

**Fashioning Readers: Canon, Criticism and Pedagogy in the Emergence of Modern Oriya Literature**

Pritipuspa Mishra  
University of Southampton

Postal Address:  
University of Southampton  
Avenue Campus  
Highfield  
Southampton  
SO17 1BF  
UK

Email- [priti.mishra@soton.ac.uk](mailto:priti.mishra@soton.ac.uk)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Contemporary South Asia* on 22nd March 2012, available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2011.646080>

Abstract

Through a brief history of a widely published canon debate in nineteenth century Orissa, this paper describes how anxieties about the quality of “traditional” Oriya literature served as a site for imagining a cohesive Oriya public who would become the consumers and beneficiaries of a new, modernized Oriya-language canon. A public controversy about the status of Oriya literature was initiated in the 1890s with the publication of a serialized critique of the works of Upendra Bhanja, a very popular pre-colonial Oriya poet. The critic argued that Bhanja’s writing was not true poetry, that it did not speak to the contemporary era, and that it featured embarrassingly detailed discussions of obscene material. By unpacking the terms of this criticism and Oriya responses to it, I reveal how at the heart of these discussions were concerns about community building that presupposed a new kind of readership of literature in the Oriya language. Ultimately, this paper offers a longer, regional history to the emerging concern of post-colonial scholarship with relationships between publication histories, readerships, and broader ideas of community—local, Indian and global.

---

Key words

Literary Criticism, Oriya literature, Tradition, Public

Word Count: 7344 including references

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 Oriya poet were published. The poet in question was Upendra Bhanja. With an entire era of the Oriya literary canon named after him, Bhanja's poetry was immensely popular among the common people of Orissa. 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 Orissa'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.”<sup>1</sup>

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 Oriya public. Not alone in his critique of early modern Oriya literature, Lala's essays sparked a rather acrimonious and public debate about the value of 'traditional' Oriya literature for contemporary Oriya public life. This article traces how the prevailing anxieties about the inadequacy of existing Oriya literature for modern educational needs and the allied anxiety about an inadequate literary legacy for community building led to the formation of a new kind of 'responsible' Oriya literary public consisting of producers, consumers and beneficiaries of a modern Oriya literary canon. In tracing the factors that led to the emergence of a readership for a new Oriya print industry I draw from and seek to add to the current post-colonial scholarly concerns with Book history that focus on the economic, social and political factors that contribute to the printing and dissemination of texts (Fraser 2008; Chakravorty and Gupta 2008; Gupta and Chakravorty 2004). As my discussion of Oriya 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 Oriya political public consisting of citizens (readers) and representatives (literary critics). Defined in opposition to their more dominant Bengali neighbours, this community of Oriya readers served as the earliest iteration of a modern Oriya political community which would later serve as the civil constituency of the movement for the formation of a separate linguistic province of

Orissa. As such, this instance of cultural nationalism in the late nineteenth century offers a pre-history of the post 1947 linguistic imagination of India which resulted in the linguistic re-organization of Indian territory in 1956.

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 (Chandra 1992) or alternative modernities (Dalmia 1996) and explore the inaugural aspect of the debate. Building upon Milind Wakankar's (Wakankar 2002) suggestion that doing so allows us to explore hitherto neglected issues of responsibility and historical origin, I ask how did Indian writers 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? 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 Orissa express this hope that a new weighty tradition will arise from new projects of literary production.<sup>2</sup>

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 post-colonial 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 Oriya literature and its eventual resolution in this literary debate illustrates how the concerns and preoccupations of 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian critics in the age of colonialism echo contemporary anxieties about the place of local literature in the global market place. The recent post-colonialist backlash against Pascale Casanova's thesis on the world republic of letters which 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 questions that were being raised by Oriya critics in the 1890s (Mufti 2010; MacDonald 2010). 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 Oriya 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 this representative function of regional literature in contemporary India.

In what follows, I will introduce the context for the literary debates of the 1890s by tracing the history of print culture in Orissa which developed around the rise of Oriya school textbook market. I will illustrate how the need for textbook worthy literature led to public debate about the 'quality' of existing Oriya literary texts. Through a focus on this debate and its eventual resolution in the writings of Biswanath Kara, one of the most influential literary critic and editor of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this paper will illustrate how these canon debates were inaugural in

their vision of a new Oriya literary public sphere.

### **Textbook Anxieties: Oriya literary culture circa 1891**

The anxiety about the appropriateness of early modern Oriya literature as material for school textbooks had its origins in earlier debates about the use of Oriya as a language of instruction in schools of the Orissa division of Bengal Presidency.<sup>3</sup> In 1864-65, the Inspector of Schools in Orissa recommended that Oriya be replaced with Bengali as the language of instruction in Orissa Division schools (Mohanty 2002, 62). The Inspector cited the lack of appropriate Oriya school textbooks and qualified Oriya teachers as justification for the change. For instance, with only 7 qualified Oriya teachers in the whole of the division in as late as 1860, the remaining Bengali teachers in the Orissa schools were unable to enforce the provisions of the Wood's Dispatch for educational instruction to be carried out in the native vernacular. 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 Oriya urban centers where organizations such as the Utkal Bhasha Uddhipani Sabha were set up refute the government's claims.<sup>4</sup> Support for the proposal came from Bengali intellectuals such as Rajendralal Mitra who argued that as Oriya was very similar to Bengali the use of Oriya in Orissa schools did not make financial sense. Infact, Mitra argued, using Bengali instead of Oriya was in the interest of the Oriya people as it would allow them to participate in the much more advanced cultural life of Bengali. As a result of this controversy and the eventual decision of the colonial government to retain Oriya as the language of instruction, the Oriya urban elite intelligentsia focused their energies on producing new Oriya textbooks.

The emergence of a commercial Oriya textbook market tranformed the political economy of Oriya literary production. Print had come to Orissa late and haltingly. The first printing press in Orissa was set up by missionaries in 1838. Prior to this, some Oriya language texts, including a Oriya translation of the Bible and an Oriya grammar, were published in the Serampore Mission near Calcutta (Shaw 1977). Despite the establishment of this new press, textual culture in Orissa was dominated by the circulation of palm leaf manuscripts in the mid nineteenth century. The production of Oriya 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 labourers working for very meagre wages (Das 1991; Mazumdar 1926). While these palm leaf manuscripts were often comissioned and owned by affluent Oriyas, some were housed in communal huts in the villages of Orissa called Bhagwat 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 listen to readings of the Oriya Bhagawat written by the

medieval bhakti poet Jaganath Das (Panda 1992; Chand 2006; Das 2005).<sup>5</sup> This loosely organized, informal literary sphere in Oriya came to be coupled with a new print centered, urban literary sphere in the late nineteenth century with the rise of printing presses in Orissa. Even though the printing industry was minute in comparison with that of Bengal (17 in Orissa as opposed to 43 in Bengal in 1900), the urban centers of the Oriya speaking areas could boast of at least one prominent publishing house.<sup>6</sup> And at the center of this emerging print industry was the textbook market.

As more and more Oriya writers came to be employed in textbook writing, the content of the books came up for debate. Contemporary Oriya press repeatedly argued that the traditional poetry written by 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century poets such as Dinakrishna, Upendra Bhanja and Brajanath Badajena should be reprinted and used as school text books. In an article published in 1868 in *Utkal Dipika* the author argued that the recuperation and reprinting of older Oriya 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 “there are no assets in Oriya language from the ancient age that can be useful to us in our efforts to advance the Oriya language” (Mishra 1996, 6). Elsewhere, Acharya noted in his 1873 article “Ganjam Sambalpur O Utkal Pustak” published in *Utkal Putra* that

“We have no expectations from the ancient Oriya 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.”<sup>7</sup>

The following excerpts from prose translations of poems by Upendra Bhanja could help explain Archarya’s anxieties about the appropriateness of early Oriya 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 *Rasikabharabalee* (Patnaik 1950, 7).

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

This knot is the thunder to the mountain of the staidness of the heart of  
 poets,  
 A chain to bind the elephant of a lovmad 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* (Patnaik 1950, 48).

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 Oriya 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 textbooks as well as evidence of the autonomous life of Oriya in the past, present and future. However, as newspaper articles of the late nineteenth century reveal, this desire for autonomy was coupled with an aspiration to emulate the 'development' of Bengali in the colonial period.<sup>8</sup> The subsequent debates and discussions about tradition and modernity in Oriya literature should be read with this paradoxical desire in mind. Infact, the roots of the arguments of both sides of the debate about Bhanja can be traced back to this dilemma. The reluctance of the Oriya literati to contenance any critique of 'classical' Oriya literature drew from their need to prove that like Bengali and English, Oriya 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.<sup>9</sup>

### **Desa-Kala-Patra: Zietgeist and Sentimentality in Early Oriya Literary Criticism.**

We return for the 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 Bhanja's poetry, which he claims has often elided critical attention due to the overly sentimental attitude of the Oriya readership, Lal 'discovers' serious flaws in the poetry of Bhanja.<sup>10</sup> 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 Arnolds 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 Oriya literati reveal that this dilemma was grounded on an anxiety about the appropriateness of 'traditional' Oriya literature to the contemporary social, political and cultural realities faced by the Oriya 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* emerges also in the counter claims by advocates of early modern Oriya 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 Oriya literary production.

Controversy on Oriya 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 Bandhopadhyay in 1864.<sup>12</sup> At this time Bandhopadhyay, an important figure in the Bengali literary scene, was involved in a rather acrimonious critique of contemporary Bengali literature. In the preface to his 1858 epic *Padmini Upakhyan*, Bandhopadhyay 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" (Chaudhury 2006, 265). 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. These concerns were shared by the Oriya intelligentsia even as they were increasingly concerned about the 'backwardness' of Oriya in relation to Bengali. In 1891, the literary journal *Utkal Prabha* was published in Baripada and funded by Ramachandra Bhanja Deo, the 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 Oriya community life—the lack of *actual* literature in Oriya. 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."<sup>13</sup> 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 Oriya community due to an excessive preponderance of obscene content.

In the subsequent years the debate on Bhanja came to dominate the Oriya public sphere in Cuttack. The pro- Bhanja group published numerous articles and received letters in the Oriya weekly *Utkal Dipika* and the anti-Bhanja camp published their opinions in another Oriya 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*. *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 Oriya literature to the contemporary *desa-kala-patra* induced the Oriya 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 Oriya 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 Jaques Derrida reminds us, is that it is property that one does not entirely own; it is simply held in trust and cannot be disposed off as though it were one’s own thing.<sup>14</sup> As such then could Oriya literary heritage be maligned or even denied? Was it subject to 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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 Oriya. 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 (Mishra 1996, 16, 20, 22, 49). If there is space within the English canon for such figures then why does the Oriya canon have to deny representation to poets like Bhanja. These essay rarely argued that contemporary literary production should emulate Bhanja or that his literary *ouvre* should be used in school textbooks. Rather, their contention was that despite the fact that earlier Oriya literature are not appropriate for modern times they were the predecessors of contemporary poets and should not be dismissed as irrelevant to the literary life of modern Orissa. Their canonization was essential to the project of forming a national literature or ‘*jatiya sahitya*’ in Oriya that would enable the advancement of the Oriya speaking people.

Such apprehensions for the loss of heritage was coupled with serious disagreements about the function of literature and whether early Oriya 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 (Mishra 1996, 10).

Implicit in Mazumdar's description of actual poetry and his charge against Bhanja that he was deceiving his readers was an assumption that literature should perform a function beyond entertainment. 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 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 the *Utkal Dipika* said of Bhanja and other poets like him,

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.<sup>16</sup>

Two very different notions of literature and its function in human life emerge here. While Majumdar asserts that poetry should have explicatory function, our 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 entertainment—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 of the debate. At issue here is not poetry or literature in itself. Rather, what is being contested here is a notion of Oriya culture even though it is not explicitly named. The linking of literature to development and progress in the framing of the question of literature within anxieties about the backwardness of the Oriya speaking community in relation to other cultural groups, national and international, suggests that the anxiety here is about whether there is a viable Oriya culture that could serve as a rallying banner for the Oriya 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'.<sup>17</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> century in his role as the editor of the *Utkal Sahitya* journal. In 1896, as the debate on pre-colonial Oriya literature was winding down, Kara published a collection of his essays on literature. Titled *Vividha Prabbanda*, this book explored the connections between literature and life, community, civilization and development (Naik 1999). Frankly didactic and programmatic, these essays were aimed at the literate Oriya population and called for an active program of reading, discussion and production of literature in Orissa. 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, traditional Oriya literature and modern Oriya literature which broke with traditional modes of expression both 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’.<sup>18</sup> Concomitant with this proposal for a more socio-culturally productive literature was Kara’s arguments about literary discussions and the role of the literary critic. Commenting upon the emerging literary activism among the Oriya 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 Oriya 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 misinformation 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 (Naik 1999, 34).

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 that 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 Oriya 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 elite-ness of this move towards greater production of Oriya literature and made it a much more populist activity involving the author, the critic and the reader.<sup>19</sup>

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 Oriya speaking people. In using the language of political representation and citizenship, Kara conjured up an Oriya republic of letters where each corner of this literary triangle has rights and obligations towards the development of Oriya literature and community life. Reminiscent of Wordsworth's vision of literary production and consumption as a contract between the poet and the reader which had as its ultimate objective a political imperative of representation, Kara's argument seems to be more political than literary (Keen 1999). In the absence of actual political citizenship, the new Oriya literary public sphere was to encompass all of the Oriya speaking people into a literary-political community of shared expression.

However, Kara did not perceive the function of Oriya literature as narrow provincialism. In a speech at the Utkal Sahitya Samaj titled "Jatiya Jibanare Sahityara Stana" (The place of literature in the life of the community), Kara explained what was at stakes in the creation of a Oriya 'literature of the community' (Jatiya Sahitya) for the constitution of the Oriya 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 (Naik, 1999, 37).

Kara's cosmopolitan justification of 'provincial' literature points to the broader political atmosphere in India. The emphasis on unity and 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 Oriya cultural artifacts to cultivate a sense of community in Orissa.<sup>20</sup> That is, 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 assertion would eventually determine the Indian National Congress's attitude towards linguistic diversity in India when Gandhi in 1931 would uphold both the need to use the vernacular and to use Hindi as a cosmopolitan means of communication (Gandhi 1956).

Furthermore, Kara's comment about the power of vernacular literature to move people reveals a new element in the understanding of language in Orissa. 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. Vernacular languages housed (through an ever growing 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. 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 self-hood. 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.

### **Conclusion: Oriya Literature in the World Republic of Letters**

Perhaps the best example of literature that represented the inner lives of the lowest class of Oriya 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* or Six and a third acres, Senapati portrayed Oriya village life in rural vernacular through the voice of a narrator who maintained an explicit conversation with the reader. This narrative voice drew from Oriya traditions of street theatre as well as from a caricature of a common figure in colonial Orissa—the

touter or the tout who inhabited multiple locales of power and powerlessness from official colonial spaces to rural Orissa (Senapati 2005, 6). Through this quasi educated narrator who made jeering references to traditional Oriya literary tropes as well as to important English political and intellectual traditions, Senapati traced a story of peasant indebtedness, the falacies of the colonial legal system and land ownership patterns. In his conversations with the reader the narrator elaborated a fundamentally Oriya critique of colonial power and that of the new Oriya elite (Mohanty 2011, 158).

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 the subsequent years such as Gopal Chandra Praharaj's *Bhagbata Tungire Sandhya*. 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 Oriya political identity in relation to both the colonial state and their more influential Bengali neighbours, elite were faced with a dilemma between the need to uphold community patrimony versus the need to display a more bouyant modern literary culture. Kara's resolution of this dilemma inaugurated a new literary republic of letters where the imagined community of Oriya 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 Oriya fit neatly into the elite expectations of 'proper' Oriya literature. As the anxious discussions about the need to reform *Jatra* or Street theatre literature in 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 Orissa (Panigrahi 2010, 93-95, Das, 2003, 96-126). However, despite their deviance from literary dogma of Kara and his contemporaries, these popular literary texts performed radical, community building functions that were strangely akin to Kara's ideal literature which could 'touch the community's innermost heart'. Together, much of popular and elite literature written immediately after the debate elaborated an effective critique of colonial administration and the local elite through narratives about the everyday lives of Oriya speaking people. In fashioning these tales, they fashioned a new body of readers. Effectively, the concerns of the canon debate and Kara's resolution of the debate represents an early iteration of the rhetoric of regional identity politics in Orissa. Set against and in emulation of the influence of Bengali and English modernity, Kara's definition of jatiya sahitya situated the Oriya community in to what Pascale Casanova calls the 'World republic of letters' (Casanova 2005).

It is the nature of this placement of Oriya literature in the 'world republic of letters' that points to the agential possibilities that the canon debate invokes for contemporary readers and writers of regional literature in India. What Kara called for

and what authors like Senapati and Praharaj produced was literature that, to borrow Qadri Ismail's evocative phrase, 'abides by' the time, place and character of Orissa (Ismail, 2005). Drawing on Ismail's formulation of the radical possibilities of literary representations of post-colonial spaces, we can suggest that the kind of literature that Kara, Senapati and Praharaj espouse is literature that represents the entire community, warts and all, in a single narrative space. Hence unlike other representations of Orissa, historical or anthropological, literary representations of Oriya life portray the shared space of community while simultaneously excavating the political oppositions between the elite and the non-elite, and between the regional, national and the imperial. This suggests the possibility of an alternative 'world republic of letters' which is not predicated on a dependent relationship between vernacular peripheries in the non-west and dominant, theoretically pregnant, literary metropolises in the west. Rather our alternative world republic of letters could consist of mutually equivalent literary cultures of the world that both represent their local homes and produce a global literary space through narratives about the engagements between the local and the global.

This debate on tradition and modernity and its resolution allows us an important and revealing entry in to the contemporary 'crisis' of Oriya literature as Oriya is increasing loosing out to the more global and vehicular English literature (Mohanty 2003, 267-274). A fate that it bears in common with most other regional languages in India, Oriya literature has been steadily loosing ground in publishing as well as in educational institutions. Focusing on this prior moment of crisis in Oriya literature draws our attention to the role of regional literature in local public life and illuminates contemporary possibilities for the function of regional literature in an increasingly global world. Rather than seeing 'vernacular' literature as a dominated inhabitant in Casanova's 'World Republic of Letters', we can use our understanding of the engagement of vernacular literature with colonial dominance (both English and Bengali) to envisage a literary culture that speaks to local engagements with the realities of cultural globalization.

### **Acknowledgements**

An early draft of this paper was presented at the British Association of South Asian Studies conference in 2011. I would like to thank the anonymous referees, Stephanie Jones, Lakshmi Subramanian, and other attendees of the panel for their insightful comments.

### **References:**

Bhargava, Rajiv and Helmut Reifeld ed. 2005. *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

- Casanova, Pascale. 2004. *The world republic of letters*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Chand, Soma. 2006. *Odisara Chitra*. Cuttack: Arjya Prakashan.
- Chandra, Sudhir. 1992. *The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Chakravorty, Swapan, and Abhijit Gupta. 2004. *Print Areas: Book History in India*. Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Choudhury, Roshinka. 2006. Cutlets or Fish Curry: Debating Authenticity in Late Nineteenth-Century Bengal, *Modern Asian Studies*, 40: 257-272.
- Collini, Stephan. 2010. *Arnold: Culture and Anarchy and other writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dalmia, Vasudha. 1996. *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendru Harischandra and Nineteenth Century Banares*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Das, Gauranga Charan, ed. 2005. *Praharaj Granthabali: Ramya Rachana Prathama Khanda*. Cuttack: Vidyapuri.
- Das, Hemant Kumar. 2003. *Odia Natakara Eitihāsika Bibartana*. Cuttack: S. Publications.
- Das, J.P. 1991. *Palm- Leaf Miniatures: The Art of Raghunath Prusti of Orissa*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Fraser, Robert. 2008. *Book History Through Post-Colonial Eyes: Rewriting the Script*. London: Routledge.
- Gandhi, Mahatma. 1956. *Thoughts on National Language*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Pub. House.
- General Report on Public Instruction in the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency. (1869-70)
- Gigante, Denise. 2007. *Zeitgeist. European Romantic Review*. 18: 265-272.
- Gupta, Abhijit, and Swapan Chakravorty. 2008. *Moveable type: book history in India*. Ranikhet, Uttaranchal: Permanent Black.
- Hatcher, Brian. A. 2000. *Idioms of Improvement: Vidyasagar and the Cultural Encounter*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Ismail, Qadri. 2005. *Abiding by Sri Lanka*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mahanti, Bamsidhara. 1989. *Odia Bhasha Andolana*. Kataka: Phrendas Pabliishars.
- Mansinha, Mayadhar. 1962. *History of Oriya Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Mazumdar, B.C. 1923. *Typical selections from Oriya literature, Vol 2*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.
- McDonald, Christie, and Susan Rubin Suleiman. 2010. *French global: a new approach to literary history*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mishra, Purnachandra ed. 1996. *Utkala Dipikare Bhanja Prasanga*. Berhampur: Royal Book House.
- Mohanty, Jatindra Mohan. 2003. *Tradition and creativity: essays on Oriya literature*. Bhubaneswar: Subarnarekha.
- Mohanty, Nivedita. 1982. *Oriya Nationalism: Quest for a United Orissa, 1866-1936*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Mohanty, Panchanan. 2002. British Language Policy in Nineteenth Century India and the Oriya Language Movement. *Language Policy* 1: 53-73.

- Mohanty, Satya P. 2011. *Colonialism, modernity, and literature: a view from India*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mufti, Amir. 2010. Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures. *Critical Enquiry*. 36: 458-493.
- Naik, Archana, ed. 1999. *Nirbachita Rachanabali: Biswanath Kara*. Bhubaneswar: Sahitya Academy.
- Neiman, Frazer. 1957. The Zeitgeist of Matthew Arnold. *PMLA*. 72: 977-996.
- Panda, B.D. 1992. *History of Library Development*, New Delhi: Anmol Publications.
- Panigrahi, Ramesh Prasada. 2010. *Signboard on the marquee: physiognomy, cultural rhetorics, and the trajectory of Odia Jatra Theatre*. Bhubaneswar: Odisha Sahitya Akademi.
- Patnaik Bichhanda Charan,. 1950. *Kabisamrat Upendra Bhanja Souvenir*, Cuttack: Chattrabandhu Pustakalaya.
- Patnaik, Sudhakar. 1971. *Sambadapatraru Odisara Katha. Vol 1 (1856-1881)*. Cuttack: Granthamandir.
- Rai, Lala Ramnarayan. December 1891. Kabi Upendra Bhanja. *Utkal Prabha*, Baripada: Baripada Printing Press.
- Roy, Anindyo. 2001. Subject to Civility: The Story of the Indian Baboo. *Colby Quarterly*. 37:113-124
- Samantraya, Natabar. 1974. *Odiya Sahityara Itihas (1803-1920)*. Bhubaneswar: Granthalaya.
- Senapati, Fakir Mohan, and Rabi Shankar Mishra. 2005. *Six acres and a third: the classic nineteenth-century novel about colonial India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Shaw, Graham. W. 1977. Cuttack Mission Press and Early Oriya Printing. *The British Library Journal*, 1977
- Third Annual Report of the Cuttack Printing Company*, (Cuttack: Cuttack Printing Company, 1869)
- Wakankar, Milind. 2002. The Moment of Criticism in Nationalist Thought: Ramchandra Shukla and the Poetics of Hindu Responsibility. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101: 987-1014

---

<sup>1</sup> Lala Ramnarayan Rai, “Kabi Upendra Bhanja”, *Utkal Prabha*, December 1891

<sup>3</sup> Orissa as a separate province was formed in 1936. Prior to that, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century Oriya speaking areas were scattered in the Bengal presidency, Madras Presidency and the Central Provinces. In 1936 a separate province of Orissa was formed by the amalgamation of all these areas.

<sup>4</sup> It is a matter of scholarly consensus that this language debate of the 1860s marked the beginning of the formation of an Oriya public sphere. See Nivedita Mohanty, *Oriya Nationalism: Quest for a United Orissa, 1866-1936*, South Asian Studies; No13. (New Delhi: Manohar, 1982)



<sup>5</sup> The presence of Bhagabat Ghara and their role in rural Oriya society has been mentioned in district gazeteers, travel narratives and contemporary literature. Soma Chand's *Odisara Chitra* is an Oriya translation of Jatindra Mohan Singh's 1903 travel narrative in Bengali titled *Odisyar Chitra*. References can also be found in Gopal Chandra Praharaj's fictional essays on the Bhagawata Tungi written in the early twentieth century.

<sup>6</sup> Cuttack had two major publishing houses- the Orissa Mission Press( est 1838) and the Cuttack Printing Company (est 1866). Balasore had the The Utkal Printing Company (est 1868) was set up in 1868 at Balasore. The Sambalpur district was served by the Jagannath Ballabh Press in Bamanda. Almost half of these presses were established by native princes.

<sup>7</sup> Pyarimohan Acharjya "Ganjam, Sambalpur O Utkal Pustak" (16-7-1873) in Patnaik, *Sambadapatraru Odisara Katha*. 677-680

<sup>8</sup> See Sudhakar Pattnaik, *Sambadapatraru Odisara Katha*, 576

<sup>9</sup> 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 urban Bengali middle class despite their concerted efforts to espouse western education, language and lifestyle. See Anindyo Roy, "Subject to Civility: The Story of the Indian Baboo", *Colby Quaterly*, Volume 37, no.2, June 2001, p.113-124

<sup>10</sup> Lala Ramnarayan Rai, "Kabi Upendra Bhanja", *Utkal Prabha*, December 1981. 2

<sup>11</sup> 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 Oriya 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 Oriya literature.

<sup>12</sup> Purnachandra Mishra ed., *Utkal Dipikare Bhanja Prasanga*, (Barhampur: Royal Book House, 1996) 2

<sup>13</sup> "Suchana," *Utkal Prabha*, April 1891.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Anne.E. Berger, 'Politics of Mother-Tongue' Unpublished translated from French by Adeline Rother and Anne E. Berger. P. 15

<sup>15</sup> For details see essays in Sudershan Acharya ed., *Indradhanu: Unabinsa Satabdira Eka Bismruta Patrika*, (Berhampur: Berhampur Biswabidyalaya, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Hitabadi (Pseudonym), "Recieved Letter," *Utkal Dipika*, 28-5-1891 1891. reprinted in Mishra, ed., *Utkala Dipikare Bhanja Prasanga*. P 14-20

<sup>17</sup> 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. Also, see articles titled *Samay*, *Paribartan*, *Utkal Sahitya* in Sudershan Acharya ed., *Indradhanu: Unabinsa Satabdira Eka Bismruta Patrika*. For a discussion or Arnold's ideas about culture see Stephen Collini, *Arnold: Culture and Anarchy and other writings*. xxvii.

<sup>18</sup> As the question of tradition in Oriya literature was not resolved, the discussion on the merits of older literature in Oriya remained a matter of debate and anxiety among the Oriya literati till as late as the 1920s when Patna University decided to remove the works of Upendra Bhanja from the curriculum

---

<sup>19</sup> 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. 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 profered meaning of the term as well as its undiognized exclusions.

<sup>20</sup> At this point the Indian national Congress used English in it communication to fecilitate converstations across regional boundaries.