The so-called Oriya language movement has deservedly received considerable scholarly attention in the recent years, as is evident from the increasing number of publications on this subject in the Oriya language. However it is not so much the language aspect, but the politics of the movement that has been focused in the relevant literature, which is not quite surprising. This article aims to focus on the linguistic and pedagogical ideas that were the subjects of debate during that period: about a decade and a half from, approximately, the 1860s. The linguistic ideas may look unsophisticated (and some of these totally unacceptable) today to the practitioners of the discipline, but these have to be seen in their historical context. However, what is important is that despite their lack of sophistication as ideas in the field of modern linguistics, these are still quite alive in our country. Although the linguistic community does not subscribe to these ideas, the same cannot be said about the academic community as a whole. This is why a discussion of these is not irrelevant today. Besides for a historian of Oriya linguistics, the Oriya
language movement has a special significance since it is only during that time that certain ideas of clear linguistic significance were articulated and debated, and it is this discourse that can be claimed to represent the beginnings of Oriya socio-linguistics, in fact, arguably Oriya linguistics itself. This paper is organized in two parts: the first discusses the linguistic and pedagogical issues that were raised and debated during the Oriya language movement, and the second attempts to draw attention to the fact that many of these are live issues even now, and also to the rather surprising fact that the way these are approached today is substantially no different from the way these were a hundred and fifty years ago. This needs an explanation and this part of the paper attempts to offer one.

I

Briefly, the Oriya language movement aimed to frustrate the move to introduce Bengali as the medium of instruction at the school level in Orissa and thereby ensure that Oriya is used for this purpose. The issue of language in education in Orissa was posed by a section of the Bengali intelligentsia belonging to Bengal and Orissa, and by a section of the elite of the educational administration in Orissa in the following way: for the economic development of Orissa, education was indispensable, and given the paucity of textbooks in Oriya, which was because of the absence of a sizable market for the same, and given further the fact of Bengali and Oriya being mutually intelligible languages, it would be in the interest of the Oriyas to adopt Bengali as the medium of education. In this context several questions of linguistic and pedagogic interest came to be discussed with vigour (and hostility and even bitterness). Among these were the following: (a) how
does one decide whether a speech community is using a language or a dialect? More specifically, on what basis can one deny that Oriya is not a dialect of Bengali but is a separate language? (b) how important is script for the identity of a language? (c) what should be the medium of instruction at the school level --- the mother tongue or what may be called a “language of opportunity”? (d) who should decide what should be the medium of instruction? and (e) when a language ceases to be used in administration and in education, is there a real threat to its existence?

It was claimed that Oriya was spoken by about three crores of people at that time and had a rich and ancient literature, although it was conceded that there indeed was a paucity of text books in prose in this language. It was argued that the market for Oriya text books was small, on account of which it would be better if Bengali was used as the medium of instruction. Textbooks were already available in this language and then after all, Bengali and Oriya were mutually intelligible languages to a very great extent. They were however written in different scripts, which was a serious problem. Therefore the suggestion was made that the same script, namely the Bengali script, be used to write Oriya too. Later it was argued that Oriya was not a separate language, but was just a dialect of Bengali.

Umacharan Haldar maintained that Oriya should be written in Bengali script because the latter is beautiful. Apart from educational advantages that would accrue to the Oriyas, the recommended practice would foster better unity among the Oriyas and the Bengalis. Some arguments, which looked curious even at that time, were also presented, one of these being the following: after all, for printing purposes the paper that was used in
Orissa came from Bengal, as did the ink and the pen, and on account of this, it would only be in the fitness of things that the Bengali script should be used to write Oriya. Against this, Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, the well known writer and intellectual of Bengal, argued that if the use of one language and one script could foster unity, then one Indian language and one script should be used throughout the country, a proposal to which the proponents of the “Oriya in the Bengali Script” were not likely to lend support. In any case, in the absence of political control and intense social interaction among the linguistic communities, he pointed out, it would not be possible for two linguistic communities to use two different languages, and yet use one script associated with one of these languages. Orissa was not under the political control of Bengal and there was no close or grass root level social interaction between the people of Orissa and Bengal; therefore it would be impossible to impose the Bengali script on the Oriyas. The intelligentsia in Orissa considered the remaining arguments to be poor: that the Bengali script was beautiful was nothing more than just an opinion, and the “ink and paper” based argument hardly strengthened the case for Bengali because the Bengalis could not be given the credit for being the first users of paper for writing! At the time under reference certain Bengali texts such as “Chaitanya Charitamruta”, “Satyanarayana Pala”, etc. were written in Oriya script, and the Oriyas (this term is being used here for both the Bengalis, who had settled down in Orissa for generations and had more or less identified themselves with Orissa, and the native Oriyas. The intelligentsia of Orissa at that time came from both these sections and they together fought for the cause of Oriya, point that is not always projected. The Oriya language movement is often seen as a fight between the Bengalis and the Oriyas on the issue of language. This is not correct.) pointed out that
these texts written in the Oriya script didn’t look good at all, and they observed that the same impression would be created if Oriya came to be written in Bengali script. Basically, they held the view that a language and the script in which it is written are organically connected in the minds of the relevant speech community.

When Kantichandra Bhattacharya, a school-teacher, took the stand that Oriya was not a separate language, but was only a dialect of Bengali, he based his argument primarily on the lexical similarities between the two languages. He accounted for the differences in terms of the lexical corruption which Oriya had undergone. Besides he maintained that since Oriya and Bengali shared the same ancestry, Oriya could not be a separate language. Those who argued against Bhattacharya’s stand included intellectuals of Orissa (to repeat, Bengalis and Oriyas both) and some English administrators. Their arguments were as follows: to make his claim Bhattacharya had considered Bengali and only the Baleswari --- the northern Oriya --- variety of the language, which for reasons of physical proximity of the relevant regions, were higher on the scale of mutual intelligibility than Bengali and any other variety of Oriya. In any case, the “lexical similarities” argument was inadequate to show that Oriya was a dialect of Bengali. Using this argument one could maintain that Gujarati and Bengali were the same language, merely written in different scripts, but this was no one’s claim. The lexical similarity in the case of Oriya and Bengali was correctly attributed to the fact that both these came from the same stock, namely, Sanskrit. Apart from that, it was not true that the lexicons of Oriya and Bengali were as similar as Bhattacharya thought them to be. As far as the “native” vocabulary was concerned this similarity was non-existent, which would
actually argue against his stand about Oriya. It was indeed a fact Bhattacharya had failed to take note of. Then by saying that the dissimilarities merely constituted the corrupt forms of Bengali, one was hardly making a persuasive point.

One was similarly not making a credible observation by saying that because Oriya and Bengali came from the same source, the former was a dialect of the latter. Interestingly, Bhattacharya did not say anything by way of arguing that Bengali was indeed a separate language. He had taken it for granted that the status of Bengali as language was beyond dispute, only that of Oriya was not. His opponents pointed out that if Bhattacharya’s point --- when two languages show similarity, one is derived from the other --- was stretched to its logical limit, it would yield the conclusion that Bengali and Hindi arose from Oriya! This was no one’s claim.

Apart from all this, the critics of Bhattacharya’s views pointed out that Oriya had a rich body of literature, both prose and poetry, and there were historical accounts of Orissa written in Oriya, and also works on arithmetic and “jyotisa” (astrology and astronomy). Therefore it was wrong to assert that it was not a separate language.

Turning to the pedagogical aspect of the matter, those who wanted Bengali to be the medium of instruction at the school level in Orissa maintained that between Bengali and Oriya, the former was actually the language of opportunity. It was a different matter if among the intelligentsia in Orissa there were many who thought that it was not Bengali but English or Persian that was the language of opportunity. The advocates of Bengali
thought otherwise and they said that access to modern education for the Oriyas would be more easily available through Bengali than Oriya in any case, and then there was the problem of the lack of adequate number of text books in Oriya. Some more enthusiastic advocates of Bengali made the following assertion: the Oriyas themselves knew that the Bengalis were prosperous people and that their language, which was well constructed, felicitous, and easy on the ear, was the main reason for their prosperity. On account of this, the more knowledgeable among the Oriyas got their children educated through the medium of Bengali. Those who were for Oriya as the medium of instruction said that there was no factual basis to the above. As regards the textbooks, they said that the problem was real, but would be readily solved if adequate financial support were made available by the government to the writers of the textbooks. At the same time they also called upon the writers and the intellectuals of Orissa to write textbooks in Oriya. They argued that there was a time when textbooks in Bengali were not available, but no one proposed at that time that Bengali should not be used as the medium of instruction on this account. The same attitude should be taken with respect to Oriya.

They also raised the question as to whose opinion should be highly valued in matters pertaining to education: that of the intellectuals or of the staff of the education department. They questioned the ability of the departmental staff to opine on such matters, and drew attention to the fact that many intellectuals of Orissa, both Bengalis and Oriyas, had taken the stand on the issue of language education diametrically opposite to the one taken by a section of the staff of the education department.
Among the intelligentsia in Orissa there was the anxiety that if Bengali became the language of instruction in Orissa, Oriya would suffer in the long run, although some asserted that Oriya, a thousand year old language with such a rich literature, would not die merely because of this. They pointed out that it had not, when during the first forty years of the British rule in Orissa, it was not Oriya but Persian that was the language of education in Orissa.

Thus the language-related issues that were discussed during this period included language-dialect distinction, relation between language and script, medium of instruction, and language decay. This was probably how Oriya linguistics began. Although there was a literature in this language, the origin of which dated back to the sixteenth century at least (for some, thirteenth century; but the resolution of this question may hinge on what text one would count as literature.), there was no careful study of the language till then. Beams’ work around this time was probably the first or among the first that dealt with Oriya language. Both scholarly grammars and pedagogical grammars of this language came into existence after this period.

If the above is correct, then we find that the linguistic study in Orissa originated in a certain social situation. There is nothing new in this; it is said that Panini engaged himself in the writing of a grammar of Sanskrit in response to certain attitudes of the students of those days to the study of grammar (see Matilal (1990), pp. 11-12). In the case of Oriya, there was the perception of threat to the language, and the linguistic discourse that emerged was a response to that threat and it had the purpose of protecting the interests of
the language. This is yet another example of the emergence of a certain knowledge-discourse from a social situation. It may be noted that Oriya linguistics did not start with a grammar of Oriya, but with addressing the question of whether Oriya was a separate language.

II

In this section we discuss the linguistic and pedagogical linguistic ideas mentioned above from the point of view of what one knows today about the issues concerned, and also how relevant the same are today. For decades it has been known that linguistics, as a scientific discipline, offers just no way of deciding whether what is claimed to be a language or a dialect is indeed a dialect or a language. From the perspective of modern linguistics this is a matter that falls outside the scope of linguistics, and as far as the dialect-language issue is concerned, it is really seen as one of power and privilege. There is that well-known saying, which by now has become almost a cliché in linguistics: a language is a dialect with an army and a navy (see Chomsky (1986)). More recently, it has been argued that even what has been traditionally called a “language” is indeed a rather intuitive notion, and not a real-world object (see Chomsky (1982, 2000)), but for reasons of overall economy of presentation we will not bring this idea into the ambit of our discussion here. However, both the questions --- those of language and of the relation between language and power --- do belong to “socio-linguistics”. The same is more or less true as far as the question of language decay is concerned; in fact, it’s more of a sociological (and pedagogical) matter, if we wish to include it in some particular branch
of study. As for the contemporary relevance of these issues is concerned, it is undoubtedly there. The makers of the Indian Constitution were concerned with choosing some languages for inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. Ever since then, from time to time, demands have been made for inclusion of this language or that in the said Schedule, and the list has been augmented. Demands have also been made and are still being made to assign the status of “language” to what has been thus far called a “dialect”. The case of Maithili provides an instance. Language death is more serious a matter today than it has been ever before, but if there is very little furore or serious concern about it, it is because the marginalized people speak the languages concerned. As for the question whether a language should use one particular script or another, modern linguistics again has nothing to say --- there is no linguistically meaningful notion of a certain script being the most appropriate for a certain language. In the ultimate analysis, it is indeed an emotional issue. But no matter what stand linguistics takes, the language-script issue is by no means a dead one. It has been proposed from time to time that it would be better if one script, say Roman or Devnagari, is used for all the Indian languages. Turning to language education, medium of instruction is as live an issue in pedagogical linguistics (or socio-linguistics) as it was then, but which language would qualify at a particular period of time as the language of opportunity is again a matter that lies outside linguistics; it is essentially a matter of societal choice – whichever language people see as having a high market value at a particular point of time is the language of opportunity for that time. That is, if the Oriyas regarded Persian as the language of opportunity at one time or English at another, and never Bengali, there was nothing more to be said about that. And as for the question as to who must decide which language
should be the medium of instruction, whether the bureaucrats in the education department or the informed public, it is again as relevant a question for us today as it was about a hundred and fifty years ago in Orissa.

Now with regard to the language related questions that were deliberated on in Orissa nearly a hundred and fifty years ago, what answers do we have today, no matter from which discipline or disciplines they come from? As noted above, the issues have contemporary relevance, and since great strides have generally been believed to have been made in virtually every discipline in the social sciences during last hundred and fifty years, we should expect very or significantly different, or deeper and more illuminating answers to these questions. It is worthwhile to see whether such answers are indeed available today. Consider the question of language. Kantichandra Bhattacharya did not say why he thought Bengali was a language, and not a dialect. He simply took it for granted. Having done so, he decided that Oriya was a dialect of Bengali. When fourteen languages were initially chosen for inclusion in the Eighth Schedule, the choice were based on factors such as the number of people speaking a certain language, its literary heritage, etc. (for details, Gupta, R.S. et al (eds.)(1995)). Essentially it is on the basis of such considerations as these that one proposes that a certain dialect be assigned the status of language. In order to reject the claim that a certain script is more suitable for a certain language than the one that has been traditionally used by that language, nothing more needs to be said than that the association between the language and its existing script is a matter that is not open for discussion, let alone review. As far as the question of medium of instruction is concerned, the considerations are still the same, the crucial one being the
availability of textbooks on various subjects, which in turn depends, among other things, on the diversity of discourses on a wide variety of topics available in the language. In sum, we find that in essence the approach to the problems is the same --- we might even say that not just the approaches, the answers themselves are indeed basically the same. It may appear that there has hardly been any growth in the relevant domains of knowledge, at least as far as the matters under discussion are concerned. This calls for an explanation.

Looking back, one might ask from where the intelligentsia of Orissa in the mid sixties of the nineteenth century got their linguistic ideas. In all probability they were not from any particular scholarly texts (there is no mention of any such source in their writing), excepting Beams’ work, which had almost just been published (and which, incidentally, had received considerable acceptance in the West). His administrative job required Beams to have acquaintance with some Indian languages, and his linguistic work was primarily based on observation. The advocates of the cause of Oriya seem to have extracted their linguistic ideas from whatever information about language were available to them and from the general intellectual milieu. They were aware of the difference between the relation that the English had with the Scottish people, and the one that the Bengalis had with the Oriyas, and they connected it with Scottish being a dialect of English and derived their argument that Oriya was not a dialect of Bengali. They were aware of the view that languages such as Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, and Oriya all came from Sanskrit. With very simple reflection they must have realized that if a language is not used as medium of instruction, it would gradually come to be used in very restricted domains, such as home, etc., and would ultimately face a bleak future.
When we formulate our answers to the same questions today, we do not depend on any sophisticated scholarship in sociology or linguistics. Recent language movements in India (pro-English, anti-English, pro-mother tongue, etc., or in favour of the inclusion of certain language(s) in the Eighth Schedule, or for a certain dialect to be given the status of a language), say in the post-independence period, have been based on quite simple and straightforward perception of what would happen to the people of certain regions if a certain language policy were followed: some people would benefit, others would not, and the latter would in fact be marginalized or further marginalized, if marginalized they already are, as the case may be. This would give rise to an even more exploitative society, which the government as the protector of the interests of the people of the country must not allow to happen. Mutual intelligibility must not be regarded as a criterion for determining what is a language and what is a dialect. Ancientness of the variety, availability of written texts on a range of topics, existence of a literary tradition, etc. are still used as arguments in favour of the recognition of a speech variety as language. When bureaucrats or politicians alone take decisions on educational matters and try to implement the same (admittedly, this has not been very frequent in post-independence India), the educationists and in general, the intelligentsia, question it on the ground that this is a matter that is too important to be left in the hands of the politicians and the bureaucrats, and that this is indeed a matter where expert opinion must be taken into serious consideration. In sum, the answers to the questions under reference have been more or less along the same lines. This might give the impression that as far as the issues under discussion are concerned, our knowledge hasn’t developed from what it was
a hundred and fifty years ago. The style --- the rhetoric --- of course has changed. And to the extent that this knowledge is available to any one with the relevant information and a capacity for ordinary reflection, one concludes that there may be little that is deep in it. The word “deep” is not used here as a judgemental term; it simply means that there is no need to go beyond perception. The knowledge that one is referring to here is what one acquires from perception, and we do not hold the view that such knowledge as gained from our perception of the world per se is necessarily superficial or inferior, especially as far as real human issues are concerned.

The matters under discussion relate to our sense of identity, our fear of the loss of that identity, the way we look upon our language, namely, as one of the crucial markers of our identity, our perception of our place in our surroundings, our understanding of at least part of the human activity as being governed by motivations of some to exercise power over others, and there is something universal about all this. As a result, the problems of “language-dialect” distinction, of script, of language death, and of medium of instruction, among others of this type are not specific to any time or place. At this level the problems have a certain “rawness” about them: fear of loss of identity or the fear that one would be crushed in the power game and the adversary would gain high economic and social advantages over one are among the very basic of human experiences, because of which there is that quality of rawness about them. The response to such problems as these would also bring out responses of the elemental --- not weak, but quite powerful --- kind, in some sense. This might be at the root of the fact that the ideas that provide the foundation
to the answers to the questions under discussion remain more or less unaffected by time. It is another matter that the terms and style of the discourse do not remain the same.

To conclude, what we have done in this paper is enumerate the main linguistic and language pedagogy issues that were raised during the Oriya language movement, and outline the responses that were given. We believe that the origins of Oriya linguistics are to be traced in this debate. We have invited attention to the fact that the issues that were raised then are still being raised in language movements in our country, and the linguistic and language-pedagogical ideas generated in the process are no different in content from those generated during the Oriya language movement about a hundred and fifty years ago. We have viewed this as something that needs an explanation, given the general agreement that the social sciences have developed very substantially during these years, and have tried to offer one.

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