha*, Vol.I, p.75.
3. R.L. Mitra, *Antiquities of Odisha*, Vol.I, p.4.
4. N.K. Sahu. *op. cit.* p.139.
5. Watters, II, p.193.
6. N.K. Sahu-*op.cit.* 141.
7. Cunningham, *The Ancient Geography of India*, pp.586.
8. N.K. Sahu, *op.cit.* p.142.
9. N.K. Sahu-*op.cit.* p.148.
10. N.K. Sahu, *op.cit.* pp.150-1.
11. Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, LXII, 1893, p.93.
12. P. Acharya, *Studies in Odishan History, Archaeology and Archives*, pp.161-163.

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