

The Biswa Sahitya Granthamala (World literature book series) as a reaction to English linguistic domination in Odisha

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The current concept of world literature as a borderless product of the global market has emerged since the 18th century. The world literary market mostly relies on the circulation of texts in English as a globally accepted lingua franca. The language regulates the production and circulation of world literature. English, being at the center, acts as a magnetic force attracting all peripheral literatures toward the center with the promise of international recognition (Puchner 2013, 32). National literature is expected to give up its language boundaries and become one with English in order to be a part of world literature. This monopoly of language in the world literary market is not regarded as a forceful imposition, but rather the consequence of power and necessity. For instance, in a multilingual nation such as India, where translation serves as a means of preserving the pluralistic cultural heritage, English has earned the designation of “a link language” as the internal literary exchange mostly relies on English translation.

Rabindranath Tagore famously rendered the term “world literature” into Bengali as *biswa sahitya*. This applies the qualifier *biswa* (meaning “worldwide” or “universal”) to the mass of literature (*sahitya*) from around the world. The phrase represents literature that is *biswatmaka*, i.e. “universal in disposition, an immense gathering or intertexture of works and discourses whose self-identity or ‘shaping soul’ is universality” (Dharwadker 2012, 477). One of the most coherent ways to define world literature is to consider it as a canon of texts that travel beyond their culture of origin in new *avatars* (incarnations), which are the consequence of the metamorphosis that literature undergoes through translation. The Biswa Sahitya Granthamala (World literature book series) in Odia (the language spoken in Odisha), is such an *avatar* which established a space for world literature in an Indian regional language.

Odia (formerly spelled Oriya) is the official language of Odisha (previously Orissa), an Indian state located on the country’s eastern coast and formed as a result of a language-based identity movement. The present state of Odisha is bordered by the Hindi speaking Bihar in the north and Madhya Pradesh in the west, the Telugu-speaking Andhra Pradesh in the south, and Bengali-speaking West Bengal in the northeast. According to the census of 2011, Odia is the native language of around 37.5 million people and thus ranks 37th out of the more than 7,000 world languages.

As Odisha stepped out of the provincial periphery and responded to increasing globalization in post-independence India, the eagerness to explore and comprehend the world beyond its borders resulted in the dramatic rise of interest in world literature, the “window of the world”. The Odia intelligentsia understood the necessity of translations of world literature into the local language to bridge the gap between the local and the global. In this context, the award-winning Indian publisher Granthamandir played a pivotal role by introducing a unique world literature book series titled *Biswa Sahitya Granthamala* (BSG) in 1969–1970. This literary endeavor took a remarkable attempt to make world culture and literature accessible to the non-English-speaking populace of Odisha. The willing submission to English with the hope to increase international exposure in the post-independence period resulted in a new wave of cultural colonialism. In this context, we argue, translations of world literature into Odia served as a liberating force. Granthamandir’s BSG can therefore be understood as a crucial step that raised a strong resistance against the cultural dominance of English.

This article will try to answer the following questions: was this situation in Odisha prompted by the growing trend of English-language translations in the context of global literary circulation? What other factors contributed to this situation? How did Odisha culture respond to this crisis? What countermeasures were taken against English literary hegemony? To provide answers, it first discusses the socio-political situation in Odisha that served as a backdrop for the 19th-century literary endeavors to establish Odia as a language, including the role of endotropic translation (i.e. from one Indian language into another Indian language). Subsequently, it outlines the evolution of the literary consciousness in Odisha and the emergence of the concept of world literature in Odia. In this context, it also focuses on the persisting colonialism which restricted the free literary exchange and confined it to exotropic translation (i.e. from an Indian language into English). From this perspective, the final section evaluates the contribution of Granthamandir’s BSG in creating a space for Odia translations of world literature.

THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN PRECOLONIAL AND COLONIAL ODISHA

Odia has a rich literary past, earning it the distinction of being India’s sixth classical language.¹ The oldest specimen of written language in Odisha are stone inscriptions on rocks (the Ashokan Edicts of the 3rd century BCE) and on cave walls (the Hathigumpha cave of king Kharavela in the Udaygiri and Dhauli hills near Bhubaneswar from approximately the 1st century BCE). However, they are not yet written in a language which can be called Odia. The earliest written literary sources in Odia are the *charyapadas*, which were composed between the 7th and 9th century. This Buddhist mystical poetry recorded the spiritual realizations of poets such as Luippa and Kanhuppa (Pattanaik 2000, 72). Their compositions represent the origin of Odia poetry. In northeast India, the *charyapadas*’ impact lasted from the 10th to the 14th century. Historians refer to this period, during which Odia emerged as a distinct language, as the Old Odia period. The remarkable Odia compositions of this period

include the historical record of the Gajapati kings and of the Puri temple called *Madalā Panji* (11th century) and the tantric text *Sishuveda* (13th century). Odia poetry achieved new heights of prominence in the hands of Sarala Das (15th century), who composed Odia retellings of the Sanskrit epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The early prose work *Rudra Sudhanidhi* of Abadhuta Narayana Swami (16th century) also deserves a mention.

The 19th-century renaissance in Odia literature heralded the birth of modern Odisha. The literary endeavors undertaken during the colonial era demonstrate strong resistance to the rising expansionism of the Bengali and Hindi languages (Mohanty 2002). Inspired by the growing nationalistic tendencies and the interest in literature in Odia, the publishing houses in Odisha accelerated the production of Odia books. Literature published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries strengthened the Odia language movement and ultimately succeeded in legitimizing the Odia language. This non-violent socio-linguistic upheaval led to the territorial unification in 1936 and the later formation of the state of Orissa in the post-independence period. The legitimization of the Odia language undoubtedly contributed to the loosening of the grip of linguistic domination of Bengali and Hindi. However, the formation of the British province and the legitimization of the Odia language were not followed by complete language emancipation. With the growing influence of English in all spheres of life in the decades subsequent to India's independence, Odia language and literature were sidetracked again. The educated populace gravitated towards English translations even of Odia literature itself, and the publishing industry followed suit.

In the socio-political matrix of 19th-century Odisha, the proximity of power, language and literary production is apparent in the relationship of the Odia language with other hegemonic languages. The significant impact of linguistic dominance in Odisha was evident during colonial subjugation in the form of Bengali and Hindi expansionism. The administrative and economic stability of the colonial provinces that governed the Odia-speaking territories aided in expanding these languages. Odia speakers were dispersed among the presidencies of Bengal, Bihar, Madras, and the Central Provinces, assigning Odia the status of a linguistic minority (Malik and Mohanty 2017, 38–40). In this period, Odisha witnessed linguistic discrimination, social and cultural subjugation, and the threat of detaching the Odia language from academia and administration based on arguments such as lack of books available in Odia for primary education and the need for the fragmented territory to adopt the language of opportunity for educational and administrative purposes. Meanwhile, further havoc was created by such events as the publication of Kantichandra Bhattacharya's book *Udiya Swatantra Bhasha Noye* (Odia is not an independent language, 1870), in which Odia was claimed to be a variant of Bengali (Acharya 2004, 83–84), Rajendralal Mitra's proposal to replace Odia with Bengali as the official language, and Umacharan Haldar's suggestion to adopt the Bengali script for Odia (Patnaik 2002, 3). Later, one planned solution for the administrative problems in the four presidencies was to displace the Odia language altogether. David Crystal best asserted this political intervention of the government to establish linguistic imperialism

in the colonies. In his words: “It may take a militarily powerful nation to establish a language, but it takes an economically powerful one to maintain and expand it” (1997, 10).

However, the linguistic dominance of Bengali and Hindi in Odisha was not the result of only military and economic power. It was the lack of literary strength of the Odia language that elevated these languages to the dominant status. The Odia language movement was an attempt to culturally unite the Odia-speaking territories in order to achieve political unification (Acharya 2016; Barik 2006; Panda 2017). It resulted in numerous subsequent literary achievements that legitimized the Odia language and united the territory.

LITERARY ENDEAVOR IN LATE 19TH- AND EARLY 20TH-CENTURY ODISHA

Cultural and linguistic disparities were apparent in Odisha, a colonial territory that was politically fragmented, linguistically suppressed, and socially and culturally underdeveloped. The identity crisis of Odia as a language took a significant turn when the language was on the verge of extinction. The consciousness of language colonization brought about the interest of Odia intellectuals in restoring territorial integrity. The sole objective of the literary production during this time was to strengthen the language movement. The emergence of the printing press assisted the massive publication of literary content, both for academic and non-academic purposes, and implicitly resulted in the development of Odia literature. By printing journals, newspapers, textbooks and literature, the printing press was instrumental in promoting a positive language consciousness (Choudhury 2013). The period also witnessed a rise of the middle-class reading public and aroused a nationalistic temperament that protested against the language monopoly in Odisha.

The inclination of Odia authors toward the West was stimulated by the quest for new literary models and techniques. Through the incorporation of Western influences in the writing of such leading figures as Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843–1918), Madhusudhan Rao (1853–1912), Gangadhar Meher (1862–1924), Radhanath Ray (1848–1908), and Gouri Shankar Ray (1838–1917), the language reached its apex in terms of style, culture and literature. Translators also responded to the expanding avenues of late 19th-century translation by creating Odia versions of Indian and Western masterpieces. The final decades of the 19th century thus witnessed a steady increase in the number of texts translated into Odia. Western literature was made accessible through translation that encouraged further adaptations. These adaptations aimed to instill pride in the Odia culture and undermine the colonial rule. Numerous masterpieces from Sanskrit, Bengali, Hindi and English were translated at this time. Translation served as a tool for strengthening Odia language and literature (Pattanaik 2000, 76). However, it should be noted in this regard that translation into Odia is not a modern phenomenon, since Odia literature has been associated with translation from the 15th century onward. Pre-modern Odia literature was enriched through translation which facilitated the exchange of ideas, culture, knowledge, and learning of the scriptures. Until the 18th century, Odia translations aimed at democratization of knowledge and making ancient literary texts available to every section of society.

The literary production, both in Odia as well as endotropic translation, strengthened the identity of the language. However, the political unification of the state and the language legitimization achieved after a long struggle did not last long, as the rise of English into a hypercentral language altered the literary landscape.

LANGUAGE HEGEMONY AND WORLD LITERATURE IN ODISHA

It is a dismal fact that an Indian literary work needs to be translated into the former colonial language, English, in order to be received in the neighboring Indian states. Odia literature has been no exception and has followed this trend. It has aspired to be translated into English to gain a wider readership. The best-known example from Odia literature of English translation serving as the gateway to acceptance in world literature is Fakir Mohan Senapati's masterpiece *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (1902; *Six Acres and a Third*), which has had several English translations that have encouraged wide reception and critical interpretation by Western scholars. The subordination to the English translation in order to reach a wider readership highlights the English language's monopoly and the lost essence of world literature which originally did not promote monolingualism. For example, it is pitiful that nowadays Gopinath Mohanty's masterful novel *Paraja* (1945) is more readily available to both local and international readers in English than in the original language.

In pre-modern times, Odia literature struggled for legitimate identity under the pressure of an elite language, Sanskrit, and it subsequently succumbed to the supremacy of Bengali. In post-colonial Odisha, English supplanted Bengali and Hindi, although the language imperialism was not overtly visible. When English took over the administration, higher education, publishing, media and communication, and established itself as a symbol of social advancement, endotropic translation, which earlier defined Odia literature, suffered a precipitous decline due to the lack of motivation and commitment. Instead, the effort to create English translations of Odia literary masterpieces took a big step forward.

Odisha passed through a tipping point when readers started preferring English texts rather than reading literature in the Odia language (both original works and translations). The Odia publishing industry, which relied on readers' interest for book sales, adopted the trend of prioritizing English books. Exotropic translation gained momentum in order to reach the elite western audience abroad and the westernized readers at home. In some instances, these exotropic translations distorted the original picture of Odia literature; Pattnaik referred to this scenario as a "full circle turn" (2000, 84). The widespread appeal of English translations for readers, publishers, and writers is symptomatic of a remarkable shift in linguistic dominance from Bengali to English.

The professor and prominent translator Jatindra Kumar Nayak has witnessed the decline of endotropic translation and the increase of exotropic translation in Odisha. He believes that the desire of writers to have their works translated into English is a phenomenon which started in the late 20th century. Nayak stated in an interview: "There appears to be an air of suspicion that a work has not realised its purpose, has not completed its voyage, until it is available in English translation"

(Pattnaik 2000, 82). The alienation of modern Odia writers from their readers fuels this need to find readers in other language communities, resulting in a new form of colonization. Therefore, Shakuntala Balliyarsingh, a Sahitya Akademi award-winning translator, characterized the act of translation into Odia as a resistance to language monopoly in a face-to-face interview. She said that translating western works for Odia readers is the most effective strategy to resist the literary market's language monopoly.²

At the time when the Odia intelligentsia noticed a second wave of a hegemonic grip over Odia language, the response toward the growing interest in world literature came to the rescue. In the 1960s, an important role was played by Prafulla Chandra Das, a renowned Odia translator and the proprietor of Prafulla Press based in Cuttack (Prasad 2014). He translated the works of several Nobel laureates and announced the beginning of a new era in the history of Odia literary translation (Mohanty 1971, 69). Under his initiative, such works as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*, Grazia Deledda's *La madre (The Mother)*, Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Bertrand Russell's *The Satan in the Suburbs* were made available to Odia-language readers (Sahu 1962, 28). Despite the remarkable contribution that Prafulla Chandra Das made to translation in Odia, he was accused of being the enemy of Odia creative writing. Writers and publishers reasoned that introducing a new western literary flavor would alter readers' literary preferences and drive them away from original Odia literature (Pattnaik 2000, 78–79). This opposition and the subsequent financial loss of the enterprise did not allow the translated books to remain in print for long, but they served as a turning point in the Odia engagement with world literature. The sheer volume of his work and the ideational underpinning of his press set Das apart from other translation activities. The effort was significant in energizing the Odia intelligentsia and preparing the reading public for a more intense reception of world literature. Even though the books did not find a huge response in the market at the time, the literary initiative heralded the birth of a new literary awareness in Odisha, one that challenged the language monopoly and aimed to create a place for world literature.

THE BISWA SAHITYA GRANTHAMALA

The renowned Indian publisher Granthamandir, based in the city of Cuttack, made the next important step ahead to change the “colonial perspective” with the series known as Biswa Sahitya Granthamala (BSG). Granthamandir recognized the new crisis engulfing Odia language and literature and introduced a world literature book series in Odia translation, thus unmediated by English. The title acted as a marketing strategy to reach more potential readers and counteract the hegemonic role of English, carrying forward the task initiated by the Odia intelligentsia during the colonial phase. The series was the dream project of three literati: Sridhar Mahapatra, the founder of Granthamandir, his son Abhiram Mahapatra, and the eminent author and translator Sridhar Das. Introduced in 1969–1970, it broached a new approach to world literature and represented a novel venture to enrich Odia children's literature (Mahapatra 2012, 501). Its objective – as mentioned in the series blurb – reads as follows:

Biswa Sahitya Granthamala aspires to present a vast canon of texts from across the globe that accomplishes two significant objectives. The first is concerned with the aesthetic pleasure of the readers, and the second is associated with enhancing their love for literature, nurturing positive reading habits, and sensitizing them regarding world literature.³

This literary endeavor embodied the publisher's vision to promote world literature and instill a positive reading habit in children. The objective of the BSG was made clear by the current director of Granthamandir, Manoj Mahapatra (the son of Abhiram Mahapatra) in a 2018 interview. He said that in addition to the primary concern for moral elevation and character building, attention is also given to the child's ability to visualize and understand the global culture.⁴ Apart from this primary goal, the BSG implicitly contested linguistic hegemony, since the development of autonomous national literature is generally acknowledged to be an effective way to combat linguistic hegemony (Sapiro [2010] 2014, 213).

The BSG introduced authors such as Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, Kalidasa, Arthur Conan Doyle, Joseph Conrad, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Henry Rider Haggard and many more to young readers in palm-sized books that made the act of reading enjoyable. The social realism in Jane Austen, the rural-colonial context in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the imaginary world of fantasy in Hans Christian Andersen, the morally developed characters in Charles Dickens, the adventure and detective stories of Jules Verne and Arthur Conan Doyle, the science fiction of H.G. Wells contribute to the cultural, moral, literal, and ethical nourishment of a child (Ganguly 2018a, 417). The vivid insight into the distinct world culture and the literature full of excitement, mystery, morale and knowledge of the world has in this way been introduced to the non-English speaking readers in abridged translation in the native language.⁵

In this context, the question arises as to why Granthamandir considered young readers as the target consumers of the series and why the series was framed as *children's* literature despite its title's resolute commitment to *world* literature. One possible reason could be the fact that at that time the Macmillan Company introduced a series of western literary works in abridged English versions under the title "Children's Classics" in the Indian market. The exciting plots with captivating characters and stories full of imagination and thrills found a wide reception. It was indicative of another threat to the language that could lead to the identity crisis of Odia literature. The Odia intelligentsia had already witnessed the western translation practice in India, which had been meant to strengthen the presence of the English language in the colonial territory, and partially collaborated in this endeavor. English translations of ancient Indian scriptures, which supported the supremacy of the colonial language, thus set a standard for future translation practice. Granthamandir recognized this problem and addressed it by introducing the same enticing stories in Odia.

The publication of the BSG can be interpreted not only as a decisive step in bringing the literature of the world to local readers in their native language, but also as an illustration of the fact that the reception of world literature can thrive without the direct presence of English. However, the series could not completely do without

the former colonial language, since the translations of the world's classics were done via the medium of English. This testifies to the prominence of English translations in the Index Translationum database (Sapiro 2014, 210). Gisèle Sapiro examined the flow of translation and found that English occupied the “hyper-central” position and served as source language of half of the world's translations in the 1980s. Despite this paradox, the series proved the viability of the Odia language. The BSG strengthened the movement of resistance against the English language monopoly in the production and circulation of world literature by challenging the center-dominated model and by introducing literature of the world in a vernacular language.

An analysis of the series reveals that the BSG included a variety of genres and authors from various literary periods.⁶ It comprised 187 titles and 230 volumes with approximately 800 stories by 34 authors from 30 different countries. About two-fifths of the series were works originally written in English. The series also included works from Spanish, Arab, Indonesian, Polish, American, Russian, Italian, Chinese, Japanese and Danish literatures, among others. Translating the foreign literary works from various world cultures into Odia was a challenge that proved the maturity of the Odia language. The BSG created a canon of world literature in Odia translation that resisted the apprehended linguistic suppression due to the English language dominance in the publishing industry and the book market.

The success of the series can be estimated from their wide circulation and reception. Since the 1970s, the series has been reprinted several times in order to meet the demand of the reading public. This astoundingly successful initiative by Granthamandir has earned gratitude from parents, applause from educators, and appreciation from young readers. This demonstrates the reception of the text not only among young readers, but also among adults. The records of annual sale reports show the popularity of the series. Manoj Mahapatra confirmed that approximately a hundred sets are sold annually. The series has gone through 20 editions to date and has earned Granthamandir the recognition of the Distinguished Publisher Award by the Federation of Indian Publishers, New Delhi, in 1993. The reprinting of thousands of copies in each edition attests to its popularity. Several literary associations also congratulated Abhiram Mahapatra and Sridhar Das for this venture. Sridhar Das posthumously received the Sarala Award and Abhiram Mahapatra was honored in 1999 at the All Indian Odia Lecturer Conference (Ganguly 2018b, 112). International organizations such as UNICEF and CARE led the initiative of circulating more than 500 sets of the series in the remote districts of Odisha.

CONCLUSION

The present article is not intended to elaborate on the conflict between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, but it rather investigates the continuing colonization in Odisha after India's independence. It points out the hegemony of the English language in the field of literature, which leads to monolingualism and the world becoming the “universe of English”. The Biswa Sahitya Granthamala was conducive to the liberation of literature in Odisha from language colonialism by disseminating world literature without recourse to English.

By promoting world literature in Odia, the BSG helped restoring the dignity of the regional language in India. The series was an attempt to break away from the continuing dominance of the previous colonial center. World literature has managed to circulate and survive in a local language without the intervention of English as the gatekeeper. The BSG strengthened the concept of linguistic diversity by translating world classics and the modern masterpieces into Odia. It demonstrated that the essence of world literature is not in promoting monolingualism, which limits its access to a specific set of people proficient in the English language. The true essence of world literature is brought into play when it is liberated from this linguistic monopoly and perceived in its diverse *avatars*. The BSG brought together the literature of the world within the frame of *biswa sahitya* and has contributed to the perception of world literature as an advocate for “universality” (*biswatmakata*). Thus, it has been a compelling attempt to bridge the local and the global.

NOTES

- ¹ Six Indian languages enjoy the status of classical languages: Tamil (declared in 2004), Sanskrit (2005), Kannada (2008), Telugu (2008), Malayalam (2013), and Odia (2014).
- ² In a face-to-face interview with Shakuntala Balliyarsingh at Bhubaneswar in October 2019, she shared her experience as a translator of more than 20 books that earned her the Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award.
- ³ The translation of the blurb originally written in Odia is ours.
- ⁴ During our personal interview with Manoj Mahapatra on February 10, 2018, we gathered a large amount of relevant information about the BSG.
- ⁵ Novels and plays were published in an abridged form, short stories and fables in full translations. Besides the BSG, many full translations of the works are available in the book market. As we are concerned with the BSG in this article, the details of these translations are not included.
- ⁶ We collected the available books of the series from Granthamandir and then created a database that contained the complete record of all published books, their publication dates, origin, authors, and translators.

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The Biswa Sahitya Granthamala (World literature book series) as a reaction to English linguistic domination in Odisha

World literature. Linguistic hegemony. Translation. World market. Odia literature. Neo-colonialism.

This article seeks to examine the remarkable literary venture of Odia culture that took a crucial step in creating space for world literature. Amid the plurality of conceptualizations of world literature as a commercial entity, a mode of circulation, an intellectual problem, a medium of international literary exchange, a dynamic system, and an emerging discipline, it sees world literature as a tool for liberating the Indian region of Odisha from linguistic and cultural domination. The colonial controversy over the language policy and the constant struggle of the Odia-speaking territories prepared the grounds for the language movement which resulted in the formation of a language-based British province in 1936. The article explores the question whether the establishment of Odisha led to linguistic liberation or a paradigm shift from cultural dominance of Bengali and Hindi during the colonial era to the hegemony of English in the post-independence period. We argue that after India's independence the Odia language and literature fell victim to neo-colonialism as a result of the adoption of the English language as the medium of internationalization. Additionally, we examine how world literature supported the liberation of the regional language and its literature from neo-colonialism by evaluating the contribution of the world literature book series titled Biswa Sahitya Granthamala, which was released in Odia by the publishing house Granthamandir in 1969–1970.

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