Scopus

LAND, LANGUAGE, AND LORD: THE EVOLUTION OF ODIA IDENTITY

Maimuna Khatun

Research Scholar
School of History, Gangadhar Meher University, Sambalpur.
Mail Id: maimuna.khatun8@gmail.com

Dr. Santosh Kumar Mallik

Assistant Professor
School of History, Gangadhar Meher University, Amruta Vihar, Sambalpur.

Abstract:

The paper examines the connection between Odisha's geography, Odia literature, and the Jagannath tradition in shaping Odia identity and self-identity. The identity of a community relies on its language, history, shared culture, and traditions. These elements foster a sense of unity and commitment, creating the foundation of a collective identity. Odia identity is a regional identity rooted in a single language and culture that has developed over many years. It manifests through literature, legends, and the Jagannath traditions. During colonial times, the culture, language, and society of the Odia people faced external challenges, leading to the marginalization of Odia interests within their land. This interaction with outside society cultivated a sense of unity or *"Odiatwa Bhaba"* among the Odia people. It paved the way for the language movement in the early twenties and eventually resulted in the unification of all Odia-speaking regions into a province in 1936. The paper emphasizes that each element, land, culture, language, and Lord Jagannath, contributes uniquely yet harmoniously to the development of a distinctive identity rooted in tradition but adaptable to change.

Keywords: Odia identity, land, Lord Jagannath, language, cultural heritage.

1. Introduction:

The strongest pillar of national life is its language and literature, which bring together a diverse population of a territory. They promote emotional integration among citizens and firmly establish national unity. They are the roots of all nationalist feelings and thoughts and bring civilizations under one roof. Literature is one of many important factors that confer individuality to a region. It is the product of social tradition. Odia is the spoken language of the people of Odisha, a state situated on the east coast of India. Odisha shares its borders with West Bengal in the northeast, Jharkhand to the north, Chhattisgarh to the west, Andhra Pradesh to the south, and the Bay of Bengal to the east. It was the first state in India created purely on a linguistic basis by the British Government in 1936 (Sinha,1962, p.158). There is considerable controversy surrounding the origin of Odisha's current name. The name Odisha has either derived from *Odra-desa, Odra-rashtra, or Odra-visaya,* with the root word being *"Odra."* The term Odra is a Prakrit word that dates back as far as the Dharma Sastra and the Mahabharata. Many historical literary works mention the people called *Odras* and their territory as the Odra country. The Bhagavata Purana specifically details the origin of the Odra kingdom, named after its ruler, who was a son of Sudesna and King Bali of the Eastern Anava Kingdom. However, it has been established that the region was named not after its ruler but after the people who inhabited it (Tripathy,2012, pp.148-150). The Odia language is an Indo-Aryan language with significant historical and cultural importance in the land of Lord Jagannath. It has roots from Vedic times to the modern world and is known for its rich literary heritage, especially in poetry and prose. In Odisha's history, it holds a special place due to its association with the struggle for Odia identity in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and it was used as a medium of expression for various artistic, cultural, and literary endeavors to establish a sense of Odia identity among the people (Pictorially presented in Fig.1).
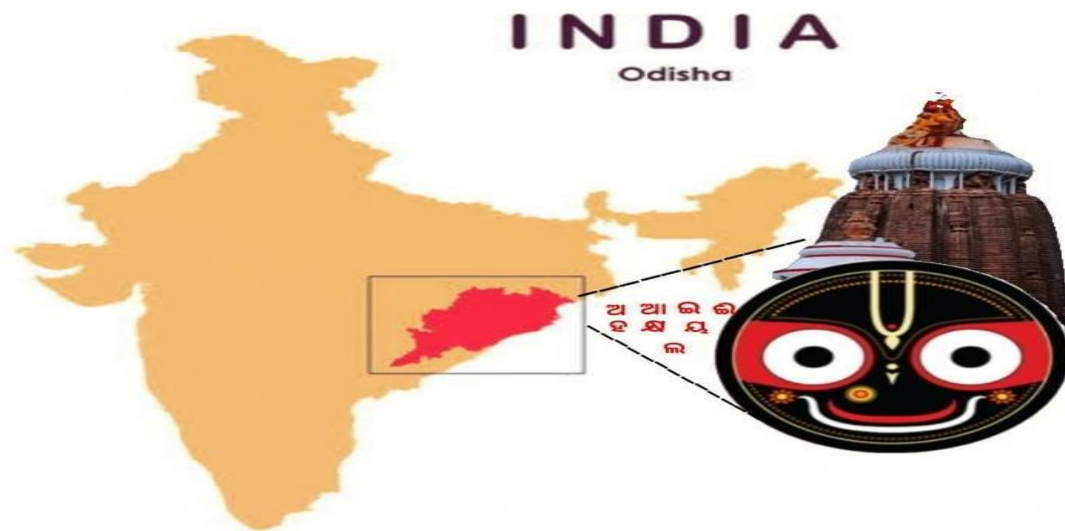
Fig. 1 Pictorial illustration of Landscape, Language, and Lord Jagannath of Odisha.

This research paper examines the development of Odia identity through geography, literature, and religion. It aims to critically assess how Odia literature, from its early devotional texts to contemporary poetry and prose, has played a key role in shaping regional consciousness and the intellectual traditions of the Odia people. It seeks to analyze the role of literature as a means of self-assertion and cultural preservation. Central to this study is the relationship between Odisha's geography, literature, and spiritual traditions, particularly the Jagannath Cult. It explores how these three elements together form the foundation of the Odia people's intellectual and cultural identity by providing a unique regional character. In tracing the historical movements that have influenced Odisha's intellectual heritage, the study closely examines significant moments such as the Odia language movement, anti-colonial resistance, and regional mobilizations. These episodes not only sparked a cultural renaissance but also strengthened the connection between land, lord, language, and identity in the Odia context.

2. Language as a Marker of Odia Identity

Odisha was mostly the land of aboriginal races like Gondhs and Kandhas, speaking several Dravidian and Austroasiatic languages before the advent of the Aryan language. This land was the

meeting point of Dravidian, Aryan, and aboriginal cultures and traditions due to its geographical location. The *Natyasastra* states that people known as the *Odras* adopted a language called *Odhra or Odhra Magadhi,* which was an Aryan language and distinguished from those of the Dravidians (Das,1951, p.137). The region was under the influence of the *Pali and Prakrit* languages. For a while, Sanskrit became popular, but the evidence supplied by the *Natyasastra* proves that *Odhra Magadhi* was an established language (Sahu,1984, pp 86-88.). The development of this language is also evident in the Tantric Charyya lyrics, some of which were written by eminent *Odia Sidhhas* in the 9th and 10th centuries A.D. Odia is an Indo-Aryan language, a sub-branch of the Indo-Iranian or Aryan branch of the Indo-European languages. It became an independent language around the tenth century A.D (Acharya,1983, pp 165-166). The political unification of Odisha under the Somavamshi rulers in the tenth century AD fostered the development of a common language, which is Odia. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Ganga rulers further unified the Odia regions under a single political entity called Sakalatkola and established Odia as the dominant language of the land and its people (Panda,2008, p.275). Kapilendra Deva, the most renowned ruler of medieval Odisha and the founder of the Suryavamsa dynasty, officially named the territory Odisha, and Odia became the state language (Mansingh,1962, p.278). Later, Ganga rulers attempted to control the administration of the Jagannath Temple of Puri as a countermeasure against the rising influence of the priests. This sudden shift in royal policies was a response to the growing prominence of the local vernacular. By then, the Odia language had already made its mark in literature. The discovery of numerous Odia inscriptions indicates that the vernacular language captured the imagination of the common Odia people. Early inscriptions in Odia are found from the Markandesvara and Patalesvara temples at Puri in the 12th and 13th centuries. Its presence is also observed at the Sikharesvara temple of Kapilas, the Vidyanath temple at Vidyanath, the Lingaraj Temple in Bhubaneswar, the Akhandalesvara Temple at Prataparudrapur, an unknown Shiva temple at Junagarh, and the Pottesvara temple at Pottangi. Saivism played a leading role in promoting and popularizing the local vernacular language in Odisha. During the Ganga rule, inscriptions in the Odia language and script are found at the Kedar-Gauri temple in Bhubaneswar (1396 AD), the Budha Mahadeva temple at Basudevapur, Siddhesvara (1394 AD), and Trilicanesvara Temples (1395 AD), among others. Many inscriptions from the late 14th and early 15th centuries have been discovered at Basudevapur in Bhadrak district, Shergarh and Patirajpur

in Balasore, and Konark in Puri (Moharana,2001, p.239). This established that Odia was widely used as the medium of expression across Odisha. Numerous Odia inscriptions written in Telugu script have also been found, such as at the Kurmesvara temple at Laksmi-Narayan temple of Simhachalam (1419 AD) and Srikurman (1422 AD). The Trimali Math (1384 AD) and Sankaranand Math (1396 AD) copper plate grants from the Telugu king contain Odia language. The use of the vernacular language in Telugu-speaking regions demonstrated the presence of a sizable Odia population, which asserted their unique lifestyle and cultural identity, setting themselves apart from the surrounding people (Mahanty,1977, pp.211-212). This gave them a sense of community to promote their shared interests in an unfamiliar land. The use of Odia in the Telugu script resulted from the involvement of Odia-speaking people in the area. It reflected their consciousness of identity and their desire to reaffirm their distinctiveness from Telugu speakers. People across social classes and communities participated in and contributed to spreading Odia literature. A regional consciousness began to emerge, and the Odia language became a symbol of identity and unity. From that time onward, Odia literature experienced gradual development. Grierson has convincingly demonstrated that Odisha, extending from the Ganges to the Godavari and from the sea to Amarakantaka, represented a single linguistic region.
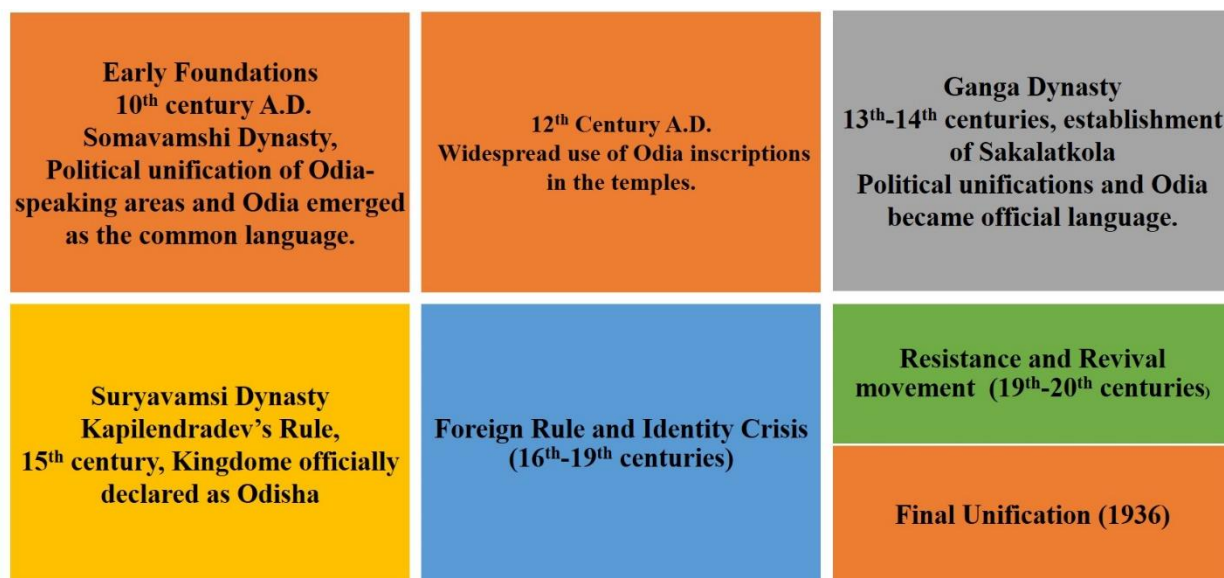

Fig. 2: Chronological structure of the development of Odia identity.

The Odia vernacular developed in the fifteenth century gave a new dimension to Odia consciousness. This is due to the presence of the five most popular medieval intellectuals, popularly known as *Panchasakhas*. Their writings reflected a consciousness about Odisha as a state and its people, its kings, and gods. Sarala Dasa's literary masterpiece, the Mahabharata, which he wrote in the Odia language, led to the Odianisation of the Sanskrit Mahabharata (Panigrahi,1976). Events and characters of his Mahabharata revolved entirely around indigenous plots. All figures from the original epic were given local flavors. The Pandavas and their mother were portrayed as Odia people acting and behaving as a traditional Odia family. They spoke in Odia, ate local traditional food, and followed Odia social norms and traditions. (Behera, 1999, p.155). All locations, including minor places, were placed within the Odia soil by assigning the region geographical significance. This demonstrates Sudra Muni's intentions to restore the glory and pride of Odia as a unique race. Balaram Dasa replaced the original Sanskrit settings and geography of the Ramayana with Odisha's landscape and climate in his Odia Ramayana. This localization of the epic turned Odisha into the central focus, emphasizing the uniqueness of the Odia language, land, and culture. Jagannath Dasa's *Odia Bhagabata* challenged the Brahmanical monopoly over religious scriptures and became a major force shaping the social and cultural life of the Odia people. Writing the *Bhagabata* in Odia made spiritual knowledge accessible to common people in remote villages of Odisha (Mishra1989, pp 45-50). This established Odia as a legitimate religious and literary language. The *Bhagabata Tungi* in distant, unknown villages became a cultural center where ordinary people shared their cultural and religious experiences. Even today, every Odia on his deathbed recites verses from the *Bhagabata*, reflecting its deep-rooted influence. This continues to be evident in folk traditions, community life, and religious practices that strengthen Odia identity (Mund,1991, p.170). As Mayadhara Mansingh stated, it became a symbol of Odia identity that reinforced the close connection between religion and daily life. Dinakrushna Dasa, in his epic "*Rasakallola,*" established Odia as a powerful language through his poetic style and rich vocabulary. This literary work, deeply rooted in Odisha's spiritual ethos, established Odia as a distinct language. By ensuring its growth in the subsequent centuries, it reinforced Odia's identity by incorporating local dialects, emotions, and traditions into a devotional epic.
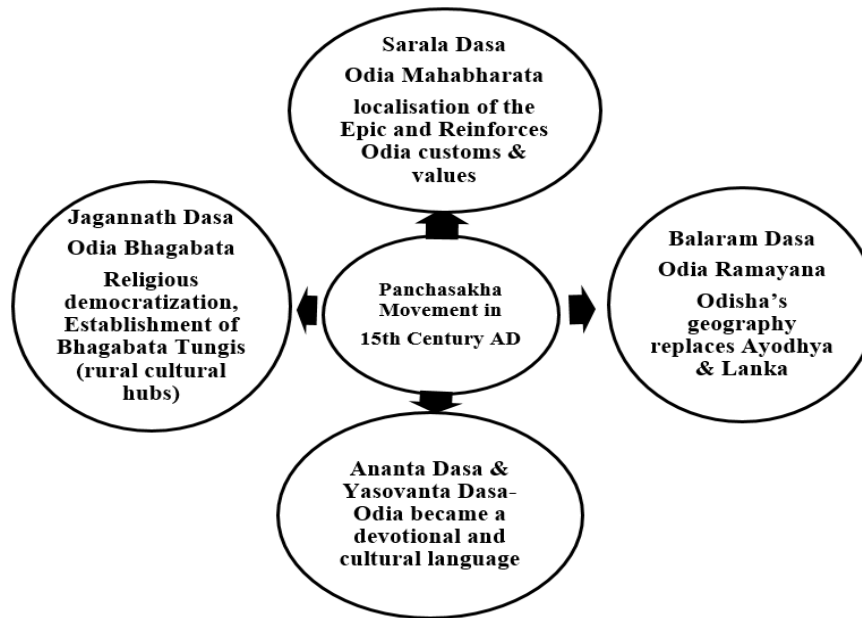
Fig. 3 Panchasakha Movement of the 15th Century AD in Odia literature.

Culturally, the name Odisha signifies a civilization that has flourished for thousands of years, with the Odia language forming the foundation of its spiritual, artistic, and literary traditions. The Jagannath Temple in Puri, one of Hinduism's most revered sites, uses Odia in its rituals, hymns, and administrative functions, reinforcing the language's sacred importance. Classical arts like Odissi dance, which originate from ancient temple performances and the region's rich literary heritage, from Sarala Das's 15th-century Odia Mahabharata to Fakir Mohan Senapati's 19th-century modernist writings, are deeply connected to the linguistic identity that Odisha embodies. Ancient inscriptions, such as those in *Odra-Magadhi Prakrit* and maritime trade records, further highlight the historical continuity of Odia as a key marker of the land's identity. Therefore, the name Odisha is not just a label but a symbol of resilience, recognizing a race that preserved its language despite colonial fragmentation, economic marginalization, and political neglect. The shift from Orissa to Odisha and from Oriya to Odia was a significant linguistic and cultural correction that addressed colonial distortions of the region's true identity. The spoken language of the people of Odisha, Odia, known as Oriya in English, was the main representation of their regional and cultural identity. The language movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, led by

educated Odia intellectuals like Fakirmohan Senapati, Gaurisankar Ray, Madhusudan Das, etc., emphasised the uniqueness of the language to challenge the dominant Bengali and Telugu languages. It greatly mobilized the demand for the creation of a separate province for the Odia-speaking people (Patra,1971, pp.219-222). Their long collective efforts led to the creation of Odisha province on 1 April 1936 on the linguistic basis by uniting the Odia-speaking tracts of Cuttack, Balasore, Puri, Ganjam, Sambalpur, and Koraput (Mishra, 1986, p.79).

The term "Orissa" was a British adaptation derived from the Sanskritised *Odra Desa* or the land of the *Odras*. Still, it misrepresented the actual pronunciation in Odia, where the region has always been called *Oḍisa* (pronounced as O-dee-sha) (Sinha,1962, p.157). Likewise, the language was anglicized as Oriya in colonial records, straying from its authentic phonetic form, Odia. This difference wasn't just about spelling but reflected a deeper historical erasure. Colonial officials, disregarding linguistic nuances, imposed external names that severed the land and its people from their authentic identity. Over the years, Odia scholars, writers, and cultural leaders fought to restore the correct name, claiming that colonial names were a legacy of cultural suppression. This resulted in the passage of the Orissa (Alteration of Name) Bill, 2010, and the Constitution (113th Amendment) Bill, 2010, both approved by the Indian Parliament. On November 1, 2011, these changes became official, restoring Odisha as the state's name and Odia as the language's official name in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (The Hindu,2011). This change was more than symbolic; it was a declaration of linguistic pride and a link to history. By removing colonial distortions, Odisha reclaimed its indigenous identity, strengthening the cultural and political unity of its people. The change also aligned India's official records with the true identity of the Odia people, correcting a long-standing misrepresentation and emphasizing the importance of linguistic authenticity in building a post-colonial nation. The conversion from *Orissa* to *Odisha* in 2011 was more than an official correction; it was a powerful proclamation of the cultural and linguistic identity of the Odia race. It was a correction of historical wrongs. By restoring the state's name to its authentic phonetic form, *Oḍiśā*, the change dismantled a colonial-era distortion that had remained for centuries. This renaming reflects three core dimensions of Odia identity. First, it affirms linguistic legitimacy, honoring the correct pronunciation and script of a classical language. Second, it represents a cultural reclamation,

reconnecting the people with their rich heritage of literature and indigenous traditions that had been overshadowed by anglicised terminology. Finally, it serves as a political claim of self-representation, allowing the Odia people to define their identity on their terms within the broader framework of the Indian nation. It was an effort to reclaim the indigenous identity and cultural integrity of the people of the region. From the maritime legacy of ancient Kalinga to the intellectual renaissance of modern Odia literature, the name *Odisha* captures the continuity of a rich cultural heritage. It recognizes the enduring link between language, land, and identity, paying homage to a civilization that has evolved through centuries while retaining its distinct character. The Odia language is not just a tool for communication but also a powerful instrument for cultural unity, resistance, and self-determination of the Odia people.

3. Land and Territorial Identity:

Historically known as *Odra Desha, Kalinga, Toshali, and Utkala*, the land of the Odia people, Odisha has immense pride and antiquity through its flourishing maritime trade and far-reaching overseas influence. The Odia people were the pioneers in establishing Indian colonies in foreign lands. Their bravery, patriotism, and illustrious past have been mentioned in many religious scriptures like the Mahabharata as well as Jain and Buddhist literatures (Mishra,1986, p.96). The state of Odisha and its name are deeply connected to its cultural and linguistic identity, especially with the Odia language. It is the main unifying aspect for its people. The naming of the state as Odisha (Odia: ଓଡ଼ିଶା) reflects the *Prakrit and Apabhramsha* influences before solidifying in modern Odia (Tripathy,2012, p.45). The British colonial administration recorded the region as *Orissa*, an anglicized version derived from Persian and Arabic transliterations (*Urdisha*, *Urissa*). Post-independence, the state was officially named *Orissa* under the Orissa (Alteration of Name) Act, 1950**.** However, to align with the correct phonetic and linguistic heritage of the Odia language, the name was officially changed to *Odisha* (and the language from *Oriya* to *Odia*) through the Orissa (Alteration of Name) Bill, 2010**,** which came into effect on November 1, 2011**.** This change was a reclamation of the region's historical identity, emphasizing its cultural and linguistic roots, as *Odisha* more accurately represents the native pronunciation and etymology (*Odra → Odisha*). The modern endorsement reflects both scholarly consensus and regional pride in preserving the authenticity of the Odia language and heritage. The

region historically had various names like *Kalinga, Utkala, Odra, and Toshali*, as mentioned in ancient texts like the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and inscriptions of Emperor Ashoka (Majumdar,1960, pp.356-362).

The earliest mentions of Odisha are found in ancient texts like the Mahabharata and the Puranas, where it is identified as the powerful kingdom of Kalinga (Tripathy,2012, p.231). However, its most significant historical moment occurred in 261 BCE, during the Kalinga War, fought between Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire and the independent Kalinga kingdom. The political and cultural identity of this region took its shape in the name of Kalinga as early as the 3rd century B.C (Majumdar,1960, pp 254-255). This land transformed the heart of the mighty Mauryan Emperor Ashoka, known for his barbarism, during the Kalinga War and made him renounce his aggressive imperialism. It is on this land that the cruel Chandashoka was converted to Dharmashoka and took shelter in Buddhism. Later on, he became the greatest supporter and propagator of Buddhism and made it an international religion. The overall discussion is summarized in a tabular form presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Historical Evolution of the names of the modern state of Odisha.

Name	Period	Significance
Odra and Odra Desha	Ancient Period (Vedic & Puranic era) Mentioned in the Mahabharata, Puranas, and inscriptions	Refers to the tribe "Odra" inhabiting central-eastern India; the earliest reference to the Odia people
Kalinga	3rd century BC onwards (Prominent in Ashoka's Invasion in 261 BC)	Famous for the Kalinga War; known for bravery, maritime trade, and rich cultural identity
Toshali	Mauryan Era (3rd century BC)	Capital city of the Kalinga province under Ashoka; mentioned in Ashokan edicts
Utkala	Medieval Period	Represents artistic excellence; often paired in Indian scriptures with Kalinga

Orissa	Colonial Period (Persian/Arabic influence, adopted by the British)	Anglicized and distorted version of Odra as Orissa. Officially used post-independence until 2011
Odisha	Modern Period (Officially adopted on 1 November 2011)	Reflects authentic Odia phonetic and cultural identity; aligns with the native term "ଓଡ଼ିଶା" (Oḍiśā)

After the decline of the Mauryan Empire, Kalinga rose to a most powerful kingdom under the Chedi dynasty ruler in King Kharavela, during the first century B.C (Sahu,1984). His Hathigumpha Inscription at Udayagiri Hills describes the military conquest of the Odia race and Kalinga over Magadha (Mahatab,1959, p.228). Subsequently, under Emperor Kharavela of the Chedi dynasty, Kalinga flourished as a vast and prosperous empire, with Kharavela himself being a devoted follower and patron of Jainism. Both religions flourished in this land along with Hinduism for a long time. The Odia people, especially the Sadhabas, were famous for their maritime trade with distant island countries like Sumatra, Borneo, Ceylon, Malaya, Java, Cambodia, etc. Odisha was a major center for maritime trade, with ancient ports like Palur and Tamralipti facilitating commerce with Southeast Asia (Behera,1999). This exchange influenced art, culture, and religious practices in the region. From the time of Ashoka till the reign of its last Hindu ruler, Mukunda Deva, Odisha was an independent, prosperous, and well-developed kingdom. Odisha flourished as Utkal under the Somavamshi rule, who built the famous Lingaraj temple in Bhubaneswar in the eleventh century AD. The Eastern Gangas built the Konark Sun Temple in the thirteenth century AD (Patnaik,2006. p.91). Its boundary touched the river Bhagirathi in the North to the Cauvery river in the South (Panda,2018). The name Utkal was mentioned in the Puranas and the Ramayana. The cultural identity of this land was further consolidated during the Gajapati rule in the fifteenth, sixteenth centuries with the territorial expansion under Kapilendradeva. The Puri Jagannath Temple became the main center of religious and cultural identity of the Odia people. They continue to remind the Odia people of their glorious past, incredible sculptures, and architecture. Odisha lost its freedom in 1568 with the conquest of Sulaiman Karrani, the Afghan ruler of Bengal, and his general Kala Pahada, which led to the beginning of the miseries of its people. Subsequently, the Mughals and the Marathas gained

sovereignty over the region. This weakened the cultural and political structures of the Odia people in the medieval age (Banerjee,1930). It disrupted Odisha's political unity and led to its fragmentation and integration into various administrative units. In 1633 A.D, the English merchants began to establish their trade factories in Odisha and sowed the seeds of future colonial rule in this soil during the rule of Shahjahan. The death of Aurangzeb led the country to witness political disorder, and Odisha also came under its grip. After that, the series of Mughal-Maratha fights created favorable conditions for the English to capture the land. The Muslim rule lasted till 1751, and ultimately, the Bengal ruler handed over Odisha to the Marathas. In the 18th century, they gained control of parts of Odisha, particularly the coastal regions, until the British annexed it in 1803 following the Second Anglo-Maratha War (O. Malley,1908, p.357).

Under British rule, Odisha was divided. Coastal regions like Bhadrak, Balaswar, and Cuttack were incorporated into the Bengal Presidency, while the princely states of Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar remained semi-independent. Sambalpur, another important Odia-speaking area, was first placed under the South-West Frontier Province before being moved between Bengal and the Central Provinces: initially to Bengal in 1860, then to the Central Provinces in 1862, and back to Bengal in 1905. This administrative division was not just a bureaucratic decision but a planned colonial act that ignored the region's linguistic and cultural identity. Lord Curzon highlighted this injustice in 1912 in the House of Lords, calling for the unification of Odia-speaking areas and lamenting that the Odia race had been "sacrificed without compensation" because of their peaceful nature. Although he advocated for change, the new Bihar and Odisha Provinces created in 1912 only partially addressed the problem, as they included only some Odia-speaking regions, leaving many still under Bengal, Madras, and the Central Provinces (Patra,1971, p.145). This division diminished Odisha's distinct identity and downgraded the status of the Odia language by making Bengali and Hindi official languages in offices and schools, which caused resentment among Odia intellectuals. By the 19th century, Odia-speaking communities were spread across the Bengal Presidency, Madras Presidency, and Central Provinces under British rule (Menon,1956, p.245), leading to a fragmented identity and threatening their social, political, and cultural influence. Odisha and its people suffered from ongoing colonial neglect and indifference after losing their independence and being denied a unified administrative unit. This division jeopardized Odia

social, political, cultural, and linguistic pride, harming their identity, development, and continuity. The land and its people faced oppression and injustice. The splitting of Odia territories under British rule had long-lasting effects, weakening their cultural, economic, and political unity. The once-glorious maritime and warrior legacy of ancient Kalinga was overshadowed by colonial dominance, turning the Odias, known for their resistance and maritime skills, into subdued people under British control. British historian W.W. Hunter lamented the Odias' suffering, saying, "Unfortunately, however, we had filled our courts and public offices with highly educated, unscrupulous subordinates from Bengal, whom the *Uriyas* (Odias) regarded as foreigners just as much as if they had been Marathas. Indeed, under the Marathas, the peasantry could always limit their miseries. The jungles provided a safe retreat from Maratha violence; no asylum could be found to shelter the unhappy '*Uriyas'* from the dexterous extortions and chicanery of our Bengal underlings" (Hunter,2014, pp. 362-364). Later in the 19th century, John Beams described Odisha under the Bengal presidency as a dark and neglected lower province (Beams,1868, pp.278-280).

Under the Madras Presidency, Odia speakers in Ganjam faced forced assimilation into Telugu-dominated administration, while those in the Central Provinces fought against Hindi-centric policies. The lack of a unified administrative system also hampered social and economic progress, as resources and infrastructure development were uneven, leaving Odia regions neglected. British indifference toward Odia unification stemmed from their divide-and-rule strategy, which prioritized administrative convenience over ethnic or linguistic harmony. Consequently, the Odia people became a marginalized community in their land, deprived of political representation and economic opportunities. The oppression was not only administrative but also cultural, as the Odia language and heritage were suppressed in non-Odia provinces. Educational policies in Madras and the Central Provinces discouraged Odia-medium instruction, eroding linguistic pride among younger generations. The dispersal also weakened collective resistance against exploitation, as Odia people in different provinces were treated as minorities with no unified voice (Mohanty 2014, p.130). Despite these challenges, the introduction of the printing press in 1838 played a significant role in reviving the Odia language and literature. It facilitated the printing of Odia books and journals, strengthening linguistic and cultural ties. Various organizations, such as Utkala Bhasa Unnati Bidhayini Sabha, Ganjam Hitabadini Sabha,

Orissa Association, Utkala Sammilani, and newspapers like Utkal Dipika, Mukura, Asha, Sambalpur Hiteisini, and Prajabandhu played crucial roles in protesting British education policies and advocating for the restoration of Odia language and identity. Their collective efforts led to Odia becoming the official language and the amalgamation of Odia-speaking areas into the state of Odisha (Patra,1971, pp 91-93).

The prolonged marginalization and neglect of the Odia cause eventually led to a growing demand for unifying all Odia-speaking regions under a single administrative unit. It was on April 1, 1936, that the region gained status as a separate province based on its ethnic and linguistic unity, excluding many Odia-majority areas like Ganjam, Medinipur, Sareikala, and Kharasuan (Mishra,1986, pp.245-246). This reflected the colonial indifferent attitude toward Odia aspirations. The formation of modern Odisha was therefore a hard-fought achievement, stained by colonial indifference and administrative disintegration. While the state eventually regained some of its lost territories after independence, the scars of colonial neglect persisted, shaping Odisha's socio-economic challenges in the years that followed. The States Reorganisation Act of 1956 further refined state boundaries based on linguistic lines, though Odisha's borders remained largely stable (Menon,1956, p.62). The historical injustice of dividing Odia-speaking lands serves as a reminder of how colonial policies deliberately undermined linguistic and cultural identities, leaving a legacy that the state continues to deal with today.

4. Jagannath: The Sacred Core of Odia Identity:

Lord Jagannath, a form of the Hindu deity Vishnu, and His temple at Puri are more than just religious symbols; they are also political, cultural, and emotional icons of the Odia people. The Jagannath cult, centered around worshiping Lord Jagannath at Puri, captures the essence of Odia identity, blending history, religion, social life, and culture. It has preserved the distinctiveness of the region's people while adapting to changing times, making Jagannath more than just a god; it's the pride of the Odia people, or *Odia Asmita*. It forms the foundation of Odia political and socio-cultural identity. For centuries, the Jagannath tradition justified regional rulers and united diverse communities, becoming a core part of Odia unity and pride. Its importance goes beyond spirituality, influencing social norms, literature, culture, architecture, and the history of Odisha.

Due to its inclusive nature, it integrates Hindu Brahmanical, tribal, Buddhist, Saivism, and other religious sects, fostering pride and unity among Odia people and serving as the main symbol of their shared identity. The Jagannath tradition mainly involves worshiping the wooden deity Lord Jagannath and His siblings Balabhadra and Subhadra at Puri's Jagannath Temple (Eschmann et al.1978, pp 351-352). It is one of the four *Dhams*, or the sacred pilgrimage places in Hinduism. This regional deity is seen as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, with roots in both Hindu and tribal traditions. Historically, Lord Jagannath was originally worshiped as Nilamadhaba, a blue stone image of Narayana or Vishnu, by the Sabara tribes as a tribal deity (Mishra,1971, pp. 148-152). Lord Jagannath and His siblings, like Balabhadra and Subhadra, have tribal and Dravidian origins (Mohanty,2005, p.240). The blending of tribal wooden deities (Daru Devata) with mainstream Brahmanical gods, such as Vishnu, along with tribal symbols and rituals, makes the Jagannath traditions accessible to diverse social groups, including Brahmins, tribals, and non-Brahmins.

The Jagannath cult is a universal tradition that absorbs elements from various sects such as Vaishnavism, Shaktism, Buddhism, Jainism, and others. Lord Jagannath is often seen as the ninth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, replacing Buddha, and is also recognized in Kabirpanth and Nepalese Buddhism as a form of Lord Buddha. This shared religious practice among diverse groups is key to the formation of regional identity in Odisha. The ruling dynasties, from the Gangas to the Gajapatis, used this religious sentiment to legitimize their power by calling themselves the servants or *Rauta* of the deity. They portrayed themselves and their authority as divinely sanctioned, creating a direct link between rulers, the deity, and the Odia people that fostered cultural and political unity. This made the Jagannath cult and temple central not just to spirituality but to Odia civilization itself. The connection between kingship and religion fostered pride among the Odia people that set them apart from neighboring states like Andhra and Bengal. The temple rituals and traditions serve as powerful unifying forces among communities in Odisha. The most notable is the annual Ratha Yatra, where Lord Jagannath, along with Balabhadra and Subhadra, is paraded through Puri on large chariots. Along with rituals like the *Navakalevara,* a renewal of the wooden idols every twelve years, this festival attracts millions of devotees worldwide. People of all backgrounds, castes, and communities participate, showing the cult's inclusiveness. The idea of the world as "one family," a central principle of Indian philosophy, guides this practice and

encourages universal brotherhood and social unity. During Ratha Yatra, caste, class, and gender barriers fade as millions partake in the festivities with shared devotion. Rituals such as *Chhera Pahara,* where the Gajapati king cleans the chariots of the deities, symbolize service and humility, strengthening collective identity. The cult combines diverse cultural and religious elements, acting as a unifying force for the Odia people. It fosters a shared religious identity by integrating Hindu, tribal, Jain, and Buddhist traditions. The *Mahaprasada*, or sacred food shared daily among devotees at the Jagannath Temple regardless of caste, symbolizes social unity and equality. The temple and cult support Odia literature and language by preserving Odia texts. Many saints and poets, like the fifteenth-century Panchasakha, composed devotional works in Odia, elevating its status as a classical Indian language (Behera,2000, p.56). Daily rituals and administrative activities in Odia further reinforce its legitimacy against the dominance of Sanskrit, Bengali, and Telugu in the region.

During colonial times, efforts to suppress the Odia language and culture made the language movement more urgent, eventually leading to Odisha's creation as a separate state based on language. Under British rule, when Bengal and its language dominated eastern India's administration, Odia identity was targeted for assimilation into Bengali traditions. In this period, the Jagannath cult became a symbol of resistance, with the use of Odia in rituals asserting cultural independence. Odia leaders like Madhusudan Das and Gopabandhu Das used Lord Jagannath and His cult as symbols of regional pride and resistance to colonial rule, transforming them into icons of Odia consciousness. Today, Lord Jagannath remains a central symbol of Odia culture worldwide. The Odissi dance and Ratha Yatra continue to promote Odia identity and heritage globally, with international observances of Ratha Yatra reinforcing this connection. Through inclusive rituals, political symbolism, language support, and cultural stories, the cult has united diverse communities under a shared regional identity. It has helped Odia people stand strong against external pressures and internal divisions. Lord Jagannath, both as a spiritual figure and a symbol of Odia unity, continues to inspire generations and stands as a testament to the resilience of regional identities rooted in shared culture and beliefs. The deep emotional bond that Odia people share with Lord Jagannath is profound, intertwined with their cultural, spiritual, and social identity. This attachment exceeds simple religious devotion, reflecting a personal connection,

Scopus

pride, and emotional fulfillment that define Odia identity. Often called the "Lord of the Universe" and the state deity of Odisha, Lord Jagannath is not only a divine figure but also a symbol of unity, heritage, and emotional belonging for the entire Odia community.

Fig. 4 The Annual Cart Festival of Lord Jagannath and His siblings (The Ratha Yatra)
(Source: Odisha Tourism)

5.Conclusion:

The mutual influence of land, Jagannath tradition, Odia language, and culture shapes a strong Odia identity. The Odia-speaking region, Odisha, with its diverse geography from tribal highlands to coastal plains, provides both a symbolic and physical foundation for Odia identity and heritage. The development of Odia identity is a complex, deeply interconnected process influenced by Odisha's land, its rich cultural heritage, the Odia language, and the spiritual significance of the Jagannath Cult. The vibrant Odia culture, expressed through Odissi dance, Pattachitra art, music, and festivals like Ratha Yatra, promotes cultural continuity and community pride, blending Vedic, Bhakti, and tribal traditions into a cohesive cultural identity. These elements together create a sense of belonging, pride, and continuity that define what it means to be Odia. At the core of this identity is Lord Jagannath, whose divine presence unites all religions, creeds, and castes, embodying the timeless ideals of unity, equality, and devotion. His traditions serve as a

spiritual anchor for cultural continuity and social cohesion. Together, these components, land, deity, and literature, form a unique and regionally specific Odia identity that fosters a sense of belonging across different regions and generations. From the coastal plains of the Bay of Bengal to the forested Eastern Ghats, Odisha's geography is more than just a physical space; it is a fundamental source of Odia cultural and historical identity. The fertile deltas of the Mahanadi, Baitarani, Budhabalanga, and Brahmani rivers have supported agricultural communities for centuries, creating a strong bond between the people and their environment. This agrarian way of life has instilled values of resilience, cooperation, and reverence for nature, which are central to Odia identity. The coastal city of Puri, home to the Jagannath Temple, symbolizes Odisha's spiritual core, while the tribal interior regions highlight the state's indigenous diversity, integrating tribal and non-tribal communities into a shared identity. The Odia identity is a remarkable blend of geographical, cultural, linguistic, and spiritual elements, each reinforcing the others to forge a cohesive and lasting sense of self. Odisha's land provides the foundation, its culture the expression, the Odia language the voice, and Lord Jagannath the soul. Together, they foster a sense of unity, pride, and belonging that define Odia identity, making it a vibrant and resilient force that continues to thrive amid modernity and globalization. This identity helps the Odia people stay connected to their heritage while embracing the future, embodying a timeless spirit of inclusivity and devotion.

AI Acknowledgement: The authors declare that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete this manuscript. The authors confirm that they are the sole authors of this article and take full responsibility for the content therein, as outlined in COPE recommendations.

Declarations: Conflict of interest: The authors have no financial disclosures and no competing interests. The views expressed in the article are those of the authors, and no one owns responsibility for the same.

References:

1. Acharya, B. C. 1983. *Odia Sahityara Itihasa*. Cuttack: Taratarini Book Store,pp. 152-155.
2. Banerjee, R. D. 1930. *History of Orissa*. Vol. 1. Calcutta: Prabasi Press, p.457.
3. Beams, John. 1868. *Memoirs on the History, Folk-Lore, and Distribution of the Races of the North Western Provinces of India*. Vol. 2. London: Trübner & Co., pp.278-280.
4. Behera, S. 1999. "Oriya Literature and the Jagannath Cult, 1866–1936: Quest for Identity." PhD diss., University of Oxford,pp 95-110.
5. Behera, Subhakanta. 2000. *Construction of an Identity Discourse: Oriya Literature and the Jagannatha Cult (1866–1936)*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharilal, p.56.
6. Behera, K. S., ed. 1999. *Maritime Heritage of India*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, p.155.
7. Das, C. 1951. "Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature of Orissa." In *Visva Bharati Annals*, edited by P. C. Bagchi, 137. Santiniketan: Visva Bharati.
8. Eschmann, Anncharlott, Hermann Kulke, and Gaya Charan Tripathi, eds. 1986. *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, pp 351-352.
9. Government of India. 2010. *The Constitution (One Hundred Thirteenth Amendment) Bill, 2010: The Orissa Alteration of Name Bill, 2010*. New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, *Gazette of India*.
10. Hunter, William Wilson. 2014. *History of Odisha*. Vol. 2. Delhi: Nabu Press. (Original work published in 1872.), pp. 362-364.
11. Kulke, Hermann. 1978. *Jagannatha Cult and Gajapati Kingship*. Heidelberg: South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University.
12. Mahatab, Harekrushna. 1959. *History of Odisha*. Vol. 1. Cuttack: Utkal University Press, p.228.
13. Majumdar, R. C. 1960. *The History and Culture of the Indian People: The Classical Age*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,pp 356-362.
14. Mansinha, Mayadhar. 1962. *History of Oriya Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi,
15. Menon, V. P. 1956. *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, p.245.
16. Mishra, Krushna Chandra. 1971. *The Cult of Jagannath*. Calcutta: Firma KLM, pp. 148-152.
17. Mishra, N. 1989. *Atibadi Jagannath Dasakruta Srimad Bhagabata*. Bhubaneswar: Odisha Sahitya Akademi,pp 45-50.
18. Mishra, P. K. 1986. *The Political History of Orissa, 1900–1936*. New Delhi: Oriental Publishers, pp.245-246.

19. Mohanty, Satya. 2014. *The Making of Modern Odisha*. New Delhi: Readworthy, p.130.

20. Mohanty, Satchidananda. 1977. *Odia Sahityara Adiparva*. 3rd ed. Cuttack: Students' Store. (Original work in Odia.), pp.211-212.

21. Mohanty, J. K. 2005. *Jagannath Consciousness and Odia Identity*. Bhubaneswar: Utkal University Press, p.240.

22. Moharana, S. K. 2001. *Odia Sahityara Itihasa*. 1st ed. Cuttack: Odisha Book Store.

23. Mund, S., ed. 1991. *Atibadi Jagannath Das: A Quincentennial Tribute*. Puri: Srikshetra Lekhaka Sammukhya, p.170.

24. Nanda, Prasanta. 2024. "From Inner Peace to World Peace: Jagannath Consciousness in the Literature of Odisha." *ResearchGate*, October 22. https://www.researchgate.net.

25. O'Malley, L. S. S. 1908. *Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa: Provincial Gazetteers*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, p.357.

26. Panda, H. 2018. *History of Odisha*. Cuttack: Grantha Mandir.

27. Panda, S. K. 2008. *History of Odisha: From Kalinga to Modern Times*. Cuttack: Kitab Mahal, p.275.

28. Panigrahi, K. C. 1976. *Sarala Sahityara Aitihasika Chitra*. Cuttack: Prajatantra Prachara Samiti.

29. Patnaik, Nityananda. 2006. *Temples of Orissa*. Cuttack: Orissa Book Store, p.91.

30. Patra, K. M. 1971. *Orissa under the East India Company*. Cuttack: Utkal University Press, pp.219-222.

31. Sahu, N. K. 1984. *History of Orissa*. Cuttack: Utkal University Press.

32. Sinha, B. N. 1962. *Geography of Orissa*. Cuttack: Utkal University Press, p.157.

33. The Hindu. 2011. "Orissa Renamed Odisha." *The Hindu*, November 9.

34. Tripathi, S. 2012. "From Kalinga to Odisha: The Evolution of a Name and Identity." *Odisha Historical Research Journal* 35 (2), pp.45–50.