

One Language, Many Scripts

By Boro Baski

(Translated from Bengali into English by Asha Baski)

With the joint effort of the Santals of Bangladesh and India, Wikipedia Foundation started Santali Wikipedia towards the beginning of August 2018. This is the first time in India that a tribal language has been included in online encyclopedia and with this more than a million Santali speaking people of India, Bangladesh and Nepal can exchange their ideas through their mother tongue. This is also the first joint venture of the Santals of India and Bangladesh.

At present, the encyclopedia contains articles on Pandit Raghunath Murmu, Santali language, Ol Chiki script and the important reference books on Santal life and culture. But till date the articles on Santals are written more in English than in Santali language indicating that the work has just begun.

After the inclusion of Santali language in the eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003, there have been many initiatives taken to promote the Santali language. This year the students have written all their papers in Santali using the Ol Chiki script in Madhyamik Examination. Shikha Mandy a Santal girl from West Midnapur became the first radio jockey in Santali. Dr. Uma Soren, Member of Parliament from Jhargram delivered a speech in Santali in the international parliamentary meet in UN, Geneva. The addition of Santali Wikipedia no doubt has helped Santali language gain worldwide recognition. However, it has also raised a debate on the preference of Ol Chiki in Santali Wikipedia.

Santali language is written in many scripts. Santals residing in different countries and states for obvious reasons use Debnagari, Bengali, Assamese, Nepali, Oriya and Roman script to exchange ideas and discuss Santali literature. Ol Chiki script invented by Pandit Raghunath Murmu is not known and used by many. Majority of Santali articles and books published in West Bengal and Bangladesh are written in Bengali script and their readers and writers are also more in number. Publications of research papers on Santali language too is more in English, Bengali and Debnagari script compared to Ol Chiki. How then can the sole use of Ol Chiki script be used in online Santali encyclopedia?

Manik Soren, one of the administrators of Santali Wikipedia said that, no script other than Ol Chiki had the Unicode required for registration as the main script. Santal identity and emotion is also best reflected through the Ol Chiki script. This authenticates its selection and acceptance in the making of Santali Wikipedia. Mr. Soren assures that Santali writings in other scripts shall be translated into Ol Chiki and included in the Santali Wikipedia.

Literary translation in itself surely has much value. But, is the very purpose of an encyclopedia not lost if it has to fully depend on translation? How much can the Santali language with its

traditionally varied scripts compromise to fulfill the technical demand for its inclusion in the open encyclopedia, is a matter of discussion. Considering any one script of prime importance based on community identity and emotion also belittles the literary works written in other scripts.

The non-Ol Chiki Santal writers are thus worried about the Santali Wikipedia.

In 2001 the Pabitra Sarkar Commission recommended government support to establish Ol-Chiki as the sole script of the Santals. It nevertheless did not issue any directive negating the use of other scripts to promote Santali language and literature either. Getting education through one's own choice of medium and script is a constitutional right. Santali writers have alleged that Santali books written in scripts other than Ol Chiki are not recommended for awards from the government. Beginning from the felicitation of Santal intellectuals in the annual functions of the Adivasi Welfare Department to the selection of books for Sahitya Academy Award, no script other than Ol Chiki is given preference in the selection and nomination procedure. Sadly Santali Wikipedia is also now included in the same category.

Sarada Prasad Kisku a Santali writer has written more than thirty books in the past thirty years. He is a victim of this favoritism and is of the opinion that the Santali books written in the past are records that portrayed the socio-economic condition of the Santals of that era. By discarding them we are depriving our future generation of knowing about their history and tradition which is a hindrance to the all round development of a community.

At present the Santals are divided into different fractions on the basis of script and religion and are utterly confused. Avoiding the narrow-mindedness and accepting all the scripts for writing Santali in the encyclopedia would not only increase the acceptance of the Wikipedia but would also retain its quality. The differences that exist among the Santals of different states with regard to script and religion could be minimized and fetch unity through language, art and literary discourse. Wikipedia is a symbol of openness. In giving importance to any particular script in the encyclopedia contradicts its own principle. It has also intensified the existing difference among the Santals. It would be commendable had the founder of Santali Wikipedia been sensitive to these issues.

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More writings by Dr. Boro Baski are found on the website of the Tribal Cultural Heritage in India website: <https://www.indiantribalheritage.org>