The Making of Modern Odia Identity and Print Media in 19th Century

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Abstract
This article chalks out the symbiotic relationship between media and nationalism in the context of modernity. There are certain basic pre-requisites required for the advent of modernity with media being one. Media creates the forum for growth of nationalism as pointed out by Anderson. I take the case of 19th century Odisha which can be considered as the period of awakening for the given society. This period saw the growth of Odia nationalism, which preceded Indian nationalism in the context of Odisha owing to the presence of a robust print media that aimed at creating a political identity by striving for unification of Odisha. Here, we take a look in the development of print media situating it within a particular historical and social milieu.

Key words: Modernity, Print media, Odia Nationalism,

Introduction
This article is an attempt to map the idea of modern Odia identity where I underscore the idea of being modern. Modernity makes its presence felt at a particular historical juncture. Every society has its own pathway and temporality for attaining modernity. Modernity does not start universally on an anointed fixed time. Every society has its own struggles of reaching it out. This article explores the idea of media and mass media to be more specific as an important component of modern times, and its symbiotic relation with nationalism. Here, I intend to contextualize 19th century Odisha as a period of advent of modernity in the midst of growing Odia nationalism supported by a plethora growth of print media across the province. In the next section, I would try to explore the relationship between modernity and media followed by a section on print media in Odisha.

Modernity, Media and Nationalism
Stuart Hall believes modernity is represented through the social formations like nation states, capitalism, new class formations, and a secular outlook (Hall 1992). Every society is a product of its historical forces. Modern societies are marked by specific historical developments, which shape its social formations. I am not a historian neither I am
trying just give a historical depiction of events but here I try to navigate through the landmark historical events to understand an emerging social institution like media. It was a time when media was treated as a social institution with a cause and the recent role of media as a corporation was beyond one’s imagination. In case of Odisha, Media was meant for a mission, and this mission grew out of the witnessed sufferings and their vulnerabilities of the people of Odisha. Modernists schools of nationalism, heralded by prominent thinks like Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner believe that nationalism as an ideology and a movement can mark its advent only in modern times (Puri, 2004). Gellner believes nationalism is the result of mankind’s encounter with modernity. Every new technology brings with it new social relations of production, giving way to new social processes. Nation – States happen to be one such product of modernity. (Gellner, 1983) But the very process of creation of a nation-state calls for mass media as noted in the ideas of Benedict Anderson. Nationalism has its roots in cultural understanding of a society. Nations became inevitable when cultural systems like religious communities with sacred languages and truth defining divine scripts as its form of operation; divine monarchs and dynasties; and the conception of temporality, which cosmology seemed to be identical with history came to lose its divine central position which again was a result of that era’s encounter with modernity. (Anderson, 1983)

These factor, mentioned above eroded with scientific discoveries, increased communication and above all with the emergence of print capitalism. After 1500-1550, publication received a market boom and soon became a prosperous industry with wealthy capitalists investing in it. But with the decline of Latin language, the Latin language market got saturated. In order to make money, the publishers thought of bringing out cheap editions in vernacular languages. Three factors brought vernacular languages into business with print capitalism. Firstly, there was a change in the character of Latin, which had made it more ecclesiastical and therefore far removed from everyday life. Secondly, because of the impact of Reformation, which itself owed its success to print capitalism. The enlightening ideas of thinkers like Martin Luther who can be called as the first best-selling author known till date, was very popular as his work was in German. Anderson believed that print capitalism gave fixity to language, and in the long run helped individuals to build an image of antiquity and continuity, which is of immense importance in forming the ideas of a nation. Besides, the Protestantism – print capitalism coalition brought out cheap editions which earned a huge new reading community, which included merchants and women who earlier refrained from reading owing to their lack of knowledge in Latin. And the third factor was the gradual and geographically uneven spread of vernacular languages as instruments of administrative centralization. These formed the language of power, which were different from the older administrative languages. In fact, it would not be wrong to argue that print media associated with vernacular language gave rise to new social structures. The modern times could not have been envisioned with print capitalism. As noted by Thompson, “Media is mediated communication”, (1995) this mediated communication through print capitalism brought a new age of nationalism with it. In the next section, we would take a
look at the Odia society in this context. Odia society reached its age of modernity in 19th century. It was the age of nationalism triggered by print media.

**Print Media and Growth of Nationalism in Odisha**

Odisha has a long history of journalism and print media. Some scholars point out that the MadalaPanji, the temple chronicles of Jagannath temple, which started in 12th century would be considered to be the first piece of journalism as it registered the events associated with the temples and kept a record of the Kings who reigned the region (Chatterjee, 2013). But it was more or less a chronicle of the rulers rather than the masses. But it must be kept in mind that any piece of journalistic work is meant to be for the people and the society, a process of creating a dialogue between the state and the society. For the people of Odisha, the need for a newspaper that discussed issues on politics, religion, health, spiritualism and agriculture was witnessed as early as in 1769 by an ascetic Sundar Das when print technology had not yet made its roads into Odisha. (Patnaik 2014). Sadhu Sunder Das’s *Kujibarapatra* (Tiny Banyan leaf) would pass off as the first handwritten newspaper to be circulated in Odisha. This newspaper was written on palm leafs and wrote extensively on issues of social justice. (Patnaik, 2014). This handwritten newspaper was so popular that it got translated in Hindi and Marathi language in 1800 A.D. The first printed newspaper made its way in 1866. It was named *Utkala Deepika*. It served the agenda for weaving Odia nationalism which preceded Indian nationalism in the context of Odisha. Before throwing light on the inception and ideological stance of this particular newspaper, it’s important to have a look at the historical developments in which this newspaper could be located. A brief introduction to the historical backdrop of Odisha is needed here which led to the emergence of this newspaper.

Odisha was conquered in parts and at different periods of time, the British had it merged with different provinces of British India. Thus, the Odia – speaking tracts remained scattered in the three provinces, namely, Bengal, Madras, and the Central province. The British rule plagued the Odia economy. They extended the Bengal regulation to Odisha division, which proved disastrous to the local conditions, especially the revenue administration. The short term and long term settlement of the land revenue worsened the conditions of the peasants. They over-estimated the returns from the land. And to add more to their misery a new coin was introduced, replacing the *cowry* currency. This new coin system left the people confused putting a great deal of financial burden on them. Barter system was no more accepted. The British set up monopoly over salt trade. The scenario was such that with declining salt trade and immense pressure on land, productivity slowed down. The poor peasants were unable to pay revenue, and finally their lands got auctioned. Thus, for the first time these peasants were thrown out of their ancestral lands. This led to the famous “Paik Revolution” in 1817. The Paik Revolution was a learning process both on the part of the native Odias and the Britishers. Odias realized that were exploited in their own lands, and Britishers tried to adopt new policies towards the Odias. Few missionaries came up who worked for vernacular and English education in Odisha. The first
printing press was established in Odisha in the year 1837. During this period many English and Vernacular schools were opened up at various parts of British Odisha. In fact it was the presence of the British missionaries who came to Odisha in 1809 published the first printed book in Odia, i.e., the The New Testament. (Dash, 2013) With the Wood’s dispatch of 1854 few vernacular schools were started. Literacy was slowly spreading in Odisha, and now government jobs were also available to the Odias. The missionaries established the first printing press in Odisha at Cuttack in 1837 known as the Cuttack Mission Press, which went on publish Gyanaruna (1849), Prabodha Chandrika (1856) and Arunodaya (1861). Bodha Dayini was published from Balasore. Basically these magazines were meant for propagation of Christianity (Chatterjee, 2013). This progress was intervened by a famine that claimed ten lakh lives in 1866, popularly known as Naankha Durvikhya. The famine is said to be a man made one by most scholars since it was the result of sheer negligence of the British government. This famine brought about a major change in the social and political life of Odisha. The newly educated looked afresh at the nature of British rule and the underdevelopment of the province. In fact, it made the intelligentsia realize the follies of the British government. Immediately after the famine UtkalaDipika, a vernacular newspaper was started that brought to light the maladministration of the British. The process of nation-building intensified. Thus, the year 1866 was the turning point in the history of modern Odisha. The 19th century intellectuals traced the source of all social and political ills to the general ignorance of people. The diffusion of knowledge, therefore occupied a central position in their programme of action. And the intellectuals realized that vernacular language was the only medium through which knowledge could be spread to the people. But they again faced a problem in their effort to implement vernacular education also. Since the Odias were dispersed in all the three provinces, they were reduced to a linguistic minority in all the three provinces.

The Odias believed that they faced economic exploitation, cultural dominance on the hands of few “dominant nationalities”. These “dominant nationalities” were the Bengalis in the coastal part of Odisha which belonged to the Bengal Province, the Telegus in the Madras Province, and Hindi speaking people in the Central province. “Oriya Speaking tracts were at that time divided into three smaller colonies inside a larger British colony” (Dash 2006). It would not suffice to say that the people in the Odia speaking tracts were under the colonial rule of the British. These were colonies with a colony, i.e., they were doubly oppressed. Whenever a government position fell vacant, some of these officials saw to it that their own fellow speakers, preferably one of their relative or friends secured the job (Dash, 2006). The Odias were ‘the other’ in these three provinces (Dash, 2006). It must be noted that the four dominant communities existed at that period of time, namely the Bengalis, the Telegus, the Hindi-speaking people of the Central Province and the British. Yet the Odias perceived the Bengali community as their strongest opponent, which later made them construct their identity, separate from the Bengalis. This form of social engineering was inspired from the debates that started during the 19th century regarding the status of Odia language, which finally led to the Odia
Language Agitation. For the Odias the Bengalis were closer to the British with their westernized lifestyles.

Odia Language Agitation (OIA) was the first step taken towards construction of language based Odia identity. Colonial administrators like T.E. Ravenshaw, the then commissioner of Odisha, and John Beams, the collector of Balasore contributed a lot to the Odia Language Agitation. The primary objective of the OLA was to oppose the imposition of Bengali in the Odia schools. Bengali scholars like Kantichandra Bhattacharya’s article Oriya swantrabhasa nay, said that Odia was a mere dialect of Bengali because of the similarity between the two languages. Therefore, there was no point in continuing the teaching of Odia in schools. It would be better option to replace it with Bengali as Bengali textbooks were available in abundance. This stance was severely criticized by some scholars of Bengali origin, such as Gourishankar Ray and Jagamohan Ray, Bengali poet Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, and Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya, the Bengali intellectual and educationist (Mohanty, 2005).

It was the vernacular newspaper getting published at different provinces that created a sense of community among them even though they lay scattered in different provinces. Another important issue that forged the sense of nationalism in Odisha was the linguistic crisis. This is where the role of the Odia middle class got recognized, when war was waged against it through newspapers like UtkalaDeepika, and political associations to demand to make Odisha a separate province by joining the Odia speaking tracts from the three different provinces. Utkaladeepika was published by Gauri Shankar Ray and Bichitrananda Das. Though both of them were part of the colonial set up, this newspaper started as a reaction to the famine of 1866 (Mohanty, 2005). It brought to light the plight and miseries of the Odia people. UtkalaDeepika pointed out issues like extreme price rise of food grains, destitutes who have been outcast by their caste group for having eaten in the relief camps and were boycotted by the Hindu society as Chhatra-Khias. The issues of orphan children and sex workers were always brought to light by UtkalaDeepika. (Mohanty, 1993). This newspaper can be considered to be the first mouth piece of the Odia voice that highlighted the sufferings of the Odia people both at the hand of the British and that of the Bengalis.

The UtkalaDeepika had a prominent role to play in the Odia Language Agitation. R. L. Mitra claimed “the true well-wishers of Odisha must, first of all, try to get Odia replaced by Bengali because otherwise the development of Odisha would be impossible.” (UtkalaDipika, March 13 1869)

This statement and the controversy that followed intensified the Odia Language Agitation. Gourishankar Ray, the editor of Utkaladipika vehemently protested Mitra’s statement. He also criticized Fakir Mohan Senapati for his recently published book The History of India because of its Bengali influence in it. Gauri Shankar Ray, Fakir Mohan Senapati, along with Radhanath Ray, Madhusudan Rao, and Gangadhar Meher, Biswanath Kar, Sashibhusan Rath, Lala Ramnarayan Roy and Dhranidhar Mishra laid the foundation stone of the first phase of modern age of Odia literature and Odia journalism as well. It was an age when Literature served the purpose of journalism,
i.e., creating a band a conscious vigilant citizens.

**Conclusion:**

The case of 19th century Odisha stands as a testimony to the intimate links between modernity, media and nationalism as noted by modernist school thinkers like Benedict Anderson. The print revolution in terms of Odia dailies and text books has been of immense significance which unleashed a wave of nationalism that ultimately resulted in the creation of a separate province for Odisha. The political and cultural identity created by print media speaks of the advent of modern era in Odia society.

**References:**


