

BANGLA-ORIYA LANGUAGE DEBATE AND THE LANGUAGE-SECURITY MOVEMENT IN COLONIAL ORISSA

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses how Bangla was in usage in schools and colleges of Oriya speaking areas, even after the British government's decision to use vernacular languages and English in educational institutions. Further, it investigates the major personalities, both natives and the British, involved in the movement—either to save Oriya as a separate language or to replace it by Bangla. Among the important personalities and their efforts under our analysis are: T. E. Ravenshaw (the then Commissioner of Orissa), John Beames, Gourishankar Ray, Rajendralal Mitra, Kantichandra Bhattacharjee, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Madhusudan Das and Madhusudan Rao. This paper further explores the dominance of Bangla over Oriya language and its consequences. It will examine the growth of Oriya-consciousness among the natives resulting into "Oriya Language-Security Movement." Subsequently, the victory of the Oriya language led to the formation of separate province of Orissa.

Keywords: Bangla, Fakir Mohan Senapati, John Beames, Oriya Language-Security Movement, *Vernacular*.

INTRODUCTION

"Bengali and Oriya are like overgrown children always returning to suck their mother's breast when they ought to be supporting themselves on other food."

– John Beames, District Collector, Balasore

Bengali and Oriya both the languages have higher dependencies on the classical parent language of Sanskrit. Though Oriya was rich in ancient literature long before the Bangla emerged as an independent language, the latter was dominant over the earlier during the British colonial

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period until the unification of Orissa in 1936. Old Oriya literature held barely some place in the modern system of education, and Oriya language had no place in the colonial governance both in the offices as well as in the court of law. The modern Orissa then was scattered under three different provinces and the costal districts were under Bengal Province. Hence, like the other two parts where Hindi and Telugu were dominant, in the costal part of Orissa, Bangla was in use in the offices as well as the courts and was also the medium of instructions in educational institutions. Bangla was quite the prevalent language in modern textbooks and most of the offices had Bengali officials in the higher positions during the colonial administration. Bengali people also had contact with the English population and administrators much earlier than the Oriya people had a chance to as the centre of the East India Company being the city of Calcutta, which was also the capital city of Bengal province itself. Bengali *bhadraloks* were better educated and those who could not get a job in Bengal sought job even in Orissa (the part under the Bengal Province). Bengali employees were dominating in almost every office and every educational institution in Orissa and hence use of the Bengali language throughout was natural.

Bengali Indologist Rajendralal Mitra, without knowing and researching on the exact numbers of Oriya people over the vast Oriya-speaking geographical area, opined that the Oriya speaking population was only twenty thousand and argued that, Oriya is a dialect of Bangla and for this limited number of people there should not be a separate official language but they should learn Bangla. But he must not had the idea of the Oriya population under the other two provinces and under *garjaats*, which was almost 30000 during the period of time on discussion. Few official speeches of Mitra himself gives clear instances of proof which put him to admit his ignorance regarding the population and the enriched classical Oriya literature available and followed by many Bengali intellectuals for religious knowledge and researches. In addition to this, the educated mass on government jobs or seeking government jobs in Orissa supported the argument for their personal benefit. But few Bengali personalities such as Gouri Shankar Ray thought themselves as the natives of Orissa and supported the *Oriya Language Security Movement* and defended Oriya.

Both Oriya and Bangla originate from the parent classical language—Sanskrit.¹ Scholars then claimed that Oriya was a well settled language long before Bangla has a unique identity.² Sir John Beames writes on Oriya language and literature:

*“Looked at from the purely linguistic side, there is no doubt that Oriya has ample proof of its individuality. ... It retains unchanged forms which are older than the oldest Bengali or Hindi and others which can only be compared with Bengali forms of three centuries ago, but which long since have died out of that language.”*³

To show that until the nineteenth century Bengali did not acquire a definite shape, Beames writes:

“Finally with regard to Bengali itself there is much difficulty in making any accurate statement. The crowd of dialectic forms which occurs on all sides is absolutely bewildering ... Even in Calcutta till quite recent times, people spoke in twenty different ways and no one was sure which was correct way.”

John Beames ⁴

But the modern system of education put Oriya behind Bangla due to the use of modern textbooks which were not available in Oriya while their number in Bangla was abundant. The textbooks were plenty in Bangla either in the original writings or the translation of the modern subjects were incorporated in the school curricula. Bangla was totally dominating over Oriya during the second half of the nineteenth century in educational institutions. No attempts were made for the educational development in Orissa even after six decades of the occupation of Orissa by the colonial government. Hence when steps were taken for the development of education in Orissa, there was the need of the school textbooks and the trained teachers. Since both, textbooks and the teachers were in scarcity in Orissa; hence the Bangla texts and the educated Bengalis who were unemployed in Bengal were deployed. Against the few educated among Oriya population, the Bengali job holders in Orissa was very high. Bengalis were appointed not only in educational institutions but in each and every government offices. The educated Bengali people imposed their superiority over the Oriya people only due to the use of Bangla as official language and presence of huge number of Bengali officials all over Orissa. One of the most important supporting factors was the support of the Bengali landlords holding huge amount of land and collecting revenue were in support of the Bengali officials in Orissa as they wanted to use them for the judicial purposes to increase their land and revenue.

In the year 1870 publication of the small book entitled *Oriya Ekti Bhasa Naye* which means "*Oriya is not a language*" by one Kantilal Bhattacharya, a teacher of Balasore Zilla School was just the reflection of the privileged Bangla-speaking proto-Middle class. Uma Charan Haldar, the Deputy Inspector of School also advocated the use of Bangla in schools giving the reason of scarcity of textbooks in Oriya.⁵ Bengali Indologist Rajendralal Mitra supported this and delivered speech at Cuttack to use Bangla in Orissa instead of using Oriya for overall development of the state. Adoption of Bangali as the official language was in the interest of Utkal, Rajendralal Mitra, argued in his lecture in Cuttack in 1865.⁶ He even goes to the extent of proving that Oriya is not accepted by the natives of Orissa and which can be seen from his speech in Asiatic Society in favour of Kanti Chandra Bhattacharjya's book and against Beames's essay.⁷ The speech goes like this:

"... I prepared a map of India in Bengali and it brought me a profit within one year of over six thousand rupees. The same map was subsequently translated into Uriya, but even the School Book Society could not venture to undertake it on their own account and the Government at last had to advance, I think, some two or three thousand rupees to help the publication. The map, however fell still-born from the press and almost the whole edition is, I believe, now rotting in the godown of its publisher, Let but the Government introduce the Bengali language in the schools of Orissa, and the Uriyas, instead of seeking grants-in-aid from Government and private individuals for occasionally bringing out solitary new books, will have the whole of our Bengali publications at their disposal without any cost..."

Again, the report of 1864-65 by Harrison, Inspector of the Department of Education mentions that Deputy Inspector of Cuttack Department of Education Umacharan Haldar had proposed to replace Oriya with Bangla in schools of Orissa. (*General Report on the Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of Bengal Presidency 1864-65*, p-250)

British government implemented the use of vernacular languages in educational institutions

but still Bangla was used in the schools of Orissa. Oriya was a subject in the schools and used as the medium of instruction in the primary and secondary schools of Orissa was also tried to be banned. 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 autobiography.⁸ Gangadhar Meher (1862-1924), a great poet, described 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'. This gradually took the shape of language debate when it was demanded that Oriya should be taught and should be the medium of instructions in schools, and the official language of Orissa should be the spoken language Oriya instead of Bangla. A group of Oriya officials held meetings and wrote a petition to the Government against the probable abolition of Oriya from schools.⁹ A group of people went in favour of the use of Oriya as an official language and another against it supporting the use of Bangla.

To save Oriya from linguicide and to keep it as a language and as official and educational language, voices from the educated people and natives from the Oriya speaking area began to rise. The language debate and the language security movement in Orissa picked up steam. The intellectual fight to keep Oriya language survive as a separate language turned into an intellectual mass movement in Orissa and Bengal. The movement named as the *Oriya Language Security Movement* was quite influential. The activities included literary writings, writings in the Press, sending of petitions and appeals and holding of meetings on issues related to public matters. There were two categories of people on the language debate: one in support and another in opposition.

J.G. Medlicott, the Inspector of Education suggested the use of Oriya language education among the lower classes in the higher schools in Orissa. It was because he marked that due to lack of sufficient textbooks all the students were opting Oriya as second language and almost everyone was succeeding in the examination. Further he added that it was mischievous to consider Oriya as a chief subject in the University education. He was supported by W.S. Atkinson, the then Director of the Department of Education who wrote to the Bengal government to omit Oriya from the entrance test of University education. R.N. Shore, the then Commissioner of Orissa strongly opposed the proposal and wrote to the government of Bengal:

"...the students from Orissa shall be subjected to the disadvantage of being required to pass in two foreign languages while all other candidates are examined only in one... The proposal will, however, if carried out, have one tangible effect, viz., to close the university to all but the sons of Bengali parents. I trust His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor will not permit such a blow to be struck at the cause of education in this province."

The beginning of *Oriya Language Security Movement* sprouted on the fourth of January 1868 when the first Oriya newspaper *Utkala Dipika*, edited by legendary Gouri Shankar Ray severely criticised the proposal of abolishing Oriya language from the schools of Orissa. The newspaper stated that this decision was crushing the hope of the improvement of Orissa. Further, "...it gives the ironical statement that government is wasting money for the vernacular education and vernacular languages but it is pathetic that the officers in the education

department are trying to abolish Oriya." It was the day when the topic of the use of Oriya in University education was taken seriously by the natives of Orissa. On 13th April 1868, T.E. Ravenshaw declared in the Cuttack high school Annual Meeting that there is no use of Bangla in the schools of Orissa. But his report was slightly different: "... exclusively in favour of establishing Uriya as the recognised of all schools of Orissa, and leaving Bengali as an extra language if preferred to be taken up in addition to Uriya, but suppression of it." (*General Report on the Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of Bengal Presidency, 1869-70, p.63*).

In 1868, in a session at the Cuttack debating club Rajendralal Mitra emphasised in a speech that Oriya people are doing harm to themselves in loving Oriya and trying to make it a separate language. He spoke: "... the injury which was being inflicted on the Uriya race by their attachment to provincial patios, which they wish to exalt into a distinct language."¹⁰

One can discern the continuation of the dominance of Bangla over Oriya from the fourth paragraph of the Annual Report on education system of Cuttack High School in 1871-72 by T.E. Ravenshaw the then Commissioner to the Bengal government. To quote: "There has been very satisfactory increase in the number of Ooriya lads under instruction. The only objection I have to make is that too much attention is paid to Bengali and too little to the vernacular, Ooriya, I should be glad to see Bengali teaching prohibited in Orissa schools".

With the rising language-debate, there arose a sub-national consciousness among the natives of Orissa and it led to the unification and formation of a separate province of Orissa in 1936. This brought to the end the language dominance of Bengali over Oriya. Oriya people renewed their unique identity with the meticulous work of the group of people who led the Oriya Language Security Movement.

ENDNOTES

1. See *Modern Aryan Languages of India*
2. See John Beames's *Modern Aryan Languages of India*, W.W. Hunter's *Orissa* and B.C. Majumdar's *Typical Selections From Oriya Literature*
3. *Odia Sahityara Adiparba*, p. 15
4. See John Beames' *Comparative Grammar of Indo-Aryan Languages Vol. I*. p. 106.
5. See John Beames and Orissa pp. 75-78; Pabitra Mohan Barik's "A Movement for Restoration of Oriya Language"
6. See Surendra Mohanty, 'Odiya Sahityara Andhakar Yug', in 'Dagara'. 16 No, 1. Also, N.N. Mishra, *Adhunik Odiya Kabyadhara*, Cuttack, 1990, pp. 63.
7. Beames essay supported the use of Oriya language in Orissa.
8. Fakir Mohan Senapati, *Atmajivana Charita*, Cuttack, 1991, (Reprint) p. 45.
9. See Fakir Mohan Granthavali, Part II, Cuttack, 1963, p. 55.
10. See Beames(1870),p. 201 and *Utkala Dipika*,13 March 1869.

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