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GENESIS OF CONCEPTION OF 'HISTORY' IN COLONIAL ODISHA

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Abstract

The concept of history has been a contentious issue in India as well as Odisha. The cultural and civilizational differences between history and Itihas have not been widely discussed so far. The Indian word for history is Itihas which signify the western characteristics without the much realization of Indic sense. The genealogical study of the word 'history' - its characteristics and meaning why and how developed in colonial period - is the point of discussion here. Also, it will examine the major writings on history of Odisha by various colonial officials in this piece of work.

Key words: History, Colonial, Genesis, Memoir, Report, Writing, *Vansavali*, *Puranas*, *Itihas*

Lexicographical Understanding of 'History'

The word 'history' has been believed to be incorporated for the first time in an Odia-English vocabulary book by Mohunpersaud Takoor, an Assistant Librarian at the Fort William College in 1811. Takoor became instrumental to introduce British with the linguistic world of Odisha. He mentioned *Biborono* as History and *Biborono Karta* as Historian in the page no. 139 in the book.ⁱ Further, an Oriya-English dictionary by Reverend Amos Sutton in 1841 defines or similes history as *Charitra*, *Itihasa*, *Purba Kathara Biborono*, *Upakhyana* and *Purana*.ⁱⁱ The words like 'historian' and 'historical' translated as *Itihasa Rachaka* and *Itihasa Samparka*. His Oriya-Oriya dictionary defines *Itihasa* as *Purbakalara Brutanta* (Narration of the past). *Charitra* can be explained as description of the achievement. In his Oriya-English dictionary, *Itihasa* has been known as history and legend. *Upakhyana* as a tale, narrative and history. He repeatedly uses Indic words like *Itihasa* and *Charitra* for history. Subsequently, a number of dictionariesⁱⁱⁱ and the writings of British officials has frequently used *Itihasa* to denote the western sense of 'history'. Even the Odias like Pyarimohan Acharya^{iv} and others carry forward the term *Itihasa* to refer the western understanding of history while writing history of Odisha.

Early Conception of Colonial History-Writing

A brief description of Odisha has been written by Walter Hamilton in his book *Description of Hindoostan* (1820)^v considered to be the first attempt to espouse the incipient form of Odisha history. Hamilton, a military officer in the English East India Company, have written about India after consulting the English-translation of Abul Fazal's writings and referred many colonial officers' voluminous report/memoirs which were easily available in England. The author is quite expressive to give the credit of previous writings of various company officials^{vi} to enable him to produce this book. One such writer is Major James Rennell whose book *Memoir of a Map of the Peninsula India* surveys the Indian subcontinent in a more accurate form. Inspired by Major Rennell's work, Hamilton has written about a brief ethno-history of India. These are all observational writing relies on mixed kind of sources composed of medieval Mughul writings, Native informers, and writings of English military officers. An excerpt from his book proves the historical sense in the manner he introduces *The Province of Odisha (UDESSESA)*,

A large province of the Deccan extends from the 18th to the 23rd degree of north latitude. To the north it is bounded by Bengal; on the south by the River Godavery; on the east it has the Bay of Bengal; and on the west the province of Gondwana...According to the institutes of Acber, Odisha, in its greatest dimensions in 1582, was divided into five districts; viz. Jellasil, comprising Midnapoor and the British possessions lying north and east of the River Suburnrekha; 2. Buddruck; 3. Cuttack; 4. Culling or Cicacole; 5. Rajamundry.

An outsider by appearance, Hamilton could not reveal the native knowledge system more properly as he was constraint with language and culture of the indigenous people. Mere geographical descriptions and mentioning of places of importance with regard to political and business centers covers his writings whereas the history-writing is silent to be found in subsequent



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writings of other successive scholars. Moreover, his writing has sketched a picture of India among the scholars who had penned implicitly to discover the knowledge about India along with its history.

Furthermore, the early history-writing in Odisha was mostly ethnographical and studies about its flora and fauna. Andrew Sterling,^{vii} Persian secretary to the Bengal government, ventured to write the history of Odisha from an approach of royal genealogy. His notable work, *Odisha: Its Geography, Statistics, History, Religion, and Antiquities* (1846) initiate the history-writing in a full-fledged manner. The third chapter of this book, *The Chronology and History of Odisha*, expounds a thorough discussion of the political history of Odisha from 473 A.D. to 1805 A.D. he questions the idea of history which almost was absent in the region as we traced from his following words,

The earlier native histories of the country are of the legendary or fabulous class, copied from the *Puranas*, but embellished or disfigured by a plentiful admixture of local traditions. This later annals assume an air of authenticity about the date of the accession of the family called the Kesari Vansa, 473 A.D., prior to which the accounts are so replete with obvious falsehoods and contradiction, inconsistency and anachronism, as to be equally unintelligible and unworthy of notice. The memory of a few great names and events, only, has been preserved upto the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era, and to adopt these to their favorite system of chronology, the Brahmins, who will never admit want of information on any subject, have been obliged to give an expansion to the reigns of their traditional Rajas, in some cases of five or six hundred years, and in all, far beyond the natural or possible term of the human life. Yet these are the men whose tales infidels would with unblushing effrontery, still oppose to the consistent and rational records of the Bible. As, however, it will not be uninteresting to those curious in researches into Hindoo antiquity, to learn what traditions the natives have preserved regarding their history in the earlier ages, I shall begin my sketch of the contents of their annals from the remotest period to which they profess to go back.”^{viii}

From his above statement it is quite clear that Sterling was convinced that a kind of knowledge that was present in Odisha might be history but those are full of legends and stories with some corrupt form of historical facts. What confused him most was the notion of time which disfigured chronology. His idea of history was traceable from 473 AD where the history prior to this time was missing due to falsehoods.

As a westerner, he has mentioned sources from which he has written history of Odisha so that a reliable history-writing would be possible. The first idea of history-writing came to Odisha though it was not academic which would take another century to come. This is about official history for enhancing the capacity of administration. The sources that are mostly used are mentioned below,

“The sources from which my (Mr. Andrew Sterling) information has been chiefly derived are, 1st. A work in Sanscrit called the *Vansavali*, belonging to a learned Brahmin of Pooree, said to have been originally composed by some of his ancestors three or four centuries since, and continued in the family to the present date. 2nd. The Chapter of the Madala Panji or records preserved in the temple of Juggernaut, called the Raj Charita or Annals of the Kings in the Oorea language, which records are stated to have been commenced upon more than six centuries, and to have been since regularly kept. 3rd. Another Vansavali or Genealogy written in Sanscrit on leaves of the Palmyra tree, procured from a Brahmin living in the family of the Raja of Puttia Sarengarh, one of the branches of the royal house of Odisha. Less certain and trustworthy guides than the above, are to be met with in the numerous genealogies possessed by nearly every Panjia or almanac-maker in the province. They in general abound with errors and inconsistencies, but occasionally a few facts or illustrations may be gleaned from them.”^{ix}

Sterling had considered the Brahmins of Odisha as most reliable people who could decipher the facts of Odisha’s past. Particularly, the Brahmins whose predecessor’s occupation was to write about kings and their achievements (Vansavali) were mostly taken by him as a historical sources upto some extent. It is quite appropriate to mention that the idea of “Dobhasi” or native interpreter as propounded by Bernard S. Cohn in his erstwhile work *Colonialism and Its Forms of*



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Knowledge. Though he raised the question about the reliability of oriental/Oriya sources like *Vansavali* and *Panji* in the beginning of the third chapter, but how some particular palm-leaf manuscripts like *Vansavali* and *Panji* convinced him later on to write the history of Odisha. Towards the medieval period or sixteenth century the work of Ferishta or Abul Fazl give some light on the history of Odisha. Even some articles on the reliability of *Madala Panji* as historical sources were a bone of content among the indigenous intellectuals in a monthly Oriya magazine *Utkal Sahitya* and *Mukura* towards the early part of twentieth century.

Sterling has employed both observational and interactive inference as a method to map the historical truth about Odisha which was uncountable by that time. His narration of native mythological genealogies of kinship opens the screen to study the history of Odisha. Sterling argues the absence of historicalness of Oriya society with anachronistic time-frame reveal from *Puranas* from its distant past. As local traditions mixed with *Puaranas*, the colonial officials felt difficulty to figure out ‘history’ as a separate branch of knowledge in western sense. This body of writing was the necessity of the then understanding of local politics, administration and socio-cultural aspects to counter the local uprising i.e. Paik Rebellion of 1817.

Vansavalis are a kind of chronological composition with an Indic notion of ‘time’ which is opposed to western notion of teleological notion of time. Sterling considers Brahmins are the men of letters who hide the Indic knowledge whose credibility is questionable and oppose to the consistent and rational records of the Bible. He has questioned the tradition of preserving native history and its decipherment.

Moreover, the high moral ground on which Sterling build-up his idea of history is lying on *Vansavalis* or genealogies which were written in Sanskrit. Here it is necessary to mention that the colonial officials like Sterling considered Sanskrit to be authentic upholder of native knowledge albeit considered to be true (compared to western perception of Greek and Latin). Seeley while writing foreword for this book has mentioned Sterling, who knew more than one Indian languages along with English, to handle the administrative exigencies of British India. He assumed Brahmins were the intellectual class and Sanskrit was their language which proved to be illogical when it was revealed that Odia is as old as Latin and English has no comparison with it. So, his observation and interaction with Brahmins led to infer and ultimately theorize the commencing of Odishan history from Cali Yuga or evil age in 3001 B.C. which is based on euro-centric notion of time. Along with *Vansavalis*, *The Madala Panji* and inscriptions provides some lights on the history of Odisha.

What necessitated these colonial officials to write this region’s history? Just after the Paik Rebellion of 1817, it is quite apparent that gathering knowledge about Odisha was in the primary agenda of colonial administration. Similarly, they were involved in writing about other parts of India. Knowledge about Indian society, history and culture will give them an edge to control the power to rule over Indians.

Writing about various geographical and cultural entities like Odisha becomes the imperial ideology to produce knowledge in order to rule over it. The kind of knowledge that was produced by imperialists determines their control over colonies. In second half of the nineteenth century a large corpus of knowledge was produced, systematized and used for administrative and political purposes of India. In the same line, a book entitled as *Odisha: The Garden of Superstition and Idolatry* by William F.B. Laurie focused on the regional cultural practices in which was a euro-centric picture on Odisha has been depicted.

A revised version of Sterling’s work has been written by G. Toynbee in the book titled as *A Sketch of the History of Odisha*.^x This book espouses the facts like establishment of British rule in Odisha in 1803 and subsequently by facing early challenges like Paik Rebellion of 1817 and Paik resistance of Kujang. More than British occupation of Odisha was the introduction of their system of civil, criminal, and revenue collection. The entire book is on the political and administrative history of Odisha between 1803 and 1828. Nothing is found about the history of Odisha before 1803. So, it is a book to familiarize the British officers for the better understanding of the establishment of Colonial rule in Odisha. The motive behind this book is quite clear that it is an attempt to perceive British rule in Odisha as the liberator of natives from corrupted rule of Marathas.



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An Attempt for Systematic History-Writing of Odisha

A full-fledged history of Odisha has been written by William Wilson Hunter^{xi} in 1872 in two volumes. He covers the history of Odisha from ancient to Maratha period which is solid in terms of history-writing. Why Hunter was interested in history-writing of Odisha? What kind of sources has been utilized to reconstruct the past of Odisha? What kind of approach has he employed to write a regional history of Indian sub-continent? The purpose behind writing his book *Odisha* was a part of colonial knowledge production which was very much concede by him in the introductory chapter in the following words,

As Government became more effective, it grew more costly. Each new function which it found itself compelled to undertake has involved an additional outlay of money. Yet any attempt at unwonted taxation among Asiatic races is beset with extreme peril; and the company early realized that one of the first fiscal duties of its servants was the study of the people. No sooner had it, in 1769, appointed English officers for the rural administration of Bengal, than it issued an elaborate circular to them, calling for a historical and statistical account of the country.^{xii}

He has used the official sources like proceedings of Court of Directors and Governor-General in Council in 1769, 1807 to foreshow the company's motive in colonial knowledge production which culminated in mixed laborious documentation of geography, statistics, and history of various provinces of India. They had realized to create knowledge about each cultural entity without dissecting them politically. Towards 1855 this inquisitive process of company took special attention when the Governor General himself prepared a plan and appointed an eminent scholar, with an efficient staff, to draw up a topographical account of each district, its history, antiquities, and climate.^{xiii}

Regarding the place of Odisha in history-writing or scholarly world has been depicted by Hunter in the following manner,

No part of Bengal has attracted less notice from the historian or from the scholar. Its hard fate has been to lie between two fertile presidencies, unclaimed and uncared for by either. Till its great agony in 1866 touched the heart of the English people, Odisha was of less account in the empire than single wealthy district of Bengal or of Madras...No curious mosses nor antique forms of life from its coast have found their way into the amber of Vedic hymns...its history seems to be little more than an interminable list of kings and of confused dynastic changes...the sources of this study consist partly of notices in ancient Sanskrit works, partly of the itinerary of a Chinese traveler, and partly of fragmentary passages in the Musalman Chroniclers...The sandstone caves of Odisha form materials of history as imperishable as the solid mountains themselves. Such memorials were till lately the subjects of vague wonder rather than of intelligent inquiry. Their walls and galleries are charged with stories of ancient life, which they in vain struggled to utter by time-effaced inscriptions and dimly sculptured biographies.^{xiv}

Above all arguments is meant to see the loopholes of Oriya society and knowledge system and sidelined the other elements itself create suspicion about the honesty in scholarly motive of the colonial officials to record the Indian culture. First of all, let us discuss the sources he has used to construct a narrative of Odisha history focused on classical Indian writings, medieval Indian manuscripts translated into English, documents by colonial officers of various ranks, writings of Bengalis and Oriya manuscripts as supportive sources to the former. A few number of Oriya sources has been used to write Odisha history which largely believed on articles in Asiatic journals, documents by colonial officials and writings by Bengalis as evident from his footnote in both the volumes. Does knowledge have homogeneity or otherwise? Knowledge is something acquired by human being under certain circumstances so it varies from one culture to another. His faith on the writings of colonial officers in the form of travelogue, Gazetteer, census, reports, and ethnographical studies is quite euro-centric nature which fails to accommodate history writing on Odisha as an indigenous one rather than an extension of west and its epistemological pursuit.

Next come to the filtering of sources and theorization even going deep into its history without using its own sources by categorizing them as literature albeit not fit into the frame of historical sources. Some examples from his book are



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antagonism between Buddhism and Brahminism, debate on *yavanas*, and insider-outsider conflict depicts his intension under the garb of history-writing obliquely pursuing civilizing mission. The fundamentalism of civilizing mission led to Hunter to go such an extent that he composed the history of Odisha even without consulting anything written in Oriya except some rare cases of supporting Oriya sources.

The narrative of Hunter regarding Odisha and its cosmology is not exaggerated or sidelined but presented by an outsider with late 19th century English mindset. Whatever he depicts about the then Odias and their culture is from limited sources available by that time. The period in which this book has been composed is mid-19th century. Hence it is the need of the hour to appraisal the work of Hunter with a scholarly manner having conscious about the self-immersed colonial attitude. His position where he understands the history of Odisha or India is 1860 to 1880. By that time many vernacular newspapers have come in regular basis apart from some irregular one. He mostly used colonial officers' records to justify the British rule on Odisha i.e. the British introduced individual property rights in land. His observations of Oriya society was weak and poor because it was looted for 50 years when Hunter observed and expressed opinion about it.

Thus, Hunter was witness to those letters which talks about a century of colonial effort to document the idea/ knowledge of India, here it is Odisha. His elaboration about Odisha history is an effort of his predecessors like Sterling, MacPherson, Missionaries, Toynbee and many others. Studying the history of an Indian region is a deliberate effort to smoothen their administration rather justifying the colonial narrative of civilizing mission. The number he mentioned in revenue collection or describing a tributary state in terms of its income or its prescribed payment to British i.e. Ghumsoor, Nilgiri, Mayurbhanj, Dhenkanal, and Khurda etc.

Conclusion

The gazetteers, memoirs, manuscripts, books on Indian geography, and Turner's English translation of Si-Yu-Ki, translation of Indian classical books in Sanskrit became the basis for the incipient knowledge about India as well as Odisha. The Asiatic Society and its journal played a vital role to bring out the history of many unknown land to the public sphere and documented the past of obscure regions into a discipline or branch of knowledge which after the process of history-writing initiated by scholars. A number of articles on the monuments and historical remains of Odisha becomes helpful to write the history of Odisha. Each article in the journal of Asiatic Society and history-writing by British officials like W.W. Hunter paved the way to know the past of a particular region which created a new narrative and add to the national history-writing in India as well as regional history of Odisha.

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- ⁱⁱ Amos Sutton. *An Oriya Dictionary (Vol. I)*. Cuttack: The Orissa Mission Press, 1841, p. 76.
- ⁱⁱⁱ A number of dictionaries published in colonial Odisha are, *An English and Oriya Dictionary* by Rev. W. Miller (1873), *An Oriya and English Dictionary* by William Brooks (1874), *Sabdanidhi* by Chaturbhuj Pattnaik and Sibnarain Nayak (1883), *Dwivasi* (1889), and *The Concise Oriya-English Dictionary* by Rev. R.J. Grundy (1916) etc.
- ^{iv} Pyari Mohan Acharya. *Odishara Itihasa*. Cuttack: The Utkal Sahitya Press, 1925,
- ^v Walter Hamilton. *A Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Description of Hindoostan and the Adjacent Countries*. London: John Murray Albemarle Street, 1820 (Two Volumes).
- ^{vi} Colonial officials like Sir John Malcolm, Mr. Elphinstone, Sir Thomas Munro, Dr. Francis Hamilton, Mr. Buchanan, and many more names should be remembered whose vast writings helped to produce history writing on India.
- ^{vii} Mr. Seeley opined about Andrew Sterling "This young man, when I was at Cuttack, was Assistant to the Commissioner. W. Blunt, Esq. after having stood at the head of all the Oriental classes at College, he was selected for an important post...I have been sitting with him in (1821), while he was conversing in three languages with some Natives of consequence, himself writing in Persian, dictating to a Native Secretary, and at intervals speaking to me, and occasionally giving orders. P. IV in *Odisha: Its Geography, Statistics, History, Religion, and Antiquities* (1846).
- ^{viii} Andrew Sterling. *Odisha: Its Geography, Statistics, History, Religion, and Antiquities*. London: John Snow, 1846, p. 80.



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ix Ibid., pp. 80-81.

x G. Toynbee. *A Sketch of the History of Odisha from 1803 to 1828 with Appendices*. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Press, 1873.

xi William Wilson Hunter (15th July, 1840 – 6th February, 1900) was a Scottish historian and statistician. He joined as a member of the Indian Civil service in 1862. He received knowledge in Sanskrit and passed LL.D. he reached Bengal Presidency in 1862 and was appointed assistant magistrate and Collector of Birbhum, in the lower provinces of Bengal, where he began collecting local traditions and records, which formed the material for his publication entitled *The Annals of Rural Bengal* and many more books on Colonial India.

xii William Wilson Hunter. *Odisha*. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1872, Vol. I, p. 8.

xiii Ibid., p. 9.

xiv William Wilson Hunter. *Odisha*. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1872, Vol. I, pp. 168-170.