

Promoting Tribal Languages in Education: A Case Study of Santali in Orissa

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INTRODUCTION

As part of a larger project on the history of language movements and language politics in Orissa, the focus of the present paper is on the role of a so-called tribal language in education. During the historical Oriya language movement, the implementation of Oriya as a medium of instruction in education, which was initiated by the Oriya elite and considerably supported by the British administration, meant one of the most significant steps for the Oriya speaking population in their fight against the dominance of Bengali in the public sector, where all posts in Orissa were reserved for Bengali speakers, Oriya being declared as a mere dialect of Bengali. As the movement aimed at the empowerment of the language with literature, literary history, journals and intellectual networks, the first step meant the writing of textbooks in the Oriya language since the main argument against Oriya as an official language in education had been the complete lack of educational materials in comparison to the much better equipped Bengali. If we take a look at the present situation of a tribal language such as Santali in its attempts to secure its survival and upgrade its status against the dominating regional languages around it, the case appears to be much more complex. At the first glance, here, too, it seems that without a proper status in primary education, the language is bound to be invaded by "quality" word borrowing and its working range more and more to be reduced to a mere "kitchen" or "home" language. Language activists here, therefore, argue in favour of an implementation of Santali in the primary sector in order to ensure a sound basis of spoken and written knowledge in this language¹, thereby securing its dynamic growth and wider functionality within the community. This concern is partly shared by Government policies and NGO activists alike, but their interest lies rather in tackling the problem of the alarming numbers of school drop outs among tribal children, who are completely overpowered by the prescribed teaching in the respective regional languages.

Paradoxically, parents, if in a position to choose, are not too enthusiastic to see their wards being instructed in their mother tongue which they themselves hold in no high respect; they therefore consider it a waste of precious time and resources on the path to enhanced prospects on the competitive regional or national job sector. Whereas the empowerment of Oriya in the educational sector was part of a strategy that led to its eventual recognition as a language that qualified for government jobs by the British as the then highest authority, the implementation of Santali in education today, even if it was much better supported, remains contested as it leads hardly anywhere in terms of a job applicability since the necessary recognition, namely the inclusion into the Eighth Schedule, has not been granted by the present highest authority, the Indian Government.

From this brief glimpse into diverging interests of different groups in the field of education alone it becomes evident, that a language cannot be viewed as a monolithic entity which translates itself into a single body of sentiments that connects it to its speakers. When evaluating the impetus of the Santali Language Movement today, we rather have to view it as a convergence of varied activities, imaginings, interests and strategies, from all those groups that are affected by and concerned with the language. This approach cannot confine itself to the interest groups within the speakers community, but has to extend necessarily to groups outside of it such as language planners, administrators, politicians and educationists on the state and national level.² The study has to extend into time looking at the history, documentation and development of the language, concentration on the philological endeavours of the early missionaries who created a body of written texts, dictionaries and grammars, histories and linguistic research work, thereby laying a foundation stone for the high cultural rank it is claiming today. It has to explore into space, while examining its relationships with neighbouring languages and cultures. It will

include the functionalization of the language in political contexts during regional movements as well as its role as a significant identity marker in its capacity to create and preserve a cultural identity. This network of discourses in turn manifests itself as a bundle of hard materialities that become the characteristics of this language, formed through the circulation of talk and published matter as well as through institutional practices. The object of discussion itself does not remain unaffected by the varied discourses: the language presents itself eventually as a dynamic practice which changes its face and dimension according to the viewer's and user's perspectives.

The limited frame of the present paper shall however concentrate on the status of Santali in the educational sector in Orissa, allowing a few comparative inputs from its position in the neighbouring state of Jharkhand. As education is one of the focal issues penetrating deeply into the existence of individuals as well as that of society, it relates to a range of historical, social and political aspects which are addressed to here as far as they are relevant in the matter.³ The study will commence with the perspective of central educational planning, where a language as Santali figures as so-called minority language or, simpler even, 'mother tongue', whose speakers inevitably await integration into the national mainstream of communication and education. The efforts of Santali activists and cultural leaders of the community, who equipped it over the decades with a script, literature, textbooks and a widespread institutional network, will be highlighted next, in order to understand their demands for a further empowerment of the language. Further it is of utmost importance to look at the majority of speakers, where the language figures on the one hand as one of the strongest identity markers and yet, on the other is considered as the most prominent symbol of backwardness. Regarding its political dimensions, we can further study the interests of political groups, that, during the Jharkhand Movement, propagated Santali as the language of the tribal state-to-come, and now after the formation of Jharkhand, strive to consolidate its status in state politics.

PROMOTING TRIBAL LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF SANTALI IN ORISSA

After the reorganization of states on a

linguistic base in post-Independence India, an important problem remained concerning the status of minority languages within the reorganized states, each of which contains smaller or larger number of speakers of languages other than the predominant regional language. As the languages and mother tongues of India are arranged in a hierarchy of official status, we find at the top two languages, Hindi and English, recognized as official languages of the Union. At the next level are the regional languages recognized as official languages in the linguistically organized states, all of which are also listed in the Eighth Schedule. At the lowest level are those mother tongues of the people which are not recognized either as official languages of India or of any state and are not listed in the Eighth Schedule. A listing on the Eighth Schedule carries symbolic and material advantages: a presumptive right to recognition as a minority language in states where other languages are dominant, including a presumptive right to recognition as medium of instruction in both primary and secondary school classes in such states¹.

The reason to concentrate on Santali for the comparative study of language movements in Orissa shall be briefly outlined. In many respects, Santali can claim a special status among the languages of India not included in the Eighth Schedule, as well as among the so-called tribal languages.² As compared to many neighbouring endangered or marginal languages, Santali appears to be empowered enough to not only defy both these categories but on the contrary, to figure as a prominent player in the language policies of the states where it is mainly spoken, i.e. Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, and Assam.³ It has developed a considerable degree of institutionalization, standardization and public awareness by an educated elite; significant factors that allow its comparison with the Oriya language movement. Its large number of speakers⁴ combined with its comparatively high language maintenance and low language shift⁵, that too inspite of a high percentage (40%) of bilingual speakers⁶, make Santali today a borderline case concerning its much propagated inclusion into the Eighth Schedule, especially in view of the languages with much lesser speakers and distribution area that had been included in the last round of 1991.⁷

Concerning the development scale of the language, Santali certainly ranges among the best

documented tribal languages of India. The western interest that had gone into Santali studies from the middle of the 19th century onwards resulted in a number of exhaustive dictionaries and grammars, apart from an extraordinary large body of transcribed or translated heritage and folkore texts, all of which in turn led to a comparatively early and lasting standardization of the language; extensive linguistic research both on national and international levels continues until the present day.⁸ The concept of “grammarless” tribal “dialects”, misnomers both anyway, can not be applied to Santali in the least, nor does it fall within the category of “oral culture”: Santali is proud to claim a written tradition since a script for Santali, *Ol Chiki*, was devised in the 1940s by Raghunath Murmu of Orissa (District Rairangpur); it is perhaps the only Indian tribal script so far that could establish itself to a considerable degree in teaching, printing and distribution.

Another foundation that fortifies the status of Santali in the public sphere is its functioning network of organizations, journals and publications, supported by a sizeable (mostly urban) elite that organizes conferences or regional meetings and actively contributes to other public platforms. By this, political, educational, social and cultural concerns are propagated with a wider reach to the outside, as well as a sense of solidarity is strengthened from within. Founded by Pt. Raghunath Murmu in the 1950s, an institution for the propagation for Santal culture and literature, as well as for the teaching, printing and propagation of the script, has since developed into a large network operating in several Santal-populated states under the name of ASECA (Adibasi Socio-Educational Cultural Association)⁹, headquarters still being in Rairangpur, Orissa. Another prominent institution promoting *Ol Chiki* and Santali Literature is the AISWA (All India Santali Writers’ Association), which among a wide range of activities in the field of literature, translation, publication and distribution, organizes the popular Annual Santal Conferences that regularly attract a lot of attention and have become one of the most important platforms to voice the political and cultural concerns of the community. Apart from a large number of regional or All-India cultural organizations such as the Santali Bhasha Morcha (SBM), the Calcutta based All India Santal

Council (AISC) or the AOOSU (All Orissa Ol Chiki Students Union, Rairangpur) to name just a few, a more recent phenomenon that hints to the extraordinarily developed community spirit of the Santal is a well equipped website on Santali and Santal culture, which provides historical information, lists of publications and distributors, educational consulting, news groups and fonts of *Ol Chiki*.¹⁰ This website has established itself also as a forum for the publication and discussion of research articles. A fortnightly on-line paper in *Ol Chiki, Dishom Khabar* from Rourkela, is published on this website, too, since October 2002.

Education and language policy is perhaps the most important function of the state governments and local bodies, as elementary education upto the VIIIth standard is regulated exclusively by the states. But inspite of Article 46 demanding the State Government to ensure free and universal education of tribal children upto the age of fourteen, the actual achievements of the tribal children on the educational front are far from encouraging. The literacy rate for tribals lies still distinctly below the general rate of the respective state, and is much lower among females than among males.¹¹ What is however most disturbing and must certainly question the whole endeavour to promote formal education in tribal areas, is the high percentage of school drop outs from the lowest levels onwards, which can reach incredibly high percentages, such as a drop out rate of 72% at primary levels (I-V), 89% at middle levels (VI-VII) and 93% at High School level (I-X).¹² Among a host of problems, that are not specific to tribal education but to education in remote rural areas generally, i.e. absenteeism of teachers and non functioning of schools, rigidity in timings and syllabi etc., the language problem gains a serious dimension here as a number of tribal languages, such as Santali, have linguistically nothing in common with the regional language that are used for primary instruction and are therefore not even remotely understood. In most cases the teachers, posted against their will and without adequate facilities for their own families in remote areas, are not prepared in the least to cope with the specific cultural contexts their students come from, and are neither trained to speak nor to understand their language. The rejection of the tribal mother tongue as “inferior” is the first crucial experience for the children that gradually develops into an overall feeling of

deficit which discourages them from the very onset and deprives them of every incentive later on.

The latest National Curriculum Framework for School Education gives rather cloudy recommendations on the use of the mother tongue in education, which should be “ideally identical with the state language”, and should be “ideally, a medium of instruction at all stages of school education, but at least on the elementary level”. In the case of those students whose mother tongue is different from the state language or regional language, it is suggested that “the regional language may be adopted as a medium only from the third standard onward”.¹³

As we can see, in some states the problem of defining a dominant regional language is still not settled as is evident from the highly politicized debates on the hegemony of Konkani or Marathi in Goa (where both have become compulsory in primary levels), or the special situation of the North-Eastern states that have a majority of tribal languages but no predominant regional language and therefore generally opted for English. And even if the official language of the state is identical with the regional language of the majority, there remains the problem of plurilingual communities residing within a given state, as for example in Orissa with its great diversity of tribes and language families. All of the tribal languages in Orissa however remain in the minority against the dominant Oriya language group, and have no official status to demand their use as a medium of instruction in schools.

State politics reflect these vague directions regarding language issues and repeat the tendency to treat education in the mother tongues, if it is practiced at all, as a transitory affair, that only serves to overcome the shortcomings of the tribal learners until a complete integration into the lingual mainstream is facilitated. In Orissa, with its 62 tribal communities, where of 314 blocks, there are 118 blocks with more than 50% tribals which come under Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) areas, there are no binding government policies concerning the medium of instruction in tribal areas, the final decision on which is actually left to the block administration and the schools themselves. One can easily guess that a systematic support of the existing tribal mother tongues will hardly figure among the major interests of the state government, which naturally wishes to avoid the

administrative costs of implementing mother tongue instruction for a multiplicity of minority languages.

Given the complexity of the tribal learners' problems in primary education that lead to the early rejection of formal education as a whole, one of the most important approaches seeks to overcome the divide between the home and the school atmosphere, which as a rule, co-exist as two separate worlds with hardly any meeting points. Tribal children have an important role to play in their families' economic set-up, as they take care of siblings, graze the cattle, collect forest products, assist in household chores etc.; therefore, their absence at home creates additional problems for the parents apart from the costs involved as the educational stage goes up. The children in turn resent being confined and disciplined indoors in school buildings, and they are left completely untouched by the alien course contents taught predominantly out of books, in a language they cannot understand and by teachers who treat them with a condescending attitude. A number of remedies to bridge the gap between the two cultures that clash in elementary schooling are presently researched and applied, concerning mainly the preparation of a teaching in the mother tongue including the use of revised text-books (and questioning the predominance of book-teaching generally); secondly, it concerns the special training and close supervision of teachers posted in tribal areas; thirdly, it aims at a positive recognition of the culture of work among tribal children to prevent their alienation from home.

As part of a different pedagogy involving more playful and appealing teaching methods, the urgent need for additional textbooks in tribal or minority mother tongues has long been recognized, in order to relate the core curriculum with the environment and the cultural context of the children.¹⁴ The gap between home and school environment has to be bridged by textbooks that offer the curriculum and exercises in the home language for at least the first two standards. Accordingly, the Orissa Primary Education Programme Authority (OPEPA) has been in the last years active in the process of developing a complete new stock of bilingual primers and reading material in a range of tribal languages, such as Saora, Kui, Kuvi, Juang, Bonda, Koya, Santali among others, the script adopted for all of them being Oriya. The production of bilingual

textbooks or reference works is also commissioned by other institutions like the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) or the State Resource Centre for Adult Education (SRCAE) in the frame of general literacy campaigns. The organized research, production, distribution and implementation of these primers is however another gigantic task the results of which at present, leave much to be desired. The core curriculum matter¹⁵ is generally adapted to the familiar surroundings of the children and is sought to be in congruence with the vocabulary of the respective mother tongues; it further seeks to recognize different systems of knowledge transmission by songs, riddles, story-telling and memorizing. In the same lines, educational NGOs like Atragamee put a lot of stress on the development of adequate course material that take into account the socio-economic situation of the learners, with the foremost intention that they should not be made to feel inferior about their culture, language and practices they know from home.¹⁶ Similarly, in various NGO and Government conducted projects, the need for special bilingual bridge courses has been recognized which would ideally commence even at the pre-nursery level, and later be used between primary and secondary levels¹⁷.

As even the best textbooks are wasted in the hands of indifferent and unskilled teachers, all concerned authorities and organizations recognize the urgent need for a special training of teachers for tribal areas. Training programmes are prepared and conducted by the Academy of Tribal Dialects and Culture (ATDC) in cooperation with the OPEPA, as well as by the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute (SCSTRTI). However, even teachers of batches that had been trained in special courses on anthropology, pedagogy and language, are reported to not take their work seriously once posted in remote areas, as they hope the posting to be transitory and they are not controlled by any efficient monitoring agency. In fact, the lack of rigorous supervision is the weakest point of educational administration of the tribal areas. The Education Department of the Govt. of Orissa has created 377 posts of Sub-Inspectors of Schools, and at least two Sub-Inspectors have been provided to every block, but in many cases, an “unholy alliance” between the absent teachers and the S.I. of Schools can be observed in covering up the non-performance

of teachers, forging of certificates and the complete neglect of village schools¹⁸. As in many rural areas of India, the employment of Shiksha Karmis (Sikhya Karmi in Oriya), i.e. members of the local community who have received a basic education and are briefly trained as elementary teachers, helps to cope with the huge demand for teachers that are familiar with local languages and customs, and also prevents to a certain extent the exodus of educated people away from their tribal background; out of a number of reasons however this and similar grass-root schemes can be no substitute for a fundamentally revised education programme, especially as it paves the way for a two-class system where the privileged are taught by “proper” teachers whereas others are left to the care of less-qualified, less-paid and possibly little motivated staff, just in order to polish the official figures.¹⁹

From the parents’ viewpoint, however, the concentration on the tribal mother tongue in education is greeted with little enthusiasm. In many cases, children are sent to school only under great constraints, and the time spent there has to lead to quick results in terms of employment chances. The hierarchical order of languages²⁰ makes parents opt for the language that holds the highest possible position, as the proficiency in the regional languages (plus Hindi and English), promises the best results in the ever growing competition on the urban job-markets. In their view, studying the language “that is anyhow spoken at home” was superfluous and would only lead to further disadvantage for their children.²¹

This rejection of one’s own mother tongue in education is part of a more complex problem that arises with the grossly exaggerated ideas of what education can do for the job opportunities of tribal children, by which teachers and administrators generally persuade people in tribal areas to join schools. If one however looks at the deplorable condition of the educated or semi-educated tribal youths who are unqualified for proper jobs and therefore remain unemployed or work in inferior workplaces, and are living in miserable quarters in towns, the often heard verdict by parents and teachers: “They have become useless” holds true in a double sense, as they are not only unfit as wage-earners, but have become equally unqualified for the traditional occupations of the village, apart from now considering work in the agricultural sector

below their dignity. Compared to the village level, in school, they might have acquired sophisticated habits in dressing and life-style and become an additional burden to their families on which they look down upon. These youths are full of resentment and frustration, as they are completely disillusioned with the inflated promises that education was the gateway to a more exciting and financially independent life in urban surroundings.

To keep up the dignity of labour that is inherent to the life concept in a tribal village, forms therefore a crucial part in the more recent educational concepts of NGOs as well as of government authorities. The guidelines of Sikshasandhan, a resource center for education with eight consortium member organizations²², accordingly propagate programmes such as “Learning while earning”, where children are taught to read and write along with their work. Income generation activities on the campus itself are useful to raise school funds and enhance the children’s confidence in their manual and economic skills. Vocational training for children includes processing of agro-products and forest produces, nursery raising, grafting, fruit processing, gardening, mat making etc. The relevance and marketability of the produce is of highest importance as can be seen from the experiences in Ashram Schools, where children (boys) are usually uniformly trained in spinning and weaving, even if they are from communities that are traditionally not engaged in this work nor come from areas where cotton is grown; or they are superficially trained in gardening by town-bred teachers, when the agricultural knowledge of their parents at home would be far superior. Children thus trained are almost certain to abandon these crafts once they have left school. Ashram Schools insist on vegetarianism when the children’s home diet includes meat and fish, and instead of training them in fowl-keeping or fish-farming, a sense of guilt is instilled in them concerning their sinful practices.²³ Education can not be reduced to literacy alone, and therefore, progressive organizations would adapt their training measures to the children’s immediate surroundings, and seek to educate the children in all reaches of life; that could extend to holding medical camps that help to create an awareness for basic healthcare and medication even among children. Co- and extra-curricular activities involve parents and the village community to a

much higher degree than usual, employing the traditional love for singing and dancing in common festivities, apart from including them in the establishing and maintaining of the school or camp premises by voluntary services (*shramdaan*). Smaller siblings have to be taught simultaneously at Balwadis and Anganwadis to allow the elders’ regular attendance. The use of the mother tongue, too, is sought to be kept on a priority basis in elementary teaching and communication without giving any attention to the implementation of tribal scripts, as neither the parents nor the teachers consider it important.²⁴

The preceding general remarks on tribal education had to reach beyond the problem of language, as language in education can not be treated as an isolated issue. To understand the case of the promotion of Santali in Orissa, a view into the diverging interests of administrators, teachers, tribal language activists, parents and the learners themselves is necessary: The following case study of the implementation of the Santali script *Ol Chiki* in primary and adult education will be presented to show in some detail how the educational problems referred to above are intertwined with administrative, lingual, cultural and political issues.

As mentioned earlier, an independent script was devised for Santali²⁵, which in the meanwhile has developed into a fairly established medium of communication even in print. It was initially designed to suit the special linguistic requirements of the Mundari languages and to provide a single, unifying script for Santali, which is otherwise noted down either in Roman, Bengali, Oriya or Devanagari letters. The *Ol Chiki*²⁶ alphabet is organized along the Roman model, i.e. it is alphabetic (no *matra*-system for vocals) and does not share any of the syllabic properties of the neighbouring scripts; the grouping of the consonants into categories however resemble the *varga*-system of Indo-Aryan scripts. Some of the letters have pictorial character, and the whole script is in fact quite learner friendly, also for children, as the shapes of the letters are not arbitrary, but reflect the names for the letters, which are words, usually the names of objects.²⁷

The ASECA as the main organization to promote the Santali language and script, run extensive teachers training programmes, mostly conducted in camps or evening classes, to propagate especially the knowledge and use of

the script in Santal-populated areas. One of these week-long training programmes would encompass however much more than a mere script-training, and aims at providing the teachers with the full literary, cultural and historical background of Santal identity.²⁸ The script thus has become the symbol of much higher values and it serves much more sophisticated purposes than only a means for communication.

More detailed course syllabi are designed by the ASECA Board of Santali Education of Mayurbhanj for various secondary and higher course programmes such as “Ol Itun Teachers Training Course (equivalent to Matriculation Standards of General Education)”, “Studies in Santali Language and Literature for +3 levels”, “Bachelor of Santali Literature in English, Pass and Honrs. (B.S.L.)”²⁹ etc. Without going into further details of the respective elaborate syllabi it is already evident, to what considerable extent Santali studies have been standardized, institutionalized and organized, something that is unthinkable in any other tribal language in Orissa. In spite of large-looming financial constraints and a rather erratic support by the State Education Department, the ASECA network is still in the position to represent and work for a larger section of the educated Santal community, not only in Orissa. It was one of the main bodies which assiduously demanded the implementation of the script in the primary sector, apart from expanding *Ol Chiki*-training for adults and teachers, from around 1986 onwards. In response to this, from 1991 onwards, the Department of Education of Orissa³⁰ finally decided to introduce the “teaching of Santali in Ol Chiki script on an experimental basis, as an additional language at the primary stage in 30 Primary Schools of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Sundargarh districts”.³¹ As follow-ups, teachers were selected, *Ol Chiki* primers prepared and the teaching commenced from May, 1992. As there were persistent demands from Santal Organizations such as ASECA, AISWA, SBM, All India Santal Council or AOOSU, to extend this to other primary schools with high concentration of Santal pupils, a pilot study of some of the schools was prepared by the ATDC. The study was presented at a meeting on 9.1.2000, organized by OPEPA, to which tribal leaders, primer writers, NGOs, Linguists and Government Officials were invited.³² On account on both the problematic findings of the ATDC

report and the demanding attitude of the Santal leaders, no consensus could be achieved in this meeting. It was felt by the representatives of educational organizations that the prestigious and controversial language issue had completely overshadowed all discussions concerning the practical levels of education for the around 70,000 Santal children in Orissa.³³ In fact, the production of Santali primers by the DPEP was stopped as their script being Oriya was vehemently opposed by the Santal leaders. In this case, the politics of the language movement clearly had proved to be counterproductive as the relation between the Government bodies and the Santal authorities have come to a virtual standstill.

Before some points of the pilot study shall be presented here it has to be made clear, that the ATDC, although it supports the cause of the minority languages as a governmental institution, is in general not sympathetic to the introduction of tribal scripts.³⁴ The list of shortcomings and fault-finding during their investigation in the 30 schools includes however all involved parties: from governmental planning and administration, to the teachers and the ASECA, and the parents and students. The study thus criticizes first the complete lack of any official evaluation or follow-up by the Government after the programme was started; in 1994, the supply of *Ol Chiki* text-books was abruptly stopped due to financial problems. The inspecting officials were mostly uninformed and unaware that such schools with *Ol Chiki* teaching existed at all. A general confusion was observed about the term *Ol Chiki*, as most officials and even educated Santal equated it with the Santali language as such, and the *Ol Chiki*-issue had taken prominence over the language. In the ATDC's view, the recognition of *Ol Chiki* functioned more as a propaganda term than it referred to the actual issue concerning the Santali script.

First of all, the schools in remote tribal areas that were inspected “lacked minimum facilities”, with insufficient rooms and teachers, no blackboards, no mid-day meals, no drinking water, no toilets etc., something that is unfortunately not at all specific to the *Ol Chiki*-issue. Teachers were found to teach two classes and more, or two teachers teaching five classes, often in one or two rooms. This situation made the teaching of Santali in *Ol Chiki* nearly impossible. All of the teachers employed to teach *Ol Chiki* had

completed courses by the ASECA and held the respective certificates, most of them had at least matric qualification. None of them however had undergone the necessary two years C.T. (Certified Teachers') training. So they were first employed as Sikhya Karmis and only after their C.T. training, their services were regularized. However, during their two years absence, no substitute *Ol Chiki* teachers were appointed, resulting in a severe damper effect on the once commenced studies. Moreover, no additional posts were created for the *Ol* teachers, and they were posted in existing vacancies with the result, that they were required to teach *Ol Chiki* in addition to all other subjects. In this situation the teachers had hardly any time to teach *Ol Chiki* at all, and in one case, one *Ol Chiki* teacher was found managing five classes alone. It is also critically remarked in the report, that one of the major objectives to demand the introduction of *Ol Chiki* had been apparently the creation of jobs for unemployed Santal youths trained by the ASECA. In the view of the investigators, once these youths had been posted, their enthusiasm for the cause of *Ol Chiki* had obviously disappeared quickly as they had "relapsed" into functioning as ordinary teachers.

As for the textbooks, a similarly sobering picture evolves. Textbooks were initially prepared for class I and II and published by the Government. But unlike textbooks for other subjects that are distributed free of cost for tribal students, these had to be paid for. Also they were found to be ill-prepared by the investigators of the report. As they had always been in short supply and were altogether discontinued after 1995, not a single copy of these textbooks was to be found in the schools during the investigation.

In contrast to the teachers' statement that they and their wards were strongly in favour of teaching Santali through *Ol Chiki*, the parents' view differed considerably. About 20% parents who were interviewed and given questionnaires, were not in favour of their wards learning *Ol Chiki*. The rest 80% "was found to be totally unaware of all these facts". While the teachers claim to teach *Ol Chiki*, students denied that they were taught in *Ol Chiki*.³⁵ Many students complained that they faced difficulties in learning *Ol Chiki* after having mastered the Oriya alphabet. As against the predominantly rural schools of Mayurbhanj and Keonjarh, in the more urbanized areas of Sundargarh district around

Rourkela, the parents, teachers and students were found to be "highly detribalized and urbanized". Learners of these groups were definitely more interested in learning Oriya and English, and considered learning their own language as secondary as it was "unnecessary and took their valuable time" in view of the strong competition.

The report ends with several suggestions, i.e. pointing out the need for periodic monitoring and evaluation of experimental schemes for introducing teaching in tribal scripts. Teaching material had to be provided free of cost, not only for the initial stages of learning, but even more importantly, as follow-up readers and supplementary material to consolidate the knowledge in the script. It suggests also the financial support of the organizations that did the "pioneering work" in this field, and these should be asked to cooperate with the Government in this regard.

From this remark it is not clear whether the ASECA are to be included in the "pioneering institutions" that should be supported. When the Secretary of the ASECA Rairangpur was asked³⁶ about any financial support from the side of the Education Department, he declared that the work of the ASECA was tolerated by the Government and supported to a certain extent, but that they existed without regular official grants, and were in fact financed with great difficulties by donations and member fees. After the outcome of the above mentioned meeting, it is further doubtful to what extent the cause of *Ol Chiki* will be carried on by the Orissa Government in future.

But apart from the practical suggestions the pilot study gives for an improvement of the *Ol Chiki* teaching, which by and large concerns problems not specific to the tribal script issue (as even the scarcity of adequate textbooks is no exception in other educational sectors), the report does not react to the most startling observation: the obvious ignorance and indifference on the side of the parents and pupils towards the controversial "language and script issue", which in fact might be the saddest aspect of all, apart from the multitude of technical mismanagement in the planning and programme activities from higher up, both from the Government side as well as from the Santal authorities. The dilemma the tribal learners are facing becomes only all too visible here: Whereas it is an undeniable truth that the disrespect by which the tribal mother

tongue is treated by teachers and officials in primary education is one of the major factors responsible for the exceptionally high drop out rates of tribal children, the imposition of the mother tongue (plus script!) in turn is perceived as an instrument of further marginalization by the learners, who feel they are put to an even more disadvantaged position in view of the additional language burden, as they will eventually have to cope with three languages: Oriya, Hindi and English. The introduction of the tribal mother tongue is acceptable for the learners only as an initial bridge medium of instruction; if it extends to a full course including script, grammar and literature, hardly any learner is willing to devote much time for it, especially as no job market is available for this specialized knowledge. Yet, as most experiments confirm especially in remote rural areas, the use of well-designed primers in the tribal mother tongue (written in the respective regional script the student is learning anyhow), taught by motivated and committed teachers of the same community, is one of the most promising methods to overcome the crucial initial barriers tribal children face in getting acquainted with the environment of formal education in schools generally, giving them first a solid foundation in their mother tongue and thereby, instilling enough confidence in them for the study of any other language later on. These approaches can perhaps not serve gigantic tasks such as securing the survival of a minority language, but on a much more pragmatic and human level, they attempt to inculcate a sense of belonging in the children concerning their cultural background incorporated in their mother tongue, instead of making them feel resentful and inferior about it from the very start.

As for the promotion of the script and higher studies in Santali, these must be obviously preserved for the sectors of adults' and teachers' training, as the target group undoubtedly consists predominantly of an already educated, bilingual or trilingual and privileged section of the Santal. The status of the *Ol Chiki* script as a significant identity marker of the Santal community cannot be denied and all efforts by the Santal elite to promote its use in print, communication and literature should be felicitated; its imposition in primary education without connecting it to job prospects however can amount to a positive discrimination of the tribal learner and prove even counterproductive

as far as the love for one's mother tongue is concerned.³⁷ The practical use of *Ol Chiki* so far seems largely constricted to its appellative function; it appears on pamphlets, inscriptions of all sorts, greeting cards, monuments, headlines, flags and demonstration banners, brochures, audio cassette covers etc., and since it is comparatively easy to read, it serves as a valuable tool of cultural self-assertion. On the literary level, several small journals are brought out in *Ol Chiki*, and a substantial stock of education material both for learners and teachers has been prepared over the years, too. Important authors in Santali however largely stick to their respective regional scripts for their novels, short-stories, poetry and dramas (especially Bengali and Devanagari), which are then, if necessary, transcribed into *Ol Chiki* for certain publications; for that purpose, an automatic computer transcription programme for *Ol Chiki* into and out of several regional scripts (Devanagari, Bengali, Oriya, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam etc.) and Roman has been successfully developed in 1998.

But even the pursuit of secondary and higher studies needs a certain incentive concerning their applicability on the job market, and it is precisely here that the demand to introduce *Ol Chiki* teaching in primary schools gains its actual importance (as already assumed by the investigators of the pilot study): the official recognition of *Ol Chiki* would result in an enormously increased demand for *Ol Chiki* teachers in Santal-populated areas, including the facilitation of enlarged training and supervising capacities. In neighbouring Jharkhand, the struggle among the nine recognized tribal languages (and especially among the prominent ones as Santali, Mundari, Kurukh and Ho) to achieve a higher status as official languages is based exactly on this concern: if for example Santali as the largest tribal language of Jharkhand would be officially recognized, two Santali teachers each would have to be appointed additionally for the existing 25.000 primary schools, by which a tremendous job market would be created and with it, a huge political potential concerning the distribution of these jobs.³⁸ To get an impression of the situation at a higher level, we again turn to Jharkhand since unfortunately, in Orissa there are no University Courses for Tribal Languages as yet. The Department of Regional and Tribal Languages

of Ranchi University³⁹ offers M.A. studies in Santali, among nine other tribal languages, and presents a detailed and thoughtfully prepared syllabus⁴⁰. Since the beginning in 1984, 51 M.A. students have passed in all. There are 30 seats (another figure names 50 students for M.A. in Santali) for every language in nine groups.⁴¹ But due to the uncertain job situation, the number of students in these studies, too, could be seen declining as the job market extends hardly beyond the academic circles. This situation could only be changed with the upgraded status of the tribal languages that is presently discussed in Jharkhand. In view of the rivalling tribal groups however, it is unlikely that one language will be substantially preferred before the others, and at the most, the nine tribal languages will be raised to the status of associate languages next to Hindi and English. The former Prime Minister, although himself a Santal, showed little ambitions to engage himself in the promotion of Santali (or any language issue for that matter), and the Santal leadership in general is divided on the issue of language and script implementation; even if latest developments show that certain measurements for the upgrading of the tribal languages have been initiated by the Jharkhand government⁴², here as in Orissa, it remains to be seen as to how far new policies can comply with the harsh ground realities in the educational sector.

CONCLUSION

Whereas on the one hand the emotional identification of speakers of regional languages with their own language is very strong, job prospects and global competition have led to a rather pragmatic attitude towards language in a country, where a majority is forced to adapt to a multilingual surrounding from childhood onwards. Therefore, in spite of traditionally strong and still growing demands for the promotion and recognition of regional/ minority languages by certain pressure groups, we can state a clear preference of the learners, provided they have a choice, towards the respective top elite languages within the hierarchical structure of languages in education, English having become the most prestigious medium of education nation-wide. The vast majority of the population, both urban and rural, sends its children to government-run schools as these are free, i.e. they do not charge fees. However given that the

quality of education in these schools is quite poor and the languages are “only” regional, the fast increasing middle-class prefers to send its children to government-aided, privately-run schools, where increasingly the medium of instruction is English (of whatever standard). The third category, the private schools, the majority of which is run by religious organizations preferring English as a medium, caters to the elite upper-class population.

Teaching in the tribal mother tongue cannot be considered as the only solution to overcome the host of incongruities the tribal learners are confronted with. Language issues in tribal education, important as they are, can only be treated as *one* aspect within a multiplicity of problems that amount to the dismal situation of primary education in rural India generally; an overall holistic approach is needed to involve the whole village community in the improvement of primary education facilities, performances and results, and to instil a sense of confidence and pride in the tribal learners towards their traditional culture.

The attempts of tribal authorities to promote tribal languages and scripts in primary education have to be de-politicized and more tailored to the actual needs of the learners; these schemes can otherwise amount to instruments of further marginalization of the already disadvantaged groups as they are faced with an additional language hurdle in the tough competition for better qualification. The privileged tribal learners will immediately try to avoid such schools and study in the regional languages or English.

The implementation of minority languages in education is no effective strategy to prevent them from further marginalization or extinction: only job prospects related to these languages could enhance their status; for Santali, the inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution would provide the much demanded impetus in all the states where it is spoken. Moreover, language seems to lose its importance as the sole and crucial identity marker on a political level as it had been the case in the success story of the Oriya movement that led to the first “linguistic” province of India in 1936, to be followed by the wave of state formation on a linguistic basis from 1956 onwards. Today, the language factor has obviously yielded largely to more pressing economic or caste-specific considerations⁴³; to

a degree, that the question of which language is to be prescribed or chosen in education has itself come completely under the dictat of economic factors: the privileged are in a position to choose prestige languages taught in elite institutions; the less privileged have to be content with whatever is offered or prescribed in free government institutions.

KEY WORDS Minority languages in education; *Ol Chiki* Implementation Programmes; Language Planning and Language Acceptance.

ABSTRACT This paper discusses State education politics in view of minority language speakers within a dominant language group, taking the example of Santali in Orissa. A brief survey of national language policies shall outline the lingual hierarchy prevalent in post-Independence India. Next, Santali will be introduced as a comparatively privileged language amongst the tribal languages of Orissa and Chota Nagpur, the main reasons being its large number of speakers, its fairly developed literary status and a considerable resilience against absorption by neighbouring languages. The existence of an independent script for Santali, *Ol Chiki*, gives it further prestige. Urban pressure groups promote the language in education and communication as they consider the implementation of the Santali mother tongue in these fields as central for the consolidation of the language. The Santal community has a vast institutional network that promotes and organizes *Ol Chiki* teachers' training programmes and prepares teaching material, apart from pursuing a host of cultural and political affairs; yet, the feasibility and sustainability of these programmes is eventually depending on the cooperation of the State Government. In comparison to the activities of the Santal authorities in the educational field, parallel programmes for the promotion of tribal language speakers in primary education shall be outlined, launched from both government and non-government agencies in Orissa. The problems that have to be tackled with here can however only partly be reduced to specific "tribal" or "language" aspects, as they overlap in many ways with the deplorable state of primary education in remote rural areas nationwide, and therefore have to be addressed in a wider context of educational reforms. In the case of Santali, a highly controversial issue is added by the demand of the Santal elite that the Santali language should be taught through its own script *Ol Chiki* during the first stages of learning. Having presented certain perspectives of the various planning authorities, the paper turns to the woes of the learners and discusses several aspects that explain the lack of acceptance of mother tongue promotion programmes among the target groups. The question may be asked in how far these programmes establish a further marginalization of the concerned groups by impeding their competitiveness on nationwide levels. General observations on the parents' and learners' preference for prestige languages in education round off the findings, pointing to the dwindling prestige of the regional languages and mother tongues in their

competition with Hindi and English in the long run. Since the neighbouring state of Jharkhand, which has a similar percentage of tribal population as Orissa, is thought to be a model state for the promotion of tribal affairs, comparative glimpses at the present and envisaged status of tribal languages in the educational system there shall be included.

NOTES

- 1 The concerns and strategies of the "founding fathers" of both language movements, i.e. Fakirmohan Senapati (1843-1918) and Pt. Raghunath Murmu (1905-1982) bear indeed striking similarities. Raghunath Murmu, too, realized that in order to enhance the cultural self-esteem of the Santal, they should be educated in their own language. As this was not possible due to the non-availability of text-books and trained teachers, apart from the lack of a corpus of literature in the language, he, too, started to write text-books and literature himself and set up a public cultural network in order to create an awareness among the educated Santal elite.
- 2 Ramaswamy presents in the excellent study on the "multiple, even contrary imaginings" that were attracted in the Tamil Language movement a variety of perspectives *within* the speakers' community of Tamil; to my understanding, the inclusion of various *outsider* perspectives on the language would have resulted in an even more complex picture (Ramaswamy 1997: 22).
- 3 Two separate articles deal with the historico-cultural and the socio-political aspects of the Santali movement respectively (Lotz 2002: "Recasting a Glorious Past: Loss and Recovery of the *Ol Chiki* Script" (In print); Lotz 2003: "A State across Boundaries: Interpretations of Santal Raj" (Forthcoming).
- 4 Cf. Brass 1997: 175.
- 5 Legally and administratively, the term "tribal" in tribal languages does not have any linguistic connotation. The Indian Constitution does not define or make any provision for the tribal languages. Further, it is not the case that all mother tongues of tribals are tribal languages, as they may have non-tribal languages as their mother tongue. There are not as many tribal languages as there are tribal communities (Annamalai 1997: 16).
- 6 Regarding the distribution of Tribal Languages in the States, Santali forms the by far largest tribal language group in the three states of West-Bengal (Santali 74,2%, next Oraon 14,5%), Orissa (Santali 23,1%, next Saura 13,2) and undivided Bihar (Santali 48,3%, next Mundari 16,8%). (Table by CIIL, cf. Abbi 1997: 14).
- 7 The figure according to the Census of 1991 is 5,216,325 (www.censusindia.net/languages). Neukom gives approximated figures for the Santal in Bangladesh (100,000 in 1983) and Nepal (40,000 in 1985) (Neukom 2001: 1).
- 8 Ishtiaq shows the large number of districts (23 out of 37) with high percentage (75% and above) language maintenance among Santali speakers as against much lower figures among Munda speakers

- (Ihstiaq 1997: 337).
- 9 Mostly in the respective regional languages, viz. Bengali, Oriya, Hindi and Assamese.
 - 10 The 18 languages included belong to the language group of Indo-Aryan, Dravidian and Tibeto-Burmese. None of the Austric family, to which Santali belongs, has been included so far in the Eighth Schedule. A point always raised by the Santali activists is further the much lesser number of speakers of Konkani, Sindhi or Kashmiri. - Another powerful applicant for the inclusion is Rajasthani which claims to have 10 crores of speakers as a lingua franca, the largest number of people after Hindi.
 - 11 The most recent Santali Dictionary (2001) was produced by Ganesh Murmu, Dpt. of Regional and Tribal Languages, Ranchi and Minegishi Makoto, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.
 - 12 ASECA was first officially registered in 1964.
 - 13 The DTP solution and computer application for *Ol Chiki* has been developed by the Chaechampa Sahitya Academy, Bhubaneswar, in 1996 (Murmu 2002: 5).
 - 14 According to 1991 census, the overall literacy rate of Orissa was 49,01%, with 36,78% of SC and 22,31% of ST. The female literacy rate was abysmally low, which ranged from 2% to 34%. The rate of enrollment among general castes was estimated to be 37,92%, while among SC and ST rates were 7,24% and 8,05% respectively.
 - 15 Data for 1992 (Tribal Welfare Department 2000: 107). Available data differ considerable. According to Shikshasandhan (2000: 8), already at the primary stage, 43,02% boys and 50,97% girls quit the school. This process intensifies with higher learning. In a publication on the Educational Planning in Orissa that reads: "It may also be observed that the number of children declines as the education stage goes up." That translates into figures of 1997/98: Enrolment of Boys at primary stage (class I-V): 5.53 Lakhs, at upper primary (VI-VIII) remain only 1,21. For girls, the figures are even more alarming, as the rate drops from an initial 3.02 lakh to 0.51 between primary and upper primary level (Tyagi 2000: 100).
 - 16 The paragraph reads: "The mother tongue is the most vital factor for the children's intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth. (...) The medium of instruction ideally, therefore, ought to be the mother tongue at all the stages of school education. In the case of learners whose mother tongue is also the regional language or state language, it must continue as the medium of instruction ideally at all the levels of schooling or at least up to the end of the elementary stage. However, in the case of those students whose mother tongue is different from the state language or regional language, the regional language may be adopted as a medium only from the third standard onwards. In the earlier years the students' mother tongue ought to be used in such a manner that a smooth transition from the students' operations in the mother tongue to those in the regional language naturally takes place at the earliest." NCERT 2000: 76.
 - 17 For the textbook production in the regional languages, the Central Government has sanctioned a grant of one crore rupees to each state (Murmu 2002: 6). There are presently no figures available on whether additional grants have been sanctioned for states with a large number of mother tongues different from the dominant regional language.
 - 18 The Orissa State makes efforts to follow the MLL (Minimum Levels of Learning) approach that lays down the minimum standards of learning for all children as envisaged in the National Policy on Education (Tyagi 2000: 48).
 - 19 Sikshasandhan 2000: 6.
 - 20 For strikingly similar experiences in Santal schools in Jharkhand see Asha Internal Report 21: 7-8.
 - 21 Tribal Welfare Department 1994: 291.
 - 22 Cf. Probe Report 2000.
 - 23 The national recommendation for the "three-language formula" consists of Hindi, English and the regional language for non-Hindi speakers/ or a South Indian Language for the Hindi speakers. Another formula recommends English, the language of the region and the official state language. Studying a tribal language first would therefore mean a fourth language for the tribal learners.
 - 24 This view was expressed in exactly the same words by tribal students of the Tribal Academy near Baroda, Gujarat (founded and run by G.N. Devy), when interviewed about the medium of instruction they desired for their children. Although all of them were concerned to preserve their mother tongue and culture, none of them opted for it in education, and instead preferred Gujarati and Hindi; a considerable number opted straight for English. (Interviews in Tejgadh, and in the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Baroda, April 2000).
 - 25 SWWS, Parlakhemundi, Gajapati; PRAGATI, Koraput; AGRAGAMEE, Kashipur, Raygada; LNSRD, Raygada; JBK, Angul; AGRANEE, Mayurbhanj; MODE, Malkangiri. The Sikshasandhan Head Office is in Bhubaneswar.
 - 26 Cf. Report on Tribals in Ashram Schools. (Tribal Welfare Department 1994: 144).
 - 27 Sikshasandhan 2000: 14. Interview with Anil Pradhan, Head Officer of Sikshasandhan, in March 2002. Many educational NGOs in West Bengal and Jharkhand, too, follow largely these principles of involving the whole community in matters of education. Apart from supporting vocational training and self-sustenance activities, they promote the formation of village councils which work for the functioning of village schools and press the government teachers into work. Additionally, Santal youths are trained and placed as "motivational and supplementary teacher" in government schools, they are paid a honorarium. Although the language of instruction is Hindi, the teaching in Santali is taken up simultaneously (Asha Internal Report 21 2001: 2-6).
 - 28 Two other languages, Saura and Ho, also developed a script in the 1930s, but its use is today restricted to a very limited number of publications in print. For details see ATDC 1997: 76-80.
 - 29 *Ol Chiki* literally means "writing script". It is also known as *Ol Cemet* ("The writing for learning") or simply *Ol*.

- 30 A number of publications deal with the history and development of the script (Mohapatra 2001: 74-88). For a quick overview, the website <http://wesanthals.tripod.com/santals> gives a good introduction.
- 31 The programme for a training camp held usually in schools includes subjects as: Hand writing in *Ol Chiki*, Reading of Santali Literature, Arithmetics, Grammar, The position of the Santals in the World, Ancient History of the Kherwals, Modern History of the Kherwals, Spiritual Culture of the Kherwals, Identity of the Kherwals, How to Improve the Present Economic Condition, Necessity of a Journal, Activity of SEMLET, Santali Education in *Ol Chiki*, History of Revolution of the Santali Language, Debating and Lecture, etc. (ASECA 2001: 1-2).
- 32 Board of Santali Education 1987: 1-17.
- 33 Much earlier, the Government of West Bengal was the first to officially recognize *Ol Chiki* in 1979 in the educational sector. In 2001, the West Bengal Government has constituted a committee to study the feasibility of teaching Santali through *Ol Chiki* and to introduce it in various syllabi and curricula. The Vishwa Bharti University of Shantiniketan has been imparting education in Santali for the last 24 years.
- 34 Full reprint of the Government Resolution in ATDC 2001: Appendix III.
- 35 OPEPA 2001: 1.
- 36 In the words of Dr. Mahendra Kumar Mishra, Director DPEP (Interview 19.03.02): "Their purpose is language, our purpose is the mental development of the child". The DPEP (District Primary Educational Programme), a joint venture of the Government of Orissa and the Government of India, was launched in 1996-7, initially in five districts and later extended to more. It takes a holistic view of elementary education and emphasizes decentralized management (Tyagi 2000: 45).
- 37 Apart from the pilot study, this view was expressed in several meetings with the ATDC Director, Dr. Manmath Kundu, a very committed and experienced researcher in the field. An earlier publication by the ATDC propagates the view of the then Director, Dr. Khageshwar Mahapatra, that instead of developing more and more writing systems, rather the employment of Oriya with diacritical marks should be encouraged (ATDC 1997:7).
- 38 That reminds of a recent report by the Convener of the Parliamentary Forum for Education, E. Faleiro, on the implementation of simultaneous teaching of Konkani and Marathi in Goa. When the children in Government primary schools were asked in which language they were studying, whether it was Konkani or Marathi, most could not reply, while many ended up saying they were studying in Hindi! In one of the schools tested, 8 classes (4 in Konkani medium and 4 in Marathi) were taught simultaneously in the same classroom (Goa Today 2002: 34).
- 39 Interview 31.3. 2001, ASECA Office Rairangpur.
- 40 It is significant, that the children and grandchildren of leading Santali activists based in Bhubaneswar, study in Oriya and English. Although they speak Santali at home, they have never been confronted with the study of *Ol Chiki*.
- 41 Interview with Ram Dayal Munda, Ranchi, 22.03.02.
- 42 Other Jharkhand Universities that conduct examinations of Santali Language/Literature on a post-graduate level are Vinoba Bhave Univ., Hazaribagh, Sidhu Kanhu Univ., Dumka and Baba Tilka Majhi Univ., Bhagalpur.
- 43 Santali, Mundari, Ho, Kharia, Kurukh, Nagpuri, Kurmali, Khortha, Panchpargania. The two years M.A. syllabus has in the first year four common papers on Ethnology, General Linguistics, Indian Literature and Theory of Literature; plus three papers for each language section on Poetry, Prose and a 100 pages Dissertation/ Essay on a literary topic. The second year has two common papers on Ethnology and Indian Literature, one in the language group for Linguistics and Grammar, one Folklore general and one in the language group, one paper in the language group on literary essays, one 100p research article and one 100p field report. The papers can be answered according to the topic, either in English, or any "standard" language (*manak bhasha*), i.e. Bengali, Oriya or Hindi; the specific papers in a tribal (*janjatiya*) or regional (*khsetriya*) language (Department of Regional and Tribal Languages 1999-2000: 1-16).
- 44 Interestingly, within one language group, one finds only mother tongue speakers as students, i.e. no Munda would study Santali or vice versa, and no non-tribal would study any of these languages.
- 45 The Jharkhand Intermediate Education Board has introduced a compulsory *Matri Bhasha* (mother tongue, native language) subject where Santali carries equal weightage with Hindi (www.std.dkuug.dk).
- 46 In the last wave of state formations, none of the new States were even remotely based on the consideration of linguistic criteria. Uttarakhand was created after large-scale protests against the reservation politics of the U.P. government under Mulayam Singh, that threatened to flood the hill areas with "low caste" job aspirants; Chattisgarh and Jharkhand were created in view of largely economic considerations and central party politics, resulting in a truncated Jharkhand with only the tribal areas rich in mineral resources included, whereas the former concept had included several tribal districts of the neighbouring states, too.

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