

Language Agitation in Odisha

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With the defeat and demise of Gajapati Mukunda Dev in the battle field of Gohiritikira, Odisha was annexed by Suleiman Karani, the Sultan of Bengal in 1568 A.D. The independent existence of the Hindu kingdom of Odisha came to an end and a long gloomy chapter began in the annals of Odisha. Odisha was ruled from time to time by the Afghan, the Mughal, the Maratha and finally the British.

The British conquest of Odisha was accomplished in three different phases leading to her political dismemberment. Since the southern portion was first to be occupied by the East India Company, Ganjam and its adjacent tract formed a part of the Madras presidency in 1766 A.D. The coastal districts of Balasore, Cuttack and Puri and the adjacent Garjats were ruled from 1803 by the Bengal Government, and the Western district of Sambalpur including some feudatory states were administered by the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces. Thus, the political dismemberment of an ancient and powerful nation having a distinct language and glorious cultural heritage in the form of art, architecture, music and literature was an accident of history.¹ In all the three provinces (i.e. Bengal, Madras and the Central Provinces) Odia became the minority language and suffered for apathy and

neglect. It had to compete with more powerful languages like Bengali, Telugu and Hindi for survival.

The Famine of 1866 or the Na-Anka Durbhiksha was one of the worst famines of the world which had led to social stagnation, economic deterioration and political unrest in Odisha. To fight against starvation, the Odias left their villages and migrated to different places in search of food and jobs. It was a great opportunity for the outsiders. They occupied all government posts and settled in Odisha. In course of time the number of Bengalis increased. Because of the deficiency of the Odia teachers in schools, mostly the Bengali teachers got appointment in different schools in Odisha. So the schools were staffed by the teachers who could teach in Bengali medium on the plea of the dearth of Odia textbooks. Further more, Rajendra Lal Mitra, an eminent historiographer from Bengal who came to Odisha to compile a book titled 'The antiquities of Odisha', was a great champion of the Bengali cause. In a meeting held at Cuttack on 9th December 1868, a paper was read on 'patriotism'. Dr. Mitra delivered a speech in which he stated that as long as Odia language was not abolished, the progress of Odisha would be a far-fetched issue. Reiterating further he mentioned

that it was unnecessary to keep a separate language which was spoken by barely twenty lakhs of people. He asserted that if the Bengali could successfully replace Odia in Midnapore district, it would be quite possible in other districts of Odisha. All these remarks of such a learned person created a sensation in the camps of both Odias and Bengalis. So the Bengalis were emboldened enough to try to replace Odia by their own language. The Odias on the other hand came forward to protect their own language at any cost.

The Odia-Bengali language dispute came to open. 'Utkal Hiteisini', strongly supported the Bengali cause in Odisha. In its issue of 1st July, 1869, Rajakrishna Mukhopadhyaya, Law Adviser of Cuttack School, supporting the Bengali cause stated that Utkala was a mixed language and that Utkala Bhasa is a corrupt form of Bengali language. Similarly, Uma Charan Halder, a Bengali Deputy Inspector of Schools advocated the necessity of using Bengali as the medium of instruction in the schools. Since there was an acute shortage of Odia textbooks, he felt that Bengali textbooks available in plenty could be used to overcome the paucity of Odia textbooks. In July 1869 he went a step further to suggest that Odia language should be written in Bengali script. In 1870, Kanti Chandra Bhattacharya of Balasore High School published a booklet entitled 'Udiya Swatantra Bhasa naye'.

There was a sharp reaction against this book in Odisha. Also in response to Kanti Chandra's polemic against Odia, John Beams had written in the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1882, "The legends of the Odia race render it probable that they came into the province through the hills and down the Mahanadi and the characteristics of the language lead me to believe that they broke away from the mainstream of Aryan immigration

somewhere about Shababad or Gya (Gaya). That they are not an offshoot of the Bengali is proved by the fact that their language was already formed as we now have it at a period when Bengalis had not attained a separate existence, and when the deltaic portion of Bengal was almost uninhabited. So that in fact they could not have sprung from the Bengalis, simply because there were then no Bengalis to spring from..... The similarity between the languages is not by any means as great as some Bengali writers have sought to make out, and what is similarity there is, is due to the fact that they both are dialects of the eastern or Magadhi form of Prakrit." Likewise, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyaya, an eminent Bengali writer refuted the arguments of Kanti Chandra Bhattacharya and Rajendra Lal Mitra.

It was by this time that Gourisankar Ray, a domiciled Bengali, the editor of the 'Utkal Dipika' criticised the statement of Rajendra Lal as totally misleading and motivated. Moreover, Kalipada Banerjee in the 'Orissa Patriot' argued in favour of Odia language. Pyari Mohan Acharya wrote the first History of Orissa in Odia language inculcating a sense of pride in the past history and glorious culture of Odisha. The other domiciled Bengalis who supported the cause of Odia language were Shyamananda De, Jaganmohan Roy, Gokul Chandra Bose and Baikuntha Nath Dey. Consequently the Commissioner of Odisha, T.E. Ravenshaw emphasised that Odia language was to be officially adopted as the medium of education in all classes of schools in Odisha. He further argued that an Odia person should be appointed as Inspector of Schools for Odisha. Radhanath Roy was appointed as Inspector of Schools in Odisha in 1877. He persistently worked hard for the increase of the number of vernacular schools. In 1890, the Committee took

initiative for publication of Odia textbooks of high quality.

The language agitation spread to Ganjam, where the Odias, pitted against stiff competition from the Telugu community, were eager to maintain their cultural identity. As a bilingual district, Ganjam was beset with complicated administrative problems for the authorities. The Odias living there had a strong desire for union with their main stock in the Odisha Division. In 1870 an appeal from Janardan Das of Ghumsur was published in the Utkal Dipika against the harsh treatment on the Odias by the Telugus. Das called upon the Odia people to organize themselves to prevent such maltreatment and urged upon the Madras Government to use Odia language faithfully in official works. The same year a public meeting was held at Russelkonda (modern Bhanjnar) under the leadership of Dinabandhu Patnaik of Ghumsur to submit a memorandum to the Government for protection of Odia language. They demanded to receive applications and maintain records in Odia. Their demands were for employment of the Odias in Government services, to open Odia classes in schools and to conduct examinations in Odia language. A large number of people from Khallikote, Aathagada, Birule, Palur, Huma, Ganjam, Dharkote, Sorada, Katigaon, Badagada, Seragada, Sana Khemundi, Chikiti, Mohuri, Jarada, Jalantara, Surangi, Terala, Tekkali, Paralakhemundi Zamindari attended the meeting. Their agitation was partly successful when in 1873, the Madras Government recognized Odia as the official language and medium of instruction. In 1876 William Mohanty in his Odia Weekly Paper 'Swadeshi' projected the miseries of the Odia speaking people of Ganjam.

In 1873 the Utkala Hitabadini Sabha was started at Berhampur and in that meeting William

Mohanty delivered a speech against the attempt of the Telugus to abolish the Odia language. For the welfare of the Odias, Aparna Panda, a leading personality of Ganjam founded Utkal Hitaisini Samaj at Paralakhemundi with Shyamananda Rajguru as its President. In 1888 the leaders of Ganjam collected signature of the Odias and submitted them to the Viceroy of India for the introduction of Odia in place of Telugu as a court language. At last the Madras Government issued an order in 1890 that Odia should be used as official language.

The linguistic movement gained momentum in Sambalpur when the Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces, John Woodburne in his order dated January 15, 1895 abolished Odia as the official language of Sambalpur and introduced Hindi in its place in order to facilitate the Hindi speaking officials in the district. With the implementation of Hindi as official language, orders were made to maintain all registers and records in Hindi. Training was given to the school teachers. Hindi became the medium of instruction in schools. Leaders like Madan Mohan Mishra, Braja Mohan Patnaik, Balabhadra Supkar and Sripati Mishra championed the cause. Through meeting, propaganda and sending memorials they convinced the Government about the grievances of the Odias of Sambalpur and persuaded to replace Odia in place of Hindi.

Sambalpur Hitaisini under the editorship of Pandit Nilamani Vidyaratna became the mouthpiece of the language agitation in Sambalpur region. Pandit Nilamani Vidyaratna called upon the local people to take strong measures against such an arbitrary decision of the Government and observed that if a change of language was imperative for good administration, the district

should be transferred from the Central Province to the Odisha Division of the Bengal Presidency. It was the first recorded statement expressing the desire of the people for amalgamation of Sambalpur with the Odisha Division. The newspaper in its subsequent issues bitterly criticized the language policy of the Government and thus became the main instrument to form and influence the public opinion of Sambalpur on this issue. Similarly, in the Utkal Dipika also a sustained struggle was waged by Gourishankar Ray and other leading public men supporting this just demand of the people of Sambalpur.

The appointment of A.I. Fraser in 1901 as Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces created favorable ground for the language agitation. One Young Odia, Baikuntha Nath Pujari was then working as Assistant Commissioner. The census was carried out in Odia with his help. According to the census report in 1901, it was found that the entire population of Sambalpur was 7,96,423 out of which the Odia-speaking population was 5,95,601. In other words, Odia-speaking persons constitute 75 per cent population of the district.

On 29 July, 1901 a delegation consisting of Madan Mohan Mishra, Balabhadra Supkar, Mahant Bihari Das and Brajamohan Patnaik met the Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces Sir Andrew Fraser at Nagpur and presented the grievances. He assured them to forward the Memorial to Lord Curzon. A strong delegation

of some leading men of Sambalpur proceeded to Simla in the last week of August, 1901 to pressurize the Government about the solution of their problem. Madhusudan Das sent a lengthy telegram to the Private Secretary to the Viceroy on 2nd September drawing the attention of Lord Curzon to the impractical order of the Chief Commissioner substituting Odia by Hindi as the official language of Sambalpur and to the just demand of the memorialists for the restoration of Odia.

On 26th September, 1901 Andrew Fraser paid a visit to Sambalpur and took an interview from Brajamohan Patnaik who explained the difficulties that the Odias faced due to the imposition of Hindi. Then in his report on 15th October, 1901 he ordered the restoration of Odia as the official language in Sambalpur which came into effect in 1903.

Thus, the language agitation which started as a cultural movement very soon transformed itself into a political movement in the form of amalgamation of Odia-speaking tracts under one province or administration.

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