

## 4 Odisha as Vernacular Homeland

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This country is not made for conquests nor for the design of human ambitions, it belongs to the Gods.  
Abul Fazal

Abul Fazal's sixteenth-century remark about Odisha has been echoed numerous times in the ensuing centuries. This view of Odisha remains in play even today. A recent textbook on the history of India titled its chapter on Odisha as "Odisha: The Land of the Gods." And yet, Odisha today is also known for conflagrations between the state government and the minority adivasi communities of the province. Even the question of religion has become a fundamentally contentious issue with the increasing establishment of polarizing Hindutva politics and violence against Odia Christian communities. In spite of the evidence of intercommunity violence and consistent state neglect of its minority communities, Odisha continues to stand as an enchanted, godly place. As Gopabandhu's early twentieth-century claim about the inclusive humanism of Odisha suggests, this reading of Odisha as a religious space performed very vital political labors during the early nationalist movement. It situated particular Odia political aspirations within the broader logic of Indian nationalism. In this chapter, I present a modern history of the idea of Odisha as a religious space and illustrate how this reading of the province enabled the colonial state, early Odia political leadership, and even major nationalist leaders like Gandhi to simultaneously highlight and elide fundamental differences within the Odia community.

This modern history of Odisha as a concept is part of a larger history of how regional space was imagined, demarcated, and configured in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Regional space, no matter how porous or fuzzy, was already a social reality by the beginning of colonial rule. Acts of pilgrimage, interactions between centers and peripheries and popular literary accounts that situated themselves in recognizably local places had already enabled a sense of shared space that was distinct from

other regional places.<sup>1</sup> For instance, in Odisha the relationship between the ritual center of Puri and small kingdoms in the distant areas in the Eastern Ghats was rehearsed in the origin myths of both the adivasi communities and princely states long before the colonial state established regional administrative zones.<sup>2</sup> While the connections between centers and peripheries were already established, the distinction between outside and inside the regional zone was also somewhat clarified in the precolonial period. When the British took over the administration of the Jaganath Temple at Puri they found that the “outsider” pilgrims have to pay a pilgrimage tax to enter the sacred complex that was not levied on “local” people.<sup>3</sup> The process of colonial accounting of India set in motion a more systematic and connected imagination of region in India.<sup>4</sup> Massive ethnographic projects such as W. W. Hunter’s *Imperial Gazetteer of India* and *Statistical Account of Bengal* not only produced discrete regions such

<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Anne Feldhaus’ work on Maharashtra in Anne Feldhaus, *Connected Places: Region, Pilgrimage and Geographical Imagination in India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Here, Feldhaus shows how narratives about and acts of pilgrimage already produced a geographical imaginary of regional cohesion that predated colonial rule. C. A. Bayly’s famous work on imperial information networks has shown how pilgrimages formed a preexisting network of communication that served the emergent empire to fathom Indian geography. See Christopher A. Bayly, “Knowing the Country: Empire and Information in India”, *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 01 (1993): 3–43. For discussions about regional connections in Odisha, see Akio Tanabe, “Indigenous Power, Hierarchy and Dominance: State Formation in Odisha, India”, in *Ideology and the Formation of Early States* (Leiden: Brill, 1996): pp. 154–65; Georg Pfeffer, *Periphery and Center: Studies in Odishan History, Religion and Anthropology*, Vol. 7. (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2007). See, also, Raphael Rousseleau, “Village Festival and Kingdom Frame: Center and Periphery from a Poroja Village Point of View”, in Marine Carrin and Lidia Guzy, *Voices from the Periphery: Subalternity and Empowerment in India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2012). For a sense of how another region thought through its spatial imaginary, see Chitralakha Zutshi’s essay about early Kashmiri spatial imaginary in her book *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity and the Making of Kashmir* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Early colonial accounts of this connection can be seen in texts such as J.P. Frye’s essay “On the Uriya and Kondh Populations of Odisha”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 17 (1860): 1–38. These colonial narratives about connection have been extensively interrogated in more recent scholarship. See, for example, Felix Padel, *The Sacrifice of Human Beings: British Rule and the Konds of Odisha* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Jaganath Pathy, “Colonial Ethnography of the Kandha: ‘White Man’s Burden’ or Political Expediency?”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 4 (1995): 220–8. As this trend makes taking the colonial narratives at face value, we can draw on more recent scholarship on center periphery studies of Odisha. For instance, Raphael Rousseleau, “The King’s Elder Brother: Forest King and Political Imagination in Southern Odisha”, *Rivista di Studi Sudasiatici: RiSS* 4 (2009): 39–62, in which Rousseleau looks at how *poroja* origin myths are used in establishing kingship in southern Odisha.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Gardner Cassels, *Religion and Pilgrim Tax under the Company Raj* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1988); and Yaaminey Mubayi, *Altar of Power: The Temple and the State in the Land of Jaganath* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

as Bengal, Odisha division, or Assam, they also marked them as specific sorts of place. Each region came to have special characteristics that would later be amplified by twentieth-century regional nationalist rhetoric in order to establish connections between regions and the Indian nation. These regional imaginaries were not simply a product of colonial knowledge but were heavily inflected by native spatial imaginaries. In her book, Jayita Sharma has illustrated how Assam came to be described as the “garden of India.” Such a description performed complex explicatory labors. As a garden, Assam was a place where British enterprise had tamed the wildness of nature to produce an ordered, productive landscape that housed a recalcitrant and “indolent” population, which could not be trained into the rigors required of a modern workforce. Thus the tea industry had to look elsewhere for labor. Being deemed the Empire’s Garden not only valorized the unique and productive ecology of Assam but also surreptitiously signaled the purported weakness of the Assamese community.<sup>5</sup> Like Assam, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh came to acquire unique reputations as the birthplace of Indian civilization and culture.<sup>6</sup> Prachi Deshpande has shown how regional cultural politics in Maharashtra presented the province as the quintessence of the Indian nation.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of Odisha, the pilgrimage center of Puri served as the core of the regional spatial imaginary. Puri, the seat of the Jaganath cult and one of the four most important sites of Hindu pilgrimage in India, is central to this project of defining Odisha as a religious space. Situated on the coast, Puri is the site of the annual Rath Yatra which attracts pilgrims from various parts of India. Scholars studying the Jaganath cult have traced how Puri and its ruling deity have come to represent a universal religiosity that bears devotion from all classes of people from the “Aryan” caste Hindus and the “non-Aryan” adivasis of Odisha. Even as scholars have argued that such a claim is interrupted by a counternarrative of Hindu appropriation of a tribal deity, the force of this inclusive religiosity continues to draw people to Puri all around the year.<sup>8</sup> During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the

<sup>5</sup> Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of Modern India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Gyanesh Kudaisya, *Region, Nation, “Heartland”*: *Uttar Pradesh in India’s Body-Politic* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Prachi Deshpande, *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> For an interrogation of the universality of Jagannath and an account of the various arguments about the legends that illustrate how the notion of Jagannath as a universal deity is historically constructed, see Ishita Banerjee-Dube, *Divine Affairs: Religion, Pilgrimage and the State in Colonial and Post-Colonial India* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2001), pp. 31–6.

spatial imaginaries of the Odia regional movement repeatedly referenced Puri and its associated legends as a central feature of the Odia community. As we will see later in the chapter, the colonial official account of Odisha also focused on how Puri was the key to understanding the culture, politics, and general ethos of Odisha. Gopabandhu's call for a regional community based on shared space and expansive humanism that was particular to this shared space could not have held meaning for his audience had there not been a commonly held understanding of Odisha as a sacred and inclusive space. This chapter seeks to unpack this orthodoxy about the centrality of Puri to Odia regional identity by tracking the history of how this centrality is established in colonial and regional narratives of Odisha.

Puri serves as such an important feature of the Odia spatial imaginary because it performs two crucial but contradictory labors in Odia rhetoric about regional space and community. As we will see in the chapter, it served as a site of *exception* to caste and religious exclusion by allowing lower caste and adivasi communities to have access to the deity during the annual festival of Ratha Yatra. At the same time this single annual event came to serve as an *example* of enduring inclusion of religious and caste difference in Odisha as a region. In the manner in which the sacred space of Puri has come to represent the religious and inclusive ethos of all of modern Odisha, we find very clear resonances of Michel Foucault's much maligned notion of heterotopia.<sup>9</sup> Heterotopia according to Foucault was a hyperreal space unlike an imaginary Utopia. Its referential power was based on commonly held meaning that all of society invested in it. By virtue of being a space that was both marked out as a discrete separate site and was squarely placed within the realm of the community's spatial life, Foucault's heterotopias could serve as both an example and a place of exception.

Heterotopias were, according to Foucault, "countersites,' a kind of effectively enacted Utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted."<sup>10</sup> If we could borrow Foucault's idea that heterotopias worked as countersites to understand how Puri came to be deployed in narratives of Odia inclusion then we can see how the Jaganath Temple of Puri was often seen as a temple with an exception. Temple entry was restricted to the caste Hindu Odias in most of Odisha and was definitely

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of other Places", *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22–7. For a critical reading of Foucault's concept of heterotopia, see Arun Saldanah, "Heterotopia and Structuralism", *Environment and Planning A* 40, no. 9 (2008): 2080–96; and Peter Johnson, "The Geographies of Heterotopia", *Geography Compass* 7, no. 11 (2013): 790–803.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, 1986, p. 24.

restricted in Puri, too.<sup>11</sup> However, as the ritual visit of the deity to meet his excluded followers stranded outside the temple has been institutionalized, the temple in Puri both sustained the idea of the ritually pure sacral space that denied entry to excluded populations while providing a regular exception to this exclusion. However, using Foucault's framework for understanding exceptional space also makes us susceptible to charges leveled against him for being too simplistic about the dualities posed by the idea of sites and countersites. Arun Saldanah has argued that in claiming that the countersite serves as an exception, Foucault was unwittingly producing a totalitarian vision of the concerned community.<sup>12</sup> In the most ungenerous reading of Foucault, the resultant totality can be read as a homogenous community that understood the meaning of the heterotopia in monolithic and undifferentiated manner.

But when we attempt to understand Puri through Foucault's idea then we come upon this totalitarianism itself as an illuminating tool. It allows us to understand how taking the exemplary and the exceptional nature of Puri at face value could be problematic. Leaders like Gopabandhu Das claimed that the people and the land of Odisha are particularly adept at inclusion of difference by citing the example of Puri. This claim could only work because Das had already assumed a uniformity of intention and belief among the people of Odisha. Das' claim eclipsed the reality of socioeconomic differences between caste Odia people and adivasis outside Puri. The narrative about the practice of inclusion in Puri came to stand in for the practice of inclusion in the region beyond Puri. However, we know that in the region beyond Puri, Odisha was not always as inclusive and egalitarian as the practices in Puri implied. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, adivasi revolts against overtaxation by princely state rulers recurred across the Odia-speaking areas.<sup>13</sup> Even in the early 1920s when Gopabandhu Das was describing Odisha as an inclusive

<sup>11</sup> There is evidence that restrictions in temple had been in place even in the sixteenth century and ways to work around these restrictions had already been practiced since then. See G. N. Dash's work on Hindu and tribal negotiations about access and ownership on the deity of Jaganath. Gaganendranath Dash, *Hindus and Tribals: Quest for a Co-Existence (Social Dynamics in Medieval Odisha)* (New Delhi: Decent Books, 1998); and Anncharlott Eschmann, "Hinduization of Tribal Deities in Odisha: The Sakta and Saiva Typology" and "Prototypes of the Navakalevara Ritual and Their Relation to the Jagannatha Cult", in Anncharlott Eschmann (ed.), *The Cult of Jaganath and the Regional Tradition of Odisha* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978), pp. 79–98, 265–84.

<sup>12</sup> Saldanah, "Heterotopia and Structuralism", 2085.

<sup>13</sup> For a history of princely state overtaxation, see Biswamoy Pati, "Interrogating Stereotypes: Exploring the Odisha Princely States", in *South Asia from the Margins: Echoes of Odisha, 1800–2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 97–115.

land, the subjects of the princely state of Kanika had broken out in revolt against their ruler due to concerns about overtaxation.

As my discussion of the colonial rhetoric on Odisha will reveal, the colonial government's engagement with what was for all intents and purposes a massive financial operation spanning Odia-speaking areas and beyond, had a significant impact on the way that they read Odisha as a space in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The subsequent Odia and nationalist accounts of Puri both borrowed from and reconfigured the colonial reading of Odisha. In what follows, I will illustrate how the colonial, Odia, and nationalist reading of Odisha exhibit as shared rhetoric of Odia religiosity and inclusiveness. In particular, I trace the account of Odisha in the writings of three emblematic figures in colonial Odia and nationalist rhetoric on Odisha – W. W. Hunter, Madhusudan Rao and, very briefly, Gandhi. I argue that in defining natural Odisha as a religious space marked by absolute difference, the Odia political elite was able to both make an argument for a unified Odia-speaking province and illustrate how the demand for such a province was not at odds with all-India nationalism.

### **Fanatic Land: Hunter's *Odisha***

In my exploration of the colonial account of Odisha I use as my central text, W. W. Hunter's two-volume history of Odisha, which was published in 1872. Hunter's account was one of the last among a long series of colonial reports on the region.<sup>14</sup> However, it is probably the most self-conscious accounting of Odisha as a category as this text served as the first two volumes of his monumental *Statistical Survey and the Survey of India*. In the preface of the piece, he claimed that this account of Odisha was to "exhibit my conception of a statistical and general account of an Indian province."<sup>15</sup> As an exemplary account of an Indian province, Hunter's history was to provide adequate information about the region for purposes of administration and travel. In his preface, he acknowledges that

<sup>14</sup> Apart from reports collected in various parts of Odisha (see Yaaminey Mubayi, *Altar of Power: The Temple and the State in the Land of Jagannatha* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005), few books on Odisha were published by colonial commentators. Andrew Stirling, *Odisha: Its Geography, Statistics, History, Religion and Antiquities* (London: John Snow, 1846); William F. B. Laurie, *Odisha: The Garden of Superstition and Idolatry* (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850); and J. Peggs, *Pilgrim Tax in India: Facts and Observations Relating to the Practice of Taxing Pilgrims in Some Parts of India and Paying a Premium to Those Who Collect Them for the Worship of Juggernaut at the Great Temple in Odisha* (London: Seeley, 1830). A year after Hunter published his book, George Toynbee published his history of the conquest of Odisha: George Toynbee, *The History of Odisha from 1803–1823* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1873).

<sup>15</sup> W. W. Hunter, *Odisha: Vol. 1* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1872), p. 13.

the nature of British interaction with India had changed by the 1870s and a new account of India and its provinces had to be framed that could respond to the new needs of the British visitors to the inner reaches of the country.<sup>16</sup>

In writing his new sort of regional history, Hunter sought to cater to the needs of the emergent British colonial official who had to engage with new regions of India every four years. His book was also provoked by the end of the East India Company monopoly over Indian trade. Hunter wrote in his preface that with the end of company monopoly more English capital would be flowing in to fund Indian industry. Using the example of the tea industry in Assam, Hunter warned against the hasty application of capital to India “without sufficient knowledge being accessible to ensure its safe and intelligent application.”<sup>17</sup> The book was meant to serve as an introduction to Odisha for the uninformed British investor. Consequently, the book had to serve as a history of Odisha that would not “trouble the reader” with “confused dynastic changes.”<sup>18</sup> Rather by dispensing with “the plots and scenic effects of history,” Hunter’s history would introduce the reader to the “essential” features of Odia society and land.<sup>19</sup>

The volumes consist of detailed accounts of various aspects of social, political, and fiscal life in Odisha that served to illustrate his key arguments about the nature of Odisha as a space and the Odia people. Overarching these descriptions were two central arguments about the region – that the history of Odisha was driven by religion above all other factors and that despite what appeared to be a fairly long tradition of Hindu social customs, Odisha was still the site of primitive “land making” – that in Odisha history is still unfolding.

For Hunter, religion was a primary vector in Indian history. The case of Odisha was a particular example of this primacy. In his preface, Hunter apologizes to his reader for giving “to frequent prominence to the religious side of Odisha history” and claims that he has done so “from a firm belief that it forms the key to the right understanding of the people.”<sup>20</sup> He argued that religion rather than ethnicity drove revolutionary changes in the history of Odisha as “each line of new kings represents a new era of worship and of spiritual belief.” Hunter’s focus on religion comes from an impulse towards writing a people’s history of Odisha rather than tracking the high politics of the Odia past. This was no nationalist history that recounted ancient glories to instill communal pride. Rather, as this history was to inform the colonial official and the British capitalist with proper knowledge about the people and the land. A history of popular belief and an exploration of the history of state practices framed by

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pp. 13–15. <sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 15. <sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 169. <sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 1. <sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

religious policies allowed Hunter to have a better sense of how the modern Odia populace have come to take its contemporary shape. In a chapter entitled "The Essentials of History," Hunter suggested that the central arguments of the book was to show the impact of larger political changes on human existence and beliefs and how they brought upon shift:

[T]he people, and the revolutions they have wrought in human existence and human beliefs; the struggles by which a race, buried in its primitive jungle, has from time to time painfully cast its skin and assumed new forms of life; above all, the stages by diverse ethnical elements have grown together into the composite rural communities of the present day.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, by writing his detailed history of Odia religious and political past, Hunter hoped to draw out how the community of Odia-speaking people came to be constituted of "diverse ethnical elements." This treatment of the Odia past was driven by a need to provide a distilled understanding of the essential nature of the Odia population while being challenged by the apparent diversity of the Odia population. By constructing a common history of the adivasi- and Odia-speaking communities, Hunter sought to produce a category of "Odia" people out of a diversity that was not necessarily amenable to this unification. Therefore, the first rationalist argument about a common history of the people of Odisha was borne out of Hunter's need to populate the modern category of "Odia people" and to render this knowledge useful for imperial governance and the spread of colonial capital into the as yet untouched Odisha. The need to produce neat regional categories what was at the foundation of Hunter's efforts was what forced the first move towards effacing difference among the population of the Odisha division. The populist impulses of his narrative, which at first glance would appeal to the modern social historian, were not necessarily populist but imperialist. Therefore, our project should not simply be about bringing the adivasi communities into the history of Odisha or India as has been attempted in the history of women or the working classes. Rather, it is more crucial to acknowledge that the process of incorporation of the adivasi into the history of Odisha has always been implicated in the operations of imperial and subsequently nationalist power.

This argument emerges from a curious juxtaposition of two parallel histories of Odisha in Hunter's text: one, the unprepossessing history of the upper-caste Odia population and, two, the history of the primeval tribal population caught in an equally primeval landscape:

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.



Nature, long grown cold and inert in Europe, here toils as wildly at her primeval labor, as if the work of Creation still lay before her. She discloses her ancient secrets of land making and admits us as spectators to the miracle of the Third day. We see the dry earth . . . Within the single province of Odisha she has brought together, as in a great museum, specimens of all her handicrafts, from the half formed amphibious regions around the river mouths, to the chaos of primitive rock which walls out the seaboard from the inner table land.<sup>22</sup>

In another curious turn, immediately after expressing his wonder at the untimely primeval antics of nature in Odisha, he mentioned the inhabitants of Odisha in archaeological terms – as organic remains – as sediments of times past, present only to illustrate their own impotence.

Nor is the province less rich in organic remains. Upon the delta, and among the mountains which rise behind it, we come upon endless strata of races, dynasties, and creeds, from the latest alluvial deposit of Bengalis, with their soft Hinduism, to the aboriginal peoples and their hard angular faith. In Europe, the primeval tribes have disappeared from the range of observation into the twilight of hypothesis. Scholars have stood like Hamlet in the Elsinore graveyard, and see the bones of forgotten nations thrown up at their feet . . . Odisha exhibits a profusion of such primitive races not in a fossil state, but warm and breathing, living apart in their own communities, amid a world of suggestive types and links that elsewhere disappeared.<sup>23</sup>

By mentioning the endless strata of races, dynasties, and creeds, Hunter acknowledges the diversity of the Odia people. However, through the use of the term “strata,” he imposed a civilizational and temporal hierarchy within the various “races” in Odisha with the Bengalis as the topmost alluvial layer. However, his subsequent emphasis on the aboriginal peoples to the exclusion of all other “races” and “creeds” seems to justify his initial claim about the lack of cultural achievement in Odisha. Through the use of metaphor of museums and archaeological soil sediments, Hunter portrayed the people of Odisha as a class of people stuck in the past. He saw the aboriginal inhabitants of Odisha as the remnants of an earlier stage of human development that has long since disappeared in Europe.

This juxtaposition of races between the Odias of the Odisha plains and the adivasis of the hilly regions of Odisha is echoed in early reports by administrators writing back to the central government as they came to encounter the newly acquired province in 1803.<sup>24</sup> When the British

<sup>22</sup> W. W. Hunter, *Odisha: Or the Vicissitudes of an Indian Province under Native and British Rule . . . Being the Second and Third Volumes of the Annals of Rural Bengal* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1872), p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance, report by John Richardson on the geography, and land tenure for the Cuttack Division, 1817, British Library, IOR F/4/505.

acquired most of the Odia-speaking areas they came to take on existing spatial divisions as their framework for understanding their new acquisition. The fertile coastal belt of present-day Odisha was called *Mughalbandi* as it used to be Mughal crown land. Areas covering the Odisha Eastern Ghats were called *Garjat* and consisted of the princely states. Early accounts of Odisha underlined the differences between the Mughalbandi and the Garjat by drawing attention to contrast between the relatively “civilized” and affluent population of the Mughalbandi and the “uncivilized,” poverty-stricken, and politically oppressed adivasi population of the Garjat.<sup>25</sup>

Accounts of the Mughalbandi areas were dominated by narratives of Puri and its centrality in the revenue and political structures in Odisha.<sup>26</sup> Hunter's vision of Odisha as a land driven by religious changes drew from this colonial preoccupation with Puri. In both administrative and missionary circles, Puri came to serve as an exemplary heterotopia of “native idolatrous fanaticism.” As the colonial government came to be more and more embroiled in the administration of massive temple complexes, the annual influx of pilgrims into Odisha from other parts of India and the institution of pilgrim taxes, they came to be faced with a growing anxiety in England and among colonial officials about how this fanaticism could mark an otherwise secular colonial state.<sup>27</sup> Within missionary discourse

<sup>25</sup> In his report on the geography of the province in 1817, John Richardson made a clear distinction between the two parts of Odisha. Of Mughalbandi, he said that these areas were “plain, fertile but not well cultivated and possessing of a numerous population,” Richardson, IOR F/4/505. 8. And that: “With all these advantages and a full enjoyment of security with the additional blessings of a mild and tolerating Government, we are naturally led to conclude and expect that the resources of this province are improving but that the inhabitants themselves through ignorant to the cause, are approaching towards a state of greater civilization,” Ibid, p. 11. However the Garjat area had an entirely different complexion. About these areas, Richardson noted that: “[T]here, little is to be seen but wretchedness and poverty. The great surface of the country is unfit for culture and the small portion cultivated produces a scanty subsistence,” Ibid, p. 12. Therefore, the Garjat area required a more assertive intervention from the colonial government. He observed that: “I have reason to believe that the connections which have existed between this portion of the District and the British government, has already tended greatly towards its improvement, still the baneful counteraction which this benign influence must constantly meet with, in depraved Government of its arbitrary Chiefs, whose cruelty and avarice, equal their ignorance and barbarity will long prove a bar to the introduction of a better order of things, so greatly to be desired, and so conformable in the views of British policy – As long as the inhabitants continue under the Iron rod of their present cruel and rapacious masters, any great amelioration of their situation is impossible, nor is it reasonable to suppose that any great change for the better will take place amongst them, until they are better protected from the arbitrary power of their chiefs,” Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> See Yaaminey Mubayi on the relationship between temple and state in Odisha.

<sup>27</sup> For colonial as well as metropolitan debates about the involvement of the colonial state in the administration of the temple, see Nancy Gardner Cassels, *Religion and Pilgrim Tax*

both in India and in England, the annual Rath Yatra came to serve as an exemplar of unbridled, irrational, and fatal religious fanaticism in India.<sup>28</sup> Finally, the institutional preoccupation with the religious nature of Odisha also drew from the incipient colonial state's engagement with a very complex political and revenue structure that was grounded in Puri through unique networks of ritual, fiscal, and symbolic power that bound together the princely states with the temple establishment.

In colonial accounts, Puri came to serve as what Michel Foucault has termed a colonial heterotopia of compensation. Even as these accounts were products of the everyday experience of rule, they also served to justify colonial rule in Odisha. As Odisha came to be defined as a religious land consisting of the fanatically religious coastal belt or the Mughalbandhi and the civilizationally backward and politically oppressed Garjat, the civilizational mission of British imperialism came to be clarified into a two-part program of disciplining Jagannath-centered Hinduism in the coastal areas and modernizing the Garjat areas. As a tourist guide book on Odisha published in 1900 argues that two kinds of people would find Odisha of particular interest – anyone interested in popular Hinduism and ethnographers interested in studying primitive tribes.<sup>29</sup>

### Divine Native Land

The centrality of Puri and the Jagannath cult in the rhetoric of Odia linguistic politics has long been established.<sup>30</sup> By the late nineteenth century, Odia poets had begun depicting Utkal or Odisha as a region that was “eternally victorious in the field of religion,” as it was able to accommodate multiple streams of Hindu faith.<sup>31</sup> Where the colonial accounts saw Odia religiosity as an instance of fanaticism, Odia nationalist

*Under the Company Raj* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1988). One such observer, William F. B. Lauri, wrote: “Orissa may be compared to a huge caldron, which has been boiling for many hundreds of years, into which ignorance stupidity, and bigotry, have cast so many poisonous ingredients, that it is difficult to say when the contents will become purified and good.” Lauri, *Orissa: The Garden of Superstition and Idolatry*, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> For details, see Subhakanta Behera, *Construction of an Identity Discourse: Odia Literature and the Jagannath Cult* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2002). Also see Geoffrey Oddie's reading of how Claudius Buchanan's account of the Rath Yatra contributed to a colonial construction of Hinduism as a “heathen” and “idolatrous” religion; Geoffrey Oddie, “Missions and Museums: Hindu Gods and other ‘Abominations’ 1820–1860”, in Indra Sengupta and Daud Ali (eds.), *Knowledge Production, Pedagogy and Institutions in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 66–8.

<sup>29</sup> W. B. Brown, *A Guide to the Principal Places of Interest in Orissa* (Cuttack: Cuttack Mission Press, 1900), p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> G. N. Dash, “Jagannath and Odia Nationalism”, in A. Eschmann (ed.), *The Cult of Jagannath*, op cit, pp. 359–74.

<sup>31</sup> The best instance of this would be Madhusudan Rao's *Utkal Sangeet*. See Behera, p. 80.

readings of the status of religion are much more positive – it serves as marker of identity and an essential nationalist myth. This nationalist myth performed a number of political labors. It served as an instance of historical pride in Odia traditions and as well as a means to illustrate how Odisha was a microcosmic version of the larger Indian nation.

At the end of Chapter 3, I discussed how the movement for a separate province of Odisha had to base their territorial arguments on the assumption that colonial Odisha was a product of artificial boundaries. According to such claims, colonial Odisha was *artificial Odisha*. Leaders argued that the colonial state needed to reform boundaries to bring together the area that was *natural Odisha*. One of the most sustained efforts to define and justify the existence of natural Odisha was written in 1919 by Niranajan Pattnaik and Chakradhar Pradhan in a book entitled *The Oriya Movement: Being a Demand for a United Orissa*.<sup>32</sup> Written with the explicit purpose of making the case for Odisha for the colonial government, this book drew on the reigning definitions of Odia community that were being put forward in the Odia public sphere of the time. The authors argued that, in spite of apparent differences among people within the projected province (which included districts from the Madras Presidency, the Bengal Presidency and the Central Provinces), they shared “social manners and customs peculiar to themselves.”<sup>33</sup> Unsurprisingly, the foundation for this claim came from Hunter’s discussion of the Odia character. Writing almost fifty years after Hunter had penned his history, Pattnaik and Pradhan argued that:

The Oriya is constitutionally religious. Dr. Hunter is his “Orissa” Vol. I., pp. 315 et seq., says rightly to understand the intensely religious, or as some might call it, the superstitious nature of the Orissa peasant, we must remember that his sole monuments of the past are the edifices of his deities and the whole background of time is for him filled up with dim August revolutions of creeds. No comment is necessary.”<sup>34</sup>

This description of the Odia character accounted for the common identity of the Odia people despite the administrative divisions among them. However, in taking on Hunter’s account of the fundamentally religious nature of the Odia-speaking people, the authors also had to acknowledge Hunter’s ascriptions of abject, superstitious natures to the Odia people. As per Hunter’s description, popular memory of the Odia past is populated by shifts in religious beliefs of the community rather than political revolutions. This makes the Odia community seem like an apolitical and

<sup>32</sup> Two Bachelors of Arts (Niranajan Pattnaik and Chakradhar Pradhan) *The Oriya Movement: Being a Demand for a United Orissa* (Aska: H. H. Panda, 1919).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91. <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

insular lot. While this insularity and apathy to political movements could curry favor with the colonial demands in the service of the movement for the formation of a separate province of Odisha, it also meant that the claim to a separate province was based on the separation between the Odia community and the people of the rest of India. Furthermore, in the subsequent discussion, the authors argued that the Odia people were different from the neighboring Telegu-speaking people because the Odias were Vaishnav and the Telegus were Shaivas.<sup>35</sup> This proposition assumes that all the people being claimed as Odia were Hindu and Vaisnav. It assumes that the adivasi communities of Odisha who constituted almost a fourth of this population were also part of this Hindu/Vaishnav faith community.

To counter this problem of insularity and the internal difference within the Odia community, the authors sought to focus on the religious landscape of Odisha:

Orissa had been all along known as the *Punya Bhumi* of India; and the Oriyas feel that the sacredness and sanctity attaching to their country has been defiled by the administrative vivisection which it has suffered at the hands of the British conquerors. In spite of the disintegrating forces, which have been at work as a result of this dismemberment, a living fundamental sense of unity has been fostered by all the hallowed spots and shrines scattered through the length and breadth of the country. As distinct from the other parts of Bharatvarsha the land of the Oriyas presents a spectacle of a marked religious entity.<sup>36</sup>

This focus on the sacred geography of Odisha allowed the authors to situate the province within the broader fabric of the Indian national community without undermining the distinctiveness of the Odia community. The experience of “vivisection” was portrayed as a positive force that trained Odias in espousing a “living fundamental sense of Unity,” which could encompass religious and caste difference within the community, and serve as the foundation for a much stronger claim for separate statehood.

This narrative of *punya bhumi* and Odia religious exceptionalism was not novel in the 1910s and 20s. Narratives centering Odia religiosity had featured in Odia poetry of the nineteenth century. In the late nineteenth century, poets such as Radhanath Rai and Phakirmohan Senapati wrote about the geography of the province and imbued their descriptions with religious motifs and ascriptions. In his travelogue *Utkal Bhramanam*, Rai

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 91. “The Telegus of the presidencies are mainly Saivites, while the majority of the Oriyas are Vaishnavaites. The Madras Oriyas like the people of Orissa follow the Vaisnavism of Chaitanya, the great Hindu Reformer of Northern India.”

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 117.

described Odisha as a “holy land” and a “gateway to heaven.”<sup>37</sup> For Rai, the holiness was an essential feature of the land of Odisha.<sup>38</sup> A succinct example of such poetry is Madhusudan Rao’s *Utkal Sangeet*.

Madhusudan Rao, often celebrated as one of the founders of modern Odia literature, wrote a number of poems that described Odisha or Utkal as a land of religious syncretism. The poem exhorts the readers to remember “mother Utkal” and her glories. The reason for this remembering is to push Odias to work towards the regeneration of the impoverished state of Odisha. While this narrative arc is a rather common nationalist trope, the means through which Rao makes his case is quite inspired. The poem begins with an attempt to make the abstract notion of the region real to the readership. Unlike other such poems that were published later, this concretization of the abstract notion of Odisha is not done through a description of the Odia landscape.<sup>39</sup> In the absence of an actual province, which covered the areas that Rao would have liked to be included in the province of Odisha, Rao had to resort to a different way to make Odisha real to his readership. Therefore, the first section of the poem had a description of Odisha that provided a religious narrative about the land. Odisha is described as a land “victorious in the field of religion.” Rao lists all the different religious sects that congregate in Odisha and describes how this congregation is sanctified during the annual pilgrimage to Puri. This reference to Puri is part of a nationalist narrative trope that recurs in definitions of the Odia community for the next sixty years. Rao’s discussion of Odia dharma allows him to enter into a more urgent discussion about the underdeveloped state of the Odia people and their economic deprivation. Towards the end of the poem, Rao inverts the discussion of dharma in to a discussion of karma or labor in the interests of mother Utkal. By beginning with the centrality of dharma to the imagination of mother Utkal and ending the need for karma for the development of mother Utkal, Rao is arguing that in this moment, the importance given to religion needs to be applied to labor for the province of Odisha.

Gopabandhu Das’ famous 1920 speech, which insisted that the Odia community be defined in terms of a shared sacred land rather than a shared language, needs to be read within the context of this conflation of religion and Odia geography during the late nineteenth century. Das argued that the instance of the annual pilgrimage to Puri illustrated the unity of the Odia-speaking people as all differences of religion, caste,

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Behera, p. 82.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 82. He repeatedly connected Odia land with sacredness in his kavyas such as *Chilika and Mahayatra*.

<sup>39</sup> An example of this would be Laxmikanta Mahapatra’s *Bande Utkala Janani*, which has been adopted as the state anthem in the postcolonial period.

language, and regional belonging fell away in the act of pilgrimage. The pilgrimage of Puri and inclusion of adivasis in the religious praxis of Jaganath cult illustrated the ethic of “expansive humanism” of the Odia people. This expansive humanism both indexed the particularity of the “Odia” people and allowed them to transcend their particular regional identity and embrace the broader national community.

Das’ reference to Puri works for him on two registers: Puri as a regional heterotopia that incites the Odia people to buy into an ethic of inclusive humanism that will transcend social differences and Puri as a national heterotopia in which pilgrimage to Puri allows the individual visitors to transcend national differences in general. In his formulation, Puri becomes a local space where one’s place in the nation could be affirmed. It worked both as an ideological beacon as well as an actual space of national pilgrimage. Das’ cosmopolitanism is hard to pin down. While it can be said that it seems to pivot on liberal transcendence of particular identities, it is not based on a liberal critique of actual social difference within the Odia community. The absolute social difference between the Odias and the adivasis is never disavowed. While the colonial rhetoric on Odisha underlined fanatic religiosity as well as a civilizational paradox of the coexistence of classical Hinduism with “primitive” adivasis, Das’ formulation overturns both these claims into an exemplary social praxis that should be emulated by the rest of India. The underlying assumptions about Odia exceptionalism, however, are carried over from the colonial discourse on Odisha.

### **Eternal Holy Land: Gandhi’s Odisha**

Perhaps it could be possible to label Das’ cosmopolitanism as a Gandhian cosmopolitanism that was based on a commitment to absolute difference and a commitment to the local. Das’ cosmopolitanism is possible not only because of the inclusive ideological imperative of the cult of Jaganath that could be exported out into the Indian nation but also because of the actual place of Puri, which serves as a transformative space in which all distinctions are lost – a place to be travelled to for this transformation. A place of pilgrimage.

In Gandhi’s writings on Odisha and Puri, this transformative possibility of Puri recurs.

For instance, in an article in *Indian Opinion* written in 1903 where he argued for a better sense of community among Indians in South Africa, Gandhi noted:

There are in India sharp divisions between the different races inhabiting it; for instance, Tamil, the Calcutta men, as the inhabitants of the upper provinces are

called here, the Punjabis, the Gujaratis, etc. There are also Mohamaddens, the Hindus, the Parsis and others according to religions. Then among the Hindus there are the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Banniyas and others. Now to our mind, if we have brought from India these divisions and differences as very valuable cargo to be treasured up all this distance, then there is no doubt that it would clog us at every slip and hinder our progress. South Africa ought to be to the British Indians a great Puri where all divisions are abolished and levelled up. We are not, and ought not to be Tamils or Calcutta Men, Mohammaden or Hindus, Brahmans or Baniyas, but simple and solely British Indians, and as such we must sink or swim together.<sup>40</sup>

We know from Gandhi's other writing not to confuse this argument for a more cosmopolitan political ethic with a Nehruvian argument for denial of particular identities. But then, what work does "we are not, and ought not to be" doing in this claim. I would argue that there the "ought not to be" emerges from the diasporic status of the South African Indians. If South Africa has to be considered a "great Puri," then *travel to* South Africa effaces difference amongst the Indians. By corollary then, Puri, in Gandhi's reading, can transform its visitors precisely because they visit. In some ways, it can be read as a philosopher's stone of equality. The act of pilgrimage to Puri is transformative. It is a local place that enables Indian cosmopolitanism.

While it is clear that Puri served as an idealized cosmopolitan space in Gandhi's thought, other readings of Puri as well as Odisha interrupt this reading of the place. Most prominent of these is the question of poverty and famine in Odisha. Many of Gandhi's visits to Odisha coincided with some of the worst famines of the twentieth century. Hence, the recurring reference to the inescapable "shadow of Odisha" that "haunts" him points us to a different reading of the exemplary status of Odisha and its place in the Indian nation. In many of his references to Odisha, Gandhi comments on how the poverty in Odisha is emblematic of Indian poverty in general even as it remains the most spectacular form of this poverty, with his references to starving bodies, orphans and destitution. In his requests for financial support for the Odisha public, Gandhi's use of the term *daridranarayan* points to his alternative reading of the relationship between Odisha and India. It has been argued that Gandhi's understanding of the nation pivoted on a political praxis of *seva* to the *daridranarayan*, as Ajay Skaria has argued, "through the weaving of Khadi, a *darshan* of the *daridranarayan* was instituted as constitutive of the Gandhian nation."<sup>41</sup> In his definition of the *darshan* of God, Gandhi suggests that

<sup>40</sup> CWMG, Vol. 3, 1903, pp. 205–206.

<sup>41</sup> Ajay Skaria, "Gandhi's Politics: Liberalism and the Question of the Ashram", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 968.



such a darshan is possible only when we look into the hearts of the people: “The darshan of God is fraught with difficulties. He dwells in the hearts of thirty crores of people. If you wish a glimpse of him there then you should merge yourself with their hearts. These thirty crores include all the skeletons of Odisha, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, men, and women.”<sup>42</sup> This juxtaposition of the “skeletons of Odisha,” with other groups that are defined on entirely different registers, suggests the centrality of a certain reading of poverty and its locus in Odisha to the Gandhian logic of the nation.

### Conclusion

I would like to conclude with two issues that this chapter incites. First, what happened to the inclusive promise of Puri? As the events of the 1930s with the failure of Gandhi’s temple entry program in Puri suggests the inclusive ability of the Jaganath cult had some real limits.<sup>43</sup> The question of *dalit* temple entry in Puri continues to be a point of contention even today. Furthermore, even within Odia definitions of Odisha, while elite claims for the horizontal brother hood of the Jaganath cult enabled them to claim adivasi areas as part of the new province of Odisha, critiques of the provincial state’s treatment of the adivasis in the past sixty years suggests that such claims could just be read as the basis for elite hegemony in Odisha.

Second, what does this discussion reveal regarding the early twentieth-century ideas about national cosmopolitanism in India? Puri as a site of pilgrimage enabled the imagination of a nation of multiregional people who were transformed into national subjects on their arrival in Puri. The subsequent linguistic organization of the India where regional linguistic interests were avowed allowed the imagination of Puri as a shared religious space that undoes regional differences to endure. However, what were unable to endure were the utopian claims of Gopabandhu Das, Madhusudan Rao, and Gandhi that Puri as well as Odisha was a space in which caste Hindus, Muslims, and adivasis were equal. While we can argue that this was due to the fact the claims themselves were fallacious at their inception, perhaps it should also be noted that the conduct of the

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> A 2012 article on NDTV news illustrates how the question of inclusive temple entry still remains fraught. The assault on an American citizen for attempting to climb the chariot of the deity during Ratha Yatra again brought up the question of temple entry and the inclusive ideals of Jaganath. <http://www.ndtv.com/bhubaneswar-news/controversies-over-jagannath-temples-entry-rules-495314> (accessed July 12, 2016). For a historical account of denials of temple entry, see R. Khuntia and B. Bhatta, “Entry of Non-Hindus into the Jaganath Temple, Puri: A Study, *Odisha Review* 6 (2012): 107-12.

postcolonial Odia regional state also contributed to the failure of Puri's inclusive promise. The endurance of a multiregional/multilingual notion of Indian cosmopolitanism at the expense of the figure of the adivasi does demand that we investigate the roots of this endurance and its price more carefully. The next two chapters of this book attend to this investigation of how the figure of the Adivasi was incorporated into the Odia community and, subsequently, into the Indian community during the reorganization of Indian provinces.