# Pritipuspa Mishra, *Language and the Making of Modern India*

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The monograph *Language and the Making of Modern India* by Pritipuspa Mishra, divided into six chapters and a postscript, traces a history of the creation of Odisha as a discrete linguistic province between 1866 and 1936.[1] The volume proposes an analysis of the role of the so-called vernacular languages in regional and national politics in both colonial and postcolonial India. This work represents an effort to overturn essentialist notions of weakness and powerlessness around the concept of vernacular by highlighting its political

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[1] Here I refer specifically to this period of time (1866-1936), as it represents the main focus of analysis of the author. In 1866 the weekly newspaper Utkal Dipika (*The Lamp of Odisha*) was established in response to the mismanagement of a severe famine that had affected the region. It aimed to inform the government about the needs of the people in the Odisha division and also worked towards the development of the Odia language. Furthermore, the year 1936 refers to the formation of Odisha as a linguistically discrete territory. However, in the subtitle of the volume the author mentions the following period of time 1803-1956. 1803 indicates the year of occupation of Odisha by the British East India Company. Lastly, the year 1956 refers to the linguistic reorganisation of Indian provinces, which had already begun in 1936 with the formation of Odisha, and that continued until the 1970s.

use on the part of regional elites. More specifically, the author is able to reveal the hegemonic power of vernacular languages in creating discrete monolingual territories through the inclusion, or rather effacement, of minority groups such as the *ādivāsī* (Indigenous) population. In this framework, Mishra refers to the case of the first province formed on linguistic basis in colonial India: Odisha. Created in 1936, the example of Odisha is particularly functional to the author's argument because of its conspicuous Indigenous presence – almost one-fourth of the population of the proposed province – and the latter's subsequent role in crafting what would be referred to as "Natural Odisha". For instance, for the Odia elite, the '*ādivāsī* element' represented both a fundamental characteristic in differentiating the Odia language and population from the Bengali neighbours and an issue of anxiety as it would qualify them as 'primitive', 'tribal' and 'uncivilised'. If, at first, this process was enabled by the "sublimation" – as Mishra borrows from Freud – of language into an imaginary geographical territory, the later use of myths associated with the Jagannath cult and the Puri pilgrimage allowed the representation of a fundamentally religious, tolerant and inclusivist, yet hierarchical, Odisha. Being sublimation a reversible process, Mishra then illustrates how the discourses around 'Odianess' are constantly challenged and manipulated to suit the needs of the Odia majority and balance regionalist and nationalist efforts through the idea of an Indian citizen 'united in diversity'.

## Between Geographical Boundaries and Literary Canons

The first Chapter starts with the description of the nineteenth-century growing imperative by the colonial government to form discrete regions which could be more easily administrated by using only one Indian language. Both the concomitant British debates and colonial policies on juridical and political language, as well as education, considered mother tongues and popular common speech the most effective and ethical choices under the idea of liberal governance. Moreover, in this section, the author elaborates on how the term 'vernacular' in India has been infused with European notions that have conferred upon it a status of powerlessness. Hence, as opposed to the idea of cosmopolitan or translocal languages, in colonial India, the term vernacular came to identify major Indian languages – local and underdeveloped mother tongues, colonial vernaculars which needed to be refined and modernised as part of the broader 'civilisational mission'. One of the author's main arguments is that in the politics of colonial vernacularisation, it was this very process of viewing Indian vernaculars as completely powerless and local that created the conditions for these languages to claim their hegemonic status

as the language of state. In this framework, local debates on boundaries between geographical domains of Indian languages, such as the 1860s-70s debate between Odia and Bengali, had a considerable influence on the development of literature, literary criticism, and education in Odisha. The debate was sparked by a proposal in 1864-65 to replace Odia with Bengali as the language of instruction in schools of the Odisha division because of the lack of appropriate Odia school textbooks and qualified Odia teachers. Bengali intellectuals like Rajendralal Mitra (1822-91) supported the proposal, arguing that Odia was very similar to Bengali and that using Bengali would be more financially practical and beneficial for Odias. The debate highlighted the Odia intelligentsia's concerns about the 'backwardness' – mostly associated with the linguistic '*ādivāsī* element' and what was considered obscene pre-colonial literature –[2]of Odia in relation to Bengali. This sentiment led to efforts – sometimes paradoxically based on the example of the Bengali language and literary tradition – on the part of the Odia elite to produce new Odia textbooks and develop a distinct Odia literary canon more aligned with the image of Odisha they wanted to represent.

In Chapter 2 Mishra continues examining the subsequent literary debates on the formation and politicisation of this new Odia canon and public, which will soon prove to be a crucial step in the establishment of the province in 1936. In this framework, Mishra (2020, 28) claims that "the vernacularity of Odia was established through radical exclusion of the non-elite". In demonstrating this process, the author does not focus on the dilemma between tradition and modernity but rather emphasises its "inaugural nature" in order to present the issue of "timeliness" of literature (Mishra 2020, 78). In this framework, Mishra highlights the role of the literary and political *a* ('spirit of the time') within Odia literature and the anxieties regarding the inadequacy of the pre-colonial canon.

## The Politics of Language-Based Odia Social Identity

According to the author, it was during the very first decade of the twentieth century that the politicisation of a social identity based on the Odia language started emerging. For instance, in the third Chapter of the book Mishra delves into the role of the *Utkal Sammillani*

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2   The 1890s saw the publication, in all the major newspapers of the Odia-speaking tracts, of a serialised critique of the popular pre-colonial Odia poet Upendra Bhanja (1670-1740). The critics argued that his works consisted of mostly obscene materials, unsuitable to the contemporary *a* and needs, such as Odia school textbooks.

(Odisha Conference or Union)[3] within this process. By discussing politics, citizenship, and the relationship of the Odia division with the colonial state, the *Utkal Sammillani* oriented the discourse of the inclusion of all Odia-speaking tracts under a single territory towards arguments for the *political* representation of the Odia people as a unified constituency. Although at first the organisation tried to avoid addressing political concerns directly, the impossibility of discussing the demand of a separate province without engaging with politics, ensured the shift of the organisation to a more openly political approach. Besides the *Utkal Sammillani* and the implementation of the colonial franchise between 1918-19, aiming to increase popular participation in governance, also the Indian National Congress radically changed its attitude towards regional politics. Hence, from eluding regionalist issues as they would supposedly undermine the unity of the Country, the Congress, as Mishra argues, started viewing regional issues as a fundamental part of the politicisation of the Indian masses through the creation of the liberal Indian citizen "united in diversity".

## Histories of a "Natural Odisha"

As examined in Chapter 4, by the late 1910s, Odisha as a proposed province and newly imagined territorial entity (Anderson 1983) started to be referred to as "Natural Odisha". In order to present the latter as a historical reality, the Odisha advocates sustained this new ontology through the writing of histories of an 'ancient', i.e., pre-colonial, Odisha. Within the framework of nationalist pluralistic rhetoric, this process tended to associate each Indian province with peculiar underlying qualities. In that context, Odisha was conceptualized as an intrinsically religious and tolerant land, embodiment of a supposedly inclusivistic and pluralistic attitude found in the Jagannath cult and the Puri pilgrimage. Odisha was thus perceived as an entity able to embrace lower-caste people, tribal groups, and even Muslims, yet maintaining a hierarchical distance between minority groups and the Odia-speaking upper-caste. Therefore, this assumed quality of Odisha allowed it to be represented both as a local and cosmopolitan space and to assume great interest for regional and national politics.

Chapter 5 examines the consequences caused by the "Natural Odisha" paradigm, among which the conceptualisation of its history through the appropriation of the *ādivāsī* pasts and its idealisation

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[3] Organization established in 1903 and aimed at the inclusion of all Odia-speaking areas under a single province. The *Sammillani* rapidly became the primary pan-Odia platform for presenting Odia concerns to the colonial authorities.

as a fundamentally homogenous and ancient homeland. The establishment of the Orissa Boundary Commission in 1931 – aimed at the delineation of the boundaries of the new province – resulted in the emergence of the intrinsic contradictions regarding Odisha as a territorial and imagined entity. One of the main aspects of anxiety concerned the presence of the non-Odia-speaking *ādivāsī* communities, which represented almost one-fourth of the population of the proposed province. By examining several memoranda,[4] the author is able to outline the major justifications for the incorporation of *ādivāsī* communities into Odisha. Unsurprisingly, the rhetoric of these documents was embedded with claims on the nature of Odisha as an inclusivist, tolerant and pluralistic entity. Not to mention the employment of a fundamentally paternalistic narrative of Odia-speaking people as benign civilizers of 'tribal groups'. Despite inherent contradictions regarding the rhetoric of the memoranda, this approach proved effective, as it allowed for the incorporation of diverse regional populations into the emerging Odia political identity and territory – albeit without granting them equal social status.

## Approaches to the Issue of Multilingualism in Modern India

Borrowing from Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's claim, the last chapter is titled "Genius of India is to Divide" and is dedicated to the analysis of linguistic difference in the making of modern India. By analysing the approaches of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1822-85), Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) towards the issue of multilingualism in India, the chapter reveals the ideologies and anxieties in the imagination of a united, yet multilingual modern India. Besides Gandhi's perspective – a non-exclusive affect-based argument towards the mother tongue – more interestingly Nehru's and Ambedkar's viewpoints uncover the inherent contradictions and tensions between regionalist and nationalist efforts in the making of modern India. Although based on Gandhi's promotion of multilingualism, Nehru and the wider Indian National Congress, attempted to present a compromise between the centrality of linguistic identity in liberal governance and an extremely limited conceptualisation of linguistic difference in India – with the acknowledgement of only fourteen major Indian languages. On the other side, Ambedkar, as a representative of the non-elite lower-caste population, feared that the division of India into extensive language-based regions would excessively increase the institutional power in

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4   Documents submitted to the Odisha Boundary Commission in 1931 by leading advocates for the formation of a separate province of Odisha.

the hands of the regional elites. Nevertheless, although aware of this complex issue, Ambedkar was unable to provide a sustained critique on the formation of linguistic provinces from the point of view of the *ādivāsī* communities – that in the proposed Odisha territory did not represent, at least quantitatively, a minority. As regional languages became central to defining representation and identity in India, the process simultaneously marginalized Indigenous peoples and limited other political alternatives. According to Mishra, this exclusion became an integral part of how the modern Indian nation was conceptualised. Chapter 6 ends with the mention and analysis of speeches by Jaipal Singh (1903-70), leader of the *Ādivāsī Mahasabha* (Indigenous Great Assembly) and the movement for the formation of the *ādivāsī* majority province of Jharkhand. In the postscript, the author briefly discusses contemporary *ādivāsī* activism in order to show how Indigenous communities are still struggling within this framework of linguistic and political representation.

## Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Mishra's work on the creation of Odisha as the first linguistically organised province in India is supported mainly through the textual analysis of a wide range of sources – Odia newspapers and periodicals (among which the Utkal Dipika), pre-colonial Odia literature, Odia literary critique, books on the history of Odisha, memoranda submitted to the Odisha Boundary Commission, speeches of prominent nationalist leaders (Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar) and *ādivāsī* activists (Jaipal Singh). However, regarding the methodology employed by the author, Mishra proposes a fundamentally multidisciplinary approach. Based on literary criticism (study of the creation and politicisation of an imaginary but functional Odia literary canon and public through the exclusion of the non-elite), the "institutional life of language" (language politics and rhetoric), and the spatial category of territory, Mishra's work employs concepts such as "sublimation" and "heterotopia", respectively borrowed from Freudian psychoanalysis and Michael Foucault's social theory. Considering the first term, sublimation denotes "the process of turning socially unacceptable hidden desires into more visible socially productive actions" (Mishra 2020, 10). The latter, often being a source of discontent is, thus, potentially reversible. In Mishra's use, sublimation represents the shift from defining a community on an exclusive linguistic basis to a territorial one, allowing the inclusion of non-Odia speaking people (such as the *ādivāsī*) within the imagined Odia community. Importantly, Mishra questions the givenness of language as a category of analysis in defining territorial domain by underlining that, when political circumstances change, the process of sublimation can

potentially be reversed in order to better align with the *a* and needs of the elite. On the other side, the term heterotopia is mentioned by the author to define Odisha as a place where exception becomes the norm. Within the framework of the "Natural Odisha" paradigm, and the subsequent representation of the province as a fundamentally religious and inclusivist land, Mishra applies Foucault's concept of heterotopia to describe how Puri, and by extension Odisha, functions as a space that is both exceptional and representative. For instance, especially during the annual *Ratha Yātrā* (Chariot journey or pilgrimage) festival, Puri represents a site of exception to caste and religious exclusion. Through the concept of heterotopia, this exceptional event becomes the norm, the representation of all modern Odisha as a place where religious inclusivity is normalized, even as it maintains social and cultural distinctions.

## Final Notes

*Language and the Making of Modern India* by Pritipuspa Mishra represents a valuable contribution to the field of linguistic politics within the regional and national histories of modern India. The main strength of the book lies in the interdisciplinary approach employed by the author in analysing a wide range of textual sources and presenting her main argument – the very process of viewing Indian vernaculars as completely powerless and local created the conditions for these languages to claim their hegemonic status as the language of state. Hence, the relevance of this volume lies especially in its ability to overturn essentialist notions of weakness and powerlessness around the concept of vernacular by highlighting its political use on the part of regional elites. In this context, Mishra's work is able to offer an understanding of the often contradictory yet fundamental relationship between regionalist and nationalist ideologies in the making of modern India, but also to reveal how the institutionalisation of language-based states and *ādivāsī* incorporation represents a contemporary issue that Indigenous communities are still dealing with throughout the Country. However, Mishra's analysis focuses on a rather limited period of time (1866-1936), potentially missing more recent developments in linguistic politics – especially the aftermaths of Indian independence (1947) which she does not cover extensively. Besides that, while the study addresses the *ādivāsī* issue, it acknowledges the challenges in providing a sustained critique from the Indigenous perspective – as she writes on Ambedkar in Chapter 6 – a point that perhaps not even Mishra's work is able to avoid completely.