

Pandit Raghunath Murmu's Epoch-Making Invention: The Ol Chiki Script

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Until the nineteenth century, the Santal community- a cohesive community in eastern zone had no written language and knowledge was transmitted orally from one generation to other. Later on, European researchers and Christian missionaries started to use Odia, Bengali and Roman scripts to document the Santali language. The invention of Ol Chiki script by Pandit Raghunath Murmu was an epoch-making invention that enriched the cultural identity of the tribal Santal community. It also provided appropriate writing symbols to the Santhals. Pandit Raghunath Murmu first conceptualized the script in 1920s and gave it the final shape in 1940s.

Though a recent phenomenon, the invention of the script has been associated with some myths and play of supernatural powers. Moreover, the characters of the script are not merely an imitation of those current in other languages around. The alphabet is also quite limited in size consisting of only 30 characters and is convenient for both printing and writing.

Pandit Raghunath Murmu was born in Dandbese village of Mayurbhanj district on 5th May 1905. His father, Nandlal Murmu, was a village head and his paternal uncle was a Munsif in the court of Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanjdeo

in the erstwhile Mayurbhanj State. As per the prevalent traditional social rituals of the Santal community (also known as the *Kherwal* community), he was named *Chunu Murmu* soon after his birth. However, later the priest, who performed his naming ceremony, changed his name from *Chunu Murmu* to *Raghunath Murmu*.

When Pandit Raghunath Murmu was eight-years-old, he got admitted to an Odia medium school. A little child is always obsessed towards his mother language so as Raghunath. He told his father to admit him in a Santali medium school. Then his father told him that there's no letters and scripts of 'Santali' language. This incident had a indelible impact in his life.

Later on when he took admission in Baripada High School for further study, his mind was stuck with the thoughts of having his own language and script. During the school vacation, when he used to visit home at his native village Dandbose, he used to spend his time alone roaming in a nearby jungle, named *Kapi-Buru*. Generally, no one ventured into that isolated Kapi-Buru jungle. He would often go off into *Kapi-Buru* with his notebook and pen. It is said that he created the Ol Chiki script at *Kapi-Buru* in 1925.

After his matriculation in 1928, he started a job as an apprentice at the *Baripada Power House*. Later, then Dewan of the Mayurbhanj State sent him to Serampore (near Kolkata) to get some industrial training. After acquiring the necessary technical education, he was appointed as a teacher at the *Baripada Technical Institute*.

After a brief stint in the technical institute, he joined as a teacher at the *Badamtolia Primary School* in 1933. It is believed that sometimes he used the Ol Chiki script while teaching in the class. One of his students, who happened to be the son of a carpenter carved out the letters he wrote on a wooden chapati roller. After applying the ink on that roller, if someone rolls that roller on a paper letters would be printed on that paper. The first book, named *Horh Sereng*, in Ol Chiki script was published in 1936.

The Santhal tradition has also been documented by Pandit Raghunath Murmu. According to him, the Santhali personality is characterized by two major virtues, namely, the willingness to sacrifice everything for the community and a love of austere living. These qualities he has sought to describe in two plays written by him. These two plays are *Bidu Chandan* and *Kerwar Bir*. These were published both in Odia and Bengali in early 1940s (Mahapatra, 1983).

Pandit Raghunath Murmu published his first play *Bidu-Chandan* in 1942. In the aforesaid novel, he described how Bidu (god) and Chandan (Goddess) who came to earth as human beings invented the Ol Chiki script in order to express their love for each other using written Santali. This book was exhibited in a function at Baripada where the Maharaja of Mayurbhanj

State was also invited. The Maharaja understood the worth of this newly invented script.

During this period, he used to stay in the house of Sudhir Majhi at the Bhutadi village. That place is now known as *Master Bari*. There was also a stage near his house. The first show of his play *Bidu Chandan* was staged there. During that period, he used to visit different santal villages in Mayurbhanj and adjoining Jharkhand and taught the use of his invented Ol Chiki script. In this way, the Ol Chiki script reached out to a large number of Santali peoples. People loved him as a teacher and started calling him *Pandit Raghunath Murmu*.

During the independence movement, he got branded as a revolutionary when he was campaigning for his invented Ol Chiki script. He escaped to his wife's native village and stayed hidden. He also continued his work of developing Santali literature using Ol Chiki script during that time.

After India achieved her independence in 1947, all princely-ruled states got integrated into India. During this time, the demand for a separate *Jharkhand* state for Santali-speaking tribal people was also gaining momentum. Being an ardent supporter of this *Jharkhand Movement*, an arrest warrant was also issued in his name when the demand for *Jharkhand* was raised at the Baripada Tribal Convention. In the meantime, he left Baripada and stayed at *Karandin Sarjom Tola* village (near Jamshedpur). During that period he started working for the *Tata Steel* in Jamshedpur.

He and his friend Sadhu Murmu together started spreading the knowledge about Ol Chiki script there. He used to teach villagers how to

read and write the Ol Chiki alphabet, during his travel to many places. He also wrote different books *Parsi Poha*, *Parsi Itun*, *Ranarh*, *Alkha*, *Ol Chemed* etc for learning Ol Chiki.

In 1956, the *All India Sarna Conference* (People who worship nature are called Sarna) held in Jamshedpur bestowed him with the title *Guru Gomke* (the great teacher). He was also honoured by Mayurbhanj State Adivasi Mahasabha with the title “Guru Gomke”. Later on with the help of a printing machine gifted by his brother-in-law, Pandit Raghunath Murmu started printing his books in the Ol Chiki script. Under his direction, the weekly magazine *Saagen Saakam* was printed and distributed to spread the Santali literature. *Baba Tilka Majhi Library* was also established under his guidance.

Pandit Raghunath Murmu visited many santal-dominated areas in West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, and Odisha and taught people about the use of Ol Chiki alphabet (Au-Ote-O-Aung) in phonetics through his songs. Gradually, he was able to convince people about the necessity of Ol Chiki script. He also started a non-political organization named *ASECA (Adivasi Socio-Educational and Cultural Association)* to organize meetings at different places where everyone can share their own ideas. In his life time, Pandit Raghunath wrote more than 150 plays, short stories, novels and poems in Ol Chiki script.

His most notable work is the invention of Ol Chiki script itself. However, there are also some other notable works regarding the Santali literature and script. These works are - Ol Chemed (primary syllabus of Ol Chiki), Parsi Poha (essential elements of Ol Chiki), Dare Ge

Dhon (drama), Sidu Kanhu (patriotic drama), Bidu Chandan (famous love drama), Kherwal Bir (patriotic drama), Hital (scripture of evolution of the Earth and human being of Kherwals myth), Hor Sereng (Santali literature songs), Ronor (Santali grammar), Elkha (Santali mathematics). His first book is the *Hor Sereng* and his first book on play is the *Bidu Chandan*. His last book is *Rah Andorh*.

Pandit Raghunath Murmu who passed away in 1982 had been bestowed with many awards and rewards for his Santali literacy works. He got many awards for his path-breaking work in Santali literature and script. Ranchi University awarded him the honorable Doctorate degree for his contribution to Santali literature. Odisha Sahitya Academy also awarded him for his literary contribution. Prof. Martin Orens, a distinguished anthropologist of the University of California USA, called him a *Theologian (Spiritual Guru)*. Mr. M.D. Julius Tigga called him a *Great Inventor and Dramatist*.

The emergence of Ol Chiki script not only gave a new identity to the Santal community but also inspired other tribal communities to create their own script. As a result, many tribal communities in India are now able to develop their own script. Significantly, the Government of India has included the Santali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India on 22 December 2003. After that, many state governments of India, specifically Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Bihar gave recognition to the Santali language. The government of Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal included the Santali language as a medium of instruction at the primary and high school levels in the santal-dominated area. Many universities and colleges of Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal are

presently offering courses on the Santali literature using the Ol Chiki script.

The Odisha Government considering the rich contribution of Pandit Raghunath Murmu for the propagation of Santali language, culture and creation of Ol Chiki script has approved the birthday of Pandit Raghunath as a holiday. In addition to this, the medical college in Mayurbhanj district has also been named after this luminary.

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