

To: Ken Whistler, Michael Everson, and Rick McGowan
From: D. Anderson
Date: 9. December, 2002
Re: Comments on Ol Chiki/Summary of Report from West Bengal

L2/02-456

I recently received three communications from groups regarding encoding for the Santali language:

1. a 25-page letter dated 1. November from Mr. H. Hansdak and Mr. E. Hembrom, both from the Santali Literary and Cultural Society, Kolkata, India,¹ which gave his group's general objections to the effort to encode Ol Chiki, a history of the Roman Script, evidence for deficiencies of the Ol Chiki script, appendices ("Examples of the Santali Phonemes," diacritical marks used in Roman Santali, Unicode values for letters and diacritical marks, a lengthy bibliography of 130-items listing Santali books in Roman alphabet [including dictionaries and grammars, publications on Santali culture and traditions, general literature and textbooks, ecclesiastical literature]), a Xerox copy of the *Report of the Committee on Santali Language (Government of West Bengal)*, May 31, 2002, and several issues of Santali magazines in the Roman script;
2. an email message sent 30 Nov. (now L2/02-443) from Mr. Divyendu Tudu Raska and Mr. Archer Anthony Marandi, both from the Tribal and Other Rural Cultural House (TORCH),² which was identical to the letter from the Santali Literary and Cultural Society, except for a new item, iv, which discussed Ol Chiki, its proponents, and the differences between the language spoken in northern and southern Santali-speaking areas of India, arguing that Ol Chiki represents southern Santali, which has "deviated" from Santali as prescribed in the grammars, and that an adoption of a standard is needed (perhaps selecting the form of the language as spoken in Godda, Jharkhand or that taught in Santal Parganas, Jharkhand as a model);
3. a letter dated 12. November, 2002, from Dr. D. Mardi of the All India Santal Welfare and Cultural Society (AISWACS) of New Delhi,³ which included appendices as in #1 above, except that a second 130-item list of Santali books in Roman script was added.

¹ Mr. Hanuk Hansdak, General Secretary, Santali Literary and Cultural Society, and Mr. Ezicheal Hembrom, President, Santali, Literary and Cultural Society. Correspondence address given: Mr. T. Hembrom, Bishop's College, 224, A.J.C. Bose Road, Kolkata – 700 017; email: lawhembrom@yahoo.com.in.

² Mr. Divyendu Tudu Raska, President of Tribal and Other Rural Cultural House (TORCH), and Mr. Archer Anthony Marandi, General Secretary, TORCH, Kalapathar, P.O. – Kalapathar, VIA – Chakulia, DIST – East Singhbhum (Jharkhand), India.

³ Dr. D. Mardi, Honorary General Secretary, ALL INDIA Santal Welfare and Cultural Society, 40/11 DDA Flats, Sarojini Nagar, New Delhi – 23, India

The 25-page letter and email communication voiced protest over the encoding of Ol Chiki on the grounds that the Ol Chiki script is a new script (compared to the use of the Roman script for Santali), only a small number of the total Santal population have any knowledge of the script, and basic materials in Ol Chiki are missing. The email message from Mr. Raska and Mr. Marandi also mentioned that the push for Ol Chiki has come from Santals who reside in the southern Santal-speaking area of India, which they feel will serve to divide the entire Santal community. The letter from Dr. D. Mardi requested that the Roman script Santali be encoded, since Roman script has been in long use for Santali and he felt that encoding the Roman script would help spread literature about the Santals to both Santals and non-Santals throughout the world. He said that his group was in support of the reasons cited by the Santali Literary and Cultural Society (though Ol Chiki was not explicitly mentioned).

Report of the Committee on Santali Language

The letter from the Santali Literary and Cultural Society had included a lengthy Xeroxed report (219 pp.), entitled *Report of the Committee on Santali Language (Government of West Bengal)*, dated 31. May 2002. This report was commissioned by the Government of West Bengal in order to determine: (a) whether it was feasible to teach Santali from primary school up to the college and university, (b) if it would be viable to teach Santali in the Ol Chiki script in the secondary and higher secondary schools, and (c) if Santali in the Ol Chiki script could be introduced into college and university curricula. The Committee of six (which included two Santals) conducted their work between August 2001 and May 2002. As part of their work, a questionnaire regarding Ol Chiki was distributed to Santals. The Committee also met with thirty organizations, linguists, and individuals which have been involved in Santali, made site visits to eleven districts in West Bengal to meet with members of the Santal community, and also visited two universities in the neighboring state of Jharkhand that currently offer college degrees in the Santali language. Since this recent study investigated the issues involved in the Ol Chiki debate for West Bengal, I am summarizing the findings below, as relevant to the discussion for the encoding of Ol Chiki.

Background

Santali is an Afro-Asiatic language spoken by approximately 6 million people worldwide. Santals live primarily in eastern India (West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa, Bihar, Assam, and Tripura), but are also found in Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. The number of Santal speakers in India is 5.7 million (1994 Census), but it is not a majority tongue in any one state and is not a recognized state language anywhere in India. Like many other tribal languages, it was not regularly taught in the schools, instead students must learn the language of the state in which they reside.

Santali is written in various scripts. Roman (Latin) was used already by Christian missionaries in the late nineteenth century for Santali, and after Independence, the language has been written in the scripts of the various states: Bengali (West Bengal), Oriya (Orissa), and Devanagari (Bihar and Jharkhand). In the 1920s, a script was created for Santali, Ol Chiki (or Ol Cemet) by the late Ragunath Murmu from Orissa. This script

has been promoted by various groups, perhaps most actively by Adivasi Socio-Educational and Cultural Association (ASECA).

In 1973, a conference was held in Pakur, Bihar (now the state of Jharkhand) on the “Protection, Preservation and Development of Santali Language, Literature and Culture” and called for the use of the Roman script, but gave its blessings to Ol Chiki, “so that it should grow into full maturity and perfection in full course.”

Ol Chiki was approved in 1979 as the official script of the Santali language by the Government of West Bengal. There were efforts to print and distribute Ol Chiki books to the primary schools in the 1980s in language, literature, natural science, history, geography, and mathematics (to the Class III level in all except mathematics, which had materials up to Class IV). The report from the Committee includes a document citing figures of 59,600 for the number of copies of books that were published in Ol Chiki for primary education from 1983-1992 (p. 210), though these were not distributed well. A training session was held in 1980s for primary teachers in the Ol Chiki script in various districts of West Bengal. The results of Ol Chiki instruction in West Bengal in the 80s and 90s was deemed, in general, to not have been a success, due to lack of enough properly trained teachers, the fact that many teachers were unwilling to travel to distant Santal majority areas, and the reluctance on the part of the teachers to teach Santal children a script that would not assist the children in the wider Bengali-writing/speaking world once they left school (p. 47).

Following West Bengal’s lead, the Government of Orissa decided in 1991 to teach Ol Chiki on an experimental basis in thirty primary schools. Teaching in Ol Chiki began in 1992. A report was prepared in 2001 and it cited the following problems in this experiment: the absence of any evaluation and follow-up to the teaching of Ol Chiki, shortage of books (with no books supplied from 1995 on), the requirement that books had to be purchased (not true of other subjects), and supplementary Ol Chiki materials were needed. A letter from the Academy of Tribal Dialects and Culture in May 2002 reports that currently Santali is not taught in the primary, secondary, higher secondary, or university level in Orissa, nor is it used as a medium of instruction for other subjects (p. 190). (Comment: The report does not specify when instruction ended in Ol Chiki.)

Still, interest in Ol Chiki has increased of late in West Bengal, perhaps aided by the workings of the Committee. In 2001, the district of Birbhum ordered Ol Chiki textbooks for use in 15 schools. Ol Chiki is also taught in informal centers in West Bengal and apparently also in schools taught by the LAMP organization, which runs 42 schools with 1425 students, aged 4-8.

Recent Interest in Ol Chiki

Ol Chiki has lately become identified with the Santal language, for the Ol Chiki script could be used for the Santali language in any state. This has become an emotionally charged issue; Ol Chiki has become a kind of cultural icon for the Santals, being promoted as a symbol of identity and pride. Note that significant Bengali and Roman script materials still exist and are printed, and Devanagari is used to teach Santali at two

universities in the neighboring state of Jharkand. In the state of Orissa, the Oriya script is used for Santali.

In the Committee visits to the eleven districts of West Bengal, majorities in favor of Ol Chiki showed up at all the meetings (Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia, Medinipur, Malda, Dakshin Dinajpur, Uttar Dinajpur, and Hooghly), with the exceptions being Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri in the north, where Roman was more familiar. The Committee noted in their summary of the district visits, “[i]t almost seemed to the Committee at moments that Ol Chiki was being invested with a miraculous power, as if with Ol Chiki all problems would vanish...” (p. 33).

The questionnaire distributed by the Committee to Santali speakers showed an overwhelming response in support of Ol Chiki (86%) vs. Roman (14%), of the 10,976 responses received. The breakdown did show a stronger pro-Ol Chiki response rate from the southern districts (Midnapore, Hooghly, Purulia, and Burdwan), which totaled 7472. (Comment: Still, 10,976 is a fairly small response out of an estimated 1.7 million Santali speakers in West Bengal [the 1981 census, p. 74] and respondents must have been literate [or used a literate intermediary] in order to fill out the questionnaire, so this will give a skewed result. The report did not give further details on how the questionnaire was distributed or the breakdown of the answers to the eleven questions asked, only a summary listing in a chart with the heading “Opinions in Support of the Following Scripts” [p. 65].)

Outstanding Issues

The Committee found a fairly universal agreement amongst intellectuals and members of the Santal community that teaching Santal children in their native tongue in the primary schools was very important, since it was felt that learning the Bengali language first presents a handicap to Santali-speaking children. The dropout rate of Santals, particularly in the higher grades, has been one cause of concern, and the language issue has brought up as a contributing factor. The difficulty was in determining which script to use, when to start Santali instruction and how to integrate it into the school system (if Santali is the first language to be taught, should English or Bengali be offered next?), and how to get enough teachers. Another question arose: If Santali instruction is made available in schools with a majority of Santali speakers, what about schools where Santal children are not in the majority?

Pro-Bengali argument: The need for students to have fluency in the language of the home state (Bengali) was also viewed as very useful by many academics and some members of the Santal community, since this could help in later employment opportunities and communication in general in state in which they reside.

Pro-Roman argument: The advantage to Roman script is that it would offer a script that is used for many languages worldwide (and comes with fewer obstacles that exist in India for Devanagari) (p. 180)

The email letter (L2/02-443) raised a few points regarding geography and religion that were not particularly stressed in the report. I cannot determine how critical these issues are to the argument, but repeat them here. Ol Chiki was described as a script representing the south; the creator of the script came from Orissa. The Roman script is more familiar in the northern Jalpaiguri district and Darjeeling. The Santals were described as being more dispersed in the north (p. 29), where contacts with other tribes is more common, particularly with Oraons, who use the Roman script. The Christian missionary movement also used the Roman script, and this group was prevalent in the north. Ties of the Ol Chiki movement to religious groups (especially Hindu organizations) was suggested in the email message, but this wasn't evident in the Committee's report.

The meetings with ten linguists and other the Santal intellectuals reflected support of Santali language instruction and the Ol Chiki script (p. 7). In the meetings with eight select NGOs, non-Santali individuals concerned with the Santali community, experts in Santali language, and educators, the most common refrain was for the need for additional printed materials in Ol Chiki and properly trained teachers.⁴ The group in general was wary of the high emotion being generated by the Ol Chiki issue and stressed that the teaching of the language was the most important factor, the script being not as critical. No single consensus on the script arose, and various script options were put forward for teaching Santali:

- Continue with Bengali and/or Roman script for Santali, since more material is needed for Ol Chiki (Dr. Animesh Kanti Pal, retired prof. of Bengali, Midnapore College);
- Continue Bengali and Roman, adding in Ol Chiki eventually (Dr. Lulabi Pattanayak, Visva-Bharati University);
- Continue Bengali in primary and secondary, with Ol Chiki as a higher degree so teachers can be trained (Dr. Ranjit Kumar Battacharya, Director of the Anthropological Survey of India);
- Continue Bengali only (Dr. Arun Ghosh, Bengali Dept., Burdwan University)
- Continue Bengali but include Ol Chiki (Sri Bhabesh Moitra, former President of the Primary and Secondary Boards of Education in West Bengal).

Recommendations of the Committee

(Comment: I am not aware of how or whether these recommendations have actually been implemented as yet, but the inclusion of Santali in the Ol Chiki script is prominent.)

Recommendation 1

"The Santali language may be used as the medium of instruction for students in either (1) Ol Chiki script, or (2) any other script in which Santals have been reading and writing their language in this state."

Recommendation 2

"A continuous support may be given to the Ol Chiki script so that it can, if it may, gradually replace the other scripts in which Santali is written."

⁴ Drs. Pal, Pattanayak, Battacharya, and Sri Moitra.

Recommendation 3

“Santali knowing teachers may be provided a thorough training in the Ol Chiki script...”

Recommendation 4

“A gradual accommodation may be made of the other languages along with their scripts at the Primary level and the following accommodation plan may be followed...”

(a chart was included, showing 100% Santali instruction and texts in Class I; 80% Santali instruction and texts in Class II, but with 20% alphabet of Bengali and simple sentences, and Introductory English; and increasingly more Bengali and English incorporated in Classes III and IV, with a slight reduction in percentage devoted to Santali instruction and texts)

Recommendation 5

“Santali may be retained as an option for the compulsory language subject at both Secondary and Higher Secondary levels, but studied in school in an available script including Ol Chiki, the medium of instruction being Santali...”

Recommendation 6

“Santali Language, Literature and Culture may be made available as a subject of study in some of the colleges under Vidyasagar, Burdwan and North Bengal Universities where there is a sizeable Santal population. It may be taught in any available script including Ol Chiki and in any available language other than Santali...”

Recommendations 7

Establishment of a Santali Akademi for the study of the Santali language, literature, culture and script as well as school texts.

Recommendation 8

“Steps may be taken to open all-Santal Primary schools for exclusive instruction in Santali”

Recommendation 9

“Recommendations 1-8 above may be implemented for an initial period of 8 years at the end of which a thorough review may be made of the measures adopted.”

The Committee didn't visit other states with Santal populations, such as Orissa, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Tripura, or Assam, where Santal populations are also found. The Committee expressed the hope that the Santal leadership would sit down and resolve the issue of a common script.

Groups Involved in the Ol Chiki Issue

a. Adibasi Socio-Educational and Cultural Association

West Bengal, 14/1, Kundu Lane, Bhabanipur, Kolkata - 25

The most ardent supporters of Ol Chiki, which it identifies as “phonetically perfect.” ASECA has taught—and continues to teach--Ol Chiki in non-formal centers in West

Bengal. ASECA started in 1960s and now has members in Assam, Bihar, Orissa, and Nepal, and over 150 branches in West Bengal. (p. 127).

b. All India Santali Writers' Association
Model School Road, Jhargram, Medinipur

This group is more moderate than ASECA, but is in support of Ol Chiki, with Ol Chiki at the outset, then English (in the Roman script), and finally Bengali.

c. Santali Literary and Cultural Society
11/1, Shariff Lane, Kolkata – 16.

This Society is in support of the Roman script (see #1 at the beginning of this document).

d. Santali Academy
52E, Beninandan Street, Kolkata – 25.

This group argues that Bengali should be used as a medium, then it should switch to Roman, which would be more suitable as a common Santali script both nationally and internationally.

e. Santali Bhasa Morcha (SBM)

A pro-Ol Chiki group.

f. All India Santal Welfare and Cultural Society
40/11, DDA Flats, Sarojini Nagar, New Delhi – 23

This Society wrote a letter in support of the “Roman Script Santali” encoding in Unicode. It stated it was in agreement with the justifications put forward by the Santali Literary and Cultural Society. (Comment: No mention of Ol Chiki was included in the letter, sent 12. Nov. 2002)