

Subhashish Panigrahi
discusses the Balesoria dialect of eastern India's Odia language

Balesoria

(also known as Baleswari-Odia or Northern Odia)

What kind of language is it?

Balesoria, or Baleswari, is the northern dialect of Odia, a language that originated in the eastern Indian state of Odisha and is spoken by over 45 million Odia people.

In 2011, the former names Oriya and Orissa were changed in the Indian constitution to Odia and Odisha. Odia is an Indo-Aryan language related to Assamese and Bengali, but also Magahi and Maithili. The dialects from coastal Odisha – the northern, central and southern dialects – have heavily influenced the written and standard variant of Odisha that dominates formal speech and writing. Of these, the central dialect, often referred to as Katakia or Mogalabandi or Mugalbandi, has been the most dominant of all the dialects of Odisha.

Where is it spoken?

While 'Northern Odia' would be the best term to describe this dialect, it has been referred to mostly as 'Balesoria' or 'Baleswari'. People from the northern Odisha districts of Balasore, Bhadrak, Kendujhar and Mayurbhanj often use 'Udia' to refer to both their dialects *and* the native language – this is a pronunciation variant of 'Odia'. The substitution of 'u' for 'o' is a common speaking practice particularly in the Balasore district and the bordering Bhadrak, Kendujhar and Mayurbhanj districts when pronouncing words with an 'o' at the beginning or the middle. Terms such as 'Balesoria', 'Bhadrakia', 'Mayurbhanjia', 'Baripadia' and 'Keonjharia' can also be found in both speech and writing – they refer more specifically to local variants found in the Balasore, Bhadrak, Mayurbhanj and Kendujhar districts.

Northern Odia comprises all these closely related variants. According to the 2011 Indian Census, the combined population of these four districts was 8,145,227, rising to an estimated 9,260,000 in 2023. While Odia people of different faiths are native speakers of Northern Odia, the indigenous Santal, Ho, Birhor, Munda and other ethnic groups also speak this dialect as a second language, due to social interaction and the domination of the majority Odia people.

The Odia people and other bilingual Bengali speakers from the Purba Medinipur district and the Paschim Medinipur district (the state of West Bengal, the north-eastern neighbour of Odisha) speak an Odia dialect called Medinipuria or Medinipuri. Despite regional and other differences, Balesoria and Medinipuria-Odia are placed right next to each other in the Odia-Bengali language spectrum.

Codeswitching among Balesoria speakers

Balesoria speakers sometimes codeswitch and try to speak in Katakia in formal settings. This is an aspirational tendency across India whereby speakers try to speak a formal form of a language instead of dialects, thereby exhibiting educational and socioeconomic privileges. Many also speak Balesoria in more private settings and a Katakia-influenced variant at work and in other formal environments.

In this region, the Odia Muslim people also codeswitch

between Hindustani Odia and Northern Odia. Hindustani Odia is a spoken tongue with grammatical and syntactic influences from the Hindustani language, a predecessor of the Hindi and Urdu languages, and a vocabulary, intonation and syntactic influence from Northern Odia. Both Hindustani Odia and Northern Odia are poorly represented in the media, although they are sometimes used in literature.

What is the vocabulary like?

Both gender and the Indian Hindu caste system influence the preference for using Balesoria. This 1920s register was recorded for the first time in my 2022 documentary Nani Ma. In the documentary, Musamoni Panigrahi (1920s-2017) does not codeswitch, as she did not receive a school education and stayed in a home environment throughout her life. On the other hand, the two Balesoria speakers – Laxmikanta Tripathy and Panchanan Mohanty – and a Baripadia speaker, Damayanti Beshra, speak in Katakia while only sharing contextual examples using Balesoria/Baripadia.

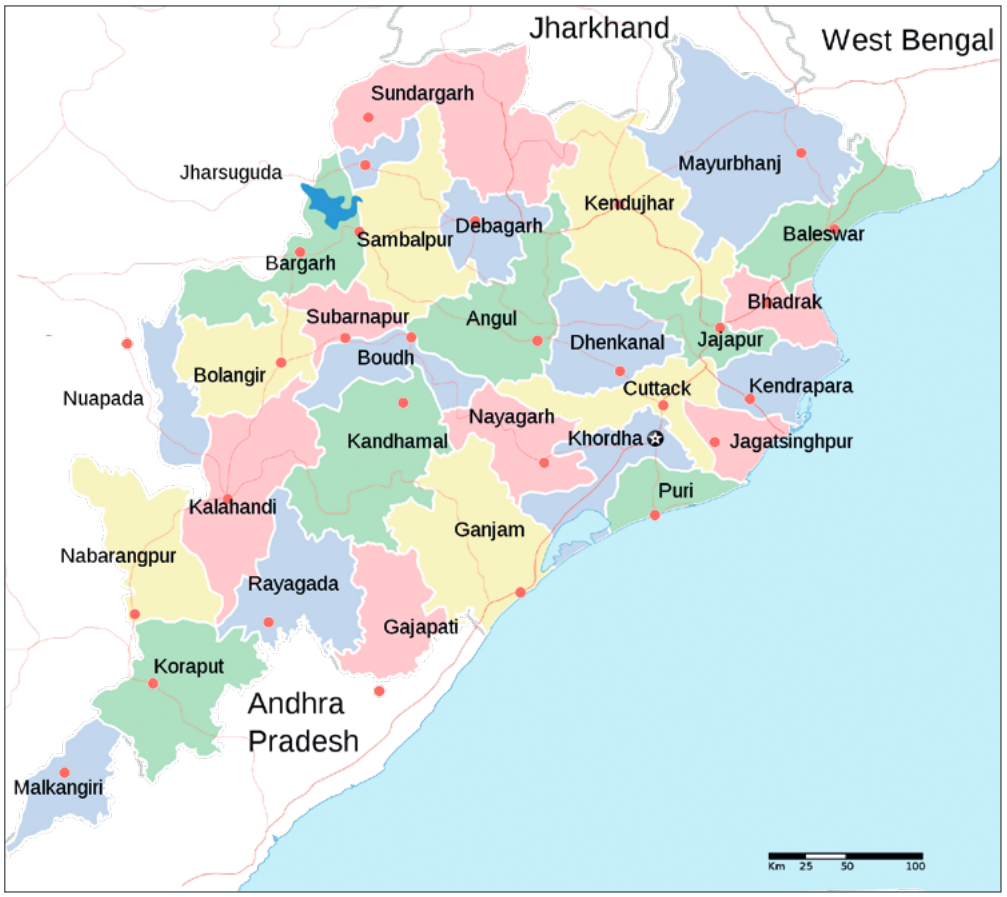
Caste is a discriminatory socioeconomic system based on ancestral professions. Brahmins, the descendants of former priests and other dominant caste groups, Kshatriyas (warriors), and Vaishyas (businesspeople), have oppressed the Shudras ('servitors') and Dalits, who were formerly untouchables and outcasts. In the documentary, Tripathy, a Brahmin, observes that caste identity determines a Balesoria-speaker's choice of vocabulary, with only Brahmins using words exclusively to assert their privilege.

Like most other dialects and languages, Balesoria has gone through natural evolution and is shaped by various influences. Many Balesoria speakers, particularly from urban areas, have started speaking Hindi-influenced Katakia as an educational and socioeconomic aspiration. Hindi and English are India's federal official languages.

Balesoria as a dialect is rarely used in the media, whereas Odisha-based media demonstrates a shift from using Odia words to using Hindi loanwords. The well-established and dominant film and news media in Hindi remain the most influential factor. In Nani Ma, you can also hear a wide range of intonations to express emotions as Musamoni Panigrahi narrates folklore and sings folksongs. However, the wide range of intonations is steadily declining among younger speakers. In fact, two terms – *mafasalia* and

English	Katakia/ Standard Odia	Balesoria (Brahmin)
oil	*telo*	*malopa*
bowl	*tatia*	*gina*
large bowl	*bela*	*konsa*
grandpa (honorific)	*budha bapa*	*jaija*
brother (honorific)	*bhai*	*nona*
sister (honorific)	*opa, dei*	*nani*

Map of Odisha, North Eastern India



Baleswari-Odia in 5 minutes

English	Katakia/Standard Odia	Balesoria
What are you about to eat, dear?	*Kono khaubaku jauco?* [kɔɳɔ kʰɑ:ibɑ:ku dʒ͡ɑ:utʃ͡ʰɔ?]	*Kiso khaite jauco be?* [kiʂɔ kʰɑ:iʈe dʒ͡ɑ:utʃ͡ɔ be?]
What kandona (mourning sing-song) should I sing?	*Ki kandona kohibi?* [ki kɑ:nɖɔɳɑ: kɔɦibi]	*Kandona kiso kohimi?* [kɑ:nɖɔɳɑ: kiʂɔ kɔɦimi?]
[A married girl] went to her parents' place	*Bapoghoroku jaithila* [bɑ:pɔgʰɔrɔku d͡ʒɑ:iʈʰilɑ:]	*Bapoduaruku jail'la* [bɑ:pɔɖuɑ:ruku d͡ʒɑ:illɑ:]
[He/she] brought back the tumbler after drinking	*Pi' sari gilaso neiasila* [pii ʂɑ:ri gilɑ:ʂɔ nɛiɑ:ʂilɑ:]	*Pi' deiki gilaso ghiniaila* [pii ɖeiki gilɑ:ʂɔ gʰiɳiɑ:ilɑ:]
Her son-in-law is holding the handkerchief like this	Tanko jwain e bholi rumalo deichonti [ʈɑ:ŋkɔ d͡ʒuɑ:ĩ e bʰɔli rumɑ:lɔ ɖeit͡ʃʰɔnʈi]	*Ta join eiroko rumal deici* [ʈɑ: d͡ʒɔ_ĩ eirɔŋkɔ rumɑ:lɔ ɖeit͡ʃi]
The mother and the son were sleeping at home	*Ma' puo duhen ghore soithile* [mɑ:ɑ: puɔ ɖuɦ ẽ: gʰɔre ʂoiʈʰile]	*Ma' puo dhien ghoro suille* [mɑ:ɑ: puɔ ɖʰiẽ: gʰɔrɔ ʂuille]



Bhubaneswar, Odisha/India 10th century Mukteshvara Temple © iStock/Oshi

gaunlia ('rural') – are used to describe the older variant that she speaks, and there is a social stigma that discourages the present use of this register. The frequently used Balesoria term *kiso* ('what') is often replaced with the standard Odia *kono*, northern-Balesoria *kene* and southern-Balesoria *kahan*, with standard Odia *kahinki* ('why'). A younger speaker in the documentary tends to speak a variant with low intonation contrast and a vocabulary very close to modern Katakia with more Hindi loanwords.

Social discrimination is regional and historical. Mayurbhanj was largely an independent state that became a part of modern Orissa after the formation of the Indian republic in 1947. The modern Nilagiri subdivision of the Balasore district was also a princely region called Gadajata. Such independence has also contributed to the dominance of regional variants over other variants within Balesoria. ¶

Subhashish Panigrahi is a civil society leader, non-fiction filmmaker and public interest archivist who founded OpenSpeaks for documentation of endangered and low-resource languages. A 2017 batch National Geographic Explorer, he has directed over nine documentaries, most notably, *Nani Ma* (2022), *The Volunteer Archivists* (2022), *Marginalized Aadhaar* (2021), *Gyani Maiya* (2019), *Remosam* (2019) and *Mage Porob* (2019).

Find out more

Online

For an online dictionary of Balesoria, visit livingdictionaries.app/baleswari-odia

Articles

Panchanan Mohanty (1997) 'Loss of /o/ in Kui, Sora, and Oriya: A clue for a sub-linguistic area', in Lang. Tribal Indig. Peoples India: *Ethnic Space* 8.

Film

Subhashish Panigrahi (2022) *Nani Ma*, O Foundation.