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Language and Identity

The Case of the Oraons of Chhotanagpur

Juhi Rose Vandana Minz

[ABSTRACT: Language plays a vital role in shaping identity. In today's world, the concept of identity includes class, race, ethnicity, gender and geographical location of a subject. These are key factors in forming the identity of a community. Language usage is determined by social, cultural and political factors. The identity of a community is shaped by how the individuals see themselves and how they are perceived by others. Taking the case of the Oraon indigenous community of the Chhotanagpur region, the paper explores the nexus between their identity and language. It is a social reality that in contemporary times, a majority of people from the Oraon community, especially those living in urban landscapes, are alienated from their language, Kurux, which is a Dravidian language. There are several factors responsible for this. The absence of *Kurux* as a medium of instruction in schools in the tribal dominated areas of Chhotanagpur is just one of the many reasons. This paper delves deeper and argues that the construction of identity of the Oraon people in contemporary times is influenced by the derogatory manner in which they have been perceived, since ancient times to the present, by the non-tribal people of India because of their prejudiced understanding of the notion of tribe. The paper explores the dual forces of British colonisation and internal colonisation; it interrogates the representations of the Oraons in various colonial anthropological materials and the exclusionary attitudes of the dominant communities in India towards them. The paper argues that the years of oppression, subjugation, social

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exclusion and othering experienced by the Oraon people have led to their socio-political and economic marginalisation, which in turn has led to the shaping of the negative identity that is responsible for the Oraons being alienated from their language.
KEYWORDS: Identity, Oraons, Kurux, tribal language, *adivasi* marginalisation, colonisation, colonial anthropology, racism]

Introduction

Language and identity are deeply interconnected. While language is very crucial to the formation of the social identity of a community, identity plays a major role in determining the language preference of a community. Class, race, ethnicity, gender and geopolitical location of the subjects play an important role in the construction of identity. Further, identity can only be understood through the "articulation of cultural differences" (Bhabha, 1994, p.1). It is through this articulation that identities are analysed and interrogated (Bhabha, 1994, p.2). Cultural differences are also instrumental in determining the linguistic preferences in society. Taking up the case of the Oraon indigenous community of the Chhotanagpur region of India, this paper argues that their identity has been shaped negatively in contrast to the mainstream population, and their languages have been understood in terms of their 'difference' from other socially acceptable mainstream languages. This identity of contrasts has created the notion of indigenous people as the 'others'. The article analyses how the identity of the Oraon indigenous people is shaped by imperial domination and internal colonisation. The paper argues that the anthropological and ethnographic works on the Oraon community, collected as part of the colonial agenda of knowing the natives, have led to very negative ideas being associated with the indigenous people of India, and particularly, the Oraon indigenous community. The article suggests that one of the reasons for the linguistic alienation of the Oraons from their mother tongue, Kurux, could be their alienation from their identity.

The Tribes and Indigenous People as the 'Other'

Contemporary notions of tribes and indigenous people are based on the colonial discourses and representations of these communities, their culture and tradition. In contemporary India, the indigenous people are seen only through the prism of political discourses where they are the beneficiaries of the development agenda of the government. Because of this, they have lost their varied and heterogeneous character and are understood within the frame of homogeneous categories. According to the 2011 census, there are 104.3 million tribal people in India who form 8.6% of the total population of India. The Anthropological Survey of India identified 461 distinct tribal communities in 1976, while the 2011 census lists 705 individual ethnic groups as scheduled tribes (Xaxa, 2019, p. 41). The concept of tribe was concretised in the consciousness of the Indian mainstream population during colonial rule. While Andre Beteille, an eminent authority on the study of tribes considers the concept of tribe as a colonial construction, Virginius Xaxa a leading theoretician of tribal/indigenous studies opines that during the British rule, in the early ethnographic works, castes and tribes were often used interchangeably and the understanding of castes and tribes as separate social formations was a later phenomenon (Xaxa, 1999, p. 1519). To understand tribes in the contemporary context, we need to trace the various connotations associated with the term

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'tribe' since colonial times. S.R. Bodhi and Raile R. Ziipao (2019), in their essay "Integration", write that:

> It is important to note the way the category "tribe" evolved. The state census was the key tool in which the construction of the tribal category took place. In the 1871 Census, just prior to the first census of 1881, these communities were marked as "others", "religion not known" and "hindus". In 1881 the "Tribal" category was a separate religious category, in 1891 they were denoted as "forest tribes under agriculture and pastoral caste", in 1901 they were identified as "animist" and in 1911 they were conceived as "tribal animist or people following tribal religion". By 1921, they were designated as "hill and forest tribes", in 1931 the words "primitive tribes"' was used, in 1941 they were designated as "tribe" and in the new Indian state they were identified as "Scheduled Tribe". Later, the Kalelkar Commission 1955, Dhebar Commission 1961, Lokur Committee 1965 and the Chanda Committee 1969, identified markers such as "primitiveness" and "backwardness", "distinctive culture", "geographical isolation" and "having shyness of contact with communities at large" as the defining criteria for the "Scheduled Tribe". (p. 56)

As already stated, the conception of tribes that we have today has been mainly derived from the anthropological and sociological works that started during the colonial rule and which have continued defining the tribes in the post-independence era. Colonial anthropological discourses, along with the sociological discourses have usually perceived tribes as being synchronic. Which means that with respect to the upward mobility of human beings' evolution, tribes are imagined to be stuck in a primitive time frame. Such an understanding has created a very negative perception about tribal and indigenous communities in India. While discussing the identity of tribes in India, Virginius Xaxa states that the definition of tribe or tribal communities has primarily been constructed on the dichotomy between the mainstream population and the tribes (Xaxa, 2005, p. 1363). This had numerous socio-political consequences. The tribes were viewed as the 'other' and there was a general perception among the mainstream people that they were barbaric and uncivilised. The definitions did not take into consideration the heterogeneity of the tribes with respect to their ethnicity and language, and conveniently tried to fit them into homogenous categories. Xaxa states that "such a category was necessitated both by the concern to subsume the enormous diversity existing into neat and meaningful categories for classificatory purposes as well as for administrative expediency" (Xaxa, 2005, p. 1363). The negative perceptions about tribes distanced them from the mainstream population, which led to their marginalisation.

In the Chhotanagpur region, the indigenous communities have encountered oppressive forces from not only the colonial tradition that believed in the superiority of the European races but the Indian mainstream population as well, which had thrived on the notion of caste superiority since ages. While discussing the transformation of indigenous communities in post-independent India, along the lines of language, culture and tradition, particularly with reference to the Oraon tribe, the general opinion of academia rests largely on the fact that conversion to Christianity by a majority of the Oraon population in the Chhotanagpur region was responsible for the social changes in the community. There are some scholars who locate

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the causes of transformation within the perimeter of colonial rule and administration. But the mainstream Indian population and their casteist attitude towards the indigenous people are also responsible for the transformation of the tribes as well as for the development of negative connotations associated with the tribes. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism*, discusses how texts written on the Orientals by historians, ethnologists and anthropologists during the colonial period were responsible for regarding colonised people as the 'others'. Said explains how "Orientalism" developed alongside European expansion. By 1914, almost 85% of the world was under colonial rule. Even though France and Britain were hostile rivals, they became allies in colonising the majority of the world. These two allies not only shared land, profit, or rule, but most importantly, they shared "intellectual power," which Said refers to as Orientalism. In a way, Orientalism served as a knowledge archive or information archive, drawing from both French and British sources. What bound these knowledge sources together was a family of ideas that "explained the behaviour of Orientals; they supplied Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere; most importantly, they allowed Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics" (Said, 1977, p. 42). Because Orientalism was a recorded and documented venture, it actually led to constrained thoughts regarding the Orientals. The main purpose of Orientalism was to concretise the dichotomy between Western superiority and oriental inferiority.

Parallels of the Orientalism project can be found in the context of tribes in India, specifically the tribes of the Chhotanagpur region. The anthropological works written by the European as well as the Indian anthropologists paint the tribes as subhuman, barbaric creatures who need to be civilised. Most of the people who studied the tribes in India, be it the European scholars, anthropologists, ethnographers, civil servants or the Indian anthropologists, did it from a certain pedestal from where they could look down on them. The Oraons were first recognised or identified as the 'other' during the colonial period, when the process of gathering knowledge in the name of colonialism began. In the colonial knowledge system, the Oraons were considered sub-human creatures because of their language and culture. The religion of the Oraons was the main factor based on which the sub-human persona of the Oraons was created. Their heathen practices and supernatural belief system, especially their belief in spirits and demons, led to them being labelled as primitive with respect to the rest of humanity's upward mobility towards modernisation and so-called rationality. Thus, the creation of social hierarchies went hand in hand with the production of colonial knowledge systems (Dasgupta, 2016, p. 439). Race and ethnicity are markers of identity, but in the case of the Oraons of Chhotanagpur, they also became markers of social seclusion. Michel Foucault argues that knowledge and power are deeply intertwined, suggesting that possessing knowledge about something grants power over it (Foucault, 2015, p. 176). In the context of colonialism, the knowledge colonial powers acquired about indigenous tribes created a power imbalance, enabling the colonisers to construct, control and dominate these groups.

The representations of the Orient in the literary as well as non-literary works produced by the Europeans were instrumental in establishing imperial hegemony and thereby concretising the domination of the Western countries over the rest of the world. The scholars, administrators, ethnographers, and anthropologists created a certain Orient that would sound exotic, crude, peculiar, and distant to Western readers. In the context of the indigenous people of the Chhotanagpur region, the picture painted is that of barbaric people engaging in

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wild drunken celebration in their religious ceremonies, which is nothing but a form of violent devotion to their god. Such religious rituals and even the worship of indigenous gods were considered immoral by the Hindus, who themselves worship deities (Dalton, 1868, p. 6).

Colonial Anthropology and Indigenous Identity

Anthropology had a lot of impact on the Indian colonial administration. In the Chhotanagpur region, the British administration modified tribal laws and customs, which affected the socio-political and cultural identity of the indigenous communities. This happened because the Britishers had no idea about the social organisation of the tribes. Soon, the indigenous people retaliated in the form of the Kol Insurrection that continued from 1829 to 1839. The colonial administration was very quick to label the indigenous people as troublemakers, lawbreakers and savages who needed to be controlled and subdued. In order to control the tribes, the colonial administration needed to know them. The entire process of knowing the tribes has caused significant harm to the identities of various tribal communities. Their cultures and traditions were interpreted from a very ethnocentric perspective.

Orientalist discourses on the indigenous communities of Chhotanagpur created stereotypes that the indigenous people are primitive, barbaric and violent. These stereotypes in turn became the basis for believing that the indigenous people deserve to be dominated and civilised. Such stereotypes have been etched in the minds of the mainstream communities, and there seems to be no space for other narratives about the indigenous people. Edward Said (1994) is right when he says that "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism" (p. xiii). The Oraons and other indigenous communities of Chhotanagpur experienced the onslaught of not only Western imperialism but also of internal colonisation at the hands of the dominant communities. In the context of imperial narratives about the Oraons, the work of E. T. Dalton must be examined to understand the grave consequences of creating stereotypes and derogatory images of the Oraon community. During his tenure as the commissioner of British India in Chhotanagpur from 1855–1875, Edward Tuite Dalton got the opportunity to work in close proximity with the indigenous people of Chhotanagpur. Two of his illustrious works, "The Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal", published in 1872 and "The Kols of Chota-Nagpore" published in 1868, shed light on the prevalent negative perceptions about the various tribes inhabiting the Chhotanagpur plateau. Writing about the indigenous people, Dalton mentions that the Mundas and Oraons were commonly referred to as the Kols, a derogatory term used by the white-skinned Aryans for the dark-skinned indigenous people:

> This word is one of the epithets of abuse applied by the Brahminical races to the aborigines of the country who opposed their early settlement, and it has adhered to the primitive inhabitants of Chota-Nagpore for ages. It includes many tribes: the people of this province to whom it is generally applied, are either Moondah or Oraon. (Dalton, 1868, p. 2)

The term Kol was originally a "Sanskrit word meaning pig or outcast that was used by the Hindus of the region to denigrate the aboriginal/tribal people" (Dasgupta, 2016, p. 447). Kol was used as a marker of hierarchical and social differentiation between dominant castes and

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the indigenous people, where the former were considered civilised and the latter looked down upon as barbaric. The term Kol was so thoroughly internalised by the Brahmanical population around the Chhotanagpur plateau that it was used by B. H. Hogdson, one of the first ethnologists to work on the indigenous people of the Chhotanagpur region, to describe the collective language used by the different indigenous communities. In his well-known work, "The Aborigines of Central India", Hodgson (1848) uses the term "the great Kol language" (551), thereby normalising the usage of such a derogatory term by the socio-economically dominant communities. During colonial rule, the indigenous people were socio-economically exploited and deprived of their dignity. Phrases like "stubborn Kols", "restless junglees", "chuar" and "dakaits" were the most common phrases that were used to describe the Oraons (Bara, 2009, p. 92). Hence, the idea of the indigenous was concretised as sub-human, uncivilised, barbaric.

Being an administrator, Dalton realised that there was a great need to have knowledge about the material culture of the various tribes in and around Bengal, for better governance. Still affected by the Kol Insurrection, where the British administration in the Chhotanagpur region had met with resistance from various indigenous communities, he had now come to understand that the indigenous people, who had been the insignificant others so far, could not be underestimated. These indigenous communities were culturally diverse and different from one another. Linguistically too, not only were they very distinct from the rest of the mainstream languages, but the languages of the Oraons, Mundas, Kharias and Hos, to name a few, were also distinct from one another. "The Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal" gives a very detailed picture of how Dalton perceived the cultures and traditions of the tribes in the Chhotanagpur region, where he had worked in close proximity with the indigenous people. He begins his description of the Oraons by the following statement:

> The Khurukh or Oraons of Chutia Nagpur are the people best known in many parts of India as "Dhangars", a word that from its apparent derivation (dang or dhang, a hill) may mean any hillmen, but amongst several tribes of the southern Tributary Mahals, the terms Dhangar and Dhangarin mean the youth of the two sexes both in highland and lowland villages, and it cannot be considered as the national designation of any particular tribe. (Dalton, 1872, p. 245)

It is worth noting here that the term 'Dhangar' for males and 'Dhangarin' for females was used in a derogatory sense to refer to a house help or a farm help. The term is usually used by people who employ the Oraons as helpers. Being a house help or a farm help is an occupation undertaken by some people from the Oraon community, and referring to the entire community as Dhangar or Dhangarin is incorrect. But when we read Dalton's ethnology, we realise that it was used as a national designation for the Oraons as they were 'best known' by these two words. S. C. Roy (1984), a well-known anthropologist working in Ranchi in the early years of the 20th century, writes that the main occupation of the Oraons was agriculture, but many people in the community were needy and occasionally worked as helping hands in households and farms on wages (p. 13). The word Dhangar signifies labourers or servants (Roy, 1984, p. 13). When the Britishers first came to the Chhotanagpur region, it was these labourers/servants that they first met, and so the name Dhangar came to be used as a collective term for the entire tribe (Roy, 1984, p. 13). It can be argued that

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even before the arrival of the Britishers, the Oraons were referred to as Dhangar in a derogatory sense by the Indian mainstream people, and the Britishers just went with the same word. It would be convenient for the Britishers not to question the derogation to ease the process of the suppression of tribal people. In order for the Britishers to portray themselves as saviours and liberators of the oppressed tribes, the tribes had to be represented in their orientalist and imperialistic discourses as low, immoral, destitute, savage, barbaric, uncivilised and other similar nomenclatures. Roy refers to Walter Hamilton's "A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of Hindostan", where the Oraons are referred to as Dhangars who are "still impure, as probably unconverted Mlechchas" and "barbarians" (Roy, 1984, p. 13). The term "Mlechcha" in Sanskrit means barbarian. This definitely means that this terminology was very much in use by the mainstream Indian communities in the early years of the 19th century, as Hamilton's book was published in 1820. The image that the Aryans had of the barbarian in early India continued till the colonial period and is still prevalent in contemporary times. Romila Thapar (1971) suggests that "if Mleccha epitomises the barbarian, then Arya includes all that is noble and civilised" (p. 411). She opines that the term Mlechcha was used to "include speakers of an alien language, social groups ranked as mixed castes, technologically backward tribes and peoples along the frontiers (Thapar, 1971, p. 415). Such a terminology was used with the agenda of exclusion of all the non-Aryan communities in early India:

> The pure land was *Arya varta*, traditionally the region inhabited by the Aryas, all else was *mleccha-desa*. Since the mleccha is ritually impure, Aryas visiting the lands of the mleccha must perform *prayascitta* or expiatory rites before they can be regarded as cleansed and fit for normal association again. The concept of ritual impurity relates to the functioning of caste and this particular aspect of the image of the barbarian appears to be unique to early Indian culture. It was this dichotomy of purity-impurity which gave significance to the role and status of the ritually pure—the Arya and eminent amongst the Aryas, the brahman. (Thapar, 1971, p. 411)

Because of the notion of purity and impurity, the dominant castes in colonial India treated the indigenous people differently and along the same lines as the untouchables, even though it is very evident that they were never a part of the caste system in India. In "A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of Hindostan", Walter Hamilton (1820) writes that "the impervious jungles here conceal many strange tribes, who, even at this late period of Hindoo predominance, have not become converts to the Brahminical doctrines, and are consequently classed by the priests among the abominable" (p. 288). So even when the indigenous were outside the realm of the caste system, the notion of purity and impurity was so strong in the consciousness of the dominant communities that they labelled them as 'Mlechchas' due to the distinctiveness of their tradition, culture and language. This is how the exclusion of indigenous people began. The dominant communities created the image of the indigenous as the 'other' who is outside the perimeters of civilised society. The 'other' was meant to do menial jobs, which the dominant communities would find polluting. The process of othering was crucial in proving the superiority of the mainstream population. Dalton concluded his discussion of the Oraons by stating that the Oraons themselves believed that they were meant to be the labouring class, and thus the community did not retaliate against or question their

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employers, who were the landlords who had captured the tribal lands due to the policies of the British government. He writes:

> Not one of their own people now occupies a position which would give him the power to protect, or influence to elevate them from the state of degradation into which a majority of the tribe have long ago fallen. They submit to be told that they were especially created as a laboring class. They have had this so often dinned into their ears, that they believe and admit it; and I have known instances of their abstaining from claiming, as authorised by law, commutation for the forced labor exacted by their landlords, because they considered that they were born to it. (1872, p. 202)

One is compelled to think about how the Indian privileged communities or the British became successful in establishing their dominance in a predominantly tribal populated region. How could a community accept and believe in such a dehumanising narrative about themselves? A lot goes into the process of marginalisation of a particular community. It does not happen all at once. Marginalisation is a slow demeaning process that breaks the spirit and identity of a community. Marginalisation of a community happens through ideological means.

Ideology is not just political. Our belief systems, our mindset, the socio-cultural ways in which we relate to the world and the socio-economic and political environment around us constitute ideology (Loomba, 2005, p. 26). In "The German Ideology" (1846), Marx and Engels explore how ideology is nothing but 'false consciousness' because the working class or the oppressed masses often misperceive the ideology of the dominant communities to be their own: "this is so because the ideologies that most circulate or gain currency in any society reflect and reproduce the interests of the dominant social classes" (Loomba, 2005, p. 27). But since social groups are heterogeneous, one cannot say for certain that the whole social group holds the same ideology. This brings us back to the question of how the oppressed masses believe in the rationale of their oppression offered by the dominant social groups. Gramsci has argued that ideological manipulation leads to hegemony: the "ruling classes achieve domination not by force or coercion alone, but also by creating subjects who 'willingly' submit to be ruled" (Loomba, 2005, p. 30). In Dalton's description of the indigenous people of Chhotanagpur, we see hegemony being exerted through ideological and discursive manipulation. Again, due to the Oraon community being heterogeneous, one cannot claim that the entire community was influenced by a certain ideology. If a community is a site of manipulative ideological exertions, then it is also a site where people of the community rebel against certain ideologies. During the colonial period, indigenous communities rebelled against the British and the Indian landlords to save their autonomy, culture, tradition, and to assert their indigenous identity. But the indigenous identity being shaped was based on differentiation from mainstream groups, which had consequences capable of completely altering the community. The shaping of a negative identity of the Oraon tribe, along with the dehumanisation of its people by the colonial administration, affected the consciousness and self-perception of the people. Societal perception is an important factor in defining the identity of a community. Though colonial anthropology has brought many cultures into the knowledge domain of the world, its representations of indigenous people have led to the creation of a negative identity.

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Racism and the Indigenous/Adivasi Communities

Franz Fanon (1967), in his groundbreaking book *Black Skin, White Masks*, writes about how an inferiority complex is created in the minds of the colonised people due to the linguistic and cultural invasion by the colonisers. Such invasions occur when the colonisers perceive the language and culture of the natives as inferior. In the case of the Oraons, the inferiority complex was created due to prevalent exclusionary understanding of the tribes as primitive and barbaric. They were also differentiated because of their physical appearance and their language, which was distinct from the languages spoken by mainstream communities in the area surrounding the habitat of the Oraons. Writing about the effects of French colonisation experienced by the Martiniquan people, Fanon (1967) writes:

> Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (p. 9)

Although Fanon here writes about the Martiniquan experiences of colonisation, one cannot overlook the fact that the same sort of inferiority is found among people belonging to the Oraon community in India. This inferiority is one of the reasons why most contemporary Oraons are alienated from their language and traditions. In fact, this alienation had begun in cities like Ranchi by the latter half of the 19th century and early years of the 20th century when the Oraons first received education. Many elderly Oraons have stated that they were restrained from speaking in their mother tongue, Kurukh, by their parents, as the parents did not want their children to feel excluded in school, which was dominated by the mainstream people. This alienation from language is rooted in colonisation and internal colonisation experienced by the Oraons over centuries. This did not happen in a year or two or even some decades. Rather, it is a result of a long historical process whereby it has been drummed into the minds of the Oraons that they are denigrated creatures, who need to be uplifted by the Britishers and the other dominant communities. The Oraons also experienced exclusion in the form of extreme racism at the hands of European colonists and mainstream Indian people. The primary propagator of such racist attitudes towards the tribes was colonial anthropological discourses. The Oraons and the indigenous people in general were not only subjugated by the British colonisation as subjects that had to be controlled, but they were also dominated by the anthropological regime, which treated them as muted subjects that had to be known.

There was a deep desire in the colonial administration to systematise Indian society in the form of various groups, communities, castes and tribes in order to create a stable social structure that could be easily controlled and analysed. Anthropology, being the most important part of colonial administration, has always been viewed as a truthful source of ethnographic knowledge. As a discipline, it has always aimed to define and classify the indigenous people in India. V. Sebastian, in his essay on the anthropological gaze, writes that

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"in the animal kingdom, the rule is, eat or be eaten; in the human kingdom, define or be defined" (Sebastian, 2015, p. 36). These undertakings have not only led to a lot of misrepresentations of the indigenous communities stemming from extreme bias, but they have also perpetuated the establishment of differential power equations between the ones who define and the ones who are defined. The "anthropological gaze" gave way to the nexus between power and knowledge (Sebastian, 2015, p. 36). The ones who are the subjects of the anthropological gaze are divested of any power simply by the act of being known by the people who have access to systems and structures of knowledge. Dalton gives a very demeaning account of the indigenous people during the colonial times. It must be stressed that the colonialist perception derived heavily from the perception and attitude of the mainstream populations towards the indigenous communities. The adoption of derogatory terms like *Kol, Dhangar, Coolie* is proof enough that the dominant communities considered the indigenous as being below them. Dalton (1868) gives the following description of the Oraons:

> The young men and women have light graceful figures, and are as active as monkeys. Their complexions are, as a rule, of the darkest; but if we take as our type those who dwell in mixed communities, we find great variety in feature and colour. If we take those who, living in isolated positions, may be supposed to offer us the purest blood, we find them generally dark and ill-favoured. They have wide mouths, thick lips and projecting maxillary processes, nostrils wide apart, and no elevation of nose to speak of, and low though not in general very receding foreheads. I have seen amongst them heads that in the woolly crispness of the hair completed the similitude of the Oraons to the Negro. It may be said that the class I am describing have degenerated in feature from living a wilder and more savage life than others of their clan; but I do not find this degeneracy of feature amongst the Jushpore Korewahs, who are to the Moondahs of Chota-Nagpore what the Jushpore Oraons are to the Oraons of the same district. (p. 17)

The passage seems to be a very subjective perspective of Dalton about the Oraons and one cannot fail to notice how it is steeped in racism. Comparing Oraons to monkeys is a way of suggesting that they have a low intellect. It divests the Oraons of any rationality or even the power to think. It also gestures towards evolutionary stasis: how the Oraons have not evolved much and are still very much ape-like. The aversion of the Europeans to the dark complexion of the Oraons and the assertion of a "similitude of the Oraons to the Negro" based on "woolly crispness of the hair" shrieks of racial prejudice. The dark, according to them, would always be "ill-favoured" and barbaric. Another important point to note here is how the intermingling of the Oraons with other non-tribal communities is favoured because it reduces their physical darkness. Dalton (1868) notes, "in the more civilised parts of the province, both Oraons and Moondahs improve in appearance. The former indeed still retain their somewhat diminutive appearance, but in complexion they are fairer, in features softer, some even good looking..." (p. 17).

Furthermore, in order to provide validity to ethnology, British ethnographers repeatedly used anthropometry—the study of human body measurements—as a tool to determine and establish the superiority of a particular race. The whole idea behind the various ventures on

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race was to ultimately prove that the Europeans, especially the British, were superior to other races and "the degree of difference between the European and other races was simultaneously a measure of the backwardness of the 'subject' (or objectified) population" (Bates, 1995, p. 4). The measurements of the skull and nose to determine the cranial circumference and nasal index were meant to underscore the scientific validity of the superiority of the European race. In this context, the work of Herbert Hope Risley is worth considering. Risley was a British ethnographer who conducted extensive research on the tribes and castes of Bengal in the latter half of the nineteenth century and based his racial theories on the so-called scientific methods of anthropometry. In his book *The People of India*, Risley (1915) writes:

> If we take a series of castes in Bengal, Bihar and the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, or Madras, and arrange them in the order of the average nasal index, so that the caste with finest nose shall be at the top, and that with the coarsest at the bottom of the list, it will be found that this order substantially corresponds with the accepted order of social precedence. Thus, in Bihar or the United Provinces the casteless tribes, Kols, Korwas, Mundas and the like, who have not yet entered the Brahmanical system, occupy the lowest place in both series. Then come the vermin-eating Musahars and the leather-dressing Chamars. The fisher castes, Bauri, Bind, and Kewat, are a trifle higher in the scale; the pastoral Goala, the cultivating Kurmi, and a group of cognate castes from whose hands a Brahman may take water, follow in due order, and from them we pass to the trading Khatris, the landholding Babhans and the upper crust of Hindu society ... the social status of the members of a particular group varies in inverse ratio to the mean relative width of their noses. (p. 29)

Such depictions and classifications have stripped the Oraons of their merit and individuality, leading them to question their identity. When the cultural and civilizational refinement is judged based on the elevation of the nose, one can only imagine how it must have affected the Oraons, who generally have a depression on the bridge of their noses owing to the features of the race that they belonged to. As far as colonial knowledge of the natives was concerned, anthropometry led to the establishment of the notion of racially and intellectually inferior natives who have simian characteristics both in looks and intelligence. This image of the indigenous people has been present in the popular Indian mind since pre-colonial times and its destructive legacy continues to stigmatise the Oraons even in contemporary times. Fanon (1967) rightly argues that "the feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European's feeling of superiority" and stresses that "it is the racist who creates his inferior" (p. 69).

Colonial as well as Indian ethnographic descriptions of the indigenous people relied heavily on the Sanskritic texts, which were centred around Brahminical values and culture. The texts gained ground because they were written texts. Most of these written texts glorify the Brahminical culture and create a very negative image of the other indigenous cultures in India that did not have any recorded history. Their representation suffered due to the hegemony of the written Brahminical texts, which portrayed themselves as progressive and the other indigenous cultures as being stuck in the lower ranks of evolutionary hierarchy. Sanskritic sources on the tribes were "replete with alternatives of the beastly image of tribe.

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The local Indian idea of tribe, thus, colluded with the western racist idea" (Bara, 2009, p. 92). Theories of race with respect to various communities in India began to develop rapidly in the nineteenth century. Because the British lacked complete knowledge about the castes and tribes in India, they predominantly relied on Brahminical notions and texts to understand these groups (Bates, 1995, p. 14). The differences of physical characteristics between the Brahmins and the tribes and the castes belonging to the lower rung of social hierarchy were recorded, and so "an elemental form of racism had already developed, particularly concerning the tribals—the section of the population about which the British were least informed and felt they had most to fear" (Bates, 1995, p. 14). The increasing acceptance of Brahminical views on caste groups and indigenous groups in India led to the creation of the notion of an "imagined tribal" that became concretised in the psyche of the British administrators as the cultural opposite of the Brahmins (Bates, 1995, p. 14). This approach was very much in alignment with the Darwinian concepts that supported the theory of race, where the White Europeans were seen as the antithesis of the Black African Americans. Further, in the context of Indian tribes, this very binary created the racial hierarchy between the Adivasis and the Britishers (Bara, 2012, p. 59).

The contact of the indigenous people with the dominant communities, as well as the British officials, was marked by hostility. Many attempts by the British officials to enter the forested depths of their homeland were met with violent resistance. As a result of such encounters, the Britishers perceived them as bloodthirsty savages (Bates, 1995, p. 15). The informants of the Britishers, mainly people belonging to the dominant caste groups, further fanned these notions of savagery due to their own prejudiced ideas about the indigenous people. Cultural and traditional differences between indigenous people and mainstream communities likely contributed to the development of such prejudices. The Oraons of Chhotanagpur have been pushed to inferior positions due to racism. The identity of the Oraons that has formed over the years since colonial rule is based on an identity of contrast. This has deeply affected the language and culture of the Oraons in contemporary times, where racism is still prevalent.

British imperialism needed to justify its domination of the natives and especially the indigenous natives whom the Britishers perceived as being "the backward-most of the backward Hindus, who, in religious terms, became the most inveterate 'heathens'" (Bara, 2012, p. 58). According to Sanjukta Dasgupta (2019), "the primitive, 'savage' subjects had to be nurtured, trained and guided to progress and civilisation, since, being child-like, they were incapable of pursuing their self-interest" (p. 110). The racial differences highlighted through colonial anthropology concretised the image of the indigenous people as primitive, stuck in a particular time frame in history, from which the Europeans have long moved forward towards modernity (p. 111). The racial differences and the underlying attitude of the white colonisers and dominant castes and communities of India, which were steeped in racial prejudices and notions of racial superiority, led to the creation of an inferiority complex in the minds of the Oraon people.

Indigenous People and the Politics of Language

India is a multilingual country, and its citizens are mostly bilingual or trilingual. Acquiring a new language does not mean that one loses the previous languages acquired. But if

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communities experience a loss of their native language, then it becomes a matter of concern that must be interrogated. In the case of the majority of Oraon people, especially those who have migrated to urban spaces, the loss of their native language Kurux/Kurukh, can be linked to the inferiority complex felt by the people of the community with respect to their language and culture. This inferiority complex is the consequence of the thoughtfully constructed othering of the Oraons by the dominant castes and communities in and around the Chhotanagpur region and the British administration through colonial anthropology that served as the basis on which the identity of the Oraons was constructed and perceived by the mainstream population.

In the groundbreaking book, *The Intimate Enemy*, Ashis Nandy explores how colonisation does not always mean colonisation of land and economic wealth. Colonisation also colonises the mind of the colonised subjects along with their body, and because of this, the colonised people "alter their cultural priorities" (Nandy, 2009, p. 11). When a group of people adopt a new language, they become dissociated with the rest of the community. When the majority of the people from the community adopt a language that is foreign to their traditional ethos, they get dissociated from their own culture. The Oraons have been primitivised by the dual agency of the colonial rulers and the dominant castes and communities in India. They have been de-civilised and treated as child-like by the British administrators and dominant castes, who have portrayed themselves as the saviours of Oraons at different points of time while ironically being their exploiters. The Oraons have been stripped of all their culture and tradition. It is presumed that they have no history due to the prejudices against oral texts. By the twentieth century, the Oraon community had faced enough exploitation, denigration and exclusion. The century also witnessed the migration of Oraons from the rural to the urban centres in search of a better livelihood. Language gets replaced when the population gets replaced. Migrations usually seem to be voluntary, but socio-economic and political pressures play a role in them. When people migrate to new places and encounter new cultures, they are often forced into using the language of the dominant community. Migration put them in contact with the non-indigenous communities. They now perceived how the mainstream population was prejudiced against their indigenous culture, tradition and languages. The identity of contrast and the hegemonic cultural forces experienced by the Oraons made them believe the ideology of the dominant communities that characterised them as inferior people. Therefore, in order to assimilate with the non-tribal communities, they had a deep desire to measure up to the cultural standards of the well-educated dominant sections of the population. The Oraons chose to speak only in the language of the dominant communities because the extent of assimilation with other groups determined their social status. They opted to speak in Hindi or English because mastery in these languages opened new avenues for them to explore. This also meant that they had a better chance of finding acceptance in society, which they never had before.

The Oraons were made to feel inferior because of their language, which the dominant communities perceived as a crude language of brutish people. Such prejudices can be traced back to the earliest encounter between the Oraons and other indigenous people and the Aryans. In her discussion of the term *mlechcha,* which the Aryans used for the non-Aryan indigenous people, Romila Thapar (1971) suggests that the term *mlech* means to speak in a manner different from our language, and the term could stand for an "onomatopoeic sound imitating the harshness of an alien tongue" (p. 409). There are numerous examples of the

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differentiation of language by the Aryans. The incomprehensibility of the indigenous languages was described by the Aryans with the use of onomatopoeic words like "*marmara*" and "*barbara*" where the word "*barbara*" might have been derived from the "Greek word "barabaros", since it occurs in late works in Sanskrit and refers to people of the north who are said to be sinful, low and barbarous" (Thapar, 1971, p. 410). This linguistic differentiation also aims to establish the superiority of the language of the Aryans over the indigenous people in India.

The latter half of the nineteenth century brought a lot of transition in the Oraon community. Various socio-economic forces affected their language preference. The Oraons, for the very first time, received education in primary schools and high schools established by the missionaries in rural places. This was just the beginning of their emancipation from the various socio-political and economic bondages they had been subject to. Education is also responsible for the alienation of educated indigenous people from their language. The medium of instruction in schools was either Hindi or English. There was no provision for acquiring education in native languages. Christopher Lakra, an Oraon scholar, who has done extensive research on the Oraons, states that the Oraon parents had to create a conducive atmosphere at home so that their children studying in English medium schools find it easier to acquire education in English. Hence, in many urban Oraon households, English became a medium of communication (Lakra, 1999, p. 163). Hindi too was preferred over the native language as it was the language of not only educational institutions but also of offices and market-places (Lakra, 1999, p. 163). Reminiscing about their school days, many elderly Oraons stated that they were often ridiculed in school for speaking their mother tongue. Because of this, they ensured that their children learnt Hindi and English. So even if the parents spoke to each other in Kurux they would refrain from doing so with their children. So that the children have some degree of social acceptance, which they, as Kurux-speaking people, did not have. Change in language preference may also be attributed to the degree of acculturation experienced by a community. If we compare the case of the Mundas, Oraons, Santhals, Hos and Kharias, the Oraons experienced the maximum contact with outside cultures, but the other tribes have better retained their native languages. The Oraons were open to migration, and they migrated to distant places in search of livelihood, which affected their language preferences. Lakra (1999) writes:

> ...it is not infrequently pointed out by the Oraons that speaking Kurukh in offices and other work places creates inferiority feeling within them. The non-tribals look down upon tribal languages as primitive. There is some truth in this because Kurukh is so different from Hindi and its dialects...the numerical majority and 'cultural superiority' attributed to the non-tribal society cannot be denied as a cause. At the same time, the sense of superiority in speaking in Hindi, English and other non-tribal languages is also preoccupying the minds of many an Oraon in the city. Learning a different language is not only pragmatic, but consequently it gradually brings about mental and attitudinal change. The Oraons begin to delink themselves from their countrysides where tribal languages are spoken. (pp. 163-164)

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The Oraons in the Chhotanagpur region have appropriated the Sadri/Nagpuri language as their primary language of communication apart from Hindi. This is because many Oraons, especially those living in urban spaces, have gradually lost their indigenous Kurux language for communication purposes. Kurux songs are sung at marriages and festivals like Karam and Sarhul. The Oraons try hard to remain rooted in their culture through these songs, which are performatory in nature as they are accompanied by traditional dance. The tradition of telling folk tales in the Kurux language has reduced considerably, with elders telling Oraon tales in either Sadri/Nagpuri or Hindi. The survival of any language depends on the communicative and literary value of that language. The language of the Oraons has suffered due to the orality of its literary material. In the absence of written literature and the absence of Kurux language as the medium of instruction in schools, the language of the Oraons cannot survive for long in contemporary times. Most of the urban Oraons have abandoned their mother tongue, Kurux, in favour of the lingua franca, Sadri/Nagpuri, and Hindi. The use of Sadri/Nagpuri is problematic for the Oraons, as it further alienates them from their mother tongue. Many Oraons feel a sense of loss of their language and often confuse Sadri/Nagpuri to be one of the indigenous languages. They mistakenly feel some consolation in using Sadri/Nagpuri as a replacement for Kurux. But Sadri/Nagpuri was never the language of the indigenous people. It is the language of the Sadans, who are the non-tribal people inhabiting the Chhotanagpur region. Sadani or Sadri/Nagpuri belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family. The term Sadan is a deviation from the term *Sud, Sudh* or *Sudhan,* which was in use during the colonial times. Dalton (1872) asserts that in the Chhotanagpur region, there is a strong distinction between the indigenous communities and non-indigenous communities. They live in close vicinity but are opposed in their customs and traditions. The Rajputs, Goalas, Kurmis, Kahars and other non-indigenous groups distinguish themselves from the indigenous communities by self-identifying as *Sadans* or *Sudhs* or *Sudhans,* which means "pure", while referring to indigenous people as *Kol,* which means "vile or impure, or chuar, robber" (Dalton, 1872, p. 308).

It is interesting to note how many indigenous communities, such as the Oraons, have adopted the language of non-indigenous people and become alienated from their native language. The preference for Sadri/Nagpuri and Hindi accelerated because it led to better assimilation of the Oraons into the multilingual communities of Chhotanagpur, which comprise mainly Sadanis, such as the Kurmis, Chik Baraiks, Telis, and Lohars, as well as Biharis and Bengalis. These non-tribal communities are domineering, and they usually form the bulk of the traders, agriculturists, and teachers with whom the Oraons had to deal on a day-to-day basis to earn their livelihood. Levinus Tirkey (1998) argues that many indigenous communities have changed their language preference. "The Bhils and Gonds, the two largest tribal groups, have almost completely abandoned the languages of their forefathers and adopted the regional languages" (p. 15). It has also been observed that many indigenous communities in Chhotanagpur are coming under the influence of Hindi, Bangla, Oriya and Sadri/Nagpuri. This is because "the new generation among the tribal groups find that their own languages are incapable of coping with the demands of modern knowledge" (1998, p. 15).

Conclusion

The Oraon people have more or less been invisible in the social, economic and political sphere of India due to their extreme marginalisation. The intersections of language, culture,

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ideology and a history of denigration, debasement and oppression have led to the construction of their identity in negative terms in contemporary times. Identities are shaped by socio-economic and political experiences, and language preference is heavily influenced by perceptions of identity. The identity of the Oraons in contemporary times has been shaped by the past experiences of marginalisation and oppression, and due to the social, economic and political divide between them and the non-indigenous communities. Anthropological knowledge has done more harm than good for the Oraon indigenous community, as it led to the establishment of social differentiation, which created an inferiority complex in the minds of the contemporary Oraons who frequently interacted socio-culturally with the non-indigenous people around their habitat. It negatively affected their perception of their selfhood because such differentiation had been experienced by the Oraons ever since they came in contact with non-tribal communities. Edward Tuite Dalton and Herbert Hope Risely were instrumental in the propagation of racial prejudices against the Oraons in the colonial period in India. The inferiority of their race was stressed upon, and they were assumed to be evolutionarily primitive as compared to fair-skinned Aryans in India. Hence, the Oraons were socially excluded based on their physical appearance and complexion, and this affected the collective consciousness of the identity of the tribe negatively. European racial theories and the Darwinian theory of evolution prevalent during the colonial rule in India furthered the differential attitudes against the Oraon people. Such racial attitudes have continued in contemporary times as well. This essay puts forward the view that extreme marginalisation can negatively affect identity, which can lead to the devaluing of native tongues. The stigmatisation of indigenous people because of racial prejudices is also squarely responsible for the shaping of negative identity, which can coerce marginalised communities to adopt the language and culture of dominant communities, in the process further concretising the loss of language and conflicts in identity.

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