

Echoes of Heritage: The Role of Odia Literature in Preserving Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Literature functions as an expansive cultural archive that logs a community's collective memory, ideological paradigms, and socio-political transitions. Odia literature, possessing an unbroken history spanning over a millennium, has been the primary vehicle for constructing, defending, and perpetuating the distinct cultural identity of Odisha. This paper traces the evolutionary timeline of Odia literature through a historicist-cultural lens, exploring how texts have actively resisted external hegemonies and internal fragmentations. Beginning with the radical vernacularization of Sanskrit epics by Sarala Das in the 15th century, the study navigates the democratizing socio-spiritual movements of the Panchasakha, the metaphysical syncretism of the Jagannath cult, the existential anti-colonial linguistic resistance of the late 19th century, and the post-colonial preservation of tribal and subaltern consciousness. The paper argues that Odia literature operates not merely as an aesthetic medium, but as an active socio-political mechanism of resilience that has continuously preserved the linguistic, geographical, and ethical boundaries of the Odia identity.

Keywords: Odia Literature, Cultural Identity, Vernacularization, Linguistic Hegemony, Subaltern Consciousness, Jagannath Cult, Cultural Preservation.

1. Introduction:

The formulation of cultural identity is an evolving, discursive process deeply embedded within linguistic and literary practices. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall notes, identity is not an accomplished fact but a production which is never complete, always constituted within, not outside, representation. For a community geographically situated along the eastern littoral of India, the "Odia identity" has historically been exposed to fluid borders, political fragmentation, and overlapping cultural assertions from neighboring linguistic blocks. Throughout these cyclical shifts, literature has consistently served as the primary repository of Odisha's distinct regional ethos.

Granted the status of a Classical Language by the Government of India in 2014, Odia possesses a linguistic continuity that rivals the oldest vernaculars of the subcontinent. However, this continuity was not achieved in a socio-political vacuum. It was forged through deliberate literary interventions that contested dominant power structures across different historical epochs:

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Published: 30 June 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i6.45817>

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1. **The Medieval Era:** Contested the linguistic elitism of Sanskrit.
2. **The Colonial Era:** Countered the systematic administrative erasure of the language by neighboring linguistic groups and British bureaucrats.
3. **The Post-Colonial Era:** Resisted the modern forces of globalization, displacement, and cultural homogenization.

This paper employs a New Historicist and Cultural Studies framework to investigate how Odia literature has systematically operated as a repository of historical memory and a defensive mechanism for cultural survival. By examining key literary configurations—ranging from medieval epic adaptations to modern realist fiction—this study demonstrates how the written word in Odisha has constructed an enduring space for regional self-assertion and cultural preservation.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

To comprehend the foundational role of literature in safeguarding identity, this study adopts a dual theoretical framework combining Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism and Homi Bhabha's concepts of cultural nationhood. New Historicism rejects the notion that literature is a passive mirror of its time; instead, it views a text as an active participant in the social and political networks of its era. Literary texts do not merely reflect history; they *make* history by negotiating, subverting, or reinforcing power dynamics.

Complementing this, Homi Bhabha's assertion in *Nation and Narration* that nations are narratives constructed through language helps illuminate how the geographical and emotional borders of Odisha were imagined and codified through poetry and prose long before they were mapped out by cartographers.

The methodology of this paper is qualitative, relying on close textual analysis of landmark Odia literary works alongside an interrogation of the socio-historical contexts in which they were produced. By placing text and context in a dialogic relationship, the study evaluates how Odia authors transformed language into an ideological fortress capable of preserving the community's unique socio-cultural syntax.

3. Epistemic Shifts and Vernacularization: Sarala Das and the Demotic Re-imagining of Epics

Prior to the 15th century, the geopolitical space of Odisha (then dynamic empires under the Eastern Ganga and Suryavamshi dynasties) experienced a deep chasm between courtly literature and the oral idioms of the masses. Sanskrit was the undisputed language of statecraft, religious liturgy, and intellectual prestige, effectively alienating the common populace from the texts that governed their moral and spiritual cosmos. The radical epistemic shift occurred during the reign of Emperor Kapilendra Deva with the emergence of Sarala Das, a peasant-poet who broke the hegemony of Sanskrit by writing the *Sarala Mahabharata* directly in the vernacular Odia language.

Sarala Das's intervention was not a literal translation or an obsequious imitation of Vyasa's Sanskrit original; it was a profound act of cultural translation and vernacularization. As literary

historian Sheldon Pollock argues, vernacularization marks the conscious choice by writers to use a local language for the expression of high culture and political voice. Sarala Das achieved this by systematically transplanting the pan-Indian epic narrative into the immediate topography, flora, fauna, and sociology of 15th-century Odisha.

In the *Sarala Mahabharata*, the legendary heroes of Hastinapur walk through the forests of Odisha, eat local varieties of rice and dried fish (*pakhala* and *sukhua*), and conform to local social taboos. The cosmopolitan characters of the Sanskrit epic are thoroughly indigenized:

- **Yudhishtira** behaves like a medieval Odia monarch navigating local land conflicts.
- **Duryodhana's** military strategies mirror the naval and infantry layouts of the contemporary Gajapati army.
- **The Sacred Topography:** Major incidents from the epic are explicitly linked to existing geographical sites across Odisha, from the shores of the Chilika Lake to the shrines of various folk deities.

Furthermore, Sarala Das introduced a vast array of sub-plots derived entirely from local oral folklore and indigenous tribal myths. He integrated non-Aryan, adivasi deities into the mainstream Puranic pantheon, validating the marginalized subaltern practices of the region. By utilizing the *Dandi* metre—a flexible, fluid, non-syllable-bound poetic structure derived from local oral performances—Sarala Das democratized access to the epic.

The *Sarala Mahabharata* served as the foundational constitutional text of the Odia collective consciousness. It proved that the vernacular tongue was capable of carrying the weight of complex philosophical and political discourse, thereby establishing an independent linguistic baseline that prevented the cultural absorption of the region into neighboring linguistic folds.

4. The Panchasakha Movement: Democratization of Sacred Spaces and Social Cohesion

If Sarala Das laid the linguistic foundation of Odia identity, the Panchasakha (Five Friends) of the 16th century—comprising Balarama Das, Jagannatha Das, Achyutananda Das, Ananta Das, and Yasovanta Das—constructed its ethical and social architecture. Operating during the height of the Bhakti movement in India, the Panchasakha executed a literary-spiritual revolution that directly challenged the elite Brahmanical custody of sacred knowledge and social spaces.

The foremost monument of this era is Jagannatha Das's *Odia Bhagavata*. Written in the highly accessible, melodic nine-syllable couplet framework known as *Nabakshari*, this text radically transformed the rural landscape of Odisha. Prior to its composition, the *Srimad Bhagavatam* was accessible only to Sanskrit pandits in courtly or monastic enclosures. Jagannatha Das brought the text to the courtyard of every peasant.

THE BHAGAVATA TUNGI SYSTEM

[Spiritual Center] —► Daily Recitation of Jagannatha Das's Text

[Social Anchor] —► Informal Education & Literacy for Masses

Judicial Forum] —► Community Dispute Resolution & Mediation

The literary dissemination of the *Odia Bhagavata* led to the creation of the Bhagavata Tungi—a unique community institution established in almost every village across Odisha. The Tungi was a physical structure that functioned simultaneously as an informal evening school, a village council for dispute resolution, a library, and a communal hall. In an era devoid of modern institutional structures, the *Bhagavata Tungi*, fueled entirely by Jagannatha Das's text, maintained social cohesion, preserved communal peace, and elevated the literacy rates of rural Odisha. It created a standardized dialect of the Odia language across disparate geographical pockets, uniting the people through a shared daily literary ritual.

Concurrently, Balarama Das's *Laxmi Purana* emerged as a radical feminist and anti-caste manifesto masquerading as a domestic religious text. The narrative centers on Goddess Lakshmi, who visits the home of Sriya, an untouchable Chandaluni (sweeper woman), defying the commands of her husband Lord Jagannath and his elder brother Balabhadra. When cast out of the grand temple for this transgression, Lakshmi strips the divine brothers of their wealth, food, and clothing, forcing them to wander as famished beggars until they accept the absolute equality of all human beings.

The *Laxmi Purana* was read annually by millions of women across castes during the month of *Margasira*. By embedding a critique of untouchability and gender hierarchy into a core domestic ritual, Balarama Das used literature to establish an inclusive, egalitarian cultural model. The text preserved an essential aspect of Odia cultural identity: the belief that the divine must be deeply humanized, socially accessible, and fundamentally opposed to rigid institutional hierarchies.

5. The Jagannath Cult as a Literary Continuum of Syncretism

To fully analyze the preservation of Odia cultural identity, one must examine how literature has shaped and defended the Jagannath Cult, which serves as the psychological and cultural axle of Odisha. Unlike many orthodox Hindu deities, Jagannath is a deeply syncretic figure, emerging from tribal (*Sabar*) origins, absorbing Buddhist and Jain philosophies, and later being integrated into Vaishnavite frameworks. Odia literature has been the primary vehicle through which this fluid, inclusive, and non-dogmatic identity of Jagannath was preserved against institutional attempts to ossify it.

During periods of political instability, when foreign invasions forced the concealment or physical relocation of the idols from the Puri temple, it was the *Jananas* and *Bhajans* (devotional prayers of deep existential distress) that kept the cultural morale of the community intact. A profound example of this is found in the compositions of Salabega, a 17th-century Muslim poet. The son of a Mughal commander, Salabega became one of the most revered devotees of Jagannath. His poetry captures an intense, personal yearning for the deity, emphasizing that divine grace transcends the barriers of religion and formal temple entry rules:

"Ahe Nila Shaila; Prabala Matta Karatoti,

Muba Hati Gala Parayen Shabar Mandira Bedha Bramhachari..."

Salabega's literary presence within the core canonical music of the Jagannath tradition ensured that Odia identity remained inherently pluralistic and assimilative.

In the 19th century, this syncretic continuum found its most radical voice in the blind saint-poet Bhima Bhoi, a proponent of the *Mahima Dharma*. Writing from a marginalized tribal background, Bhima Bhoi rejected idol worship, caste distinctions, and temple hierarchies entirely. His extensive poetic corpus, including the *Stuti Chintamani*, was composed in simple, powerful vernacular lines meant to be sung by wandering ascetics. Bhima Bhoi's poetry re-centered the Odia spiritual identity around radical humanism and universal empathy, famously writing:

\$\$ \text{"Praninka Arata Jiba Dekhu Dekhu Moba Jiba Narke Padi Thau, Jagata Udhar Heu"} \$\$

Through Bhima Bhoi and the Mahima literary output, Odia literature preserved an alternative, subaltern stream of identity that stood against elitism, ensuring that the region's cultural syntax remained anchored to the welfare of the poorest and most marginalized sections of society.

6. The 19th-Century Linguistic Crisis and the Modern Literary Renaissance

The most precarious moment for the preservation of Odia cultural identity arrived in the latter half of the 19th century under the British colonial administration. Following the catastrophic Na'Anka Famine of 1866, which decimated one-third of Odisha's population, the community found itself in a state of profound psychological and administrative vulnerability. Seizing upon this structural weakness, certain non-Odia bureaucrats and cartographers deployed within the colonial machinery launched a systematic campaign to eliminate Odia as an official language.

Led by figures like Kantichandra Bhattacharya, who published a treatise titled *Uriya Swatantra Bhasa Nahe* (Oriya is Not an Independent Language), it was argued that Odia was merely a corrupt dialect of Bengali. Consequently, proposals were made to completely replace Odia with Bengali in the schools and courts of northern Odisha, and with Telugu in southern districts like Ganjam. Had this administrative erasure succeeded, the distinct cultural identity of Odisha would have been permanently assimilated into neighboring linguistic cartographies.

In this context of cultural survival, literature was weaponized. A visionary triumvirate of writers—Fakir Mohan Senapati, Radhanath Ray, and Madhusudan Rao—spearheaded a modern literary renaissance that dismantled the colonial-hegemonist arguments and single-handedly preserved the language.

Fakir Mohan Senapati: The Realist Bulwark

Fakir Mohan Senapati, widely revered as the *Vyasakabi*, understood that to save a language, one must showcase its incomparable vitality and psychological depth through modern literary forms. His masterpiece, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (Six Acres and a Third, 1897), was a revolutionary departure from the romantic, courtly traditions of the past.

Written with razor-sharp irony and deep psychological realism, the novel exposes the systemic exploitation of rural peasants by a ruthless, colonial-aligned landlord, Ramachandra Mangaraj.

More importantly, Fakir Mohan saturated his text with the vibrant, idiomatic, and colloquial speech of the rural masses—the women at the village pond, the weavers, the barbers, and the farmers. By weaving this rich oral tapestry into a sophisticated novelistic structure, he proved

that the Odia language possessed a distinct, irreplaceable, and highly evolved socio-psychological vocabulary that could never be subsumed by any other tongue.

Radhanath Ray and the Spatial Cartography of Pride

While Fakir Mohan conquered the linguistic landscape, Radhanath Ray reclaimed the physical geography of the region. In epic narrative poems like *Chilika*, *Chandrabhaga*, and *Usha*, Radhanath did not look to European landscapes or mythical Sanskrit geographies for inspiration. Instead, he aestheticized the mountains, rivers, and lakes of Odisha.

He transformed the Chilika Lake into a living, breathing goddess of beauty, elevating local regional topography into a site of profound nationalistic and aesthetic pride. His poetry instilled in the fragmented Odia populace a deep, emotional attachment to their immediate land, establishing a spatial-cultural identity that was vital for modern state formation.

Madhusudan Rao and the Institutionalization of Literacy

Simultaneously, Bhaktakabi Madhusudan Rao addressed the pedagogical roots of the language crisis. He authored *Barnabodha* (1895), a foundational primer for learning the Odia alphabet and language. *Barnabodha* was meticulously engineered to blend phonetic rigor with ethical and spiritual instruction.

For well over a century, this single textbook served as the primary entry point into literacy for every Odia child across generations. By standardizing primary education, Madhusudan Rao ensured that the language was structurally preserved within the minds of the youth, neutralizing the threats of linguistic displacement.

7. From Literature to Cartography: Utkal Sammilani and Linguistic Statehood

The literary defense of the late 19th century directly provided the intellectual, emotional, and ideological ammunition for the political movements of the early 20th century. Writers like Utkal Gaurav Madhusudan Das and Utkalmani Gopabandhu Das were simultaneously poets and statesmen. Gopabandhu Das established the *Satyabadi Bana Vidyalaya* (an open-air school amidst grove trees), creating a literary circle known as the *Satyabadi Yuga* that produced intensely patriotic literature aimed at mass mobilization.

Gopabandhu's famous lines became the defining slogan of regional sacrifice and nationalistic alignment:

"Misu mo sharira e desha matire,
Deshabasi chali jaantu pethire..."

(Let my body mingle with the dust of this land, and let my countrymen walk over my back to freedom.)

This seamless synthesis of literature and political activism found expression through the Utkal Sammilani (Utkal Union Conference). The collective emotional awakening generated by decades of novels, poems, and essays culminated on April 1, 1936, when Odisha was officially declared a separate province. This marked a monumental milestone in the history of modern

India: Odisha became the very first state to be carved out exclusively on a linguistic basis, demonstrating how literary preservation can directly alter political cartography.

8. Post-Independence Transitions: Documenting Marginalization and Global Challenges

In the post-Independence era, the responsibility of Odia literature shifted from defending borders against external languages to preserving internal cultural varieties and marginalized identities against the onslaught of rapid industrialization, state-led displacement, and corporate globalization.

The most towering figure of this period is Gopinath Mohanty, who received the Jnanpith Award for his monumental novel *Mati Matal*. In foundational works like *Paraja* (1945) and *Amrutara Santana* (1947), Mohanty lived among and painstakingly documented the lifeworlds, oral myths, complex kinship structures, and ritual songs of the Paraja and Kandha tribes of Southern Odisha.

CONTEMPORARY LITERARY RESISTANCE LANDSCAPE

[Gopinath Mohanty] —► Safeguarded indigenous tribal oral myths
against industrial erasure & exploitation

[Pratibha Ray] —► Reclaimed classical subverted epics through
subaltern & feminist perspectives

Mohanty did not look at tribal communities through an orientalist or patronizing lens; instead, he treated their eco-cosmological worldviews as an essential, foundational component of the grand Odia cultural mosaic. His novels functioned as an ethnographic and literary shield, preserving the vanishing realities of indigenous cultures from being erased by modern industrial forces.

In contemporary literature, writers like Pratibha Ray have engaged in re-evaluating ancient cultural and mythological paradigms from a subaltern perspective. Her novel *Yajnaseni* reconstructs the *Mahabharata* through the consciousness of Draupadi, challenges patriarchal readings of Indian epics, and grounds the narrative in the deep psychological realities of contemporary Indian womanhood.

Similarly, the modernist and postmodernist poetry of Sitakant Mahapatra and Ramakanta Rath has continuously used classical local motifs to explore modern existential angst. By constantly modernizing traditional metaphors, contemporary Odia literature ensures that the regional identity does not become a static, museumized relic, but remains a living, evolving dynamic capable of processing global human complexities without severing its native roots.

9. Conclusion:

This study demonstrates that the evolution of Odia literature is inextricably linked with the survival and preservation of Odia cultural identity. Across five centuries of turbulent socio-political shifts, the written word in Odisha has repeatedly stepped out of the domain of pure aesthetics to perform vital civic, political, and defensive duties.

- Sarala Das and the Panchasakha democratized the linguistic and spiritual landscape, integrating folk and tribal structures into a unified, egalitarian regional consciousness.
- The Poets of the Jagannath Cult preserved a fluid, highly syncretic philosophy that resisted religious and social dogmatism.
- The 19th-Century Realists built an unyielding linguistic fortress that thwarted administrative erasure, ultimately restructuring the political map of modern India in 1936.
- Post-Independence Modernists have continuously guarded the fragile eco-cultural heritage of tribal and marginalized groups against the pressures of global homogenization.

In a contemporary globalized world where minor languages and regional sub-cultures face unprecedented pressures toward assimilation and erasure, Odia literature stands as an enduring model of textual resistance. It remains the primary archive that safeguards the distinct memory, ethical syntax, and unique cultural identity of the Odia people.

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