

# Re-engineering History: Odia Identity Crisis and Crisis Manager Pt. Nilakantha Das

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## Introduction

This article discusses the formation of the modern state of Orissa (Odisha) in 1936 and the contribution of Pt. Nilakantha Das in restoring the pride of the ancient race of Oriyas (Odias), who suffered prolonged national identity crisis during the British Raj. A teacher, linguist, freedom fighter, academic administrator and social reformer, Pt. Das sacrificed his personal comforts at the altar of “Utkal Janani” (Mother Utkal) and worked tirelessly for the creation of a separate province to fulfill the socio-economic, cultural and linguistic aspirations of the people of Odisha. Pt. Das fought many battles with hegemonic forces that had already rendered the otherwise heroic race of Oriyas into subalterns, who dared not to speak. He inculcated a sense of unity in the marginalized people of a shrunken state, a subdued race, who had been constantly losing grounds in terms of territory, linguistic and cultural autonomy, economic independence, and national identity. Pt. Das did not only become instrumental in awakening a sense of ethnocentrism in the people of Orissa but he also ensured they defeat the colonial forces and reclaim their lost glory. With the creation of Orissa as a separate province of India on 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1936 and the glory of Oriya language fully restored, the identity crisis of Oriyas had been relegated to history. This article the identity crisis of contemporary Oriyas and Pt. Nilakantha Das’s epic struggle in successfully reclaiming the history (rewriting history) of Odisha.

## Odisha Before and After the First War of Indian Independence

The modern state of Odisha, which was established as a separate province on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1936, has an interesting history concerning its formation. It became Odishâ under a resolution of the Parliament on 23 September 2011, which substituted “Odiâ” for “Oriyâ” and “Odishâ” for “Orissâ”. Odisha happens to be the first state of India formed on linguistic basis as much as its Paika Bidroha (Paika Rebellion) of 1817 is the first war of Indian independence (Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Culture, Government of India communique, dt. 20-July-2017). However, before revisiting this adventurous episode of modern history, we must get a glimpse of the ancient history of Odisha, to correctly assess this part of history and in it the role of the illustrious Odia patriot, Pt. Nilakantha Das. In the olden days, historical records exhibit, Odisha was called Kalinga, Udra, Kosala, and Utkal. The mention of Kalinga is found in the epic, Mahabharat and in *Maha Govinda Sutta*. The “Calinga” in the works of Ptolemy, Pliny the elder, and Claudius Aelianus is nothing but Kalinga, i.e., Odisha. We find the mention of “Utkal” in the Raghuvansam and the Brahma Purana. Historians agree that the names Kalinga, Udra, Kosala, and Utkal were often interchangeable and at

sometimes were distinct, comprising smaller or bigger areas (Banerjee, 1981). Although with thousands of years of existence, Odisha was known by different names in different periods of history, it was known as a centre of trade and commerce, culture and literature, adventure and love for independence. Thus, it must be very interesting to see how the people of Odisha suffered identity crisis and the role of Pt. Nilakantha Das as the crisis manager.

The famous Kalinga War, which was fought between the Mauryan emperor Ashoka and the Kalingas in 261 BCE, has been recognized as a turning point in world history, as it resulted in the transformation of a ruthless dynast into a messenger of love and peace. Ashoka played a significant role in spreading the message of Lord Buddha throughout the world. The locale of the Kalinga War is Dhauli (named after the eponymous hill: Dhauligiri) boasts of Rock Edicts Nos. I-X, XIV and two separate Kalinga Edicts bearing the message of the conqueror. Situated on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha, Dhauligiri today attracts tourists from India and abroad. In the 1st century BCE, Mahameghavana Aira Kharavela established the Mahameghavahana dynasty in Kalinga. Emperor Kharavela was the third ruler of the dynasty. He reigned in the second half of the 1st century BCE. Most of the information about Kharavela comes from the Hathigumpha inscription in Udayagiri near Bhubaneswar. The maritime history of Kalinga compels the scholar of history to acknowledge its richness, military prowess, and cultural supremacy (Behera, 57). The rise and growth of Odisha is not properly chronicled, though. However, it goes without saying that Lord Jagannath has been the *Rashtra Devata*, the national deity of the Odias, since recorded history. It would be of great interest to examine how such a land suffered ignominy and how it fought back to assert itself. This will help us to contextualize the concept of this paper --- the identity crisis of Odisha and the contribution of Pt. Nilakantha Das in restoring the pride of Odisha.

A bird's eye view over the history of Odisha is enriching. History shows that Mahapadma Nanda conquered Kalinga in c. 350 BCE and Emperor Ashoka conquered Kalinga in the Kalinga War in 261 BCE. The coronation of Kharavela, a great patronize of Jainism, took place in 170 BCE and he expanded his territory beyond Kalinga and conquered most part of India (as per his Hathigumpha inscription). Samudragupta invaded Kalinga during his reign in c.350. Gautamiputra Satakarni (78–102 CE) is known to have invaded Kalinga during his reign The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang (Yuan Chiang) visited Odisha in 639 A.D and his writings have been made available to us as 'On Yuan Chwang's Travels' by T. Watters, 'Life of Hiuen Tsang' by Hwuie. The Soma or Kesari Dynasty originates in South Kosala, but by the reign of Yayati I, they controlled most of modern Odisha. The Ratnagiri, Udayagiri and Lalitgiri excavations and inscriptions reveal the cultural richness of Odisha during 5<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The poet Sarala Das makes numerous references to Udra, Odra, Odra Desa, Odra Rastra, Odabisa, Odia, Odra Rastra Mandal and Odisha in his famous epic the Mahâbhârata. It is found that the Gajapati king of Odisha Dev (1435–1467 A.D.) calls his territory 'Odisha Rajya' or 'Odisha Rastra' in his proclamation inscribed on the temple walls of Jagannath Temple.

Narasimhadeva I built the Konark temple in 1245 CE. The *Madala Panji*, the temple chronicle of Lord Jagannath of Puri, describes the historical events of Odisha related to Lord Jagannath or Jagannath Temple beginning from 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Ganga dynasty ruled Odisha from around 500 AD. And the Gajapati rulers succeeded the Gangas. The Gajapati kings of Odisha, especially Kapilendra Deva, Purusottam Deva and Prataprudra Deva, advanced the territory of Odisha in all directions. It was in Prataprudra Deva's time that Sri Chaitanya visited capital Puri. Under his influence, the martial king became swayed by Bhakti and Odisha transformed into a singing and chanting from a warring state. Odisha lost its independence during the reign of the last of the Gajapati kings, the last independent and sovereign Hindu king, Gajapati Mukunda Deva, in 1568. Odisha empire lost her sovereignty and independence on sudden and sad demise of in Gohiri Tikira battle field. Mukunda Deva (1656-1674) was the last independent king of Odisha, as in 1568 the Karabani Sultans of Bengal incorporated Odisha (then Orissa) into their kingdom. Odisha was thereafter ruled in succession by Afghans, Moghuls, Marathas and lastly by the British till the 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947 when India along with Odisha got independence from the foreign rule (Majumdar, et al., 1960). Historians hold Sri Chaitanya's advent in Odisha as the beginning of the end of Odisha's independence.

A historian writes thus:

“Orissa's problems actually started with Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Under his influence, a basically martial king, Prataparudra Gajapati turned towards Bhakti and neglected the kingdom military tradition of Kalinga. With a weak/withdrawn centre, the Prime Minister, Govinda Vidyadhara rebelled and took the reigns from the Emperor's sons in 1541. His dynasty itself was overthrown by a general Mukunda Deva in 1559. Mukundadeva allied with Bhurishreshta drubbed the Muslim forces in the Battle of Triveni in 1565 under the command of Rajiv Lochan Ray. Something happened in the middle because of which Rajiv Lochan Ray asked permission from Mukunda Deva to convert to Islam so that he may marry the daughter of the Sultan of Bengal. The permission was denied, he rebelled and took the name of Kalapahad. In 1568, taking opportunity at the break in alliance between Bhurishreshta and Kalinga, Kalinga was attacked by the Sultanate of Bengal with the same Kalapahad as the commander of the invading forces. Mukundadeva was killed in a battle at Gohira Tikiri on Vaitarini River near Bhadrak. The kingdom was subjugated completely and all lands till Rajahmundry in North Central Andhra Pradesh came under Muslim rule for good. All these wars placed even the Bengal on a platter to the advancing Mughals who took Bengal in 1576.”

<https://cbkwgl.wordpress.com/2014/11/09/three-battles-which-broke-the-back-of-hindu-india-in-a-decade/>

After the death of Gajapati king Mukunda Deva in 1568 war, Orissa came under the Mughal rule. Moghuls were also defeated by Afghans and Orissa was under Muslim rule till the armies of Maratha king Chatrapati Shivaji conquered them. Only after 1751, the Marathas gained control of Odisha, but in 1803, the British conquered the region during the Second Anglo-Maratha War.

Orissa, which Nilakantha saw during his time (5 August 1884 till formation of separate province on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1936) under the British rule, was a dismembered Orissa. The Oriyas were scattered in four provinces: (1) Bihar & Orissa, (2) the Central Provinces, (3) Bengal, and (4) Madras. As a result of this dismemberment,

the Oriya-speaking territories virtually became appendages to these four provinces. Historian R.D. Banarjee's observations in this context are worth quoting:

“The inclusion of the Oriya speaking districts of Ganjam in the Madras presidency is due to the different steps in the Musalman conquest of Orissa. While the Sultans of Bengal conquered Northern Orissa in 1568, their own independence was at stake, as Akbar destroyed the independence of the Musalman kingdom of Bengal eight years later, in 1576. The Musalman conquest of Central Orissa was left unfinished and the Afghans seldom succeeded in penetrating into the interior of the Mahanadi Delta. The Qutbshahis of Golkonda were very slow in approaching Central Orissa, though they occupied Rajamahendri [presently Rajahmundry, officially known as Rajamahendravaram, a city located in East Godavari district in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh] soon after the death of Prataprudra. They advanced as far as Quasimkota in many different stages. So far only the plain flat country at the foot of the Ghats had submitted to them and the Hindu chiefs remained independent in the west hilly country to the North-west. The Ganjam district was reached by the Qutbshahis only a few years before their fall in 1687. Because the Oriya tracts were included at that date in the kingdom of Golkonda, therefore they continued in the Subah [a province or division of the Mogul Empire or its government] of Haidarabad [Hyderabad] till their transfer to the British in 1761. Even after the unification of the whole of the Oriya-speaking countries under British rule in 1804-05 and 1856, the Ganjam district till continued to form a part of Madras (Presidency), and the states on the border of Kosala belonged to the Central Provinces till 1905, while Southern Medinipur (Midnapur) is still included in Bengal. (Banerjee, p 7)

Even after 1947, many Odia speaking tracts have remained outside of Odisha, but in India: Sareikala-Kharsuan (formerly the Princely States of Seraikella and Kharsawan is today one of the districts of Jharkhand), Midnapur (West Bengal) and Palasa (in Andhra Pradesh).

### **Odisha and Odia Language during the Days of Pt. Nilakantha Das**

Oriya, a scheduled language of the Indian Constitution, occupies the official Language status in Orissa. During the period of 1803 to 1936, Oriya was neglected as an independent language in Orissa. By that time most of the Indian territories were ruled by the British government. Orissa was divided spatially into the three main presidencies at that time: the presidencies of Bengal, Madras, and the Central Provinces. The people of Orissa did not allow the British government to capture the region easily. It took around sixty years for them to fully occupy Orissa and bring it under the British East India Company. Finally, the Company annexed Orissa at least in three different phases, Coastal or North Orissa proper in 1803, Western Hilly Tracts, i.e. Sambalpur in 1849 and Southern Orissa in 1868. Then Orissa was divided into three divisions: the Coastal division, i.e. administrative division and part of the lower provinces of the Bengal presidency, which consisted of three districts, Balasore, Cuttack, and Puri and the areas nearby them. The other two major parts of Orissa: Ganjam and Sambalpur were controlled by the presidencies of Madras and the Central Provinces respectively. ([https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105708/1/11/11\\_chapter%204.pdf](https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/105708/1/11/11_chapter%204.pdf))

The Oriyas were reduced to the status of linguistic minorities and felt neglected and dominated by the linguistic majorities of those provinces. Language had become the major problem for the Oriyas in administrative matters. At that time the court language of Orissa was Persian. A very few Oriya *Amalas*



spoke the Persian language perfectly and fluently. Alternatively, in many cases, Bengali was being used. British officers used to like Bengalis over Oriyas, too. Before the British, “the key posts were held by outsiders who had knowledge of Persian” (ibid: 13). The Oriya *Amalas* did not have proficiency either in Persian or Bengali or English which were the languages of British administration. Oriyas particularly felt distressed when an anti-Oriya brigade deliberately tried to abolish Oriya language and culture. In 1870, a theory was propagated by Kanti Chandra Bhattacharya (Bengali teacher of Balasore High School) that Oriya is not a distinct and separate language. As such, he argued, Bengali be substituted for Oriya as the language of the people in all schools and courts and public documents. A Bengali scholar namely Rajendralal Mitra tried to undermine Odias by identifying them to be not different from Bengalis. In all possible ways – administrative, linguistic, and cultural identity – Oriyas were suppressed.

It was a dark period of identity crisis that Oriya language faced in 1860s and 1870s and it facilitated the Oriya National movement in the 19th century. Gopabandhu Das lamented: “Bharate Utkala Maha punya dhama, Bharata panji're nathlla ta nama”, that is even though Utkal/Odisha is a place of great importance in India, it has not got due recognition”. Patriotic Oriya – foremost among them Madhusudan Das, Gopabandhu Das, and Nilakantha Das – were bothered by the pathetic condition of Oriyas and Oriya language. They worked relentlessly to bring back the golden days of the past when Oriyas were known as a valorous race and Orissa was a land of wealth and knowledge. Scholars of History like Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji have maintained that “Odia is older than Bengali and Assamese” whereas L.S.S. O’ Malley says, “Oriya is in an older stage of grammatical development than even classical Sanskrit, and, among Indo-Aryan Languages, can only be compared with the ancient Sanskrit spoken in the Vedic times”. The Oriya nationalists like Pt. Nilakantha Das made efforts to re-engineer history – started a mass movement to protect Oriya language and culture. It soon became a political movement. The logical conclusion was that Orissa must have a separate political identity to save its language and culture. Pt. Nilakantha conceived the idea of making Orissa a separate province by uniting all Oriya speaking tracts lying scattered in different provinces. He made a mass Oriya movement for the formation of a separate province for Orissa and fought legally and political to achieve this goal. Thanks to his efforts, Orissa became a separate province on 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1936.

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