

# Translation and Multilingualism in Nineteenth-Century India: A View from Orissa

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## Abstract

*Considered the founding father of modern Oriya literature, Phakir Mohan Senapati wrote the first short story and the first autobiography in that language, as well as the first social-realist novel in any Indian language. He was also a social activist and a colonial administrator, and as such he was a witness to and a participant in the events taking place in eastern India in the nineteenth century under the British Raj. Neither a nativist nor an unconditional admirer of all things British, Phakir Mohan Senapati acted throughout his life as a mediator, defending Oriya culture and language but at the same time promoting social change. His autobiography, the focus of my analysis here, provides a portrait of the multilingual nature of Oriya society in the nineteenth century, of the hierarchies involved in such a situation, and of the interaction of languages through translation.*

India is a multilingual nation; the linguistic basis of its different states has led to the official, constitutional recognition of certain of its languages, creating a situation in which hierarchies and privilege exist, a situation in which other – unrecognized – languages jockey for position. The number of these ‘other’ languages in India is simply staggering; according to the 1961 census India was at that time home to some 1652; only a small percentage of these – less than 2 per cent – have received official recognition, whether in Schedule 8 of the Constitution or by bodies such as the Sahitya Akademi or the National Book Trust. This difference between ‘official’ and ‘non official’ languages, and ‘semi official’ languages, exists in other nations as well, including those which are monolingual or bilingual. The United States and France are states in which one language alone is given pride of place whether officially or unofficially; Canada and Belgium are examples

of constitutionally bilingual nations. In these monolingual and bilingual countries too, other, 'non official' languages exist alongside the official ones, most notably perhaps – because they pre-exist the languages of the colonizers – the multiple, and endangered, American Indian languages of the United States and Canada. In all of these countries too some sort of recognition is often sought for 'other' languages, for Spanish, for example, in the United States.

Whether a nation is multilingual, bilingual, or monolingual has consequences for translation. Canada is a country in which a great deal of translation takes place *because* of the official recognition accorded English and French and the obligation to translate all official documents into these two languages; the United States is a country in which relatively little translation takes place, despite the very large number of Spanish speakers, *because* of the status, albeit unofficial, accorded English alone. The multilingualism of India poses special problems for translation, and its constitutional distinction between national language (Hindi), associate language (English), and official languages (the twenty-two listed in the Eighth Schedule, with as few as one lakh speakers [Dogri] or as many as forty crore [Hindi]), also affects and tempers the amount and the type of translation carried out. Indeed, the very existence of an 'associate' language, for use primarily in the courts, implies non-translation.

The Indian linguistic situation, because of the large number of languages used, has certain particularities that distinguish India as a zone of translation from other parts of the world. One of these is the use of 'link languages', that is languages that are neither the source nor the target language but through which the source passes on its way to the target. Hindi and English are very often used as link languages, but other languages – such as Bengali and Marathi – can also take on this role. From the point of view purely of accuracy, the use of link languages can be deplored. After all, if between two languages there is loss, and gain as well, then between three there is the possibility of complete transformation, to the point of unrecognizability. Certainly, in an ideal world, competent translators

for all possible pairs of Indian languages, or at least of ‘official’ Indian languages, would exist. But this is in fact not yet the case. Are there translators from Konkani into Oriya, for example? If not, is it preferable that no translation exist rather than that done through Hindi or English or Bengali? And the problem is perhaps even greater for the translation from non-Indian languages into Indian languages. In the 1950s a translator in Cuttack undertook to translate all the Nobel Literature Prize laureates into Oriya. This was only possible through English, and his translations provided access in Oriya to some of the world’s greatest literature.

Link languages continue to be used in translation in India, reflecting not only the complications of multilingualism but also the hierarchies – whether de facto or official – in such a situation. An example of this is the text from which I will be extensively quoting here, a text of signal importance in its testimony regarding the evolution of Orissan society in the nineteenth-century. This is a translation of Phakir Mohan Senapati’s *Autobiography*. I will say more about the text later, but for the moment I wish to note that this translation is scheduled to serve as a basis for translations into other Indian languages. Once again, I would say that this is not an ideal situation, but the amount of work and care that have gone into this translation into English, as well as the problematic nature of the text itself, perhaps justifies its use as the basis for other translations; only ‘perhaps’, because despite my arguments justifying the use of link languages in translation I am also forced to accept the difficulties involved in such a practice.

Related to the use of link languages and the absence of competent translators for certain pairs of languages is the issue of the payment translators receive. It is difficult to develop a professional attitude towards translation if payment is so low – when it exists at all – that it does not permit the development of translation as a profession. There are certain people, of course, who would make the claim that translation, and the translation of literature in particular, should be based purely on love for the text and the desire to share it with others. I would not really want to argue against such

a motivation for translation, but we also need to recognize that love alone is not sufficient; skill is at least as important as love; and the development of translational skills requires a professional attitude towards the activity of translation. How can such an attitude be fostered? By a recognition of the *value* of translation – its *economic* value, its *literary* value, its *epistemological* value. Until translators are properly paid for their work, until there is a recognition that translations are not all equally acceptable (that is, that there is a recognizable difference between a translation which respects certain professional criteria and one that does not), until there is discussion around the theoretical and epistemological questions raised by translation and forums created for such discussion to take place – until these different aspects are given importance, translation is destined to remain a ‘pre-professional’ activity. The consequences of this will be that the *value* of translation will continue to go unrecognized and the quality of translations will depend on the skills of the particular individuals involved in the process. Transforming translation into a professional activity, on the other hand, requires that those involved in the activity of translation reflect on what it means to translate in a modern multilingual society, and for such reflection to take place forums, journals and conferences are a first, and useful, step.

I began by referring to the multilingual nature of India, to the recognition of certain languages and not others, and to the hierarchies and struggles that inform language politics in a multilingual setting. I want now to return to these themes and examine the way in which they play out in nineteenth-century Orissa, taking as my point of reference the autobiography – the first in Oriya – of Phakir Mohan Senapati.

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Phakir Mohan Senapati was a man of many trades and multiple passions, who lived from 1843 to 1918 in the eastern coastal area of India now known as Orissa, which, during his lifetime, was divided between three separate administrative divisions: the Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta Presidencies. At different times in his life Phakir Mohan was, among other things, a school teacher; a lumber

merchant; an apprentice accountant in his family's sail-making business; a leader in bringing the first printing press to the city where he lived and the third in all of Orissa; a journalist; an administrator over a period of some twenty-five years of what were known as Feudatory or Princely States; a translator from Sanskrit into Oriya of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Upanishads*; and after he had accomplished all of this, a writer of what are still considered some of the most important and most innovative texts of modern Oriya literature.

It was essentially once his administrative career ended, in 1896,<sup>1</sup> at the age of 53, that Phakir Mohan turned to writing fiction, although before this he had published numerous, often provocative, pieces in Bengali and Oriya newspapers and journals on a number of subjects. In one, for example, entitled "Changes in Women's Lives", he put forward the novel idea that women should wear some sort of garment under their saris, both to safeguard their modesty and to protect themselves from the cold. He notes that his argument was well received by the British colonial administrators, the 'sahibs', and that its satirical tone provoked laughter among his fellow clerks. This shows Phakir Mohan in two of his – interconnected – roles: that of social reformer, and that of social satirist, roles that he brought together in his writing, and in his fiction in particular. Prior to embarking on his career as an administrator Phakir Mohan also produced much needed textbooks in Oriya, for use in the schools which were developing during the period, including a book on arithmetic and one on grammar, a *History of India*, and the translation, from Bengali, of a collection of sketches of the lives of Western scientists by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the Bengal reformer and champion of improving the status of women in India. We will return to this aspect of his career and of his writing, as it directly relates to the multilingual, and hierarchical, nature of Indian society at the time.

Upon retirement from administrative service in 1896 Phakir Mohan concentrated his intellectual activities on writing, producing, in addition to a good deal of poetry – on subjects as varied as



Mohan wrote his autobiography in the last two years of his life and its serialization began in *Utkal Sahitya* during his lifetime. Two English translations of the text have been published – one by John V. Boulton, under the title *My Times and I*, and another, *Story of My Life*, by Jatindra K. Nayak and Prodeepta Das. Both of these are based on the bowdlerized version of the text. A third translation of Phakir Mohan's complete text, some forty per cent longer than the previous two, is presently being prepared for publication by Diptiranjan Pattanaik, Basanta K. Tripathy, and myself.

In Phakir Mohan's autobiography a constant theme is the need to enrich and defend the Oriya language; along with the desirability of extending education to women and to Oriyas living outside the larger cities and towns, the defense of his mother tongue is Phakir Mohan's principle concern. Indeed, the very justification for writing an autobiography – an enterprise that could be seen as an exercise in self-aggrandizement – is framed in such terms. Thus the "Brief Note" at the head of the text, written most likely by the son, but nevertheless reflecting the essence of the father's preoccupations, reads<sup>8</sup>:

For the last four or five years a number of friends, as well as some educated young men whom I love and who are like sons to me, have been pressing me to put the story of my life on record. I have found it extremely difficult to ignore their requests. Autobiographies in Oriya are still rare, and my own life has been too ordinary to have much to offer that is worthy of one. What is more, to be truthful, I do not have the literary talent to sustain the interest of my readers. Nevertheless, there is at least one justification for my having begun such an important undertaking. I firmly believe that in the near future many auto-biographers will emerge in this sacred motherland of ours; I am simply their forerunner.

The reference here to "this sacred motherland of ours" is not a simple figure of style; rather, it points to Phakir Mohan's deep commitment to Utkal, to a reunited Orissa (which was to come about





Oriya with Bengali, and from the English-educated, who now felt “awkward speaking Oriya”, since their identification with English values had led them to feel self-conscious about their origins. By abolishing the Oriya-medium “chatalis” and replacing them with Bengali-language schools, and by eliminating Oriya from the Court – in modern terms the civil service, Bengalis would also be able to eliminate Oriyas, and not just the language, from these positions and acquire them for themselves. In the following passage, Phakir Mohan recounts the changes in language use that have taken place over time in Midnapore, as well as the resistance to such change, creating a separation between the public and the private spaces of Oriya-speaking families:

In around twenty-two hundred square miles of Midnapore’s total area of five thousand two hundred settlements were exclusively Oriya. The inhabitants used only Oriya in their daily conversations, letters, calculations, documents of business transactions, and land records. Earlier, Oriya had also been used in the courts of Midnapore district, and clerks working there had been appointed in Balasore District Court. These practices have been discontinued to a great extent.

Even now, however, the *Bhagabata* by Jagannath Das, the *Mahabharata* by Sarala Das, and the Oriya *Ramayana* are recited every evening in the houses of well-to-do people in the villages there. A lady from the zamindar family of Pataspur patronized the translation of the Sanskrit *Bhagabata* into Oriya verse-form, and it is now recited in certain places. Hundreds of Brahmins from the districts of Balasore and Cuttack and well-versed in pothis still earn their living reciting scriptures in various places. Such Brahmins are employed in the houses of zamindars and rich men. The English-educated Babus in the area now feel awkward speaking Oriya, but they have not been able to eliminate the national language from their households due to the resistance of their Kulalakshmis.

The abolition of the chatasalis in south Midnapore was painful and unfortunate, the result of underhanded manoeuvring. A Bengali was posted as Sub-Inspector of Schools in south Midnapore between 1865-1870, with the mission to set up schools in the area. He tried to establish Bengali vernacular schools but he failed in his attempt, as people were unwilling to have their children schooled in Bengali. As he had been specifically assigned the task of setting up schools, his job was at stake. Would it have been wise for him to inform his superiors of his failure and lose such a lucrative position?

Necessity is the mother of invention, and the Babu hit upon a plan. He visited every police station. With the help of the officer-in-charge, he summoned all the chatasali abadhans under the jurisdiction of the police station to appear on a specific date. He showed them a forged stamped document in English. "Look here," he said. "This is an order by the Collector of Midnapore district. All the chatasalis under this police station are being abolished and all the abadhans must return home within seven days of receiving this order. Warrants will be issued against those still present after that, and they will be punished with fines and jail terms." The Sub-Inspector made the rounds of different police stations, reading out the forged order.

How could weak-kneed fellows such as they were have summoned up the courage to resist? This was, after all, an order from the district Collector; moreover, it was being issued from the police station. They fled back to their homes, abandoning the chatasalis forever. Needless to say, it was then quite easy for the Sub-Inspector to set up Bengali vernacular schools. The elder brother of the above-mentioned Sub-Inspector was Headmaster of Balasore District School. I was very close to him, and he told me all of this to demonstrate how competent an administrator his brother was.

Although the people of south Midnapore received their education in Bengali, Oriya continued to be used at home. Is it ever easy to abandon one's mother tongue? The Oriya *Bhagabata* by Jagannath Das and a few other Oriya books printed in Bengali script were read in every home.

The interplay between Oriya, Bengali, and English here is worth underlining. Gradually Oriya is being erased from the public space, replaced by Bengali. Although ideological factors may be at work here, the motive seems essentially economic: by insisting on the primacy of Bengali, Bengalis are certain to obtain most of the positions in education and at Court. Nevertheless, at least for the moment, Oriya remains strong within the households, largely through the influence of the women. It is they who resist attempts to eliminate Oriya, and it is a woman who sponsors the translation of the Sanskrit *Bhagabata* into Oriya. Oriya constitutes, indeed, the *mother* tongue. But it is the use made of the language of colonization, English, that is particularly worth noting in this multilingual situation. English is given a role to play in the charade invented by the Bengali Sub-Inspector of Schools and it is largely the power invested in that language, with the backing of the police officer, that enables Bengali vernacular schools to be set up.

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In the next passage to be quoted from the autobiography, what is particularly noteworthy is the change that is taking place in the value being accorded the language and the literature of Utkal [Orissa] in the face of the development of Bengali and the spread of English. This latter aspect – the invasion of English customs and of the language itself – is the object of many acerbic comments in Phakir Mohan's fiction; the former – the rapid development of Bengali – gives rise to both admiration, as an example to be followed, and combativeness, an aspect that will become clearer in the third passage I have selected. Phakir Mohan, who in a certain sense belongs both to the past and to the future of Orissa, sees the change that is taking place – the switch from Oriya to Persian, English, or

Bengali – as troubling, since he holds his language and culture, his Oriya identity, dear. But he also wishes to actively fight this change, not through some rearguard and conservative action, but by following the example being set and competing on equal terms. In the passage that follows, Phakir Mohan presents the context that will lead a group of concerned Oriyas, of which he is a leader, to establish the third printing press in Orissa:

The growth and spread of the Bengali language began in 1857, after the Sepoy Mutiny. The lack of textbooks in the schools of Bengal and Orissa provinces was offset by the introduction of a variety of books by Mahatma Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, revered Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, and esteemed Akhyaya Kumar Dutta. Renowned persons like Prasanna Kumar Sarbadhikari, Babu Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay, and Pundit Loharam also wrote a number of books on arithmetic, algebra, geography, grammar, etc. These textbooks helped pupils in their intellectual development. Earlier, the language of the prescribed textbooks had been as flawed as their subject matter. The three parts of the *Nitikatha* and the *Hitopadesa* in Oriya, which had been in the syllabus from the beginning, were still there, with no additions; no other books had been added. The Bengali teachers and other Bengali Babus used to make very mean and vulgar remarks about the Oriya language; it was as if they were insulting our mother. As these comments were hurtful, they provoked anger against the slanderers. At that time it occurred to me that unless we enriched our mother tongue we would remain obscure to the outside world, and the possibility of improving the life of our community would remain only a dream. What are the ways in which a language can develop? Day in and day out I thought about this. My sole objective was to sacrifice everything so that my mother tongue could grow. I was between nineteen and twenty at the time, without education, strength, or money.

During those times, many books of various sizes, dealing with different subjects, were being published in Bengali every month. I used to buy some of

them and others I would borrow from the library of Babu Damodar Prasad Das, who lived in Sunhat village, near Balasore. Whether Damodar Babu read them or not, he would always buy the books and keep them for our benefit. Now I remember that most of the books published in those days contained vulgar language and that the contents were extremely offensive to moralists. It is a relief to know that the names of these books have been forgotten. Whatever few good books were published are still in circulation and will continue to shine in this world, as gems of Bengali literature.

Whenever there was a new Bengali book I would examine it closely, turning it over and over again for a long time, wondering when such a book would be brought out in the language of Utkal. Without even realizing it I would heave a deep sigh. At the time a single monthly magazine, *Bibidhartha Sangraha*, was published in Bengali. Nityananda, the son of my father's cousin, was a subscriber, and I was able to borrow the magazine from him and read it through three or four times. There were also two weekly magazines published in Bengali: *Som-Prakash* and *Education Gazette*. A renowned zamindar in Balasore was a subscriber to *Som-Prakash*; *Education Gazette* was available at the Zilla School. It took a great deal of persuasion and effort on my part to obtain a copy of it. At times I would worry whether such a weekly could be brought out in Oriya, but my mind would immediately answer in despair that that would be impossible. A committee of translators was set up in Calcutta with Government funds, and I heard that some learned men were translating English books into Bengali and winning prizes worth thousands of rupees. While going through these translations I felt as if my spirit was burning up with envy. This led me to wonder what prevented the Government from setting up a committee for translation in Utkal as well.

It is worth noting that Phakir Mohan's main point of reference for Orissa is what he sees happening in Bengal, where the proximity to colonial power has made possible something quite unimaginable – at least until that point in time – in Orissa. Spurred on by his own familiarity with Bengali and with Bengal, Phakir Mohan will take this as a model, to turn it against itself. In this passage he continues, identifying the causes for the turn away from Oriya by the higher social classes, seeing it as the result of their own self-interest (the clerks knew Persian, and could use this knowledge to retain their positions, while the Sanskrit pundits did not know Oriya, and thus encouraged its abandon), and contrasting this with the strength of the language in rural areas and popular practices:

Constantly I would ask myself when educated and well-to-do people in Utkal would develop a love for their mother tongue. At the time English or Persian educated Babus considered it an insult or a sin to pick up an Oriya book or to speak Oriya correctly. The clerks spoke in half-Persian and half-Oriya, and their writings read like a strange dialogue between the two languages. They even recorded their household expenditures in Persian. Earlier Persian had been the language of the Court. In 1836 the Government put an end to the use of Persian and passed an order introducing the native languages in its place. This had no effect, however. The clerks had taken a lot of care and put in a great deal of effort to learn Persian, and it was a matter of pride for them to speak and write that language. They were not used to writing Oriya, with the result that the registers and books of the Court continued to be written in Persian for a long time, even though applications from outside were written in Oriya.

Oriya was taught at Balasore Barabati School and at the Mission School. It is true that there was an order from the Government requiring the pupils of the Zilla School to read Oriya as a subject, but I never saw

them with Oriya books. When pupils asked their guardians for money to buy Oriya books, the answer they received was, "Haven't you already learned enough Oriya from the abadhan? What more is there to learn from Oriya books? Go and learn English." Artatrana Nanda, a man from Soro, was appointed to teach Sanskrit and Oriya at the Zilla School. Earlier, even the Sanskrit-educated pundits had hated reading or teaching Oriya. They could neither read hand-written Oriya nor write the language. To write letters home to their families, pundits would take someone's help. They considered it acceptable for the pupils not to buy Oriya books. The pundits were content to confine their teaching to the *Upakramanika*, by Vidyasagar. Moreover, all the teachers in the school were Bengalis. What need was there to pay any attention to teaching Oriya? Rather, they felt it would be a relief if the provision regarding teaching Oriya in the schools was abolished. Students in the English school considered it undignified to speak Oriya and used Bengali mixed with English. Given such an inauspicious situation, Oriya was completely banished from the English schools.

With a heart full of devotion I repeatedly pay tribute to the sacred departed souls of esteemed Jagannath Das, the great poet Upendra Bhanja, Kabibara Abhimanyu, and Dinakrushna Das. These great men were the saviours of the literature of Utkal; the books they wrote laid the foundations of the Oriya language. The great names of these Mahatmas will continue to shine as long as Oriya exists.

The *Bhagabata* by Jagannath Das used to be read in every village in Utkal. In larger villages there were permanent Bhagabatgadis, which were worshipped. Earlier, the *Bhagabata* and the works of other poets were included in the syllabus of chatahalis. Deliberations on books of poetry were the principal source of intellectual pleasure at meetings held by zamindars in the countryside

and in the choupadhis of Khandayats. There were singers in Utkal whose occupation consisted in singing songs, following them with explanations. They would crisscross the Gadajat States explaining the meaning of the songs to the Kings. During the period of anarchy and civil war, a large number of books from the storehouse of Oriya literature were destroyed. In order to save their own lives, people had to hide in jungles and on mountaintops. How could they have preserved literary works? Yet, there were many books that they kept hidden in their hearts. These are still there and will remain there forever.

At that time my only objective in life was to enrich the Oriya language. Despite several other engagements I kept my mind focused on that. I wanted to publish Oriya books on a regular basis, as was being done in the case of Bengali. But who would write them? Could I myself? I had written occasionally for the Bengali magazine *Som-Prakash* and was filled with courage and enthusiasm, as the editor had assured me he would print any letters I sent him.

There was a dance troupe in our village that performed Krishna Lila. I asked them to sing some quatrains I had written and was happy to hear them sung by the children in the troupe. I started writing a few articles whenever I had the time. No matter if they were all rubbish, by doing this I was able to put together a book in prose, entitled *History of the Prince*. I showed it to my friends; they were happy to read it. So far so good, but how to get it printed?

There was only one printing press in Utkal, on which all hopes rested, called the Cuttack Mission Press. Enquiring about the cost of printing, I learned that a single quarto would cost thirty rupees. I calculated that it would cost three hundred rupees to print my book. My God! Where could a man like me get so much money? Until then I had never touched one hundred rupees at any one time. Whatever salary I received every month – twenty or twenty-five rupees – I had to hand over to my



aunt, and I had to account for any delay in doing so. I was completely without hope of being able to have my book printed. Due to my negligence *History of the Prince* would not see the light of day. That did not keep me from writing, however, and I hoped that my example might inspire others to write and print books.

The ridicule of the Bengali Babus had become increasingly unbearable; I was thoroughly upset. At the request of the esteemed Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, I translated his biographical sketches from Bengali into Oriya and had it printed at the Calcutta Baptist Mission Press. For the scholarship examinations, this work was introduced as a textbook, in place of the *Hitopadesa*. Then I wrote two small books: a grammar book and a book on arithmetic. These too were included in the school syllabus. In the meantime Inkailu Raghunath Prasad Bhuyan, one of my classmates, wrote and published a small book called *Srenipatha*. It was also selected as a textbook for the scholarship examination in the lower classes. Still I was unhappy; what would we gain if Oriya books were read only by school children, I wondered. Our mother tongue would not develop unless common folk outside schools had access to it [...]

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Phakir Mohan's concerns were not simply limited to enriching Oriya language and literature by providing books for schools and "people in every house"; he also had to counter "the ridicule of the Bengali Babus", and, even worse, the attempts by these same Babus to eliminate Oriya altogether. The third passage, relating to the multilingual nature of Orissa in the nineteenth-century, recounts events during a particularly significant period – the end of the 1860s, when arguments were produced justifying the elimination of Oriya. Far from presenting an idyllic view of multilingual India, in this episode of Bengali-Oriya relations the autobiography demonstrates a much harder and more cynical view of the way in which languages

interact. As Phakir Mohan himself sets the scene for the events that were to take place, I need not go into great detail about them here. But it should be noted that such ‘language wars’, as these events have been referred to, have taken place not only in Orissa but elsewhere as well. Phakir Mohan rushes to the defence of Oriya essentially on cultural grounds, yet he fully realizes that for his arguments to induce others to resist what can only be termed Bengali hegemony they have to be grounded in the self-interest of these groups. Thus, finally, it is because he is able to convince the clerks that their social and economic position is in jeopardy that he is able to rally them to defend their language:

Pundit Sadasiva Nanda, an inhabitant of Soro in Balasore district, was working as the Oriya pundit at the Balasore Government School. He was assigned the task of teaching both Oriya and Sanskrit. When he reached the age of retirement, Nanda was replaced by Kantichandra Bhattacharya, a man from Bengal. Bhattacharya felt perhaps that it would not be difficult to teach Oriya. After studying hard for four to six months he was able to read textbooks printed in Oriya, but there was still one problem. Despite all his efforts he was unable to speak the language. In addition, he found it quite impossible to pronounce the Oriya sounds “Na” and “La”. By that time Bhattacharya had reached the age when people renounce the world and retreat into the forest. Has it ever been easy to pronounce an unfamiliar alphabet with a tongue that has already become old and dry? He pronounced “La” as “Da” and “Na” as “No”, saying, for example, “O badaka gano” instead of “O balaka gana”. This made the entire class burst into laughter. How could a pundit of his reputation accept such an insult?

Implicit in this account of the humiliation suffered by the Bengali pundit is the larger issue of the reversal of the existing hierarchy, in favor of Oriya. This becomes clear in the paragraph that follows, in which the reaction of the students themselves, in favor of the disappearance of Oriya from the curriculum, is also presented in

terms of their own particular interests. Phakir Mohan then proceeds to recount the steps taken to ensure the Bengali position, and his arguments against it. He continues:

All means to an end are good. One day Bhattacharya went into the class and announced, “Boys! Oriya is not a separate language; it is just a distorted form of Bengali. There’s no need to keep on studying Oriya.” I do not know how the students reacted, but they must have been delighted and celebrated: “Long live the pundit! May he be happy here.” This was because students in those days considered reading Oriya quite troublesome. At that time there was no obligation to read Oriya as the second language, as there is now; studying Oriya was purely optional. Under such circumstances the students suffered. Moreover, all the teachers, from top to bottom, were Bengalis. There was no one to argue in favour of Oriya. Such a context suited the pundit well.

It was not enough simply to state that Oriya was not a separate language; this needed to be supported with evidence. The pundit set about writing a book, the title of which was “Oriya Is Not a Separate Language.” The book came out in print. The Bengali Headmaster sent a report to the Inspector Sahib, along with a copy of the book. R.L. Martin was then Inspector of Schools, headquartered at Midnapore. All the employees in his office were Bengalis. The report by the Headmaster, with the recommendation of the Bengali Deputy Inspector of Balasore district, reached the office of the Inspector. Very soon the Headmaster received an order from the office of the Inspector, the gist of which was that only Sanskrit and Bengali were to be taught at the Balasore Government School.

At the time, not only in schools, but also in all Government offices, there was not a single Oriya officer of high rank. All the Bengalis were of the same opinion;

all of them were equally Oriya haters and slanderers. Now they rejoiced. Kanti Bhattacharya danced for joy, convinced he had left a lasting legacy in Orissa.

The proposal to abolish Oriya was carried out not only in English schools; it was extended to Government-aided schools as well. Mandal Babu, the Bengali zamindar, established an exclusively Bengali school in his zamindari in the countryside.

Not only in Balasore, but throughout Utkal, Bengali employees all agreed that Oriya should be abolished. Bengalis and Oriyas in Utkal were in heated conflict with each other. Now one of the parties gave way to mirth and enthusiasm, its goal in sight, while the other remained calm and docile. We felt as if a bolt out of the blue had suddenly struck us. The rejoicing and jeers of the enemy pierced our hearts like arrows. What had happened? Would our mother tongue remain forever unread? A meeting of the committee, which had become smaller and weaker, was held. Our thoughts focused only on how to save our mother tongue.

From early evening until late into the night we visited the houses of the headmen of the town. At a gathering of court clerks we asked them to find ways for us to defend ourselves. All of them replied in a chorus, "Babu! This is a Government affair. Whatever syllabus the Government prescribes our children have to abide by it. Why should we risk getting into trouble by speaking out against a Government order?" Hearing what the clerks had to say, the zamindars and businessmen in the town refused to listen to us. Many of them replied openly, "When the clerks don't dare oppose this, why should we get involved and end up paying fines?"

We were greatly indebted to Babu Gourishankar Ray, who was bringing out essays defending Oriya in *Utkal Dipika* every week. The inhabitants of Balasore, were able to read his inspiring words, rare in the whole of Utkal. We wrote on the topic in *Balasore*

*Sambadabahika*, which we had recently begun to publish from Balasore. Nor did we simply sit idly by; we spent every day and every moment trying to find a solution. One day we arranged a talk at a gathering of the clerks of the Court. The gist of what we had to say went as follows: Dear Sirs! The abolition of Oriya in schools and its replacement by Bengali is not based on a Government order; it is a conspiracy hatched by the Bengalis, and they have done this by misleading the Inspector Sahib. Very shortly they will abolish Oriya from the Court too; don't you see what is happening? The Bengalis have monopolized all the high paying jobs and clerkships. In Persian, you are as competent as the maulabis, but all your knowledge will be rendered useless if the Bengalis become clerks by abolishing the Persian language. With Oriya no longer being used, the relatives and families of the Bengalis will become the clerks. Most assuredly, all of you will be eliminated from your jobs. Moreover, your children and grandchildren will have no access to Government jobs in the future.

Our words caused a furore. All of the clerks shouted, "No, no! This cannot happen. Our children will read Oriya at school." They urged us to find ways to address the issue. We answered, "The solution is quite simple. We have to send an application to the Government requesting that Oriya be reintroduced into schools. Once that's done, no Bengalis will be able to become clerks." Everyone was now in a hurry, insisting, "Write the application at once."

Auspicious work should never be put off. After working day and night an application was readied and signed by about five hundred people. It was submitted to the Collector Sahib. All the British officers and missionaries in Balasore at the time were sympathetic to our cause, for different reasons. All of them pleaded in our favour.

John Beames Sahib, the Collector of Balasore in those days, was regarded as a linguist in official circles. He forwarded our application to the Commissioner Sahib, with a favourable comment. Oriya was an ancient and separate language, he noted, and should be taught widely in Orissa. He had written a book in English on the subject and sent it to the Government.

T. Ravenshaw, the great defender of Orissa, was Commissioner of Utkal. He sent the application to the Government, with his recommendation. An order was issued: “The Bengali language is to be abolished from all schools in Orissa, and schools may be opened in various places to promote the Oriya language.”

Through his appeals to the clerks’ fears that they might be dispossessed of their positions, Phakir Mohan is able to rally them to the cause of Oriya language and culture. In turn, he is able to use the attitudes of the British to garner support and in the end defeat the attempts by the Bengalis to dominate Orissan territory.

Immediately after the last sentence I have quoted above from the autobiography, the following, absolutely remarkable, exhortation falls from Phakir Mohan’s pen: “May God be merciful and allow the just British Government to rule Utkal forever.” This was written at a time when the independence of India was already being fought for; indeed, in 1898, Phakir Mohan himself had been a delegate to the Indian Congress meeting in Madras, and the Congress was, as he remarks, “the forum that was working to bring unity among educated, patriotic, freedom loving, worthy sons of the motherland”. If despite this, Phakir Mohan could express the wish that “the *just* British Government” should “rule Utkal *forever*” it is because his love for his language and culture went so deep. Phakir Mohan had no illusions about the rapacious nature of the colonial structures – passages from his fiction clearly demonstrate this, but he also had that greatness within him to be able to differentiate between these structures and those actions of the colonizers that had a beneficial effect. In this case the claim could be made that the

colonizers on Orissan territory at the time were at least as much the Bengalis as the British. In this episode of the ‘linguistic wars’ between Bengalis and Oriyas – which has left its traces even in the modern-day relations between these two groups – we are provided with a clear view of the hierarchies multilingualism inevitably implies, and the struggles it engenders.

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I have said nothing about the translational activities Phakir Mohan was involved in within this multilingual space, and it is impossible to present them here in any great detail. I would like to briefly mention two examples, however.

In the first of these, Phakir Mohan tells of correcting a translation from English into Oriya by an English missionary, and of a misunderstanding that occurs due to a lack of knowledge of Oriya and a mistrust of ‘native’ interpreters:

The Sahib was confident of his command of Oriya. After struggling for many days, he translated a small English book into Oriya. When the translation was done, it was decided that I should make any necessary corrections, after which Bhikari Bhai, the head of the missionaries, would read it through from beginning to end. If approved, it would be printed. On receiving the manuscript, I began to make corrections. As far as I can remember, the first sentence of the book read as follows [this is a back translation from the Oriya]: “There are this kind of people in the world who do not believe is God in the world.” I corrected this to read, “There are many people in the world who deny the existence (‘astitwo’) of God.”

After making my corrections, I went to Bhikari Bhai with the book. He was not used to hand-written manuscripts, and so I read it out to him. After the first sentence, he became angry and shouted, “What? What have you written, pundit? The ‘bone’ of God? Is God like

some idol of idol-worshippers, made of wood and stone, that He can have bones?" I gaped at him in bewilderment. Bhikari Bhai was trying to convince me that God had no bones. I asked him in a quiet and polite tone, "Bhikari Bhai! Where have I mentioned bones?" He replied, "You have written: 'People who deny the 'asthi' of God.' Don't we know that 'asthi' means 'bones'?" So saying, he went out to the Sahib and blind with rage shouted, "Sahib brother! The pundit has defiled your work by mentioning unholy things." To the Sahib, Bhikari Bhai was a learned person, as he could haltingly read the gospels according to John, Luke, and Matthew in the printed Bible. Moreover, he was a Christian and therefore a person worthy of trust. What he was saying had to be true. I was an idol-worshipping evil Hindu and consequently should not be trusted. Without heeding my pleas, the Sahib started yelling at me. For a long time he would not talk to me properly. I never learned the fate of the manuscript he had authored.

In the second passage, Phakir Mohan translates – deliberately *mistranslating* this time, so as to *purposely* mislead – the request the subjects of the princely state of Dompara, where he is the Dewan, are making to the Sahib who has come to settle a dispute in which they are involved:

His body completely covered in an English blanket the Sahib came out and stood in front of his tent, with only his eyes and face visible. The bench clerk and I stood beside him. The Sahib asked in Hindi, "Well, subjects! Do you agree that Phakir Mohan Babu, the Dewan, can act as mediator to settle your dispute with the King?" Four or five leading headmen cried out together, "Why have you bothered to come from Cuttack in the rain and the storm if the Dewan Babu is going to solve the problem?" Failing to make out what they were saying, the Sahib looked at me. I immediately told him, "They're saying that when the Dewan Babu is present to settle the dispute, why are you putting yourself through pain and



suffering by coming from Cuttack in such rainy weather?"

The Sahib responded, "Very good, very good! The Dewan Babu will do what is necessary. He's a competent man, and we trust him. Goodbye, subjects, goodbye!" Saying that, he hurried back into the tent and drew the curtain. The headmen looked at each other, wondering what had happened. What had the Sahib understood? The clerks were my friends and the orderlies my subordinates, and they drove the subjects away from the tent.

Mistrusted when he accurately translates, trusted when he deliberately mistranslates, Phakir Mohan embodies here the possibility that translation, and in particular translation in contexts of power and hierarchy, can constitute a form of betrayal, a possibility which in various countries of Europe led to the establishment of institutions – schools of oriental languages – to train their citizens as translators and interpreters and thereby avoid the necessity of having recourse to 'native' subjects. In both of the cases cited by Phakir Mohan in his autobiography translation is an occasion for misunderstanding; in both cases translation raises the question of what the parties involve actually 'share', of what actually is communicated, of the nature of their 'community'. As we have seen, these same questions arise, in all their complexity, in nineteenth-century multilingual Orissa.

## Notes

1. In October 1899 he came out of retirement for a short stint of nine months as manager of the state of Kendrapara.
2. My thanks to Jagannath Prasad Das for drawing my attention to this.

3. An English translation of this novel has been published by University of California Press under the title *Six Acres and a Third*.
4. Thus John Boulton notes that Phakir Mohan's "[...] novels and stories were very popular, especially *Cha Mana Atha Guntha* [Six Acres and a Third]. When the account of Mangaraja's trial in this latter work began to appear in *Utkala Sahitya* some naive country folk came to Cuttack to attend the trial." (Boulton 1993, p. 237)
5. This is the central theme of *Six Acres and a Third*.
6. See, for example, Phakir Mohan's story "The Postmaster", in which the English-educated son comes to despise his adoring father as a symbol of all that is native and backward, going so far as to throw his ill father out of the house, after delivering "two English punches".
7. Consider the following tongue-in-cheek remarks by the narrator of *Six Acres and a Third* about how to describe his heroine's beauty: "According to classical literary techniques, all one has to do is find parallels between specific attributes of our heroine Champa and different fruits, such as bananas, jack-fruits, or mangoes, and common trees, leaves, and flowers. But such old-fashioned methods are no longer suitable; for our English-educated babus we now have to adopt an English style. Classical Indian poets compare the gait of a beautiful woman to that of an elephant. The babus frown on such a comparison; they would rather the heroine 'galloped like a horse'. The way English culture is rushing in like the first floods of the River Mahanadi, we suspect that our newly educated and civilized babus will soon appoint whip-cracking trainers to teach their gentle female companions to gallop." (*Six Acres and a Third*, 57)
8. All quotations from Phakir Mohan's *Autobiography* are from the as yet unpublished translation referred to in the previous paragraph.

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