

## The Language Crisis in the Nineteenth Century Odisha

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### Abstract

Present work deals with language crisis of Odisha during 1860 to 1936. The Odia speaking tracts scattered with central, Bengal and Madras presidencies under British rule. The Language crisis was pronounced by indigenous intelligentsia, press, public Associations, public issues of Odisha. Through Language crisis nationalism grew in Odisha. Neighbouring states Language tried to be the Language of Odisha like Bengali, Telugu and Hindi but failed. The leaders like F.M. Senapati, Gangadhar Meher, Madhusudan Rao, Radhanath Roy, Gourisankar Roy, Bichhanda charan Pattanaik and many others through their nationalism and patriotic writings of prose, poetry, Odia books and novels talked the situation properly. The establishment of schools and colleges and introduction of English language produced intellectuals, press and public associations like Utkal Sammilani establishment was a turning point to give the language crisis a solution to mitigate and up keeping the Odia language as the official language in Odisha. Not only the Odia people but also the foreigners and kind hearted neighbours had extended their helping hand to solve the language crisis of Odisha in 19th Century.

The present work is strife to study the language crisis in Odisha during the late nineteenth century. As the crisis ranges over a very vast period (from 1860's to 1936), only the developments of the last 40 years of the nineteenth century are dispensed with. Further, as there was no such political countenance as Odisha during that period what is meant by the word "Odisha" here is the Oriya speaking tracts of the Central Provinces and the Bengal and Madras presidencies. This was pronounced as Odisha proper then in the contemporary literary works as well as in common parlance. Later on these tracts together formed Odisha in 1936.

The term "crisis" is used here to pronounce 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 issues<sup>1</sup>. The two terms, 'intelligentsia' and 'nationalist intelligentsia' are used inter changeably as they point to the same meaning – literate persons with a concern for societal issues- during the period under study.

Language provided the base for the growing nationalist crisis in Odisha during the period. The people, more predominantly 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 Odisha language distress and those of larger Indian nationalism. The Odisha intelligentsia challenged the interventionist claims of neighbouring Indian languages and strove for a regional, language and cultural individuality. Simultaneously, they also shared the all India vision of the larger Indian nationalism. All these make the study of the language crisis in Odisha significant and fascinating today.

In the Odishan division, comprising Cuttack, Puri, Balasore of the Bengal Presidency, Bengali was observed as a threat to Oriya. The Odisha intellectuals 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 1865. 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.<sup>3</sup> This had made the threat quite real to them. In the western Odisha 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 Odisha, had been creating administrative problems which could be sorted out by displacing the language.<sup>4</sup>

The language issue had certain social and economic implications. The Oriyas were being looked down upon by the Bengalis in Odisha, Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918) protested in his autobiography<sup>5</sup>. 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 department<sup>6</sup>. Gangadhar Meher (1862-1924), a great poet, described the non-Oriya officials working in Odisha, as aliens, who 'surround' the king, 'misinterpret our words', eat up our food and water', and 'kick us at our head'<sup>7</sup>. While recounting the sternness of the famine which greatly affected Odisha in 1865-66, Fakir Mohan impugned 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 casualness by the insensitive non-Oriya Indian officials<sup>8</sup>. Besides, 'the influx' of Bengalis polluted the local atmosphere, for the Oriyas 'imitated' only the 'bad' practices of their neighbours, the intelligentsia complained<sup>9</sup>.

Subsequent the language dispute, at the instance of Fakir Mohan the amlas of Balasore held meetings and sent a petition to the Government contrary to the possible abolition of Oriya from the School<sup>10</sup>. Since lack of textbooks was cited as a basis for abolition,<sup>11</sup> 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 aptitude 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.<sup>12</sup>

So as to counter 'the undermining of language and cultural greatness of Odisha', the intellectuals shaped a glorious past for the nourishment of their regional individuality. 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 Odisha and its culture to inspire the 'present' generation'.<sup>13</sup> 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 heaven<sup>14</sup>. Utkal's greatness, Fakir Mohan believed, attracted many seers of the world who were proud to have their Peeths, sacred seats, here<sup>15</sup>. 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'<sup>16</sup>. Ramashankar Ray (1857-1931) recalled the greatness of medieval Odishan empire in his play, Kanchi Kaveri (1880), to depict the triumph of the Utkal king Purushattam Dev over the king of Vijayanagar to win Kanchi<sup>17</sup>. When the play was first staged in Cuttack, the show went houseful, re-counted the local press<sup>18</sup>.

The ostensible domination of Telugu middle class in Ganjam was countered by such an upsurge during that period. After stay in Ganjam in 1903, Fakir Mohan wrote that, out of 120 clerical staff in the district collectorate, only three were from Odisha<sup>19</sup>. 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> Reinstatement 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 distress not only in south Odisha but in the other parts of Odisha as well.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> The concentration 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 onwards.<sup>24</sup> Signature campaigns, fund collection from public in support of the crisis and distribution of crisis-related pamphlets in Oriya were some of the new forms used by the intellectuals in Sambalpur.<sup>25</sup> The leaders counted in Madan Mohan Mishra, Balabhadra Supakar, Dharanidhar Mishra and Chandra Sekhar Behera. The newspapers, Utkal Dipika, (Cuttack) and the Sambad Vahika (Balasore) along with the Sambalpur Hiteishini, (Bamanda, Sambalpur) became the main intellectual forum for emphasizing the language problem arising out of the replacement of Oriya in Sambalpur.

Enthused by the language issue Gangadhar Meher, a local poet from the inner of Sambalpur, wrote two lovely 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 significant persons were urged to be fearless and raise their voice against such injustice.<sup>27</sup> Fakir Mohan, in an essay, described Mr. Woodburn, the Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces under whose tenure the elimination of Oriya was proposed, as a 'villain' in the 'justice loving British administration'.<sup>28</sup>

One and only noteworthy outcome of the language crisis was the coming of the intellectuals from different parts of Odisha under one political podium, the Utkal Sammilani, translated as the Utkal Union conference (UUC), which was instituted in 1903. Imposition of Hindi in Sambalpur was no more a local issue in that part of Odisha. Fakir Mohan was as precarious of the threat of Bengali in central Odisha 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 designated him to denote the Odisha municipality constituency in the Councils in 1896.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, though the crisis's main apprehension was regional language and the main confrontation was counter to certain Indian 'neighbours' who were described as 'foreigners', there was no narrow provincialism in it during the late nineteenth century. To the Odisha intelligentsia, taking up of the Odisha issue was as natural as identification with the larger all India issues. After the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, the local intelligentsia attended its annual sessions and proliferated the Congress ideas in Odisha. 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', 'Indenisation of administration', 'undue defence expenditure', 'import of Liverpool salt' and 'high salary of the British officials', etc<sup>30</sup>. The intricacies involved between the national and regional issues were aptly dealt by Fakir Mohan in an essay circulated in 1913. To him, the nation was like a musical Tanpura having several free 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 resemblance of music in it.<sup>31</sup>

One more noteworthy feature of the crisis 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 moans of her subjects. The grievances carry on, 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 headfirst with the objective of achieving a nobler goal', he concluded with an optimistic note.<sup>32</sup> Gangadhar Meher's Victoria Staba (Prayer for victoria) also replicated such faith in the British rule in which the poet wished the Queen a long life for the benefit of her subject.<sup>33</sup>

Fakir Mohan had enormous trust on the capacity of individual British officials. John Beams, the Balasore district collector, T.E. Revenshaw, the Commissioner of Odisha Division, and a few other officials with whom he had coalesced were 'learned', 'well-meaning' and sincere 'friends of Utkal'. He devoted his work, 'Ramayan' (1880) to John Beams 'for his interest in the Oriya language and in the well-being of her people<sup>34</sup>. T.E. Revenshaw, in spite of committing a 'gross error' by listening to his on-Oriya subordinate staff, and by 'not sending timely relief' to the famine pretentious areas in 1865-66 was

described as a 'mahatma' and a great fiend of Utkal. Due to the efforts of these officials Oriya could be retained in Odisha, Fakir Mohan noted in his autobiography. 35

To the intellectuals, individual officials were the soul of British rule accountable 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 Odishan history'<sup>36</sup>. Gangadhar enticed to Woodburn, 'the incarnation of justice and kindness', for annulling to order regarding the displacement of Oriya from Sambalpur.<sup>37</sup> When the order could not be annulled, all the blame went of Woodburn, 'a villain in the justice loving British rule'.<sup>38</sup> In 1901, when Oriya was once again refurbished 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'.<sup>39</sup>

The intellectual's overestimation of the aptitude 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 crisis to the people during the period. While alluring to the chief commissioner, Gangadhar urged the 'princes and Zamindars and other influential persons' to raise their voice against prejudice. However, never did he approach the people during the course of the crisis.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> Even Gangadhar presumed that many of his 'capable countrymen', i.e., princes and Zamindars, would not support the cause of Utkal Bharati 'for fear of losing their titles'.<sup>42</sup> Such lack of faith in the 'countrymen' made the intelligentsia more reliant on the British support for any just action.

Nonetheless, the faith on the English rule was not the same as imitation of the English culture. Rather, the intelligentsia sternly criticized all those so called educated persons who blindly followed the English for 'becoming' 'modern' and sabhya (civilized)<sup>43</sup> Fakir Mohan urged his educated countrymen to take motivation from the English and Bengali, whose development appears miraculous because of the hard work put by the people, but found it quite illogical and unscientific to imitate them.<sup>44</sup> There was no place for imitation in the intellectuals' notion who believed that 'development' and 'civilization' of the natives were the ultimate craving 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 reciprocal

antagonism also convinced them to advocate for larger Indian nationalism, which apparently did not pose any risk to the sustenance of their local identity. Indian nationalism and the related issues were as accommodative as the Odisha issues in the intelligentsia's structure of world development and its processes.<sup>45</sup> The 'pitfalls' were only provisional and inadvertent due to problems like communication gap, presence of some indifferent lower level officials and lack of education, etc. hence, the intellectuals' role of 'true communicator' between the rulers and the countrymen was well thought-out central in the wider nationalist scheme of nation making, of which 'development of national language' was only a close module, in the late nineteenth century Odisha.<sup>46</sup>

### References :

Gopal Chandra Praharaj in his novel, *Bhagabat Tungire Sandhya* (1900) defines an intellectual as quite dissimilar from a *parakrutistha* (worldly, materialistic ) person. It is not the 'knowledge' of 'English' or 'Sanskrit', rather the person's apprehension for common societal concerns contrary to personal issues which becomes a distinct specific of an intellectual. See Gopal Chandra Praharaj, *Bhagabat Tungire Sandhya*, Cuttack, 1900, p. 117.

Surendra Mohanty, 'Odiya Sahityara Andhakar Yug', in 'Dagaro', go., 16 No. 1, in N.N. Mishra, *Adhunik Odiya Kabyadhara*, Calcutta, 1980, P. 63.

Sevak , 15 and 22 Dec. 1886, in Report on Native Newspapers-Bengal (RNNB) , 8 Jan 1887.

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Fakir Mohan Senapati, *Atmajivana Charita* , Cuttack, 1991, (Reprint) P. 45.

Ibid.

N.N. Pradhan, ed., *Gangadhar Granthavali*, Cuttack, 1990, P. 332.

Senapati, *Atmajivana Charita* , PP. 28-34

Anant Mishra, ed., *Madhusudan Granthavali*, Cuttack, 1991 (Reprint), P. 36

Senapati, *Fakir Mohan Granthavali (FMG)*, Part II, Cuttack, 1963, P. 55.

While asking the Oriya people to approve 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.

One whole chapter is on the textbooks in the Nineteenth century Odisha, in Srinivas Mishra, *Adhunik Odiya Gadya Sahitya, 1811-1920*, Cuttack, 1995, PP. 63-90.

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For details see C.R. Mishra, Freedom Crisis.  
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SH. 30 Oct. 1895 and 6 March 1895, in NN Pradhan, ed., Gangadhar Granthavali, PP. 438-40  
Senapati, FMG, Part-II, P. 679  
UD, 22 Feb 1886  
Details to be found in RNNB of 1868-1900.  
Senapati, FMG, Part-II, P. 743.  
Praharaj, Bhagabat Tungire, P. 118.  
N.N. pradhan, ed., Gangadhar Granthavali, P. 343.  
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Senapati, Atmajivana Charita , P, 31.  
Sanapati, FMG, Part-II, P. 679.  
N. N. Pradhan, ed., Gangadhar Granthavali, P. 440.  
Ssenapati, FMG, Part-II, P. 679.  
UD, 12 July 1902, in RNNB, 26 July 1902; Sambad Vahika, 17 July 1902, in RNNB 2 Aug. 1902.  
N. N. Pradhan, ed., Gangadhar Granthavali, P. 440.  
Senapati, FMG, Part-I, P. 210.  
N. N. Pradhan, ed., Gangadhar Granthavali, PP. 440-441.  
Senapati, Galpa Salpa, Part-I, Cuttack, 1987 (Reprint), PP. 69-82.  
Senapati, FMG, Part-I, PP. 210-212.  
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 Tungi (village community



place), make them read 'the National Congress', a pamphlet distributed 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.

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 designated as oblivious then ?' See N.N. Pradhan, ed., Gangadhar Granthavali, P. 263.