



Utkal Sammilani¹ In 1920s: A Shift From Regionalism To Nationalism

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Abstract: The establishment of Congress dominance over the Odia political scene in 1920 precipitated a shift towards nationalism in Odisha. Initially the *Sammilani* justified its abstinence from anti-colonial politics by arguing that there was no need to politically oppose the colonial state as long as it was fulfilling its responsibilities properly. However, despite its best efforts, this attempt to affirm politics as governance remained riddled with contradictions. This nationalization of regional politics could not have been brought about without the intervention of a new breed of Odia intelligentsia led by Gopabandhu Das. Gopabandhu's speech was not only the harbinger of the changes in Odisha politics but also the most sustained and representative statement of the changing attitude towards political activism, the colonial government and the Indian National Congress in Odisha.

In the history of freedom movement in Odisha, the 1920 Chakradharpur session of the *Utkal Sammilani*, an Odia regional organization, has been treated as a landmark event.² In this session it was resolved that the *Sammilani* was to give primacy to the fight for *swaraj* or self-rule rather than the struggle for the amalgamation of the Odia-speaking tracts. While these two objectives were not exclusive of each other, the early *Sammilani* stance against participation in anti colonial nationalist politics and emerged from a tactical decision to focus on particular Odia interests rather than engage in the broader ongoing critique of and opposition to colonial rule. The resolution at this session to fight for *swaraj* has been treated as the beginning of the nationalization of Odia political life. At the time of the *Sammilani*'s inception in 1903, Odia-speaking people were linguistic minorities

in three different British Indian provinces. The *Sammilani* was set up to address problems peculiar to such a state of affairs and to lobby for the amalgamation of the Odia-speaking tracts under a single administration. After 1920, even the articulation of particular Odia -speaking tracts into a single province by suggesting that India was a nation by divine design and that each province had to perform certain divinely ordained functions in the destiny of the nation. For this purpose, Odisha as a region had to be clearly defined and located within a broader Indian national community.³ Historians have treated this moment as a point of rapture between Odia regionalism and Indian nationalism in the narrative of the freedom movement in Odisha.⁴

A focus on the rhetoric within the *Utkal Sammilani* about the nature and purpose of politics, and its ultimate participation in anti-colonial nationalist politics, can reveal the ways in which a vocabulary of nationalism emerged in this period-despite the explicit efforts by the *Sammilani* leadership to the contrary. The establishment of Congress dominance over the Odia political scene in 1920 precipitated a shift towards nationalism in Odisha. Initially the *Sammilani* justified its abstinence from anti-colonial politics by arguing that there was no need to politically oppose the colonial state as long as it was fulfilling its responsibilities properly. However ,despite its best efforts, this attempt to affirm politics as governance remained riddled with contradictions.

The foremost intension of this essay is to analyze Gopabandhu Das's humanist definition of the *Utkal Sammilani*, the Odia community and the relationship between the region Odisha and Indian nations. His redefinition of both the *Utkal Sammilani* and the Odia community enabled him to post a new idea of liberal community which was not based on any exclusive marker of identity. Rather, it was based on a shared everyday life which in turn enabled him to see members of both the Odia and the Indian community as mutually interchangeable and fundamentally equal.

As the prevailing understanding of rule based on the relationship between the British sovereign and the Indian colonized subject was changed due to the introduction of electoral franchise in 1919-1920 and the Indian nation came to be understood as a conglomeration of linguistically distinct region, Odia attitudes towards anti-colonial, nationalist political agitation radically changed. The emerging recognition of regional linguistic politics within the Congress in 1920 occasioned a radical change in the attitude towards anti-colonial politics and alliance with the Indian National Congress within the *Utkal Sammilani*. It is at this moment that All India nationalism was given primacy in the *Utkal Sammilani* and through the activities of its members in Odisha in general. This nationalization of regional politics could not have been brought about without the intervention of a new breed of Odia intelligentsia led by Gopabandhu Das. These activists attempted to rethink crucial relationship between the British and the Odia people, the relationship between the interests of the region Odisha and the Indian nation and finally the relationship between the elite of public organizations and the people they seek to represent. It is this rethinking that produced a new notion of citizenship in Odisha articulated through terms such as *praja-sandhana* (ordinary-subject) often used by Gopabandhu Das in his writing. Central to

this rethinking was the privileging of those who constituted the 'silent masses of India' in definitions of community and politics.

In his speech and writings Gopabandhu Das conceptualized the relationship between regional linguistic politics and Indian Nationalism. Fundamental to his understanding of this relationship was Gopabandhu Das's populist recourse to the idea of the smallest fragment of both political units-region and nation- the common Odia people. In his speeches and writings, Gopabandhu like Gandhi, called for mass participation in the political activism and made the individual Odia central to both regional and national politics. Therefore his definition of the relationship between the region and the nation was founded on the primacy of the needs, interests and potential of the individual Odia person.

In order to make his point Das used both rhetoric strategies and conceptual intervention into the way community was thought in Odisha. He tried to introduce a new concerns into the *Sammilani* platform and to reformulate the very meaning and symbolism of the *Sammilani* as a community organization. While he called for a reformulation of the prevailing understanding of the *Utkal Sammilani* to include more populist ideas and imperatives, Das also introduced a new way of thinking about community itself by arguing that the ultimate objective of the *Utkal Sammilani* should be the establishment of *udaar manabikata* or 'expensive humanism'. This informed the way he re-conceptualized the constituents of the Odia community and located the Odia region within the Indian nation. More significantly, the notion of 'expensive humanism' informed his eventual construction of the identity of the Odia/Indian citizen. He used subversive rhetoric strategies to introduce new concerns and issues that had been hitherto neglected in Presidential speeches. He employed the vary structures that the earlier self-consciously political and elitist presidential speeches used to introduce a much more populist political agenda in the *Sammilani*. For instance, at the very onset of his speech, Gopabandhu Das addresses the issues of elitism in the *Utkal Sammilani* by arguing for a need to think about the organization in broader terms. As the Presidential speeches of the earlier years had often begun with obituaries to notable members of the Odia community, Gopabandhu too commenced with obituaries to recently deceased members of the Odia elite. However he departed from the earlier speeches by using this occasion to call attention to even greater losses to Odia population due to the ongoing famine and floods in Odisha in 1919. The significance of this departure was not simply because of the mention of the Odia masses in the same register as the members of the Odia elite but also due the tone of this invocation of the Odia people.

Other than this, in different concerns of this land, overwhelmed by scarcity, Food shortage and disease many left helpless and hopeless are dying untimely death-If they had lived a long life with healthy and strong

Bodies they could have added great strength to this country. Who knows what talents lay hidden in them. Who can say what they could contributed to society if these talents were given time to develop? Today we have a deep sorrow in our hearts for those helpless, unknown dead of Orissa. It is superfluous to say that their deaths have weakened Orissa. Each one of them, either in a big way or a small way, were the strength of this community union of ours.⁵

Furthermore, by invoking the potential of the Odia people, Das was surreptitiously turning on his head the previous tendency within the *Utkal Sammilani* to focus on the potential and significance of particular members of the organization. His awareness of the tendency is evident from his attempt later in the speech to defend the role of particular members of the organization as a vanguard class. By using the language of potential and talent which had hitherto been used in the service of upholding elite control of the *Utkal Sammilani*, Das was attempting to radically change the way the people, the elite, potential for development, etc were brought thought of within the organization. To this end he called for a more inclusive understanding of the organization.

This *Sammilani* is of the Oriya community. It is not only of those who are present here or of those who have written letters of support in lieu of their absence. For that matter, this *Sammilani* is not just of those men, women and children of the Oriya community who are living today; those who have not been born yet, those who will be our descendants in hundreds of years to come—this *Sammilani* is theirs. This the continuous life force of the Oriya community. If we do not see the *Sammilani* as such then this *Sammilani* will remain a mere conference—that is, it will be a meeting of knowledgeable Oriya people aimed at discussing the interests of Orissa or that of Oriya people and the pure feeling of union, the constant image of community feeling will not be reflected in the *Sammilani*.⁶

This call for a more expansive understanding of the *Sammilani* was based on his argument for a much more inclusive understanding of the Oriya community which was no longer merely founded on the Odia language. Rather, Das's new Odia community was based on the place Orissa.

Who is Oriya community? It is seen around the world that communities are named after places. A feeling of affinity develops naturally among those who inhabit the same place. Their hope, purpose, fate and future is confined to a singular interest for welfare. Their land of action is the same and undifferentiated. For them that very land is a pure and lovable space. It is their birth place. In their view it is equal to heaven. Therefore, those who live in such a defined tract of land—they are one community and they are named according to the name of that land. According to this natural law those who have been born and have died with the same hopes and desires, and have been imbued with the same interests—they are all Oriya community.⁷

This definition of the Odia community signaled a significant shift the understanding of community in Odisha as the fundamental basis of the Odia community shifted from language to place. Definitions of community in Odisha, both before and after the formation of the *Utkal Sammilani* had always been based on language. The efforts by the colonial states to replace Odia with Bengali first occasioned public articulation of the interests of the 'Odia community'. Since then community came to be defined as a group of people speaking the same language. Occasional efforts to broaden this understanding to include non-Odia-speaking communities who resided in the Odisha Division were made by the domiciled Bengalis of Odisha Division. The domiciled Bengalis were the influential group within the Odia literati of Cuttack and played an important role in the Odia language movement of the nineteenth century. In 1905, the *Star of Utkal*, an English language paper published by a member of the domiciled Bengali community featured an article which introduced the term *Utkaliya* to denote member of the Odia community. *Utkaliyas* were people who lived in the Odia-speaking area but did not use Odia in their day to day lives.⁸ However, it was with Gopabandhu's speech that the dominant understanding of the Odia community went through its first divorce from language.

Gopabandhu called for a shift in focus from linguistically based community to geographically organized regional community. In his speech, G.Das managed this shift by calling into question the distinction between Utkal and Odia. The common understanding of Utkal due to its link with the term *Utkaliya*-invoked the idea of the inhabitants of Odisha. The appellation of Odia denoted the speakers of the Odia language. Das posed-is there a distinction between those who inhabit Orissa and those who speak Odia?

Some people even see a difference between Utkal and Oriya. In fact, there is no difference between these two and there should not be any. Whether they are from Bengal or Punjab, from Marwar or Madras, Hindu or Muslim, Aryan or Aboriginal, those who have assimilated their selfhood and interest with Orissa ...Orissa is theirs and are of Orissa. There is almost no place on earth where different communities or societies are not living together. Only, the focus of their interests is one. It is natural and acceptable that over time they become united as a community. The United States of America is an example of such a formation of community affiliation.⁹

This move proposed to shift the focus of Odia regional politics from an exclusive community based on linguistic identity to a more inclusive constituency based on a shared everyday life in a common place. However, the argument for a community based on adjacency and commonality of interests did not necessarily involve a disavowal of the Odia community as a linguistic unit. Rather the very invocation of other such linguistic identities such as Bengali, Punjabi, Marwari etc. reveals Gopabandhu's investment in the distinctiveness of these identities. In fact, he was calling for a cosmopolitan idea of community where shared interests, common historical experience and future aspirations transcended rather than affaced particular linguistic identities. Furthermore, by calling for transcendence of linguistic identities he did not forsake the idea of a distinct region of Odisha. Infact for Das, the transcendence of particular linguistic, religious or caste identity was possible precisely because the geographical category Odisha was assumed as an irrevocable reality. Hence, his call for the inclusion of other linguistic groups in the Oriya community did not threaten to demolish the long-cherished vision of a separate province of Odisha.

The geography of the proposed province of Odisha became central to the objectives of the *Sammilani* as a consequence of Das's privileging of a special definition of the Odia community. Hence in this session a new constitution of the *Utkal Sammilani* was drafted where the concept of 'natural Orissa' as a geographical category was defined.¹⁰ In the new constitution, Natural Orissa was opposed to the existing 'artificial' or political Orissa that did not include all Odia-speaking areas. This 'Natural Odisha' was the proposed province of Odisha that the *Utkal Sammilani* had been lobbying for since 1903. Das's privileging of shared space over shared language underlined the centrality of the category of 'natural Odisha'.

As the definition of regional community came to be founded on a commonality of interests and shared everyday life rather than exclusive on language, Gopabandhu was able to argue for a new set of objectives for the *Utkal Sammilani* that were aimed at fostering an inclusive politics based on expansive humanism. He listed three main objectives of the *Utkal Sammilani*. First, the *Sammilani* was to be responsible for fostering kinship among the various communities that had made Odisha their home. Second, the *Sammilani* should participate in

politics because as a well-rounded community organization all interests and concerns of the community fall within the purview of the *Sammilani*. He argued that without political power it was impossible to achieve the overall development of the Odia community. Hence participation in politics, which as understood as anti-colonial activism, was essential to the effectiveness of the organization. Finally, Das proposed that the ultimate aim of the organization should be the establishment of liberal humanism. At stake in these three disjointed objectives was G.Das's effort to bring about a major reversal in the position of the *Utkal Sammilani* on Odia participation in the Indian National Congress led an anti-colonial political movement. Through a radical revision of the understanding of Odia community Das was attempting to argue for a different understanding of the relationship between Odisha and India as well as Odisha and the Colonial state.

At the root of this revision was his use of expansive humanism which enabled him to forge an intrinsic connection between the interest of the Odia community and that of the Indian nation. It should be noted that rather than merely arguing that primacy should be given to the interests of the emergent Indian nation, G.Das argued his position from the vantage point of a member of the Odia community. That is, he approached the question of the relationship between Odisha and India from the perspective of the interests of the Odia community. Hence, he argued that the achievement of the ultimate goal of the *Utkal Sammilani*-expansive humanism could be possible only through espousing broader Indian objectives.

India feeling will definitely help us in our journey towards gaining expansive humanism. We have to remember that we are part of the Indian community. India is a mega-nation, hence over time many small communities marked by provincial differences have emerged in India; only all their fates are encompassed in the fate of India. Whether we are connected with Indian institutions or not, we have to remember that we are human first, then Indian and finally Oriya. If we do not keep this thought in mind then the development of our community is impossible. Every individual has freedom, only without social foundation this freedom cannot emerge. Just like that, the freedom of Orissa will blossom on the firm ground of strong Indian nationalism and all-inclusive expansive humanism.¹¹

Unlike M.S.Das' sisterhood of provinces organized by a common allegiance to the British Empire, Gopabandhu Das' India remains unmarked by Indian subject-hood to the British. Infact this construction of the Indian community ignores the British presence in India entirely. Hence, while M.S.Das' organizing principle for the making of the Indian nation was a shared bond with the British empire, for Gopabandhu Das it was a social kinship of common interests. The Indian nation in Gopabandhu Das' formulation was a society of linguistic provinces where the freedom of each province was ensured by the establishment of the strong national civil society. Hence, Das posed Orissa as something akin to a citizen in the Indian social world populated by other such communities. Also the emphasis on India as a liberal civil society allowed him to re-imagine the relationship between other communities residing in Odisha-Biharis and Bengalis.

The earlier *Utkal Sammilani* attitude towards these groups is best exemplified by M.S.Das' description of the Bengalis and Biharis as 'intermediary ruling races'. That is, M.S.Das argued that being majority linguistic groups in their respective provinces, these groups of people occupied a more dominant position in the colonial hierarchy of influence. They acted as intermediaries between the colonial rulers and the Odia people. Such a reading of the relationship between these communities and the Odia community implied unequal and oppressive transactions between Bengalis and Biharis and the Odia community. Through his discussion of liberal humanism and a national civil society, Gopabandhu Das attempted re-imagine the relationship as equal. This was not just an effort to reduce animosity between the groups but also a subversive effort to provide a definition of the Odia and Indian community where such 'intermediary ruling races' could not dominate.

Gopabandhu Das's approach was clearly a departure from Madhusudan Das' understanding of the Non-Odia-speaking people such as Bengali and Biharis as 'intermediary ruling races' whose control over the fortunes of the Odia-speaking people, in the Bengal presidency and the province of Bihar and Orissa, threatened to negate the colonial government's efforts to introduce representative government based on franchise. Gopabandhu Das's concern about the creation of a community based on the homogenizing potential of expansive humanism was informed by his desire to think the relationship between the Odias, Bengalis and Biharis differently.

A stake in this rethinking was an argument for a national community that allowed for both Indian nationalism and Odia regional affiliation. That is, the move from an idea of regional community based on exclusive interests to an idea of regional community predicated on expansive humanism enabled the imagination of an Indian citizen who could be simultaneously loyal to both India and Odisha.

References:

- ¹ . *Utkal Sammilani* (1903) was organized as a non-political organization. It used to discuss problems pertaining to amalgamation of the Odia-speaking tracts, education, industrialization, unity among the Odia-speaking people etc. The Sammilani struck to constitutional methods of petitioning, ventilating grievances in the legislature, sponcering deputation etc. Criticisms of the Government and Government officials were strictly prohibited in its sessions.
- ² . In Madhusudan Das, "*Utkal Sammilani*," *Utkal Sahitya*, vol.ii,no.3(1908),p.63
- ³ .D.G.Panda., *Political Philosophy of Pandit Gopabandhu Das*,Cuttack,1980.
- ⁴ .For such histories of regional politics in Odisha see Purusottam Kar.,*Indian National Congress and Orissa,1885-1936*,Cuttack,1987,Nibewdita Mohanty.,*Oriya Nationalism:Quest for a United Orissa,1866-1936*,New Delhi,1982.
- ⁵ . Das, Gopabandhu., *Desa Miisrana Andolana*,Vol.3,Gopabandhu Rachanabali (Collected Works of Gopabandhu Das),Cuttack,1976,10.
- ⁶ . *Ibid.*,10.
- ⁷ . *Ibid*,12
- ⁸ .Anonymous, "Utkaliya" Star of Utkal,1905
- ⁹ . Utkal is a term used both to denote the Oriya language and the place Odisha as a geographical category. In this particular instance Gopabandhu is using Utkal to denote the both and here Oriya denotes simply the language. Das., *Desa Misrana Andolana*, p.12.
- ¹⁰ . Das ,Debendra Kumar., (ed) *Utkal Sammilani*,(1903-1936) ,part.1,Rourkela,2005.
- ¹¹ . *Desa Misrana Andolana*,p.15.