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Between Recognition and Erosion: Linguistic Vitality, Script Multiplicity, and the Politics of Transmission among Santali Speakers in Odisha

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Abstract

Santali, an Austroasiatic language of the Munda family spoken by roughly ten million people across Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha, occupies a paradoxical position among India's minority and indigenous languages. Constitutionally recognised in the Eighth Schedule since 2003 and equipped with its own indigenous script, Ol Chiki, devised by Raghunath Murmu in 1925, Santali is often cited as a comparative success story of Indigenous-language institutionalisation. Yet beneath this formal recognition lies a more uneven landscape of vitality, particularly in Odisha, where Santali speakers are numerically smaller and more dispersed than in neighbouring states, and where the language competes for domain space with Odia in education, administration, and every-day public life. This paper examines the dynamics of maintenance and shift among Santali-speaking communities in Odisha, focusing on three interlocking pressures: the fragmentation of literacy across as many as five competing scripts (Ol Chiki, Odia, Devanagari, Bengali, and Roman), which undermines standardised transmission even as it reflects communities' pragmatic multilingualism; the generational drift of Santal youth toward Odia and Hindi as languages of employment and social mobility; and the uneven visibility of Santali in Odisha's linguistic landscape compared to its stronger institutional presence in West Bengal and Jharkhand. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and secondary sociolinguistic data, the paper argues that Santali's vitality in Odisha cannot be read solely through constitutional status or aggregate speaker numbers, but must be understood through localised practices of script choice, intergenerational transmission within households, and community negotiation of multilingual repertoires. In doing so, it contributes a subnational, comparative lens to broader debates on how minoritized languages persist, adapt, or recede within India's shifting linguistic and political landscapes.

Keywords: Santali language, Ol Chiki, Odisha, linguistic vitality, script multiplicity, language shift

1. Introduction:

Language is never only a system of sounds, words, and grammatical rules. For Indigenous communities, it is a medium through which histories are remembered, kinship is organised, ecological knowledge is transmitted, ritual life is enacted, and collective identity is affirmed. The vitality of a language therefore cannot be assessed merely by counting speakers or by noting its presence in constitutional documents. It must be examined through the everyday practices through which a language is learned, used, valued, written, sung, and passed on from one generation to the next.

Santali presents a particularly instructive case for such an examination. It is one of the most widely spoken languages of the Munda subgroup of the Austroasiatic family and is spoken across several Indian states, including Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and Assam, as well as in parts of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. In India, Santali was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution through the Ninety-second Constitutional Amendment Act in 2003, a milestone that gave the language formal national recognition and opened possibilities for its use in education, public administration, competitive examinations, literature, and academic research.

At the same time, Santali possesses a distinctive Indigenous script, Ol Chiki, created by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in 1925. Ol Chiki consists of thirty letters designed to represent the phonetic features of Santali, including sounds that are difficult to capture adequately through borrowed scripts. Its creation was not simply a technical achievement in writing-system design; it was also a cultural and political act. By providing Santali with a script of its own, Murmu offered the community a visible symbol of linguistic autonomy, intellectual dignity, and cultural continuity.

Yet the story of Santali in Odisha cannot be told only through the language's constitutional recognition or the existence of Ol Chiki. In Odisha, especially in Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, and Balasore districts, Santali speakers live within a multilingual environment shaped by Odia as the state's dominant administrative and educational language, Hindi as a language of wider mobility and media, Bengali in border and trade areas, and English as a language of higher education and employment. Santali must therefore compete for space in homes, schools, markets, offices, digital platforms, and public culture. Its vitality is uneven: strong in certain households, villages, festivals, and community organisations, but fragile in formal education, administration, and intergenerational transmission among younger speakers.

This paper examines this paradox between recognition and erosion. It asks how Santali remains alive in Odisha despite the pressures of linguistic hierarchy, script fragmentation, and social change. It also asks why formal recognition has not automatically produced equal linguistic security. The central argument is that Santali's vitality in Odisha must be understood as a localised and relational process. It depends not only on state policy or aggregate speaker numbers, but also on script choices made by writers and readers, language practices within families, the availability of Santali-medium education, the prestige attached to Odia, Hindi, and English, and the capacity of Santali institutions and community networks to sustain the language across generations.

The paper proceeds in six main sections. The first situates the study within sociolinguistic debates on language vitality, language shift, and linguistic human rights. The second outlines the historical and demographic context of Santali in Odisha. The third examines the politics of script multiplicity, especially the coexistence of Ol Chiki with Odia, Devanagari, Bengali, and Roman scripts. The fourth analyses intergenerational transmission and the changing language practices of Santali youth. The fifth considers institutional support, education, media, and public visibility. The final section discusses implications for language maintenance and suggests directions for policy and community-led revitalisation.

2. Conceptual Framework:

Language Vitality and Language Shift

Sociolinguists have long argued that the survival of a minority language depends chiefly on its intergenerational transmission. Joshua Fishman's influential theory of reversing language shift emphasises that a language remains viable when it is transmitted within families and community networks, particularly

in the home and neighbourhood domains. Where children cease to acquire a language as a first language, institutional support alone may not be sufficient to secure its long-term future.

Language shift, in this framework, is rarely a sudden event. It usually begins in particular domains: parents may continue speaking the heritage language among themselves but use a dominant language with children; children may understand the heritage language but respond in the dominant language; and the next generation may acquire only passive knowledge or lose the language altogether. In multilingual India, such processes are often shaped by schooling, employment, migration, marriage patterns, media consumption, and the perceived prestige of state and national languages.

The concept of linguistic vitality therefore includes more than demographic strength. It involves the number and distribution of speakers, the proportion of children learning the language, the domains in which it is used, its presence in education and media, community attitudes, institutional support, and the availability of written resources. A language may be demographically large but still vulnerable if young people are shifting toward dominant languages in key domains. Conversely, a numerically smaller language may remain resilient if families, schools, religious institutions, cultural organisations, and digital networks actively sustain its use.

Recognition and Its Limits

The recognition of a language in a constitution, official policy, or educational curriculum is an important achievement. It can legitimate a language in the eyes of the state and provide access to resources. For Santali, inclusion in the Eighth Schedule in 2003 enabled its use in formal domains and strengthened its claim to educational and administrative support.

However, recognition is not the same as revitalisation. A language may be constitutionally recognised yet remain absent from classrooms, government offices, courts, digital services, and everyday public signage. Recognition may also create what may be called a "symbolic inclusion" in which the language is celebrated in official discourse but receives limited material support. The gap between symbolic recognition and substantive implementation is especially visible in multilingual states where several recognised languages compete for limited educational and administrative resources.

This distinction is central to the present paper. Santali's Eighth Schedule status and Ol Chiki script are major achievements, but they do not by themselves guarantee that Santali speaking children in Odisha will acquire literacy in the language, use it confidently in public settings, or transmit it to their own children. The vitality of Santali must therefore be assessed at the level of practice: who speaks it, with whom, in which settings, in which script, and with what degree of institutional support.

Script and Language Ideology

Scripts are not neutral technologies. They carry social meanings and political histories. The choice of a script can signal religious affiliation, regional identity, educational background, generational difference, or political orientation. In multilingual societies, script choice may also determine access to texts, schooling, publishing, and digital communication.

For Santali, the existence of multiple scripts reflects both historical pragmatism and contemporary fragmentation. Before Ol Chiki became widely established, Santali was written in scripts associated with neighbouring languages and colonial missionary traditions, including Bengali, Odia, Devanagari, and Roman. These scripts enabled different groups of Santali speakers to produce religious texts, school materials, newspapers, and literary works, but they also divided the reading public. A person literate in Odia-script Santali may not be able to read Ol Chiki; a reader of Bengali-script Santali may not access texts published in Devanagari or Roman.

Ol Chiki was intended to overcome this fragmentation by providing a script specific to Santali phonology and identity. Its thirty-letter system was designed to represent Santali sounds more accurately than borrowed scripts. Yet the older scripts have not disappeared. They continue to circulate in older publications, family records, religious materials, regional networks, and digital communication. Script multiplicity thus remains both a resource and a challenge: it demonstrates the adaptability of Santali speakers, but it can also divide literary communities and complicate standardised language teaching.

3. Santali in Odisha: Historical and Demographic Context

Santal Migration and Settlement

The Santals are one of the largest homogenous Indigenous communities in eastern India. Historically associated with the Chotanagpur region and the Santal Parganas, Santal communities migrated and settled across parts of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Assam over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Odisha, they are concentrated particularly in Mayurbhanj district, with significant populations also present in Keonjhar and Balasore.

Mayurbhanj occupies a special place in Santal cultural history because it is the birthplace of Pandit Raghunath Murmu, the creator of Ol Chiki. This connection gives the district both symbolic and practical importance in the history of Santali language activism. Murmu's work emerged from a context in which Santali speakers were dispersed across administrative boundaries and written in scripts associated with dominant regional languages. His creation of Ol Chiki sought to give the language a unified written identity rooted in Santali phonology and cultural self-respect.

The Santals of Odisha have therefore been both beneficiaries and producers of Santali language activism. They are not merely a peripheral population within a language region centred elsewhere; Mayurbhanj is one of the historic centres from which modern Santali linguistic consciousness emerged.

Demographic Position

According to the 2011 Census, India recorded more than 7.3 million Santali speakers, with the largest concentrations in West Bengal and Jharkhand. Odisha accounted for approximately 0.86 million speakers, a substantial number but smaller than in the neighbouring states. Within Odisha, Santali is especially significant in Mayurbhanj, where it was reported as the first language of nearly one-quarter of the district's population in the 2011 Census.

These figures reveal an important demographic reality. Santali is not a small language in absolute terms, but its distribution is regionally uneven. In Jharkhand and parts of West Bengal, Santali speakers form larger and more contiguous populations, giving the language greater social density and institutional visibility. In Odisha, Santali speakers are numerous but often live amid a Odia-dominant linguistic environment. This has consequences for language maintenance. Where speakers are dispersed, opportunities for Santali-medium schooling, Santali public administration, and Santali-language cultural infrastructure are limited or absent.

The demographic position of Santali speakers in Odisha therefore helps explain the paradox identified in this paper. The language has enough speakers to sustain community life and cultural production, but not always enough institutional density to compete equally with Odia in formal domains.

4. Script Multiplicity and the Politics of Literacy

Ol Chiki as Cultural Sovereignty

Ol Chiki is more than a writing system. It is a central symbol of Santal cultural sovereignty. Created in

1925 by Raghunath Murmu, the script was designed specifically for Santali language and consists of thirty letters that correspond closely to the language's phonetic structure. Its development gave Santali speakers a script that did not depend on the orthographic conventions of Odia, Bengali, Hindi, or English.

The significance of Ol Chiki lies in its association with self-representation. For a community whose language had often been written through scripts developed for other languages, Ol Chiki represented the possibility of naming the world in one's own terms. It enabled the production of Santali literature, school materials, newspapers, songs, religious texts, and later digital content in a script recognisably Santali. The centenary of Ol Chiki has been officially celebrated as a milestone of linguistic empowerment, reflecting its continuing importance in Santal's cultural and political life.

Ol Chiki also plays an important role in language ideology. For many Santali activists, writers, teachers, and community leaders, the script is inseparable from the language itself. To write Santali in Ol Chiki is not merely to record the language; it is to affirm that Santali has its own intellectual tradition and its own right to institutional space.

Multiple Scripts in Practice

Despite the symbolic authority of Ol Chiki, Santali continues to be written in several scripts. Odia, Devanagari, Bengali, and Roman scripts have all been used for Santali at different times and in different regions. This multiplicity has historical roots. Missionary linguists, colonial administrators, and early Santali writers often used the scripts familiar to their audiences or available through local printing technologies. The use of Bengali-script in writing Santali developed strong traditions in parts of West Bengal and Bangladesh; Odia-script Santali circulated in Odisha; Devanagari was used in some Hindi-speaking areas; and Roman-script Santali became important in missionary, academic, and digital contexts. This diversity is not simply a problem of orthographic inconsistency. It reflects the multilingual lives of Santali speakers. Many Santali speakers are already literate in Odia, Hindi, Bengali, or English because of schooling, employment, migration, or media exposure. Using these scripts to write Santali can make texts accessible to readers who have not learned Ol Chiki. It can also allow Santali speakers to participate in regional literary and religious networks.

At the same time, script multiplicity can weaken linguistic cohesion. It divides readerships, complicates the production of textbooks, and makes it difficult to build a unified corpus of Santali written materials. A Santali book published in Odia script may not reach a Santali reader in Jharkhand who reads only Ol Chiki or Hindi. A digital post in Roman Santali may be accessible to young users but unfamiliar to older readers trained in Ol Chiki. These divisions matter because written language is increasingly important for education, administration, publishing, and online communication.

Script Choice as Social Practice

In Odisha, script choice is often situational. A community elder may read Santali in Ol Chiki because of involvement in cultural or literary activism. A schoolteacher may use Ol Chiki in Santali-language classes but Odia in official school records. A young person may use Roman script in social media because it is convenient on mobile keyboards. A family may maintain religious or ritual texts in Odia or Devanagari because these were the scripts available in earlier generations.

Such practices cannot be reduced to ignorance, disloyalty, or lack of commitment to Santali. They reflect pragmatic multilingualism. Santali speakers make script choices according to audience, purpose, accessibility, and institutional context. However, these choices also have cumulative consequences. When Ol Chiki is used mainly in formal or activist settings while Odia or Roman dominates everyday digital

communication, the script associated with Santali identity may become less central to young people's linguistic lives.

The politics of transmission therefore includes the politics of script. If Santali is to remain vital, Ol Chiki must not remain confined to textbooks, cultural celebrations, and activist networks. It must become usable in ordinary digital communication, local administration, publishing, and youth-oriented media. At the same time, revitalisation efforts should not dismiss speakers who use other scripts. A realistic strategy must recognise existing literacies while gradually strengthening Ol Chiki as a shared public script.

5. Intergenerational Transmission and Youth Language Practices

The Household as the First Domain

The household remains the most important site of language transmission. Children acquire not only vocabulary and grammar but also the social meanings attached to a language. When parents and grandparents speak Santali with children in daily routines—while cooking, farming, telling stories, correcting behaviour, singing, praying, or discussing family matters—the language becomes associated with intimacy, care, and belonging.

In many Santal households in Odisha, Santali continues to function as a language of family interaction. Grandparents often play a particularly important role, using Santali in storytelling, ritual instruction, and everyday conversation. Children may acquire receptive competence first, understanding Santali before they speak it confidently. Active production depends on whether children are encouraged to respond in Santali and whether the language is used consistently in emotionally meaningful contexts.

However, the household is not insulated from wider social pressures. Parents who have experienced discrimination, economic hardship, or limited access to formal employment may believe that Odia, Hindi, or English will offer their children better opportunities. They may speak Santali at home but encourage children to prioritise Odia in school and English for future mobility. Such decisions are understandable, but they can gradually reduce the frequency and prestige of Santali in child-directed speech.

Youth, Education, and Mobility

Young Santali speakers in Odisha grow up in a linguistic economy in which Odia is necessary for schooling and state administration, Hindi is useful for wider communication and media, and English is associated with higher education, employment, and social prestige. Santali, by contrast, may be perceived as a language of home, village, ritual, and cultural identity rather than a language of professional advancement.

This perception does not mean that young people reject Santali. Many continue to value it as a marker of identity and family belonging. They may use it with grandparents, relatives, and village peers, and they may participate in Santali cultural events, music, dance, and social media groups. Yet their everyday linguistic repertoires are increasingly mixed. They may begin a conversation in Santali, switch to Odia when discussing school or administration, and use Hindi or English words when referring to technology, employment, or popular culture.

Code-switching itself is not evidence of language loss. Multilingual speakers routinely draw on more than one language according to context. The concern arises when Santali is progressively confined to fewer domains and when young speakers lack opportunities to develop advanced literacy, academic vocabulary, and public speaking skills in the language. If Santali is used only in informal domestic settings, it may survive as a heritage language but lose strength in education, governance, literature, and public life.

Emotional Meaning and Cultural Transmission

Santali language transmission is closely connected to emotional and cultural life. Santali songs, stories, proverbs, ritual speech, and communal performances carry meanings that are difficult to translate fully into Odia, Hindi, or English. Music, in particular, is embedded in festivals, agricultural cycles, marriage rituals, mourning practices, and community gatherings. Through songs and dance, speakers express affection, grief, joy, longing, pride, and social critique while reinforcing collective memory and belonging. This emotional dimension matters for language maintenance. Children are more likely to retain a language when it is associated with pleasurable and meaningful experiences: singing with grandparents, participating in festivals, listening to stories, or performing in community events. If Santali is experienced only as a school subject or an obligation, its emotional appeal may weaken. If it remains embedded in music, ritual, humour, kinship, and celebration, it is more likely to be valued by younger speakers.

Therefore, language revitalisation should not focus exclusively on grammar, orthography, and formal schooling. It must also create opportunities for young people to use Santali in emotionally significant and socially rewarding contexts. Cultural festivals, music competitions, storytelling events, theatre, digital content creation, and youth cultural groups can all help make Santali a language of creativity and belonging rather than merely a symbol of the past.

6. Institutional Support, Education, and Public Visibility

Schooling and Mother-Tongue Education

Education is one of the most consequential domains for language vitality. When children are taught initially in their mother tongue, they are more likely to develop strong literacy skills, participate confidently in classrooms, and maintain a positive relationship with their home language. Mother-tongue-based multilingual education can also help children bridge between home and school without requiring them to abandon their first language.

Santali's recognition in the Eighth Schedule has created possibilities for its inclusion in school curricula, teacher training, textbooks, and examinations. In Odisha, however, the implementation of Santali-medium education remains uneven. Some schools offer Santali as a subject or use it in early-grade instruction, but many Santali children continue to encounter Odia as the principal language of classroom interaction. Teachers trained in Santali may be limited in number, and instructional materials in Ol Chiki may not be available consistently across schools.

The result is a gap between policy and classroom practice. A child may speak Santali at home, study Santali as a subject for a few periods each week, and yet receive most of their academic knowledge through Odia. Under such conditions, Santali may develop as a cultural subject rather than as a fully functional language of learning. This does not mean that Santali cannot survive, but it does mean that its institutional space remains limited.

Higher Education and Literary Development

Higher education plays an important role in producing teachers, writers, researchers, translators, and cultural leaders. The inclusion of Santali in university curricula and national examinations has expanded opportunities for advanced study and professional recognition. Santali departments, research programmes, literary organisations, and community publications contribute to the development of academic vocabulary, critical writing, and scholarly debate in the language.

For Odisha, the challenge is to ensure that such opportunities are accessible to Santal students in the state. Higher education in Santali can help counter the perception that the language is unsuitable for intellectual

or professional life. When young people see Santali used in research, literature, journalism, administration, and digital media, they are more likely to view it as a language of the future rather than only a language of tradition.

Media, Digital Spaces, and Public Visibility

Public visibility is another crucial dimension of vitality. A language becomes more secure when it appears on signboards, government notices, radio, television, films, social media, and digital platforms. Visibility communicates that a language belongs in public space, not only in private homes.

Santali has a growing presence in music, cinema, social media, and online publishing. Digital platforms have created new opportunities for young Santali speakers to produce content without relying on conventional publishers or state institutions. Short videos, songs, memes, news updates, educational content, and literary posts can circulate rapidly among dispersed communities. These spaces may be especially important in Odisha, where Santali speakers are geographically dispersed and may not encounter Santali regularly in formal public institutions.

However, digital visibility also raises questions of script and standardisation. Much online Santali content uses Roman script because of keyboard convenience and wider digital accessibility. While this expands communication, it may limit the growth of Ol Chiki literacy among young users. A balanced digital strategy would support Ol Chiki keyboards, fonts, autocorrect tools, online dictionaries, and user-friendly content creation platforms, while also recognising the communicative value of Roman-script Santali.

7. Comparative Perspective: Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal

Santali's position differs across states. In Jharkhand, Santali has a larger speaker base and a stronger presence in regional politics and administration. In West Bengal, it has gained recognition as an additional official language and has developed significant literary and educational infrastructure. In Odisha, Santali has important cultural centres, especially in Mayurbhanj, but its speakers form a smaller proportion of the state population and function within a Odia-dominant institutional environment.

This comparative difference matters because language vitality is shaped by institutional density. Where Santali is used in schools, government communication, local media, and public administration, speakers encounter it as a language of public life. Where it is mainly confined to homes and cultural events, its domain range is narrower. The same language may therefore experience different trajectories in different states.

Odisha's case demonstrates that national recognition does not automatically produce uniform vitality across a language's entire geographic range. Santali may be constitutionally recognised throughout India, but its everyday security depends on state-level policy, district-level implementation, school resources, teacher availability, and local community organisation. A subnational perspective is therefore essential for understanding the actual conditions under which Santali is maintained or eroded.

8. Discussion: Recognition Without Guaranteed Transmission

The evidence discussed above suggests that use of Santali in Odisha occupies a position of conditional vitality. The language has strong cultural roots, a significant speaker base, a dedicated script, constitutional recognition, and active community networks. These are major assets. Yet it also faces persistent pressures: Odia dominance in formal domains, the attraction of Hindi and English for mobility, script fragmentation, uneven educational provision, and the risk of reduced intergenerational transmission among youth.

The central lesson is that recognition and erosion can coexist. A language may be honoured in constitutional texts while remaining marginal in classrooms and offices. It may be celebrated during festivals while disappearing from everyday digital communication. It may have millions of speakers nationally while experiencing localised shift in particular districts and families. This is why language vitality must be studied through grounded, localised evidence rather than through national categories alone.

The case of Santali also challenges a simple opposition between tradition and modernity. Santali speakers are not abandoning their language because they lack attachment to it. Rather, they are negotiating complex multilingual realities. They need Odia for state institutions, Hindi for wider communication, English for higher education and employment, and Santali for identity, kinship, culture, and community belonging. Language maintenance strategies must work with this multilingual reality rather than pretend that speakers can or should live in linguistic isolation.

9. Recommendations for Language Maintenance

Strengthening Home and Community Transmission

The first priority must be the household and community. Language policy should support parents and grandparents in using Santali with children through storytelling programmes, community libraries, mobile libraries, cultural camps, and parent education initiatives. Local organisations can organise Santali storytelling evenings, song competitions, youth cultural festivals, and intergenerational dialogue events. Such activities make the language socially enjoyable and emotionally meaningful.

Expanding Ol Chiki Literacy

Ol Chiki literacy should be expanded beyond formal schooling. Community learning centres, adult literacy classes, mobile applications, online tutorials, and digital keyboards can help speakers of different ages learn and use the script. Public institutions in Santali-majority blocks should use Ol Chiki in signage, notices, certificates, and local communication wherever feasible. The aim should be to make Ol Chiki visible and practical in everyday life.

Consolidating Santali-Medium Education

Santali-medium education should be strengthened through trained teachers, quality textbooks, teacher-training programmes, and continuous assessment materials. Early-grade instruction should use Santali as a foundation for literacy while gradually introducing Odia, Hindi, and English as additional languages. This approach supports multilingualism without requiring children to replace their first language.

Supporting Digital Santali

Digital tools are essential for reaching young speakers. Developers, community organisations, and educational institutions should collaborate to produce Ol Chiki keyboards, fonts, spell-checkers, digital dictionaries, audiobooks, and learning applications. Support should also be given to young Santali content creators who produce music, videos, podcasts, and educational material in the language.

Building Cross-State Cooperation

Because Santali is spoken across several states, cooperation among Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, and Assam is important. Shared teacher-training materials, standardised terminology projects, digital archives, literary exchanges, and joint research initiatives can strengthen the language across administrative boundaries. Such cooperation should be community-led and should respect regional variation in dialect, script use, and cultural practice.

10. Conclusion

Santali in Odisha stands between recognition and erosion. Its constitutional status, Ol Chiki script, cultural institutions, and active speaker networks demonstrate that the language has achieved a level of formal visibility that many Indigenous languages in India have not. At the same time, its everyday vitality remains uneven, particularly where young speakers encounter Odia, Hindi, and English as languages of schooling, employment, administration, and social mobility.

This paper has argued that Santali's future in Odisha will not be determined by recognition alone. It will depend on whether children acquire the language at home, whether they see it used in schools and public institutions, whether they can read and write it in a shared script, and whether they experience it as a language of creativity, emotion, and opportunity. Script multiplicity reflects the pragmatic multilingualism of Santali communities, but it also requires careful strategies to build shared literacy and unified cultural infrastructure.

The vitality of Santali cannot be separated from the vitality of Santali communities. Language maintenance must therefore be understood as a social, educational, cultural, and political project. It requires state support, but it also requires community ownership, youth participation, and respect for the knowledge of elders. If Santali is to move from symbolic recognition to substantive vitality, it must be present not only in constitutional schedules and commemorative events, but also in classrooms, homes, digital platforms, public offices, and the everyday imaginative life of Santali speakers in Odisha.

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