Odia Language and Literature: History, Present Status and Future Challenges

Pritish Acharya

Professor of History, Regional Institute of Education, Ajmer
Email: pritishacharya63@gmail.com

Abstract

Odia was accorded the classical language status in 2014 based on its antiquity, literary heritage and originality. The earliest forms of Odia are traced in Prakrit Apabhramsa or Bibhasha in the seventh century CE. The script gradually evolved due to political unification and economic rise between the eleventh and the fourteenth century and facilitated the growth of literature. The Sarala Mahabharata composed in the fifteenth century by a Shudra Chasa (agriculturist) Sarala Das is the first great work to have an Odisha-wide impact. Adopted from the Sanskrit Mahabharata, it gives a vivid picture of the regional polity and society and silently challenged the hegemony of Sanskrit and the social elite over textual and puranic knowledge during the period. The Panchasakha (Five Friends) poets of Bhakti literature rendered the Ramayana, Bhagabata, Harivamsa and other Puranas in lucid and simple Odia and sustained the tradition started by Sarala Das. Their questioning of the caste and gender inequality is noteworthy. Upendra Bhanja writing in riti or scholastic style represented Odia writings of the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries. Odia faced a deep crisis, for its existence and heritage was challenged in the late nineteenth century. However, in contemporary times, the challenges Odia literature faces have acquired new dimensions and require serious attention.

The earliest literary works in Odia can be traced back to the seventh century CE. They are in Prakrit *Apabhramsa* or *Bibhasha,* an early form of Odia. The noted Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang wrote had noted back then that there were similarities between the scripts used by the people of Kangoda (that is, coastal Odisha) and that of central India, but the writing style differed. Does it indicate the beginning of an early form of Odia script in the seventh century CE?

The human presence in the region known as Odisha today can be traced back to the Stone Age (c. 6000 BCE). The antiquity of language or languages spoken there could be ascribed to some form of pre or proto-Odia long before the emergence of its literature and script. The Ashokan Edicts, dating back to the fourth century BCE and Kharavela's

Hathigumpha inscription, dating back to the first century BCE, were in Brahmi and Prakrit respectively. Sanskrit inscriptions in the region can be traced back to fourth century CE. But neither Sanskrit, nor Pali nor Prakrit were the spoken languages of the people in the region. From the seventh century CE, followers of *Sahajia* Tantric cult used *Dohas* and *Charyapadas*, which contained many local Odia words. The *Sahajias* had developed a hybrid language in eastern India (Panigrahi 2024, 54). Their oral literature might have helped in the development of regional literature in a rudimentary form.

The Odia literature and script evolved because of the emerging social and political needs of the state.[1] The political unity of Koshal (the western part), Kangoda (southern part), Kalinga, Utkal and Odra (the central and coastal parts) under the *Somavamsi* rulers, sustained and expanded by the Gangas between the tenth and fifteenth centuries and accompanied by economic growth necessitated writings in indigenous language. The *Somavamsis* and the Gangas adopted the local culture, patronised it, and grew as regional powers. Though the 'high' culture, Sanskrit and Brahminism continued to dominate, the needs of administration required development of Odia language and script to communicate with the ruled people (Acharya 2011, 65–66).

The earliest instance of Odia script has been dated to 1051 CE, found in the form of a temple inscription at Ananta Basudev temple in Bhubaneswar. Initially a few specimens of bilingual inscriptions issued by the Ganga kings dating back to the thirteenth and fourteenth century having Odia dialect written either in Tamil or Telugu script were discovered. But the oldest inscription having both Odia script and Odia language was found at Sonepur in the western Odisha and was dated 1384 CE (Panigrahi 2024, 54).

While this has been the trajectory of the development of Odia in tangible form, studies have shown that Odia had considerably developed and was widely used even before the fourteenth century in the form of folk-songs and sayings that were transmitted orally to the succeeding generations. The *Khanabachana*, sayings of Sage Khana, is such an early folk-text.

Sarala Das and the Odia *Mahabharata*

The fifteenth century poet Sarala Das can be considered to be the real founder of Odia literature. He wrote the *Vilanka Ramayana, Sarala Mahabharata*, and *Chandi Purana* in chronological sequence. The names of his compositions such as—*Sarala Mahabharata*, give an impression that his name might have been Sarala. However, his actual name was Siddheswar Parida. Born as a Shudra *chasa* (agriculturist) by caste, his literary accomplishments are attributed to the blessings of local goddess Sarala, which is why the name of the latter became a part of his identity as well as that of his literary works.

Das's writings contained many regional proverbs, stories, idioms, metaphors, and ideas and made extensive usage of *Dandi-Brutta,* for its characteristic flexible nature (Mansinha 1960, 53–57). *Dandi* comes from *danda*, meaning street in Odia. This is indicative of the localised nature of his compositions. Though Sarala Das did not receive any patronage from the Gajapati rulers, he dared to write in local dialect by liberally using the words from its indigenous vocabulary. With his writings, the literature took a great leap. The script on the other hand had attained uniformity long before.

Sarala Mahabharata, adapted from the Sanskrit *Mahabharata,* is the story of a war. Its impact can be gauged from the fact that the word *Mahabharata* has become a synonym of war in Odia lexicon. *Jhimiti Khelaru Mahabharata* is an adage taken from the text, which means a war originates from triviality. The one-word adage suggests the futility of war.

Some scholars trace the beginning of Odia literature to an earlier date than Sarala Das. They predate it to writings, such as the *Kalasa Chautisha* of Batsa Das and *Keshava Koili* of Markanda Das. Their size, scale and impact in terms of linguistic and poetic effects, however, was much less compared to the *Sarala Mahabharata,* which nonetheless could not have been a sudden development without any precedence of regional literary traditions. Acknowledging the poet as the *adikabi* (earliest poet) and his writings as a watershed in Odia literature does not seem to be misleading.

The *Panchasakhas* and the Bhakti Literature

The tradition started by Sarala Das developed further in the sixteenth century. It resulted in the growth of a new genre called *Bhakti* poetry in Odia. The early poets of this tradition were known as the *Panchasakhas* (Five Friends). They were Balaram Das, Jagannath Das, Achyutananda Das, Yashovanta Das and Ananta Das. Barring Jagannath Das, they all were non-Brahmins. Their compositions were mostly on religious and mythological themes. However, their tirade against caste discriminations, 'high' class domination, untouchability and gender inequality made it a voice of dissent.

Balaram Das (born 1484 CE), the eldest among the *Panchasakhas* was a contemporary of Gajapati king Prataparudradeva (r. 1497–1538). In a manner similar to how Sarala Das attributed his literary motivations to the divine, Balaram Das named his magnum opus Ramayana as *Jagamohana Ramayana* and declared to have composed it under the instruction of *Jagamohana* (that is, lord *Jagannath*) for the well-being of the humanity. It is popularly called the *Dandi Ramayana* (or Street Ramayana) for its slacken style. His other noted works like *Mruguni Stuti* and *Gaja Nistarana*, which exemplify the supremacy of *bhakti* (devotion) over *gyana,* were adaptations of folk-tales.

Balaram Das's other noted text is the *Lakshmi Purana*. As the story goes, Lakshmi— the goddess of wealth, visited the house of her devotee who was considered untouchable. This enraged her husband lord Jagannath and her brother-in-law lord Balabhadra, who then asked her to undergo purification rituals. After the goddess refused to perform the rituals, there was a bitter fight between them. However, as per the tale, in the end the duo gave up their demand which then is said to have led to the opening of the Puri temple to all castes. The booklet ridicules the practice of untouchability; gender inequality, particularly the heady perception of masculinity and economic inequality all at one go. Reading of this text along with the *Lakshmi Puja* rituals is a living tradition in Odisha, which alternately also indicates the popularity of the text.

Jagannath Das—the only Brahmin among the *Panchasakhas*, wrote the *Bhagabata* in *nabakshari* style, which involved usage of nine letters in each line and was influenced by Sanskrit. This was in contrast to the slacken style of *Sarala Mahabharata* and *Dandi Ramayana.* Adapted from Purana, this was also written in very simple and lucid Odia. Since the *Bhagabata* was not in the '*Deba-Bhasha*' Sanskrit, its reading in the temple was not permitted by the priestly class. As a counter, alternative *Bhagabata tungis*, low-cost thatched

houses, mushroomed in the villages which institutionalised its reading and listening. The 'low' caste Shudras who could not go to the temples had access to the *tungis* as readers as well as listeners of the text. The *Bhagabata tungis* gradually emerged as community centres in almost all villages. The Odia *Bhagabata* and the *tungis* symbolised a silent revolution against the 'high' class hegemony of textual and puranic knowledge.

Another noted *Panchaskha* poet was Achyutananda Das. As a social reformer, he had a large following among the 'low' caste *Kaibarta* (fishermen) *Gopala* (cow-herds) *and Kamars* (blacksmiths)*.* Born in a *Karana* (scribe) family, his writings included *Shunya Samhita, Malika, Kaibarta Gita, Gopalanka Ogala*, and *Harivamsa*. His *Harivamsa* depicting the cowherd Krishna as the lord is immensely popular like the *Sarala Mahabharata, Dandi Ramayana,* and *Bhagabata* (Mansinha 1960, 103).

Yashovanta Das, another *Panchasakha* poet, was born in 1487 CE. His most widely known work—*Govindachandra*, ardently questions the caste untouchability. Ananta Das, the last among the *Panchasakhas*, described God as *avarna,* meaning beyond any *varna*. Though some of these *Bhakti* poets were erudite Sanskrit scholars, they chose vernacular Odia to convey their thoughts to the masses. Their association with the medieval Saint Chaitanya, who lived in Puri during the period, encouraged them to rationalise their ideas against 'high' class culture. Their writings were used as primer for learning Odia in the *chatshalis*. They universalised the use of religious texts and textual knowledge. Their focus on the futility of idol worship, rituals, caste hierarchy, and priesthood was carried forward by their disciples, such as Arjun Das in *Ram Bibha,* Damodar Das in *Rasakulya Chautisha*, and Sankar Das in *Ushavilash.* Their focus on social issues through religious themes made Odia a living and dynamic literary forum during those formative phases.

Odia Literature in the 17th and 18th Centuries

Between 1568 and 1803 CE, when the Afghans, Mughals and Marathas consecutively ruled Odisha, the *Gadjat* (princely state) rulers, *zamindars* and even minor landlords patronised literature, for it exalted their social status. Persian was the official language during the Mughal period. The Marathas brought Marathi, though Persian continued alongside. The reading of Odia *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Bhagabata*, *Harivamsa*, etc., dominated the popular culture. This formed the syllabi of the informal *chatshali* education. It prompted the replication of these works on palm-leaves in calligraphical handwritings; the literati also attempted to scribe new books in Odia language.[2]

A significant development of the period was the writing of Sanskrit in Odia script. It aimed wider dissemination of Sanskrit through the Odia script and at the same time also indicated a gradual shift to Odia in the educated circle. The Odia lexicon too got enriched by the incoming of Sanskrit, Persian, Urdu, and Marathi words. The expositions in Sanskrit proliferated wider through their translations in Odia.

This was also the time when a new variety of writings in Odiya appeared. Known as the *Riti Kal* (scholastic period)*,* the period witnessed the ushering of ornate poetry. The literary doyens of this period included Upendra Bhanja (1670–1740), Dinakrushna Das (1650–1710), Kavisurya Baladev Rath (1739–1845) and Brajanath Badjena (1729–1799). They did not directly confront with Sanskrit, which was still held in high esteem, but followed the complex

diction and style of Sanskrit to demonstrate the worth of regional literature. Generally, they hailed from the upper social strata and placed Odia in the intellectual arena.

Upendra Bhanja, a scion of Ghumsar *zamindar* family, stood as the epitome of ornate poetry in Odia casting his shadow to modern times. He declared himself *kabikalachandra*—moon in the galaxy of poets, which was a statement of assertion for writing in Odia. In this period, the *Kabya* was seen as a woman bestowed with varied forms of *alankaras* (ornaments) for adding to her beauty. The themes centred around love, union between lovers through a mediator, and tragedy due to separation. Despite being *klishta,* (puzzling), the *riti* literature claimed self-esteem for the Odia writings (Sahu 2020, 42–43). The local *zamindars* and *Gadjat* princes set in rural milieu indiscriminately patronised both the Sanskrit as well as the Odia writers.

In terms of genre, it (post-Bhakti literature) heralded the emergence of the prose, which predominated literature a few decades later. This is evident from the fact that *Chatura Binoda* of Brajanath Badajena and the *Rudra Sudhanidhi* by Avadhuta Narayan Swami of Bhubaneswar were in prose (Mansinha 1960, 35).

Odia Linguistic Movement in the 19th century

In the late nineteenth century, a powerful linguistic and cultural movement emerged to assert Odia's identity. Known as the Odia movement, it coincided with the emergence of nationalism and was inter-related to it. It was a fallout of the colonial cultural and political domination. The reaction and response to the British administration resulted in such a movement.[3]

The genesis of this movement can be traced to the 1860's, when Odisha fell victim to the *Naanka Durvikhya*, the great famine of 1865–66. The famine took a heavy toll of over one million human lives. The newly educated middle class from Odisha, very small in size, construed the precarity in terms of a community, that is, Odia *Jati* (community), and ascribed it to the influx of 'outsiders' in all spheres, such as administration, trade, and social life. Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843–1918), an eye witness to the 'plight,' sang in the *Utkal Bhramana* (1892–94): "*Marwadi, Kapodia, Bhojpuri, Modis*, have blocked the entry of others (that is Odias) in trade and commerce… All *hakim* and lawyers are foreigners. Even the postal clerk is not *desi* (from Odisha)" (Cuttack Students Store 1957, 677).

Though the British were not blamed directly, their 'mismanagement' of the situation during the famine supposedly due to misguidance given by the 'outsiders' was seen as the root of the problem. The regional strive for linguistic and cultural identity continued till Odisha became a separate linguistic state on April 1, 1936.

With the rise of nationalism, the leaders of the national struggle in Odisha tried to maintain a balance between national identity and the Odia linguistic identity. The Indian National Congress (INC) too realised the significance of the regional issue and allowed the formation of provincial units on linguistic basis in 1920. The British had conquered Odisha in piecemeal manner and enforced their administration without considering its linguistic and cultural entities. The western Odisha comprising towns like Sambalpur, Sonepur and Kalahandi, was attached to the Central Provinces since 1862. South Odisha with Ganjam and Koraput, was merged into the Madras Presidency and the coastal Odisha, comprising Cuttack, Puri and Balasore, formed a part of the Bengal Presidency. The Odia speaking population remained a minority and suffered 'discrimination' everywhere.

Hence, the Odia movement demanded a separate linguistic state preceded by the demand for amalgamation of the Odia speaking tracts under one provincial administration. Persistent appeals were made to the British followed by mobilisation in the newly founded vernacular prints, such as the *Utkal Dipika* (1866) printed in Cuttack and *Sambad Vahika* (1868) printed in Balasore. Odia was restored in Sambalpur in 1901 and the region was amalgamated with the Odisha division in 1905. The agitation in Ganjam resulted in the recognition of Odia as the official language in South Odisha and as a subject of study in the Madras University in 1890. However, Ganjam was restored to Odisha only in 1936.

In coastal Odisha, the language movement intensified due to the belligerent attitude of Bengali intelligentsia.[4] A booklet, *Odia Ek Swatantra Bhasa Naye* (Odia is not a distinct language) by Kanti Chandra Bandopadhyaya added fuel to the fire (Mohanty 2022, 84). It argued that Odia was but a mere variant and dialect of Bengali. When the modern Odia literature with focus on prose and social themes was on its emergence by challenging the 'medievalism', it faced gross challenges to its identity in the late nineteenth century. The substitution of Odia with Bengali from the schools had been recommended in 1870. This created a charged atmosphere among the Odisha intelligentsia. They vociferously asserted the distinctness, antiquity, and greatness of their language at all levels. Some associations were set up as a part of this linguistic assertion. They had linkages with the INC and regularly sent their delegates to the annual sessions of the Congress. The *Utkal Sammilani* (UUC) was formed to champion the regional issues at Cuttack in December 1903.

The early leaders of the movement were prolific writers in different genres. They included editor Gourishankar Ray (1838–1917), novelist Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843–1918), poet and educationist Radhanath Ray (1848–1908), poet Madhusudan Rao (1853–1912), lawyer and liberal leader Madhusudan Das (1848–1934) and Gangadhar Meher (1862–1924). Besides being accomplished writers, they founded the press; wrote in the newspapers and journals; organised associations; held meetings; sent petitions and memorandum to the government, and attended the annual sessions of the INC.

The leadership of the linguistic and literary movement was centred around Fakir Mohan Senapati, who wrote novels, short stories, poems, essays, and translated Sanskrit classics in prose. He was, thus, a pioneer of the nineteenth century Odia literature and an integral part of the cultural history of Odisha.[5] His unyielding struggle to assert a distinct Odia identity in the face of the growing domination of Bengali in the colonial context and his enormous contribution towards the shaping of modern Odia during the period have earned him the epithet of *senapati,* that is, a legendary general and hero of the Odia people.

This generation of authors also played an important role in making Odia as a medium of instruction in schooling. For instance, Fakir Mohan Senapati wrote *Ankamala*, the mathematics primer for school. Madhusudan Rao wrote *Barnabodh*, the primer on alphabets, while Gangadhar Meher, a great poet himself, translated Hindi poems for use in the primary grades. Radhanath Ray wrote textbooks on all subjects starting from geography to mathematics.

After a stint at translation, Fakir Mohan wrote the *Utkala Bhramanam* which was a survey of the Odisha literary scene in a satirical form between 1892–94. It shows his concern for the unity and progress of Odisha. He wrote a full chapter on the famine of 1865–66, of which he was an eye witness, in *Atmajibanacharita* (1917), the first autobiography and a classic

one in Odia. Fakir Mohan was also instrumental in the setting up of a society in Balasore for the promotion and promulgation of modern literature. The society started a printing press, the first of its kind in Balasore, and brought out the journal *Sambad Vahika*, mentioned earlier.

What pressed Fakir Mohan instantly to public life was a campaign in 1868–70 against the removal of Odia from the schools in Odisha on the ground that it was not an independent language and literature, but a variant of Bengali, mentioned earlier. The most creative and eventful phase of Fakir Mohan's life began in his late fifties after 1896. He wrote most of his poems, published a translation of the *Upanishad*s and penned *Rebati*, one of the earliest short stories in Odia language on women education, and two of his four novels- *Chhamana Athaguntha* (1902), and *Lachama* (1901–03) during this period.

The *Chhamana Athaguntha* vividly describes the process of 'de-peasantisaton' of a weaver couple, Bhagia and Saria, the rise of an upstart Mangaraj and the decline of 'old' *zamindar* Fate Singh under colonial administration. The *Lacchama* highlights the great glories of Odisha people during the 'marauding' Maratha rule. Mamu and Prayaschita were Fakir Mohan's two other social novels. He wrote his novels and short stories in the colloquial speech– the living language–by using mostly *desaja* and *tadbhava* words of the common people, while many of his contemporaries used mainly *tatsama* words, or Sanskrit words adapted into the Odia language. In the modern age, characterised by the construction of competing and contesting social identities, the role of language, especially because of its capacity to determine a group's identity, became crucial (Dash 2006, 4801–06). Fakir Mohan envisioned the language of the land as the mother figure associated with fertility cult in many of his writings. He wrote that if you continue to disrespect your mother tongue, you would be destined to suffer defenceless and unknown forever" (Das 2008, 328–331).

Gourishankar Ray (1838–1917) was another pioneer of the movement. Besides writing school textbooks, his major contributions included building of institutions for enriching the Odia movement. He founded the Cuttack Printing Company (1864), began publishing the Odia classics on paper, edited the first weekly *Utkal Dipika* (1866), set up the Odisha chapter of Brahmo Samaj (1870), formed the *Odisha Sabha* (1870), and the *Utkal Sabha* in 1882. He regularly attended the annual sessions of the Congress. At the time of evolution of both Indian nationalism and Odia movement, Gourishankar proved to be a vital bridge between the two. Despite being a Bengali, he was a trusted leader of the Odia movement and above any Bengali chauvinism.

Radhanath Ray (1848–1908), known as the *Kabibara* (born poet), began writing both in Odia and Bengali, and later focused only in Odia. In his epic, *Mahayatra* (1896), the Pandavas of the Mahabharata, turn to Utkal in course of their final journey to heaven, for he (poet) wrote, if all the lands were leaves (of a plant), Utkal was the flower. He composed the theme song for the UUC and named it the *Bharat Gitika* (song of India). It sang, 'Thou art the mother of us all, India.' In the evolutionary stage of nationalism in those days, it suggested his vision of Odisha as an integral part of India. Freedom without victory over internal weaknesses and social evils is meaningless, he foretold in the *Mahayatra*. His other notable works include: *Kedar Gouri*, *Chilika*, *Jayati Keshari* and *Nandikeswari*.

Madhusudan Rao (1853–1912), known as *Bhakta-Kabi*, was basically a poet; however, he brought out the first collection of essays, *Prabandhamala*, on varied themes in the vernacular in 1880. His songs were wide spread for their lucidity and clarity like the Bhakti

literature. Even at the height of the Odia movement, he eschewed all shades of chauvinistic regionalism and sang, 'Thou art the motherland, pious land India! We all are your children.' He gave the clarion call to the people of Utkal to come out of their present state of pessimism (Mishra 1991, 247).

Gangadhar Meher (1862–1924), a great poet from western Odisha, fervently appealed to all for the restoration of Odia in Sambalpur during the agitation in 1894–1901. Most of his *kabyas* were based on religious themes. However, his selection of religious theme did not deter him from espousing democratic and modern values. For example, his ideal character Sita in his *Kabya Tapaswini* based on Ramayana agreed to abide by the eviction order of her husband Ram, for the latter cared for the voice of the people. In *Bharati Bhabana* written in 1920–22, he admonished the British. He castigated all rulers for denying justice to the people, despite assuming the label *Dhrama Abatara*, incarnation of justice, for themselves[6]

The nineteenth century literary movement characterised as the *Satyawadi-yuga* in Odia literature included many other writers. It enriched Odia and strengthened its base. The legacy was carried further in the early twentieth century by many of the top nationalist leaders, such as Gopabandhu Das, Nilakantha Das, Godavarish Mishra, Harekrishna Mahatab, Birakishor Das, and Banchhanidhi Mohanty. Lucidity and simplicity were the hallmark of their writings.

Present Status

The issue of Odia *Asmita* (identity) comprising language, literature and cultural symbols continues to be an emotive issue in Odisha. In the recently held elections of 2024, the two major political parties portrayed themselves as its best custodians and accused the other of jeopardising Odia's interests, heritage and conservation. Odia speakers constitute over 82 percent of the population in the state. The bordering states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and Bengal also have a sizable Odia speaking people. In fact, Odia is the second official language in Jharkhand.

In Odisha, while Odiya is the medium of instruction in government schools, while the private schools continually nullify its learning. Hence, rise of private schools is seen as alarming for the survival of Odia. Since 2020–21, the enrolment in govt school is on rise with its corresponding fall in private school, that is, 19 percent in 2020–21 and 20 percent in 2021–22. Recently, the engineering and medical colleges too have been instructed to use Odia as their medium of instruction for students who are feel comfortable learning in the same. All these apparently indicate a healthy status for Odia as a language and literature. The classical status conferred in 2014 has added to its health.

However, the challenges to the language could be discernible only when the issue is critically appraised. It is natural that, compared to other curricular areas, if retention is ensured and dropout rate minimised in school, the situation in terms of the 'Basic Reading' skills in mother language (despite questionable learning avenues) will keep growing. This has also led to the emergence of a perception that mother tongue is easier to learn. As per the sample survey of the rural segment in the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) for 2023, in rural Sambalpur, 77.4 percent children in the age group of 14–16 years possess the 'basic reading' skill. The above-mentioned report also points out that the 'Basic Reading' in English in contrast to Odia is only 52.6 percent in the same place and same age group. But, whether this 'Basic

Reading' skill necessarily ensures sustenance in reading habits in the language? This is a question to ponder over.

It is possible that in the years after schooling when the youth are pushed to do jobs quite unrelated to reading or writing, their literary tastes might get trampled. In medieval Odisha, the need for reading *puranas* in comprehensible Odia with the objective of both 'redemption' and creative entertainment, had stirred people to have informal *chatshali* education. Today the needs are diverse and the avenues are numerous, which is a big challenge for the upkeep of the vernacular. The craze for English medium education through private schooling is not on wane. Had this craze been for trilingual or bilingual learning inclusive of both Odia and English, the challenge would not have been gross, because multilingual learning is a need for sustenance of the vernacular in present scenario.

Further, the official instruction for tertiary or higher-level learning in Odia medium without ensuring the availability of multiple quality texts in vernacular might not yield the desired results. This is why, the number of candidates opting to write in Odia medium in any national level competitive exams is rare, and the number of successful candidates there even rarer. This dissuades the youths from pursuing higher studies in Odia medium. In the late nineteenth century, the local intelligentsia had collectively rushed to mitigate the dearth of textbooks to save Odia. Today, after 150 years, such an 'urgency' is unfelt and unheard of.

Besides Odia, the state is fortunate to have multiple languages which enrich its cultural diversity and multifariously contribute to the making of the society. Koshali-Sambalpuri which is used in Western Odisha and at least the 21 tribal languages spoken by 62 tribes (who as per the Census of 2011, constitute 22.84 percent of the population) have both similarities and numerous divergences with Odia. The language spoken in south Odisha also has its own uniqueness. Their survival, even without scripts or written literature or patronage from the intelligentsia, needs appreciation. The tag of 'dialect' undermines their self-esteem. There is a need for the Odia literati to address the question of endangerment of these languages. They need to appreciate that these languages enrich the existing Odia literary forms and lexicon. The discord between Odia and these 'other' languages persists, which then further nurtures the grudges against Odia. For instance, the discord within the Koshali-Sambalpuri is not unnoticeable; even a consensus on a common name of the language is yet to be arrived at.

The challenge before Odia is to grow as an inclusive, accommodative and truly living and evolving language. In today's time of democratic polity, they would supplement one another, and a little figment of internal intolerance might prove grossly ruinous to them, especially Odia. Even the exalted status of 'classical' needs to be notionally and heartily shared among all.

During the medieval period as well as in the late nineteenth century, the colloquial diction and forms used in rural Odisha had proved to be the redeemers of Odia from imminent extinction. But this 'colloquial' mostly remained centred around coastal Odisha, the 'core area' of polity and culture since medieval times. This is because, barring Bhima Bhoi (1850–1895), a Khond tribal and the 'saint' poet, and Gangadhar Meher (1862–1924), the 'weaver' poet from western Odisha, most of the authors hailed from the coastal region. In present cultural and literary scenario, the 'colloquial' from the 'periphery' needs to be accepted in mainstream Odia language and literature. Assimilation without diluting the distinctness of each is the challenge as well as the solution to its existential issue. The primers have been developed in a few tribal

languages only in the last decade and their efficacy at the ground level requires assessment and scrutiny.

Odia got its first novel *Padmamaili* in 1888 (by Umesh Chandra Sarkar), celebrated its epoch-making novel, *Chhamana Athaguntha* in 1902 (by Fakir Mohan Senapati), and gifted the illustrious novel, *Amrutara Santana* (by Gopinath Mohanty) based on the Khond tribal life in Koraput in 1949. However, its first Dalit novel, *Bheda* by Akhila Naik who belongs to Kalahandi in western Odisha, came only in 2010. The novel has been translated into English and published by the Oxford University Press, New Delhi, in 2017. One wonders, if any tribal has ever penned any novel or autobiography in Odia so far, although each tribe has many long stories to tell. It is more miserable that, no tribe has ever scripted it even in his mother tongue outside Odia, although their telling and foretelling in oral form may not be precluded. Has the 'domineering' official Odia been a deterrent in their literary pursuits? Such dilemmas pose multiple challenges to Odia as well as to other sister languages in contemporary times.

Like multilinguism, horizontal proliferation of Odia across the social and geographical domains of the state could be a solution. Are these solutions far to seek? Are not they concealed within the challenges? Is the intelligentsia unaware of this? These are some pertinent questions for brooding today.

End Notes

[1] The script originated from the Brahmi in the third century BCE, as claimed by Mayadhar Mansinha and many others (Mansinha 1960, 14).

[2] At least 30 versions of *Ramayana* and 4 to 5 versions of *Mahabharata* existed (Mansinha 1960, 12).

[3] For details about early resistance movements see Acharya, Pritish ed. 2011. *Odisha Itihas*, 178-192. Bhubaneswar: Ama Odisha. For details on the Odia movement see Mohanty, Nivedita. 2022. *Odia Jatiyata: Eka Purnanga O' Swatantra Odisha Pradesh Gathanar Prayas: 1866-1956*. Bhubaneswar: Ketaki Foundation.

[4] See Utkal Dipika, March 13, 1869, Cuttack.

[5] See details about Fakirmohan's literary career and production in "Literary and Social Trajectory of Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843–1918) and the Question of Women." 2022. In *Vernacularizing Pasts Odisha: Mahabharata to 'Modernity,'* edited by Nanda, Chandi Prasad; Acharya, Pritish and Krishan, Shri. 280–303. Primus Books: New Delhi.

[6] See details about Gangadhar Meher's literary career and production, in "Beyond Colonial and Derivative Discourses: Weaver-poet Gangadhar Meher (1862–1924)." 2022. In *Vernacularizing Pasts Odisha: Mahabharata to 'Modernity,'* edited by Nanda, Chandi Prasad; Acharya, Pritish and Krishan, Shri. 383–402. Primus Books: New Delhi.

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