QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES ON ODIA LANGUAGE AND RELATED MATTERS

1 Odia shastriya manyata heba pare apana odia bhasaku nei kana sabu sambhabana asha karanti?

(Odia has got the classical language status. In this context, what possibilities do you visualize about this language?)

One good thing that has happened after Odia got this recognition is that the language has received considerable media attention, which had not happened in the recent years, thanks to which many are aware of its present situation, which is not encouraging. Until very recently, it was the state language of Odisha more in name than in practice. It seems that only technically it is a language of undergraduate education in the humanities and the social sciences. It is not yet a language of modern knowledge in the fields of science, technology and humanities and the human sciences at the highest level; therefore, it is not a language of opportunity. Many parents, even in semi-urban areas, prefer to send their children to English-medium schools. In this context, the media’s attempt to sensitize the Odia speakers to its present situation is a positive thing. If the Odia speakers are really sincere and serious about their language, then things will change for the better. We know what to do to start with, namely, use Odia in domains it has not been used so far. It is not going to be easy, but this step has to be taken.

Related to its recognition as a classical language, Prof. Udayanath Sahoo, a well-known Sarala scholar, once told me that there isn’t much interest in medieval Odia literature these days among researchers at our universities. However, according to Prof. Arabinda Patnaik, there have recently been some welcome signs in this regard; after its recognition, some scholars now show inclination to work on medieval Odia literature. One hopes it is indeed the case. We can expect in the near future translations of our classics, authoritative and modern editions of the same and quality research on these works, among others.

We would also expect the classical texts to be digitalized. Here I am not talking about scanned material, which the computer cannot process for queries and other operations. Scanning can solve the problem of storage (of books, palm leaf manuscripts, etc.) and that’s all. It will not contribute to research. For that, the material must be in text-format which can be processed by the computer (i.e., search engines and similar operations can apply).

2 Bhasara bikasa o samarthyaku kipari akalana karanti? Odia bhasara bikasa o samarthyà pain kana kana karajiba abasyaka
How do you evaluate the potential of a language for its growth? How do you evaluate the development of a language? What can be done for the development of Odia?)

Whether and to what extent a language is developed (bikasa) is a matter of in how many and how diverse contexts that language has been and is still being used. If a language is not used to create and disseminate knowledge in, say, science, technology and law, that language will be considered less developed than the one which creates and disseminates knowledge in these areas.

As for the inherent ability (samarthya) of a language, no language is deficient. All languages are potentially equal in this respect. The popular belief still is that languages differ with respect to their inherent ability, therefore, some languages are developed, others are not. This is not correct. But despite the equal potentiality of languages, in actuality there indeed are developed languages and there are underdeveloped or undeveloped languages. If a certain language is developed and a certain other language is not, it is merely a matter of the use these languages have been and are being put to. For various reasons, entirely non-linguistic, people live their lives at different levels of awareness. Not all speech communities are concerned with the neurological structure of the human brain or the human genetic endowment in physicalist terms, for instance. In our country itself, there are communities who live the eighteenth or the nineteenth century life, and there are people whose life styles are of the mid-twenty-first-century. So their communicative needs are not the same, cannot be the same. As a result, some language is used only in limited domains and some other, in very many domains.

As for the development of Odia, we must use it in many and new domains. This will enrich its vocabulary and styles of expression. Across centuries, many foreign words have been nativized in Odia; so today, we must not be unwilling to borrow from other languages. Nativization will inevitably follow. Borrowing (an inexact and unfortunate term) does not undermine a language; often it empowers a language by increasing its expressive power. We must however be careful that borrowing remains need-based and not arbitrary or for creating impression.

3 Bhasa bikasare sahityara bhumika kana

(What is the role of literature for the development of a language?)

Literature contributes to the development of language. There is no room for doubt here. Literary language enriches the vocabulary and the stylistic range of a language. Eminent writers coin words and collocations and sometimes extend the meaning and the use of existing words. They say things in new ways; as a result, the expressive power of a language increases. A developed language, i.e., a language used in a wide variety of contexts, has a rich literary tradition.
However, it is wrong – very wrong, in fact, to think that a language can develop only though the imaginative literature (poetry, drama, fiction, etc.) written in that language. The contribution of knowledge literature for the growth of a language is immense. Creation of both kavya (imaginative literature) and shastra (knowledge literature) is important for the development of a language.

4 Shastriya manyata pariprekshire odia bhasara gabesana o bikasaku anekatah gurutwa pradana karajauchi. Ehi pariprekshire odishare prachalita aneka anchalika bhasa o adibasi bhasa kana upeksita hoi rahiba?

(After Odia received the classical language status, much stress is being given on research and the development of Odia language. In this context, is there reason for concern that the other languages spoken in Odisha, including the Adivasi languages, are going to suffer neglect?

Research on the classical phase of Odia, translation of works (including loka vani or sahitya) of that period, etc. is one project and modernization (i.e., development) of Odia is another project. These are unrelated.

Whether a regional language has classical status or not, it must be modernized, that is, be enabled for use in a wide variety of domains, including the knowledge-based ones. If a language has a classical phase, then that phase has to be studied carefully for its attainments in the fields of language and literature, both imaginative literature and knowledge literature.

From the above, it does not follow that development of other languages of the state should be neglected. That must not happen. Maybe three years ago, the State government wrote to the Union government to include Kosali and Ho in the Eighth Schedule. Since the Eighth Schedule contains languages, not dialects, the government’s recommendation amounts to a tacit cognition of the status of Kosali and Ho as languages. It will not help if Kosali and Ho are neglected in the language development project. In a different context, author and intellectual, Dr. Bhagban Prakash, has expressed a similar view.

Adivasi languages must not be neglected, if we really mean to provide primary education to every child in his or her mother tongue. So far there has been a clear lack of will in this regard, as far as my understanding goes. A truly welfare state strives to give equal educational opportunities to all learners to the extent practicable.

5 Odiare gyana pathara bikasa simita kahinki?
Why is the progress of Odia unsatisfactory when it comes to the development of knowledge (-based) literature in this language?

For an Odia, writing knowledge texts in English is easy but doing so in Odia is difficult, as Prof. Arabinda Patnaik tells me. I agree because today, our access to knowledge at a sophisticated level in any subject, be it in science, technology, law, social sciences or humanities is in English, as it has been for decades. So it is quite natural that knowledge literature in Odia on modern topics at a sophisticated level is unavailable.

By the way, in which language did the great Pathani Samanta write *Siddhanta Darpana* in the nineteenth century? Sanskrit, not Odia! The reason is the same. Odia did not have the resources needed for the reporting one’s findings in a technical field like astronomy. It is a different matter that he wrote it in Odia script. Writing Sanskrit in *devnagari* script was possibly not the norm then.

Creating knowledge literature in our language is a great challenge and a great opportunity. It has to be done and done soon enough. Without it, needless to say, there will be no development of the language and consequently, the domain of its use will not increase. Incidentally, the state government’s recent decision to use Odia for administrative purposes will contribute to the development of this language to a certain extent.

6 Odia bhasa alochana samparkare apananka matamata kana?

(What is your opinion on the linguistic studies of Odia?)

Although there is a good tradition of linguistics in Odia, there doesn’t seem to be much discussion on Odia language in Odia today. There is comparatively more discussion on this language in English. This is in the form of M.Phil. and PhD dissertations and research publications.

I hear that our Sahitya Akademi has initiated a project on a comprehensive grammar of Odia. There is a great need for it. It should be published in both Odia and English. There is need for a comprehensive lexicon and a thesaurus, for instance. CIIL, Mysore has initiated a project on Odia thesaurus. Although some studies exist, there is the need for an exhaustive description of Kosali phonology, morphology and grammar. I do not know to what extent Ho has been studied.

The endangered language project of UGC should prioritize the description of at least the most endangered languages, some of which are spoken in Odisha.

At the same time, there must be linguistic literature in Odia language on the revolutionary ideas of modern linguistics: linguistic universals and related issues, language acquisition
being a biological endowment and connected questions, including its relevance to the theory of evolution, and what sense language is a typically human attribute, among many, many others.

Besides, there are equally important issues concerning language: language as an expression of culture, an instrument of power, use of language in real life situations, the way language and society are related, etc. These were not dealt with in the linguistic studies of earlier periods. Using technical language, pragmatics and discourse were ignored in linguistics. But now these are emerging as among the serious concerns of the discipline of linguistics. The study of language structure and of the use of language in day-to-day life are both important. We must have work on these and related subjects in Odia language. Incidentally, research on some of these topics, with reference to Odia, has been published in English language. I haven’t seen many publications on these issues in Odia language. Maybe I am wrong.

7 Odia sahitya kahinki, samagra bharatiya sahityare nutana siddhanta kimba tatwara bikasa kahinki hoiparanahi?

(Why according to you, is it the case that no highly significant, “original” (in the sense of “innovative”), new and impactful (in a much larger context) literature is not emerging, in not just Odia language, in other Indian languages of our country as well?)

The observation is right but it is difficult to answer this question. There is this saying: why your picture appeared in this morning’s newspaper is easy to answer, but why it did not, is difficult to answer with any confidence because there are indefinitely many possible answers. In other words, why something happened is easier to explain than why something did not. Sometimes, even why something happened cannot be easily explained. For instance, think of Sarala’s works, in particular, his Mahabharata. Look at the Odia literary tradition, in particular, the narrative tradition, before Sarala. One cannot say that it was strong enough for us to expect that a supremely creative story teller and thinker like Sarala Dasa would soon arrive.

Talking about fiction in our regional language literatures during the twenty-five years or so, one could say that there have been some really good and memorable works. The other day I read One Thousand Days in a Refrigerator by Manoj Kumar Panda which I thought is excellent as a work of art. But yes, there haven’t been many which are impactful: I have in mind the best of Gabriel Marquez, Naquib Mahfouz, Jose Saramago, Orhan Pamuk, Mario Llosa, Kazuo Ishiguro, J.M.Coetzee, Milan Kundera, to name a few. About a year ago, I read Han Kang’s remarkable novel “The Vegetarian”, and hopefully I am wrong. I miss much writing in Odia which make comparable creative experiments. Even imitation from another literary (and cultural) tradition is fine so long as it is creative and not mechanical, and blended harmoniously into our tradition. This, to my mind,
happened in quite a few regional literatures in our country, including our own, in the
nineteenth century. There is a lot to say, but a detailed response is out of place here.

8 Apana Sarala Mahabharataku ingrājī punarbyakshya karibe pachare karanati
kana?

(Why did you think of retelling Sarala Mahabharata in English?)

E.M.Forster once said something like the following: when one has a beautiful experience,
one feels like sharing it with others. Reading Sarala Mahabharata was an overwhelmingly
elevating experience for me. Sarala had, in ample measure, what Shelly called
“myth-making imagination”. His Mahabharata shows how remarkably innovative he was
as a story-teller and how refreshing and how deep a thinker he was. Besides, he was able
to articulate profound thoughts in a deceptively simple language. I felt like sharing my
intellectual delight of reading Sarala Mahabharata with those who do not know Odia. So
I decided to retell in English the most creative of those episodes which were novel in
Sarala’s retelling – “novel” with respect to Vyasa Mahabharata. It has been a joyful
experience for me, to say the least.

9 Sarala Mahabharatare mahabharatiya paramparare upeksita heuthiba anarjya
paramparaku Sarala dasa besi gurutwa deichanti tatha ehara pratishtha
karichanti manekaranti ki?

(Do you think it is the case that in Sarala Mahabharata, the cultures and traditions
ignored by the dominant classical tradition, have been given significant
importance?)

Certainly. Just to give one example, think of Jara, who unknowingly became the cause of
Krishna’s departure from the mortal world. And in Sarala’s Mahabharata, he was the
only one who did not seek Bhagawan – God. He was too naïve for that. Unlike the
gopis, who are perhaps the best examples of bhakti in the Indian puranic literature, he did not
long for God, who was Krishna for them. And unlike the great bhakta, the savari, in the
Ramayana, he did not wait for God, who was Rama for her. Unlike her or the gopis, he
never thought of giving Him anything, either material or emotional.

It was Bhagawan who sought him. He would receive worship from him alone, the sacred
Wood from which His Murtis would be made, moved into the designated place only
when Jara joined the effort. And He wanted Jara to make his Murti – Jara who had no
idea how he would do that. The creator god, Brahma, would eventually make the Murtis,
but Jara would be with him.
This relationship between Bhagawan and Jara is about God seeking man rather than man seeking God. This latter is the fundamental idea of bhakti in the classical tradition. Jara is not part of it. Call his bonding with Bhagawan an ana-arjya (non-Arjya) concept, if you like. Since he was sought by Bhagawan, one can interpret it as Sarala’s respect for the non-arjya tradition.

10 Ingrazi bhasa prati amara abhimuksysya kana heba thik boli apana bhabanti?

(What do you think should be our attitude towards English today?)

We have to learn English language well. (In fact, not just English, anything we learn, we must learn well: be it Odia language and literature, be it computers or health science.) The society (not just the government) must provide the necessary facilities, as a priority, to the deprived and marginalized sections of the society for the learning of this language. English is the main language of (economic) opportunity in today’s world. (Even if de-globalization takes place, English for us will still remain the main language of opportunity, as it was prior to globalization.) Anti-English attitude is against our interest. In fact, today, the anti-English attitude would reflect the colonial mind set.

Hopefully, sooner than later, if we work together seriously and hard for it, Odia will become a language of knowledge. But even then, Odia will not become the main language of opportunity. How many (and of what kind) job opportunities, for example, can Odisha offer? Will there be the economic environment outside Odisha where the Odias and the non-Odias will interact with each other in Odia language for mutual benefit? But this does not mean at all that we must not work urgently for making Odia a language of knowledge.

These days some think in Odisha that pro-English is anti-Odia. This “either-or” position is self-defeating. We must learn both Odia and English well, and Hindi too. Some seem to take the phrase “English is the killer language” too literally and too seriously. The one who said this (David Crystal) never advised anyone (including those who speak the languages, supposedly threatened by English, not to learn English for that reason.)

Learning English (all over the country, not just in our state) has unfortunately got closely connected with studying in an English-medium school. In Odia medium schools also one can learn English well. This was indeed the situation till about fifty years ago in Odisha.

Language learning, be it one’s mother tongue or an “other-tongue”, takes place throughout life. At school, only the foundation is laid so that the learner can learn the language on his or her own. As far as English is concerned, a carefully designed 400 – hour English teaching course is sufficient for the creation of this foundation, I think. It can be offered even outside of the formal system (in the form of coaching classes, for instance) or as a strong supplement to the formal system. The investment in time and
money will be much less than the investment of the same if one goes to an English medium school to learn English. It is high time we consider this option.

(Questions of Dr. Sanjaya Bag, Responses by B.N.Patnaik)

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