

## Promoting Tribal Languages in Education: A Case Study of Santali in Orissa

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**KEY WORDS** Minority languages in education; *Ol Chiki* implementation programmes; language planning and language acceptance.

**ABSTRACT** This paper discusses State education politics in view of minority language speakers within a dominant language group, taking the example of Santali in Orissa. A brief survey of national language policies shall outline the lingual hierarchy prevalent in post-Independence India. Next, Santali will be introduced as a comparatively privileged language amongst the tribal languages of Orissa and Chota Nagpur, the main reasons being its large number of speakers, its fairly developed literary status and a considerable resilience against absorption by neighbouring languages. The existence of an independent script for Santali, *Ol Chiki*, gives it further prestige. Urban pressure groups promote the language in education and communication as they consider the implementation of the Santali mother tongue in these fields as central for the consolidation of the language. The Santal community has a vast institutional network that promotes and organizes *Ol Chiki* teachers' training programmes and prepares teaching material, apart from pursuing a host of cultural and political affairs; yet, the feasibility and sustainability of these programmes is eventually depending on the cooperation of the State Government. In comparison to the activities of the Santal authorities in the educational field, parallel programmes for the promotion of tribal language speakers in primary education shall be outlined, launched from both government and non-government agencies in Orissa. The problems that have to be tackled with here can however only partly be reduced to specific "tribal" or "language" aspects, as they overlap in many ways with the deplorable state of primary education in remote rural areas nationwide, and therefore have to be addressed in a wider context of educational reforms. In the case of Santali, a highly controversial issue is added by the demand of the Santal elite that the Santali language should be taught through its own script *Ol Chiki* during the first stages of learning. Having presented certain perspectives of the various planning authorities, the paper turns to the woes of the learners and discusses several aspects that explain the lack of acceptance of mother tongue promotion programmes among the target groups. The question may be asked in how far these programmes establish a further marginalisation of the concerned groups by impeding their competitiveness on nationwide levels. General observations on the parents' and learners' preference for prestige languages in education round off the findings, pointing to the dwindling prestige of the regional languages and mother tongues in their competition with Hindi and English in the long run. Since the neighbouring state of Jharkhand, which has a similar percentage of

tribal population as Orissa, is thought to be a model state for the promotion of tribal affairs, comparative glimpses at the present and envisaged status of tribal languages in the educational system there shall be included.

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