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**The Roots of Linguistic Reorganization of Indian States:
The Experience of Orissa as a Linguistic Province in
the British Raj**

Jhumpa Mukherjee, Ph.D.

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Ethnicity, Nation Status and Language

John Stuart Mill emphasized language as a great factor in the formation of a nation. Before him, Fichte had stated, “wherever a separate language is found, there is also a separate nation which has the right to manage its affairs independently and to rule itself” (Roy, 1965). While this is largely true of the nation-making processes in Europe, India offers a different model. India as a single political unit is a later creation than India as a cultural unit. The sense of being a single nation or cultural unit has variously occupied the thinking of Indians for a very long time. The role of language, however, is highly emphasized to mark the ethnicity of various groups in Indian psyche.

Genesis of Linguistic Statehood in India

In India, a country where language changes every few square miles, paradoxical though it may seem, language has been a powerful factor for unifying people since the days of the British rule. Lokamanya Tilak was perhaps the first national leader to appreciate this conspicuous feature of the Indian society and to advocate the reorganization of the provinces on a linguistic basis with a view to promoting unity in diversity. He wrote as early as in 1891:

The present administrative division of India is the result of certain historic processes, and in some cases, purely the result of accident. ...if they are replaced by units formed on a linguistic basis, each of them will have some measure of homogeneity and will provide encouragement to the people and languages of the respective regions. (Kesari)

Partition of Bengal – Prime Mover for Linguistically Homogeneous Reorganization

The genesis of the movements for linguistic statehood can be traced to the Partition of 1905. “Not only did the Bengali-speaking people learn to think in terms of linguistic unity and of the establishment of a province on that basis but the contagion was automatically caught by the people of Bihar and Orissa. Both on grounds of tradition and

on grounds of their separate linguistic affiliation they demanded each a province of their own” (Roy, 1965).

Thirumalai points out, “The Partition of Bengal ... [which] was the decision of Lord Curzon to divide a largely linguistically homogeneous community into two religiously heterogeneous groups that was responsible in shaking off the lethargy that had set in, in the Indian National Congress as an organization. Suffice it here to say that Indian language and linguistic identity which had until now not been given any crucial role in the conduct of the deliberations of the Congress sessions and in its programs of action, came to dominate the scene almost as an uninvited guest for the next six years in the history of the Indian National Congress” (See Thirumalai, 2005).

In fact, the Indian National Congress had supported the idea of reorganizing the states on a more rational basis as early as 1905 and it was contended that among the different criteria for reorganization---language would be the most sensible and reasonable one. The Congress protested against the British policy of Partition of Bengal at its twenty first session at Benaras in 1905. The resolution further stated, “This Congress recommends the adoption of some arrangement which would be consistent with administrative efficiency and would place the entire Bengali community under one undivided administration.”

It was argued that Bengali language united the people irrespective of religious considerations and the partition was a vicious game of divide and rule played by the colonial rulers. The partition of Bengal could not dampen the spirit of the Congress and their zeal for the conceptualization of linguistically based administrative units.

Beginning in 1908, when a ‘province’ of Bihar was created in the organizational set up of the Congress, the Party was organizationally restructured with the creation of 21 vernacular units in the form of Provincial Congress Committees. (Chandoke: 2006).

Birth of Bihar and Orissa

Conceding to popular demand Bengal was reunited in 1911 but this change brought about the transfer of territories giving birth to new provinces. In 1912 Assam was reconstituted into a Chief Commissioner’s Province, and Bihar and Orissa with Chota Nagpur was formed as a separate province of Bihar and Orissa. It brought into the light the necessity for the creation of homogeneous units based on language to strengthen the sense of unity.

Subsequently, Dr. Annie Besant and her Home Rule Movement also emphasized the need for the creation of linguistic provinces. The Home Rule movement served as an important milestone in the recognition of linguistically homogeneous areas. Mrs. Besant in her Presidential Address at the Calcutta Congress, 1917 said:

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There is much work to do in helping the people to prepare themselves for the new powers, which will be placed in their hands. And for this, the work must be done in the vernaculars of each Province, as only by their mother-tongue can the heart and brain of the masses be reached. Sooner or later, preferably sooner, Provinces will have to be redelimited on a linguistic basis.

The Nehru Committee Report

The same objective was reiterated in 1928 in the *Report of the Nehru Committee* (consisting of Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, Sir Ali Imam, Subhas Chandra Bose, etc., under the chairmanship of Motilal Nehru) of the All Parties Conference. The Committee raised the plea that the existing multilingual State and Provinces would create political difficulties while the homogeneous linguistic States would encourage greater political cohesion, administrative efficiency and economic development. It asserted that there should be some rational basis for the reorganization of provinces and expressed the view that

Partly geographical and partly economic and financial, but the main considerations must necessarily be the wishes of the people and the linguistic unity of the area concerned. ...It becomes essential therefore to conduct the business and politics of a country in a language, which is understood by the masses. So far as the provinces are concerned, this must be the provincial language. ...If a province has to educate itself and do its daily work through the medium of its own language, it must necessarily be a linguistic area. If it happens to be a polyglot area difficulties will continually arise and the media of instruction and work will be two or even more languages. Hence, it becomes most desirable for provinces to be regrouped on a linguistic basis. Language, as a rule corresponds with a variety of culture, of traditions, and literature. In a linguistic area all these factors will help in the general progress of the province” (*Motilal Nehru Report*, 1928).

Indian Statutory Commission on Linguistic Reorganization of Provinces

Understanding the necessity of reforming the provincial boundaries, various committees expressed it in their respective representations to the Indian Statutory Commission. Diverse claims were put forward before the Commission to redistribute the provincial territories on a racial or linguistic basis. The Commission, however, stated that “in no case can the linguistic or racial principle be accepted as the sole test. Each proposal requires consideration on its merits with strict relation to the conditions of each”.

Congress Accepts the Linguistic Principle

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The linguistic principle was subsequently officially adopted by the Indian National Congress and included in its election manifesto. (Shiva Rao, 2004). The Congress leadership approved that “it has also stood for the freedom of each group and territorial area within the nation to develop its own life and culture within the larger framework and it has stated that for this purpose such territorial areas or provinces should be constituted as far as possible on a linguistic and cultural basis.” Despite much hue and cry on the part of Congress for the creation of linguistically homogenous provinces, the British government turned a deaf ear.

Post-Independence States Reorganization Commission

However, in the post-independence period, following severe agitation from several linguistic groups the States Reorganization Commission was set up in 1953 which analyzed the political, administrative and socio-cultural aspects of the demand for the creation of linguistic states.

The Commission concluded that the creation of linguistic states on the principle of linguistic homogeneity resulted in administrative convenience. The broad principles enunciated by the Commission were---

1. Preservation of unity and integrity of the country
2. Preservation of linguistic and cultural homogeneity
3. Financial, economic and administrative viability
4. Successful working of the Five-Year Plans

The Government accepted most of the recommendations in the States Reorganization Act, 1956 leading to the redrawing of the map of India by creating linguistically homogenous States, particularly in the South. The States Reorganization Act erased the distinction between Parts A, B, and C States and reorganized state boundaries on linguistic lines, thereby reducing the number of states from 27 to 14 (plus 6 Union Territories).

It All Began with Orissa

Although the country was reorganized linguistically on the basis of certain principles put forward by the States Reorganization Commission, yet it cannot be denied that the present linguistic states owe their origin to the state of Orissa, the first linguistic unit created in India as early as 1936. There have been numerous studies on linguistic states in India but creation of Orissa as the forerunner of linguistic statehood seems ignored in academic studies on the subject.

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In the early part of the British Raj, the current provinces of Bihar, West Bengal, Assam and Orissa formed a single administrative unit. During the latter half of the British rule the Oriya speaking people made demands for a separate Oriya province. Though the demand for the linguistic provinces had been raised frequently by the national leaders from time to time, yet the British government initially paid no heed to this demand and did not reorganize the Indian states for their administrative convenience.

Oriyas constituted a major linguistic community of the Indian subcontinent, but they were disbursed under several administrative jurisdictions: some of the territories of Orissa were in Bengal, some in Madras Presidency and so on. The Oriya people felt that they were not afforded due justice for nearly a century since the British conquest of Orissa in 1803. The *Na Anka* famine of 1866 and the language agitation of the Congress since the first quarter of the 20th century contributed to the growth of political consciousness among the Oriyas scattered in the neighbouring areas regarding their precarious position as well as the administrative disadvantages suffered by them.

The Demand for a Single Linguistic Province for the Oriyas

The demand for a single linguistic province for the Oriyas united all classes of people and numerous representations were submitted to the Government to this effect in subsequent years. When John Beams was the Commissioner of Orissa, the Oriyas appealed to him for the merger of the Oriya-speaking areas into a distinct linguistic unit; the people of Baleswar made a similar representation to Richard Temple, the Lieutenant-Governor, who did not pay any heed to that appeal.

However, in 1903, considering the scheme of Partition of Bengal, Lord Curzon made a proposal to unite the Oriya speaking tracts under one unit. Subsequently, the Montagu-Chelmsford Commission as well as the Central and Provincial legislatures recognized this need but nothing was done in practice.

In 1920 Sachchidananda Sinha moved a resolution in the Imperial Council for the appointment of a Committee for the amalgamation of the Oriya-speaking tracts into a single unit within the existing province of Bihar and Orissa. (Bomball, 1967).

Ultimately the Government recognized the necessity for the creation of a separate linguistic state and appointed the Simon Commission to report on the matter. The Commission in its report stated, "Bihar and Orissa is a glaring example of the artificial connections of areas which are not naturally related" (*Orissa State Gazetteer*).

In the First Round Table Conference, the Raja of Parlakimadi pressed for the establishment of a separate province for the Oriyas. His main argument was that since Orissa was an area with a single language and definite historical and cultural associations,

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it should be under one administration instead of being parceled out among four different provinces - Bihar and Orissa, Bengal, Central Provinces and Madras” (Bomball, 1967).

As such, the Government appointed the Boundary Commission, and the Commission, after a detailed enquiry, came to the conclusion that the province of Orissa was linguistically and racially the most homogenous province in the whole of British India. In lieu of this fact the new province of Orissa as an administrative unit came into being on the 1st April, 1936 as per the Government of India (Constitution of Orissa) Order,1936 (*Orissa State Gazetteer*).

Conclusion

The creation of Orissa is a landmark event in the sense that it legitimized the regional languages. It is a unique experience in the federal history of the world in the sense that the process of federalization on a cultural basis was recognized and that too in a colonial environment, paving the way for the recognition of internal self-determination of the Oriya speaking population. The creation of Orissa proved that linguistic aspirations can hardly be ignored.

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Jhumpa Mukherjee, Ph.D.
Department of Political Science
St. Xavier's College
30, Park Street
Kolkata 700016
West Bengal, India
jhumpa_27@yahoo.com

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