

Look askance: loss and recovery of writing in South and Southeast Asia

Nishaant Choksi

*Department of Humanities and Social Science, IIT, Gandhinagar,
Gandhinagar- 382424, Gujarat, India
Email: nishaant.choksi@iitgn.ac.in*

In the twentieth century, forest and hill-dwelling communities throughout South and Southeast Asia have been involved in the creation of unique orthographic scripts to represent their languages. While many outsiders have seen this as the result of literacy initiatives and the rise of identity-politics in the postcolonial nation-state, the narratives surrounding these scripts within communities ranging from the Santal (India) to the Hmong (Southeast Asia) talk about these scripts as having been “recovered” from the hoary past. These recovery narratives of the recently developed orthographies contradict the developmental view of literacy, in which reading and writing are seen as markers of progress, instantiating a view of time that saturates the present with a lost past recovered from the dustbin of history. The paper draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of ‘chronotope’ and Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the “angel of history” who looks askance to the past as it moves forward, to suggest that scripts arise in a political moment of suturing. This process occurs when communities seek to assert alternative historical visions following the violence of dislocation, migration, and upheaval brought about by state-formation in the Asian post-colonies.

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Introduction

In the areas of upland Southeast Asia and stretching to the hilly regions of northeastern India, there is a widespread narrative among several communities that writing was once “possessed” and then “lost.” This myth, as Judith Pine notes, is shared by upland groups

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ranging from the Lahu, Karen, Hmong, and Akha in Southeast Asia, but also among the Austro-Asiatic speaking communities with whom we worked in eastern India, such as the Santal, Munda, Ho, and Sora. Pine writes, “these myths share a number of motifs, among them a concept of writing as a commodity, a physical object rather than a skill, and an explicit association between the loss of writing and a diminished political and economic status... the existence of the loss of writing myth... had a profound impact on the follow of other ideas associated with written language, most especially those brought by the arrival of Protestant missionaries into the region” (Pine 2008: 225).

This paper will discuss the “loss of writing” narrative in the context of communities such as the Hmong of Southeast Asia and the Santal of eastern India, where new scripts have been developed. However, instead of understanding the loss of writing myth as a part of a “diminished political status,” it is argued that the loss of writing narrative suggests a competing “chronotope” of literacy and politics which seeks to preserve historical continuity and autonomy through periods of dislocation, dispersal, and forced assimilation into hegemonic political regimes (such as the post-colonial nation-state).

Chronotope is a word originally derived from Mikhail Bakhtin to describe the way space and time are expressed in literary genres, such as epic or novel (Bakhtin 1981). Anthropologists later used the term to describe the way social actors navigate the spatial and temporal dimensions of their world. It is, as anthropologists Michael Lempert and Sabina Perrino write, “a temporally situated, virtual space of emplotment” (Lempert and Perrino 2007: 207) through which historical time and cartographic space is mapped. Dominant chronotopes often construe certain peoples as “marginal” (on the fringes of space) or “primitive” (prior in time). However, since chronotopes are linked to cultural milieus, communities have a different understanding of space and time, and these understandings can be sources for what I am calling here “autonomy.”

Chronotopes of Literacy

Classic studies of the transition from orality to literacy such as Ong (1982) or Goody (1986) have discussed this transition in terms of a cognitive shift between those communities which never had writing (‘illiterate’) and communities which developed writing and script (‘literate’). This replicates a linear chronotope that is prevalent in dominant understandings of literacy today, in which the ability to write is seen as a prerequisite for human technological progress. Policy-makers often consider those communities which never had writing as ‘backward,’ and, if they developed writing late, like the upland communities who created new scripts for their languages, they are seen, in this chronotope, as merely ‘catching up.’

Correlated with the temporal idea of ‘primitive’ or ‘backward’ is the spatial notion of ‘marginal’. As Anderson argued, the unity of language and script was essential in creating the “imagined community” that grounded the postcolonial nation-state in Southeast Asia and elsewhere (Anderson 1983). As part of national formation, a cartography emerges in which language, script, people, and history are all encapsulated within a geographic space. Literacy in the dominant language and script were seen to be markers of membership in the national community, and illiteracy was understood to be not only temporally backward (in

a history that starts with the nation-state) but also spatially marginal. The state creates itself and its history through a spatial and temporal understanding of literacy. This history can manifest itself differently in specific narratives of nation-state formation. For instance, as Lurie (2011) notes for Japan, it is said that ‘writing’ in Japanese emerged when the Chinese characters (*kanji*) were imported from China, and the mixed-use symbols in use before that were not considered modern writing. This narrative forms continuity with the basis of modern Japanese state power, which is articulated through the learning and control of Chinese characters (Gottlieb 1991). On the other hand, countries like Vietnam displayed an inverse situation, where the modern state rejected Chinese characters in favour of Romanisation, such that the knowledge of Vietnamese written in Chinese characters is only relegated to a few expert scholars (Marcucci 2009). Hence in Vietnam, knowledge of *only* Chinese characters would effectively render you illiterate.

What about new scripts within this chronotope? As the minority-language communities are often considered primitive, illiterate and marginal from the point of view of the dominant communities, the creation of new scripts is usually seen as a way to “catch up;” reinforcing a ‘backward’ status. Thus, while new scripts can be used effectively to wrest some form of cultural recognition and patronage from states, it does not effectively alter the communities’ politically marginal and temporally primitive status. In this chronotope, the creation of new states appears, as many assume it to be, a form of identity politics that has minimal political impact; serving as a way communities assimilate themselves to the nation-state given their structural and economic disadvantages.

Yet, drawing mostly from Hmong and Santal cases, but equally applicable to communities such as Karen or Lahu, it is argued that that the loss and recovery script narratives offer a different chronotope that, like many possible chronotopes, is not tied to the space-time emplotments that underlie the process of nation-state formation. In this chronotope, both historical time and spatial configurations are punctuated by disruption and dispersal, and literacy, not as a skill, but as material expressions of autonomous political action, providing continuity in times of upheaval. The chronotope we outline takes seriously “loss” and “recovery” not as singular actions, but as tropes that frame the spatial and temporal emplotments of communities characterised by dispersal and upheaval, and as points that inform not only the creation of new scripts, but ground a politics of autonomy in general. We will begin with a discussion of Hmong drawing on published ethnographic studies, and then compare it with the case of the Santali speakers in eastern India, with whom we have conducted fieldwork since 2009.

Hmong

The Hmong are an ethnic group spread over southern China, Southeast Asia, and from the late twentieth century the United States. They are located primarily in southern China, (where there are known as “Miao”), Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. They are internally a quite diverse population, comprised of different sub-groupings and also speaking various dialects. The group names are associated with colours, including the “Flowery” Hmong (*A Hmong*); the “White” Hmong (*Hmoob Dawb*), the “Green” Hmong (*Hmoob*

Ntsuab); and “Black” Hmong (*Hmoob Dub*) (Tapp 1989: 72). Following the Vietnam War, when the United States invaded several Southeast Asian countries, many Hmong migrated as refugees to the United States, where they reside mainly in the states of California and Minnesota. The Hmong comprised of a traditionally migratory group, constantly living in the shadow of a highly graphic Chinese ‘civilisation,’ and even though their narratives claim that they had writing at some point, they were seen as “illiterate” by the dominant society. As Tapp notes, the desire for literacy made them more amenable to Christian missionisation (Tapp 1989: 75).

From the point of view of the dominant civilisational chronotopes, Hmong were both spatially marginal and temporally primitive. Yet like many of the upland Southeast Asian groups, they had a special and intimate relationship with writing. The anthropologist Jacques Lemoine said:

The lack of any ability to write on the part of the great majority of the Hmong did not in the least show any lack of interest. On the contrary, no doubt struck with the importance placed on written documents by the Chinese administration, the Hmong dreamed of a writing system to fall from heaven as their very own. This theme recurred constantly through the different messianic movements. According to the messianic myth, a king would be born, or already had been born to unite the Hmong and deliver them from subjection to other peoples. The king or his prophet did not fail to announce that writing had been revealed to him. That in itself was the sign of the heavenly commission (Lemone 1972: 124-125).

In this quote, Lemone relies on the well-established notion of “messianism” to describe the Hmong relationship to writing. Writing, as he suggests, was something *possessed* by the Chinese, and *dreamed* of by the Hmong; for the Chinese, writing was part of a general civilisational chronotope, while Hmong’s relationship to writing existed in the future tense, as one that will come at some later time. Thus, the Hmong’s relation to writing could always be seen as “messianic” – as a wait for what will come.

Lemone’s view however fails to recognise the chronotope embedded in what Tapp (2015) has called Hmong “messianism.” Unlike the temporality given to the Chinese civilisation (or Japanese or Thai, etc.), Hmong messianic time is characterised by “recurrences and resemblances” where past and future come together in “dynamic simultaneity” (Tapp 2015: 307), a fact he shows through an exhaustive review of Hmong rebellions in the twentieth century. In addition to time, Tapp characterises spatial recognition among the Hmong as a type of “geographic transnationalism at a time when modern nation-states and their novel borders in east and southeast Asia were just in the process of formation... and of mass migrations and relocations of thousands of people” (Tapp 2015: 307). So while nation-state centered chronotopes were finding histories and undertaking literacy initiatives based on continuous time and spatial contiguity, groups like the Hmong entered into a very different relationship to writing.

As Tapp argues, the theme of lost writing regained appears continuously throughout the Hmong revolts in the twentieth century, first starting with the Pollard revolt in 1900, and most famously with Pa Chay Vue’s “War of the Insane” in 1919. It is said that Pa Chay together with a gun received from Heaven, three pens, and a book, and he transmitted his

part of a general recurrence of the 'recovery' of writing (8). The second is that Pahawh Hmong was part of "a singular complex of events that traced the trauma of the Vietnam War (17). Finally, even though most Hmong embraced the Roman script, known as RPA (Romanised Popular Alphabet) developed by missionaries, a few Hmong, particularly those displaced refugees in the Long Cheng refugee camp, eagerly embraced the script (32). After Shong Lue was assassinated the script has declined in popularity in Southeast Asia and the center of production has shifted to a group of diasporic Hmong living in Minneapolis in the USA (97). This shift suggests a certain alignment with an enthusiasm for the script and an experience of displacement.

The script reveals a chronotope of literacy in which temporal events are recurrent, rather than linear, and space is dispersed rather than geographically concentrated. This is contrary to the 'messianic' notion outlined in Lemone's account of the Hmong myth, in which writing is a dream that will deliver the Hmong from exploitation; a dream that is both located on the margins of the dominant Chinese civilisation and in future tense to that civilisation. In that chronotope the Hmong are marginal and looking to the future for delivery. In the chronotope we outlined here, the norm is disruption, upheaval, and dislocation, and the relationship to literacy, as well as history, are emplotted on such a time. This does not mean that disunity and dislocation are valued, but they are recognised as an essential feature of time and space. In Smalley *et al.* (1990)'s account, Shang Lue's claims the script is rooted in "traditional values," and it addresses the "disunity and lack of cooperation" which he believed inherent to "Hmong culture" (12). In place of "culture," it is believed it would be more precise to use the word "chronotope" - a virtual space-time that is inherently disruptive and diasporic, upon and in which social practices, such as writing, emerge.

As mentioned earlier, the most popular script among the Hmong in both Southeast Asia and the diaspora is the RPA (Romanised Popularised Alphabet) although there continues to be production in Pawah Hmong, including the development of movable type and then subsequently a computer font (Smalley *et al.* 1990: 118). Both orthographies appear to be stable writing systems, and to some extent have undergone a form of institutionalisation (although the former likely more than the latter). Institutionalisation necessarily means adapting to alternative chronotopes, such as the ones preferred by institutions such as the Church or education, though it does not mean abandoning the chronotopes which informed scripts' emergence/recurrence and initial circulation. Like the interesting work that looks at the intersection between Christianity and loss of writing myths, and that is also relevant for communities like Lahu and Karen, we can see multiple chronotopes co-existing or blending, sometimes combining to produce new forms, similar to the "structure of conjuncture" that anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has described during colonial encounters (Sahlins 2013). However in order to see this, we have to shift the frame from calling Hmong (or other groups') writing 'marginal,' 'future-oriented' or even 'messianic', so we can understand in more detail the spatial and temporal practices which underlie politics of autonomy.

Santal

In addition to Hmong, Lahu, and Karen and other groups in upland Southeast Asia, the "loss and recovery" of writing chronotope also informs the creation of new scripts in the

hilly, forested regions of eastern India, where we conducted fieldwork between 2009-2012. The Santal, an Austro-Asiatic (Mon-Khmer) speaking group with about six million speakers, are spread throughout the hilly regions of eastern India, across the states of Assam, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa, and also into the neighbouring countries of Nepal and Bangladesh. Santals, and other Austro-Asiatic speaking groups like Munda, Sora, etc. are called Scheduled Tribe by the Indian government, who recognise their social organisation as different from “castes” within the Hindu social structure.

The Santal and other Austro-Asiatic speaking groups have a similar history to the minority groups in upland Southeast Asia. During the British colonial period, they were classified as “primitive” or “backward” and even today the Indian government continues to use the term “backward classes” to describe groups like the Santals. Famous authors, poets, and artists have routinely described Santals with reference to their orality, especially their propensity for “song and dance.” This has, as Indian historian Prathama Banerjee has argued, frozen the Santals as the perennial “primitive” to the modern, emergent Indian nation-state, stereotyping Santal culture as pre-eminently oral and literacy as something alien to the tribal ethos (Banerjee 2006a). Even today, official Indian government organisations, when they discuss the literature of ‘tribes’ such as the Santal, they usually refer to in combination with “oral literature” (Choksi 2018).

The chronotope of the Indian developmental state therefore always places tribes as ones in *need* of development, by their very definition “backward.” This, and their association with orality, serves also to characterise tribes as “illiterate.” During the fieldwork, people in the villages we worked with would always say that “Santals are illiterate” despite most of the younger generation having entered into school. Thus, rather than the actual fact of illiteracy, it is the chronotope which places tribes as both “primitive” and “backward” which shapes their relation to literacy from the view of the Indian state as well as community members.

In addition to a “politics of time” (Banerjee 2006b), Santals and other tribal groups in eastern India are also spatially considered marginal, and this has affected their relationship to language and literacy. After Indian independence, India’s states were organised along linguistic lines, so for instance, in eastern India, West Bengal’s official language was Bengali (Bengali script), Bihar’s was Hindi, Orissa, Oriya, and Assam, Assamese. Because Santals were located in the hilly areas across these different regions, they had to accept the dominant language of the state where they resided (Choksi 2014). Yet, because the principle upon which Indian states were organised was that linguistic groups should have sovereignty over their own territory; Santals and other communities who were left out of this organisation felt that they should have their own state, which led to a political movement known as “Jharkhand.” These politics resulted directly from the spatial marginalisation that occurred at the founding of the Indian nation-state (Mullick and Munda 2003, Chattopadhyay 2014).

Before discussing further the relationship of script to the nation-state, we will discuss the Santal chronotope of literacy, which later informed the “Jharkhand” movement and the creation of new scripts. In 1855, as Santals were reorganised by the British into a large area known as Santal Parganas, two Santal brothers led a massive revolt of Santals and other

communities against upper-caste Hindu settlers and British colonial administrators. This revolt was known as the Santal “Hul,” and lasted a full year, with some estimates that over 15,000 persons were killed. Eventually the British reasserted control over the area but not without themselves suffering heavy casualties.

Like in Pa Chay’s rebellion, which occurred during a similar period in French Indochina, literacy served as a persistent trope in Santals’ own accounts of the uprising. Sidhu and Kanhu, the two brothers who led the rebellion, were assumed to have special powers, one of which was to have knowledge of writing. This knowledge was magically “revealed” to them by the Santal spirits. Here is an account of their testimony at the court in Calcutta, from the 1856 edition of the “Calcutta Review”:

A bit of paper fell on Seedoo’s head and suddenly the Thakur [Santal god] appeared before the astonished gaze of Seedo and Kanhu, he was like a white Man in native dress, he held a white Book and wrote therein; the book and with it 20 pieces of paper, in 5 batches, four in each batch, he presented to the brother... then came two men with six fingers on each hand... at one time it was in a flame of fire, with a book, some white paper and a knife... a solid cart wheel, in the silvery pages of the book and upon the white leaves of the single scrap of paper, were words written (Calcutta Review, 1856, quoted in Banerjee 1999: 219).

From this account, suffused as it is with colonial tropes such as the “white man” offering the natives an account of writing, one could easily build into a narrative that the Santals were attempting to incorporate the white man’s knowledge of the written word in order to, as Banerjee suggests, make “a statement about a new epoch” (Banerjee 1999: 219), a chronotope in which Santal power begins with a move to literacy, brought on by the violent appropriation and upturning of the colonial technology. However this statement ignores the chronotope that informs the “loss and recovery” narrative, which is one in which writing is revealed and then lost and then revealed again during times of turbulence - when precisely political power asserts itself.

The idea that “writing” is not a new phenomenon is present in Santal narrations of their origins and migrations. For the Santals, there was a time when all the various Santal clans lived in separate forts within a unified kingdom, where they ruled the land and lived free of rent or debt. This land, which is called Cae-Campa, does not have any historical or spatial location, but is imagined and re-imagined within the narratives and songs of Santals and in particular moments, such as the Santal Hul, which sought to reassert Cae-Campa if only for a brief period throughout Eastern India. In one such Cae-Campa song we see the appearance of writing in the fort of the Murmu, the priestly clan, and the clan of the brothers Sidhu and Kanhu (priest is also called “Thakur”):

Murmu tōhakur ko do baba
puthi baba ko padḍhao a
Badoli konyda gadōte
likhon calak’ kan

The Murmu priests, oh my father
read books, oh my father

On Badoli konyda fort,
Writing is occurring
(Santali song, Hembrom 2001: 19).

Songs such as this suggest that “writing” was not an isolated event, nor the start of a new chronotope whereby Santals were entering into some kind of hybrid modernity, rather it was a recurrence or resemblance – manifesting itself in a time of trauma where Santals were forcibly asserting a different kind of chronotope, one in which literacy emerges and is lost and time and space assume the relations of place called “Cae-Campa” which exists not in the past nor in the future but as a periodic and spatially dispersed phenomenon. The loss and appearance of writing mimics the temporality of the rebellion itself, which lasted over a year. From the point of view of a state-centric chronotope, it was a failure; it did cement an idea of Santal autonomy that was to influence later generations.

Indian independence occurred in 1947, and the period immediately before and after was also one of trauma and dislocation. Most famously, the subcontinent was partitioned between India and Pakistan, which caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, and massive displacements and refugee crisis in the areas of Punjab and Bengal. Internally too there were numerous dislocations, rebellions, and state suppression to ensure the unity and organisation of the post-colonial nation-state.

This also occurred among the tribal groups in eastern India such as the Santal. At the time of Indian independence, the Austro-Asiatic speaking and other similar upland scheduled tribe groups advocated for their own independent, tribal-majority state within the Indian union known as “Jharkhand.” This was to prevent dislocation and merging with the dominant caste-Hindu communities, and also to safeguard the special provisions that the British guaranteed the tribal groups after rebellions such as the Santal Hul, such as communal land tenure and recognition of traditional political structures. However, the Indian state denied the claim to “Jharkhand,” and divided up the Santali-speaking area into the states of Bihar, West Bengal, and Orissa.

Since most of the population was concentrated in Bihar, the groups in the states such as Orissa revolted to join Bihar with the hope that they may acquire some of the special provisions guaranteed to tribes, and also be part of any future Jharkhand. For instance in 1949, two years after Indian independence, a revolutionary named Sonaram Soren led a massive uprising of Santals in northern Orissa, demanding that his Santal-dominant region be allowed to join Bihar state to the north. The Indian army was called in, and numerous Santals were killed or imprisoned, and the movement was violently suppressed; the region stayed part of Orissa state (Das 2010).

It was in this region, and during this time, when a Santal schoolteacher and playwright, Raghunath Murmu, developed the *Ol-Chiki* script (Fig. 2). Like in the other cases, Murmu did not himself claim to have “invented” the script; he was said to have received directions from the Santal spirits in a dream to ascend one of the hills near his home village, where he would find the script inscribed on a stone. Murmu discovered the script there and modified it into a modern alphabetic system. In order to popularise the script, Murmu wrote a play called “Bidhu-Chandan.” The play is set in a time of war [trauma] when two lovers find

themselves on opposite sides. Since they can no longer talk to one another they communicate by means of a secret “code” which only they can understand; deciphering each other’s feelings. That secret code is the Ol-Chiki script. Later the lovers die and ascend to the spirit world and become the spirits “Bidhu” and “Chandan,” the patron saints of the Ol-Chiki script.

Even though Murmu claimed a scientific validity for the script, invoking a state-centered chronotope that argued the script would serve as a foundation for a future Jharkhand state, he popularised it through a different chronotope; one that linked the script to war, dislocation, and secret codes which were lost and now recovered (Lotz 2007). The play invoked both the unity of Santals (through the lovers coming together) as well as the traumatic nature of violent conflict and dispersal, one of the central features of Santal migration narratives that frame oral histories. Hence, even though the script was invented with the explicit aim of founding a claim to the state of Jharkhand, the way it spread in the Santali speaking areas was through another chronotope - where it was not linked to state cartographies or future-oriented time, but through a chronotope in which Santals could place the script as a connective modality in a time of trauma and dislocation.

During my fieldwork, the script has gained a newfound popularity. This is especially after the failure of the Jharkhand state to unify all Santals. In 2000, the Indian government finally acceded and allowed the southern half of Bihar state to separate and form the independent state of Jharkhand. Yet, other Santali-majority areas, such as in West Bengal

ᱠ	ᱡ	ᱢ	ᱣ	ᱤ
A (a)	At (at)	Ag (ak')	Ang (anj)	Al (al)
[a]	[t]	[k', a]	[ŋ]	[l]
ᱥ	ᱦ	ᱧ	ᱨ	ᱩ
Aa (a)	Aak (ak)	Aaj (ac')	Aam (am)	Aaw (aw)
[a]	[k]	[c', a]	[m]	[w/v]
ᱪ	ᱫ	ᱬ	ᱭ	ᱮ
I (i)	Is (is)	Ih (ih)	Iny (in)	Ir (ir)
[i]	[s]	[h, ʔ]	[n]	[r]
ᱯ	ᱰ	ᱱ	ᱲ	ᱳ
U (u)	Uch (uc)	Ud (ut')	Unn (un)	Uy (uj)
[u]	[c]	[t', d]	[n]	[j]
ᱴ	ᱵ	ᱶ	ᱷ	ᱸ
E (e)	Ep (ep)	Edd (ed)	En (en)	Err (er)
[e]	[p]	[d]	[n]	[r]
ᱹ	ᱺ	ᱻ	ᱼ	ᱽ
O (o)	Ott (ot)	Ob (op')	Ov (ow)	Oh (of)
[o]	[t]	[p', b]	[w]	(k) ^h

Fig. 2: Ol Chiki script (<http://wesantals.tripod.com/id45.html>)

where we worked, or Orissa, where the Ol-Chiki script was created, was left out. Among the populations was a new feeling of dislocation; Santals in these areas found themselves at the 'margins' of the state idea for which they had fought for half a century. The younger generations in these areas embraced Ol-Chiki with a fervour, seeing it a way to assert a new chronotope of politics, one of imagining a "Jharkhand" or political unity without the possibility of state; by enacting autonomy in the here and now through the use of script.

One of these ways is through the increasing use of Ol-Chiki in Santali-language magazines. Santali-language magazines are mostly written in the script of the dominant region (such as Bengali/Eastern Brahmi in Bengal) or in a missionary-derived Roman script. However, many magazines in the area we did fieldwork in, are now be written in Ol-Chiki script (Choksi 2017). Even though it is regional, these magazines are pointing to a vision of Santal unity that spatially transcends 'region' and also temporally brings together the current moment, with events such as Raghunath Murmu's discovery of the script and the Santal rebellion. In addition, Ol-Chiki is being increasingly used as a counterpoint in public space to the traditional Santali written in Eastern Brahmi or Roman scripts. Most Santali announcements were written in the Bengali/Eastern Brahmi script, but now those related to "All India" or some other large projections encompassing the entire Santal diaspora, are often written in Ol-Chiki. Ol-Chiki is also being used on school grounds to indicate that it should be the language of Santali education (Choksi 2015).

In this way, during this new political moment, a spatial polity is being enacted without the recourse to discourse of nation-state, and a punctual temporality, based on recurrence, is being created through the merging of events such as Bidhu-Chandan/Santal Hul/and Raghunath Murmu's discovery. In addition to the use of script, they are also wandering performers who travel through the Santali speaking areas to *sing* about the script. For instance, a blind singer, Kanuram Soren, from West Bengal, travelled to Murmu's home village in Orissa to sing about the script, where he sings about the discovery of the script. An excerpt of the song is given below:

*Bidu Chandan onol bonga. jivi janwar bir bonga .
seba seba-tem kanka len seba seba-tem kanka len . bir buru-rem...
aabowak'ol bayhaa aabowak', ror . aabowak', ol bayhaa abowak' ror . buru dhiri
uduk rem n'am keda . buru dhiri uduk rem n'aam keda...parsi baha teley baha hisid mey .
enec' seren' teley lasarhet', . Enec' seren' teley lasarhet'. disom hor teley aatang me.*

Bidhu-Chandan, the prose-form bonga, the animal, and the forest bongas, you remained silent, you stayed in the forest... Our writing (ol), my brothers, our speech/language (rodò), our writing (ol) my brothers, You received it from inside a mountain cave... we salute you with language-flowers, we welcome you with song-dance [enec'-seren'], receive our, the people of this country's, for the sake of language, our teacher...

In songs such as these the 'loss and recovery' narrative manifests itself sonically and kinetically. The song recollects in the moment the way Murmu received the script from the spirits, and Murmu's spirit along with the forest spirits, spirits of prose, and the hero spirits of Murmu's play, Bidhu and Chandan are called into the space and bring about the union

between “speech” and “writing” to make script, sharpened through “song and dance.” It is at these moments where the script, which is not present during the actual singing of the song, is recovered and spiritually empowered again.

Conclusion

I have outlined the spatial and temporal dimensions of a ‘politics of autonomy’ by drawing on the “loss and recovery of writing” narratives that are present among groups ranging from Hmong, Lahu, Karin, and Santal in eastern India. It leads to the question about what is autonomy? And how is it different from other political frames, such as “resistance,” “messianism,” or the “anarchic” tendencies of minority groups living in the margins of states, outlined in terms like “Zomia” (Van Schendel 2002, Scott 2010).

Chronotopes are not only the frames through which social actors understand their worlds, but also how we, as scholars of society, history, culture, narrate and “emplot” events. The terms we use reference certain spatial and temporal coordinates. For instance, when we discuss ‘literacy’ or ‘writing’ what do we suggest? Can we meaningfully distinguish societies with and without writing; i.e. oral vs. literate cultures? If we do, on which chronotope are we making that distinction? In the ‘loss of writing’ chronotope we have outlined here, that it is hard to make such distinctions. In this chronotope, writing is not a ‘representation’ of language, nor is it part of a history of human becoming. One does not enter into writing as a foundation of history, state or civilisation, rather writing appears and disappears; its occurrence shapes the way people relate to space and time.

What about other terms we may use to narrate political events in relation to minority communities, such as “resistance?” These terms are also used in reference to dominant state-centric chronotopes. For instance, by classifying this as resistance, we assume that the chronotope of “loss of writing” is always oriented towards the state, or to what we call the literate civilisations, and that the lifeways of the community evolve always in reference to the ‘dominant.’ However, we would say the chronotopes do not emerge primarily as a mode of resistance to the dominant spatio-temporal orientations, but when rather they emerge as responses to lived realities which diverge from the neat spatial-temporal emplotments assumed by the dominant chronotope. It is not a coincidence that these chronotopes are particularly salient for communities for which the reality is one of migration, dispersal, and trauma, and whose histories move in such a direction. These chronotopes can interact with state-centric, religious (like Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist), and other dominant chronotopes and can result in political formations which are sometimes novel, but sometimes conservative, such as identity politics. Autonomy must be considered on its own terms, and we should thus be wary of equating identity with resistance.

Finally, what about the chronotope of ‘messianism?’ The ‘messianic’ has a root in Judaic thought, which stems from a politics of waiting, when the messiah, as Walter Benjamin puts it, can enter the door at any moment. Messianism often implies both an assumed ‘end of time,’ a spiritual salvation, and a waiting for something to come. The chronotope we outlined here appears to have some messianic elements, but the end of time, or salvation is not one of them. This form of time is called ‘punctual,’ meaning it happens in the form of

events, and not as a progressive build up; and it is built on resemblance and recurrence. It is only messianic in that it happens in moments but does not build up to the end, nor is oriented to the future or to waiting.

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin writes:

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. His face is turned toward the Past... But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin 1978: 249).

The angel of history in the Klee painting that Walter Benjamin is referring to have a face that is 'turned toward the past' but is irresistibly propelled toward the future. Thus in this 'irresistible wind' called progress, the angel moves through the sky with its senses oriented not toward some irredeemable past, but looking at the past as to portend what is to come, as a way to encounter the chronotope of progress through the trope of a recurrence or resemblance of what is past.

In some ways we could say the angel is looking "askance." According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "askance" means to "look obliquely or sideways" usually with a look of "suspicion." The origin of the word is "uncertain." The head of the angel is turned obliquely as it navigates through the multiple chronotopes it inhabits, looking at each one suspiciously and contemplatively. The origin of writing, like the origin of the word "askance" is uncertain, it is lost only to return again, the new becoming old and the old becoming new. For communities whose everyday reality is one of rupture and dislocation, writing spreads its wings over space and time to create the autonomy that marks their political reality.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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