Revisiting the ‘unbroken cultural development’ through the socio-cultural history of pre-colonial Odisha

Dr. Sharmila Chhotaray,

An analysis of Odisha’s changing social structure that problematizes the status of culture with reference to historical constructions of dominance, power and subjugation, is the thrust of this paper. The ‘unbroken cultural development’ of Odisha engages historians for an endogenous explanation. Lord Jagannatha, the presiding deity of Odisha and the nucleus of the regional synthesis¹, has received wide academic attention. This tradition shapes Odia cultural, economic and political identities significantly. By doing so, it reinforces the social order by either challenging to transform or reproducing it to maintain the status quo. The regional identity formation ‘into the flexibility and the dynamic that modifies continuously its substance and gives it a new meaning in order to make it suitable to the prevailing conditions and need of time’ shall be highlighted in this paper.

Pralay Kanungo (2003) appropriately mentions that the Odia character is not monolithic. It has been shaped by a host of factors: topography and furies of nature, emergence and decline of different religious sects and cults, long absence of an encompassing dynastic rule, fragmentation and annexation of its territory, strong influence of neo-Vaisnavism under Chaitanya, tyrannies of Hindu Rajas, Muslims, Marathas, British colonial intervention, Bengali hegemony, struggle for an Odia identity, the national freedom movement, and the post-colonial experience. Thus, for a better understanding of Odia people and society, I would examine the above-mentioned factors in whose presence Jatra originated and evolved.

A brief attention to the Hindu-Moghul-Maratha-British-Bengali rule that forms the social and cultural history of Odisha would provide a ground to discuss the contemporary social relations of the region. Reiteration of the historical development of Odia identity movements through language, education, service, landholdings, tribal uprisings, drama, art and craft, architecture and religion would therefore provide the relevance of past in the present.

¹ Due to geographical constraints (high adivasi population concentration) the uninterrupted tribal-Hindu continuum or in other words the existence of former tribals (daitas) and Vedic Brahmans amongst its priests are by no means an antitheses, but a splendid regional synthesis of the local and the all-Indian tradition Kuke, et.al. 1986
Society in Pre-colonial and Colonial Odisha

The atypical history of Odisha renders the citizens to be nostalgic for a golden past. They romanticize Odissa’s past as a land of prosperity and plenty, “morally awakened and politically powerful”. A pride in the mythical past is obvious amongst Odia cultural historians and the invocation to the preponderance of glorious past in any political speech or a literary gathering have been a cliché in Odisha.

Pralay Kanungo (2003:3293-94) describes further that Hinduism had never been a monolithic discourse; rather it represented confluence of diverse cults reflecting a marvelous mosaic. ‘Unlike some other parts of India, tribal customs and traditions played a significant role in shaping political structures and cultural practices right up to the 15th century. When Brahminical influences triumphed over competing traditions and caste differentiation began to inhibit social mobility and erode what had survived of the ancient republican tradition’. The medieval period from 10th to 18th century witnessed the result of different political and administrative units, a feeling of unity within the Odia speaking tract and a certain degree of social mobility that provided space for ordinary peasants to make contributions to popular literature and poetry.

The Resistance to Brahminic Hegemony: Vaishnavism and Popular Hinduism

‘The history of Orissa is identified with history of Jagannatha’ (Mukherji 1940). The dominant Jagannatha cult emerged, a heterogenous religious movement-Buddhism, Saivism, Tantrism, Shaktism- emerged as a part of medieval Vaishnavism in the first half of medieval Odisha. The Soma and Ganga dynasties built the gigantic Jagannatha temple (started in the year 1078 and completed in 1211) in Puri for supremacy of power. The kings championed Vaishnavism as Jaganntha was treated as the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The religious synchretism resulted in tribal-Brahmin God that was appropriated by the orthodox and authoritarian

Pundits and their representative Thakura raja (God-King). However, neo-Vaishnavism professed by Sri Chaitanya’s Bhakti movement in early16th century denounced and reformed the earlier Vaishnavism. Without compromising for a social reform movement, the twenty-four years of legacy of Chaitanya disseminated the divine ecstasy of Krishna’s incarnation. The movement questioned the orthodox and repressive Brahminical understanding of Hinduism and advocated for the religious aspirations of the lower castes and women in society.

2 www.members.tripod.com/~india_resource/sahistory.html
The resistance to Sanskrit, the literature of the elite, started up with compositions of mass literature in native language-Odia. It was the first move for the equal access of commons to the lord and Vedas. Vaishnavites from lower class and caste, who translated the Sanskrit Mahabharata, Ramayana, Bhagavata and Harivamsa in colloquial Odia (elaborate description on such protest literature is given in the next chapter) were called Shudramunis. These poet-reformers were influenced by Buddhism, Jainism and Vaishnavism ‘with a predilection for the vernaculars, for syncreticism with alien beliefs, and for social reforms’ (Boulton 1979:234). The ‘left’/non-elite/Vaishnavites from lower caste defied the orthodox Brahmins of Jagannath temple, who stigmatized the native language and codified the caste system. Mallik (2004) suggests that the literatures produced were an intellectual challenge against the orthodoxy and literary hegemony of the established order. Social movements at a mass level had a greater impact to establish popular Hinduism in Odisha. However, by achieving access to Hindu scriptures, the newly constructed popular Hinduism sustained the institutional inequalities, which legitimized unequal relationships publicly. The decline of Odia civilization began with the Surya kings who began to usurp undue privileges, growing Brahminic dominance in temple and festival affairs, crystallization of social stratification and declining social mobility as a result of the new caste groups in royal administration-Patnaiks, Mahapatras, Nayakas etc. Moreover, the deteriorating maritime economy due to silting up of Odissa’s major rivers, followed by political invasions by Afghans (1567), Mughals (1611), Marathas (1751) and finally British in 1803, forced Odias to face abject poverty.

It is during the rule of East India Company that the state under one rule was divided into three major parts. The Western districts were under central presidency, the southern districts were under Madras presidency and the coastal areas of Odisha division were under Bengal presidency until 1912 when it was transferred to the province of Bihar-Odisha. Although the East India Company did not interfere in religious activities in order to gain popular support, the literary, economic and political conditions of Odias were not given sufficient attention. The permanent land settlement was the only way to control the native zamidars through the stringent laws of tax settlement of Bengal. Patnaik (1973) notes that between 1806 and 1816, 1011 estates out of 2340 were auctioned to rich Bengalis. Protest against the East India Company rose up in 1818, called Paik Bidroha, because of the land settlement and the abolition of royal authority/power of the Puri King. Under the inspiring leadership of Baxi Jagabandhu Vidyadhara, the hereditary Commander-in-Chief of Raja of Khurda, the paikas (landed militia) and kings of princely Odisha fought the battle. ‘For six months there was practically no British Government, at least in South Odisha. The ‘rebellion was in the end ruthlessly suppressed.

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3 Educated gentries from lower castes like Sarala Dasa, Balaram Dasa, Jagannatha Dasa, and Achyutananda Dasa.
4 The Odia literature in the medieval period glorified Jagannatha in Janana and Bhajana (devotional songs), and Chaupati (narrative poems).
quelled’ (Mansingh 1962:157). The advent of a new zamindari class mostly of the Bengalis was the consequence of the new tenancy law ‘Sunset Law’. Banerjee (1930 cited in Mansingh. ibid) mentions that “Having control of judicial and executive work, the Bengalis found Odisha an easy means to get rich quick...Hundreds of old Oriya noblemen were ruined and their ancient heritage passed into the hands of Bengali zamindars” 6. All administrative posts not directly handled by the British were assigned to Bengalis ‘who were perceived to be more loyal to the British rule’7.

Religious nationalism was revived in the early 19th century with the arrival of missionaries in 1822 and the establishment of Cuttack Mission Press in 1837 and the earliest British Historiography on Odisha. Behera (2002:205-12) in his analysis of historiographical writings on Jagannatha shows as to how the Lord was construed, documents the anti-Jagannatha perspectives. Many British scholar-administrators (for example, historians like Sterling (1846) and Hunter (1956)) perceived Him negatively on the basis of superstition and defamed the Lord. By interpreting Him as an irrational, yet exclusive Odia phenomenon the West sets Him off as the opposed, inimical ‘other’.

Odisha’s deteriorating economy was aggravated during the Great Famine of 1866. Bidyut Mohanty (1993) writes that starvation, deprivation, death and exploitation dealt by the middle class to the lower class did not only affect their lives and economy, but it also contributed to their religious status8. Immediately shaken by this attitude of Hindu middle class Odias, the poor embraced Christianity as the missions mushroomed during this time. The post-famine period saw an emerging English educated Odia middle class. The shared consciousness among them recognized the evils of petty zamindars, landlords and the Sunset Law. The printing press and magazines gave a new fixity of language and created a ‘language-of-power’ from the administrative vernacular (Bengali) for the cultural nationalists. The origin of national consciousness in the nineteenth century, the growth of education, the urge to preserve the Odia language from annihilation, the publication of numerous periodicals and newspapers, establishment of Odia press, the rapidly growing consciousness of the youth about the backwardness of their region, class and caste dominance, the development of communication, and the interest shown by the authorities to ameliorate the prevailing

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5 Kanungo class of Bengal controlled the collection of taxes from princely states. To have direct control and later they settled and became the new zamindar class (Samantray 1964:8).
7 www.members.tripod.com/~india_resource/sahistory.html
8 By being ‘outcaste (a new caste called Chhatara khia) by Hindu society for having eaten at the relief centers’. The Chhatara khias were again ‘purified’ by some social reformers in order to be readmitted to their respective castes.
conditions—these were the elements that led to the construction of Odia identity. ‘Oriyas started aspiring for their territorial unification on the basis of their cultural and linguistic homogeneity’ (Mohanty 2005:9).

Odia Nationalism and Language Resistance Movement: Identity Retrieved

Mahapatra (1996), Dash (1986) and Behera (2002) aptly argue that Odias had a rudimentary notion of their identity during the pre-colonial period, which got articulated when it impinged on self-definition during the colonial rule. Calcutta was the centre of trade, administration and education whereas Odias remained socially excluded with ‘a feeling of oneness …and the aspiration to remain free and united under its Rajas of Khurda’. Language politics was crucial to the affirmation of the Odia identity during the nineteenth century. It remained passive for nearly 43 years after the failure of the rebellion due to the consolidation of British rule and English education. Popular history of Odisha’s independence from that of Bihar and West Bengal emphasizes the linguistic identity. Several critics have suggested that the Odia identity is largely a contentious issue. While outlining the social and cultural history of Odisha, academicians from all disciplines (Pati; 1993&2001, Nivedita Mohanty; 2005, Sachidananda Mohanty: 1999&2005, Manoranjan Mohanty; 1976, 1986 & 1993, Mahapatra; 1996, et. al) have written extensively on many factors that contributed to the rising sense of unity and cultural, social and economic identity. ‘Essentialistic invocation of cultural identity is central to nationalistic discourses all around the world,’ Mahapatra argues. So is the case of Odia identity formation during the colonial period. As ‘a minor outpost of the colonial empire - a cultural wasteland’, Odia nationalists along with the national freedom struggle commenced the agitation. The main cause of the growth of regional consciousness in Odisha was the result of uneven development in the late nineteenth century. Mahapatra underlines limitations of the internal colonialism to understand the generation of consciousness of backwardness among the Odias. The Odia middle class, whose growth was slow in comparison to that of Bengalis, focused on the causes of their backwardness and discrimination of Odias in education and employment.

The Bengali domination and the Great Famine of 1866 gave way to Odia nationalism from 1870s, through the linguistic identity movement. Controversial remarks of Rajendralal Mitra that ‘Odia is a dialect of Bengali’ and of Kanti Chandra Bhattacharya, a Bengali Inspector of Schools who said, “Oriya is not a separate language” (Boulton 1979:242) stirred the Odia educated middleclass nationalists. Significantly,
these socio-economic factors led to the ‘save Odia movement’\(^9\). Bengali, Telugu and Hindustani (Hindi) administrators allied with the British government and ‘enjoyed an ascendancy over the Oriya speakers’ (ibid.242). Apart from some Odia Karanas, the natives developed apathy for English education that kept the Odia language only as a spoken language. During the uncoordinated phase of Odia nationalist movement the primary concern was the independence of Odisha from non-Odia domination, (not with the Independence of India from British rule) through launching of journals, periodicals, presses and cultivation of literature. Boulton (1979:247-8) suggests that ‘the chief opposition to the movement probably (came) from the middle class in contiguous regions, Bengal, Bihar, Central Provinces and Madras’ and the financial support was drawn from Odia kings in Gadajat Mahal (princely states), zamindars and landed gentry.

The first Cuttack Printing Company was established in 1865 by domiciled Bengali called Gouri Shankar Ray; a Karana, educated in Calcutta, translated and printed some Odia literature and published the weekly *Utkala Deepika* through its coverage of the issues and problems of Odia society (famine news) and nationalistic ideas liberalized the idea of enlightenment among Odias. This inspired the three early nationalists and the pioneers of modern Odia prose literature--Phakir Mohan Senapati, Radhanath Ray of Balasore and Madhusudan Rao of Puri. These major nationalists instituted the period of Renaissance of Odia national life through the emergence and development of Odia language and literature, which ‘underwent a transformation under the impact of Western education’. For instance, Biswamoy Pati (2001:29) draws from *Utkal Deepika* that the ‘conclusions regarding the Sanskritik origins of Sadhu bhasa (high, Sankritised Odia) and its ‘purity’, led to the marginalization of chalet (popular, spoken) Oriya’. It is only the first modern Odia literature of Fakir Mohan Senapati who ‘attempted to shift to the ‘impure’ spoken Odia of the coastal region—chalit bhasa.

Odisha was one of the first states to achieve its separate identity in 1936 as an independent state purely on linguistic basis. Around the late 19\(^{th}\) century, the decline of native language as a mark of loss of identity emerged among the newly growing Odia middle class. The movement got its momentum when Odias controlled the schools. This was ‘a victory for Orientalism, with its tenet of vernacular education’ (Mohanty 2002:53). The demand for the unification of Odia speaking tract under one administration took the shape of an agitation.

In a highly complex and contradictory process, the language of the common people was recast and refashioned to constitute a new form, which bore little resemblance to the original spoken Odia of the common people (low caste/class people) in coastal region’(Pati 2001:31). Thus, having the element of an anti-colonial

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\(^9\) A number of champions of Oriya language such as Radhanatha Ray, Fakir Mohan Senapati and Madhusudan Das led this movement. They pioneered the modern literature through poems and stories confronting the political and cultural instabilities.
discourse, Senapati, being the president of *Utkal Sammilani* (Union) in 1917, called for a united Odisha in demonstrating independent identity of the Odias. Paradoxically, although his life and his novel have contained, with popular protests, common people’s life, Pati points out that ‘the vision of ‘Oriya’ was clearly confined to the coastal, upper-caste/class urban and feudal sections’. Similarly, the first Odia encyclopedia-*Bibidha Ratna Sangraha* written by Lala Nagendra Nath Ray appeared in order to assert and consolidate Odia identity and to subvert the colonial authority (Jatin Nayak). Odia, a language spoken by 17 million people was ‘saved from a political death’.

The ‘development of underdevelopment’ or the uneven development of Odisha state is recently getting attention. Many social scientists maintain that Odia social structure remained unchanged. The emphasis is on economic backwardness that relates underdevelopment of politics, gender, health, regional disparities, education and art. Marginalization of certain classes, castes and regional groups remains unchanged in a slowly changing society. The emerging Odia intellectuals and revolutionaries appealed and fought for Odia nationalism for an independent linguistic cultural identity and the demand for a province separate from Bihar and Bengal. It is crucial to mention here the passivity among the Odia nationalists to be part of Indian National Congress during the freedom movement primarily because the regional issues did not ‘get aligned with the broader anti-colonial movement spearheaded by the Indian National Congress’. The formation of Odisha occurred in 1936 as a separate province. Twenty-four feudatory states were merged with Odisha only in 1948. Later the local struggles like Kissan Sangha and Prajamandal Andolana in 1940s against the class and caste oppressions by some zamindars and kings were more meaningful to the people than the anti-imperial movement. Independence for them was the consolidation of lands of small peasants. However, the peasants remained powerless as the ruling class occupied a large share of the agricultural land. Although the political division between princely states and coastal region got reduced after the elimination of constitutional guarantees for privy purses and royal privileges, the division can be felt further in the new political situation. After the merger of all the princely states in 1948 the system of (traditional) authority through reciprocal obligation continued to operate after Independence. Some kings and their children continued to be in politics and some equally powerful kings like the Raja of Mayurbhanj and Dasapalla generally stayed away from public life and went into business. The developed communication network and cultural level put the eastern people in a much more advantageous stage. People who happened to be the former rulers champion the regional sentiments. Thanks to the agriculture sector and implementation of poor rural industrialization schemes by the ruling party, the land situation continued to be basically stagnant in terms of social relations and productivity until the end of sixties.

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10 Jatindra Kumar Nayak explains the encyclopedia as an initiative for identity-building and the celebration of the emergence of modernity from the world of feudalism [www.encyclopedia.ch](http://www.encyclopedia.ch)
Census reports do not seem to bring in phenomenal changes in numbers since 1947. Manoranjan Mohanty’s (1990) extensive study, drawing from important statistics, states that the persistence of poverty, frequency of natural calamities, increasing unemployment have coexisted with a firmly saddled middle class drawn from the upper castes. The isolated interventions of this class, self-centered industrialization policies, inefficiency in implementing the rural developmental schemes, insufficient attention to local entrepreneurship, lead to the pervasive existence of traditional pre-capitalist agriculture. Despite Odisha ranking well below national averages in terms of social welfare indicators, the issue is not necessarily one of lack of resources, but poorly managed systems of delivery, poorly informed decision making, weak policies and unaccountable delivery mechanisms. Other contributing factors include: continued dominance of traditional elite, an extremely heterogeneous population, limited decentralisation and low levels of political awareness among poor people (Das 2006). The sustained impassiveness to mass movements after independence is not only creating an impasse for development, but also is reinventing its feudal socio-political domination. The Odia identity is represented by the cultural hegemony- mythic past compounded with cultural, caste and gender hierarchies ‘within the popular psyche of the nation’.

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