

The Third Moment: Ol Chiki, Adivasi (Power) And The (Unfinished Grammar Of) Indian Nationhood

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Abstract- The election of Droupadi Murmu to Rashtrapati Bhavan and Mohan Charan Majhi to the Chief Minister's office in Odisha in close succession has unsettled the established grammar of Indian politics. That both leaders belong to the Santal community is not a footnote to democratic history; it is a punctuation mark—a full stop to one era and a comma before the next. This conjuncture signals a shift from marginal presence to institutional visibility for Adivasi communities within the political order of India. The emerging phase is not merely symbolic but indicative of a deeper rearticulation of power, identity, and representation. It suggests that the next chapter of Indian democracy may increasingly be shaped through the linguistic and cultural frameworks long excluded from it. In this sense, that next era will be written in Ol Chiki.

Keywords: Language, Adivasi, Politics, Santal, Nationhood, India

I. INTRODUCTION

The ascent of Droupadi Murmu to Rashtrapati Bhavan and Mohan Charan Majhi to the Chief Minister's office in Odisha marks a decisive shift in the symbolic and political architecture of India. However, both leaders emerge from the Santal community is not incidental nor a mere demographic coincidence. It signals the reconfiguration of representational power in a polity where Adivasi communities have historically been subjects of governance rather than its authors.

This moment can be read as a rupture in the *longue durée* of Indian democracy. A transition from subaltern invisibility to institutional presence. It does not simply expand participation; it alters the terms of political imagination. When individuals from marginalized communities occupy the apex of constitutional authority, they do more than representing themselves recalibrate what is thinkable within the democratic order.

Therefore, to describe this as a “punctuation mark” is analytically apt. It is a full stop to an era in which Adivasi existence was acknowledged primarily through the idioms of welfare, protection, and development. It is also a comma, an opening into a new phase where Adivasi agency asserts itself within the grammar of the state. This is not yet a complete sentence; it is an ongoing construction.

In this emerging phase, Ol Chiki conceived by Guru Gomke Pandit Raghunath Murmu acquires renewed significance. It is no longer only a script of cultural preservation; it becomes an instrument of political articulation and epistemic assertion.

To say that the next era “will be written in Ol Chiki” is not merely metaphorical. It gestures toward a deeper transformation: the possibility that governance, law, and public discourse may increasingly accommodate the linguistic worlds of those who were historically excluded from them. This moment must be approached with analytical caution. The symbolic breakthroughs do not automatically translate into structural transformation.

The persistence of inequalities in land rights, education and access to state institutions reminds us that representation at the top does not dissolve marginality at the base. What it does, is create a new terrain of struggle one in which claims to language, identity, and sovereignty can be articulated with greater legitimacy.

Here, the use of “third moment” is neither culmination nor closure. It is a transitional conjuncture where the grammar of Indian nationhood is being revised but not yet rewritten in full. Whether Ol Chiki becomes a medium of substantive governance or remains a powerful symbol depends

on how this moment is institutionalised in policy, pedagogy, and everyday state practice.

II. A PEOPLE, A SCRIPT, AND A SILENCE BROKEN

The Santals constitute one of the largest Adivasi communities in South Asia, with a population exceeding seven million across Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar, and Assam. Their language, Santali, belongs to the Austroasiatic languages' family, situating it historically prior to the consolidation of Indo-Aryan and Dravidian linguistic dominance in the subcontinent.

However, this temporal depth, did not translate into symbolic or institutional power; rather, Santali remained structurally marginalized within the linguistic hierarchies that accompanied state formation, colonial administration, and missionary expansion.

For centuries, Santal society sustained itself through a robust oral epistemology. The knowledge, history and cosmology were transmitted through performative and mnemonic practices like ritual invocations of bonga spirits, seasonal agricultural cycles such as Erok sim, and collective dance formations like dong. This was not an absence of literacy but an alternative regime of knowledge production what anthropologists would term an oral civilisation with its own internal logic of preservation and transmission.

The absence of an indigenous script must be read not as a deficit but as a consequence of structural misfit. There are scripts such as Roman, Bengali, Odia, and Devanagari, introduced through colonial and regional hegemonies, functioned as imperfect linguistic technologies. They failed to adequately encode the phonological system of Santali particularly its glottal stops, nasalization patterns and vowel distinctions thereby producing phonetic distortion and epistemic erasure.

In sociolinguistic terms, this represents a classic case of linguistic subordination, where dominant scripts reshape or suppress the expressive capacity of subordinate languages.

It is within this context of marginality and partial articulation that Guru Gomke Pandit Raghunath Murmu intervened in 1925 with the creation of the Ol Chiki script. His intervention can be interpreted as an act of semiotic decolonization, a deliberate effort to realign language with its own phonetic and cultural structures.

The script's thirty characters, reportedly inspired by elements of nature, the human body, and everyday material life, reflect an attempt to ground writing in the phenomenological world of the Santals. Rather than importing an external symbolic system, Murmu encoded a script that resonated with indigenous perception and cognition.

Thus, the emergence of Ol Chiki marks a critical shift from orality to script-based identity formation, not as a rupture but as a strategic adaptation. It enabled the Santals to enter literate modernity on their own terms, transforming language into a site of resistance, cultural reproduction, and political assertion.

Guru Gomke Pandit Raghunath Murmu, born in 1905 in Dandbose village of Mayurbhanj (then a princely state) emerged from within the socio-political margins of colonial India, where Adivasi communities were structurally positioned outside the dominant circuits of power, literacy, and state recognition.

As the son of a village headman, he occupied an intermediary social location embedded in indigenous authority structures yet exposed to external institutional influences such as missionary education. His early schooling in Odia languages external to Santali can be analytically understood as a form of linguistic hegemony, where dominant regional languages functioned as instruments of cultural assimilation.

This experience of being educated outside his mother tongue exemplifies what sociologists identify as symbolic violence (in the Bourdieusian sense), wherein the imposition of an alien linguistic order delegitimizes indigenous epistemologies and everyday life worlds. For Murmu, this dislocation became the constitutive rupture that informed his lifelong intellectual and cultural project.

The invention of the Ol Chiki script in his early twenties was not merely a linguistic innovation but a counter-hegemonic intervention. By naming it “Ol” (writing) and “Chiki” (learning/script), Murmu anchored the system within Santali semantic universes, resisting the epistemic dependence on external scripts like Devanagari, Odia, Bengali, or Roman.

Unlike derivative orthographies, Ol Chiki was an autochthonous semiotic system, emerging from within Santal cosmology and material culture. Its graphic forms, often interpreted as reflecting elements of Santal ecology and visuality, can be read as an attempt to inscribe indigenous ontology into written form.

Murmu’s pedagogical practices written on copper-graphite mold, using a hand-cranked press to publish Ol Chiki (1931) and travelling across villages in Odisha, West Bengal, and Bihar (now Jharkhand) for literacy mobilization. This was not literacy as state policy but literacy as cultural activism, aimed at reclaiming narrative authority and producing a literate public within the Santal community.

His efforts exemplify what can be termed vernacular modernity, where modern forms like print and script are appropriated to sustain rather than erase, indigenous identity. His literary works, especially Bidu Chandan functioned as cultural texts of legitimation, embedding Ol Chiki within Santal mytho-historical consciousness. Through drama, poetry, and textbooks, Murmu did not simply create a script; he cultivated a discursive field in which Santali language, history, and identity could be articulated on their own terms.

The gradual institutional recognition of Ol Chiki introduced into school curricula in Odisha (1975) and later in Jharkhand (1981) reflects the slow incorporation of subaltern cultural forms into state structures. This delayed recognition underscores the dynamics of cultural marginalization and subsequent accommodation where indigenous knowledge systems are often acknowledged only after sustained struggle.

The conferment of the title “Guru Gomke” by Jaipal Singh Munda in 1956 at the All-India Sarna Conference further situates Murmu within a broader Adivasi political awakening, linking linguistic revival with emerging forms of ethnic consciousness and political mobilization. Murmu passed away on 1 February 1982, before Ol Chiki received constitutional recognition. Its later inclusion in the 8th schedule can be interpreted as a posthumous institutional validation of a long-standing subaltern intellectual project.

His life’s work represents a critical case of how language, script and literacy can function as instruments of identity reconstruction, resistance, and cultural sovereignty among indigenous communities.

The Constitutional Moment: 22 December 2003

On 22 December 2003, the Parliament of India enacted the 92nd Constitutional Amendment Act incorporate Santali into the 8th schedule of the Constitution of India (in 2004). With this inclusion, Santali became the 22nd scheduled language marking a decisive shift from cultural marginality to formal linguistic citizenship.

This transition represents the movement of a language from the domain of vernacular existence to that of institutional legitimacy. The 8th schedule is functions as an apparatus of state-mediated recognition enabling access to bureaucratic, educational, and communicative infrastructures.

Languages included within it gain eligibility for use in competitive examinations, state correspondence and curricular frameworks. This distinction between a language that circulates within community life and one that is recognized by the state captures the transformation of Santali into a bearer of symbolic capital (in Bourdieusian terms) where linguistic identity acquires measurable institutional value.

Subsequent recognition by states with substantial Santal populations West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha and Bihar further illustrates the process of multi-scalar incorporation. It indicates that identity claims articulated at the community level are gradually absorbed into both regional and national governance

structures. This layered recognition reflects the interplay between ethnic assertion and administrative accommodation.

A particularly significant moment in this trajectory occurred in December 2025, when the Constitution itself was translated into Santali using the Ol Chiki script. This act can be read as a form of epistemic inclusion wherein the foundational legal text of the republic becomes accessible within the linguistic framework of a historically marginalized community.

It signals not merely translation, but the extension of constitutional subjectivity, the ability to engage with the state's highest normative document in one's own language. The symbolic culmination of this process was visible in February 2026 Honourable president of India Droupadi Murmu inaugurated the centenary celebrations of the Ol Chiki script at the Dr.

Ambedkar International Centre. The issuance of a commemorative ₹100 coin and a postage stamp further exemplify what may be termed rituals of state recognition symbolic gestures through which the nation retrospectively acknowledges and incorporates subaltern histories into its official narrative.

These developments illustrate a broader sociological process: the gradual reconfiguration of the Indian nation-state from a homogenizing linguistic order toward a more plural and negotiated cultural polity. The recognition of Santali and Ol Chiki does not erase historical marginalization become a significant moment in the ongoing struggle for linguistic justice, cultural dignity, and political visibility among Adivasi communities.

The First Moment: Language and the Making of States

To understand the contemporary conjuncture, one must return to the foundational moment when language became a principle of territorial governance in India. The early postcolonial state was marked by a deep ambivalence toward linguistic federalism. The Dhar Commission rejected language as a viable basis for state formation, reflecting anxieties that linguistic reorganisation might fracture the fragile unity of the newly independent nation.

This caution was reiterated by the JVP Committee comprising Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Pattabhi Sitaramayya deferred linguistic reorganisation while acknowledging its political inevitability. What ultimately transformed hesitation into policy was not deliberation but embodied protest.

The death of Potti Sreeramulu in December 1952 following a prolonged hunger strike, catalysed mass mobilization and compelled the creation of Andhra State in 1953 the first state explicitly organised along linguistic lines. This marked the beginning of linguistic territorialisation where language became the basis for mapping political space.

The process reached its institutional culmination with the States Reorganisation Act, operationalised alongside the 7th Constitutional Amendment Act. These measures reconfigured the internal geography of the republic into linguistically aligned states and introduced Article 350-A mandating mother-tongue instruction for linguistic minorities.

India was reorganised into 14 states and 6 Union Territories embedding language within the architecture of federalism. This reorganisation did not resolve linguistic tensions; it formalised them. Subsequent state formations of Maharashtra and Gujarat (1960), Punjab and Haryana (1966) and later Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Uttarakhand (2000) as well as Telangana (2014) demonstrate that language remains a dynamic axis of political negotiation.

Sociologically, this phase represents the institutionalisation of linguistic identity as a legitimate claim to territorial sovereignty even as it leaves unresolved the hierarchies embedded within multilingual states.

III. THE SECOND MOMENT: LANGUAGE AS HIERARCHY AND EXCLUSION

If the first moment was about recognition, the second was about stratification. Language in India has functioned as an instrument of social closure. Dominant regional languages have operated as gatekeeping mechanisms, regulating access to education, employment and legal recognition.

However, conflicts such as the anti-Hindi agitations in Tamil Nadu, the recurrent tensions over Kannada primacy in Karnataka and the dialectal-cultural contestations within Andhra Pradesh and Telangana reveal that linguistic politics is fundamentally about legibility to the state. To speak the “wrong” language is to risk exclusion from bureaucratic processes and public goods. Language thus becomes a form of cultural capital unevenly distributed and institutionally reinforced.

Odisha illustrates this dynamic internally. The tensions between Kosali (Sambalpur) speakers in western Odisha and the dominance of standard Odia reflect a pattern of intra-state linguistic hierarchy where one regional language subsumes others within its administrative domain. However, such hierarchies are not anomalies; they are structural features of Indian federalism. What distinguishes the Santal case is that it lies beyond even these hierarchies. While dominant and sub-dominant languages contest space within the state, Santali historically existed outside the very framework of recognition. This represents a deeper level of marginality epistemic

exclusion; a language is not merely subordinated but rendered invisible within the institutional logic of governance.

The Third Moment: Indigenous Peoples and Linguistic Self-Determination

The present conjuncture signals a qualitatively different phase, a third moment in India’s language politics. If the first moment territorialised language and the second stratified it, the third is about linguistic self-determination among indigenous communities. This moment is exemplified by the political visibility of Santal leadership, particularly figures such as Honourable president Droupadi Murmu and Mohan Charan Majhi. Their ascent represents more than symbolic inclusion; it reconfigures the horizon of political possibility for Adivasi communities. For populations historically positioned as subjects of governance, this visibility marks a shift toward participatory sovereignty.

At the same time, the centenary of the Ol Chiki script originally devised by Guru Gomke Pandit Raghunath Murmu demonstrates that language is no longer

confined to cultural preservation. It has become a site of political articulation, linking script, identity, and institutional recognition. However, this moment unfolds within a contested terrain.

Debates over affirmative action, pressures on constitutional safeguards for Scheduled Tribes, and ongoing conflicts over land and forest rights indicate that linguistic recognition alone does not secure substantive equality. Rather, it must be understood as part of a broader struggle for cultural sovereignty and resource control. Importantly, the Santals are not isolated in this trajectory.

There are communities such as the Gonds, Bhils, Mundas, and Hos are articulating parallel demands for linguistic and cultural recognition. Collectively, these movements signal a broader shift toward pluralising the linguistic foundations of the Indian state.

IV. THE UNFINISHED GRAMMAR

India’s governance continues to operate through a borrowed linguistic order. The Constitution of India was drafted in English and higher judicial processes remain anchored in a language inaccessible to the majority. Developmental discourse of planning, rehabilitation, and policy often unfolds in idioms detached from the lived realities of those it seeks to govern. Within this context, the demand for Ol Chiki is not parochial but structural.

It is a demand for deep translation not only as texts but also of state-society relations. It seeks to align governance with the linguistic worlds of its citizens, particularly those historically excluded from formal institutions. The project initiated by Guru Gomke Pandit Raghunath Murmu in 1925 can thus be read as an early articulation of this demand. By creating an indigenous script, he challenged the necessity of mediating Santali through external linguistic systems. The subsequent recognition of Santali through the 92nd Constitutional Amendment Act marked a partial institutional response and signal symbolic acknowledgment.

Hitherto, the grammar remains unfinished. The realization of this project requires substantive commitments: effective mother-tongue education, administrative accessibility in Santali and the integration of Ol Chiki into legal and bureaucratic processes. This is a shift from recognition to redistribution from symbolic inclusion to material access.

The Indian state once reorganized itself along linguistic lines in 1956. It is now confronted with a more demanding task: to democratise its linguistic order by incorporating not only dominant regional languages but also the voices of those historically excluded from its epistemic framework. That is the grammar Guru Gomke Pandit Raghunath Murmu began inscribing in the forests of Mayurbhanj. The text remains open; its meanings still being negotiated.