FROM BUXI TO BAJI

Rethinking the Grammars of Odia Nationalism

International Interdisciplinary Colloquium

Commemorating the Birth Centenary of Shaheed Baji Rout (1926–2026)

4 November 2026 | 10:00 a.m.

M.K.C.G. Auditorium, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar

Curated by: Buxi Jagabandhu Chair, Utkal University

In collaboration with: Guru Ghasidas Central University, Bilaspur; Baji Rout Memorial College, Bhubana; and Odisha Sahitya Akademi

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CONCEPT NOTE

1. Baji Rout at One Hundred: The Politics of Refusal

What does it mean when a twelve-year-old boy refuses the command of an armed state? And how does such an act illuminate the making of political consciousness, popular sovereignty and nationalism?

On 11 October 1938, at Nilakanthapur on the banks of the Brahmani, Baji Rout refused to ferry an armed police party across the river. Associated with the Banar Sena of the Dhenkanal Prajamandal movement, his defiance cost him his life. Yet the significance of this moment extends beyond youthful courage and patriotic martyrdom.

Baji's refusal was embedded in a collective struggle against princely autocracy and coercive authority. It raised a fundamental political question: **Can those denied the power to govern nevertheless claim the moral authority to refuse obedience?**

Commemorating his birth centenary, this International Interdisciplinary Colloquium places Baji Rout at the centre of a wider historical enquiry. The journey *From Buxi to Baji* becomes an intellectual passage through changing languages of resistance, sovereignty and Odia nationalism. Its purpose is not merely to celebrate heroic individuals, but to recover the political worlds, collective struggles and contested imaginations of belonging that made their actions historically meaningful.

2. From Buxi to Baji: Changing Grammars of Resistance

The Paika Rebellion of 1817, associated with Buxi Jagabandhu, and Baji Rout's martyrdom in 1938 belong to different historical conjunctures.

The former emerged from disruptions in older structures of sovereignty, agrarian relations, military obligations and customary authority under colonial rule. The latter arose within the expanding politics of popular rights, anti-autocratic mobilisation and representative government.

Between them unfolded the struggles over Odia language and territory. Fakir Mohan Senapati's literary interventions exposed the contradictions of colonial modernity, social hierarchy and vernacular life, while Radhanath Ray's poetry contributed to the cultural imagination of a distinctive Odisha. Madhusudan Das translated linguistic and regional consciousness into organised political claims through the Utkal Sammillani, while Gopabandhu Das expanded the imagination of Odia belonging beyond linguistic affinity towards public service, social responsibility and a larger humanistic nationalism.

These developments intersected with Gandhian mobilisation, peasant and Adivasi resistance, and the Prajamandal movements. They cannot, however, be compressed into a seamless nationalist chronology. The political actors of 1817 did not necessarily inhabit the nationalist vocabulary of the twentieth century. Nor can Baji's resistance be reduced to the culmination of an earlier rebellion.

The movement from Buxi to Baji signifies not a continuous nationalist awakening, but the transformation of political agency across different historical worlds.

3. Odia Nationalism: Canon, Insurgency and Contested Belonging

How does a region become a political community? Through language, territory, shared memory and cultural institutions? Or also through struggles that unsettle the very boundaries of collective identity?

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* illuminates the role of print, language and collective imagination in producing the nation as a community of belonging. Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* links nationalism to the cultural and institutional transformations of modern industrial society, while Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolic approach foregrounds the persistence of myths, memories and historical attachments in national identity.

Yet nationalism cannot be adequately understood through the making of cultural coherence alone. Stuart Hall conceptualises identity as historically produced, relational and continually transformed rather than inherited as an immutable essence. Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* exposes the contradictions of anticolonial nationalism, while his distinction between spiritual-cultural and material domains complicates the assumption that colonial nationalism merely imitated European models.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* challenges universal histories of political modernity by foregrounding heterogeneous temporalities and experiences that exceed dominant explanatory categories. Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* similarly restores insurgent consciousness and subaltern political agency to histories too often organised around elite leadership.

Odisha offers a compelling historical location from which these debates can be reconsidered.

Odia nationalism developed through linguistic assertion, vernacular print, sacred geography, political mobilisation and territorial consolidation. Yet its canonical narratives raise difficult

questions: Who could speak for Odisha? Whose language represented the region? Which communities entered the dominant nationalist imagination, and which remained marginal?

Chandi Prasad Nanda, in his seminal work *Vocalizing Silence: Political Protests in Orissa, 1930–42*, offers an important empirical and historiographical intervention into these questions. By examining the social reach, ideological complexities and uneven participation of peasants, Adivasis and other groups in late-colonial political mobilisation, Nanda challenges histories that privilege established political leadership over the diverse experiences and political languages of ordinary people. His work brings into focus the tension between organised nationalism and popular political consciousness, asking how apparently marginal actors participated in, negotiated or exceeded the dominant frameworks of the nationalist movement.

The distinction between canonical nationalism and its insurgent histories is therefore essential. Marginal voices are not simply omissions to be added to an established narrative; they may compel us to rethink the categories through which nationalism itself has been understood.

4. Odia Asmita: Histories, Historiographies and the Politics of Belonging

Odia Asmita has never constituted a singular or uncontested inheritance. Its intellectual genealogy traverses debates over language, religion, territory, culture, sovereignty and the relationship between Odisha and India.

Harekrushna Mahtab's historical writings and political interventions illuminate the relationship between regional consciousness, institutional state formation and the integration of princely territories within modern India. His perspective invites us to reconsider Odisha not simply as an inherited cultural homeland, but as a political formation whose territorial and institutional boundaries required continuous negotiation.

Nivedita Mohanty's *Oriya Nationalism: Quest for a United Orissa* reconstructs the historical struggle for linguistic consolidation and territorial unification, illuminating the tensions between regional aspirations, colonial administration and Indian nationalism. Pritipuspa Mishra's *Language and the Making of Modern India* complicates the familiar region–nation opposition by demonstrating how vernacular nationalism participated in the making of modern India, while generating its own tensions over territory, people and political representation.

Bishnu N. Mohapatra's interpretation of the Kanchi-Kaveri legend reveals how cultural narratives and inherited traditions can be reworked to produce modern political meanings. Hermann Kulke's studies of Jagannath, kingship and regional state formation illuminate the historical interdependence of sacred authority and political sovereignty. The contributions of Chittaranjan Das and Gaganendranath Dash direct attention to the intellectual, literary and cultural traditions through which Odisha's past has been narrated, inherited and reconsidered.

Debi Prasanna Pattanayak's linguistic interventions remind us that the assertion of Odia identity must be reconciled with India's multilingual realities and the dignity of minority languages. Pragati Mahapatra's engagement with the gendered dimensions of cultural and literary history invites scrutiny of women's representation within the making of regional identity.

Akio Tanabe's historical anthropology of ritual sovereignty, caste and vernacular democracy reveals how political belonging emerges through everyday social practices rather than exclusively through formal institutions of the modern state. Pritish Acharya's historical investigations illuminate the intersections of regional consciousness, popular mobilisation and nationalist politics, while Biswamoy Pati's social histories foreground marginal communities, popular protest and the contradictions of colonial power.

A further theoretical and methodological intervention emerges in Nanda's *Vernacularizing Pasts: Odisha—Mahabharata to 'Modernity'*, co-authored with Pritish Acharya and Shri Krishan. By interrogating historicism, vernacularity and alternative historical temporalities, the work asks whether Odisha's past can be adequately understood through predetermined narratives of modernity. Its engagement with the *deshi*, the aesthetics of place and the relationship between History 1 and History 2 suggests that regional histories are not merely local illustrations of universal categories, but can themselves generate theoretical insights. This perspective opens possibilities for understanding Odisha's political and cultural formations through the historical worlds in which they acquired meaning, rather than through externally prescribed narratives of historical progression.

Nanda extends these concerns in his more recent work, *Belonging Contested: The Grammar of Odia Asmita*, where the question of identity is approached as a historically constituted and continually contested field of meaning. Moving between the canonical narratives of Odia cultural and political identity and the insurgent traces that unsettle them, he draws attention to the shifting relationships among memory, sovereignty, cultural selfhood and political agency. Odia Asmita, in this formulation, cannot be reduced to a fixed inheritance or an uncomplicated celebration of regional pride. It also involves the persistent negotiation of who speaks, who is represented, whose histories are authorised and whose experiences remain outside established narratives of belonging.

These interventions collectively suggest that Odisha's identity must be approached not as a completed historical formation, but as an evolving and contested political imagination.

Odia Asmita is therefore not merely about who belongs to Odisha, but about who determines the terms of that belonging.

5. Baji Rout: Popular Sovereignty, Martyrdom and Historical Memory

The Dhenkanal Prajamandal movement challenges conventional histories that locate anticolonial resistance primarily within the relationship between British authority and organised Indian nationalism. In princely Odisha, struggles against arbitrary rule, oppressive exactions and political exclusion generated distinctive languages of rights and popular sovereignty.

Baji Rout's refusal must be understood within this collective political world. He was not an isolated child acting outside history, but a young participant in an organised movement challenging coercive power.

His subsequent transformation into a nationalist symbol raises another question: how does an act of resistance become public memory?

Sachidananda Rautray's celebrated poem *Baji Rout* transformed the young martyr's sacrifice into a powerful literary expression of resistance, carrying the event beyond its immediate locality into Odisha's wider cultural and national imagination. Literature here did not simply commemorate history; it participated in producing the emotional and ethical vocabulary through which nationalism was understood.

Commemoration, however, must not detach Baji from the Prajamandal workers, women activists and ordinary communities whose struggles formed the setting of his action.

To remember Baji Rout meaningfully is to recover not only the courage of the individual, but also the collective history that made his refusal possible.

6. Beyond Commemoration: Odisha, Nation and Democratic Futures

The history of Odia nationalism unsettles the familiar opposition between regional identity and Indian nationalism. Regional assertions helped shape India's plural political imagination, even as linguistic consolidation generated difficult questions about minorities, Adivasi communities and alternative forms of belonging.

Contemporary debates on Odia Asmita, alongside Viksit Odisha 2036 and Viksit Bharat 2047, make these historical questions newly relevant. Cultural recognition must remain connected with education, dignity, inclusion, political participation and substantive citizenship.

Baji Rout's centenary therefore invites a question extending beyond the past: **Can a society that celebrates a child's courage against unjust authority also create institutions that recognise the agency, dignity and freedom of its young people today?**

7. Proposed Thematic Areas

- **Baji Rout at One Hundred:** Childhood, martyrdom, political agency and the Dhenkanal Prajamandal movement.
- **From Buxi to Baji:** Changing languages of resistance, sovereignty and political belonging.
- **Odia Nationalism and Its Historiographies:** From linguistic and cultural assertion to the making of modern Odisha.
- **Canon and Insurgent Trace:** Subaltern histories, popular resistance and the limits of nationalist narratives.
- **Odia Asmita and the Politics of Belonging:** Language, identity, sacred geography, memory and territorial imagination.
- **Prajamandal, Princely States and Popular Sovereignty:** Subjects, political rights and the democratic imagination.
- **Literature and the Making of Nationalist Memory:** Sachidananda Rautray, Baji Rout and the cultural life of resistance.

- **Caste, Gender, Adivasi Worlds and Linguistic Plurality:** Revisiting the exclusions and contradictions of regional nationalism.
- **Region, Nation and Historical Theory:** Reconsidering nationalism through Odisha's multiple archives.
- **The Afterlives of Resistance:** Public history, commemoration, education and the contemporary meanings of Odia Asmita.

8. The Unfinished Grammar of Freedom

The centenary of Shaheed Baji Rout is both an act of remembrance and an invitation to historical reconsideration.

From Buxi to Baji brings into conversation different political worlds without dissolving their historical distinctions. It asks how histories of rebellion, linguistic assertion, popular mobilisation and anti-autocratic struggle contributed to the making—and continual remaking—of Odia nationalism.

Above all, it returns to the extraordinary political significance of a young boy's refusal on the banks of the Brahmani.

If Buxi Jagabandhu invites us to reconsider the political worlds of rebellion and sovereignty, Baji Rout compels us to ask how those denied the power to command can nevertheless acquire the moral authority to refuse.

The most compelling histories of nationalism are not necessarily those that show how people learned to belong to a nation, but those that reveal how they struggled to determine the terms of their belonging.

It is in that unfinished struggle that Baji Rout's sacrifice acquires its enduring significance.