

# The Santals of Bangladesh and Their Linguistic Transformation: A Recent Collocation on its Juxtaposition

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**ABSTRACT:** The Santals of Bangladesh are a group of autochthonous people of the land who had long been living in a very widely dispersed area of the Barind region in the northern part of the country, having been influenced by Christianity as part of their religiosity and culture change. Their linguistic transformation is very much visible when they are mostly found to be bilinguals, speaking Bengali language outside their own communities and simultaneously, using their own dialect most frequently while communicating with people within their own ethnic group. Like many indigenous languages in other parts of Bangladesh, the Santali language itself does not have any strong alphabet and scripture of its own, and for that reason, the speakers have great difficulties in using it in higher education. Being influenced by the Church, some of them, for that reason, are now in favour of Romanizing their script and thus, are desiring to take it to the international standard. But the great majority of the Santals are now reluctant to accept this view and instead, they are in favour of borrowing the Bengali scripture to convert the alphabet in order to facilitate their formal education within the country. The Santals are now suffering from an acute identity crisis. This paper discusses the main controversial issues in this regard.

## INTRODUCTION

The Santal<sup>1</sup> group of people in Bangladesh is an autochthonous ethnic minority living in a widely dispersed area of the Barind region<sup>2</sup> in the north-western part of the country. They are the inhabitants of the Barind region staying together with the Bengali Muslims and Hindus and apart from these Bengali communities, there are sprinklings of other aboriginals in the country who are socio-culturally different from the majority of the Bengali people (Ali, 2004; Karim and Karim, 2006; Karim, '89; Karim, 2017). All these ethnic minorities are often referred to by the term *adibashis*<sup>3</sup>, and among these *adibashis*, the Santals are the most prominent and influential people having

inhabited a special type of ecological setting based on their traditional sedentary economy (O'Malley, '16; Dalton, 1872). Supported by their own techniques of farming, the Santals in the northern part of the country remain quite adjustable to this eco-environmental setting. As an indigenous group, the Santals have been the original occupants of their land for the past 300 years and have survived on small-scale economic activities. But recent pieces of evidences (e.g., Das, '93; Zehadul Karim *et al.*, 2008) suggest that a group of land grabbers in the country has occupied their land to marginalize the majority of the Santals and eventually it has uprooted them from their own original paternal homes in the Barind region.

Being the victims of such pauperization, the Santals now live in a poor economic condition which effectually compels them to move to the city areas  
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seeking alternative survival subsistence working as day labourers and performing multifarious tasks in urban professional organizations located in the peri-urban areas of Rajshahi city (Karim *et al.*, 2008). Those left behind in the villages are the most poverty-stricken people remaining at the mercy of the Bengali communities to work as pulled-laborers based on seasonal availability (Karim and Karim, 2006; Karim *et al.*, 2008).

Since the Santals, as a threatened sub-culture, have strategically migrated to the urban areas, they seek economic shelter in a few professional Christian organizations located in Rajshahi city. The Christian churches in Rajshahi support them socially, economically and psychologically allowing them to stay and find work in the catchment areas near the churches. The Christian missionaries at Rajshahi provide them with all the socio-cultural and economic assistance; as a result, the Santals have become attracted to accept Christianity in large numbers (Karim and Karim, 2006; Karim, 2017). After conversion to Christianity, many Santals have now been influenced to Romanize their Santali language as they have a feeling that the Roman script is part of the Bible. In their argument, the Santals have an understanding that since they have shifted their religion to Christianity, it is therefore morally logical for them to transform their language into the Roman script as a mark of respect to the newly-accepted religion. In the meantime, the Santals have become bilinguals as they have to communicate with a large number of Bengali people within their surrounding catchment areas in their everyday life but simultaneous use of the Roman script puts them with trilingual juxtapositional complexities to keep track of the variations in meaning. This paper contains narratives of those linguistic problems and transformations and thus provides emic and etic explanations of the issue.

#### DATA SOURCES

This is a qualitative study based on a few focus group discussions (FGDs) and personal interviews conducted with a number of Santal and non-Santal key-informants who work as Field Officers at ASROY, an international NGO (non-government organization) dealing with the Santals at the grassroots level. The

first author of this paper had a number of face-to-face interview sessions with seven such key informants on July 31 through August 2 of 2018; all of these key informants notably stay in the fields keeping proper records about their clients. Apart from the information gathered through the FGDs and data provided by the key informants, this paper additionally relies heavily on a number of ethnographic studies of the first author which were conducted in phases on the Santals starting from the very beginning of 2000 until now (Karim and Karim, 2006; Karim *et al.*, 2008; Karim, 2017). Similarly, the co-author of this paper, Ahsan Ali has also published a very detailed book on the Santals which is part of his doctoral dissertation submitted to Calcutta University, India (Ali, 2004). Furthermore, Ali remains closely attached to this ethnic community continuously through his work as Managing Director of ASROY, which deals particularly with the ethnic minorities in the northern part of Bangladesh. Hence, both authors' own observations are important sources for this paper.

#### INFLUENCE OF CHURCH ON THE SANTALS

The Santals had arrived in Bangladesh and settled in the Barind region after migrating mostly from Chotonagpur, Orissa, and Jharkhand and also from other parts of West Bengal in India. They had migrated to Bangladesh during the British colonial period after they revolted against the British who at that time, masterfully adopted some strategies to subdue their revolution (Risley, 1891; Datta-Majumder, '56; Karim and Karim, 2006). It is reported that as many as 1,119 Santals were in the first flow of migration which arrived in Bangladesh and among them, at least 1,039 (92.85%) had settled in parts of Dinajpur. Within a span of fifty years, this migration of the Santals to present day Bangladesh had risen to 733,340 causing a mass settlement in the Barind region of Bangladesh (Gait, '01; Thompson, '23; Karim, 2017). A huge number of such movement continued until 1941, when the total number of Santals arriving in Bangladesh stood at 838,909 (Lacey, '31; Thompson, '23). But the Santal population in Bangladesh started to decline between 1947 and 1971 due to Pakistan Government's reluctance to approve their settlement in Bangladesh (Government of Bangladesh, '91).

In India, the Hindu Mission embraced and welcomed the Santals as many of them were very much influenced by the Hindu religion. As a matter of fact, from socio-religious and ethnic points of view, many of the Santals had more inclination to the Hindu religion which indirectly encouraged them to return to India (Ali, 2004). Those who stayed back in Bangladesh had remained in scattered villages in the Barind region as it was more economical. Being pauperized in the rural areas, the Santals started moving towards the city areas where they were welcomed by the Christian missionary people.

In this section, we shall provide a brief history of the Santal settlement in Rajshahi and the influence of the churches in the city areas. At present, there are two churches in Rajshahi and one of them was established during the British period. The other was built a decade ago near the *adibashi* settlement in the city. It may be mentioned here that these churches undertake many benevolent and welfare activities in the surrounding areas. They run a big hospital and also sponsor a number of development programmes related to the *adibashi* settlement. The Santals arriving in the city area seek direct assistance from these churches. Due to their link to the churches, the Santals in the urban areas settle in compact catchment areas located near the churches. It is learned that as soon as the Santals arrived in Rajshahi, the Christian churches started to encourage them to convert. They did not however, force them in the process of conversion; instead, the Santals became convinced to change their religion.

The Christian missionaries built schools and hospitals and simultaneously provided them with all kinds of economic support. They helped the Santals in getting employment in some of the Christian-based NGO, located near their catchment areas. Many of them are employed in the Mission hospital which encouraged them to be closer to Christianity. In the following section, we shall provide very briefly the ethnicity and socio-religious background of the Santals which relates to their occupation.

#### SANTALI PHONEMES AND THEIR CORRESPONDING ENGLISH TRANSLITERATION

Since 1867, the Santals in many parts of Bhutan, India and Nepal are said to be frequently using an 'extended form of Latin' or 'Roman' in their occasional use of their scriptural writings (Raksha, *nd*). It is perhaps because after the ceasefire of the direct conflict with the Santals, the British afterwards tried to influence them in their socio-cultural and religious activities, and thus the Romanization of the Santali script became essential at that time. In the post-independence era, the Santals residing in different states of India started using the language script of their respective state in their writing in Santali as opposed to the 'Roman script'. As a consequence, the West Bengal Santals have the Bengali form of Santali language while the Oriya script has been used by the Santals of Orissa. Nevertheless, these rival scripts sponsored by different state governments of India could not however, eliminate the influence of the Roman scripts of Santali language fully since all the basic materials for learning the Santali language are found exclusively in the Roman script (Raksha, *nd*). I personally visited some of the Santal families in West Bengal during the 1990s while I was attending a conference in Santiniketon where I found many of them using their local language and also at the same time, they were following the Hindu religious practices side by side with their own *sanatoni* (traditional) religion. As they are not influenced to use the Roman script, it seems that religious following and local influence acts as an important force to inspire linguistic practices. The religious conversion does not affect the use of language. Thus there is no denying of the fact that a kind of conflicting situation however prevails where their own ethnic integrity is impacted. In order to understand the Christianization impact on the Santals, it is essential for us to understand their linguistic patterns as formulated enthusiastically by a group of activists having inclination towards Christianity. It does not however works as they expect it. We have, however, provided below in Table 1, the similarity of etymological meaning and the complexities of Santali script.

TABLE 1  
*Examples of Santali phoneme with their corresponding English meaning of the alphabet and transliterating meanings*

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A a = 'Am' means 'you' in English and pronounced as 'a' in English 'army'.
E e = 'Eskar' means 'alone' in English and pronounced as 'e' in English 'net'.
I I = 'Itil' means 'fat' in English and pronounced as 'i' in English 'India'.
O o = 'Oda' means 'moist' in English and pronounced as 'o' in English 'ozone'.
U u = 'Ul' means 'mango' in English and pronounced as 'oo' in English 'school'.
B b = 'Botor' means 'fear' in English and pronounced as 'b' in English 'ball'.
C c = 'Coilo' means 'pointed' in English and pronounced as first 'ch' of 'Church' in English.
D d = 'Dokan' means 'Shop' in English and pronounced as 'th' in English 'there'.
G g = 'Gol' means 'to whistle' in English and pronounced as 'G' in English 'God'.
H h = 'Hoho' means 'to call' in English and pronounced as 'h' in English 'hall'.
J j = 'jo' means 'fruit' in English and pronounced as 'j' in English 'job'.
K k = 'kolom' means 'pen' in English and pronounced as 'c' in English 'column'.
L l = 'Lolo' means 'hot' in English and pronounced as 'L' in English 'London'.
M m = 'Merom' means 'goat' in English and pronounced as 'm' in English 'memorandum'.
N n = 'Nehor' means 'request' in English and pronounced as 'n' in English 'nomad'.
P p = 'Parkom' means 'cot' in English and pronounced as 'p' in English 'population'.
R r = 'Ran' means 'medicine' in English and pronounced as 'r' in English 'rural'.
S s = 'Sojhe' means 'straight' in English and pronounced as 's' in English 'soil'.
T t = 'Tumdak' means 'drum' in English and pronounced as 't' in English 'Tazikistan'.
V v = 'jivi' means 'soul' in English and pronounced as 'w' in English 'wind'.
W w = 'Nawa' means 'new' in English and pronounced as 'w' in English 'water'.
Y y = 'Toyo' means 'jackal' in English and pronounced as 'y' in English 'yoyo'.

*Source:* Borrowed from a 'Proceeding of Santali Organization Protesting and Justifying the Rationale of Using Santali Script' (nd).

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#### VIEWS OF THE INFORMANTS BASED ON FGDs AND PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

The first author (AHM) of this paper, with all logistic support from the co-researcher, has conducted a few extensive focus group discussions (FGDs) along with six personal interviews with the informants of this research as they are directly involved with the local Santals as employees of 'ASROY' at the field level. We provide below the opinions and views of

the local Santals as collected through these informants as each informant is directly involved with the Santal community in their everyday life to represent and provide support through ASROY. The views narrated below in this section thus are the critical views of the local Santals as interviewed by field assistants who were simultaneously are the informants of this research. Table 2 presents the views and opinions of the informants during the FGDs and interviews

TABLE 2  
*Informants' views and opinions as mentioned in the FGDs and interviews*

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Name of informant	Views and opinions as narratives
1. Hopna Kisku	a) Lack of alphabet is the principal constraint of Santal language. b) Land taken over by the local elites is another problem.c) Most of the Santals are uneducated, therefore they are required to enroll in schools as part of Compulsory Primary Education (CPE). d) Bengali people have never accepted them as their good neighbourly co-inhabitants.

*Contd...*

- e) A kind of nasal type of pronunciation is found in the original language which could not be understood properly in other language. Only Roman pronunciation can help in this context.
  - f) Even the missionary schools are also found using the Bangla medium.
  - g) In the Romanized language, beliefs and faiths are properly explained.
  - h) All political parties including the leftists also lied to the Santals in terms of their language who promised them protecting their Santali language. But, nothing was done in this context.
2. Gopal Chandra Mondal
    - a) Santals should practice their mother tongue and also the state language of Bangladesh to immerse with the people of the land.
  3. Nilima Murmu
    - a) The majority of the Santals in Bangladesh are inclined to be bilingual using Santali script with the Bengali language.
  4. Provash Tudu
    - a) It becomes easier for the Santals to practise their language then they should accept Bengali language as part of adjustment with the locals.
  5. Joshana Barman
    - a) I always work to help preserve their culture.
    - b) There is no alphabet nor any institution where they can seek assistance for their academic development.
  6. Mr. K.M.G.Rabbani
    - a) While talking about the Roman script, Mr. Rabbani mentioned that it is very difficult to find teachers in this language for which he suggested preserving both languages of Bangla and the Santali.

While the Santals are facing problems in their enrollment into schools, the ASROY helps them providing a pre-school training through their 60 identified schools in different parts of northern Bangladesh. ASROY employs community teachers in this respect who are supported and supervised by a group of Program Officers and Support Officers. They are assisted by a group of non-formal teachers under the supervision of ASROY.

#### ANALYTICAL CONCLUSION

The Santals are the early settlers in the Barind region in the north-western part of Bangladesh, residing in that area for the last 300 years since the British colonisation. The Santals from those Indian parts of West Bengal had arrived in Bangladesh due to the oppression of the British as they revolted against them in 1867. Later, under the political and state intervention of the Pakistani government during the period between 1947 until 1970, the Santals started suffering enormously for which, many of them had to return to India. "But in the last few decades, the fate of this community has largely been interrupted due to expansionist attitudes of a few rich and politically powerful Bengali land grabbers, who forcibly took away their land and exterminated many of the Santal families out of the Barind" (Karim, 2017:2).

Being Christianized and settled in the city areas, the Santals in Bangladesh are now working in diverse occupations made available to them through the initiatives taken by the missionaries and thus, it is quite likely that they might have some weakness for the Roman alphabet to be utilized in their language. Their traditional values and ethnic practices are now very much influenced by Christianity. For that reason, many of them are supporting the use of the Roman script for their Santali language. In the meantime, there is another group of Santals who are not supporting Romanization; instead, they justifiably want to retain their language structure as part of their traditional culture as there is a close relationship between the Santali religious celebrations and their secular festivals.

But now obviously, the question comes to mind as to what should be the alternative strategy for the Bangladeshi Santals in regard to their linguistic issue. Should they follow the Bengali scripture as they live on a land where the majority of the people are the Bengalis? They are particularly self-conscious about their cultural heritage which is obvious as they are clearly found to retaining their patronymic titles having suffixed them with their newly taken Christian names (Karim, 2017). In this context, the Santals do not disregard their own culture, rather they are giving

equal status to it. It is also true that in terms of language, a socio-political conflict has already started which requires to be settled, otherwise it might take a bad shape in future (e.g., Sultana, '98; Ali, 2004; Karim and Karim, 2006; Karim *et al.*, 2008). Under this staggering situation, the Santals are now suffering from an acute identity crisis, both ethnically and linguistically. Contextually, this paper thus raises the main controversial issues and finally suggests that a better option for the Santals in this juxtapositional context is to seek their own views through some mandates. Based on field data, it may be concluded by saying that since ASROY is taking a special initiative to teach the Santals their own alphabet and help them learn both Bengali and Santali, it can be regarded as an ameliorative solution for their survival in Bangladesh. It will help them to adjust properly with the local people while they depend on their own economy. Moving to the cities and finding employment with the Christian-based organization is not a permanent solution in the case of language.

The title, subject matter and the discursive issues of the paper are fully based on ethnicity and linguistic. The writings will be updated and improved further after the completion of the second phase of the fieldwork.

#### NOTES

1. There are a few *adibashi* groups of people in the northern part of Bangladesh; among them, the Santals are the most prominent having numerical dominance. One researcher named Budla Orao, estimated that there are a total of 3,20,000 Santals (as quoted in Das, '93) which seems to be overstated, as the Government Census earlier has reduced this number to 2,23,392 (see Government of Bangladesh, '91). As a matter of fact, we do not have any reliable and accurate information about their real number. Once I personally appealed to UNDP in Bangladesh to make a compilation of an *adibashi* census in Bangladesh by employing a few anthropologists in the country. Once again, I specially request UNDP and/or ASROY to take initiative in this context (see Karim, 2017).
2. The Barind region is a vast area of dry land located in the north-western part of Bangladesh which is inhabited by the mainlander Bengali people and the *adibashis*; the region also includes a small part of the Indian state of West Bengal. Of the total area of Barind, some 70% of it are located in Bangladesh and the remaining 30% are situated in India (BMDA, '99). In Bangladesh, it mostly includes the districts of Rajshahi and Dinajpur which cover an area of 3266 sq. miles in total. The land

is extremely dry; the farming in this region is fully dependent on mechanized irrigation and often on monsoon rainfall. The land is so rugged that Rennell's Map the Survey which was done between 1769 and 1771, clearly identified this area as "uneven jungle country" (Nelson, '23; Karim *et al.*, 2008; Karim, 2017).

3. The word *adibashi* in Bangla is connoted as the 'early-comers' who are believed to have arrived in this land as the first settlers. But it is often stated that since, most of the tribal people in the northern part of Bangladesh had arrived from India during the British period, the authenticity in using this word *adibashi* exclusively to mean them as early settlers remains questionable (Karim *et al.*, 2008; Karim, 2017).

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