

GURU GOMKE



SANTALI LANGUAGE & OL CHIKI SCRIPT

SANTALI LANGUAGE

Santali belongs neither to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family (which includes Hindustani, or Hindi-Urdu, Bengali and Punjabi among others), nor to the Dravidian language family (which includes Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada among others). Instead, Santali is an Austroasiatic language. It belongs to the Munda branch of the Austroasiatic family, along with languages such as Mundari, Ho and Sora Sompeng. The name Santali derives from the word Santal, used for the people who speak the language, and further Santal is believed to be a corruption of the common Bengali name for their tribe, saotal or saotar. Santali was first studied by outsiders only in the middle of the 19th century, and foreign missionaries working in India were the first to do so. Scholars who pioneered the study of Santali during that time were Rev. J. Phillips, who wrote *A Santali Primer* (1845), *Sequel to A Santali Primer* (1850) and *An Introduction to the Santal Language* (1852); Rev. L. O. Skrefsrud, who wrote *A Grammer [sic] of the Santal Language* (1873); and Rev. F. T. Cole, the author of *Santali Primer* (1969). Research and documentation of the script continued into the 20th century. Santali was discussed in detail in G. A. Grierson's mammoth publication, *Linguistic Survey of India* (1906) was the subject of P.O. Bodding's *Materials For A Santali Grammar Pt. I and II* (1922 and 1929 respectively).

According to the 2001 census conducted in India, a little under six million people in the country, i.e. 0.578% of the total, identify Santali as their mother tongue. Another quarter of a million speakers of Santali live in neighbouring countries of Bangladesh

and Nepal. Within India, most speakers live in Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. In 2003, Santali was added to the list of languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, along with Dogri, Maithili and Bodo.

SCRIPTS USED FOR WRITING SANTALI

Up until Santali came to be studied in the 19th century, it was an oral language only, but it has been written using a number of scripts since. Rev. J. Phillips, for instance, used Bengali letters for his *An Introduction to the Santal Language* (1852). However, none of the Indic scripts used for writing Santali, whether Bengali or Devanagari or Odia, are considered adequate for representing all its sounds. One of the main drawbacks of using Indic scripts is that they are not equipped to represent checked consonants, which are peculiar to Munda languages, including Santali. In *The Munda Languages* (2008), Toshiki Osada phonetically describes checked consonants as—

‘first, the glottis is closed and the tongue or the lips simultaneously form an oral closure. The tongue or lip position is the same as that of the corresponding normal stops. Then the glottal closure is released, which is optionally followed by nasal release and voicing.’

In addition, these scripts do not traditionally have a character for the glottal stop, which is used frequently in Santali. Finally, these scripts also fall short in their ability to represent Santali vowels. Santali uses eight or nine vowels that can be short or long, and nasalized, while Indic scripts provide only six vowels. Even with diacritic marks, the solution is not ideal. Latin, on the other hand, is

able to represent checked consonants. But it, too, does not include a sign for the glottal stop in its basic or classical set of alphabets. This brings us to the Ol Chiki script, which was designed specifically to write Santali.

OL CHIKI SCRIPT

Ol Chiki script was invented by Santali writer and scholar, Pandit Raghunath Murmu, who began work on its design in the 1920s and finished twenty years later. Even though it is known who created the Ol Chiki script and when it was made, there are several myths in the community about its creation. One proclaims that the script came to be at the time when the Earth itself was created. Another says that the script was given as a divine gift to a learned man, i.e. Murmu.

The forms of the Ol Chiki letters are said to be derived from nature, physical forms and everyday life of the Santals. The same is said about the pronounced sounds of the symbols. For instance, the pronounced sound *at* is depicted by a circle; its shape represents the earth and the meaning of the pronounced sound is the same. Similarly, the letter *ut* both looks and sounds like a mushroom. However, some discrepancies exist in the descriptions of these relationships provided by Pandit Raghunath Murmu himself and those by scholar, Rameshwar Murmu.

Ol Chiki is written from left to right. It contains six vowels and twenty-four consonants, along with five basic diacritics (a sixth is made by the combination of two existing ones). The letters are organized in a matrix of 6 by 5, and the first letter of each row, i.e.

the first column, are vowels, and the rest consonants. An additional three vowels are generated by using the diacritic *gahla tudag*, which can follow the vowels *la*, *laa* and *le*. The diacritic *mu tudag* nasalizes vowels, and *mu-gahla tudag*, which is made by the combination of the *mu tudag* and *gahla tudag* nasalizes a newly created vowel. The other three diacritics—*rela*, *phaarkaa* and *ahad*—are used as a length mark, glottal protector and for deglottalizing respectively. Ol Chiki also has two punctuation marks, *mucaad* and double *mucaad*. Both are used in poetry, and only the former in prose to mark the end of a sentence. Latin punctuations comma, question mark, exclamation mark, parenthesis and quotation marks are also. Finally, Ol Chiki, which also uses the decimal number system, has its own form of numerals.

Ol Chiki letters have different forms for printing and handwriting. Unlike printing forms, handwriting forms cater to the need of writing fast. These forms are usually slightly slanted and narrower, and the shapes are simplified in a way that they can be written quickly and without lifting the writing instrument. In particular, in the handwriting form, the diacritic *ahad* is ligated with the four consonants it can follow, instead of being written separately.

DESIGN PROCESS

The process of designing this typeface family began with (a) the study of printed material or their images and (b) by practicing how to draw Ol Chiki letters. These two steps were essential in familiarizing one's self with an alphabet that was completely foreign. Ol Chiki is less than a century old, so there are no

historical manuscripts to be consulted. Literacy in the script is quite limited, and the communities who speak Santali are marginalized. As a result, printed material in Ol Chiki is neither found in abundance, nor readily. Contact details for several publications, for instance, turned out to be dead-ends. With help of the limited material that could be collected, a first draft of the regular weight was designed. This design was then used as a starting point to understand how the script should be translated into a typeface. It was shared with native readers for their feedback on shapes and proportions. To make this critique more useful, inputs on specific matters were also sought. They were presented with, for instance, different positions of placement for diacritic marks *rela* and *phaarka*. Or how close or far they would expect to the space on the left of the *mucaad* to be. The *mucaad* had been found to be very close to the last letter of the last word of a sentence in some of printed material that was consulted. Changes were made to the letter shapes according to this feedback.

Ol Chiki Italics

An Italic style was needed for this typeface for emphasis within text, and for complying with Latin-based typographic conventions that have come to be expected. Ol Chiki handwriting forms, as seen in writing manuals and in handwritten samples collected from native readers (during the feedback for the regular), have been used as reference to design this style. The basic letterforms have been designed and are awaiting feedback so the design can be improved.

GURU GOMKE TYPEFACE FAMILY

la	at	ag	ang	al
laa	aak	aaj	aam	aaw
li	is	ih	iny	ir
lu	uc	ud	unn	uy
le	ep	edd	en	err
lo	ott	ob	ov	oh

REGULAR

ø	o	ē	3-	p
la	at	ag	ang	al
Ø	b	Ḁ	Ḑ	Ṗ
laa	aak	aaj	aam	aaw
ʌ	ʟ	ʡ	q	ɹ
li	is	ih	iny	ir
ʮ	Ḃ	Ḅ	Ḥ	Ḭ
lu	uc	ud	unn	uy
z	ɹ	Ṁ	Ṃ	ɹ
le	ep	edd	en	err
ə	ḥ	Ḷ	Ṛ	Ṝ
lo	ott	ob	ov	oh

ITALIC

ø	o	ē	3-	p
la	at	ag	ang	al
Ø	b	Ḁ	Ḑ	Ṗ
laa	aak	aaj	aam	aaw
ʌ	ʟ	ʡ	q	ɹ
li	is	ih	iny	ir
ʮ	Ḃ	Ḅ	Ḥ	Ḭ
lu	uc	ud	unn	uy
z	ɹ	Ṁ	Ṃ	ɹ
le	ep	edd	en	err
ə	ḥ	Ḷ	Ṛ	Ṝ
lo	ott	ob	ov	oh

BOLD

