

THREE MUNDA SCRIPTS

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

“Tribal” central India in the first half of the twentieth century was a place where many new scripts were devised, devised by native speakers of the languages. Apparently it was felt by the newly conscious speakers of “tribal” languages that a full-fledged language in the Indian context needed a script of its own, one clearly different from those of its neighbors. Certainly more than a dozen of these scripts were made for less than half that many languages. For some of them, e.g., Ho, more than four scripts were devised. Most of these scripts are no longer used, or even remembered. Several of the tribal communities were, sooner or later, satisfied to use a regional or international scripts, and speakers of these languages saw—and were pressured to see—the advantages of learning a regional language, and, in some cases, replacing their native languages with the dominant regional languages: Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, Telugu, Marathi. Most of the Christian missions and the communities influenced by them in this area used the Roman script until fairly recently, when it was replaced by a local regional script. (This supplanting of Roman did not take place in northeast India or the Nicobars.) The Christian missionaries were in the earlier periods the chief—in many regions the only—advocates and promoters of tribal literacy in the tribal languages, and in the regional languages. The new scripts were designed on a variety of principles and in various styles, borrowing from and/or dissimilating themselves from the familiar scripts of their neighbors. Some of the scripts, notably the Ol script which Raghunath Murmu devised for Santali, show independent thinking about sounds, symbols, words and their graphic representation.

The three scripts discussed here—each used for writing a language of the Munda family—were devised by charismatic community leaders as parts of a comprehensive cultural program; in all three cases they were offered as improvements on scripts used by Christian missionary linguists and their “tribal” associates. All the devisers of these scripts, unlike Shong Lue Yang, the creator of a Hmong writing system the origins of which are in other respects

rather similar,¹ were familiar with one or more scripts used in their provinces. These three scripts survive; they are in use in primary and adult education, and are the vehicle for a variety of printed materials. In the case of Santali we have a language spoken over a widespread area by more than six million people.² It was—and is—written in four “older” scripts: Devanāgarī, Bengali, Oriya and Roman, the areas being as multiscritpal as “Greater Kurdistan” and some parts of Southeast Asia. Raghunath Murmu’s Ol script has been the most successful of the three scripts, and there have been recent attempts by Santals to induce other “tribal” groups in the Chota Nagpur area, both Munda and Dravidian, to adopt this improved script, attempts that, I am told, have met with indifferent success.

Some comparisons can be made among the three, but we lack information on the social anthropology of the uses and meaning of writing—ritual uses among others. On one small topic, controlled comparisons can be made: the preglottalized consonants found in almost all the Munda languages (and many of their Mon-Khmer relatives) are unmarked in word-final position, and alternate with voiced stops in prevocalic position, where they would also be considered unmarked. We can compare how these unmarked pairs of stops are treated graphemically in the three scripts.

2.0. SORA

We know less about Mangei Gomango’s Sora script (*Sorang Sompeng*, hereafter “SS”) than we do about the other two scripts; the only history and description of this script is found in a short paper by Khageshwar Mahapatra. I have three monolingual booklets in SS, but I cannot make much of them. Sora has been written in a Roman-based script originated by Baptist missionaries, as well as in Telugu characters (devised by G. V. Ramamurti and associates), and, briefly and apparently with little practical use, in Oriya characters also. Mahapatra describes controversy between the promoters of Oriya and those of Telugu for the predominant influence on the Sora people living between the Oriya- and Telugu-speaking populations in what later became the Orissa-Andhra border area. Some “self-conscious tribal leaders,” Mahapatra writes, “instead of choosing a side [with which] to merge themselves, endeavoured to maintain their identity by inventing a new script for themselves.” Malia Gomango, an influential leader of the non-Christian Sora, led the movement for a separate script, and “inspired his son-in-law, Mangei Gomango” to devise a proper script for Sora. Mangei, “an educated person . . . conversant in Oriya, Telugu

¹ See Smalley et al. 1990. [Ed.]

² I am not including Assam and Nepal, where Santali laborers were brought in in fairly large numbers.

and English" (and presumably familiar with the Christian Sora script) resigned from his job as a compounder at a pharmacy, and "observed a kind of penance in the hills for several days. Finally, at midnight on June 18, 1936," he received the script "as a divine gift." Mangei said that "the Sora people . . . then . . . were sacrificing cocks, goats, buffaloes and human beings too at their rituals . . . They worship, pay obeisance, and then pour blood and liquor on the deity [deities'] head. However, after many days, at the end of the Age of Kali, the Lord came back and said: Now I have come to you not as Daru [alcoholic liquor] Brahma, but as Akshara Brahma (*akṣara* 'written syllabary character'; the term also has philosophic implications). You worship me in this form. I will be visible on the Məttar Bənom Vijnan hills. The Savara then went and saw. The twenty-four letters appeared in his vision. Then a shrine was built at that site, and the worship of Akshara Brahma commenced from that day." Mangei then set up a new religious order called Məttar Bənom Dəmri, "the religion that opens the eyes and makes people good and wise."³

In the Akshara Brahma shrine near Gunupur, in southern Orissa there is an image in the shape of the sacred syllable OM ("written in Oriya characters") which has the twenty-four letters of SS, twelve numerals and a crest. Note the use of OM in the Ho Varang Kshiti script. The mantric power of OM and its peculiar written representation seem more unique than prototypical, but certainly are important enough to be taken over, and ideas of OM influence notions of writing and uttering and what these can effect. What discourses and practices are associated with the various Hindu-influenced notions (Daru Brahma, Akshara Brahma) among the Hinduized Sora of the Gunupur region is not clear to me, nor who "the Lord" is, or what importance a Kali Age has. The various Gods whose names contribute to the letter names of SS are, perhaps, loosely and syncretistically linked with these wider Hindu notions.

One would like to know whether the various less Hinduized, interior Sora groups accept the script and the various discourses and practices that Mangei would like to go with it, and what they make of them. Mahapatra writes that Mangei has proselytized "a good number of tribesmen, and has established sub-centres all over the Sora-speaking tract in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. In many villages evening schools have been set up to teach the script, and in some areas the script has been widely learned, and is used in intra-community communication and literary activities." It is not clear, however, how many Sora are literate at all, and in what script(s). Probably a fairly small minority. Mahapatra writes that after the first book in SS (by Mangei) was printed in Vijayawada, a press was set up locally, at Dambasara (Putsahi). Mahapatra

³ David Stampe confirms my understanding that the Sora did not sacrifice humans. Why make the statement above, and for whom? Non-Soras?

writes: "the precinct of the press is treated as a place of sanctity," and is the center of the SS literacy drive. Mangei, who wrote all the publications listed by Mahapatra (eight of them, published between 1967 and 1976, after the first one), "mostly lives there as the sire of the institution." Mahapatra notes that the press has also published tracts, almanacs, invitation cards and bulletins. It is not clear whether these genres, however modified, are in any way traditionally Sora, or were taken—translated—from Oriya and Telugu. The SS script seems to be in large part an instrument of acculturation: note the illustrations in the SS booklets of Lakshmi, Nehru, Ganesh and a rather elegant teacup and saucer.

The twenty-four characters are arranged in a four-row-by-six-column diagram, the six vowels being entered in the last (bottom) row. See Table 1. (The schwa vowel is "inherent," i.e., is not represented by a written character.) The twenty-four letters get their names from twenty-four gods in the Sora pantheon, thus (working across the top row) {s} for "Sundaŋ", {t} for "Tənod", etc.⁴ Mahapatra found no rationale for the arrangement of the characters and/or of the gods that give them their names. It is not clear how the letter names or the sounds they symbolize relate to the particular gods from which their names are derived. (There is probably no esoteric sound symbolism involved, of the Ho type or any other.) The names of the consonant characters are formed by adding "a?" to the consonant sound, i.e., *sa?*, *ta?*, etc. Mahapatra suggests that the characteristic shapes of the SS characters owe something to English cursive letter shapes, which could have been familiar to Mangei; this seems plausible. Perhaps the loops and curlicues were influenced by the Telugu script, but there seems little influence of the regionally dominant Oriya script. No attempt at a graphemic componential analysis of the characters is offered here. We note only that the letters are clearly different componentially from the numbers, which is common elsewhere.

2.1. *Sounds and symbols*

Divine providence does not guarantee that a script will have linguistic efficiency. Mangei's script does not represent the phonemes of Sora as well as it might. However, it should be noted that we do not know as much about the script as we need to, so that there may be morphophonemic and perhaps

⁴ I write phonemes and morphophonemes between slashes (e.g., "/e/"), graphemes between curly brackets (e.g., "{o}"), and allophones and phonetic descriptions between square brackets (e.g., "[o]"). Both Sora scripts (like the other non-Perso-Arabic-derived scripts of India) are written from left to right.