

Rethinking the History of the ‘Odia Identity’: An Appraisal in Jagannath Das’s ‘Odia Bhagavata.’

Snigdha Acharya

Odisha, because of her geographical position has developed a pattern of life, art, language and literature of her own. Nature’s bounty gave her people and individuality, out of which grew up a culture representing a solid mixture of the Aryans and Dravidians. From the beginning of her dated history, Odisha maintained her political identity, economic prosperity, overseas commerce and cultural efflorescence. The emergence of the Eastern Gangas in the 12th century brought a significant turn in the history of Odisha. Anantavarman Chodagangadeva united the territories of Kalinga and Utkal into one political entity, which entailed a chain of events in the society¹. It was in the Ganga rule that the Odia language as an Odia vernacular became the dominant speech in Odisha². The united kingdom of Odisha extended from the river Ganges in the North to the Godavari in the South.³ A great solidarity of thought was generated out of the union and the Odia language under a public administration developed the sense of linguistic, social and cultural unity among the people. Chodagangadeva’s construction of the monument Jagannath temple knit the Odias further into cultural unity and henceforth Jagannath was to be recognized as the presiding deity of the Odias. Beginning from the 15th century, the Odia literature has been enriched by the mighty pen of eminent

writers and poets like Sarala Dasa, Jagannath Dasa and a host of others. A pan-Indian consciousness was present not only in the contemporary Odia literature but also in the treatment of the Jagannath cult.

The conceptual framework of nationalism brought a new spirit to the Odias through the Medieval Odia literature contained by the Odia intellectuals. The Odia nationalism as a symbol of geopolitics phenomenon created a separate province, which one in the later stage known as Odisha and placed its name as the first linguistic-based state in the 19th century. This essay reveals the newness on the base of literary references. In the particular time frame of the 16th century literary activities, we find a discussion about the identity of a particular region and race fixed within the ancient region of Kalinga, Tri-Kalinga, and Utkala and as well as *Odra* or *Odra-Desha* context. The discourses of the Odia nationalism and its identity were not only the product of the 19th century, but it was also developed long before the 16th Century AD. The literary work of Sarala Dasa has installed the underpinning stone in his monumental work ‘Odia Mahabharata’. This work has established the identity of a race through their practices of socio-polity-economy basis and in their day to day life. The discussion in this essay has explored

the work of Jagannath Das's 'Odia Bhagabata' in the context of Odia identity and Odia nationalism.

The Odias for four centuries, lay dismembered and scattered as neglected and exploited, their language and nationally systematically extirpated by their neighbours. It was the 'Bhagavata' of Jagannath Das that kept their nationalism secretly alive, to be reunited again as a homogeneous people after centuries of sufferings. Even today the 'Bhagavata' may be found in a hundred thousand homes outside the political boundaries of the Odisha state in Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh -as the commonest and the surest symbol of Odia nationalism.

The Bhagavata of Jagannatha Das of Odisha, a medieval saint of the 16th century, is honoured in every household in Odisha for his original translation of the Bhagavata from Sanskrit to Odia. It is free translation and at the same time a commentary on the original text in the Odia verse. It has made him a household word in Odisha, the most outstanding author in the national consciousness of Odias. To fulfill the mother's pious desire he started writing Odia Bhagabata chapter by chapter and recited each to her. His mother hardly realized that her humble desire was to grow a scriptural composition that was not only to touch individuality the sons of millions in and outside Odisha, generation after generation but also to bind together the scattered people for centuries and be the banner of their national existence. It is a fact to be noted that although Jagannatha Das, the author of the epic 'Odia Bhagavata' was initiated to Vaishnavism by Balaram Das on the direction of Chaitanya and became their disciple, yet he did not adopt the principle of Gaudiya cult of Vaishnavism of Chaitanya. He expounded the philosophy of Odishan Vaishnavism in his work. Thus, there was

the birth of Odia Bhagavata, the torch bearer of the Jagannath Dharma and culture.

The Odia Bhagavata also helped much in reducing illiteracy from Odisha. It gave a new turn to the growth of Odia literature due to its mass appealing qualities and its simplicity became very popular among the common mass⁴. It is indeed, well appreciated and recited even by the tillers in the field, the stranger on the road and the illiterate common villagers even today. Here we may mention one thing that Jagannatha Das was almost of the same age of Chaitanya himself. He first met him in the precincts of the Jagannath temple. Dibakar Das, the seventeenth-century biographer of Jagannath Das, claims that Chaitanya himself has appreciated the Odia rendering of the Bhagavata by Jagannath Das in the following lines:

“Ehi samaye Sri Chaitanya
Sangate dhari sakha gana
Bata tolana bije kale
Purana suni toso hele”

(*Jagannath Caritamrta*)

At the same time, the Brahmanas owing to the illiteracy of the other people used to earn their livelihood by interpreting Sanskrit scripture especially the Bhagavata which was it seems, quite popular in Odisha to the Odia-speaking people who did not know any Sanskrit. Often they charged exorbitant fees for the same taking advantage of people's ignorance of Sanskrit language. However, due to Jagannatha Das, the Bhagavata was made available in Odia language. They learned that Bhagavata as the most sacred book was within their reach. As a result, the people took the study of vernacular Odia with uncommon zeal and energy. This is why the art of reading and writing is known to be practiced extensively in Odisha.⁵ Therefore, the monopoly of the Sanskrit knowing people (Brahmanas) over the

sacred scripture had been severely threatened. People became more and more reluctant to pay the Brahmanas for their interpretations. Either they could now read it or at least get it read to them by anybody just knowing Odia script. People in every village took interest to copy the Odia Bhagabata on palm leafs in large numbers and worshipped the same by establishing 'Bhagabata Gharas' or 'Bhagabata-Tungi' in the villages of Odisha. Thus, Jagannath Das not only saved Jagannath Dharma and Jagannath culture from the clutches of the *Sahajiyas* but also created feelings of nationalism among the Odias that resulted in the establishment of Bhagavata Gharas in the villages of Medieval Odisha. A multipurpose village institution-the village school, the village hall, and the village library, all combined into one.

There must be few books in the whole of Indian literature that can compare in depth and pervasive influence with this Odia Bhagabata of Jagannath Das says the Bengali scholar B. C. Majumdar: 'There cannot be any hesitancy in making this statement that Jagannath Das presenting his 'Odia Bhagavata' to the people, induced all classes of men of his country to cultivate the vernacular language'⁶. Long ago, Basudev Mukherjee as Inspector of school duly observed this fact of Odia mass education and reported the matter in his public report. 'I can not too highly speak of what Jagannath Das has done to raise his countrymen to a higher level of moral existence. No poet of old time enjoys so much popularity as poet Jagannath Das does. There are not single villages in Odisha, where at least a portion of Jagannath Das's Bhagabata is not kept daily recited.'

Jagannath Das has left behind a style in Odia, which for its chastity, elegance, dignity and beauty remain inimitable. Among the masses of Odisha, lines from this book are most quoted, suiting them to various situations. He gave a new

birth to the Odia cultural notion and cultural identity. The work of Jagannath Das is of the medieval perspective, and it brought changes in the socio-geo-political outlay to construct the Odia identity through the vision of mass. The common voice through the form of language audible and understandable to others is now in new context. The issues like geopolitical division and creation of a separate identity in diversion perspective in India is now visible. The work of Jagannath Das is an indication and a standard version to understand the problem of the common mass. The common mass while using and practicing a language in their day to day life as well the medium of communication gave it a valuable position it always needed to be. Odia Bhagavata played a dominant role in the context of social sphere to regulate the education system and became a symbol of growth in the literary percentage of that time. This text not only gives the advice to construct an ethical and moral society in social engineering system with the Odia mass but also to reconstruct the literacy percentage in the medieval Odisha. It had more impact on the Odia linguistic movement during the colonial era. The Odia intellectual groups got a new spirit to reframe the idea of Odia identity from the various quotation of Odia Bhagavata. The conceptual framework of Odia Bhagabata was based on the identities of Odias as per the tradition of people's lifestyle, communication and lingua franca. It may be assumed that *Chahali* as a primary education system was prevailing in the earlier period. In this education system, the syllabus merely consisted of the reading of the religious text of medieval literature like *Koili*, *Chautisha* and also some part of Odia Bhagavata. They can at least learn, read, write and understand through the lingua franca in a particular language and script, which is known as Odia as a 'script' and 'language.' In this legacy, Odia community has refreshed themselves to evaluate their identity through the

literary mass. From the *Chahali* education system, some Odia educated came out and later enriched them through the English education. Inspired by their childhood education system (*chahali*) they started thinking of reconstructing the Odia movement in the colonial period. In this direction, we may take examples from the lives of some of the elites like Madhusudan Das, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Gaurishankar Ray, Radhanath Ray, etc., who have noble contributions for the growth of Odia nationalism.

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Snigdha Acharya, Ph. D Research Scholar, P.G. Department of History, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar

