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Research article

The Politics of Difference: Ol-Chiki and Santal Identity in Eastern India

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The indigenous people of India have a very contested history of their origin, and hence a blurred identity. The initial contours of tribal identity in India was shaped by the idea that tribals should be assimilated into the dominant Hindu fold or integrated as citizens of a nation state. The dominant communities wanted the tribals even to learn and speak the languages of the dominant groups over their own native languages. On the other hand, the struggles against this discrimination waged by the oppressed and subordinated for last two centuries or more were seen as struggle for recognition as equals. However, in recent times, as a counter to the threat posed to the tribal ways of living by the dominant groups, articulation of tribal identity has been emerging from within. The new struggle encompassed another completely new and opposite demand – the demand for recognition of difference. Building on Santali script (Ol-Chiki) movement in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, the paper argues that the struggle for equal rights of citizenship and distribution along with taking pride in their own tribal identity has led to the development of subnationalism among the Santals in Eastern India.

Keywords: Politics of difference, Ol-Chiki, identity, subnationalism, Santal.

The Problem

The indigenous people of India, known popularly as “adivasis” and officially as Scheduled Tribes, have a very contested but blurred history of their origin (Béteille 1986, 1998; Kuper 2003; Radhakrishna 2016). Without understanding the complexity, the British colonial administrators arbitrarily classified the Indian population into ‘castes’ and ‘tribes’ purely for administrative purposes. Hence, the colonial anthropological discourse constructed the ‘natives’ as backward, childlike or ‘exotic’¹ and in opposition to the Western self (cf. Appadurai 1988: 39; Asad 1973; Das 1995: 3; Sarukkai 1997: 1406; Trouillot 1991), particularly to the colonisers who were rational agents of progress (Said 1979: 40; cf. Chatterjee 1993). As a result of which, the indigenous people learnt to realise and recognise their identity in society not by the characteristics and attributes of their own social being but by one imposed by their superiors. Building on Gramsci’s (1971) ideology of negation in constructing and interpreting subaltern consciousness, Ranajit Guha draws our attention to the problem in the following paragraph (1983a: 18, cited in Singh 2001: 241-42).

In colonial India, a sense of identity was imposed on him (peasantry)² by those who had power over him by virtue of their class, caste and social standing. It was they who made him aware of his place in society as a measure of his distance from themselves – a distance expressed in differentials of wealth, status, and culture. His identity amounted to the sum of his subalternity. In other words, he learnt to recognise himself not by the properties and attributes of his own social being but by diminution, if not negation, of those of his superiors.

The conception of “adivasi” understood in both the ways of its construction and appropriation laid the foundation of a “civilising mission” for tribals. The initial contours of tribal identity in India were shaped by the idea that tribals should be assimilated into the dominant Hindu fold or integrated as citizens of Indian nation (Xaxa 2005). The dominant communities wanted the tribals even to learn and speak the languages of the dominant groups over their own native languages. On the other hand, the struggles against this discrimination waged by the oppressed and subordinated for last two centuries or more were seen as struggle for recognition as equals: one man one vote, equal pay for equal work, equality before law, the need to overturn the inherited structures of power, to capture state power, taking pride in their own tribal language and so on. However, in recent times, as a counter to the threat posed to the tribal ways of living by the dominant groups, articulation of tribal identity has been emerging from within the tribal communities. The new struggle encompassed another completely new and opposite demand – the demand for “recognition of difference” (Pandey 2006). The *raison d’être* of such articulation was not only to demand some degree of political freedom and autonomy but also to ensure the protection, development and promotion of tribal language, customs, culture and their own ways of being.

¹ For a fascinating account of the ironies in the historical evolution of terms like native, inlander, indigenous, etc., in the context of Dutch colonialism in Southeast Asia, see Anderson (1991: 113-128) and autochthonous, see Furer-Haimendorf (1982). For a historical review of notion of primitive society, see Kuper (1988) and for the idea of indigenous people in India and related issues, see Baviskar (2006), Beteille (1993, 1998), Kuper (2003), Sengupta (1988a, 1988b), Shah (2007) and Xaxa (1999).

² This observation is applicable to all subaltern groups including the ‘tribals’, though Guha made his observation particularly with regard to the peasantry.

Here the thrust of my analysis is to explore how the competing demands for social justice and the language of equal rights on the one hand and the recognition of difference on the other have awakened the tribal “person” to strive for another demand – like American slogan – to be *equal but different*. “Where social group differences exist and some groups are privileged while others are oppressed, social justice requires explicitly acknowledging and attending to those group differences in order to undermine oppression” - Iris Marion Young argues (Young 1990: 3). So this politics of difference is crucial in not only resisting domination and oppression but also establishing social justice. Building on this, analysis of Santali script (*Ol-Chiki*) movement in Mayurbhanj district in Odisha, as an instance, would appreciate the struggle of the Santals’ demand for equal rights of citizenship and distribution along with taking pride in their own tribal identity has led to the development of subnationalism.

Individual, Person and Identity

In his book *Evolution and Social Life*, Tim Ingold (1986) makes a crucial distinction between an individual and a person. For Ingold, as for Boas and Darwin, “the individual is an objective entity, a thing of parts, whose historical specificity depends on the combination of elements underlying its morphology and behaviour” (1986: 43). The biological human being is a unique amalgamation of genetic elements. And the performance of the social individual, the ‘culture bearer’ is an articulation of a certain set of instructions loaded in the conscious levels of mind. This tagging of cultural elements is, as for Boas, “a psychological integration... internal to the individual actor. Its obligatory character was not externally imposed, but based on unconsciously internalised categories” (Stocking 2001: 34). Ingold writes, “the individual is constituted by its parts, not by its position in a wider system of relationships” (1986: 44).

Whereas ‘person’ is a broader concept. Though individuality and personhood are complimentary concepts, we cannot exactly say where individuality ends and where personhood starts. Yet, to put simple, a person is a conscious agent who carries forward, and of course accumulates, past experiences into the present, and hence puts forth a new form of consciousness. And this conscious agent is a complex network of social relationships.

The first clear and precise statement of the difference between individual and person in anthropology, as Ingold acknowledges, goes back to Radcliffe-Brown, who writes (1952: 193-94),

Every human being in society is two things: he is an individual and also a person. As an individual, he is a biological organism, a collection of a vast number of molecules organized in a complex structure, within which, as long as it persists, there occur physiological and psychological actions and reactions, process and changes. Human being as individuals are objects of study for physiologists and psychologists. The human being as a person is a complex of social relationships. He is a citizen of England, a husband and a father, a bricklayer, a member of a particular Methodist congregation, a voter in a certain constituency, a member of his trade union, an adherent of the Labour Party, and so on. Note that each of these descriptions refers to a social relationship, or to a place in a social structure. Note also that a social personality is something that changes during the course of the life of a person. As a person, the human being is the object of study for the social anthropologists. We cannot study persons except in terms of social structure, nor can we study social structure except in terms of the persons who are the units of which it is composed (cited in Ingold 1986: 114).

Ingold goes on comparing Radcliffe-Brown's dictum, "The human being as a person is a complex of social relationships" (1940: 5) with a similar statement by Marx, in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, "The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations" (Marx and Engels 1977: 122). Here, Marx is referring to personhood. Yet, it can hardly be said that they are telling the same thing, albeit both of them use almost similar words. The basic difference is that,

Marx's person is a real historical agent, enmeshed in a fabric of intersubjective relations that unfolds in the course of his and others' purposive, creative action. Radcliffe-Brown's person is a puppet whose actions are entirely determined by rules; whatever is irregular or idiosyncratic is omitted from the specification of structure and hence cannot be put down to persons as its constituent units (Ingold 1986: 115).

In this sense, the 'person' is nothing more than the role he plays and the place he occupies in the social structure. Here Radcliffe-Brown's usage of 'person' is typical to the original meaning of Latin *persona*, which means, "a mask, or more generally, an artificial role, a part in a play, or a kind of masquerade or imposture" (ibid). Mauss going a step ahead has enlightened us that the notion of person has undergone a series of transformations as '*the category of self*' and hence as the centre of consciousness (Mauss 1979: 78-79, cited in Ingold 1986: 115). It is precisely this distance covered in these transformations that differentiate Radcliffe-Brown's conception of 'person' from Marx's and Ingold's. Here what is crucial to the understanding of Ingold is the criterion of *agency* of personhood. Let us put it simply. A biological human being may be a husband, a father, a voter of a constituency, member of an elected party, a citizen of a country and so on. It implies two things. The human being firstly is a role occupant (author) and secondly, a role player (actor). Yet, the person is not only the actor who plays these roles. But the person, as Ingold argues, both as an author and actor is neither only an individual organism nor *persona*, but "become involved in *real* social relations with other author-actors" (Ingold 1986: 115-16). In short, Ingold's idea of person "depends on the conception of the social as consisting not of relations between the component parts of a regular programme of practical conduct, but of the entwining of the lives that are being conducted" (ibid: 116).

The individual as a person – a conscious human being – persists to survive in the society in a complex of social relations. The person today not only persists to survive but also fights for justice. He struggles for dignity and recognition; dignity of life and living. For a tribal in general a dignified life and living does not mean that s/he would have, like some others, a grand mansion, rich food, expensive dresses and supremacy of voice. Rather s/he should have her/his basic needs fulfilled, his/her voice may not be considered as supreme but should be honoured. And s/he should be free from all exploitations, anomalies and indignities. This is part of what Nancy Fraser calls struggle for *redistribution* and *recognition* (1995: 73). In this struggle often it is recognition which gets the primacy ignoring the issue of distribution. But even the struggle for recognition often ends up in a superficial formation of identity. Thus, Nancy Fraser elsewhere challenges us to rethink 'recognition'. As Nancy Fraser (2000: 113-114) challenges us,

Recognition is not group-specific identity but the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction...it means a politics aimed at overcoming subordination by establishing the misrecognized party as full member of society, capable of participating on a par with the rest...misrecognition is neither a psychic deformation nor a free-standing cultural harm but an institutionalized relation of social subordination. To be misrecognised,

accordingly, is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down upon or devalued in others' attitudes, beliefs or representations. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitutes one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem.

In this status model, the politics of recognition moves beyond the question of identity, and seeks institutional justice for institutionalized wrongs. This politics seeks to overcome the status subordination by changing existing wrong values and entrenching new values that will enhance parity of participation in society.

Furthermore, today the person, preferentially here the conscious subaltern person, demands for "recognition of difference" (Pandey 2006). For last two centuries or more, Gyanendra Pandey argues, the struggles waged by the oppressed and subordinated were seen as struggle for recognition as equals: one man one vote, equal pay for equal work, equality before law, the need to overturn the inherited structures of power, to capture state power and so on. In the later decades of 20th century, the struggle encompassed another completely new and opposite demand – the demand for recognition of difference. The awareness of gender, race and ethnicity, the richness of language, beliefs and communal practices and the different ways of being have provided enough ground for diversity and the demand for recognition of difference. Let's consider the rationale behind the Santali script (Ol-Chiki) movement in Mayurbhanj district in Odisha.

Ol-Chiki Movement and Santal Identity

The roots of the Santali language movement in Mayurbhanj districts of Odisha goes back to Pandit Raghunath Murmu. He was born on 5 May 1905 at Dandbose, a small village near Rairangpur town in Mayurbhanj. He is the person who for the first time thought of inventing a script for Santali language. In 1925, while serving as the headmaster of Badamtaliya Model School, he invented a script for Santali language called *Ol-Chiki*. *Ol* means drawing an imaginary picture in mind without making any sound and *Chiki* means pictorial representation. Ol-chiki script has 30 letters including six vowels (*raha alang*) and 24 consonants (*keched alang*). The letters of the Ol-chiki script are not arbitrary but pictorial which are designed based on the shapes of an objection or action in their natural surroundings. For instance, the word /AT/ means earth and the shape of letter "  " /AT/ is derived from the round shape of the Earth. Similarly, /UD/ means mushroom and so, the letter "  " /UD/ looks like a mushroom (<http://wesanthals.tripod.com>).

Sachidananda Das, the then Superintendent of Education of the state, went on a surprise inspection found that Raghunath Murmu was having a hand press behind him and he came to know about the script then. Following his suggestion, the hand press and the script were displayed in the state exhibition in February 1939. Later, it was brought to the notice of the then Maharaja Sir Pratap Chandra Bhanj Deo, who after a long discussion was convinced about the suitability of the script. He proclaimed that his government would have no objection if the people would adopt the script to read and write their spoken language. He also remarked, "Success of the invention lies only in its application" (Hemram et. al. 1972: 9).

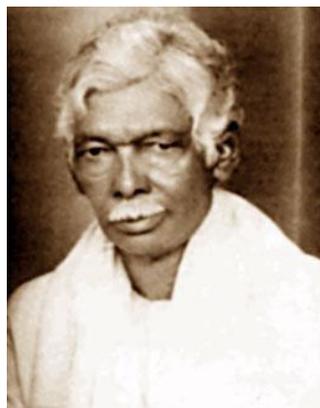


FIG. 1. Pandit Raghunath Murmu, the inventor of Ol-Chiki script.
http://www.indianetzone.com/44/santhali_language.htm, retrieved on 18 Sept 2010

Three years later, Pt. Murmu was transferred to Rairangpur High School on promotion, but soon he resigned from the post in 1946 and devoted all his time for propagation of *Ol-Chiki* in Santal dominated states of India. He published novels, books and journals in *Ol-Chiki* script. Many organizations were started. One among them was Adivasi Cultural Association formed in 1954. The semi-political affiliation of the organization slowed down the propagation of Ol-Chiki script. Finally, a pristine non-political organization named Adivasi Socio-Educational and Cultural Association (ASECA) was formed in 1964 and got registered in June of 1964. It is now functioning in Odisha, Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, Jharkhand and other parts of the country.

After Pt. Murmu (died on 1 February 1982), the ASECA and its followers have been carrying forward the movement. In the 1980s, one of the leaders, Mr. Chhutai Soren, the present President of ASECA, Mayurbhanj (Odisha) wrote, describing the rationale and suitability of Ol-Chiki, to the then Prime Minister of India (Indira Gandhi), Chief Ministers of West Bengal, Odisha, Assam and Bihar for recognition and adoption of Ol-Script (*Ol-Chiki*) for Santali language. Since the time of Pt. Murmu till the present day, the most important demands of the movement were to include Santali language in the Eighth Schedule of the constitution of India and to introduce *Ol-Chiki* script from Primary School to University level. Furthermore, the Santals now demand that their mother language should be the medium of instruction in academic institutions. In response to the demand, the Department of Education of Government of Odisha, passed a resolution on 25 February 1991 for introduction of Santali language in Primary School level in the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Sundargarh that got implemented in 30 schools (20 in Mayurbhanj, 5 in Keonjhar and 5 in Sundargarh) on an experimental basis from May 1992. The experiment failed. The report of the expert committee set up by the Government of Odisha for studying the impact on introduction of Ol-Chiki script in 30 schools of Odisha concluded that the parents "are found to believe in competition and tuition. They are more in favour of learning Oriya and English. Learning their own language and script is secondary for them" (GoO 2001: 13).

Later, All Odisha Ol-Chiki Student Union (AOOSU) was formed at Rairangpur on 10 January 1999 with an objective to strengthen the movement for getting recognition of Ol-Chiki and its implementation in the educational system of Government of Odisha. From

time to time organizing rally and *dharna*, the AOOSU demanded for implementation of Ol-Chiki in District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). Finally, on 29 October 2002, an Expert Committee was set up by the Department of School and Mass Education, Government of Odisha, to examine the suitability of the use of Ol-Chiki script in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. The Expert Committee after careful observation submitted its report on 12 November 2005 suggested (GoO 2005: 26-27):

- “Santal language should be used as medium of instruction at the primary level (Class I-V). Attempt must be made to bridge the gap between mother tongue (MT) – Santali and regional language/ school language (RL) – Odia.
- “Bilingual transaction model needs to be experimented. In the first year 80% time should be used to teach reading and writing of Santali and 20% time should be used for spoken Odia. In the final Primary year, the time is to be reversed. 80% time should be used for speaking, reading and writing of Odia and 20% time for reading and writing for Santali. Time in the in-between years should be adjusted 40-60, 50-50, and 60-40%.
- “Use of Ol-Chiki script to study Santali language be made optional.”

Getting positive feedbacks from the Expert Committee, the Government of Odisha in April 2006 declared that *Ol-Chiki* would be introduced in 100 schools on an experimental basis. The programme is under progress.

Politics of Difference and Growth of Subnationalism

In the meanwhile, Government of India was pleased to include Santali language in the Eighth Schedule of the constitution of India on 22 December 2003. Similarly, in Jharkhand, the state has given recognition to Santali as the second language as the state on 19 August 2005. Since then, some universities like Siddhu Kanhu University, Ranchi University (both in Jharkhand) and some colleges have started imparting Santali language as one of the Modern Indian Language (MIL) subjects. ASECA, Mayurbhanj, is providing BA and MA Degree certificate courses in Ol-Chiki. In some of the universities and colleges, it is taught as an optional subject up to BA and MA Degree. Central Government has been pleased to allow writing Ol-Chiki as an MIL subject in UPSC examination. The movement is still in roll. The Santals today demand for:

- Teaching Santali students in Santali language and Ol-Chiki script in all schools.
- Creation of special department for Santali language in colleges and Universities.
- North Odisha University to be named after Pt. Raghunath Murmu.
- Establishment of Sahitya Academy for Santali in Odisha.
- Laying the statue of Pt. Murmu in front of the Assembly of Odisha.
- Inclusion of Santali as an optional subject in Odisha Public Service Commission and so on.

Why is a separate script (Ol-Chiki) for Santali language needed? Soren (1980), Zide (1996), Murmu and Hansdah (ND) have described the rationality, suitability and novelty of Ol-Chiki for writing Santali language. They argue that the problems of accurately representing Santali language in Indic script, viz. Odia, Hindi, Bengali, Assami and Roman script (English) are manifold. A portal of *Ol-Chiki* script of the Santals writes,

Firstly, in Indic language, some phonetics like checked consonants /k', c', t', p'/ do not exist. If one attempts to suppress the inherent vowel of consonants /KA/, /CA/, /TA/ & /PA/ of any Indic script, it would only produce /k/, /c/, /t/ & /p/, respectively. There are no mechanisms to represent these unique Santali sounds. Secondly, there is a difficulty of representing the Santali vowels. Currently, the Santali language does use eight or nine vowels that can be short

or long and nasalized, whereas the Indic scripts provide only six vowels. By modifying the vowels of Indic script using diacritic marks, the Santali vowels can be represented to some extent, but when such vowels are used in the beginning of a word, they tend to approximate with closest vowels of the Indic script. Thirdly, there is no mechanism to represent the Glottal stop of Santali sounds which Santals use very frequently (<http://wesanthals.tripod.com/id45.html>).

Santali language, linguistically, has certain beauty, specialty, peculiarity, sweetness and originality. The Ol-Chiki script represents all sounds accurately that are naturally appealing to the Santals. Therefore, “to think of Santali without ‘Ol Chiki’ is a sign of mere madness”, writes Dr. K. R. Soren, the President of All India Adivasi (Santal) Council, Midanapur, West Bengal, in an open letter to Shri Morarji Deshai, the then Prime Minister of India, for giving recognition to Ol-Chiki script by the Government of India on 15 February 1978 (Datta 1995:105).

Apart from linguistic problems, Chhutai Soren, the President of ASECA, elaborated further that there were practical reasons too. After the independence of India, the Santals of Odisha, Bihar, West Bengal and Assam started using Odia, Devnagari, Bengali and Assami scripts respectively and consequently they also started writing Santali language in those scripts. The Santals living in different states and writing in their respective regional scripts failed to understand and communicate with each other. Hence, the geographical boundary stood as a barrier for their unity, identity and integration, albeit they possessed and used the same language, culture and tradition. In this context, advocating for use of a common script for Santali language and reproaching the miscreants who for political gain are on the move to overthrow this cause, Mr. C.T. Besra of Dumka in Bihar, writes, “Our friends forget that our Santal brothers are also in Bengal, Assam and Odisha. If we are made to write in Hindi character, they will have to translate the same thing into Bengali, Assami and Oriya respectively and as such we, the great solid community, will be divided into different zones of language” (Hemram, et al. 1972: 9).

Secondly, the use of different scripts for writing Santali has negatively affected the progress of Santali language in several fields starting from literature to history, philosophy and science. While there exist considerable materials for Santali in Roman script, mostly confined to academic people only, common Santals have no appreciation for the same. The fact that there exists almost no creative literature in Santali using Roman script shows that it has not been able to penetrate to the common Santals. The problem of further deformation of Santali language comes from the fact that different scripts are being used for the same language. In this process, the style and formation of words used for dominant languages influence the writing of Santali language and this phenomenon further distorts the language. After invention of *Ol-Chiki* script, Santali literature has been enriched by the publication of different books, journals, novels, short stories, poetries, songs, religious sermons, books on Santal society and culture, fundamental books for learning *Ol-Chiki*, books for learning primary mathematics, Santali grammar and books on great adivasi leaders.

However, the inventor’s main interest was to bring the Santals together living in different States by providing them a single communicative language (cf. Mahapatra 1983). The hidden agenda, as Chhutai Soren acknowledges, was to bring about a single state by conglomerating districts from neighbouring States. At least this is what some of the other leaders claim. Raghunath Murmu also hoped that the Hos, Mundas, Mahalis and Birhors who shared the understanding of the Santali might adopt Ol-Chiki (Carrin 2008: 32). Lastly, and most importantly, the language movement of Santal is a struggle for

recognition and identity. As Muniram Baskey, a man who worked with Pt. Raghunath Murmu and Jaipal Singh for the development of *Ol-Chiki*, succinctly writes, "An important question which must be considered seriously is the work of making Adivasi race conscious. This belief can be done by the acceptance of a new Script altogether which will give them an individual identity" (ibid).

To my further inquiry of how far the success of *Ol-Chiki* movement has strengthened the Santal identity and ethnicity and formal recognition of *Ol-Chiki* made an ordinary Santal to think at par with rest of the society, my friend Karu Marandi replied, "I am very proud now to identify myself as a Santal, which I was hesitant to do earlier. Earlier I avoided speaking in Santali language even to my Santal friends in the presence of others, especially a non-tribal. I am happy now to converse in Santali language as I have my own language and script like yours". Damayanti Besra, a Lecturer in the Department of Odia, MPC College, Baripada, recounts her experience in the college. One day, she was talking to some of her Santali students in Odia language outside the classroom. To her surprise, one of her students requested her saying, "Madam, we are not Odias. Would you mind speaking to us in our mother tongue, Santali?" Later, Damayanti Besra started teaching her children at home to learn *Ol-Chiki* script and speak in their mother tongue, Santali. She further told me, "The Santals are now taking pride not only in their language and identity but also in different manifestations of their culture. The Santals are energetic enough to revive their past customs, traditions and culture through writing, teaching and celebration of cultural festivals". The acceptance and popularity of Santali language and script are indicated by the presence of a number of book stores and audio-video shops exclusively dealing with Santali books, music and video cassettes in Raigangpur and Mayurbhanj towns. Thus, the *Ol-Chiki* movement is a persistent attempt to regain tribal identity and ethnicity. Using *Ol-Chiki* script as a medium, the Santali language movement has been trying to create what N. K. Bose calls "subnationalism" (1967) and Roy-Burman calls "infra-nationalism" (1969) of its own resisting the mainstream nationalism and domination.

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