

Odisha, Odia Language, and Pt. Nilakantha Das

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Odia has been recognized to be the primary language of the people of Odisha since the earliest recordings of history and literature. A province in free India today, it had also enjoyed the status of a free and independent kingdom before its Mughal and British occupation. This ancient land, formerly known variously as Kalinga, Utkal, Udra, has found mention as a valorous, wealthy, and independent land in the early literature of India (e.g. the *Mahabharat*). This land has been famous for the Kalinga War (which ended c. 262 BCE) and the consequent transformation of Emperor Ashoka as the pioneer of non-violence and Buddhism. However, with the advent of the Mughal rule (1568) followed by British rule in Odisha (1803), the subaltern Odias tried to dismantle the foreign yoke but in vain. When the First War of Independence of India was fought in Odisha in 1817 (Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Culture, Government of India communique, dt. 20-July-2017), the people of Odisha had undergone untold miseries in terms of political, geographical, and linguistic identity crisis, which will be described in the next sections. However, due to the pioneering efforts and prolonged battle of some remarkable Odia patriots and intellectual colossal like Pt. Nilakantha Das (orator, legislator, author, academician, administrator, freedom fighter, social reformer, and member of the famous Satyavadi group), Odisha became a separate province of India on 1st April 1936 (celebrated as 'Utkal Divas') and the first state of India formed on the basis of the common language of its people.

Pt. Nilakantha Das is recognized by one and all as one of the makers of modern Odisha. We may not be wrong to call Nilakantha as the Father of modern Odisha in the sense Gandhiji is regarded as the Father of the Nation, an epithet given to him by Nilakantha's friend Subhash Chandra Bose. To put Pt. Nilakantha Das's contribution, we need to look at the period he lived (1884-1967) and the condition of Odisha and Odia during his time. Nilakantha was born to Ananda Dash at Sri Ramachandrapur village in the district of Puri in Orissa Division of Bengal Presidency, in British India. If you mark the difference between the surname of the father (*Dash*) and the son (*Das*), you may be surprised by the difference between *sh*[ʃ] and *s* [s]. The change of surname was one aspect of several linguistic reforms performed by the renowned Odia linguist Nilakantha. He simplified the spelling system in Odia (script) about which I will discuss later. It may be helpful to briefly take a bird's eye view of this reformist's life.

It leaves many scholars stunned that even though Pt. Nilakantha Das studied in village school, he could sit and talk in equal ease with the highest and best in the British system. After his subsequent study at Puri Zilla School, he passed his BA in 1909 and undertook M.A. and B.L. studies. In Calcutta (now Kolkata), the then capital of India. On his return from Calcutta Nilakantha joined as a teacher in the Satyabadi School, on the request of its founder and social worker Gopabandhu Das. The school that was founded in 1909 soon became popular as the Satyavadi Bana Vidyalaya under the Headmastership of Pt. Nilakantha Das, who had relinquished the urge of a luxurious government job and vowed to live like an ascetic. of the school for a large period like most of the people of Odisha. In this forest school, modelled upon Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan, Nilakantha carried out many social reforms. Later he joined as a Professor in Oriya and Philosophy in Calcutta University, but soon he relinquished his service in order to join the Non-cooperation Movement. Nilakantha became a member of the All India Congress Committee, edited a newspaper namely 'Seba' from Sambalpur, and was arrested in 1922 for anti-British activities and put to Hajaribag Jail for six months. With Pandit Gopabandhu Das's support, he contested for General Assembly and in 1923 he was elected as a member of Central Assembly. After resigning from the Central Assembly, Nilakantha joined the 'Lavana Satyagraha' or 'Salt-Satyagraha' movement and was imprisoned for six months. He also edited an Odia journal *Naba Bharat* in 1933. A name to reckon with at the central level, he was instrumental in arranging Gandhiji's tour of Odisha. Before the death of Madhusudan Das (1934), the tallest figure of Odisha had predicted that Nilakantha would finish his dream job: uniting Odisha into a separate province. Nilakantha played his own role and filled the absence of Madhusudan Das in the struggle for the formation of Odisha as a special province. Nilakantha was the first person to officially propose for Odisha to be given the status as a separate province and the last to ensure the dream came true, even after the death of Gopabandhu (1926) and Madhusudan Das (1934). Odisha

became a separate province in 1936. Nilakantha was also the central force behind the creation of Utkal University. He was the Speaker of Odisha Legislative Assembly from May 1957 to July 1961. The government of India awarded Nilakantha with the Padma Bhushan in 1960. With huge contribution to his motherland, like a contented rishi, Nilakantha breathed his last on 6th November 1967.

Pt. Nilakantha Das was born in British India but he was lucky enough to shape the modern education in Odisha in the independent India. It may be mentioned that Odisha came under the rule of the British on 14 October 1803. However, it was a division of the Bengal Presidency with its capital in Cuttack. (Cuttack remained as the capital of Odisha till 1948, when it was shifted to Bhubaneswar). Under the British Raj, as the First Census of India (1901) shows, Odisha had an area of 35,664 km² and 5,003,121 inhabitants. On 1st April 1912, the province of Bihar and Orissa was detached from Bengal, and the Orissa Tributary States were under the authority of the governor of Bihar and Orissa. Orissa Province was a province of British India created and became a separate province on 1st of April 1936 by partition of the Bihar and Orissa Province. In the elections of 1937, under the Government of India Act 1935, Krishna Chandra Gajapati, the Maharaja of Paralakhemundi, became the Prime Minister of Orissa. Nilakantha had helped Subhash Chandra Bose, who had in turn helped Maharaja Krishna Chandra Gajapati to form the government. The Maharaja has contributed a lot in the formation of Odisha as a separate province even when his kingdom was a part of the Madras Presidency. Odisha happens to be the first province in India to be carved on linguistic lines (Andhra Pradesh comes after Independence, on 1st October 1953). As of today, Odia has earned the distinction of being a classical language by the Union Parliament. In this article, the author aims to focus on the pioneering work of Pt. Nilakantha Das, who not only fought for the special status of Odia language but also made it more user-friendly and communicative through his numerous writings and linguistic reforms.

Odia (formerly Oriya) is an Indo-Aryan language (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indo-Aryan-languages>). It is the official language of the state of Odisha (formerly Orissa). In fact, with the constitutional amendment and through the “Orissa (Alternation of Name) Act, 2011, Orissa became Odisha and Oriya became Odia vide the Act, with effect from 1st November 2011 [published in *Gazette of India*, Extraordinary, Part II, Section 3 (i)]. About 82% of native speakers of Odisha speak Odia. It is also spoken in some parts of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh. The earliest inscription of Odia script is at least 10 A.D. old (Pattanayak and Prusty, 2016). With a long literary and linguistic history, Odia is accorded the status of a classical language by the govt. of India in 2006. The criteria for classical language are as follows:

High antiquity of its early texts/recorded history over a period of 1500–2000 years; a body of ancient literature/texts, which is considered a valuable heritage by generations of speakers; the literary tradition be original and not borrowed from another speech community; the classical language and literature being distinct from modern, there may also be a discontinuity between the classical language and its later forms or its offshoots. (Ambika Soni, Minister of Culture, spoke in Rajya Sabha)

How a language that was being treated with disrespect, as much sidelined as the people speaking it, came to occupy the prestigious tag of a classical language? This author discusses briefly how Odia had become an endangered language and how people like Madhusudan Das, Gopabandhu Das, and Nilakantha Das preserve, protect, and promote Odia so that it could survive the disaffection of the then administration and cultural hegemony of other languages to emerge a classical language in the 21st century.

Pt. Nilakantha Das was the most revered friend, philosopher and guide of Pt. Gopabandhu Das (1877–1928), the renowned patriot, social reformer, essayist, poet, legislator and founder editor of the popular Odia daily, the *Samaja* (Pattanayak, 2013). The most popular leader of his time, Gopabandhu was popularly called Utkalamani, which means the jewel of Odisha. For two years, after Gopabandhu's death, Nilakantha carried on the editorial responsibilities of the *Samaja* as long as he could work independently. Nilakantha never compromised with any person or situation undermining the interests of Odisha and Odia people. I am inclined to agree with Pattanayak (2013):

Nilakantha, matchless man of letters and patriotism, was the most revered man of Orissa [Odisha] after Kula Gourav Madhu Sudan Das and Utkalmani Gopabandhu. If Gopabandhu was the spirit behind the Satyavadi School, Satyavadi Press and the *Samaja*, he was the main architect.

Nilakantha was so affectionate towards Gopabandhu that he had procured the entire Press of Nilachala Samachar for Gopabandhu's use and had gifted a house to him to stay along with the Press, which then was christened ‘Satyavadi Press’.

Pt. Nilakantha Das always stood like a solid rock by the side of Pt. Gopabandhu Das, his compatriot and the guileless political saint. Gopabandhu had sacrificed all his personal comforts and his every single breathe was dedicated to the people of Odisha. If we take away Nilakantha Das from Gopabandhu's life, it will remain incomplete. And if we remove Gopabandhu from Nilakantha's life, it would be difficult to imagine what this uniquely gifted son of Odisha would have become. The fact remains that they were made for Odisha, and for each other. The sagacious personality that Nilakantha was --like the eponymous God (Lord Shiva)—Nilakantha did not mind drinking the poison of misery for being a social servant instead of going for a luxurious

life which his qualifications could have brought for him. Had he not lived the life of an ascetic, he could have perhaps not done what he has done for Odisha — giving a map in India and immortalizing Odia as a distinct language.

Gopabandhu was junior to but the compatriot of Gourav Madhusudan Das(1848 –934), the first graduate and advocate from Odisha, the founder of Utkal Sammilani, and the pioneer of the Odia Language Movement, aimed at making Odisha a separate state by uniting the “bichhinnanchal” or the various tracts of Odisha at that time in the control of different administration control of British India. Popularly called “Madhubabu,” he was revered as “Kulabruddha,” which means *Grand Old Man* of Odisha. Mr Das Madhu was the resident tutor of Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, who later became the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University in Calcutta and of Janakinath Bose, father of Subhash Chandra Bose at Ravenshaw College (now Ravenshaw University). After returning to Odisha from Calcutta in 1881, Madhubabu started his legal practice in Odisha High Court bench in Cuttack. Gopabandhu, who was an advocate, was close to Madhusudan Das. Madhubabu loved Nilakantha immensely and he had predicted that his unfinished work of uniting Odisha would be completed by Nilakantha. His prediction came true: Madhubabu died in 1934, but Odisha became a separate province on 1st April 1936 in which Nilakantha played the biggest role. It must be borne in mind that both Gopabandhu and Nilakantha were closely associated in their socio-political development of Odisha. They had one goal (to see a *swatantra Utkal*) and Odias basking in past glory and present happiness; they always worked in tandem, complementing and supplementing each other.

In this context it may be noted that Orissa, which Nilakantha saw during his time under British rule, was a dismembered Orissa with Oriyas being scattered in four provinces - Bihar & Orissa, the Central Provinces, Bengal and Madras. As a result of this dismemberment, the Oriya-speaking territories virtually became appendages to these four provinces. The Oriyas were reduced to the status of linguistic minorities and felt neglected and dominated by the linguistic majorities of those provinces. Nilakantha had to undergo the pressure of fighting with the British and Indians who were bent upon demeaning Odisha, Odia language and culture, and keep its people to subservient to that of Biharis, Bengalis, and Madrasis. Nilakantha’s struggle was for both Odisha and Odia at the same time and the odds were heavy against his mission. His determination and love for principles rather than personalities made his struggle more focussed and pin-pointed.

On 8th February 1927, as a member Pt. Nilakantha Das moved a resolution in the Central Assembly for formation of a separate province of Odisha. The resolution read: “This Assembly recommends to the Governor General in Council to be pleased to take immediate steps to put, or publish the schemes of putting all Odia-speaking tracts under one local administration”. Nilakantha had the guts to say that the people of Odisha would not settle for anything less than a separate province of their own and mass movements and agitations would continue till the demand was met. He wrote articles and essay in several languages --- he had mastery over English and many other Indian languages --- and got them published in newspapers, magazines, and journals published from Bombay (Mumbai), Delhi, Madras (Chennai) and Calcutta (Kolkata) to build pressure on the British government to form a separate province of Odisha by amalgamating the disparate stretches of Odisha. It’s a historical debate whether Simon Commission failed or not, but Nilakantha got the Simon Commission (1927-28) heed his demand and ordered an inquiry into its feasibility. When the Commission report was published, it showed the government had “agreed to the Odia demand for separation”. Nilakantha impressed upon the government that the two issues of Odia movement; amalgamation and separation should not be confused.

Nilakantha’s strategy also coerced the Indian National Congress to accept the proposal of a separate province of Odisha in 1928 and reconsider its provision of economic viability and retain its current hold. He pleaded that Odisha being a natural disaster-prone state ---- a regular victim of floods, droughts and famines --- it will be a burden on the people to pay. As a historian put it: “He tried to bring an amendment in the Calcutta session of the Congress The President Pandit Motilal Nehru ruled it out. Nilakantha staged a walk out along with all the delegates from Odisha and brought out a procession in the Calcutta streets next day. Gandhiji intervened. Motilal expressed regret. Later the Congress agreed that Odisha would be the first province to be formed on linguistic basis. Not a small achievement for Nilakantha and his leadership.” Nilakantha was also promised the title of “Sir” by Alexander Muddiman (Home Member) if he agreed to Odisha as a sub-province, but his answer was “Mr Minister, you have come to a wrong door”. The government had to finally accede to Pt. Nilakantha Das’s demand and Odisha became a separate province on 1st of April 1936.

Pt. Nilakantha has written in his autobiography about his compulsions and the compulsions of the British government:

“Possibly in 1929, Muddiman Saheb made correspondence with me regarding the idea of a sub-province for Orissa after consideration in the cabinet. Following discussion on it, the Finance Minister of Government of India persuaded me to accept the proposal of making Orissa a province with a Central grant of Rupees Forty lakhs. I insisted on 80 lakhs to be given for Orissa’s progress and development. However, I was pressurized by BhubananandaBabu to accept this condition in the assembly. I accepted the condition almost as a

matter of compulsion. This was the incident of 1933-34. As per the O' Donnel Committee Report, the British government decided to form the province of Orissa comprising Puri, Cuttack, Balasore, Sambalpur and Ganjam with Jeypore. It was carried out on 1st April 1936." [A loose translation from Odia by Dash, Sriram Chandra, pp 94-95]

Pt. Nilakantha Das is to Odia language what John Webster is to American English: both modernized the usage by simplifying and making the language user-friendly. He prescribed and used only one 's' instead of three s's in Odia language (already mentioned Dash vs Das). He simplified the "yuktakshars" (roughly equivalent to combination of two consonants into a single letter that created difficulty for readers and speakers of Odia language). Today, most of the largest circulated Odia dailies, including the *Samaja* and the *Sambadare* using the reformed spelling as substitutes to the old spellings. Nilakantha himself used his own prescribed improved versions of spellings and script in copious writings of his own.

During the struggle and even afterwards, Nilakantha continued to write to enrich Odia language and literature. In his busy schedule too, Nilakantha made it a point to educate the people of Odisha through his writings. Nilakantha was an essayist, poet, linguist, and propagandist of Odissan language and culture. His autobiography (*Amajibani*) stands a testimony to his brilliant sense of accuracy, historical investigation, lucidity of style and felicity of language. A great lover of Nature and folk literature, Nilakantha was a poet par excellence. Works like *BhaktigathaPranayani*, *Konarke*, *Kharavela*, *Das NaikandPilanka Gita* attest to his poetic genius. His books and articles are copious in number. Some of them are *BharatiyaSanskritikuOdisara Dana* (The Contribution of Odisha to Indian Culture), *BiswaSanskritikuOdisara Dana* (The Contribution of Odisha to World Culture), *Religion and Philosophical Development in Orissa*, *The Cult of Jagannath*, *Oriya language and culture in Orissa History*, *Oriya Vyakarana* (Odia Grammar), *Oriya Bhasa Vyakarana* (Linguistic Grammar of Odia), *Oriya VyakaranareKetotiSamasya* (Some Issues in Odia Grammar), *Oriya Varna O Lipi* (Odia Letters and Script), *Oriya Bhasa O Sahitya* (Odia Language and Odia Literature), and *Oriya Sahityara Krama Parinama* (The Evolution of Odia Literature). Pt. Nilakantha Das has been awarded with Sahitya Academy Award for his autobiography 'AtmaJivani'.

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