

MODERN ODISHA

The Rise of the Odia Movement: A Struggle for Unity and Identity

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • December 25, 2024 • 3 min read

Odia Movement: After the death of Mukunda Deva, the last Hindu ruler of Odisha, the region descended into political chaos, territorial fragmentation, and socio-cultural disturbances. Odisha fell under the control of the Afghans, Mughals, and Marathas, each bringing further instability. Eventually, the British occupied Odisha in 1803. During British rule, Ganjam was annexed in 1759 and integrated into the Madras Presidency, while Sambalpur was captured in 1849 and became part of the Central Province. Coastal districts like Balasore, Cuttack, and Puri were seized from the Marathas and placed under Bengal's administration. Consequently, Odia-speaking regions were split across Madras, Central Province, Bihar, and Bengal, leading to neglect and domination by linguistic majorities. Efforts were even made to abolish the Odia language.

This marginalization spurred a growing sense of unity and national consciousness among Odia-speaking people in the 19th century. Factors like modern education, political awakening, press and journalism, socio-cultural organizations, and Christian missionaries fueled the Odia movement. Movements like the Brahma and Mahima reforms further galvanized the cause.

Key organizations emerged to champion Odia identity, notably the **Utkal Sabha**, established in Cuttack in 1882. Its primary goal was to unify the Odia people and advocate for their political rights. The first meeting, held on August 16, 1882, at the Cuttack Printing Company, was attended by prominent leaders. Chaudhuri Kasinatha Das and Gouri Sankar Roy were elected as the first President and Secretary, respectively.

Gouri Sankar Roy, also the editor of *Utkal Dipika*, used the journal to publicize the Sabha's activities and highlight issues affecting Odias. Regular meetings of the Sabha, often held at the *Utkal Dipika* office, discussed the preservation of Odia language, literature, and culture. Leaders like Madhusudan Das were closely associated with the Sabha's efforts, which significantly contributed to the rise of Odia identity and its consolidation during the 19th century—a landmark chapter in Odisha's modern history.

The Odia movement gained significant momentum following the devastating famine of 1866. Numerous vernacular journals of the time, including *Utkal Dipika*, *Sambada Bahika*, *Utkal Darpan*, *Utkal Putra*, and *Sambalpur Hitaisheni*, played a pivotal role in promoting Odia heritage and raising mass awareness by emphasizing the region's glorious past. Alongside these journals, associations such as the Utkal Bhasa Bidyayini Sabha, Ullasini Sabha, Utkal Hitabadini Sabha, and Utkal Sabha were instrumental in fostering a collective identity among Odia-speaking people.

The threat to the Odia language became pronounced as some Bengali officials, occupying key positions in Odisha, advocated for its abolition. These remarks ignited a strong reaction among the Odias, uniting them in opposition to Bengali dominance. The vernacular journals and associations fiercely criticized this attitude, further solidifying a nationalist spirit among the Odia people.

In 1903, a significant milestone occurred at Rambha, near the shores of Chilika Lake, where key leaders met under the chairmanship of the Raja of Khallikote. This gathering led to the establishment of the **Ganjam Jatiya Samiti**, with its first session held in April 1903 in Berhampur. Representatives from various Odia-speaking regions attended, and Shyam Sunder Rajguru was appointed Chairperson of the conference.

Building on the Berhampur resolutions, the **first Odia National Conference**, known as **Utkal Sammilani**, convened in Cuttack on December 30–31, 1903. Presided over by the Maharaja of Mayurbhanj, the conference brought together representatives from across Odisha. It laid the foundation for a truly Odia national organization, passing resolutions advocating the unification of Odia-speaking regions.

The socio-political awakening of the Odia people was evident through this historic event. The movement that began with the Utkal Sammilani in 1903 became a pioneering effort in India to demand the creation of a new province based on linguistic identity—a landmark in the history of Odisha and Indian nationalism.

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