

SPECIAL LECTURE SERIES

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Graphic Politics in Eastern India

SCRIPT AND THE QUEST FOR AUTONOMY



SPEAKER

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ORGANIZED BY

**Department of Anthropology
University of Delhi**

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Dr. Nishant Chowksi is an assistant professor at Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT-Gandhinagar. He is trained in linguistic anthropology, and his research areas include the study of script and writing systems, language and performance, the aesthetic component of language, and the cultural politics of heritage.



LECTURE SUMMARY

Rapporteurs: Ms. Gargi Mitra & Ms. Rashmi Patel

The lecture was delivered on 9th March at 3:30 PM in the Seminar Hall of Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi. The chair of the session, Prof. P.C. Joshi began the event by introducing Dr. Nishant Chowksi. He talked about the importance of Linguistic Anthropology in Indian context while remarking that language is the root of culture. He further mentioned that language plays a key role in politics and the recent book by Dr. Chowksi, 'Graphic Politics in Eastern India' addresses the important topic of how a marginalized community is using language as a tool of political identity. Following this, Prof. Joshi invited Dr. Nishant Choksi to deliver his talk.



Dr. Choksi began his lecture by providing a brief introduction of Linguistic anthropology and his research trajectory within this sub-discipline of anthropology. He discussed his work with the Bhils in Gujarat and his interest in the scripts they were using. Following this, he talked about his doctoral research with the Santhals in Jhilmil, West Bengal which serves as the basis of his recent book publication. He structured the lecture based on the book where he described his research chapter-wise.

Within the first chapter, he describes how the politics of script is different from the politics of language and seeks to find their congruence. Mainly 4 scripts are written in Jhilmil, West Bengal, where he conducted eighteen months of study. These scripts are – Eastern Brahmi, Roman, Ol-Chiki, Devanagari. In the first chapter, he mentions how Jharkhand was proposed to be an Adivasi district but some of areas proposed to be a part of Jharkhand were left out. The chapter provides glimpse into the Jharkhand’s movement for autonomy.



In Chapter two, Dr. Chowksi talks about how the transformation of script took place. Earlier Ol-writing or Ol -script was very close to drawing. Ol was way to express genealogy, was used in rituals, ceremony and spirit calling. This was the older concept but after going to schools for two consecutive generations, Santhals decided to devise new script which will be a modified form of old Ol-Chiki (alphabetic literacy). The new script that was formed had - iconic representation like livelihoods of Santhali (forestry, agriculture), has sound attached and has alphabet e.g., ir (has sound, alphabet) and represented by sickle (indicating to agricultural lifestyle of Santhals). So here the Santhals have not given up their script but modified it and thus maintained their autonomy using their script.

The third chapter provides insight on linguistic landscape of the region. It talks about the contestation over territory and how script here is regionally placed, visually tied. Here the author talks about the pamphlets pasted on the walls. Pamphlets at the market place e.g., a movie poster which was pasted in both Ol-Chiki script as well as Bengali because scripts written over movie banners have different sponsors and they publish it as per changing place. The fourth chapter covers the use of script in the education sector where Ol-Chiki has become predominant, so much so that Santhals who do not understand Ol-Chiki are considered illiterate and a personal sense of shame is attached with not understanding the native script.



In the last chapter, Dr. Chowksi spoke about the multilingual, multiscriptal print media. He showed how the newspaper houses are now publishing in Ol-Chiki font at the same time even though the advertisements were in eastern Brahmi. So basically, Chiki script dominance has taken over but the theme is to be inclusive of all popularly used scripts. Ol-Chiki is aiming is one among the equals and is attempting to create an equal space for political assertion using the script.

The lecture was concluded by Professor Joshi who thanked Dr. Chowksi for his illuminating presentation. He spoke about how the Santhals are trying their best to assert themselves by using the concept of Sarna dharma. Asserting Ol-Chiki is just another form of this. He also spoke about the use of Roman script by the Nagaland tribes.





This was followed by an engaging QnA session where the audience raised several questions on verbal repertoire script assertion. Topics such as the impact of Ol-Chiki script assertion on intercommunity feelings and the hegemonic power shift in the CNTA (Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act) area, use of the Ol-Chiki script as a medium of instruction in school were also brought into the discussion.

The vote of thanks was proposed by Dr. Chakraverti Mahajan.

