

Bande Utkal Janani (I adore Thee , O Mother Utkal)

One hundred and eight years after this song by Laxmi Kant Mahapatra was sung at the meeting of Utkal Sammelani in 1912 , the Odisha Cabinet accorded it the status of the ‘state anthem’ on June 7, 2020. Now it has to be officially sung in all academic institutions and at state functions. Earlier , on 9th November 2010 , the enactment of Orissa (Alteration of name) Bill gave the state the new name of Odisha , besides changing the name of the language from Oriya to Odiya . Thus, Odia nationalism is in the ‘present continuous’, but its protagonists contend that the cultural construction of Odisha blends with , and strengthens the nationhood of India. They go on to ask : if each state had its anthem and flag , and if regional icons (leaders, monuments, texts) were to be placed on the Indian currency, will it not strengthen people’s identification with India?

There are many ‘firsts’ to the Odisha story . Orissa , along with Sindh was the first of the ‘linguistic states’ conceded by the British on April 1, 1936 after a long and persistent demand of the Oriya speaking population. Orissa’s case is quite different from that of Sindh, for Oriya speaking population was spread across four administrative entities : as a division in the Bengal Presidency, in Central provinces , in the Madras Presidency and as small kingdoms under princely states. This also gave rise to the concept of Natural Orissa, to which we shall refer in the later part of this essay .

Secondly, the assertion of their identity was primarily against the domination of the Bengalis who dominated the administration, judiciary and the educational institutions, and these were the only employment avenues open at that time. The role of Commissioner TE Ravenshaw, his contributions to the Oriya language have to be placed on record. Thirdly, the Oriya elite had a clear two pronged strategy in place for a linguistic province. While on the one hand, they were making an appeal to the colonial state through memorials, petitions, signature campaigns and references in the state and central legislatures, on the other they were educating their own brethren about the salience of Oriya as a language and Utkal as a territory and invocation of Lord Jagannath as the unifying force for all those who lived in the region. Fourthly, we see the transition in leadership – from the constitutionalism of Madhusudan Das to the ‘mass movement’ of Gopabandhu Das. Fifthly, we see the tension between the Central and the provincial leadership of the Congress, as also the multiple factions within the party, as well as their attempts at one-upmanship. Sixthly, we note that linguistic and cultural nationalism -whether of the Oriyas or Telugus or Kannadigas – was in tandem with political nationalism (for Independence from the colonial (British) regime).

Again, mobilizing people on the basis of popular demands was different from the task of governance, and this became apparent when there was a clear clash of class interests, especially between the landlords and the share croppers. Eighthly, the dominant discourse on development was so strong that considerations of ecology, livelihoods and cultural mores were often brushed aside. The concerns of tribal population (or aboriginals as they were referred to, even by VP Menon) were not art of the political discourse , for while they

constituted over forty percent of the population, as a group, they were a disenfranchised community, and could be used as cannon fodder by different interest groups – by the rulers of feudatory, by the Communist insurgents as well as by the Congress and the Praja Mandal if the need arose. Last but not the least the acceptance of Gandhian ideal of Swaraj as the end, and Stayagrath as the means for its political realization came to the fore as the most potent political force in the region.

Let's start with the first stirrings. Nivedita Mohanty in her work Oriya Nationalism points out that as early as 1866, the Utkal Bhasha Unnatti Bidhayani Sabha was founded at Balasore, and Commissioner T E Ravenshaw attended the meeting of the Association in 1868. Then came the Cuttack Debating Club in 1869 and a host of other societies and clubs, all of which were affiliated to the Utkal Sabha or the Utkal Union Conference founded in 1882 with Gouri Shankar Ray as the Secretary and Madhusudan Das, the Calcutta returned lawyer as its Vice president. He was also nominated by the Sabha to attend the first session of the INC in 1885. In 1886, it confronted the government for meddling in the affairs of the temple of Lord Jagannath in Puri, and in 1895, it urged the government to reconsider its decision regarding imposition of Hindi (in place of Oriya) in the schools and courts of Sambalpur. With the introduction of Oriya as a subject under Calcutta University in 1902, the differences between SN Banerjee and Madhusudan Das came to the fore, and the latter founded the UCC or the Utkal Sammelani. Earlier, (in 1898) Madhusudan Das was also elected to the Bengal Legislative Assembly and also become the Minister for Local self-government in the short lived state of Bihar Orissa in 1911.

However, the constitutional methods, and overt loyalty to the Crown were no longer acceptable to the next generation Oriya leaders like Gopabandhu Das, who had established the Satyabadi Bana Bidyalaya in 1909 to encourage youth to engage actively with the social, educational and economic up-liftment of the Oriyas. Gopabandhu Das had to decide between 'loyalty to the Crown' and commitment to the Nationalist causes (Swaraj and Stayagrath): he chose the latter. Gandhi's first visit to Orissa was in 1921, and he supported the cause of a 'linguistic state for Orissa'. By this time, the difficulties in the rather unnatural state of Bihar and Orissa were coming to the fore, and there was a very strong demand for the establishment of 'natural Orissa', which would include all the Oriya speaking areas in the different administrative jurisdictions.

(to be continued)