

Language Identity and Cultural Resilience among Santal Community

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Abstract

Santali is a member of one of the largest Austroasiatic speaking Adivasi communities in South Asia which is an interesting case study for the study of sociolinguistic persistence. Minoritized indigenous communities in modern India are subjected to high pressure of economic displacements of neo-liberalism, migration and the structural domination of regional Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages. This is a research paper that explores the relationship between language identity and cultural resilience in Santali communities. The interpretation of the role of language in the preservation of the culture heritage and socio-political resistance is analysed through an interdisciplinary approach, merging the theories of subaltern studies, sociolinguistics and indigenous sociology. The analysis is based on the development, propagation and digitalization of the Olchiki invented by Pandit Raghunath Murmu. It also focuses on the implementation of Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education in the light of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India. It reveals that there is an oral and written continuity—creation epics (Binti), festival songs (Sereng) and riddles (Kudum) that sustains Santali cultural resilience with a distinct eco-spiritual link to ancestral lands (Zameen). Structural problems including geographic fragmentation, pedagogical materials, and differences due to the script are also discussed. Finally, the paper suggests that it is important to institutionalize Santali education and critical to support digital indigenous spaces as part of decolonization. By protecting the language, we are also speaking for the protection of alternative, sustainable worldviews which are becoming more valuable to current global ecological discussions.

Keywords: Santali Language, Olchiki Script, Cultural Resilience, Language Identity, Multilingual Education (MLE).

Introduction

Language is not just a set of words and rules; it is a dynamic knowledge system which forms, encodes, and carries human thought, social values and historical memory through the generations. Language is a crucial element and a main source of collective identity and historical continuity for indigenous communities around the world. The Santali language, a member of the Austroasiatic (Munda) language family, is a remarkable example of indigenous

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resistance in India. Santali is the language of the Santal people, with more than seven million speakers in the contiguous states of Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Assam, portions of Bangladesh and Nepal, and the Santal worldviews and social values, along with their rich oral culture. The adoption of the Olchiki script in the twentieth century transformed this oral tradition into a codified literary form, serving as a pivotal mechanism for strengthening the community's linguistic and cultural identity. Furthermore, the integration of Olchiki into contemporary educational and digital spheres functions as a resilient response to the pressures of linguistic assimilation and dominant regional scripts ([Jasimuddin, 2026](#)).

Traditionally, the preservation of the Santal cultural heritage has been entirely on a basis of oral tradition. This tradition includes sacred creation stories, community songs, and traditional judicial systems such as Manjhi-Parganait system. But its marginalization is due to the introduction of colonial administration and the post-colonial push to linguistic homogenization. The younger generation is under the threat of cultural alienation because of the systematic marginalization of Santali from the public space by the dominant regional languages. A significant milestone was the development of the Olchiki script in 1925, created by Pandit Raghunath Murmu, which offered an orthographic system specifically developed for the language to represent the unique phonetic characteristics of the language. This feat eventually led to the inclusion of Santali in the 92nd Amendment Act, 2003 of the Indian Constitution, which became part of the Eighth Schedule. The implementation of the Olchiki script has further served as a vital instrument for linguistic self-representation and political assertion, fortifying the community's cultural resilience against the homogenizing pressures of urbanization and mainstream assimilation ([Carrin, 2022](#); [Jasimuddin, 2026](#)). By establishing a unique orthography, the script has enabled the formalization of Santali literature and the expansion of its presence within educational institutions and digital media, thereby transforming it from a solely oral medium into a potent marker of modern identity ([Jasimuddin, 2026](#)). This shift represents more than mere linguistic preservation; it is a calculated socio-political strategy that allows the Santal community to articulate its distinctiveness and challenge the hegemony of dominant regional languages ([Mahana, 2020](#)). As the Santali people continue to navigate the complexities of contemporary societal change, understanding the interplay between script-based literacy, community agency, and cultural persistence becomes essential. This paper examines how these elements intersect to support the Santal identity, specifically addressing how the Olchiki script functions as a catalyst for political and cultural self-determination in an increasingly globalized landscape.

Even though the Constitution has made strides, the inclusion of Santali in formal educational systems is still slow and not uniform. The aim of this paper is to look into the position of Santali language in safeguarding indigenous cultural heritage through education. This research examines the structural challenges to the preservation of Santali, and the significance of institutionalization of the language in the education context for the preservation of Adivasiyat (indigenous identity) and its return to the Santali community.

Literature Review

The scholarship surrounding indigenous language revitalization and education is anchored in the foundational premise that mother-tongue instruction is central to both cognitive

development and cultural preservation. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) famously argued that denying indigenous children the right to education in their native language constitutes a form of "linguistic genocide," systematically dismantling their cultural identity and alienating them from their community roots. In the context of global subaltern education, Hornberger's (2003) continua of biliteracy framework demonstrates that literacy practices are most effective when they draw upon the learners' existing linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Focusing specifically on the Santali language, early documentation by Christian missionaries like P.O. Bodding (1922) provided valuable grammatical resources but often viewed the language through a colonial, Eurocentric lens. Contemporary indigenous scholars have challenged this perspective, reframing Santali not as a primitive dialect, but as a complex vehicle for a sophisticated, eco-centric philosophy. Mahapatra (1986) demonstrated that Santali oral literature holds deep ecological wisdom, encoding centuries of sustainable forestry and conservation practices that are easily lost when the language shifts to regional dominant tongues like Hindi or Bengali.

The historic invention of the Olchiki script by Pandit Raghunath Murmu represents a major area of study within South Asian sociolinguistics. Hembram (2012) notes that Olchiki was more than a system of writing; it was a political and psychological tool for unification, allowing a geographically scattered community to assert a unified identity. Recent assessments of Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MLE) in states like Odisha and Jharkhand reveal mixed results (Panda & Mohanty, 2009). While studies show that MLE programs significantly lower school dropout rates and boost cognitive participation among tribal students, researchers like Sonthagayan (2018) point out that these initiatives are frequently undermined by structural deficits. These include a severe shortage of trained Santali educators, unstandardized textbooks, and a lack of clear political will. This study is further grounded in the work of preceding studies that have investigated the direct relationship between formal language learning in the Olchiki and the retention of certain oral histories and the culture involved.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive research design to investigate the role of the Santali language in educational spaces. Given the subaltern nature of the subject, the methodology combines textual analysis with community-based policy evaluations through three primary approaches:

1. **Policy Analysis:** A systematic review of educational frameworks, including India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, state-level Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MLE) guidelines, and reports from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
2. **Curriculum and Textual Scrutiny:** An analysis of primary and secondary school textbooks printed in the Olchiki script in Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal to assess how accurately traditional folklore, ethics, and histories are integrated into standard curricula.

3. **Synthesis of Ethno-historiographical Case Material:** Drawing upon published narratives, documentation of village council meetings (*Manjhi Durup*), and oral testimonies from Santali language activists and educators.

The collected data was analysed using a thematic framework focused on linguistic human rights, subaltern agency, and cultural continuity. This approach allowed the study to contrast formal policy goals with the practical realities of classrooms in tribal areas.

The Epistemological Matrix: Oral Traditions and Cultural Preservation

The Santali language has a huge oral tradition which serves as the community's main library of knowledge. At the heart of this matrix lies the Binti, a long chant narrating the history of the universe, the migration of the ancestors of the Santals and the establishment of moral laws in marriage ceremonies and during big festivals. If the Santali is not passed from generation to generation in the formal classroom, this treasure trove of oral knowledge starts to decay. On the other hand, these traditions are passed along to young people through early education, and they will continue to have access to their community's special cultural wisdom. Within this framework, the act of writing functions as a critical strategy to counter epistemicide, enabling the community to reclaim authority over its historical narratives against the pressures of dominant, colonial-rooted knowledge systems (Hembrom, 2022).

The impact of a forced displacement of a tribal community by an industrial project goes well beyond the loss of livelihood, it is a profound disruption of cultural continuity. This is a deep trauma due to contrasting views of environmental resources. The indigenous Adivasiyat's understanding of land differs from the mainstream modernity view, which uses land only as a commodity that is immediately converted to financial capital; they see land as a sacred space that is deeply connected with their cultural identity. As such, when corporations or states invade such places, they do not just take control of land, they are destroying a whole epistemological infrastructure that includes ancestral spirits, community law, and collective memory. By leveraging indigenous knowledge as a central departure point, the community exercises vital agency, transforming resistance into a proactive strategy for reclaiming their historical and ecological consciousness. Within this sociolinguistic resilience framework, the Santali language operates as a mechanism for cultural continuity that effectively counters the 'cultural genocide' associated with forced displacement and land alienation. By codifying oral traditions into the Olchiki script, the Santali community establishes a robust platform for political assertion that mirrors broader global indigenous efforts to reclaim linguistic sovereignty against state-led assimilation (Carrin, 2022; Mahana, 2020). This proactive development of an orthographic infrastructure not only reclaims symbolic space but also serves to anchor collective memory in a durable, formal medium, thereby ensuring that the transmission of Adivasiyat remains resilient amidst the homogenizing pressures of contemporary modernization (Hembrom, 2022; Jasimuddin, 2026). Consequently, this linguistic fortification provides the necessary epistemic leverage for the community to maintain its distinct socio-cultural identity, even as it navigates the precarious complexities of state-integrated schooling and globalized digital environments.

Since these are seen as existential threats, cultural resilience takes the form of a collective determination to defend such places. Indigenous communities show that their ecological advocacy is in fact cultural self-defence, through progressive legislation such as the Forest Rights Act (FRA) or through organizing historic grassroots mobilizations and movements, that protecting their sacred geography is their necessary work to ensure they can continue to live in accordance with their culture for generations to come.

Cognitive and Psychological Empowerment via Mother-Tongue Instruction

If mother tongue is not used in classroom, it forms a psychological barrier for indigenous students, resulting in low self-esteem and high dropout rates. A child is required to learn complex thoughts and concepts, in addition to the decryption of an unfamiliar language, when a child enters a school where the regional language is spoken. (Zulu & Gumede, 2025)

This is being resolved by the use of mother-tongue instruction in Olchiki script which matches the child's home environment with the school environment. This way, a healthy sense of identity is developed instead of forcing assimilation of their background. Gravity of concepts is known to be better understood by students taught in their native language up to at least Grade 5, consistent with India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which encourages mother-tongue teaching in classrooms that have gained encouraging results in the case of Santali-medium classrooms. In addition, it reduces student alienation, and creates classrooms that are places for collaboration, not places for cultural domination. By fostering such inclusive pedagogies, the community effectively pivots from educational marginalization toward a model of cultural agency, where institutionalized literacy serves as both a tool for academic parity and a vital bastion for heritage conservation (Carrin, 2022). This paradigm shift, resonant with broader global indigenous movements aiming to reclaim linguistic sovereignty, transforms the formal learning environment into a site of active resistance against the erosion of traditional knowledge systems (Mahana, 2020). Consequently, the systematic integration of the Olchiki script into curricula does more than enhance cognitive performance; it empowers Santali youth to navigate contemporary academic landscapes without compromising their ontological foundations, thereby ensuring that their cultural identity remains dynamic and resilient against the persistent pressures of homogenizing modernization (Zulu & Gumede, 2025).

Ritual Reinvention and Digital Adivasiyat

This modern framework of cultural resilience in indigenous peoples is clearly visible in the creative integration of indigenous heritage in digital environments. For example, the oral literature and lore, which has traditionally been chanted by the village elders, e.g. the sacred Binti and Karam histories, is being stored and made accessible through podcasts, YouTube channels and digital archives carefully collected by tribal youth. This digital reclamation allows for the preservation of ancestral knowledge, ensuring that traditional narratives remain accessible to a globally dispersed community while simultaneously countering the potential for memory loss in the wake of displacement (Damodaran & Dasgupta, 2022).

Likewise, the local scripts that were used to teach in between village houses, such as the Olchiki (for Santali language) and Warang Chiti (for Ho language), have been transformed over time into technology for digital literacy by means of Unicode-based letter series; dedicated mobile

keyboard applications; and advanced digital typography. In addition, such eco-festivals, based on the sacred grove dances and ritual assemblies like Karam, Baha and Sohrai, have spread across the physical distances. These celebrations, though, are still alive today through the world's hyper-local broadcasts, digital photography exhibitions, and linked pan-tribal networks, which demonstrate how technology can help hold cultures together and not force them to assimilate. This digital proliferation effectively transforms social media into a crowdsourced repository, allowing the younger generation to bridge geographical and generational divides by documenting ancestral practices in real-time (Soren & Kipgen, 2025).

Conclusion

The Santali language is the core of the Santal identity, the history, ethical norms, and knowledge of the community about ecology. This study is an example of how language can be saved from the marginalization of the formal and informal educational system. The integration of the Olchiki script and the Santali oral literature into early childhood education and primary education is not merely about reducing school dropouts, it's about empowering indigenous youth by fostering their sense of identity and cultural pride.

These benefits can only be realised by a government, academic institutions and civil society that are not just symbolically supportive, but also provide structural support. This involves uniformizing learning materials of Olchiki and training bilingual teachers for the country, and creating a strong bilingual teacher-training program, and also digitizing Santali literature to engage the contemporary youth. The preservation of Santali language, through education, is not only a linguistic choice, but an important step towards decolonization and social justice. The conservation of the Santal language will ensure that the deep worldview of the Santal people will continue to add to the human story of the world.

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