

THE LINGUISTIC MOVEMENT IN THE 19TH CENTURY ORISSA

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The paper is an attempt to study the linguistic movement in Orissa during the late 19th century. As the movement spreads over a very vast period (from 1860's to 1936), only the developments of the last 40 years of the 19th century are dealt with. Further, as there was no such political expression as Orissa during that period what is meant by the term "Orissa" here is the Oriya lying tracts of the Central Provinces and the Bengal and Madras presidencies. This was described as Orissa proper then in the contemporary literary writings as well as in common parlance. Later on these tracts together formed Orissa in 1936.

The term "movement" is used here to describe the activities of the intelligentsia. The activities included literary writings, writings in the Press, sending of petitions and appeals and holding of meetings on issues related to public matters. Similarly, the intelligentsia refers to a class of newly educated people who expressed their concern for broader societal issues¹. The two terms, 'intelligentsia' and 'nationalist intelligentsia' are used interchangeably as they point to the same meaning - educated persons with a concern for societal issues- during the period under study.

Language provided the base for the growing nationalist movement in Orissa during the period. The people, more particularly the intelligentsia, resisted Oriya being replaced or dominated by other languages. The 'other' languages were neighbouring regional languages like Bengali, Telugu and Hindi, and not English, the official language of the ruling class. This, however, did not lead to any clash between the protagonists of Orissa language agitation and those of larger Indian nationalism. The Orissa intelligentsia challenged the expansionist claims of neighbouring Indian languages and strove for a regional, linguistic and cultural identity. Simultaneously, they also shared the all India vision of the larger Indian nationalism. All these make the study of the linguistic movement in Orissa relevant and interesting today.

In the Orissan division, comprising Cuttack, Puri, Balasore of the Bengal Presidency, Bengali was perceived as a threat to Oriya. The Orissa intelligentsia suspected that their language would be displaced by Bengali as the medium in schools as well as the language in the court and offices. The main basis of their fear was one small book, *Odiya Ekti Bhasa Naye*, written by one school teacher, Kanti Chandra Bhattacharya, in Balasore in 1872. The book argued that, Oriya was not a language, but a variant of

Bengali. Adoption of Bengali as the official language was in the interest of Utkal, Rajendralal Mitra, a scholar from Calcutta argued in a lecture in Cuttack in 1865². By then, in the Ganjam tract, a part of the Madras Presidency, Oriya had already been replaced by Telugu in the offices as well as in schools.³ This had made the threat quite real to them. In the western Orissa comprising Sambalpur, the threat was equally strong. In 1895 the chief commissioner of the Central Provinces issued an order to use Hindi in place of Oriya in the Offices and in the schools. The government felt that the use of Oriya as the official language in parts of the province, i.e., the western Orissa, had been creating administrative problems which could be sorted out by displacing the language.⁴

The linguistic issue had certain social and economic overtones. The Oriyas were being looked down upon by the Bengalis in Orissa, Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918) complained in his autobiography⁵. In all government offices the lower level officials were Bengali speaking, who strongly advocated for replacing Oriya with Bengali. 'In case of any job vacancy, they would try to bring their own men. There was not a single Oriya person working in the public works and postal department⁶. Gangadhar Meher (1862-1924), a great poet, described the non-Oriya officials working in Orissa, as foreigners, who 'surround' the king, 'misinterpret our words', eat up our food and water', and 'kick us at our head'⁷. While recounting the severity of the famine which greatly affected Orissa in 1865-66, Fakir Mohan blamed the lower level Bengali officials, for they had access to the authorities, but shelved the real situation. The writer who was an eye witness to the famine wrote that the 'well-meaning' British authorities could not take timely action because of such gross negligence by the insensitive non-Oriya Indian officials⁸. Besides, 'the influx' of Bengalis polluted the local atmosphere, for the Oriyas 'imitated' only the 'bad' practices of their neighbours, the intelligentsia complained⁹.

Following the language controversy, at the instance of Fakir Mohan the *amlas* of Balasore held meetings and sent a petition to the Government against the possible abolition of Oriya from the School¹⁰. Since lack of textbooks was cited as a basis for abolition,¹¹ the intellectuals set out to write textbooks for the schools. Madhusudan Rao (1853-1912) wrote the elementary learner, *Barnabodh*, Fakir Mohan wrote the mathematics primer, *Ankamala* (1870) and the history of India in two parts (1869-70), while Gandadhar Meher translated Hindi poems to suit the primary standard and Radhanath Ray (1848-1908), who worked as a school Inspector and acted in his own official capacity to retain Oriya in the schools, wrote books on all subjects starting from geography to mathematics for the primary students. Bichhanda Charan Patnaik and Gouri Shankar Ray also wrote school text-books during the period.¹²

In order to counter 'the undermining of linguistic and cultural greatness of Orissa', the intellectuals shaped a glorious past for the sustenance of their regional identity. Pyari Mohan Acharya's *Odisar Itihas*, Gopal Chandra Acharya's *Sri Jagannath O Chaitanya*, Jatindra Mohan Singh's *Odisara Chitra* were some such attempts made for the purpose of glorifying Orissa and its culture to inspire the 'present' generation'.¹³ Others like Fakir

Mohan sang in *Utkal Bhraman* (1891) that the land of Utkal was the greatest of all, for there existed the *swargadwar*, the gateway to heaven¹⁴. Utkal's greatness, Fakir Mohan believed, attracted many seers of the world who were proud to have their *peeths*, sacred seats, here¹⁵. Similarly, Radhanath Ray in his epic, *Mahayatra* (1896) made the *Pandavas*, the Mahabharata heroes, turn to Utkal in the course of their final journey to heaven 'for other lands will be compared to leaves of a plant], Utkal will be the flower'¹⁶. Ramashankar Ray (1857-1931) recalled the greatness of medieval Orissan empire in his play, *Kanchi Kaveri* (1880), to depict the victory of the Utkal king Purushattam Dev over the king of Vijayanagar to win Kanchi¹⁷. When the play was first staged in Cuttack, the show went houseful, reported the local press¹⁸.

The alleged domination of Telugu middle class in Ganjam was countered by such an upsurge during that period. After visiting Ganjam in 1903, Fakir Mohan wrote that, out of 120 clerical staff in the district collectorate, only three were from Orissa¹⁹. Oriya was no more there in the schools against which the local intelligentsia had sent a number of petitions to the Government in 1869. There were also meetings at Ghumsar, Huma and Dharakot, etc., on the issue in 1870.²⁰ One William Mohanty brought out an Oriya weekly, the *Swadeshi*, in 1976. This was followed by the formation of two socio-cultural organizations, *Ganjam Hitabadini Sabha* and *Utkal Hiteisini Sabha* in 1881. The intellectuals' efforts were further consolidated when one *Ganjam Odisha Hitabadini* was brought out from Parlakhemundi in 1899.²¹ Restoration of Oriya in the court and the offices in Ganjam and as a subject in the Madras University in 1890 gave a big moral boost to the language agitation not only in south Orissa but in the other parts of Orissa as well²².

In Sambalpur, the notification regarding replacement of Oriya by Hindi in the offices and schools in 1895 led to holding of several meetings and sending of memorandum appealing to the authorities to revoke the order.²³ The intensity of such activities grew manifold between 1896 and 1901, when Hindi actually became the court language and a compulsory subject in schools from class three onwards²⁴. Signature campaigns, fund collection from public in support of the movement and distribution of movement-related pamphlets in Oriya were some of the new forms used by the intelligentsia in Sambalpur²⁵. The leaders included Madan Mohan Mishra, Balabhadra Supakar, Dharanidhar Mishra and Chandra Sekhar Behera. The news papers, *Utkal Dipika*, (Cuttack) and the *Sambad Vahika* (Balasore) along with the *Sambalpur Hiteishini*, (Bamanda, Sambalpur) became the main intellectual forum for highlighting the linguistic problem arising out of the replacement of Oriya in Sambalpur.

Provoked by the linguistic issue Gangadhar Meher, a local poet from the interior of Sambalpur, wrote two beautiful poems *Bharati Rodana* (The Language Weeps) and the *Utkal Bharatinka Nibedana* (Utkal Language Appeals) (1894-95) and got them published in the Press. In the poems, the Utkal language appealed to the authorities not to cause

such grave injustice to her. The poet sang that replacing Oriya in Sambalpur would be like displacing the “mother” for the sake of a “step mother” (Hindi). The princes, Zamindars and all other influential persons were urged to be fearless and raise their voice against such injustice²⁷. Fakir Mohan, in an essay, described Mr. Woodburn, the Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces under whose tenure the abolition of Oriya was proposed, as a ‘villain’ in the ‘justice loving British administration’.²⁸

One notable outcome of the linguistic movement was the coming of the intellectuals from different parts of Orissa under one political platform, the *Utkal Sammilani*, translated as the Utkal Union conference (UUC) , which was founded in 1903. Imposition of Hindi in Sambalpur was no more a local issue in that part of Orissa. Fakir Mohan was as critical of the threat of Bengali in central Orissa as of Telugu in Ganjam or of Hindi in Sambalpur. Madhusudan Das (1848-1934), a man from Cuttack was so intensely involved with the Sambalpur agitation that, the people there in a meeting unanimously nominated him to represent the Orissa municipality constituency in the Councils in 1896.²⁹

Secondly, though the movement’s main concern was regional language and the main resistance was against certain Indian ‘neighbours’ who were described as ‘foreigners’, there was no narrow parochialism in it during the late 19th century. To the Orissa intelligentsia, taking up of the Orissa issue was as natural as identification with the larger all India issues. After the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, the local intelligentsia attended its annual sessions and propagated the Congress ideas in Orissa. Besides, the local press was as infamous as the national press in the official circle for its criticism of the Government on various issues like ‘Arms Act, 1878’, ‘Indianization of administration’, ‘undue defence expenditure’, ‘import of liverpool salt’ and ‘high salary of the British officials’, etc³⁰. The complexities involved between the national and regional issues were aptly dealt by Fakir Mohan in an essay published in 1913. To him, the nation was like a musical *tanpura* having several independent and interdependent strings comparable to various regions and languages of India. The strings when put together make a melodious ‘vande materam’ but if they are interfered by one another there would not be any semblance of music in it.³¹

Another significant aspect of the movement was the intelligentsia’s ‘great faith’ on ‘the good will’ and ‘the good sense of justice’ of the British rule. In his novel, Gopal Chandra Praharaj described ‘the Queen’ as the ‘mother of us all’, who was ever ready to redress the grievances of her subjects. The grievances persisted, because ‘we’ have failed in ‘our prayers to her’. The novelist urged the countrymen to ‘see the history’ how ‘the English nation has always stood for justice... It is beyond doubt that, under the English leadership, the world is moving forward with the objective of achieving a nobler goal’, he concluded with an optimistic note.³² Gangadhar Meher’s *Victoria Staba* (Prayer for victoria) also reflected such faith in the British rule in which the poet wished the Queen a long life for the benefit of her subject.³³

Fakir Mohan had immense faith on the capacity of individual British officials. John Beams, the Balasore district collector, T.E. Revenshaw, the Commissioner of Orissa Division, and a few other officials with whom he had interacted were 'learned', 'well-meaning' and sincere 'friends of Utkal'. He dedicated his work, 'Ramayan' (1880) to John Beams 'for his interest in the Oriya language and in the welfare of her people'³⁴. T.E. Revenshaw, despite committing a 'gross error' by listening to his on-Oriya subordinate staff, and by 'not sending timely relief' to the famine affected areas in 1865-66 was described as a '*mahatma*' and a great friend of Utkal. Due to the efforts of these officials Oriya could be retained in Orissa, Fakir Mohan noted in his autobiography.³⁵

To the intelligentsia, individual officials were the soul of British rule responsible for the making and unmaking of the administrative policies in the country. Thus, T.E. Revenshaw's tenure became 'the Revenshaw Yug' and 'the golden age of Orissan history'³⁶. Gangadhar appealed to Woodburn, 'the incarnation of justice and kindness', for revoking to order regarding the displacement of Oriya from Sambalpur.³⁷ When the order could not be revoked, all the blame went of Woodburn, 'a villain in the justice loving British rule'.³⁸ In 1901, when Oriya was once again restored in Sambalpur it was Andrew Freser, the serving chief commissioner of the Central Provinces, who was showered with lofty praises for 'such a just action'.³⁹

The intelligentsia's overestimation of the capacity of individual officials was accompanied by their underestimation of the strength of their countrymen. Except in Sambalpur where some signature campaigns were made and publication of pamphlets in Oriya was undertaken, there seem to have been no efforts to extend the base of Oriya movement to the people during the period. While appealing to the chief commissioner, Gangadhar urged the 'princes and Zamindars and other influential persons' to raise their voice against injustice. However, never did he approach the people during the course of the movement.⁴⁰ Similarly, in *Utkal Bhraman* (1891) Fakir Mohan found only 'the educated and influential persons' capable of espousing the cause of *matribhasa* but feared that many of them 'do not use science and logic' while looking into the issue.⁴¹ Even Gangadhar presumed that many of his 'capable countrymen', i.e., princes and zamindars, would not espouse the cause of *Utkal Bharati* 'for fear of losing their titles'.⁴² Such lack of faith in the 'countrymen' made the intelligentsia more dependent on the British favour for any just action.

However, the faith on the English rule was not the same as imitation of the English culture. Rather, the intelligentsia severely criticized all those so called educated persons who blindly followed the English for 'becoming' 'modern' and *sabhya* (civilized)⁴³ Fakir Mohan urged his educated countrymen to take inspiration from the English and Bengali, whose development appears miraculous because of the hardwork put by the people, but found it quite illogical and unscientific to imitate them.⁴⁴ There was no place for imitation in the intellectuals' notion who believed that 'development' and 'civilization' of the natives were the ultimate desire of the already 'civilized' and 'developed' British rule. The belief

that their development as well as the development of British rule could go together without any mutual antagonism also convinced them to advocate for larger Indian nationalism, which obviously did not pose any threat to the sustenance of their local identity. Indian nationalism and the related issues were as accommodative as the Orissa issues in the intelligentsia's scheme of world development and its processes.⁴⁵ The 'pitfalls' were only temporary and unintentional due to problems like communication gap, presence of some insensitive lower level officials and lack of education, etc. hence, the intellectuals' role of 'true communicator' between the rulers and the countrymen was considered pivotal in the broader nationalist scheme of nation making, of which 'development of national language' was only an inseparable component, in the late 19th century Orissa.⁴⁶

Footnotes :

1. Gopal Chandra Praharaj in his novel, *Bhagabat Tungire Sandhya* (1900) describes an intellectual as quite different from a *parakrutistha* (worldly, materialistic) person. It is not the 'knowledge' of 'English' or 'Sanskri', rather the person's concern for common societal issues against personal issues which becomes a distinct characteristic of an intellectual. See Gopal Chandra Praharaj, *Bhagabat Tungire Sandhya*, Cuttack, 1900, p. 117.
2. Surendra Mohanty, 'Odiya Sahityara Andhakar Yug', in 'Dagaro', go., 16 No. 1, in N.N. Mishra, *Adhunik Odiya Kabyadhara*, Calcutta, 1980, P. 63.
3. *Sevak*, 15 and 22 Dec. 1886, in *Report on Native Newspapers-Bengal (RNNB)* , 8 Jan 1887.
4. *Sambad Vahika*, 7 Feb. 1895, in *RNNB*, 16 March 1895.
5. Fakir Mohan Senapat, *Atmajivana Charita*, Cuttack, 1991, (Reprint) P. 45.
6. *Ibid.*
7. N.N. Pradhan, ed., *Gangadhar Granthavali*, Cuttack, 1990, P. 332.
8. Senapati, *Atmajivana Charita*, PP. 28-34
9. Anant Mishra, ed., *Madhusudan Granthavali*, Cuttack, 1991 (Reprint), P. 36
10. Senapati, Fakir Mohan Granthavali (FMG), Part II, Cuttack, 1963, P. 55.
11. While asking the Oriya people to adopt Bengali, Rajendralal Mitra estimated the strength of Bengali language, i.e., 300 published books against three/four books in Oriya in 1865. See Surendra Mohanty, *Odiya Sahityar*, P. 63.
12. One whole chapter is on the textbooks in the 19th century Orissa, in Srinivas Mishra, *Adhunik Odiya Gadya Sahitya, 1811-1920*, Cuttack, 1995, PP. 63-90.
13. Jagabandhu Singh, *Prachina Utkal*, (1915-17), Part-I Bhubaneswar, 1982 (Reprint), P. 2.
14. Senapati, *FMG*, Part-I, (1957), P. 201.
15. Senapati, *FMG*, Part-II, P. 733.
16. Trinath Patnaik, ed., *Radhanath Granthavali*, Cuttack, (no date, Reprint) P. 204.
17. Hemant Kumar Das, *Natyakar Ramashankar*, Bhubaneswar, 1982, PP. 42-44.
18. *Utkal Dipika (UD)*, 12 Feb. 1881.
19. Senapati, *FMG*, Part-II P. 685.
20. *UD*, 22 Oct. 1870, in N.N. Pradhan, ed., *Gangadhar Granthavali*, P. 35.
21. Chandra Sekhar Mahapatra, *Odisar Patra Patrika*, Bhubaneswar, 1986, P. 60.

22. Two Bachelor of Arts, The *Oriya Movement*, Ganjam, 1919, PP. 23-24.
23. *Sambalpur Hiteishni* (SH), 25 July 1894; UD. 2 Feb. 1895.
24. The Central Provinces Government Education Report, 1898-99, in C.R. Mishra, *Freedom Movement in Sambalpur*, Delhi, 1984, P. 166
25. For details see C.R. Mishra, *Freedom Movement*
26. *UD*, 30 March 1895, in *RNNB*, 18 May 1895; *SH*, 27 Feb. 1901, in *RNNB*, 16 March 1901.
27. *SH*. 30 Oct. 1895 and 6 March 1895, in NN Pradhan, ed., *Gangadhar Granthavali*, PP. 438-40
28. Senapati, *FMG*, Part-II, P. 679
29. *UD*, 22 Feb 1886
30. Details to be found in *RNNB* of 1868-1900.
31. Senapati, *FMG*, Part-II, P. 743.
32. Praharaj, *Bhagabat Tungire*, P. 118.
33. N.N. pradhan, ed., *Gangadhar Granthavali*, P. 343.
34. Aravind Giri, ed., *Fakir Mohanka Durlava Rachanavali*, Bhubaneswar, 2000, P. 338.
35. Senapati, *Atmajivana Charita*, P, 31.
36. Sanapati, *FMG*, Part-II, P. 679.
37. N. N. Pradhan, ed., *Gangadhar Granthavali*, P. 440.
38. Ssenapati, *FMG*, Part-II, P. 679.
39. *UD*, 12 July 1902, in *RNNB*, 26 July 1902; *Sambad Vahika*, 17 July 1902, in *RNNB* 2 Aug. 1902.
40. N. N. Pradhan, ed., *Gangadhar Granthavali*, P. 440.
41. Senapati, *FMG*, Part-I, P. 210.
42. N. N. Pradhan, ed., *Gangadhar Granthavali*, PP. 440-441.
43. Senapati, *Galpa Salpa*, Part-I, Cuttack, 1987 (Reprint), PP. 69-82.
44. Senapati, *FMG*, Part-I, PP. 210-212.
45. The compatibility between the interests of 'Utkal', the National congress' and 'the British Empire', which the intelligentsia saw, was well reflected in the novel, *Bhagabat Tungire Sandhya* (1900). The novelist brings all those showing concern for Utkal under the shade of the *Bhagabat Tungire* (village community place), make them read 'the National Congress', a pamphlet published in Oriya and, at the end, let them say in unison, 'Victory to the Emperor', 'victory to the Congress'. See Praharaj, *Bhagabat Tungire*, P. 118.
46. In his poem 'Matribhumi' (1914) Gangadhar asked, 'If the persons bereft of love for their *Matribhumi* and *Matribhasa* are called *Gyani*, who else would be described as ignorant then?' See N.N. Pradhan, ed., *Gangadhar Granthavali*, P. 263.

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