

***Graphic politics in Eastern India: Script and the quest
for autonomy***
Nishaant Choksi (2021)

London: Bloomsbury Academic. Pp. 224
ISBN: 9781350215924 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781350159587 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781350159594 (Ebook)
ISBN: 9781350159600 (Epub)

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Although linguists and other social scientists proudly assert that India is a land of linguistic diversity and richness, there aren't many empirical studies showing how this linguistics diversity is socially and culturally anchored and more importantly how it is deployed by speakers in making sense of their identities and simultaneously asserting and claiming those identities. Even more striking is the lack of studies on script and writing systems, not just as a mere representation of speech on paper, as it was conceived in the structuralist traditions, but as a semiotic resource that is created, imagined, and utilized within the social, cultural, and political realms. Studies treating Indian languages and scripts as semiotic resources utilized by their speakers in their day-to-day linguistic encounters are slowly emerging (e.g. Ahmad, 2011; Choksi, 2014; LaDousa, 2020; Martineau, 2020). For example, while the previous studies of Urdu and Hindi in India informed by ideas of nationalism (e.g., van der Veer, 1994; King, 2001) treated them as fixed symbols of Muslim and Hindu identities respectively, recent studies (e.g. Ahmad, 2008, 2011) view script and other linguistic forms of Urdu as resources whose cultural significations emanate from and are rooted in larger social practices which are in a state of flux.

Nishaant Choksi's *Graphic Politics in Eastern India: Script and the Quest for Autonomy* not only fulfils this research gap but does it *graphically* by weaving

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together the social and political aspects of language, script, and the quest for the cultural autonomy, with extremely rich ethnographic insights, of the lives of Santali speakers and their words, both as they utter them and write them with a view to drawing a representation of their past as they paint a picture of their future. Another mark of distinction of this book is that it shows how the Ol-Chiki script for Santali has become the fulcrum around which the struggle for an Adivasi identity against the historical upper-caste Hindu oppression and the demand for a share in the material and symbolic resources revolve. The symbolic value of Ol-Chiki script for Santali must be understood in the context of the indexical meanings associated with other scripts in which Santali have been written because a linguistic form derives its meaning from the system of distinction in which it relates to other possible styles. While the Roman script is associated with Christian missionaries, the Bengali and Devanagari scripts are emblematic of the upper caste Hindu literary practices.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 offers a useful theoretical perspective, going beyond the limiting view of script derived from the structural traditions espoused by the stalwarts like Ferdinand de Saussure and Edward Sapir who viewed language primarily as speech (Saussure, [1916]1959; Sapir, [1921]2004). The chapter offers a linguistic anthropological framework that treats both spoken language and written language as communicative practices and thus ideological constructs that shape and are simultaneously shaped by issues of power and identity and are deployed in the (re)imagining and (re)fashioning of a new social order. In this view, script is a key modality of politics that sits at the nexus of literacy, memory, and community aspirations. Choksi shows how the struggle for the adoption of Ol Chiki is closely interwoven with cultural and political aspirations of the Santali-speaking people.

Chapter 2 provides a historical account of the development of different scripts such as Monj Dander Ank by Sadhu Ramchand Murmu, Roman script by missionaries, Ol-Chiki by Raghunath Murmu. In discussing these scripts, Choksi treats script as a cultural symbol, not just a tool for the representation of speech in writing, that binds Santals to their territory, social structure, and their spiritual world. In the emergence of Ol as a distinct script, the chapter mentions two important factors, namely, the Santals' urge to extricate themselves from the cultural and political dominance of the upper caste Hindus for attaining autonomy and at the same time dissociate themselves from the Christian missionaries and the Roman script. The chapter explains the reason why the missionaries rejected the Brahmi-derived script and adopted the Roman; they did this with the twofold aim of creating a wedge between the Santals and the upper caste Hindus and their script, which would also make Christianity look attractive to the Santals.

Chapter 3 focuses on the village of Jhilimili, in the eastern state of West Bengal in India, the ethnographic site on which this study is based, to show the dynamic and strategic use of multiple scripts of Santali in the linguistic landscape of the village. The deployment of the Brahmi, Roman, and Ol-Chiki scripts in the bazar creates, for speakers of Santali, complex interconnections with the social and political forces operating at the regional, trans-regional and pan-Indian level. While Santali is one of the twenty-two recognized languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and also adopted for promotion by *Sahitya Akademi*, a government organization dedicated to the advancement of Indian literature in multiple languages, the local upper caste Hindus do not even consider it a proper language and often derogatorily refer to it as ‘thar, or a type of sign language or grunt language attributed to deaf, mute, or other speakers with articulatory disabilities’ (p. 82). What is interesting is that even government institutions such as banks and post offices use Hindi/Nagari and English/Roman official languages of India and Bengali/Brahmi, the official language of the state of West Bengal, to the complete exclusion of Santali/Ol-Chiki. Choksi analyzes these complex interconnections and conflicting ideological positions about Santali using the theoretical concept of ‘scales’. The dominance of Bengali, the language associated with upper caste Hindus, and English and Hindi, national languages, reinforces the exclusion and erasure of Santali and Ol-Chiki from the linguistic discourse and practice of the official institutions. Ahmad (2020) shows a similar case of disjunction in which an oath of office taken in Urdu in the state legislature of the State of Uttar Pradesh was declared null and void in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where Urdu is the second official language. In contrast to banks and post offices, where Santali is regularly erased, the village council employs Santali and three of its scripts, whereby the Ol-Chiki and Roman scripts index a trans-regional identity of Santals living within and beyond Jhilimili, and the Brahmi script symbolizes its locale within the state of West Bengal where Bengali written in Brahmi is official.

Chapter 4 examines the intersections of the Santali language with its Ol-Chiki script and the issue of social caste in the Jhilimili High School. Hindu society is divided into four rigid hierarchical social groups, based on birth, in which a small group of Brahmins and Kshatriyas are at the top and Shudras, the untouchables, at the bottom of the system. Shudras face ritual, social, and economic marginalization (Dumont, 1980). Even though Adivasis do not fall within the Hindu caste system, upper caste Hindus treat them as ritually untouchable and consequently their spoken language is also treated as stigmatized and becomes embroiled in the system of linguistic inequality generated by the Hindu caste system. To subvert this deeply entrenched system of inequality, in their discourse and practices,

the Santals bypass the spoken form and employ the written mode of the language for the assertion of their autonomy as script is linked with state-sponsored developmental programs that promote written literacy as a necessary tool for creating modern citizens. The Santals use these potentialities in the script to propagate Ol-Chiki through organizations such as Adivasi Socio-Educational Cultural Association. Giving an extremely rich and fascinating account of the interplay of caste, language, and script in the school, Choksi shows how different languages and other cultural symbols are represented on school spaces. While Bengali, associated with caste-Hindus dominated on school premises, the linguistic landscape of the hostel buildings, which Santali-speaking students had more power to shape, showed not only Ol Chiki script but also many Adivasis symbols imprinted on them. The use of Ol-Chiki on the hostel premises symbolizes an 'assertion of Santali aspirations for institutional equity and community autonomy' (p. 120).

Based on an analysis of Santali literary production, Chapter 5 examines how the politics of the Santali language, script, and identity was played out in the print media. Calling into question Benedict Anderson's notion that print capitalism creates monoglot publics, Choksi shows how the Santali print media constructs images of publics that assert differences and simultaneously attempt to bridge them to create 'trans-ethnic' political affiliations. The chapter argues how the juxtaposition of Brahmi script and Ol-Chiki on a magazine creates different social connections. While the use of Brahmi script establishes Santali's place in the state of West Bengal, the use of Ol-Chiki signifies a broader connection, transcending the local boundaries and uniting Santali speakers in other regions in Eastern India. The book concludes with highlighting the relationship between the politics of script, identity, and autonomy and calls for interdisciplinary research on other communities struggling for their identity and recognition.

This book is a pleasure to read as it creates an engaging narrative in which language, script, identity, and the struggle for recognition and autonomy are beautifully woven together with theoretical insights from a range of academic disciplines including anthropology, linguistics, history, oral literature, and social movements. The book is a valuable resource not only for linguists but for social scientists in general who are interested in understanding how language and script are embedded in issues of identity and power struggles. Furthermore, the book is a significant contribution to the existing literature on the political and linguistic struggles of the Adivasis, who are one of the most marginalized communities in India.

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(Received 14th June 2022; accepted 17th January 2023)