


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Cohabiting a textualized world: Elbow room and Adivasi resurgence

Ruby Hembrom 

Department of Sociology, International Inequalities Institute, London School of Economic and Political Science, London, United Kingdom  
Email: [R.Hembrom@lse.ac.uk](mailto:R.Hembrom@lse.ac.uk)

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## Abstract

Stories matter—writing them down matters. For indigenous (Adivasi) peoples from oral traditions, literature has become a way to maintain culture and keep it alive. This article too is a story—an investigative one—questioning and vocalizing the challenges we encounter in trying to articulate our realities and histories in a form that is new to us, one that we've been denied as a practice and one we are not believed *we are entitled to use*. Mainstream cultures have side-lined, overshadowed, and subjugated our knowledge systems, placing us in structures we have to traverse, and within which we have to exist, which is possible only by internalizing and mirroring others' or mainstream ways and languages to gain legitimacy as peoples or, worse, being branded and judged by their versions of narratives of us. This article plots the course of Adivasi histories and narratives enduring, outlasting, or being demolished by dislocation and dispossession, by dominant languages and cultures, and how both writing and orality are practices of both resistance and resurgence.

**Keywords:** Adivasi; Tribal; Indigenous; orality; writing; publishing

## Introduction

This article illustrates how Indigenous literature confirms and sustains our *textualized* presence in the world. Writing offers *continuity* now—a way that affirms indigenous peoples' presence—linking our past and future. Writing and literature become the tools to resist cultural displacement and loss of traditional ways of being, thinking, and expression that changing lifestyles—both imposed and circumstantial—have set us up for. Even if and when we are displaced, we still are the owners and carriers of our stories, and are the ones most appropriate to retell them in our *non-conventional ways*, often in contravention to what writing cultures expect or are accustomed to—like this article.

Dominant cultures have marginalized, eclipsed, and exploited our knowledge systems, positioning us in their structures, which we have to navigate and survive in; this is possible only by absorbing and impersonating their ways and languages to gain legitimacy as peoples or, worse, being forever marked and judged by their versions of narratives of us, within a coloniality—reproducing and establishing long-standing patterns of power, a residue of colonialism.<sup>1</sup> Writing then becomes a tool to resist epistemicide within Miranda Fricker’s framing of epistemic injustice.<sup>2</sup>

This article traces the trajectory of how Adivasi histories and narratives, particularly the Santal account, survive, outlive, or succumb to displacement and dispossession, dominant languages and cultures, and how both writing and orality are practices of both resistance and resurgence. This is explored through six sections: Adivasis ‘resist’, oppose, and reject writing; Between orality, written traditions, and a publishing conundrum; Negotiating writing worlds: the Santali literary landscape; Being written about and the politics of it; Producing ourselves, in our own way; Stories, counter-stories, and countering stories; and concluding with Cultural gatekeeping, displacement, and resurgence.

Being Adivasi, this article is part auto-ethnographic, and my straying into the first person singular and plural, at times, is reflective of my own inclusion in the issues, articulations, and struggles of my peoples.

### Adivasis ‘resist’, oppose, and reject writing

‘You are a people of orality, why do you write?’ I was recently asked. ‘You should revive your traditional performative ways of storytelling.’ These are the usual snippets from encounters of *well-meaning* enquiries and unsolicited advice, when my being an Adivasi—indigenous<sup>3</sup>—publisher, cultural

<sup>1</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, ‘On Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept’, *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2–3, 2007, pp. 240–270.

<sup>2</sup> Miranda Fricker, ‘Epistemic Justice as a Condition of Political Freedom?’, *Synthese*, vol. 190, no. 7, 2012, pp. 1317–1332. M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> While each of the terms ‘Adivasi’, ‘Tribal’, ‘Scheduled Tribe’, and ‘Indigenous’ have their own genealogies and conceptual histories, the use of Indigenous for Adivasi and tribes sits uncomfortably with many scholars, being framed within the discourse of settler colonialism, but Virginius Xaxa helps us formulate its usage, application, and ownership. According to Raile Rocky Ziipao, ‘Tribes in India face two waves of Colonialism, what [Xaxa] calls “double colonialism”—one from the British and one from the non-Tribal Indian population. Hence, the problem of trying to unravel tribal social reality from the post-colonial framework of South Asian Studies, Tribes still have yet to experience a post-colonial reality. For Tribes, post-colonial reality and framework is just an idea.’ Raile Rocky Ziipao, ‘Epistemology is the Key to Tribes’ Emancipation’, The Lakshmi Mittal and Family, South Asia Institute, Harvard University, 2018, available at <https://mittalsouthasiainstitute.harvard.edu/2018/03/epistemology-is-the-key-to-tribes-emancipation/>, [accessed 1 July 2022]. At the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Indigenous Populations’ annual sessions in Geneva, India’s delegates (1985–1990) express solidarity and a common plight with the world’s indigenous peoples, ratifying the declaration, and in the same breath alternating between the views that India has no indigenous peoples *and* that everyone is Indigenous, as their official stance

practitioner, and documentarian is discovered. What's baffling about the opinions is not only the assumption or concern of writing eclipsing our orality or the need for 'revival' of something still in existence, but that my choice and manner of engagement with my culture is questioned. It is a denigration directed at me from those who know more, and better, than an Adivasi. This is 2022, and I am a second-generation Adivasi with a formal, mainstream education. Many of my first cousins, on both sides of my Santal family,<sup>4</sup> back home in Santal Parganas,<sup>5</sup> either never attended or finished school. My extended family is dotted with first-generation formal school goers, and some who will never go to school. Are Adivasis now to be told how to use these newly acquired literacy and numeracy skills? If Adivasis wish to write, shouldn't they be able to, or if they wish to work the fields, despite going to formal school, why can't they?

An Adivasi scholar friend narrated how a *Diku*<sup>6</sup> academic presented a diligently referenced paper, amply quoting James C. Scott's works on resistance,<sup>7</sup> to finally deduce that Adivasis 'resist', oppose, and reject writing—they don't write and will not write because they don't want to, also alluding to them

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for India's Indigenous, which has been a ploy to refuse Adivasi and Tribes the official recognition and status of being the original inhabitants. This denial is a rejection of Adivasi identity, self-determination, and agency—that's why a discomfort with Adivasis and Tribes using Indigenous is discriminatory. See Bengt G. Karlsson, 'Anthropology and the "Indigenous Slot". Claims to and Debates about Indigenous Peoples' Status in India', *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2003, pp. 403–423. As for the history of the term 'Adivasi', see Virginius Xaxa, 'Tribes as Indigenous People of India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 34, no. 51, December 1999, pp. 3589–3595: 'The ascription of the term Adivasi as being indigenous (what the Indian Government assigns as Scheduled Tribe from the administrative perspective of lack of literacy, economic backwardness, lack of political participation and their inability to deal with the external societies) emerged more as a political self-reference than as an anthropological definition of such groups. It relates more to the common experience of subjugation faced by tribal groups from the state since colonial times. The term signifies our demand for recognition of our identity to and rights over ancestral lands, forests, customary practices and self-governance amidst the exploitative relationship by the larger dominants.' Daniel J. Rycroft, 'Looking Beyond the Present: The Historical Dynamics of Adivasi (Indigenous and Tribal) Assertions in India', *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies (JAIS)*, vol. 1, no. 1, August 2014, pp. 1–17. Daniel Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta, 'Introduction', in *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi*, (eds) D. Rycroft and S. Dasgupta (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Santals form the largest homogenous indigenous (Adivasi) people of India across Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Orissa, and in smaller numbers in Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh in India. Outside of India Santals are found in Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. They number about seven million in India, available at <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/PCA/ST.html>, [last accessed 12 August 2020].

<sup>5</sup> Santal Parganas is one of the divisions or commissionerates of Jharkhand. Its headquarters are in Dumka. Presently, this administrative division comprises six districts: Godda, Deoghar, Dumka, Jamtara, Sahibganj, and Pakur.

<sup>6</sup> I use '*Diku*' to mean the non-tribal. If I were writing this article in Santali I would automatically use '*Diku*', and thus prefer it here too. S. C. Sinha, Jyoti Sen and Sudhir Panchbai, 'The Concept of Diku among the Tribes of Chotanagpur', *Man in India*, vol. 49, no. 2, April–June, 1969, pp. 121–138.

<sup>7</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

being too lazy to write. This is a twisted way of using Scott's works to establish why Adivasis don't and won't write. The truth is Adivasis don't write because they couldn't or can't, they didn't and don't know how to, they didn't or don't possess the tools of a writing system. To say we 'resist' writing would be misplaced as it positions Adivasis as peoples who possess inordinate influence or power, to navigate written, literate spaces and mark their protest by refusing to write. I can envision the rejection of the use of the dominant or oppressor's means of expression—writing, for instance, as a potent exhibition of empowerment and resistance narratives for the disinherited. All this makes for an impressive and provocative scholarship, but it is fabricated. Our strategy instead is to use the master's tools<sup>8</sup> to further our cause—as an act of subversion—acknowledging Lourde's treatise of the limits of such a *dismantling*, and challenging ourselves to push those limits. We oppose and resist a lot of things—discrimination, dispossession, and deprivation—but not writing—even if we struggle to, with a shorter writing tradition, and a literacy rate of 59 per cent against the national total of 73 per cent as per the 2011 census.<sup>9</sup> How else will Adivasis record their own stories, how will their voices be registered, if not through these tangible mediums of expression? Refusing to write is self-destructive—a process of erasure. How can we reject what we don't know? Why would Adivasis annihilate themselves before we've even penned one word, or first engraved our resistance into print, or before we've even build a considerable body of written work, a repository of ourselves? This positing of *Adivasi rejection*, or questions about 'why Adivasis write', or opining that we should 'renew orality' are not casual, harmless utterances, but rubrics that reek of intellectual bias and attempts at cultural gatekeeping. These are also taunts and a mockery of our struggles of inhabiting a writing society, and calling us lazy is a deliberate attack on Adivasi personhood, by reinforcing Adivasi stereotypes. The message we get is: *You are as civilized as your domain of writing.*

This message that Adivasis need civilizing is neither new nor recent, and has been high on the post-Independent India agenda. The Constituent Assembly Debates (CADs)<sup>10</sup> lay threadbare the Tribal/Adibasi<sup>11</sup> question(s). These documents are a testimony to Jaipal Singh Munda's<sup>12</sup> tenacity in

<sup>8</sup> Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (London: Penguin Classics, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> First Post, 'Literacy Rates of Scheduled Tribes Far Below National Average, Says Parliamentary Panel', 2015, available at <https://www.firstpost.com/india/literacy-rates-scheduled-tribes-far-national-average-says-parliamentary-panel-2154745.html>, [accessed 1 July 2022].

<sup>10</sup> CAD India Project, *Constituent Assembly Debates. Read Search and Explore India's Constitutional Origins* (Bangalore: Centre for Law and Policy Research, 2016), available at <https://www.constitutionofindia.net/>, [accessed 1 July 2022].

<sup>11</sup> The Constituent Assembly Debates record Jaipal Singh Munda's usage of the term 'Adibasi', spelled with the letter *b* and not *v* as it has come to be used now.

<sup>12</sup> Jaipal Singh Munda, from the Munda tribe, represented the tribals in the Constituent Assembly that drafted the Constitution, to which he was elected from Bihar in 1946. He was one of the Independent candidates to have been elected to the Constituent Assembly, available at [https://www.constitutionofindia.net/constituent\\_assembly\\_members/jaipal\\_singh\\_](https://www.constitutionofindia.net/constituent_assembly_members/jaipal_singh_) [accessed 1 July 2022].

advocating for the rights and identities of Adivasis, as well as exteriorizing the general mindsets of the *Diku* Constituent Assembly Members for and about Adivasis. The general opinion became an estimation of the Adivasis' 'backwardness',<sup>13</sup> 'a sub-human state of existence',<sup>14</sup> a 'stigma on our nation',<sup>15</sup> that their 'general level' had to be raised,<sup>16</sup> and when they 'come up to our level'<sup>17</sup> they would 'become indistinguishable from the rest of the Indian population'.<sup>18</sup> While caution and care was used most of the time to talk about the state and fate of Adivasis, many of the statements and observations were paternalistic, patronizing, racialized, and offensive. Thus began the project of taming, refining, and improving; diagnosing all along that '...the Adibasis are so backward that the period of ten years prescribed here (for Reservation/affirmative action) may be safely extended to twenty years'.<sup>19</sup> This system of improving and reprogramming a certain population still continues today, of which formal

<sup>13</sup> Lakshminarayan Sahu: 'Perhaps this amendment, that the provisions will operate only for ten years, has been moved in view of these considerations. I think we should not bother about the period, whether it be ten years or twenty years, for the Adibasis are so backward that the period of ten years prescribed here may be safely extended to twenty years. We need not worry about this. The main thing that we should be anxious about is that we do not forcibly bring them into our fold. Some of us advocate that we should force them to come into our fold. It is very improper. It is only by a gradual process of creating closer relations that they should be absorbed amongst us.' Lakshminarayan Sahu, *Constituent Assembly of India Debates (Proceedings)*. Volume IX. 5th September, 1949. (Document number) 132. (Paragraph number) 171, available at <https://www.constitutionofindia.net/>, [accessed 1 July 2022].

<sup>14</sup> Shibban Lal Saxena: 'Sir, the existence of the scheduled tribes and the Scheduled areas are a stigma on our nation just as the existence of untouchability is a stigma on the Hindu religion. That these brethren of ours are still in such a sub-human state of existence is something, for which we should be ashamed. Of course, all these years this country was a slave of the British, but still we cannot be free from blame. I therefore think Sir, that these scheduled tribes and areas must as soon as possible become a thing of the past. They must come up to the level of the rest of the population and must be developed to the fullest extent. I only want that these scheduled tribes and scheduled areas should be developed so quickly that they may become indistinguishable from the rest of the Indian population and that this responsibility should be thrown on the Union Government and on the Parliament.' Shibban Lal Saxena, *Constituent Assembly of India Debates (Proceedings)*. Volume IX. 5th September, 1949. (Document number) 132. (Paragraph number) 131, available at <https://www.constitutionofindia.net/>, [accessed 1 July 2022].

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant said 'I believe that they have not received that attention and active service at our hands to which they were entitled. I think we owe them a duty and we should do all we can to raise their general level...' Vallabhbai J. Patel stated '... But I would like to make one thing clear. Is it the intention of people to defend the cause of the tribals to keep the tribes permanently in their present state? I do not think it is in their interest to do so. I think that it should be our endeavour to bring the tribal people to the level of Mr. Jaipal Singh and not keep them as tribes, so that, 10 years hence, when the Fundamental Rights are reconsidered, the word "tribes" may be removed altogether, when they would have come up to our level. It is not befitting India's civilization to provide for tribes...' Vallabhbai J. Patel, *Constituent Assembly of India Debates (Proceedings)*. Volume III. 30 April, 1947. (Document number) 19, (Paragraph number) 152, available at <https://www.constitutionofindia.net/>, [accessed 1 July 2022].

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Saxena, *Constituent Assembly of India Debates (Proceedings)*. Volume IX.

<sup>19</sup> Sahu, *Constituent Assembly of India Debates (Proceedings)*. Volume IX.

education was seen and has become one of its vehicles of deliverance. However, mainstream formal education as a development tool to assimilate and civilize India's 104 million indigenous peoples—Adivasis and Tribals—<sup>20</sup> has become an apparatus of domination, suppression, and further marginalization instead. An out of context, un-Adivasi, and alien education makes possible Adivasi estrangement from self. Instead of having far-reaching positive outcomes, half-measures in implementations have even failed to cover the entire Adivasi population in terms of access.<sup>21</sup> That in itself speaks of the gaps in infrastructural preparedness, capability, quality, or intent in ensuring that the basic tenets of public formal education coverage are met. Yet, this mediocre education is a trade-off as it allows Adivasis' entry into lettered realms, enabling writing to supplement traditional ways of expression and being—allowing them a continuity of their life ways into current and contemporary times and lifestyles; and into times, both past and present, when the *Diku*—outsider—landlords, traders, police, missionaries, researchers, and the government machinery came into their regions, to flourish economically, to control, to civilize, and to bring them into the mainstream, thus introducing and exposing Adivasis to their 'better and other' ways.

### Between orality, written traditions, and a publishing conundrum

Formed in a tradition of orality, Adivasis never needed to record their literature, scholarship, or culture because we were living documents ourselves. Passing on Adivasi knowledge systems through retellings, songs, music, in the performing of tasks of subsistence, practice of rituals, observance of ceremonies, and in festivity was usual—a natural way of imbibing and transmitting life ways.<sup>22</sup> This existence embodied ancestral wisdom, communitarian knowledge and belief systems, life and survival skills infused with individualistic opinions and convictions.

For the Santal people, like many Adivasi/Tribal/Indigenous peoples,<sup>23</sup> singers and storytellers are not necessarily professionals or specialists. They are just members of the community: families, friends, and neighbours, who pass on, through their oration and singing, their communities' credo and literature,

<sup>20</sup> Xaxa, 'Tribes as Indigenous People of India'. Rycroft, 'Looking Beyond the Present'. Rycroft and Dasgupta, 'Introduction'.

<sup>21</sup> First Post, *Literacy Rates of Scheduled Tribes*.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> My specific examples are drawn from the Santals, the people I come from. Though 'They vary among themselves in respect of language and linguistic traits, ecological settings in which they live, physical features, size of the population, extent of acculturation, dominant modes of making a livelihood, level of development and social stratification' (Virginus Xaxa et al., *Report of the High Level Committee on Socio-economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India*, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, 2014, available at <https://cjp.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2014-Xaxa-Tribal-Committee-Report.pdf>, [accessed 21 July 2022]) the facts and features of discrimination, deprivation, and articulations of rights are more or less the same for Adivasi peoples.

preserving and re-creating the community's idea of itself, its history, rituals, and culture. The oral tradition is a distillation of the shared community and corporal experience that gives meaning to language, thought patterns, ideas, and expression through generations in long duration processes. Yet, the validity of orality as a source of Adivasi history-making or writing is not upheld, and its authenticity has been questioned. Questioning orality is questioning Adivasi being. This comprises epistemological and ontological suspicion, which Fricker<sup>24</sup> frames as epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical. Will we ever be believed? Do we have the tools to make ourselves believable, credible? Colonial anthropologist H. H. Risley's entry about the Santals in *The Castes and Tribes of Bengal* confirms this. After his inclusion of an abbreviated version of the Santal creation myth and the traditional history of the Santal migrations, Risley states: 'A people whose only means of recording facts consist of tying knots in strings, and who have no bards [!] to hand down a national epic by oral tradition, can hardly be expected to preserve the memory of their past long enough or accurately enough for their accounts of it to possess any historical value.'<sup>25</sup> These deductions would appeal to logic but they have to be viewed in the context of intellectual bias and how Adivasi knowledge systems were, have been, and continue to be undervalued and dismissed as unempirical—founded in fables, are rudimentary, or just underdeveloped thinking. That Adivasi ways can't stand on their own as differential knowledge systems, but have to match or measure up to established *Diku* scholarship is prejudiced.

What is rejected as myth is a world view for Adivasis, whose oral traditions blend 'the material, spiritual and philosophical together into one historical entity, and it would be a clear violation of the culture from which it is derived if well-meaning scholars were to try to demythologize it, in order to give it greater validity in the Western sense of historiography'.<sup>26</sup> Memory, then, in all its variability and unpredictability, is the channel and the basis of orality, and Adivasis accept it as an instinctive process of life and knowledge systems. The strength of oral traditions and their inherent quality lies in the ability to survive through the power of collective memory which renews itself by repetition, recollection, relapse, recognition, and recovery, often incorporating new elements of remembrance in the process. If the Adivasi community assumes this reality of creation and re-creation of narration, acknowledging the multiple versions, variations, lives, and afterlives of this shared history and shared memory as organic to producing and reproducing knowledge systems, there's no reason for anyone else to find fault in it. Despite transcendence of time, knowledges passing through generations, and fragility of memory, the departures in Adivasi narratives are negligible.

*Remembering it* becomes and fulfils the purpose of the oral act of telling our stories, but now that we're writing, it does so for this as well. Our retelling in either form depends, then, on how and what we remember; and, most

<sup>24</sup> Fricker, 'Epistemic justice'; Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

<sup>25</sup> Herbert Hope Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891).

<sup>26</sup> Penny Petrone, *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990).

importantly, why we continue to engage with the act of recalling the histories of our ancestry. One thing is certain: we do not want to forget who we are and where we come from. Questioning memory and its accuracy from a *Diku* standpoint is an epistemological fallacy. To frame this literate *Diku* dissonance, I borrow from Walter J. Ong,

But the illumination does not come easily. Understanding the relations of orality and literacy and the implications of the relations is not a matter of instant psychohistory or instant phenomenology. It calls for wide, even vast, learning, painstaking thought and careful statement. Not only are the issues deep and complex, but they also engage our own biases. We—readers of books such as this (his own)—are so literate that it is very difficult for us to conceive of an oral universe of communication or thought except as a variant of a literate universe...<sup>27</sup>

This demonstrates that orality has, and can have, a life of its own, independently, and valid, and for Adivasis it acts as an appendage to literary and digital cultural extension.

In 2012, the Santal creation story fashioned itself in front of me, from my father's out-of-print book,<sup>28</sup> on the contrast and comparison of the Santal and Biblical creation traditions, which I hadn't read until I began tilling for material to publish. The surge of a void in my identity in discovering how the story of Adam and Eve wasn't the only creation narrative I came from, but I was also a descendant of geese, propelled an urgent impulse to ensure that these stories live a lifespan right into infinity—in other forms, supplementing our oral retelling traditions that still continue. I wanted to retell the mythical Santal creation stories in an illustrated format, which would initiate young readers into engaging and re-engaging with their roots. A picture book on our origins had never been done before—that's the stage of writing and producing books we're at, and even then without the ability to being able to read this one. Every approach, format, and production were going to be new. There was no ready manuscript. I filled those shoes too—a situational, desperate need of the hour. That's when I took creative liberty to recast the long, engaging, narration for a Santal Creation Stories series.<sup>29</sup> As we designed the covers for the first two books of the series, we stumbled onto a demanding question—'authorship?'.<sup>30</sup> In that moment I was confronted by a critical epistemological and ethical problem: whose name to put as author on this book? I wasn't questioning the origin of the creation stories here; who really began the

<sup>27</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Timotheas Hembrom, *The Santal and the Biblical Creation Traditions: Anthropological and Theological Reflections* (Kolkata: adivaani, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Ruby Hembrom, *We Come from the Geese* (Kolkata: adivaani, 2013). R. Hembrom, *Earth Rests on a Tortoise* (Kolkata: adivaani, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Ruby Hembrom, 'Orality, Folklore, and Authorship—A Publishing Quandary', *International Society for Folk Narrative Research*, no. 8, 2021, pp. 7–11: Special Issue: Indigeneity, Ecology and Narrative, available at <http://www.isfnr.org/files/Newsletter2021.pdf>, [accessed 1 July 2022].



retelling and transmission didn't matter, just that they existed and meant something in an all-encompassing way mattered. The basis of this problem was if I could put my name on a version of traditional stories—stories that our forebears passed on as heirloom, as wisdom, as identity onto us? Stories that run through our blood, stories we embody individually and as a community. The illustrator suggested that I put my name, as I had recast the text to make it comprehensible for youngsters—a user-friendly way around the English language—as my aim was not just to reorient our children to stories of our origin but also to teach them this language that most of our public education system leaves us bereft of. The idea of putting my name on the cover, as author, made me deeply uncomfortable. This wasn't an original story that I had ideated. This was a shared story, this was a belief system, this is what our knowledge specialists, called *Karam Gurus*, perform and recite in the form of the *Karam-Binti*.<sup>31</sup>

How could I? How dare I claim authorship of something that belongs to every Santal, and to probably no Santal at the same time, given the stories are communal. But then how were we to credit the version of text I created and the handiwork of the illustrator? Some solution, both as a publishing and epistemological remedy, had to be found. With some back-and-forth deliberation and reflection, it dawned upon me that, as a Santal, I was the inheritor, bearer, and custodian of the stories—invaluable and inalienable to my identity, to my being. It was with that sense of ownership, reverence, and responsibility that I embraced the authorship of the books, albeit in the most dutiful way. On the books' front covers, we just put the titles and series name: 'Santal Creation Stories'. It was on the inside, on the title page, and on the back cover, that I put my name to attribute the text to me—announcing that I was the author of this version of the traditional stories. The copyright page of the book has the source from which I extricated and moulded these stories. For me, the acceptance of authorship was an act of reconciliation with my heritage in the most intimate of ways. That my retelling of the creation narrative, in my style, without having to seek permission from the elders, made of me an orator, a storyteller stringing together words on paper. That's what orality does to you; it makes you the carrier of your traditions and cultures.

It was only in 2015 that we opened up our archiving and publishing outfit of and by Adivasis—adivaani (the first voices)<sup>32</sup>—to non-Adivasis writing about Adivasi issues, through an imprint called 'One of Us'. One of the manuscripts

<sup>31</sup> Santal knowledge specialists called *Karam Gurus* recite the *Karam Binti* (roughly translates to prayer, plea, or supplication of the *karam*, both a plant and a term used to imply festival or ceremony). The *Karam Binti* is one of the most pivotal institutions of the Santals, connected with the recitation of '... the history of the world from the creation and through the ages': P. O. Bodding, 1932–36. *A Santal Dictionary, 5 Vols* (Oslo: Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi, 1935), pp. 451f. The *Karam Binti* is traditionally performed through various significant life events of the Santals—ritual ablation and initiation of children as 'affiliates' of the Santal society, at weddings, and at funerals with the *Karam* tree signifying regeneration and prosperity. This recitation is now reduced to a special festival, over three days, where the recital lasts all night long, an approximation of 12 or 13 hours.

<sup>32</sup> adivaani's website: <https://adivaani.org/>, [accessed 1 July 2022].

submitted to us was a collection of folktales of a people, never recorded before; years of research, chronicling, and translation went into producing this draft. Clearly, I wanted to publish this rare compilation. The author was not from the tribe the stories emerged from but declared great love for them. The first thing that struck me was his name splashed on the cover page of the manuscript. I looked inside and noticed a thoughtful dedication to the storytellers. The discomfort of authorship was unsettling. Whose name should actually go on the cover?

The *author* worked very hard to produce this collection; however, the people are the heirs and keepers of the stories. They shared their bequest of stories with him, and he documented and translated them into English and was retelling them in a printed book form. No one was denying him that. I asked him if he'd consider putting the storytellers—however many there were—as the co-authors and he as collator, compiler, or editor of the book. I never heard back from him. The book has now been published elsewhere, with his name as author front and centre. And many will not see this as a problem but instead find fault in my taking exception to this. How can a *Diku* be the author of another peoples' folklore? How can the storytellers be banished to the dedication or acknowledgements' pages alone, and their mention absolve one of further responsibility to them. Their magnanimity in sharing their folktales should count for more than just a shout-out. This is appropriation of agency. This is an epistemological gap. Not putting one's name as author does not cancel out credit for undertaking the mammoth task of recording and translating folktales of another people. That is understood, that is implied—but recognition need not be seized like this.

The reconstruction of the Santal creation stories from a retelling in a book illustrates how orality is kept alive. Rehabilitation in new forms appears to be a lineal transition, but it'd more accurate to call it cyclic: from the recitation, to being fixed in a book, to being illustrated in another format, to being read out aloud, to being performed, and to being vocalized, many times over. This is an example of what the literary landscape for Adivasi knowledges looks like—it is in the simultaneous existence of orality and writing, feeding off each other, feeding into each other, growing roots in people to enable and facilitate remembering and retelling. Memory is still our living and fluid archive.

So writing is not the next stage or end of orality, as often seen. For Adivasis it mostly means the ability to negotiate the necessity of being lettered, the possibility of securing seats in higher education or finding a job. Writing for Adivasis is foremost about survival. Orality is second nature, allowing us to function and communicate with a skillset committed to memory. Writing is an acquired skill, often thrust upon us, without Adivasis being ready to receive it, most often in formal, alienating, institutionalized settings, and often having to transition from a known language into an alien one, from familiar approaches to the unknown, with exacting testing standards. Becoming lettered can be a burden too, more than a pleasure, and the ones who endure it do it for the refuge and prospects it affords them in contemporary times. Writing as a means of scholarship or creativity is an afterthought, an accommodation, often when our sustenance is safeguarded. In Adivasi realities both

text and orality share a parallel existence with no conflict, at least for now; they fulfil different usages and relevance in Adivasi life ways. What writing is not (and shouldn't be) is it becoming a measure of how modern, advanced, or cultivated Adivasis are or not. It is an aptitude that shouldn't place on us the obligation to practise, to be tested for being cultured, or an appraisal of our civilization. As Adivasis discover and explore writing, only time will tell what will be transmitted and committed to paper and print—but what we do know is that histories matter and writing them down matters.

### Negotiating writing worlds: The Santali literary landscape

Publishing through adivaani was something I strayed into. In 2012, when I enrolled on a publishing course, I was confronted by the reality of being the only Adivasi there, and that solitary placement immediately translated to exclusion. The first month of the course was called 'Publishing Lives'—meeting the 'who's who' of the publishing industry—national and international mainstream publishers, independent publishers, authors, poets, illustrators, and printers. Some publishers focused on a specific literary genre or became the platform for a particular group of people. That spaces were created for specific narratives was inspiring. But I soon realized that there was no Adivasi on the guest speaker list. There were only two plausible explanations: we were not significant enough to be included, as usual, or we were non-existent in the publishing panorama. Non-existent we were not; despite a shorter writing tradition, we write—we write in our native languages or adopted regional languages—and mostly self-publish. That we wrote in our native-tongues or in the regional dominant languages formal education thrust on us made our contribution to the national literary fabric, which is unofficially synonymous with English language publishing, something that could be overlooked or simply omitted. More than that, it was one's ethnicity, one's indigeneity that was enough to have the odds stacked against Adivasis. How could these 'primitive, savage and backward'<sup>33</sup> non-thinking people produce anything intellectual or of literary merit? adivaani was a response to that moment of the normalization of invisibility and erasure. I didn't know a thing about the process of book making, all I knew was we had to publish in English, whether we knew or spoke the language or not, as that is what gets you noticed and acknowledged in India.

In 2014, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a Santal writer, burst into the established, mainstream Indian publishing scene and broke into the English trade book publishing market space with his debut novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*.<sup>34</sup> The book swept several literary awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar, 2015 (India's National Academy of Letters, Youth category), and Shekhar became the first Santal writer to win the award writing in

<sup>33</sup> Sanjukta Das Gupta and Rossella Ciocca, 'Introduction', *Anglistica AION*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2015, Special issue: 'Out of Hidden India: Adivasi Histories, Stories, Visual Arts, and Performances', doi: 10.19231/angl-aion.201511.

<sup>34</sup> Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2014).

English.<sup>35</sup> Shekhar's phenomenal success will forever be etched in Adivasi and Santali literary history but his personal breakthrough, as proud as we are of him, offsets a bleak reflection of the Adivasi (Santal) literary landscape.

Let's dwell at some facts here: how many Santal writers have mainstream trade book publishers published? One—Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, in 2014. Even if one were to include the total number of Tribal and Adivasi authors on mainstream trade publishers' lists,<sup>36</sup> we'd struggle to even come up with ten names. Shekhar's extraordinary feat cannot but point in the direction of the historical exclusion of Adivasis, and the literary industry is no exception.

Let's suppose Shekhar was published by adivaani. Would he have had the same success he has today? No! adivaani makes for a great story of resurgence and empowerment, but it does not translate into success. Shekhar was published by Aleph Book Company, an independent Indian publishing firm founded by David Davidar in May 2011, in partnership with Rupa Publications India. Davidar's journalistic and publishing career spans 40 years. He's been chief executive officer of Penguin India, Penguin Canada, and Pearson India, and managing director at Dorling Kindersley India. Rupa Publications India, founded in 1936 with the tagline 'The House of Bestsellers', is one of the foremost trade book publishers in India, with print runs of a lakh (100,000) and an impressive distribution system. With a combination of experience and contacts such as these, there's no reason why Shekhar's book would not have been served well. It's been advertised and promoted in public domains, been reviewed by every leading newspaper; the author's attended book launches and literary festivals, and got the mileage adivaani can't offer any of its books and authors yet.

Adivasis having the skillset to write doesn't automatically mean a steady stream of literature; the establishment of an 'Adivasi' publishing house, which operates from home with no staff, doesn't mean a churning out of books that will find elbow room on book shelves and book shops, or draw instant fame for its Adivasi authors. We have neither capital nor social capital,<sup>37</sup> and as a publisher, adivaani remains in the peripheries of the publishing industry.

What then happens to Santal writers writing in Santali, who have traditionally been self-publishing, with no publishing or distribution ecosystem to

<sup>35</sup> [http://sahitya-akademi.gov.in/awards/yuva\\_samman\\_suchi.jsp](http://sahitya-akademi.gov.in/awards/yuva_samman_suchi.jsp), [accessed 1 July 2022].

<sup>36</sup> Some of these known Indigenous authors published by mainstream publishers are Easterine Kire, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *When the River Sleeps* (2014), *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016), *Don't Run, My Love* (2017); Mamang Da, *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2003), *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal* (2004), *The Sky Queen and Once Upon a Moontime* (2003), *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2008), *The Black Hill* (2014), *River Poems* (2004), *The Balm of Time* (2008), *Hambreelmai's Loom* (2014), *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2014); Temsula Ao, *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), *Songs From the Other Life* (2007), *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone* (2005), *Laburnum for my Head* (2009), Janice Pariat, *Boats on Land: A Collection of Short Stories* (2012), *Seahorse: A Novel*, (2014), *The Nine-Chambered Heart* (2017).

<sup>37</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital*, in J. Richardson, *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241–258.

sustain the kind of reach enjoyed by Shekhar? There are three things to unpack here: the first is that we write in a language that is not global, though Santali is spoken by at least seven million people. Nishaant Choksi, in his findings from Jhilimili village (West Bengal) of the *Diku* attitude to Santali says:

many caste-Hindus did not even consider Santali a language, or if they did, referred to it as a caste-delimited variety that was specific to this area. The language was either referred to as *thar* (mute sounds, i.e., not language) or by a younger generation who lived through the rise of the Jharkhand movement, as simply *Adivasi* language, or the language of the *Adivasi* caste (i.e., Santals), the original inhabitants of the area.<sup>38</sup>

Linguistically, Santali is assigned as Austro-Asiatic, which Max Müller called the Munda family of languages. Grammatically Santali is quite distinct from the neighbouring Indo-Aryan languages.<sup>39</sup> In 2003, Santali was included as one of India's 22 official languages, becoming one of the two Tribal languages to be incorporated, alongside Bodo. Universities in Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Orissa offer graduate and postgraduate courses in the Santali language. Public service exams in these states can be taken in Santali. This indicates that Santali is as legitimate as any other Indian majoritarian language; yet it is not.

This brings us to our second point of consideration: the medium in which Santals write. Santals speak the same language everywhere but we don't have a uniform system to write it in. The first Santal to be published was Majhi Ramdas Tudu whose *Kherwal Bongsho Dharam Puthi* [*The Religious Book of the Kherwals* (a term for Munda-speaking people)] was published in Calcutta in 1894 in Santali using the Eastern Brahmi (Bangla) script. Sociological and anthropological evidence locates Santals in India to being pre-Dravidian and pre-Aryan, and being in India for at least 5,000 years<sup>40</sup> but it took until the nineteenth century for their first known writing to be produced. About 50 years before Majhi Ramdas Tudu's book, a collection of Santali songs and folktales was published by American missionary Jeremiah Philips in 1845. Arriving in India in 1838, Philips learnt Bengali, and then in Odisha came across the Santals. He not only started preaching to the Santals but learnt Santali too. In the course of time he discovered the Santals' living repository of songs, traditions, riddles, customs, and prayers. He began to collect them on his preaching tours. He fell back on the Eastern Brahmi (Bangla) script to document them as he realized the Santals had no writing method. To Philips is attributed the introduction of Santali in the written form, in the Bangla script.<sup>41</sup> This ushered in the

<sup>38</sup> Nishaant Choksi, 'Surface Politics: Scaling Multiscriptality in an Indian Village Market', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–24.

<sup>39</sup> Nishaant Choksi, 'Scripting the Border: Script Practices and Territorial Imagination among Santali Speakers in Eastern India', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, no. 227, 2014, pp. 47–63.

<sup>40</sup> Timotheas Hembrom, *The Santal and the Biblical Creation Traditions: Anthropological and Theological Reflections* (Kolkata: adivaani, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Paul Olav Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit: A Short History of the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches 1867–1967* (Dumka: Santal Mission of the Northern Churches, 1967).

missionary period of documentations and publications, which started emerging from all Santal regions in Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar (Jharkhand), and Assam. These collections included primers, books on Santali language and grammar, common songs, hymnbooks, orders of worship, dictionaries, traditions of Santals, ancient medicinal practices, etc.

The Eastern Brahmi (Bangla) script became popular in Bengal but it was not suitable for missionaries working in Bihar. In 1863 Dr C. R. Lepsas, making some alterations to the Roman script, developed the first standard Santali Roman script with the use of diacritical marks. The first printing presses were set up between 1879 and 1890 to support demand for publication in Roman Santali.<sup>42</sup> Thus commenced a literary legacy in multiple scripts to which India's Independence added more traction. With the demand for linguistic autonomy, the states had to be reorganized on the basis of language dominance and scripted languages. Quite obviously, Tribals could not canvas for separate states, as they were non-scripted peoples who were assimilated and divided by state boundaries.<sup>43</sup> While Santali, the spoken language, remained mostly the same across all geographies, Santali writing continued to be produced in the dominant regional scripts or in their respective official Brahmi-based scripts. For instance, in Bihar, the literary magazine *Hod Sambad (News of the Santals)* produced Santali writing in Devanagari (script), and in West Bengal, in 1955, the government produced the magazine *Pachim Bangla* (first named *Katha-Barta*) published in the Eastern Brahmi (Bangla) script. Simultaneously, as primary education in the official state languages became more accessible in rural areas, small Santali-language magazines in the various Brahmi scripts started sprouting throughout the Santali-speaking regions.<sup>44</sup>

The Roman script has been used mostly by those educated in the missions, but many non-Christian Santals felt that the script, being 'foreign', did not represent an inclusive, 'national' community. In response, numerous writers and poets started designing independent Santali scripts that did not borrow characters from other scripts.<sup>45</sup> The most accepted of these newly crafted scripts was Ol Chiki (writing symbol/sign), invented by the Santali dramatist, educator, and poet Raghunath Murmu.

The script was supposedly revealed to Murmu by the Santal spirits (or *bongas*) on a hill near his village in Mayurbhanj district, Orissa in the late 1920s. Like the Roman script, Ol Chiki was alphabetic and contained an almost identical phonetic inventory. Yet, unlike the Roman script, supporters claimed that the script was distinctly Santal, based on signs and symbols used for communication by Santals long before alphabetic literacy. Each grapheme not only had a phonetic value, but

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Virginius Xaxa, 'Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 40, no. 13, 26 March 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Choksi, 'Scripting the border'.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

also a separate image-name, i.e., a Santali word that was diagrammatically associated with the grapheme.<sup>46</sup>

Murmu was not just a literary activist but a political one too, who wanted the new script to unify the Santals, who he felt had been divided for too long by political borders. However, what this dream of a single script unifying the Santals has actually done, and is doing, is the opposite. We now stand on a battleground of 'supremacy of script'.

This brings me to the third deliberation. Santali literature, now produced in five official scripts (Latin/Roman, Ol Chiki, Eastern Brahmi (Bangla), Devanagari, and Odia) can cater only to those who read and write in them. The 2001 census places the literacy rate of Santals at 23.3 per cent. The data from current censuses are not disaggregated and thus the updated Santals' literacy rate can't be placed here. So primarily a majority of formally educated Santals would be literate in one or two scripts that Santali is written in, at most. Multiscriptality therefore limits a Santal's enjoyment of Santali literature. The Sahitya Akademi (India's National Academy of Letters) allows submissions for the Santali prize in Ol Chiki alone, and because of this year after year many are denied participation in the awards and many Santals are deprived of reading the prize-winning books. We hear of Santals who don't know Ol Chiki and want to submit their books for the Sahitya Akademi awards commissioning those who do know it to transcribe their works. Transcribing from one script to the other is another feature of the Santali literary landscape; of course, this has financial implications for such authors. I also believe that at some point we will have to go back to a certain kind of orality where to experience Santali literature we will need to listen to it, from Santals who know the scripts we don't, with them reading or performing these out for the rest of us.

### Being written about and the politics of it

Writing means having the tools to do so, using a native script or one invented for documentation in the native tongue or borrowing a universal, more dominant one. Santals, when first written about by Shore in 1795<sup>47</sup> or when they came in contact with missionaries, possessed none of these tools.

What does it mean for the Santals to be documenting and writing themselves only in the last 150 years, where formal literacy rates are dismal and orality is very much the epicentre of their cultural, religious, and traditional expressions?

The politics of history writing is in the perpetuation of the dominant narrative. In Hindu epics such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas (folklores), there are several references to interactions and wars between the forest or hill tribes and the Hindus, where the tribes are referred to as demons, non-human, and slaves. This is the basis of one kind of discrimination faced by Adivasis to date. Writing gives the licence to subjugate, oppress, and

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Hembrom, *The Santal and the Biblical Creation Traditions*.

manipulate, and readers often become conduits in the propagation of discrimination, including reinforcing stereotypes, and romanticizing and fetishizing Adivasi being. The Constituent Assembly Debates<sup>48</sup> enumerate the earlier denigration and the paternalistic attitudes of the framers of the Indian Constitution. Then there are examples of the Christian missionaries who, in deciding what went into print, wielded control of what was made public. Norwegian missionary P. O. Bodding, who along with his Santal teachers, collectors, and writing collaborators, collected some 1,500 stories, which are now found in the Santal Archives of the Oslo University Library.<sup>49</sup> Bodding chose to publish only a few hundred stories; the exclusion of others is explored in the 2011 book *From Fire Rain to Rebellion*.<sup>50</sup>

The central most significant event for the Santals in the nineteenth century is the rebellion of 1855 (Hul) led by brothers Sido and Kanhu Murmu who rose against the oppressive forces of the Indian zamindars (landlords who had encroached upon their land, enslaving them for agricultural and other menial work, while taxing them additionally). When that threshold of tolerance was crossed, Santals gathered at Panchkatia near Bhognadih on 30 June 1855, deciding to first walk to Calcutta, 300 kilometres away, to present their grievances in a memorandum to the British—as they were the ones who had enabled the entry of the zamindars into Santal lands—as their way to reclaim their personal and community freedom. The large gathering distressed the police and attempts to disperse the crowds resulted in a clash, quickly escalating to the uprising as we know it today. The Santals with their bows and arrows never made it to Calcutta, instead Calcutta and the British army with their guns and arms reached them. It took the British two years to quell the rebellion, leaving 30,000 Santals dead. The rebellion gave legitimacy for the Santal Mission (Protestant Church) to be formed, allowing the entry of a spiritual conquest, to yet again ‘tame’ the Santal Adivasis. The colonial power was behind the mission in a general way.<sup>51</sup>

Sagram Murmu, Bodding’s most impressive Santal collector, who could be called a writer in his own right, worked on the three volume Santal folktale collection extensively. Forty-two years after the Hul, stories, tales, and memories still revolved around it, the reasons for the defeat, and its aftermath. Murmu collated two collections through interviews with villagers in *The Time Before the Rebellion* and *The Story of the Santal Rebellion*, which Bodding neither published nor used as sources.<sup>52</sup>

Collection and publication, then, became a way to expunge and obliterate history—and culture too. This was not an oversight but a deliberate concealment and suppression of certain histories that don’t align with the official narrative recorders want to project. In the 44 years Bodding worked in India, he

<sup>48</sup> CAD India Project, *Constituent Assembly Debates*.

<sup>49</sup> K. Santosh Soren, *Santalia: Catalogue of Santali Manuscripts in Oslo* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 1999).

<sup>50</sup> Peter B. Anderson, Marine Carrin and Santosh K. Soren (eds), *From Fire Rain to Rebellion: Reasserting Ethnic Identity Through Narrative* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



produced material that is humanly unmatched. He was without doubt an exceptional ethnographer and linguist as he improved the adaptation of the Roman script for the Santali language that he mastered. But Bodding's work was made possible, and easier, with the help of his Santal guides, teachers, collaborators, and helpers like Sagram Murmu and other contributors, who were all but relegated to the margins of history.

Bodding is a revered figure among Santals and is known as the 'Father of Santali Literature', particularly among Christian Santals, but let's not forget that Bodding's incredible studies and recordings in *Materials for a Santali Grammar I* were created because we were a people with a well-developed and rich language. Bodding's *Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore* was possible because we were a people with a deep and intimate understanding and knowledge of healing, plant, and forest life. This huge landscape of living cultures was a goldmine for ethnographers and ethnologists.<sup>53</sup>

Indigenous knowledge systems have no ostensible value on their own unless they are packaged as academic products by others, the *Dikus*, those who are cultured and educated. This value elevation extends to the usage and marketing of traditional medicinal wisdom, early agricultural techniques to organic farming, animal husbandry, and traditional arts, crafts, and music. The source communities become the agents of others' success. The yields of this success remain with the others, becoming a process of exploitation, and expropriation, where those profiting feel almost entitled to do so. While there have been a handful of supportive colonial writers, and there are some post-Independence and contemporary scholars, many of whom are personal friends, whose works challenge racist constructs and stereotypes, and who advocate for Adivasi rights, and act as allies, yet the legitimacy of Adivasi discourses comes only when the *Dikus* write, analyse, theorize, and represent Adivasis and their issues. With intellectual and creative engagements on Adivasis, through writing, being upheld as a *Diku* domain, like practically every field of study, the distinction between *source* knowledge producers and *resultant* knowledge reproducers is compromised. This is not only about credit, or copyright, but also about epistemological abuse, when the knowledge Adivasis put out is dismissed or treated condescendingly, as 'their thought processes are very basic'.

Where is the elbow room for Adivasi writing? What are the costs of jostling for space? Is writing to become an Adivasi instrument to stand up to exploitation and persecution, and to seek epistemological justice? If there's room for Adivasis, there's room for their writing, their thinking, their expressions, and their deviance from expected norms and standards of being. The politics of writing and being written about lies in disentangling why Adivasis telling Adivasi stories aren't the benchmark of literature and scholarship but *Diku* writing is.

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<sup>53</sup> Ruby Hembrom, 'The Santals and the Bodding Paradox', *Norsk Tidsskrift For Misjonsvitenskap*, vol. 71, no. 3, pp. 51–58.

## Producing ourselves, in our own way

The apparent transition from orality to a written culture for Santals was clearly one of imposition, one decided by anyone but them. When today the Santali literature landscape boasts 150 literary magazines across scripts and at least a hundred books being published every year, with over 300 writers and over 33 Sahitya Akademi Award winners, we need to appreciate and address the struggles that went and go into expressing and asserting the cultural identity we own through writing. The history of Santali literature is not linear and nobody can really say in which direction it is going next, but what we know is that new generations of storytellers are expressing themselves in ways and languages we couldn't have imagined a century ago, and reclaiming our stories and knowledge for a new era.

As a publisher, coming also from a tradition of orality, I am confronted by the dilemma of transmitting, translating, and reproducing what's organic and breathing into a form that in many ways is limiting. After all, how do you market insight, experience, memory, and traditions? If one draws a Venn diagram of the terms, concepts, and functions of *orality*, *publication*, and *Adivasi literature*, three distinct entities stand out, yet at some point their borders merge in meaning and purpose. If we had to pinpoint the overlap, it would throw up in the infinite list (among others): words, syntax, interaction, imagery, memory, knowledge, wisdom, culture, heritage, history, and civilization. This overlap embodies something so critical—the identity of entire indigenous peoples and communities—that the medium used to showcase, work, document, or transmit Adivasi literature can't be taken lightly.

Adivasis balance themselves 'both as a scholarly outsider and as a functioning insider'.<sup>54</sup> That's the location Adivasis write from, that's the responsibility they articulate from, and that's what they release into the world, with accountability to ancestral wisdom and the community. They now write in their native languages, in the regional dominant languages, and English, mediums used as a crutch to express, set records straight, defend ourselves, and counter the dominion of texts of the past, but also of the textual dominion we live in and what is to come.

This kind of assertion comes with its own set of epistemological and ontological problems, which Adivasi/Tribal researchers, scholars, intellectuals, and writers navigate differently. This is particularly true of representation, with concerns around invalidation, devaluation, subjugation, misappropriation, misrepresentation, marginalization, primitivism, decontextualization, and the exclusion and rejection of indigenous knowledge systems. When it comes to researching Santals or Adivasis, I am not an outsider. I am the *knower* as well as carrier of *our* and *my* knowledge. Not only am I inside the terms of my research—the boundaries of it include me and I approach my object of work with an instinctive immersion within my people. There is no conflict, just an organic intimacy with one's own knowledge systems. Ontologically,

<sup>54</sup> Jarold Ramsey, 'Francis LaFlesche's "The Song of Flying Crow" and the Limits of Ethnography', in *American Indian Persistence and Resurgence*, (ed.) Karl Kroeber (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 191.

though, I am the ‘other’ myself. My concerns then vary from those of *Diku* scholars. That’s why I leave the problems of representation to the outsider. I am part of the narrative; I am the narrative and I am the source on which my representation of self is built.

When the Tribal Intellectual Collective India<sup>55</sup> premises its scholarly writing, theoretical engagements, and critical dialogue ‘sourced directly from people’s lived experience’ or a ‘perspective from within’ or ‘engaging with multiple intersecting realities, with a definitive focus on tribes’ episteme’, they are but stating the obvious, and displaying ontological coherence. Our work has to focus on our own concepts and methodologies as well as those of our peers. We have to invest in, build, repurpose, or regenerate our knowledge systems, and getting embroiled in others’ idea of us only keeps us from nurturing our own.

This is what Audra Simpson calls sovereignty and refusal: ‘... to think about “sovereignty”... is to think very seriously about needs and, basically, involves a calculus ethnography of what you need to know and what I refuse to write in’.<sup>56</sup> Writing can be an act of exercising nuances in regulation—of which doors to open, which to keep open and which to close—how much to let you in on what one knows.

### Stories, counter-stories, and countering stories

Texts and narratives that talk of Adivasis are reflections we sometimes can barely recognize. Tribal scholar Richard Kamei reiterates this literary and academic dissonance, which continues to influence how indigenous people are treated in the present,

Many ethnographic studies are replete with language that exoticizes or degrades tribes, such as ‘naked’, ‘savage’, ‘primitive’, ‘uncivilized’, ‘barbaric’, ‘wild’ and ‘criminal’—terminology that is telling of a lack of understanding, empathy or respect towards tribes and their ways of life. These labels often remain unaddressed in academia and public discourse. Alternatively, they have been justified by apologists or casually overlooked as incidental to the tribal narrative, but this branding continues to define the approach of mainstream societies towards tribal people.<sup>57</sup>

Simpson echoes the same discordance in being written about, ‘I was stimulated to frame my project on Mohawk nationhood and citizenship by the complete disjuncture between what was written about my own people

<sup>55</sup> The Tribal Intellectual Collective India is a knowledge-producing community constituted by activists, professors, and academics from various universities in India and across the globe who are engaged in tribal and Adivasi Studies, available at <http://www.ticijournals.org/>, [accessed 1 July 2022].

<sup>56</sup> Audra Simpson, ‘On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, “Voice” and Colonial Citizenship’, *Junctures*, no. 9, 2007, pp. 67–80.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Kamei, ‘Uncivilising the Mind: How Anthropology Shaped the Discourse on Tribes in India’, *The Caravan*, vol. 13, no. 3, March 2021, pp. 84–95, available at <https://caravanmagazine.in/books/anthropologists-tribes-india>, [accessed 1 July 2022].

and the things that mattered the most to us.<sup>58</sup> If the interpretations in the writing of others antagonize us, to whom would we complain? How could we challenge what was going down in history, academic discourses, literature, for posterity? That's why Adivasis, now reading and learning what's been written about them, defend their knowledge systems, stating: *You now listen to us, this is who we are, and this is how we tell our stories and histories.*

Adivasis' brand of literature may be diverse and distinctive from others that reading cultures have encountered, and in many cases, it will require some extra effort, imagination, and graciousness on their part to appreciate it. Adivasis do feel burdened or imprisoned by standards of language and literary benchmarks and feel pressured to alter or simplify it, make it relatable—to conform—but how much is too much? I've had to defend one of our Adivasi authors who also writes in English, having learnt the language in his adulthood. I was told 'his English writing is so basic; very everyday blog material'. As his publisher and editor, I have the liberty to change the language to suit and meet the so-called erudite established standards, but then that would not be him any more, that would be me. My responsibility is towards the author and his authorship whose simplicity in a foreign language doesn't take away from the impact of his stories and narratives. This is who we are, this is the literary stage we are at, and we have to take pride in it. I am often ambushed by this arrogance in language syndrome. And it is no easy experience.

Producing knowledges and expressing creativity in original text or translation is fuelled by the desire to be heard, known, and understood. As indigenous peoples we release our material with the adage: 'If you don't understand me, I'll tell it to you in your language. However I can't guarantee you will understand.' The need to assert that Adivasi works are a source of human history, and not archaic but contemporary, has now become my mission as an Adivasi cultural documentarian and publisher. Literature is not just about the licence to push creativity or reproduce traditional stories, but also about challenging and questioning society. Adivasis are not just hoping for the acceptance of their stories and books, but also the dignity of acceptance as storytellers, knowledge producers, and thinkers in their own terms, their own ways.

Omaha ethnologist Francis LaFlesche (1857–1932) is an example of one occupying a textualized world within the limits and possibilities of one's own ways.

The unpublished writings of 'the first professional American Indian anthropologist' ... include a file of handwritten and typed manuscripts in the National Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C. The bulk of these manuscripts reflect LaFlesche's literary inclinations; more specifically, they seem to represent his ongoing interest in finding new ways of 'doing' ethnography, beyond the standard forms of discourse established in the Boas era of American anthropology and followed by LaFlesche himself in his monumental collaboration with

<sup>58</sup> Simpson, 'On Ethnographic Refusal'.

Alice Fletcher on the culture of his own people, *The Omaha Tribe*, and other scholarly writings.<sup>59</sup>

Most of the unpublished pieces in the Smithsonian Archives are literarily self-conscious explorations in forms of autobiographical discourse, with persistent emphasis on figures such as the author himself, moving equivocally between native and Anglo cultures.<sup>60</sup>

In his memoir of a summertime return to the Omaha reservation entitled ‘The Song of Flying Crow’, LaFlesche reflects on discovering a brand-new song his community knew and he did not, even though he could sing some 500 to 600 songs. He immerses himself in learning and memorizing it. Against the backdrop of that event, he reflects on his homecoming, the source of the song, its creator (his deceased childhood friend), and the meaning of the lyrics and melody, but nowhere does he publish the song itself. It was withheld from outsiders. This song became a shared knowledge and legacy of the Omaha people alone. ‘If it is a tacit denial of our expectations as readers to learn something else about the Omaha, it is also an act of self-fashioning refusal, and it stands as a deeply moving affirmation ... of the wholeness of what LaFlesche knows about himself ... Ethnography has stopped short of betrayal.’<sup>61</sup> The suppression of key information, this teasing, this leaving it hanging, and the leading of one into a game of hide and seek are about epistemic liberation—emancipation from expectations, of how one can withdraw from the established rules of engagement for writing and scholarship. He exercises free will; he displays the control of knowing and sharing his ethnography of self.

That is what Adivasis—new writers, publishers, scholars, researchers, intellectuals—are doing. They are crossing over and engaging with their cultures, transacting ancestral spaces, inhabiting their narratives, and living the ideas, philosophies, histories, and expressions of their peoples and finding ways to generate their own pedagogy within established academic and literary spaces—what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls the ‘academic industrial complex’, which cannot provide the ‘proper context’ for indigenous ‘intelligence’, experiences of learning. Only ‘restitution’ from the ‘academic industrial complex’ can facilitate the ‘recognition of the context within which Nishnaabeg intelligence manifests itself—in the practice of its lifeways emerging from land’.<sup>62</sup>

Adivasi scholars have tremendous pressure on them, treading cautiously in spaces new to them, speaking languages foreign to them, inhabiting knowledge systems different from theirs, and traversing hostile spaces of intellectual bias and micro-aggressions in daily encounters. That is the burden they carry not

<sup>59</sup> Hartley B. Alexander, ‘Francis LaFlesche’, *American Anthropologist*, NS, vol. 35, no. 2, 1933, pp. 328–331.

<sup>60</sup> Ramsey, ‘Francis LaFlesche’s “The Song of Flying Crow”’.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, ‘Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2014, pp. 1–25. It must be noted that Simpson is also developing an idea she borrows from Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

just to make linear educational progress but also to assert their ability in being counted as intellectuals. They have to shoulder this responsibility and be liable for the material they put out. They are presenting and preaching to a breed of hard-core believers in the conventional and established scholarship, as well as to those who already acknowledge the knowledges emerging from Adivasis.<sup>63</sup> Yet, the task is to be committed to creating our own brand of indigenous scholarship, by refining arguments, sharpening its erudition to challenge that traditionalism, to build recognition for this work, and to influence more mainstream scholars to receive this with respect. How to ensure indigenous scholarship survives and thrives is not just up to us but also to the *Diku* outsider; even though we won't wait for their approval or endorsement and their disapproval will not prevent us from producing and reproducing our knowledges. This is the academic and literary soil in which stories, counter stories, grow, and seeds of ideas and strategies for countering stories are germinated.

### Conclusion: Cultural gatekeeping, displacement, and resurgence

Our traditions and stories are constantly changing. Our stories have been changed, erased, censored, and sanitized, sometimes without our consent, and neither our capacity to understand the process of transformation and obliteration. A physical uprooting, a forced migration, and displacement sever our ties with home—the known eco-systems where stories sprout and spread. When bulldozers and excavators raze our homes to the ground, tear down our forests and lands to make way for roads, mining, extractivism, refineries, or Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) camps, they demolish the tangible remnants of traditional knowledge—the architecture, the sacred groves, and dancing grounds, all spaces that bear testimony to and hold culture. But one could argue that people are the carriers of culture and our traditions and stories should go with us wherever we go. They do, but how do you sing harvest songs when your forced or circumstantial displacement makes of you a road construction worker or a stone quarry miner? How do you sing of open skies, forests, and rivers that dot your homelands when you're confined to others' homes as domestic workers or living as 'economic refugees'<sup>64</sup> in cities? Sure, you could sing them, but when you are detached from the context where your stories come from, or your songs and dances originate, they become an imagined realm, a world that seems distant, elapsed, stolen, and that's a tragedy.

Changing lifestyles due to the influx of dominant cultures, or an uprooting that places us in new spaces and systems, positions us in an unequal equation where, to survive, we imbibe and imitate the dominant ways and languages. That becomes fairly easy to do when you're constantly reminded that your ways are 'primitive' and 'backward', and when you realize that the government

<sup>63</sup> Sangeeta Dasgupta, 'Adivasi Studies: From a Historian's Perspective', *History Compass*, vol. 16, no. 10, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010).

machinery doesn't even recognize your ways and has no use for them. This cultural encroachment and takeover by dominant cultures, languages, and modes of communication further marginalize indigenous ways and effectively displace culture. When trauma replaces the familiarity of home, when survival substitutes security, the joys of living and expression evaporate. New locales and languages bring new threads to cultures. When protest slogans replace traditional songs, new facets of culture are created. This is a natural and inevitable way of living and surviving. But we have to know and ask: How will our ancestors recognize us as indigenous? How will we recognize our great grandchildren as indigenous? How do we ensure our young people are connected to our homelands, languages, and our cultures in a way that is meaningful to them?<sup>65</sup>

By protecting our territories, our *lands*, we are not just saving the forests or fighting against capitalism. We are, in fact, and most of all, trying to preserve ourselves and the deep and ancient roots that link us to our earth—we are resisting cultural loss. Our knowledge is a shared resource—a narrative of pieces of a resistance that needs to blossom in a collective resurgence. That's where writing as resistance, as an act of courage, and an act of remembering come in.

Making the connection of books being a medium to preserve entire indigenous communities from extinction and cultural genocide<sup>66</sup> is not an easy one, but nevertheless it has to be attempted. When publishers in India are ordered, as a legal recourse, to pulp books<sup>67</sup> that offend religious and other sentiments only shows that laws can curb freedom of expression and literature, and ultimately deform any culture. How Adivasi narratives cope with such bullying, gagging, and distortion of our histories is critical to the sustainability and authenticity of our knowledge. This supervision, regulation, or surveillance of culture just accentuates the need for Adivasis to take up documentation themselves and reclaim its production and reproduction.

When one questions why we write or claim that we reject writing, it is a perverse, subtle way of denying us agency—refusing us elbow room in creative and literary fields and space as cultural peoples. Miranda Fricker<sup>68</sup> situates these experiences as epistemic injustice, where the burden of *legitimacy* is placed on the 'knower' and not the *receiver*, whose power has enabled them the rule setting of 'credibility', placing the 'knower' prejudicially within a

<sup>65</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back. Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (Kolkata: adivaani, 2014).

<sup>66</sup> Gladson Dungdung and Felix Padel, 'Adivasis on the March—Crisis and Cultural Genocide in Tribal India', Adivasi Hunkar, 2019, available at <http://www.minesandcommunities.org/article.php?a=13943>, [accessed 21 July 2022].

<sup>67</sup> In 2014, 'Penguin Books India agreed to withdraw from sale and pulp all copies of *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, by the US-based academic Wendy Doniger, as part of a settlement after a group of Hindu conservative nationalists filed a case against the publisher', available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/13/indian-conservatives-penguin-hindus-book/> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/14/penguin-india-pulping-book-wendy-doniger> [both accessed 1 July 2022].

<sup>68</sup> Fricker, 'Epistemic Justice'. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

replication of the social order of inequalities in the domain of knowledges. When your social location or identity clouds how your truth or 'credence' is perceived and received, that is testimonial injustice, and when your knowledge systems do not share the same codes of meaning making, and thus prevent expression or participation in legitimate knowledge making, you face hermeneutical injustice. To reconcile both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice<sup>69</sup> for Adivasis is about an assertion through *producing and reproducing ourselves, in our own ways* by co-habiting a textualized world, through orality.

Who writes and who publishes is not what we're negotiating with, because we can't stop anyone from doing so. Who has written and who has published can tellingly point to the vacuum in the body of our narratives—that it has not been us telling our stories until very recently. We can't stop anybody from telling our stories, but that someone would want to stop us, can, and does, tells us more about those others' insecurities and fragilities in indigenous knowledge production—not forgetting the immense power, control, and possibilities of manipulation they also hold. Anyone can tell our stories, but can they love them? When we tell and retell our stories it's from knowing our own existence is at stake, it's from the realization of being on the brink of disappearance—and the emotions this evokes is an anticipatory grief that is personal. That's what no outsider can own or appropriate: our stories run through the fabric of our collective life like blood made out of time, dreams, and hope.

Our lives sometimes merge, sometimes run parallel, sometimes run ahead, and sometimes fall behind our culture and literature from the past. How are we coping? What do we do to share what our ancestors created with Adivasis born in cities, in other provinces, and under quite different circumstances? How do we interpret texts for the new-breed Adivasis? Reclamation is acknowledging the liberty and responsibility of knowledge producers also—as is questioning whether we're handing down and preserving for our next generations through our publications an adulterated version of who we are as indigenous peoples, because we compromised on authenticity and conformed with mainstream standards and expectations. There has to be a way we can transmit ourselves into the future without diluting ourselves as indigenous peoples. That is resurgence.

Indigenous peoples have always engaged in complex and ongoing forms of resistance and resurgence against these processes in order to protect the core of our cultures and life ways, and in order to protect the integrity of our homelands. This has taken, and takes, many forms—from the more visible large-scale land protection mobilizations, to critical acts of physical survival, to everyday acts of resurgence designed to connect the next generation to our land, culture, and language.<sup>70</sup> Every time an Adivasi speaks it is claiming, reclaiming, a production, a reproduction of a knowledge system that are key to our collective survival—evidence of who we have been during our millennial travel through our territories of time. This is asserting our collective place in our species, as human beings, refusing to be forgotten and marginalized.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*.



Whenever I go to a library or a book fair I am overwhelmed by the number of books on shelves, wondering who would read ours in the mountains of uncountable books. The paradox of how many of us can actually read our own writing is not lost on me as well. Reclaiming the production and reproduction of Adivasi knowledge is also an assertion of its right to exist. Whether we read or not, we need to have our say, we need to nudge our way into shelves just to be. That is elbow room. We will not be shamed or denigrated for being peoples of and from orality and neither will we be discredited for what we put out through our writing. Elbow room and Adivasi resurgence are not about inclusion of our knowledge systems in the established discourses alone, as inclusion does not automatically qualify as cohabiting—as a space of parity. One can be included, though still exist in the margins. Adivasi resurgence is not a mission of indigenizing dominant literary and scholarly spaces, but about revitalizing the connections to our ancestral and communitarian knowledge and wisdom. From typeset text we have to speak, our voices unapologetically echoing those of our ancestors, our contemporaries, and our own, as we enable our brand of knowledge to take a life form of its own, standing the test of time and critique.

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