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Nishaant Choksi (2021). *Graphic politics in eastern India*. Bloomsbury, New Delhi. xvi+204 pp. Price: INR 999. ISBN 978-93-90358-73-1

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Graphic Politics in Eastern India with a subtitle *Script and the Quest for Autonomy* is a part of the Bloomsbury Studies in Linguistic anthropology. It focuses on the interlocking concepts of 'script' and 'autonomy' in relation to the recognition of the identity of the Santal-speaking Adivasis of West Bengal, Orissa, Jharkhand, and other regions. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in southwest West Bengal, Choksi explores various 'sites of production' connecting the dispersed community with other castes and communities in his ethnographic study.

The introduction chapter lays out the framework for the book. Firstly, Choksi argues for the centrality of the graphic dimension of language in the contemporary politics among Santali-speaking Adivasis, embedded within the 'Adivasi triad' *jala* (water), *jaṅgala* (forest) and *jamĩna* (land) (p.3). Secondly, he suggests that 'autonomy' lies in the liminal space between legal and socio-economic orders and corporeal, aesthetic, and ritual practices, following the framework of Ranabir Sammadar's work (2007) (p. 10). He considers "the invention of new scripts as well as resignification of already existing ones...as a graphic politics of autonomy" (p. 14)." Finally, he portrays the role of script as a catalyst for autonomy. All these are foregrounded on an idea of Jharkhand - beyond statehood and electoral success.

Santali, an Astro-Asiatic language spoken in India, Nepal and Bangladesh, is written in Eastern Brahmi (known as Bangla script), Roman (developed by the Missionaries), Utkal script (used for Oriya) and indigenous script (custom script of Brookes (2021)) called Ol-Chiki. The resultant multiscriptality, and the politics of claims behind each script, which forms the (central and state) governmental concept of language, is ideological, material as well as (spi)ritual.

Chapter 2 focuses on *Ol* as an Autonomous Practice, where *ol* (writing) primarily serves as a communicative medium for *khoṇḍ ol* (ritual diagrams) that mediates the Santals to another traid of *hoṛ* (humans), *bongas* (spirits) and shared histories of migration and dispersal.. Against the backdrop of the governmental concept of language based on script and its association with autonomy, various independent scripts (14 in number) have emerged to perpetuate political, religious, and territorial claims.

Some of these scripts include Monj Dander Ank devised by Sadhu Ramchand Murmu (1922); Ol-Chiki (symbol) devised by Raghunath Murmu in the 1930s, initially for all Adivasis (see pg. 44); Hor Ol (Santal script) devised by Raghunath Hembrom; Tonol Ol (unity script); and Hapram Hor Ol Gentec (the script of the Santal ancestors), which symbolise linguistic representation of Santali speech asserting unity and autonomy. Among these, Ol-Chiki has emerged as the most popular script for Santali language education, media networks, and territorial consciousness. However, Choksi also draws fissions and fissures within the Santali language and its scripts. Abbi (2008, pp. 166-7) mentions that Ol-Chiki has been adopted by some other tribal languages to maintain tribal identity. Furthermore, the script-making process continues with other Adivasi groups like Ho, Sora, Oraon, Mundari, and Gond, demonstrating the significance of script for autonomy both in the Indian and global contexts.

Chapter 3 focuses on the linguistic landscape of Jhilimili, a small village in the Adivasi-dominated Jungle Mahal of West Bengal, bordering Jharkhand. This village serves as an active site of

Jharkhand politics and activism, where various castes and communities engage in discourse over Bangla and Santali and their respective scripts. The upper castes consider Santali, despite being recognised as an Eighth Scheduled language in 2003, as a pantomime (thar) or even as a dialect of Bangla. Choksi employs Carr and Lempert's "Scalar Project" (2016) to illustrate how contextual boundaries are drawn by social actors. This chapter analyses various linguistic landscape sites, ranging from graffiti to film posters that reflect the use of Santali language with its different scripts and the social evaluations of the participants. These findings lay the groundwork for exploring autonomy projects within educational institutions and print media in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4 on Caste, Community, and Santali language education dwells on the issue of indigenous languages and scripts in the formal educational system. With the recognition of Santali in the Ol-Chiki, it became autonomous; hence equal, and reasonable enough to challenge the social constructs associated with spoken Santali. Choksi further demonstrates how Ol-Chiki connects with Santal history, cultural practices, and the politics of autonomy.Thus, he concludes that Ol-Chiki "aligns with the larger Jharkhand project" (p. 126). However, he also highlights the negative consequences of prioritizing *ol* (writing) over *ror* (speech), and "resulting in new feelings of illiteracy within the larger Santali speaking population" (p. 126) within the larger Santali-speaking population and potentially distorting the concept of Jharkhand.

In Chapter 5 Choksi scales Santali literary and cultural journals and magazines in multiple scripts and Santali-Bangla newspapers in Eastern Brahmi and Ol-Chiki that link Santali with Jharkhand. His scale informs that Santali in Eastern Brahmi is used for "locally based politics of autonomy" (p. 133), whereas Ol-Chiki forges "unity" among the Santals dispersed in eastern India. On the other hand, use of Bangla is to cast transethnic Jharkhand. With the widespread availability of internet services, electronic media emerges to complement print media in the development of Santali language and in the politics of Jharkhand.

In the final chapter, Conclusion: Autonomy and the Global Field of Graphic Politics, Choksi discusses indigenity and development within the rubric of Jharkhand movement. Choksi posits that efforts related to Santali and Ol-Chiki are part of the global pursuit to safeguard endangered languages and scripts and revitalize them. But as a movement in southwest West Bengal, Choksi opines that it "bear[s] resemblance to the Kurdish project" (p. 168). With regard to the graphic politics, he mentions autonomous design (see Escobar 2018) and focusses "on the coconstitutive relationship between autonomous politics and ...writing" (p. 169). Penultimately, he ascertains that graphic transmits political ideologies like autonomy, and becomes a vehicle in its articulation.

Graphic Politics in Eastern India is a result of Nishaant Choksi's graduation and postdoctoral programs supported by various individuals and institutions as mentioned in his acknowledgments (p. xii). It is enriched with list of figures, tables, note of transcription conventions (Modified Roman, IPA and Ol-Chiki) followed by endnotes, references and index. The book is supplemented with maps and photographs/figures, and with quotes and pointers to make reading enjoyable. Choksi effectively incorporates Santali and Bangla words (in Modified Roman) to capture the essence of the subject matter, and provides endnotes explaining these words.

There are a few minor points to note regarding Choksi's usage and style. For instance, he uses phrases such as Santali-speaking, English-reading, and Brahmi-derived with hyphens. Additionally, he cites sources using (197) to mean (ibid: 197) (as seen on page 169), which may not conform to conventional usage and style guidelines. On his note on research, he mentions "a mixed methodology" (p. 21). He mentions about various methods and tools employed in his study

which points to mixed methods rather than mixed methodology (see Given 2008, p. 516, 526). Choksi's "Kurdish project" (p. 168) may be stated as the 'Saami Council model' (proposed by Prof. Roy Burman for the Nagas of the northeast India, see Longkumer, 2016).

On the other hand, Choksi's observation on Chomsky's program for Universal Grammar or Searle's Speech Act, or other communicative approach to language (see the first two sentences of the last paragraph, p. 170) is an unwanted comparison, and could have been avoided by the author.

Despite these matters not so diverting, *Graphic Politics in Eastern India*, a semiotic account of evolution of *ol* from a ritual to rights (to the name of the train - Ol-Chiki Express, p. 162), offers a framework to engage with writing among the indigenous communities and autonomy. It also empirically (re)establishes the claims (Khubchandani, 1983; Masica, 1991; Abbi, 1997) over script, community, governance in South Asia. Undoubtedly, it is a landmark study of writing systems and their connection to autonomy, while also stimulating further exploration of graphic politics among the indigenous peoples of the sub-continent.

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