2 Vernacular Publics: A Modern Odia Readership Imagined

In the winter of 1891, in the capital of the princely state of Majurbhanj set deep in the hills of the Eastern Ghats, a series of articles critiquing the work of an early modern Odia poet were published.[1] The poet in question was Upendra Bhanja. With an entire era of the Odia literary canon named after him, Bhanja was an immensely popular poet among the common people of Odisha. Bhanja's modern critic, Lala Ramnarayan Rai, was arguing that his poetry failed to meet the standards of true poetry. His poems were unnecessarily obscene, grammatically incorrect, and used very verbose and convoluted language. An instance of Rai's critique of Bhanja's epic *Vaidehisa Bilasa*, which was based on the Ramayana, follows.

Lala quotes one of the episodes immediately following Sita's kidnapping where Rama laments to his younger brother, Lakhman:

> Now that Sita is gone, who will I conduct the business of love with?
> Whose gold like form will rub against my touch stone of a body?

Outraged, Lala remarked: "Dear Readers! What is the justification of this animal like, undignified description of Mahapurush Rama's emotions? . . . Isn't Ramachandra our ideal man? . . . If this epic is an ideal epic or if the hero of this epic serves as an aspirational ideal for our youth then it would not be too much to say that Odisha's progress is impossible! Be that as it may, we put this in front of our dear readers to evaluate the merits of our argument."[2]

Lala's outraged comment points to the nineteenth-century entanglements between regional literature, aspirations for community progress and an emergent notion of responsible readership that presupposes a discerning Odia public. Not alone in his critique of early modern Odia literature, Lala sparked a rather acrimonious and public debate about the

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[1] A very early version of this chapter appeared in *Contemporary South Asia* in 2012. See Pritipuspa Mishra, "Fashioning Readers: Canon, Criticism and Pedagogy in the Emergence of Modern Oriya Literature", *Contemporary South Asia* 20, no. 1 (2012): 135–148.

[2] Lala Ramnarayan Rai, "Kabi Upendra Bhanja", *Utkal Prabha*, December 1891.

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value of "traditional" Odia literature for contemporary Odia public life with these essays. This chapter traces how the prevailing anxieties about the inadequacy of existing Odia literature for modern educational needs and the allied anxiety about an inadequate literary legacy for community building led to the imagination of a new kind of "responsible" Odia literary public consisting of producers, consumers, and beneficiaries of a modern Odia literary canon. As my discussion of Odia literary criticism in the late nineteenth century will reveal, at stake in this fashioning of a new literary republic was the imagination of a homologous Odia political public consisting of citizens (readers) and representatives (literary critics). Defined in opposition to their more dominant Bengali neighbors, this imagined community of Odia readers served as the earliest iteration of a modern Odia political community that would later serve as the civic constituency of the movement for the formation of a separate linguistic province of Odisha. By unpacking the impulses and arguments that informed the imagining of a new Odia literary public, we can explore the formation of the political constituency of the Odia language that would later define the limits of regional community in Odisha.

But first, a few words on my approach to reading of the debate on literary criticism that forms the core of the chapter. In framing what is essentially another Indian debate about tradition and modernity in literature and literary criticism during the colonial period, I seek to move away from discursive frameworks of critical impasse or alternative modernities and explore the inaugural aspect of the debate.[3] Building upon Milind Wakankar's suggestion that doing so allows us to explore hitherto neglected issues of responsibility and historical origin, I ask how Indian writers managed to bring the "burden of their own literary pasts" to bear upon their apprehension of their role at a time of unprecedented social and political change?[4] I suggest that notion of the inaugural invokes the first moment of the establishment of what is hoped to be a long-lasting tradition. The literary critical debates of the 1890s in Odisha express this hope that a new weighty tradition will arise from new projects of literary production.

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[3] For a discussion of the tradition/modernity debate as a moment of critical impasse, see Sudhir Chandra, *The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992). For a discussion of the resolution of the tradition/modernity debate in the formulation of an alternative modernity, see Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendru Harischandra and Nineteenth Century Banares* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[4] Milind Wakankar, "The Moment of Criticism in Indian Nationalist Thought: Ramchandra Shukla and the Poetics of a Hindi Responsibility", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2003): 987–1014.

In moving away from discursive frameworks of critical impasse and alternative modernities, this reading of a late nineteenth-century literary debate illuminates a crucial aspect of the postcolonial predicament of regional Indian literature. Not focusing on the tradition/modernity dilemma and drawing more attention to the inaugural nature of this debate allow us to dwell more closely on the question of "timeliness" of literature. Anxieties about literary and political zeitgeist of Odia literature and its eventual resolution in this literary debate illustrates how the concerns and preoccupations of nineteenth-century Indian critics in the age of colonialism echo contemporary anxieties about the place of local literature in the global market place. The postcolonialist backlash against Pascale Casanova's thesis on the world republic of letters that divides the literary world into a few metropolitan centers and many provincial peripheries suggests that we have come back full circle to the kinds of question that were being raised by Odia critics in the 1890s.[5] Faced with oppressive traditions, Western as well as Indian, these critics were poised to suggest the foundations for a new literary tradition that situated local Odia everyday life within broader political and social concerns in India and beyond. The resolution of this debate and the subsequent literature produced in response to it suggest to us the possibilities of recuperating and interrogating this representative function of regional literature in contemporary India.

By interrogating the representative function of regional literature and how it was managed by literary critics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, we could arrive at a clearer sense of how Odia as a modern vernacular was produced in this period. The vernacularity of the language in this case was invoked when Odia was presented as the essential medium through which the story of the community could be told. However, as the subsequent discussion of the debate on the remit of literature illustrates, the nature of the story was policed by an emergent infrastructure of literary criticism. In laying out the limits of inclusion into the Odia literary canon and excluding certain elements that did not fit the liberal agenda of the emergent Odia middle class, early twentieth-century literary critics produced a vernacular literature that claimed to represent the entire Odia public even as it excluded or ignored more popular forms of literary expression.

What does it mean to speak of a vernacular Odia public in this self-consciously inaugural moment in the history of modern Odia literature?

[5] See Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Amir Mufti, "Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures", *Critical Enquiry* 36 (2010): 458–493; Christie McDonald and Susan Rubin Suleiman, *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Any invocation of an "Odia public" necessarily refers to our understanding of publics articulated within the Habermasian framework of the public sphere.[6] However, as Albert Welter has noted in his study of emergent public spheres in China, the Habermasian public sphere is rooted in his analysis of eighteenth-century Europe and as such may not apply to readings of non-Western public spheres. Welter argues that the public sphere modeled on eighteenth-century European discourse and politics presupposes a number of conditions that were not necessarily present in non-Western or colonized spaces such as India and China. Preconditions such as "participatory democracy, the role of public opinion, attitude towards citizen activism . . . lack of regard for status among participants, the domains of common ground over which private citizens could exercise authority and ever expanding notions of inclusivity," had not yet emerged in the Odia-speaking areas of the Bengal Presidency, Madras Presidency, and the Central Provinces.[7] Apart from the absence of participatory democracy, social parity, and citizen activism, the very possibility of a "common ground" where Odias could engage in discussions was undermined by the administrative fracture of Odia-speaking areas. So then, what kind of public and by extension public sphere could emerge in nineteenth-century Odisha? Here I draw on Rajeev Bhargava's discussion of the specific nature of the literary public sphere in India. In his reading of Habermas' notion of the public sphere, Bhargava argues that in colonial India, unlike in the liberal public sphere, the literary public sphere was not open to everyone.[8] Bhargava's discussion served as an introduction to a volume of essays that explored an Indian approach to Habermas' arguments about the public sphere. These essays argue that, in colonial India, the public sphere was not a singular space. It served as a site for contestation between groups that brought avowedly private matters to bear on public discussions. Hence, the publicness of public life itself was always under question. It also created a public sphere that was not simply liberal. Rather, it had to make space for discussions about religion and affect. Therefore, the public sphere in India was both narrower (in terms of membership) and wider (in terms of concepts and texts) than the Habermasian public sphere.

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[6] In his definition of the public sphere, Habermas notes that: "[T]he bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public." See Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 27.

[7] Albert Welter, "The Sphere of Privilege: The Administration of Buddhism (and Religion) in China", in Albert Welter and Jeffrey Newmark, eds., *Religion, Culture and the Public Sphere in China and Japan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 22.

[8] See Rajiv Bhargava, "Introduction", in Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld, *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions* (New Delhi: Sage 2005), pp. 13–58.

The public at issue in this chapter is akin to what Habermas has called a "public-at-large." Public spheres, according to Habermas, are always outward facing and are inherently not imagined as enclosed enclaves limited to their empirical numbers. No matter how small or fledgling a public sphere, as Nancy Fraser has described Habermas' formulation: "[I]ts members understand themselves as part of potentially a wider public that indeterminately, empirically counterfactual body we call 'a public-at large'."[9] Discussions about the duties of the *Odia readership* in the late nineteenth century was founded on such an imagination of a wider public that went beyond the actual, limited urban Odia public sphere. This inauguration of an idea of a public was already, at its very inception, a flawed notion that elided actual fractures in the way public life was lived in colonial Odisha. It sought to represent all Odia-speaking people even though, at least at its inception, it only consisted of urban educated Odia elite.[10] It was an imagined rather than real public that served as the foundation of an equally imagined notion of an Odia liberal political constituency. This chapter is an account of how an Odia public was *imagined* within literary debates about the status and function of the reader.

In what follows, I will introduce the context for the literary debates of the 1890s by tracing the history of print culture in Odisha that developed around the rise of the Odia school textbook market. I will illustrate how the need for textbook-worthy literature led to public debate about the "quality" of existing Odia literary texts. Through a focus on this debate and its eventual resolution in the writings of Biswanath Kara, one of the most influential literary critics and editors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, I will illustrate how these canon debates were inaugural in their vision of a new Odia literary public. However, as the final discussion of the relationship between the emergent field of literary criticism and popular forms of literary expressions will reveal, the radical potential of this new literary public is limited by the exclusion of contemporary non-liberal, nonmodern literature of the late nineteenth century.

Textbook Anxieties: Odia Literary Culture Circa 1891

As we have seen in the last chapter, the anxiety about the appropriateness of early modern Odia literature as material for school textbooks had its

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[9] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 67.

[10] For a detailed discussion of social structures of class and caste in nineteenth-century Odisha in urban and rural areas, see Jayanta Sengupta, *At the Margins: Discourses of Development, Democracy and Regionalism in Orissa* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 12–83.

origins in earlier debates about the use of Odia as a language of instruction in schools of the Odisha division of Bengal Presidency. In 1864–65, when the Inspector of Schools in Odisha recommended that Odia be replaced with Bengali as the language of instruction in Odisha Division schools, he cited the lack of appropriate Odia school textbooks and qualified Odia teachers as justification for the change.[11] With only seven qualified Odia teachers in the whole of the Division in as late as 1860, the remaining Bengali teachers in the Odisha schools were unable to enforce the provisions of the Wood's Despatch for educational instruction to be carried out in the native vernacular.[12] Bengali, with a large number of trained teachers and a flourishing textbook industry, was a much better choice.

This proposal led to a lively debate in Odia urban centers where organizations such as the Utkal Bhasha Uddhipani Sabha were set up to refute the government's claims.[13] Support for the proposal came from Bengali intellectuals such as Rajendralal Mitra, who argued that, as Odia was very similar to Bengali, the use of Odia in Odisha schools did not make financial sense. In fact, Mitra argued, using Bengali instead of Odia was in the interest of the Odia people as it would allow them to participate in the much more advanced cultural life of Bengal. As a result of this controversy and the eventual decision of the colonial government to retain Odia as the language of instruction, the Odia urban elite intelligentsia focused its energies on producing new Odia textbooks.

The emergence of a commercial Odia textbook market transformed the political economy of Odia literary production. Print had come to Odisha late and haltingly. The first printing press in Odisha was set up by missionaries in 1838. The Orissa Mission Press established in 1838 was set up in Cuttack to keep up with the increased demands for Odia tracts that could be circulated by missionaries in Odisha. Prior to this,

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[11] Panchanan Mohanty, "British Language Policy in Nineteenth Century India and the Odia Language Movement", *Language Policy* 1 (2002): 62.

[12] Wood's Despatch on Indian education of 1854 had a profound impact on how state-sponsored education was delivered in colonial India. One of the most important stipulations of the despatch was that education at the primary and secondary level should be delivered in the "vernacular" language of the area. For details about the history of the dispatch, see R. J. Moore, "The Composition of 'Wood's Education Despatch'", *English Historical Review* 80, no. 314 (January, 1965): 70–85.

[13] It is a matter of scholarly consensus that this language debate of the 1860s marked the beginning of the formation of an Odia public sphere. See Nivedita Mohanty, "Odia Nationalism: Quest for a United Odisha, 1866–1936", *South Asian Studies*, no. 13 (1982). See also P. K. Mishra, *The Political History of Orissa, 1900–1936*(Calcutta: Oriental Publishers & Distributors, 1979), Atul Chandra Pradhan, *The Nationalist Movement in a Regional Setting, 1920–34: The Rise of Congress to Power in Orissa* (Cuttack: Amar Prakashan, 1992).

some Odia language texts, including an Odia translation of the Bible and an Odia grammar, were published in the Serampore Mission near Calcutta and brought to Odisha.[14] However, this was a cumbersome exercise as the number of Odia tracts and books being printed had risen over the years. The activities of the Press expanded rapidly. In the first year of its establishment, Odisha missionaries were able to distribute 50,000 tracts.[15] A year later in 1839, the Orissa Tract Society was set up by the General Baptist Society to stimulate the publication of a greater number of Odia texts produced in Cuttack. As a result, 429,500 texts were circulated by the missionaries in 1839.[16] In this period, the Press produced texts such as *The Wonderful Advantages of a Pilgrimage to Jagarnath*, which provided an account of the evils of pilgrimage to Puri, new editions of the Bible, an Odia dictionary and school textbooks for the government vernacular schools. By 1858, the Press employed eighteen people and had printed a total of 952,700 books of which 34,750 were educational texts.[17]

Despite the establishment of this new press, textual culture in Odisha was dominated by the circulation of palm leaf manuscripts in the midnineteenth century. The production of Odia palm leaf texts was driven by private patronage of literary scribes who wrote on palm leaf manuscripts. While original authors depended upon patronage from princely state rulers, the actual reproduction of the texts was carried out by scribes of variable skill who produced illustrated palm leaf manuscripts as temporary wage laborers working for very meagre wages.[18] While these palm leaf manuscripts were often commissioned and owned by affluent Odias, some were housed in communal huts in the villages of Odisha called Bhagawat Ghara or Bhagawat Tungi. These huts served as village libraries and as the site for village panchayats. They were also a site for a shared aural literary sphere as the village community gathered there to

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[14] Graham W. Shaw, "The Cuttack Mission Press and Early Oriya Printing", *British Library Journal* (1977): 29–43.

[15] Ibid, 37.   [16] Ibid, 37.   [17] Ibid, 35.

[18] J. P. Das and Joanna Williams have traced a number of scribes in the Ganjam District of Orissa who worked in the nineteenth century. Their research reveals that these scribes often worked as temporary wage laborers in the households of affluent landowners. They describe the life of a celebrated scribe, Raghunath Prusti, who would work on the outer veranda of a rich landowner's house for meagre pay and food for the day. However, while Prusti was a talented and professional scribe, Das and Williams have found evidence of a number of other scribes whose work reveals that they were amateurs at the craft. Be they professional or amateur, the life of the scribe was not financially secure and often ended in utter poverty. J. P. Das, *Palm-Leaf Miniatures: The Art of Raghunath Prusti of Odisha* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1991); and for details on the production and patronage for original literature in Oriya during this period, see B. C. Majumdar, *Typical Selections from Odia Literature, Vol 2*. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1923).

listen to readings of the Odia Bhagawat written by the medieval bhakti poet, Jaganath Das.[19]

This loosely organized, informal literary sphere in Odia came to be coupled with a new print-centered, urban literary sphere in the late nineteenth century with the rise of printing presses in Odisha. Even though the printing industry was minute in comparison with that of Bengal (seventeen in Odisha as opposed to forty-three in Bengal in 1900), the urban centers of the Odia-speaking areas could boast of at least one prominent publishing house. Cuttack had two major publishing houses – the Odisha Mission Press (established 1838) and the Cuttack Printing Company (established 1866). Balasore had the Utkal Printing Company (established 1868). The Sambalpur District was served by the Jagannath Ballabh Press in Bamanda, which was moved from Cuttack to Deogarh in 1889. Almost half of these presses were established by native princes.

The first native-owned printing press was established in Cuttack in July 1865, nearly thirty years after the establishment of the Cuttack Mission Press by missionaries in 1838. Coined as the Cuttack Printing Company, the new Press was to play an essential role in Odia language publishing for the next sixty years. It published one of the most influential and longest running Odia newspapers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Utkal Dipika*. The manner in which the Cuttack Printing Press was floated reveals broader trends in how early printing in Odisha was started and funded. A clerk in the Cuttack Collectorate, Gaurishankar Rai, initially sought to establish a press in Cuttack. With the support of prominent local figures including Bichitrananda Das, Jagamohan Roy, the Raja of Dhenkanal, and the Collector of Cuttack, T. E. Ravenshaw, Rai collected a seed fund of Rs 7,500 to start the Press.[20] Initial funding for the Press was gathered by selling capital shares, which were purchased by princely state rulers such as the rajas of Talcher, Badamba, Nayagarh, Athgarh, and Narasignghapur. A number of zamindars also bought shares in the venture. While the Press was funded by zamindars and princely state rulers, the editorial control of *Utkal Dipika*

[19] The presence of Bhagawat Ghara and their role in rural Odia society has been mentioned in district gazetteers, travel narratives, and contemporary literature. Soma Chand's *Odisara Chitra* is an Odia translation of Jatindra Mohan Singh's 1903 travel narrative in the Bengali-titled *Odisyar Chitra*. References can also be found in Gopal Chandra Praharaj's fictional essays on the Bhagawat Tungi written in the early twentieth century. See Soma Chand, *Odisara Chitra* (Cuttack: Arjya Prakashan, 2006), B. D. Panda, *History of Library Development* (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1992), and Gauranga Charan Das, ed., *Praharaj Granthabali: Ramya Rachana Prathama Khanda* (Cuttack: Vidyapuri, 2005).

[20] Sachidananda Mohanty, *Periodical Press and Colonial Modernity: Odisha 1866–1936* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 27–30.

remained in the hands of Gaurishankar Rai until he retired in 1917. The newspaper continued in publication until 1936. The case of the Cuttack Printing Company suggests that early native-run Odia printing was heavily dependent on financial patronage from the minuscule Odia upper class but was often actually run by the emergent college educated middle-class elite. The Utkal Printing Company in Balasore was set up in 1868 using a very similar method of sourcing capital. The Press was started by Fakir Mohan Senapati who, along with Jayakrushna Chowdhury and Babu Radhanath Roy, formed an association to run a funding campaign that would sell capital shares for the press to investors. They organized a number of meetings at which they delivered speeches claiming that the Press would publish religious material at cheap rates, which would be easier to read than palm leaf manuscripts and that the Press would also produce educational material for children.[21] Information on who bought these shares has not survived but, given the method of collection adopted, it may be possible that the Press could have had a wider range of supporters. The Balasore Press published the second most important newspaper of this period, *Balasore Sambadabahika*, in July 1869. Twenty years later, the weekly newspaper *Sambalpur Hiteisini* was brought out by the Jaganathballabh Press in Deogarh, the royal seat of the Raja of Bamanda Basudeva Sudhaladev. Even though the newspaper was edited by Nilamani Bidyarantna, it was funded entirely by the Raja of Bamanda. These three newspapers, *Utkal Dipika, Balasore Sambadabahika*, *and Sambalpur Hiteisini*, served as the three major nineteenth-century Odia newspapers. Apart from these major newspapers, a number of minor newspapers and journals appeared between 1866 and 1900: *Cuttack Chronicle* (1871), *Utkal Darpana* (1873), *Utkala Putra* (1873), *Utkal Darpan* (1873), *Utkal Madhupa* (1878), *Mayurbhanja Fortnightly* (1879), *Purshottam Patrika* (1882), *Utkala Samaskaraka* (1883), *Prajabandhu* (1882), *Sebaka* (1883), *Pradipa* (1885), *Odia o Nabasambada* (1888), *Utkal Prabha* (1891), *Ganjam News* (1896), and *Ganjam Hitabadini* (1899). Most of these newspapers were published in Cuttack and Balasore and many of them were monthlies and weeklies with small readerships. In the twentieth century, this newspaper industry became much more established with new major newspapers being published such as *Asha, Sahakar, Samaja, Nababharata*, and *Prajabandhu.* All these newspapers eventually became dailies by the 1930s and 1940s.

A number of public associations also emerged in the Odia urban centres in the late nineteenth century. In 1866, Utkal Bhasha Unnati Bidhayini Sabha was established in Balasore to discuss and lobby for the

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[21] Ibid, p. 30.

status of the Odia language. After a number of false starts, the Cuttack Debating Society was set up in 1869. The Cuttack Young Men's Association, which catered mostly to school students, was set up in the same year. Associations more focused on specific agendas were also established in this period. For instance, the "Temperance and Suppression of Bribery Association" was established in 1884 and in 1888 the "Orissa Islamic Association" was also established in Cuttack.

Much of the discussions in these newspapers, journals, and associations focused on arguing against the imposition of Bengali in Odisha or on matters of neglect by the colonial state.

In his magisterial history of Odia literature, Natabar Samantaray has argued that the fledgling Odia public sphere was very limited in its scale both geographically and demographically. Geographically, most of the printing presses, newspapers, and public associations were located in Cuttack and Balasore with a few scattered in Puri, Sambalpur, and Ganjam.[22] Demographically, the Odia public sphere of this period was supported mostly by a miniscule middle class.

And at the center of this emerging print industry was the textbook market. Even as the introduction of the printing press changed the way literary production took place in Odisha, it was the emergence of a commercial textbook market that finally shifted the emphasis from palm leaf manuscripts to printed books. The business conducted by the Cuttack Printing Company illustrates how important the textbook industry was to the survival of these incipient presses that would later play an important role in the growth of modern Odia literary production. The Cuttack Printing Company figured prominently in the canon debate of the 1890s as it published the literary journal *Indradhanu*, which supported the use of early modern Odia literature in school textbooks. In its early years, this Press struggled to survive and depended on the publication of government forms and school textbooks. The third annual report of the Press reveals that out of a total of 18,200 books published in the Press, 12,500 were school textbooks. These books were self-published by the authors and the Press was only responsible for the printing. While this protected the Press financially, the printing of textbooks allowed another layer of protection as the timely sale of these texts was assured from year to year. In comparison, the Press published very few general books and reserved its meagre financial support to very select publications such as reprints of early modern poetry in Odia and books of social use such as *Kangalinka Jati Karana*, which detailed methods of caste reentry for those

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[22] Natabar Samantraya, *Odiya Sahityara Itihas (1803–1920)* (Bhubaneswar: Granthalaya, 1974), pp. 167–169.

who had lost their caste status during the 1866 Odisha famine.[23] This trend of increased production of Odia school textbooks is also revealed in the spike in the number of Odia books sold by the Calcutta School Book Society, which rose from 767 books in 1857 to 14,459 in 1868.[24]

In this way, the writing, production and sale of school textbooks became big business in late nineteenth-century Odisha. While this increase in itself contributed to the formation of a new print-centered Odia literary public sphere, the question of patronage for textbook writing and printing also introduced public contestation between rival groups and helped mark out the limits of this literary public sphere.

This process is particularly evident in the literary life of Radhanath Ray, the first Inspector of Schools of Odisha and a prominent textbook writer who was later slated as one of the three founders of modern Odia literature. Born into a middle-class family of Balasore, Ray was brought up to become an official in the British government. His early education tracks the trajectory of the development of school education in Odisha. He began his schooling at home under a tutor before joining the new school at Soro, which had been set up with his father's support. Subsequently, he moved to the new Balasore High School and joined its faculty after graduating. He passed the entrance exam for Calcutta University in 1868. After university, he taught in various schools of Odisha and was eventually appointed as the Deputy Inspector of Schools in 1872. As he progressed through his school education and early teaching career, Ray met and befriended some of the most influential figures in the emergent Odia literary sphere, including Fakir Mohan Senapati and Baikuntha Nath De in Balasore, and Madhusudan Rao in Puri. In the years from 1868 until his death in 1908, Ray wrote a number of Odia textbooks, epics, and essays.

While much of his nontextbook writing was sponsored by princely state rulers, the publication, and sale of his Odia textbooks caused considerable controversy. Like a number of inspectors of schools in the Bengal Presidency, Ray began writing Odia textbooks to earn additional income. Even as his books were essential to the development of modern textbook literature in Odia, his contemporaries claimed that he enjoyed an undue advantage as a textbook writer. Gobinda Chandra Rath, a contemporary textbook writer, filed a complaint against Ray claiming he was involved in nepotism and favoritism. Even though his complaint was dismissed, it is possible that as Inspector of Schools and a close friend of De Press'

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[23] See *Third Annual Report of the Cuttack Printing Company* (Cuttack: Cuttack Printing Company, 1869).

[24] Natabar Samantraya, *Odiya Sahityara Itihas (1803–1920)*, p. 122.

Baikuntha Nath De, who published a large number of school textbooks in Odia, Ray was in a position to influence the production, publication, and sale of textbooks. As a result of considerable controversy in the Odia press, Ray had to stop writing textbooks. However, his stint as textbook writer earned him many detractors, who would later question the efficacy of his literary work during the canon debate of the 1890s when Ray's "modern" poetry was pitted against Upendra Bhanja's "traditional" epics.[25]

Controversy about textbooks was not limited to the economics of their production and sale. As more and more Odia writers came to be employed in textbook writing, the content of the books came up for debate. Early Odia textbooks were written by missionaries such as Amos Sutton who wrote them for use in the English Charity School (established 1823) in Cuttack. With their overwhelmingly religious stance, these early books were not appropriate for secular education.[26] Furthermore, as the missionaries were first introduced to Bengali before writing these textbooks, the language of the books borrowed heavily from Bengali idioms and vocabulary.[27] In 1841, the Vernacular School Book Society hired vernacular translators to translate school books into local languages in India. Amos Sutton was appointed as the Odia translator. However, even these books remained fairly Bengal centric in their references.[28] After 1869, due to the government's decision to uphold the use of Odia in Odisha schools and allow the market to take over the production of textbooks in Odia, a number of important literary figures, including Radhanath Ray, Fakir Mohan Senapati, and Madhududan Roy, began writing textbooks. In fact, one of the earliest "modern" Odia poetry anthologies, *Kabitabali*, was written by Radhanath Ray and Madhusudan Roy as a school textbook. These three men were later named as the makers of modern Odia literature in the Odia literary canon.[29] This canonization of early Odia textbook writers points to a connection between efforts to produce Odia textbooks in the late nineteenth century and the development of new Odia literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The connection was not merely based on the pioneering contribution of the earliest writers of Odia texts, rather the very process of producing Odia textbooks involved an anxious reappraisal

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[25] Ibid, p. 92.   [26] Ibid, pp. 98, 99.   [27] Ibid, pp. 99–102.
[28] Ibid, pp. 108–9. Samantaray quotes from a few of the books to illustrate how the books refer to life in Bengal rather than that of Odisha.
[29] This view is a dominant one in the history of Odia literature. Even the official history of Odia literature sponsored by the Sahitya Academy names these three as the makers of modern Odia literature. See Mayadhar Mansinha, *History of Odia Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1962).

of the traditional Odia literary canon, which focused on rethinking the actual parameters of ascertaining the value of literary texts.

At the root of this reappraisal was the question of whether older Odia texts could be used as school textbooks. Contemporary Odia press repeatedly featured arguments that the traditional poetry written by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poets such as Dinakrishna, Upendra Bhanja, and Brajanath Badajena should be reprinted and used as school textbooks. In an article published in 1868 in *Utkal Dipika*, the author argued that the recuperation and reprinting of older Odia literature should have greater priority than the writing of new texts. Even as such arguments favoring the use of early modern texts were being floated, there was a growing concern that these texts may not be appropriate for school children. The matter became the focus of public debate when the issue was raised at the 1878 meeting of the Utkal Sabha, an organization that sprung from the Utkal Bhashauddipani Sabha mentioned earlier. The keynote speaker at the Sabha, Pyarimohan Acharya, pointed out: "[T]here are no assets in Odia language from the ancient age that can be useful to us in our efforts to advance the Odia language."[30] Elsewhere, Acharya noted in his 1873 article, "Ganjam Sambalpur O Utkal Pustak," published in *Utkal Putra* that:

We have no expectations from the ancient Odia texts. The glitter of Upendra, the antics of Dinakrushna and the love-play of Abhimanyu are not appropriate to our interests. Therefore, we are ashamed of presenting such obscene texts as school textbooks into the hands of innocent little boys.[31]

The following excerpts from prose translations of poems by Upendra Bhanja could help explain Archarya's anxieties about the appropriateness of early Odia literature for school textbooks:

No joy indeed is comparable to the joy
Derived from dipping the nails into the beloved's person,
From painting her breasts with drawings
And from beholding through sheer happy chance
The lusty pair of her breasts in the morning when she upraiseth
  her arms to remove langour.   from *Rasikaharabalee*[32]

How tightly hath she tied the knot of her sari with its comely border!!
Like the entrenching of her conscience doth it appear to be

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[30] Purnachandra Mishra (ed.), *Utkala Dipikare Bhanja Prasanga* (Berhampur: Royal Book House, 1996), p. 6.

[31] Pyarimohan Acharjya, "Ganjam, Sambalpur O Utkal Pustak", in Sudhakar Patnaik, *Sambadapatraru Odisara Katha, Vol. 1 (1856-1886)* (Cuttack: Grantha Mandir), pp. 677–80.

[32] Bichhanda Charan Patnaik, *Kabisamrat Upendra Bhanja Souvenier* (Cuttack: Chattrabandhu Pustakalaya, 1950), p. 7.

This knot is the thunder to the mountain of the staidness of the heart of
    poets,
A chain to bind the elephant of a lovemad heart
And an eddy in the river of charms capable of setting at naught all
    similies.
Verily her waist is a mesh laid by lovegod to catch the bird of the eye
    therein.
The knot of the sari on her waist both the eye and the mind have made
    their abode of.   from Labanyabatee[33]

These textbook anxieties formed the immediate context of the canon
debate that began in 1891 with the publication of Lala Ramnarayan
Rai's critique of Bhanja's *Vaidehisa Bilasa*. What should be noted in this
brief history of the emerging Odia literary public sphere is the pervading
sense of domination by the shadow of Bengali and the need for an
independent canon that could serve both as a basis for modern text-
books as well as evidence of the autonomous life of Odia in the past,
present, and future. However, as newspaper articles of the late nine-
teenth century reveal, this desire for autonomy was coupled with an
aspiration to emulate the "development" of Bengali in the colonial
period.[34] The subsequent debates and discussions about tradition and
modernity in Odia literature should be read with this paradoxical desire
in mind. In fact, the roots of the arguments of both sides of the debate
about Bhanja can be traced back to this dilemma. The reluctance of the
Odia literati to countenance any critique of "classical" Odia literature
drew from their need to prove that, like Bengali and English, Odia too
had an impressive classical literary tradition. The critics of this tradition
were driven by a need to approximate the norms of emergent Bengali
civility, which they read as evidence of the more developed status of
Bengali and its peoples.[35]

Desa-Kala-Patra: Zeitgeist and Sentimentality in Early Odia Literary Criticism

We return for a moment to the spark that led to the canon debate of the
1890s – Lala Ramnarayan Rai's essays on Upendra Bhanja published in
Utkal Prabha. In his essays, Rai espouses a revelatory tone. In exploring

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[33] Ibid, p. 48.   [34] See Patnaik, *Sambadapatraru Odisara Katha*, p. 576.
[35] Of course, this Bengali civility was not necessarily an unalloyed social construct. In his
essay on the making of the "Bengali Baboo," Anindyo Roy has traced how the notion of
civility itself is not entirely accessible to the urban Bengali middle class despite its
concerted efforts to espouse Western education, language, and lifestyle. See
Anindyo Roy, "Subject to Civility: The Story of the Indian Baboo", *Colby Quarterly* 37,
no. 2 (2001): 113–24.

Bhanja's poetry, which he claims has often elided critical attention due to the overly sentimental attitude of the Odia readership, Lal "discovers" serious flaws in the poetry of Bhanja.[36] The contretemps of his prose, as he oscillated between scathing critique and a sense of sentimental disappointment, points to how Rai saw his role as a literary critic. Reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's call for a "disinterested" critic who "could see the object as in itself it really is" and avoid getting embroiled in "ulterior" or "political" motives, Rai's tonal contretemps suggest an attempt to remove himself from the affect community that held Bhanja dear and yet to speak for the interests of that community.[37] A reading of the essays reveal that at the crux of his critique is a dilemma about the opposing pulls of sentiment and the need for a more critical approach to literary tradition. Subsequent discussions on the merits of Bhanja's poetry among the Odia literati reveal that this dilemma was grounded on an anxiety about the appropriateness of "traditional" Odia literature to the contemporary social, political, and cultural realities faced by the Odia literati – something that they came to call *desa-kala-patra* (place-time-character) and we recognize from readings of the history of literary criticism as something akin to zeitgeist. Mention of desa-kala-patra also emerges in the counterclaims from advocates of early modern Odia literature that older texts need to be studied within their original context. Through a brief description of the debate on Bhanja and the subsequent resolution of the debate in the writings of a prominent editor and literary critic of the time, Biswanath Kara, I will reveal how these anxieties about context and timeliness came to produce a new orthodoxy of Odia literary production.

These discussions in Odisha are not unique in the history of modern literature. As Michel Foucault notes in his essay on the spatial turn in twentieth-century disciplinary knowledge: "The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis, and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world."[38] Throughout the nineteenth century, the question of zeitgeist or temporal context had circulated in discussions about the social life of literature in England. The concern with time took different forms in English literary discussions. It was cited as the

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[36] Lala Ramnarayan Rai, "Kabi Upendra Bhanja", *Utkal Prabha*, December 1981, 2.

[37] Here I must confess that Arnold's litany of critical sins also includes "practical." See Stephan Collini, *Arnold: Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. xvi. I think this is where the Odia and English literary concerns diverge. The practical value of literature is of utmost importance to the members of both sides of the debate on the value of ancient Odia literature.

[38] See Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22.

prevailing zeitgeist, spirit of the age, plastic stress, Time-spirit, stream, tendency, river of time etc.[39] However, these notions of temporal context, with its allied themes of the legacy of past authors and the contemporary function of literature, was not always internally consistent.[40] For instance, Matthew Arnold, who popularized the use of the term zeitgeist, reinterpreted its meaning many times over his long career as a literary and social critic. In his discussion of the term and its function in Arnold's oeuvre, Frazer Neiman has illustrated how Arnold's definition of the term shifted from zeitgeist as a confining, local and parochial notion of temporal context that needed to be transcended by the poet and the critic to zeitgeist as a temporally translocal and eternal force that should guide the craft of the poet and the critic. In early Arnoldian thought, we see that he uses zeitgeist to mean the "spirit" that marks the thought or feeling of a certain age.[41] It is something that the creative intellect needs to escape in order to produce art that can be eternally valid. In later texts by Arnold, the term is used to mean something similar to Goethe's "time–spirit," which denotes "an agent of necessary change in the realm of the intellect."[42] This shift in the understanding of zeitgeist is mirrored in the tension in Arnold's thought between the particular intellectual and political commitments of the critic and the need for a more general outlook in literary criticism.[43] This comes through in both his formulation of a "disinterested" critic who was not to speak from any specific political position prevalent at the time as well as the idea of the "prose of the center" where, paradoxically, centrality consisted of the "widest possible position" in intellectual thought. What is of interest to us here is not the complex nuances of Arnoldian thought. Rather, we should note how the idea of temporal context influenced his understanding of the role of the critic and poet, and of criticism. Also, we should take from this discussion an understanding that even in the English literary sphere, which in Odisha was considered as a stable field of ideas that should be emulated, the standards for judging traditional literature, timely literature, and eternal literature were constantly shifting and were a source of much controversy.[44]

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[39] For a detailed discussion of the various iterations of zeitgeist in literary discussions, see Frazer Neiman, "The Zeitgeist of Matthew Arnold", *PMLA* 72, no. 5 (1957): 977–96.

[40] For the inconsistences of this term and the pitfalls of using it as a fundamental literary concept, see Denise Gigante, "Zeitgeist", *European Romantic Review* 18, no. 2 (2007): 265–72.

[41] Neiman, "The Zeitgeist of Matthew Arnold", 977.   [42] Ibid, 982.

[43] For a detailed treatment of this tension, see Collini, "The Literary Critic", in *Arnold: A Critical Portrait*, 46–68.

[44] In the beginning of his essay, Neiman gives an account of the public response to Arnold's critique of the contemporary zeitgeist.

Controversy on Odia literary tradition had been simmering long before the publication of Rai's essay. The earliest mention of Bhanja's poetry can be found in a Bengali journal article written by Rangalal Bandyopadhyay in 1864.[45] At this time Bandhopadhyay, an important figure on the Bengali literary scene, was involved in a rather acrimonious critique of contemporary Bengali literature. In the preface to his 1858 epic *Padmini Upakhyan*, Bandyopadhyay explained that he had borrowed many "pleasing sentiments" from English literature to introduce English literary tropes to those who could not read English and to ensure that "the immodest and contemptible poetry of today shall retreat, along with its exit, its gangs of followers shall proportionally decrease in numbers".[46] Bandhopadhyay's critique drew from discussions in a meeting of the Bethune Society in 1852 about the backwardness of Bengali literature and rising concern about the need for a "national literature" in Bengali itself. These concerns were shared by the Odia intelligentsia even as it was increasingly concerned about the "backwardness" of Odia in relation to Bengali.

In 1891, the literary journal *Utkal Prabha* was published in Baripada and funded by Ramachandra Bhanja Deo, Prince of Mayurbhanj. In the inaugural introduction of the journal, the editor declared that the objective of the journal was to close a gap in Odia community life – the lack of *actual* literature in Odia. The introduction argued that actual literature was literature that consists of texts "on reading of which the common person comes to gain an individual sense of responsibility and which helps every one to learn about ethics, character building and socialization."[47] In contrast, argued the editor, older literature by poets like Bhanja – though blessed with originality and gravitas – did not contribute to the development of the Odia community due to an excessive preponderance of obscene content.

In subsequent years, the debate on Bhanja came to dominate the Odia public sphere in Cuttack. The pro-Bhanja group published numerous articles and received letters in the Odia weekly *Utkal Dipika* and the anti-Bhanja camp published its opinions in another Odia weekly newspaper, *Sambalpur Hiteisini*. Eventually, as the sheer volume of the writing on the debate came to overwhelm the two newspapers, two separate journals were floated to carry on the debate. *Utkal Dipika* sponsored a new journal *Indradhanu* and *Sambalpur Hiteisini* supported the publication of *Bijuli*.

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[45] Purnachandra Mishra (ed.), *Utkal Dipikare Bhanja Prasanga* (Barhampur: Royal Book House, 1996), p. 2.

[46] Roshinka Choudhury, "Cutlets or Fish Curry: Debating Authenticity in Late Nineteenth-Century Bengal", *Modern Asian Studies* 40 (2006): 265.

[47] "Suchana", *Utkal Prabha*, April 1891.

Indradhanu was published for almost four years from 1893 to 1897 and carried articles from a steady group of writers who wrote under various pseudonyms. *Bijuli* became defunct in two short years. However, in this short period, anxieties about the appropriateness of Odia literature to the contemporary desa-kala-patra induced the Odia literati to raise some essential questions about the nature and function of literature and literary criticism. These concerns were centered on two major issues – the question of literary heritage and the need to ascertain the function of literature in contemporary Odia society.

Literature was repeatedly alluded to as "jatiya sampatti" or community patrimony in the rhetoric on both sides of the debate. In this context, critique of Bhanja's poetry posed an untenable dilemma – what were they to do with an inheritance that did not cater to their contemporary needs? The paradox of inheritance, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, is that it is property that one does not entirely own; it is simply held in trust and cannot be disposed of as though it were one's own thing.[48] As such then could Odia literary heritage be maligned or even denied? Was it subject to nineteenth-century tenets of literary criticism or beyond it? In this vein, defenders of Bhanja countered arguments that the antiquity of a text does not necessarily require affective attachment by calling for greater attention to the ethics of reading and judging the value of literature with its own historical context in mind.[49] Many of the pro-Bhanja essays in *Utkal Dipika* and *Indradhanu* reveal that this defence of literary inheritance was based on a mandate to establish an ancient literary canon in Odia. A common feature in these essays is a recurring refrain where the author asks the critics of Bhanja whether they should apply the same dismissive criticism to older English literary figures such as Dante, Milton, and Shakespeare.[50] If there is space within the English canon for such figures, then why does the Odia canon have to deny representation to poets like Bhanja? These essays rarely argued that contemporary literary production

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[48] Quoted in Anne E. Berger, "Politics of Mother-Tongue", *Parallax* 18, no.3 (2012): 15.

[49] For details, see essays in Sudershan Acharya (ed.), *Indradhanu: Unabinsa Satabdira Eka Bismruta Patrika* (Berhampur: Berhampur Biswabidyalaya, 1991). For instance, in an itemized response to a published critique of Bhanja's poetry, one of the contributors to Indradhanu asked: "As literary critics should we analyse a poet's work within the context of this time, place and character or by basing our reading on contemporary tastes?" Acharjya, *Indradhanu*, p. 14.

[50] See articles reprinted in Purnachandra Mishra (ed.), *Utkala Dipikare Bhanja Prasanga* (Berhampur: Royal Book House, 1996), pp. 16, 20, 23, 43–8. For instance, in a received letter published in *Utkal Dipika* in April 1893, a contributor queries: "Is giving a realistic description a matter of important literary flaw. If so, then Ramnarayan Babu would consider Milton's description of the embrace between Adam and Eve in Paradise lost to be the most egregious violation of good taste?"; Mishra, *Utkal Bidipikare Bhanja Prasanga*, p. 23.

should emulate Bhanja or that his literary oeuvre should be used in school textbooks. Rather, their contention was that despite the fact that earlier Odia literature is not appropriate for modern times, it was the predecessors of contemporary poets and should not be dismissed as irrelevant to the literary life of modern Odisha. Its canonization was essential to the project of forming a national literature or "jatiya sahitya" in Odia that would enable the advancement of the Odia-speaking people.

Such apprehension about the loss of heritage was coupled with serious disagreements about the function of literature and whether early Odia poetry was true poetry. One critic of Bhanja's work, B. C. Mazumdar, argued that while his poetry entertains the reader, it does not perform the critical explicatory functions that are an essential feature of true poetry. Drawing heavily on tenets of English Romantic literary criticism, Mazumdar defined true poetry to be:

In that which has new-ness of description; that is, it has a clear description of the complexity of human nature, an efflorescence of profound joy as well as despair and an inviting explication of psychology, only that deserves to be called poetry. The unnecessary effort to describe the beauty of a beautiful woman through sentences filled with words like sakachanchunasi, Indibaranayan or Maralagamana is simply disingenuous.[51]

Implicit in Mazumdar's description of actual poetry and his charge against Bhanja that he befuddled his readers was an assumption that literature should perform a function beyond entertainment. Drawing on Romantic literary criticism, Majumdar's notion of true poetry had to use unadorned common speech to describe emotions that would then allow the reader to human psychology.[52] Literature of this kind has a social function as it helps the community delineate human subjectivity and, by extension, some notion of a collective modern Odia subjectivity. Within this Romantic framework, Bhanja's poetry fails to do so. Furthermore, as Ramnarayan Lala's critique of Bhanja's epic *Vaidehisa Bilasa* illustrates, the critics of Bhanja found his work wanting when judged by Western standards of rhyming, rhetoric, sentiment, taste, imagination, poetics, and sentence structure. Based on these criteria, Rai had found Bhanja's poems to be difficult to understand, lyrically harsh, grammatically incorrect, and obscene. As a response to Majumdar and Rai, an article published under a pseudonym in *Utkal Dipika* said of Bhanja and other poets like him:

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[51] Ibid, p. 10.
[52] The connection between emotion and human psychology in Romantic poetry has been extensively explored. See Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

In their writing there is hidden an eternal, indescribable, wonderful and unparalleled captivating force and it is precisely this force that attracts the human heart like a glittering jewel. It is in them that there is the actual essence of poetry or even a tiny speck of this essence; they are actual poets.[53]

Two very different notions of literature and its function in human life emerge here. This anonymous defender of Bhanja drew on the prevailing understanding of Bhanja's poetry as some of the finest examples of Sringara Rasa poetry.[54] Rasa in Sanskrit means juice or sap and has been defined as that element in literature that raises the reader or viewer from the realm of their ordinary lives and feeling (*bhava*) to a higher plane of "ordered" and "depersonalized" emotion.[55] Sringara Rasa in Indian literature appeared as depictions of scenes that evoked sexual desire in the reader or viewer. However, in Indian aesthetics, this desire is not a profane emotion. In his book on the making of romantic love, William Reddy has shown how in the tradition of Indian literary criticism, Sringara Rasa allowed the reader to experience transcendental emotion that, in turn, gave them access to association with the heroic and the divine. A. K. Ramanujam has argued that this association with the divine through Sringara Rasa is always as a result of collective effort rather than an individual effort of reading. Therefore, while Majumdar asserts that poetry should have an explicatory function, the author of the article here bases his claims about the nature of actual poetry in something far more nebulous, in its ability to captivate the human heart. It is disagreement between two visions of literature – literature as social instruction versus literature as an incitement to emotion – that spawned the debate on Bhanja and informed later discussions of literary production.

It should be noted here that even though this disagreement about the true nature of poetry appears to be based on an attempt to determine the limits of the genre of poetry, the terms of the debate – especially the invocation of the function of literature – points to a different reading. At issue here is not poetry or literature in itself. Rather, what is being contested here is a notion of Odia culture even though it is not named explicitly. The linking of literature to development and progress in the framing of the question of literature within anxieties about the backwardness of the Odia-speaking community in relation to other cultural groups, national and international, suggests that the anxiety here is about whether

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[53] Hitabadi (pseudonym), "Received Letter", *Utkal Dipika*, May 28, 1891, reprinted in Mishra, (ed.), *Utkala Dipikare Bhanja Prasanga*, pp. 14–20.

[54] On Rasa literature, see Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

[55] William Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 57.

there is a viable Odia culture that could serve as a rallying banner for the Odia-speaking people. The concern with development in a number of articles published during the debate on both sides suggests that this anxiety about culture assumes an Arnoldian understanding of the concept where it is not something that "we have" but something that "we become."[56] The culture in these terms is fundamentally tied to an educational imperative aimed at the community rather than the individual. It is this desire for cultural transformation that the two sides of the debate were trying to apprehend in diametrically opposite ways.

This issue of literature driven by an educational imperative was finally resolved by Biswanath Kara. In the years following the debate, Biswanath Kara became one of the most influential literary figures of the twentieth century in his role as the editor of the *Utkal Sahitya* journal. In 1896, as the debate on precolonial Odia literature was winding down, Kara published a collection of his essays on literature. Entitled *Vividha Prabhanda*, this book explored the connections between literature and life, community, civilization, and development.[57] Frankly didactic and programmatic, these essays were aimed at the literate Odia population and called for an active program of reading, discussion, and production of literature in Odisha. Bypassing the anxieties of literary modernity and tradition prevalent in the Bhanja debate, Kara recognized that literature served two functions—as symbolic capital and as an engine for social change. Therefore, both traditional Odia literature and modern Odia literature that broke with traditional modes of expression served as symbolic capital by establishing ancient literary heritage and a lively modern engagement with contemporary realities. According to Kara, good literature was *Jibanta Sahitya* or living literature which was life like because it represented the aspirations and development of human life. To this end he called for the formulation of a new literary tradition informed by "new ideals."[58] Concomitant with this proposal for a more socioculturally productive literature was Kara's arguments about literary discussions and the role of the literary critic. Commenting upon the emerging literary

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[56] The theme of development or *unnati* and regression or *abanati* crops up in many of the articles written by proponents on both sides of the debate. See *Suchana, Sahitya Charcha, Utkal Sahitya* in *Utkal Prabha*, 1891. See, also, articles entitled *Samay, Paribartan, Utkal Sahitya* in Sudershan Acharya (ed.), *Indradhanu: Unabinsa Satabdira Eka Bismruta Patrika*. For a discussion of Arnold's ideas about culture, see Collini, *Arnold*, p. xxvii.

[57] Archana Naik (ed.), *Nirbachita Rachanabali: Biswanath Kara* (Bhubaneswar: Sahitya Academy, 1999).

[58] As the question of tradition in Odia literature was not resolved, the discussion on the merits of older literature in Odia remained a matter of debate and anxiety among the Odia literati until as late as the 1920s when Patna University decided to remove the works of Upendra Bhanja from the curriculum.

activism among the Odia elite to work for the advancement of their mother tongue, Kara argued that the literary critic was an essential guide in this process.

In his essay titled "Sahitya O Samalochana" (Literature and Criticism), Kara extended the field for this community activism for the enhancement of Odia literature by introducing and centering the reader in the economy of textual production. In this essay about the function of literary criticism, Kara discussed the rights of the reader, duties of the authors and the function of the critic:

> It is true, literary criticism is useful for both the writer as well as the reader. Whether a particular piece of literature is good enough to occupy a permanent place in society, literary criticism can show it by examining every nook and corner of the literary piece. Literary criticism reveals the value of literature to readers. Writers have freedom; they can freely express their opinion. However, just because they have written something does not mean that the people have to accept it meekly. If it is based on mis-information or is harmful, then the individual has the right to reveal that. … All writers should remember that – just as they have freedom (of expression), so too do others have freedom. There is one writer, there are many readers. Not everyone's vision is equally sharp, not everyone has finely tuned taste; therefore, not everybody is capable of good literary criticism. A civic literary critic performs this function as a representative of the people … Whatever it may be, the chief task of literary criticism is to apprise the writer of his responsibilities.[59]

By tempering artistic freedom with responsibility, Kara effectively staged the reader as a consumer who was central to the process of literary production as his needs directed the efforts of authors. The critic in this economy was the representative of the readers and was bound to regulate literary production by critically engaging with the author's work and demanding he heed the needs of the reader. This formulation of the literary world has three important implications. First, it gave the critic almost unlimited power to police and regulate future Odia literature. Second, by centering the reader, Kara finally established the importance of the utility of literature as being the chief criterion for good literature. Finally, by centering the reader and shifting the focus of literature from entertainment to education, Kara mitigated the eliteness of this move towards greater production of Odia literature and made it a much more populist activity involving the author, the critic, and the reader. While we know that the term "populism" invokes many contradictory meanings, I use the term here to mean political activism that takes the masses as its constituency.[60]

[59] Naik, p. 34.
[60] See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005) on the contradictory forms of populism.

Even as this is a problematic definition of the term as populism because politics of the masses is often a matter of rhetoric rather than fact, Kara's understanding of the term espouses both the proffered meaning of the term as well as its undiagnosed exclusions.

It should be noted that this literary populism proposed by Kara was more aspirational than actual. While constraints of literacy and economic access limited the number of readers who could participate in this new literary world to the educated elite, Kara envisaged a reading public consisting of all Odia-speaking people. In using the language of political representation and citizenship, Kara conjured up an Odia republic of letters in which each corner of this literary triangle has rights and obligations towards the development of Odia literature and community life. Reminiscent of Wordsworth's vision of literary production and consumption as a contract between the poet and the reader that had as its ultimate objective a political imperative of representation, Kara's argument seems to be more political than literary.[61] In the absence of actual political citizenship, the new Odia literary public sphere was to encompass all of the Odia-speaking people into a literary-political community of shared expression.

However, Kara did not perceive the function of Odia literature as narrow provincialism. In a speech at the Utkal Sahitya Samaj entitled "Jatiya Jibanare Sahityara Stana" (The Place of Literature in the Life of the Community), Kara explained what was at stake in the creation of an Odia "'literature of the community" (Jatiya Sahitya) for the constitution of the Odia as well as pan-Indian community:

It should always be remembered that literature of the community is a method of creation of community life. I have said it before, at present the objective of all of India is to build a mega-community and because of it the creation of provincial literature is considered meaning-less and detrimental. However, it is important to think about one thing properly. It is not wise to throw away what we have and build community life based on artifacts produced somewhere else. In different places, among small communities, those thoughts that have been expressed and collected can never be overlooked. The community's self-hood easily touches that community's innermost heart and its lowest rungs. Also the way various provincial literatures in India are being developed, common similarities between these literatures are gradually increasing – it is no longer difficult for various communities to understand each other.[62]

Kara's cosmopolitan justification of "provincial" literature points to the broader political atmosphere in India. The emphasis on unity and

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[61] See Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[62] Naik, p. 37.

commonality of expression at the national level continued to make it necessary for leaders like Biswanath Kara to negotiate the demands of pan-Indian nationalism even as they argued for using Odia cultural artifacts to cultivate a sense of community in Odisha.[63] In the late nineteenth century, Kara was not alone in making the case for the constitutive relationship between Odisha and India. Often, poetry that elaborated on Odia selfhood would also mention the relationship of this emergent region with the broader nation. The most consistent poetic engagement with this theme can be found in the work of Madhusudan Rao. For instance, in his poem *Navyuga* or New Age, Rao called for the integration of Odisha not only into India but into broader humanity. The poem equated insularity with the defunct past and an expansive openness to the world with the "new age" of Odia community life.

References to India were not simply about the need for a greater openness in the Odia mind-set. Odisha was imagined as an essential part of the larger Indian whole. In his poem *Bharath Bhavana*, Rao gave an account on the history of the making of India and posed Odisha as essential to the making of the nation. Even in its earliest moment of conceptualization, the region had to think itself as part of the broader nation. However, it should be noted that this acknowledgement of the metonymic relationship between the region and the nation was not based on a disavowal of regional particularity, because to do so would be impractical. As can be inferred from Kara's statement, only the literature written in the language of the people could possibly unite them. This Herderian assertion of a provincial *volkgeist* would eventually determine the Indian National Congress's attitude towards linguistic diversity in India when, in 1931, Gandhi would uphold both the need to use the vernacular and to use Hindi as a cosmopolitan means of communication.[64]

Furthermore, Kara's comment about the power of vernacular literature to move people reveals a new element in the understanding of language in Odisha. In fact, the debate of the 1890s about literature, tradition, and community hinged on this new element. As the functional and political qualities of literature came to be foregrounded in the debate, it became apparent that regional languages that spawned such literature were something more than just objects of affect or mother tongues. Regional languages housed (through an evergrowing body of literature) and enabled (through discussion and propagation of literature) a continuous articulation of shared everyday life of the people who spoke such languages.

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[63] At this point, the Indian National Congress used English in its communication to facilitate conversations across regional boundaries.

[64] For a detailed exposition of Gandhi's position, see M. K. Gandhi, *Thoughts on National Language* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishers, 1956).

Kara's reference to the "community's self-hood" that "easily touches that community's innermost heart and its lowest rungs" is a case in point. Here language, through literature written in it, expresses the community's selfhood. And this expression is unprecedented in its reach, to both the inner life of the speakers of the language as well as the lowest classes among these speakers.

Vernacularity of Modern Odia Literature

Perhaps the best example of literature that represented the inner lives of the lowest class of Odia speakers were Fakir Mohan Senapati's novels and short stories published from 1898 until his death in 1911. In his most well-known novel, *Chcha Mana Atha Guntha* (Six and a Third Acres), Senapati portrays Odia village life in rural vernacular through the voice of a narrator who maintains an explicit conversation with the reader. This narrative voice draws from Odia traditions of street theatre as well as from a caricature of a common figure in colonial Odisha – the touter who inhabited multiple locales of power and powerlessness from official colonial spaces to rural Odisha.[65] Through this quasi-educated narrator who made jeering references to traditional Odia literary tropes as well as to important English political and intellectual traditions, Senapati traced a story of peasant indebtedness, the fallacies of the colonial legal system and land ownership patterns.[66] In his conversations with the reader, the

[65] Fakir Mohan Senapati and Rabi Shankar Mishra, *Six Acres and a Third: The Classic Nineteenth-Century Novel about Colonial India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 6.

[66] The narrator's satirical references to traditional Oriya literary tropes and equally problematic Western literary ones allowed Senapati to directly reference the canon debate of the 1890s. When he introduced of the central female protagonists of Senapati, a jeering narrator asked:

"At this point we should tell our readers that they will meet Champa often in the course of this tale, since she was very closely connected to Mangaraj's household. And so it is important for us to describe her person and her character carefully. The most revered and classical rules of literature require writers to draw the portrait of their heroes and heroines in traditionally prescribed ways. We are not in a position to violate these divinely sanctioned principles.

But our writers have a major weakness. When it comes to talking about the heroine of their tales, they behave as though they have chanced upon something very delectable and do nothing but describe her beauty, forgetting everything else about her. As for us, it is not that we do not know how to describe the beauty of a heroine. Consider how ridiculously easy it is. According to classical literary techniques, all one has to do is to find parallels between specific attributes of our heroine Champa and different fruits, such as bananas, jack-fruits, or mangoes, and common trees, leaves, and flowers. But such old-fashioned methods are no longer suitable; for our English-educated babus we now have to adopt an English style. Classical Indian poets compare the gait of a beautiful woman to that of an elephant. The babus frown on such a comparison; they would rather the heroine 'galloped like a horse'. The way English culture is rushing in like the first floods

narrator elaborated a fundamentally Odia critique of colonial power and that of the new Odia elite.[67]

Senapati's literary world populated by jeering narrators, active readers, dispossessed but morally superior peasants, pretentious babus, and irrelevant traditions (both Indian and Western) was echoed in later texts produced in subsequent years, such as Gopal Chandra Praharaj's *Bhagbata Tungire Sandhya*. In his work, Praharaj also portrayed a critique of both the educated and uneducated elements of Odia society as being implicated in a modern malaise of oppression, double standards, and social absurdity. The radical realism of Senapati's fiction owes much to the canon debate of the 1890s. In struggling to configure a literary canon that would cater to contemporary necessity to carve out a separate Odia political identity in relation to both the colonial state and their more influential Bengali neighbors, the literary elite was faced with a dilemma between the need to uphold community patrimony and the need to display a more buoyant modern literary culture. Kara's resolution of this dilemma inaugurated a new literary republic of letters in which the imagined community of Odia readers were not simply passive consumers of tales but formed the fundamental rationale for literary production.

Of course, we should read this move with some caution as not all popular literature in Odia fit neatly into the elite expectations of "proper" Odia literature. As the anxious discussions about the need to reform *Jatra* or Street Theatre literature between the 1890s and the 1910s reveals, popular literature produced outside elite institutions like the Utkal Sahitya Samaj often displayed a messy combination of Bhanja-like references to sexuality with more modern political critique of the dire economic and social conditions in colonial Odisha.[68] Much more widely consumed than the more highbrow literature of Senapati and Praharaj, the Odia Jatra had attracted criticism from the literary elite as early as the 1870s. In 1873, a call for the reform of Jatras was published in a major newspaper where the author described the contemporary Jatra as: "Some rogues come to villages, sing in unparliamentary language, present some hysteric dance with naked and half naked costume on the stage, put on the costume masks of beasts and birds, excreted and defaced in front of

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of the River Mahanadi, we suspect that our newly educated and civilized babus will soon appoint whip-cracking trainers to teach their gentle female companions to gallop." Senapati, pp. 56–7.

[67] Satya P. Mohanty, *Colonialism, Modernity, and Literature: A View from India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 158.

[68] Hemant Kumar Das, *Odia Natakara Eitihasika Bibartana* (Cuttack: S. Publications, 2003), pp. 96–126. Ramesh Prasada Panigrahi, *Signboard on the Marquee: Physiognomy, Cultural Rhetorics, and the Trajectory of Odia Jatra Theatre* (Bhubaneswar: Odisha Sahitya Akademi, 2010), pp. 93–5.

poor men's cottages."[69] By 1895 as the debate on the status of Odia literature raged in towns of Odisha, calls for public opinion on the reform of Jatras were being published in newspapers. In an article published in *Sambalpur Hiteisini* in October 1895, the author argued that the contemporary Odia Jatra can be considered as the most clear barometer of popular taste. And that the civility of popular taste demonstrates the level of advancement of the community. By linking the rise of Western knowledge with the eradication of obscenity in popular literature, the author firmly situated the much desired advancement within a Western notion of civility and proper behavior. Using the more favorable example of Jatra in Bengali, the author lamented that unlike Bengali Jatra, that of Odia had not been transformed from its traditional obscenity to a more decent literary representation. The solution, he argued, was in a systematic reform of the Jatra tradition in Odisha that had to draw on the support of the educated elite.[70] Such calls for reform often ignored the fundamentally popular nature of the Jatra tradition and argued for a Westernization of the Odia public tastes that had to be effected from the top down. In an article published in 1918 in *Utkal Sahitya*, the same author narrated twenty years of his efforts to reform the Odia Jatra. In the intervening years, he wrote, the educated literary elite of Odisha were encouraged to write Jatras in Odia. However, these pieces did not appeal to the popular audience as Jatras would. Keeping the "social backwardness and conservatism" in mind, efforts at reform were focused on coupling narratives of religious myths with modern dramatic literature. According to the author this was somewhat more successful.

These efforts at reforming Odia Jatra were successful from the Odia literati's perspective. As revealed in the work of Baisnab Pani, the most prolific Jatra writer of the twentieth century, Jatra literature underwent a radical transformation in the early 1900s. Pani did precisely what the elite critic of Jatra was hoping for – he coupled traditional Jatra narratives of religious myths with critiques of rural indebtedness, enforced migration, and other adverse effects of colonialism in Odisha. However, this reform came from within the Jatra tradition rather than from above. Pani himself was an impoverished school dropout and was trained in the religious environment of a Puri Mutt. His reformed Jatra did not do away with the elements of traditional Jatras that made elite critics uncomfortable. Rather, it supplemented them with the emergent popular discontent with the contemporary economic, social, and political problems

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[69] Quoted in Panigrahi, *Signboard on the Marquee*, p. 94.
[70] Krushna Prasada Choudhury, "Ruchi Paribartana", *Sambalpur Hiteisini*, dated October 13, 1895, reprinted in Labanya Naik (ed.), *Krushnaprashada Prabandhamala* (Bhubaneswar: Orissa Sahitya Academy, 1992), pp. 175–7.

in colonial Odisha. Pani's incorporation to the Odia canon remained peripheral because even when our elite critic lamented about the lack of proper Odia Jatra in 1918, Pani had been producing his reformed Jatra for more than fifteen years. Utkal Sahitya Samaj named him *Ganakabi* only ten years after his death in 1956. Pani provided a resolutely nonmodern, nonliberal mode of literary discourse that despite being celebrated by the Utkal Sahitya Samaj could only serve as a peripheral part of the mainstream Odia literary canon.

This elite discomfort with nonmodern literary engagement with Odia life at the turn of the nineteenth century is more starkly evident in the Odia literati's response to another popular literary corpus – the writing of Bhima Bhoi. Born blind to adivasi Khond parents and introduced to a millenarian cult called Mahima Dharma at an early age, Bhima Bhoi's literary oeuvre was extensive.[71] The Mahima Dharma cult enjoyed a widespread following among adivasis and poorer Hindus of western Orissa. Much of Bhoi's oeuvre was written between the mid-1860s and the mid-1890s when he died.[72] Bhima Bhoi had become the most influential leader of the Mahima Dharma by the early 1880s and, in 1881, Bhoi's followers stormed the Jaganath Temple at Puri and protested against idolatry.[73] In the flurry of administrative accounts that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the 1881 temple entry protest, Bhoi was cited as the chief instigator of the event. The storming of the temple was received by the upper classes with much consternation and gave rise to an antagonistic relationship between the Oriya literati and the Mahima Dharma. An article published in *Utkal Dipika* dismissively referenced as "extreme *mlecchas* [outcastes]" who belonged to "wild" and "uncivilized" tribes and had been misled by their leader.[74]

What the elite failed to account for was that this forced entry into the Jaganath Temple was a result of complex critique of mainstream Hindu religiosity, caste discrimination, and social oppression of the adivasis and

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[71] His most well-known works are his autobiographical epic, *Stutichintamani* and his collection of devotional poems *Bhajnamala*. See Bettina Baumer and Johannes Beltz, *Bhima Bhoi: Verses from the Void: Mystic Poetry of an Oriya Saint* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2010). See, also, Ishita Banerjee-Dube, *Religion, Law and Power: Tales of Time in Eastern India 1860–2000* (London: Anthem Press, 2007); Ishita Banerjee-Dube and Johannes Beltz, *Popular Religion and Ascetic Practices: New Studies on Mahima Dharma* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2008).

[72] The exact dating of Bhima Bhoi's life and work is shrouded in legend. Anncharlott Eschmann estimated that he joined the Mahima Dharma in 1862. Cited in Baumer and Beltz, *Verses from the Void*, p. 25. His death is clearly dated at 1895. See Banerjee-Dube, *Religion, Law and Power*, p. 75.

[73] It was reported that the Dharmis threw cooked rice around the temple and desecrated the *bhog* of the temple. They even threatened to burn the idol of Jaganath. Ibid, pp. 49–50.

[74] Ibid, p. 51.

lower castes.[75] Bhoi drew heavily from Hindu, Christian, and Islamic theology to argue for a radical secular universalism, which produced, as Mukti Makhi Mangharam argues: "[A] universalist idea of rationality (that) would recognise that other cultures have forms of thought which are just as rational as Western forms of thought, even if they are not scientific."[76] Bhima Bhoi's poems served to combine a modern critique of Western intellectual dominance with everyday forms of speech and writing for the uneducated reader.

Effectively, Bhoi's poetry did exactly what Biswanath Kara was arguing for – it produced a literature that spoke to the innermost hearts of the people. However, we find very few references to Bhoi's poetry in the Odia press of the time. The first reference to Bhoi appeared in 1908 in the monthly journal *Mukura*, as a bid to introduce readers to Bhima Bhoi and his work. There were no ongoing discussions about him after this time. If Kara's desired literature was to represent the life of the readers and engage their interests then the neglect of Bhoi's oeuvre or Pani's Jatra are quite revealing in their omission. The emergent Odia canon could not comfortably house these resolutely nonmodern and subaltern literary works because of the foundational political economy between the author, critic, and reader that thinkers like Kara were proposing. This representational political economy, which claimed that regional language was the only language through which the people could be reached because it was vernacular to them, was always steeped in a liberal framework of political representation. The democratization of literary production with the increasing effort to bring the Odia reading public into the cycle of literary production always assumed a liberal citizen subject who would engage in this cycle. The consumers of the literature produced by Pani and Bhoi were deemed as unsuited to this task due to their "backwardness," "conservatism," and "wildness." Effectively what was being avoided was not just the inclusion of

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[75] For instance, in *Stutichintamani*, Bhoi extensively critiqued caste prejudice:

> "Their minds are steeped in ignorance
> And wicked are the high-born
> When I speak of you as without desire,
> O Swami, they just their moustaches in pride"

> And later in the same poem:
> " 'Give them no shelter, they are sinners and fools!
> If you see them, drive them out!'
> I preach the initiation of equality
> And so they call us dogs."
> Baumer and Beltz, *Verses from the Void*, pp. 125–31.

[76] Mukti Lakhi Mangaram, "Radical Religious Poetry in Colonial Orissa", *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVI (2011): 82–94.

subaltern literature but also the subaltern people who created and con-sumed this literature. The vernacularity of modern Odia literature depended on the participation of the Odia public but the Odia public was imagined as a body of liberal individuals. Thus the vernacularity of modern Odia literature had written into it the exclusion of those groups that sought to destabilize the emerging Odia liberal middle class.