The Researchers' - Volume XI, Issue II, June 2025
International Research Journal (Double-blind peer-reviewed)
ISSN : 2455-1503
Impact Factor - 5.882
Date of Acceptance : 11 March 2025
DOI - 10.21276/tr.2025.11.2.AN4

4. Lost in Translation: English Writing and the Identity Crisis of Oraon Migrants

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Abstract

When the Oraon tribe moves from their homeland to cities, they face big challenges in keeping their cultural identity, mainly because they start losing their native language. To fit into their new surroundings, they often learn and use dominant languages like English for work and Sadri often in their daily life. Over time, this causes their traditional language to fade away. Losing their language doesn't just affect how they speak-it also creates a deep identity crisis because language is a key part of who they are. This struggle is shown in books like Mary Oraon by Mahasweta Devi, which talks about how English influence's tribal identity and culture. The story shows how mixing English words with native languages reflects bigger social and cultural changes, as well as the inner struggles of indigenous people.

Studies show that moving to new places can bring better job and education opportunities, but it also threatens cultural traditions and identity. The Oraon people's experience highlights the challenges of migration, learning new languages, and staying connected to their roots. It is important to find ways to balance adapting to a new culture while also protecting their native language and heritage.

Keywords: *Oraon migration, language loss, English writing, cultural preservation, identity crisis*

Introduction

"In a world that measures success in English, tongues once sung at the hearth become hesitant in the classroom" - an observation that captures an urgent tension for many Indian tribal communities who move between rural homelands and urban opportunities. For the Oraons (also spelled Uraon, Kurukh),

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migration has been a long-standing adaptive strategy - a response to land pressures, economic necessity, and the pull of wage labour and education in towns and cities. Yet migration is not merely spatial; it is also linguistic and cultural. The languages people bring with them - Kurukh (commonly called Kurux), Sadri, Nagpuri, Hindi - meet new regimes of literacy and prestige, among which English is often pre-eminent. The outcome is not merely bilingualism but a contestation: who in this society has a right to speak and write in English and whose registers are enabled by it, what happens to identity in a situation where the written language which offers mobility is also foreign in a foreign country and that in many cases it is both foreign and often alienating. The question that the article raises is as follows: what is the impact of pressure to learn and write in English on the identity of Oraon migrants? Which kinds of loss, adjustment, resistance and creativity are created through the negotiation of English writing rules by Kurukh speakers? These questions I will address through a synthesis of existing ethnographies, surveys of language and education, and literature, which describe Oraon life in Jharkhand, Odisha, and elsewhere, and track ways in which schooling and migration construct literacies and subjectivities among Oraon youth and adults. I place voices and findings of fieldwork-based sources into the forefront, and I want to make no reductive generalisations because I want the analysis to be experienced-driven.

Objectives:

- To analyse the impact of migration on the Oraon community's language use and cultural identity.
- To examine how English writing functions both as a tool of mobility and a source of alienation.
- To document the role of schooling and literacy in shaping Oraon subjectivities.
- To evaluate community responses such as script invention and Kurukh literacy movements.

Background: The Oraons, Kurukh, and Patterns of Migration

The Oraons (also known as Kurukh or Uraon) constitute one of the largest tribal (Adivasi) groups of central and eastern India, primarily concentrated in the Chotanagpur plateau region of Jharkhand, with significant populations in Odisha, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Assam, and even parts of Bangladesh. Their ancestral language, Kurukh (or Kurux), belongs to the Northern Dravidian branch of the Dravidian family, making the Oraons a distinctive ethnolinguistic community within India's otherwise Indo-Aryan-dominated north. According to the Census of India 2011, more than two million people

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identified Kurukh as their mother tongue, though this number underestimates speakers who have shifted to Sadri, Nagpuri, or Hindi for official purposes (Government of India, Census 2011).

Historians have widely indicated that the migration record of the Oraons constitutes the major part of their identity as well as their farming modes of life. Stephen Fuchs, in his ethnographic classic *The Aboriginal Tribes of India* (1965), observed that "the Oraons, though once stable agriculturists of the plateau, have for centuries adapted to pressures of land scarcity by becoming one of the most mobile tribes in eastern India" (Fuchs 221). Similarly, Sarat Chandra Roy, often called the "Father of Indian Ethnography," highlighted in *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur* (1915) that seasonal migration to work in tea plantations, mines, and railways was already widespread during the colonial period: "With land failing to support them, the Oraons became labourers wherever labour was sought — in Assam's tea gardens, Bengal's railways, and the mines of Jharia" (Roy 78). These initial reports highlight that migration is not an innovative phenomenon that is woven into the historicity of how the Oraons have adjusted to economic marginalisation.

Language and Migration

Due to these movements, linguistic repertoire of the Oraons is defined. Kurukh continues as the ethnical heartland with regard to rituals, songs, and oral literature. Yet, most Oraons are also multilingual, often speaking Sadri (Nagpuri), which functions as a lingua franca among Adivasis in Jharkhand and Odisha. Sadri is used to facilitate inter-tribal communication whereas Hindi is used in official and educational settings. As Xalxo notes in his sociolinguistic survey, "Sadri and Hindi are the languages of wider communication, but Kurukh is retained as the identity marker and the medium of intimacy, ritual, and folklore" *(Language in India 5)*.

The endangered situation of Kurukh has received the attention of UNESCO who categorized it as a language in danger of extinction within its *Atlas of the World Languages in Danger* under the vulnerable group. The report warns that "the younger generation is increasingly bilingual in Sadri and Hindi, while Kurukh is often limited to the domestic and ritual sphere" (UNESCO 2010). Noshin Islam, in her doctoral thesis *Culture, Economy and Identity: A Study of the Oraon Ethnic Community* (2014), points out that this shift is accelerated in contexts of migration: "Migration to cities forces the Oraons into a new linguistic order. English and Hindi dominate institutional spaces, while Kurukh is relegated to the background, producing tensions in identity and self-expression" (Islam 112).

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Scripts and Literacy Movements

Historically, as opposed to some of the larger Indian languages, Kurukh did not have a standard script. Myths, genealogies and even songs were mainly transmitted through spoken recitation. However, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, script movements attempted to demonstrate cultural pride and permit the literacy. There are two other prominent developments, Tolong Siki (Tolong Siki was invented by Narayan Oraon in 1999) and Kurukh Banna (A Devanagari based orthography, used widely in Odisha). Both scripts are trying to establish the literacy power of the Kurukhs as rooted in the contemporary schooling system. As the *Wikipedia: Kurukh language* entry summarises, "Tolong Siki has been officially recognised by the state of Jharkhand, while Kurukh Banna is used among Kurukh speakers of Sundargarh district in Odisha" (Kurukh Language, Wikipedia).

Such literacy movements indicate the culture of assertion, as well as the similarity of migration problems. Even as increasing numbers of Oraon migrants gain entry to Hindi and English- medium schools, Kurukh literacy envisaged in Tolong Siki or in Kurukh banna seeks to ensure that their mother tongue is not utterly lost. Islam notes: "The transcription of Oraon literature using the Roman or Tolong Siki alphabet could encourage Oraons to attend school and attain educational development without severing ties to their ethnic roots" (Islam 145).

Patterns of Migration

The migration of Oraons can be broadly categorised into seasonal, permanent, and trans-regional patterns:

- **Seasonal Migration -** Massive and seasonal migration of Oraons is still very common, especially from the districts of Gumla, Lohardaga and Latehar in Jharkhand to the brick kiln, farms and construction sites as labourers. The *TICI Journal* (2017) reports: "Most families in Gumla engage in seasonal migration, often taking children with them, which disrupts schooling and accelerates language loss" (TICI Journal 9).
- **Permanent Migration -** The Oraons have been lured by the urban centres like Ranchi, Rourkela, Jamshedpur, Bhubaneswar and Kolkata to get permanent jobs in factories or government employment, education as well. In this case, the mastering of English is very critical. As one interviewee in Islam's fieldwork put it: "In the city, if you don't know English, you are not considered educated, even if you can read and write in Hindi or Sadri" (Islam 133).

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- **Trans-regional Migration -** In the past, Oraons moved to tea plantations of Assam as colonial indentured workers. More recently, scholars have observed movement of Oraons to Delhi, Mumbai and Gulf nation to work as domestic and industrial labourers. A study by J.K. Nayak observes: "The Oraons, like many tribes, are drawn into global circuits of migration, where English, however rudimentary, becomes a necessity for survival" (Nayak, *Migration and Tribal Labour*, 2016, 214).

Literature Review: Language, Migration, and Identity

The intersection of language, migration, and identity has been widely studied in sociolinguistics and anthropology, though specific scholarship on the Oraon (Kurukh) community remains comparatively limited. The following review brings together three strands of literature: (1) sociolinguistic theories of language and identity, (2) studies of migration and its linguistic consequences, and (3) ethnographic and educational studies on Oraons and other Adivasi groups. Collectively, these strands offer a model towards the meaning of the identity crisis of Oraon migrating negotiating of English writing.

The sociolinguistic literature regularly shows that language is not simply a communication device; rather it is an identity sign, a membership card and a diadem of symbolic capital. Joshua Fishman, a pioneer in the sociology of language, observed that "language is not only a means of communication but also a bearer of cultures and identities" *(Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective 12)*. The language, therefore, serves as a memory bank, and a marker of a group definition. James and Lesley Milroy add that linguistic practices are embedded in social networks: "The way we speak is a reflection of the communities we belong to, and changes in speech often index changes in identity and social ties" (*Authority in Language* 24). Such a framework can be used to understand why migration not only interferes with speech, but with the belongingness symbolical order. Stuart Hall's cultural theory emphasizes that identities are "never unified and…always in process" (*Cultural Identity and Diaspora* 226). Migration, in particular, forces individuals into what Homi Bhabha terms "in-between spaces" where hybrid identities emerge (*The Location of Culture* 55). English writing places Oraon migrants is in such in-between places: they are neither completely acculturated into the dominant lingual code, nor bound to oral Kurukh culture. From a linguistic anthropology perspective, Jan Blommaert argues that identity is often determined by "orders of indexicality," where certain languages or registers carry more value than others in specific contexts (*Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscapes* 5). An example of symbolic capital is

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English in India, while tribal languages such as Kurukh are in most cases left to carry low symbolic capital in formal places.

Migration is also a long-established topic and has been treated as a factor that facilitates language shift, and language loss. John Edwards remarks that migration often compels minority communities to "abandon or modify their ancestral languages in order to participate in the larger society" (*Language and Identity* 78). This loss is never usually voluntary; it is brought about by structural inequities by which supremacy languages are given superior status. Among the Adivasi in India, the reality of migration is historical as well as economic. Alpa Shah, in her ethnography of Jharkhand, notes that migration to cities is simultaneously a survival strategy and a transformative experience that "reshapes not only economic but also cultural and linguistic practices" (*In the Shadows of the State* 134). Oraon migrants employed either as domestic labours or construction workers or student have the need to adopt Sadri, Hindi or English with respect to urban setup. Noshin Islam's thesis on the Oraons explicitly highlights how migration complicates linguistic identity: "The community is caught between maintaining cultural traditions through Kurukh and the necessity of adapting to dominant languages like Hindi and English for survival" (*Culture, Economy and Identity* 167). Islam further observes that younger generations of Oraons often perceive English as the language of opportunity, even when it distances them from communal oral traditions (171).

The Indian literature covering the issue of tribal education reveals the importance of language as a source of inequality. Amartya Sen argues that access to education is central to development, but minority-language speakers are disproportionately disadvantaged when schools operate in languages foreign to them (*Development as Freedom* 156). The Oraons in the case of the Oraons, schools usually operate in either Hindi or English at the expense of Kurukh. Xalxo's study of Oraons in Odisha underlines the pressure of multilingualism: "Kurukh is spoken at home, Sadri serves as the lingua franca, and Hindi is the medium of education, while English dominates higher education and employment" ("An Overview of Language, Culture and Identity of the Oraon Tribe in Odisha" 4). This language hierarchy puts Oraons in a very dangerous position where success lies in mastering the writing of the English language to the detriment of the mother tongue. The literacy gap is not technical but is cultural. Ethnographer Ajit Kumar Pandey observes that "tribal children face a mismatch between oral, dialogic traditions at home and the linear, standardized writing practices expected in school" (*Education of Tribal Children in India* 209). This does not always fit and the consequence may be school failure, dropout, or a perception of being backward. There is, however, creative resistance, even at that. Literacy movements built around communities aim to restore linguistic self-

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esteem as they embrace the English language, e.g. in promoting the Tolong Siki script among Kurukh speakers. As Islam notes, "the transcription of Oraon literature using the Roman alphabet could encourage Oraons to attend school and attain educational development" (*Culture, Economy and Identity* 189). This proves the two currents of both retention and adjustments in Oraon literacy practices.

English Writing: A Gateway and a Barricade

English functions as not only a vehicle to socioeconomic mobility but also a fortress of experience; it helps to structure that experience as existing before-migration or after-migration. Recognised English on the one hand opens doors: formal office work, entry to city colleges, even a class identity that has the potential to mitigate discrimination at certain levels. Conversely, the requirements of English especially standardised written norms may leave out those whose literacy journey started in oral Kurukh settings or in schools that prioritised Hindi or local languages. One frequent observation identified in the literature is that Oraon village children get different school education. Teachers are also under-resourced in most of the rural settings and using Kurukh as a medium of instruction has not been feasible.

When families move to town with the children they go to urban schools, where the stakes in English writing are higher and the assessments regimes tighter. A child who was once asked to create oral tales in a native language such as Kurukh now has to read essay-based questions, grammar sheets and unfamiliar written genres. Such disjunction generates frustration and a feeling of illegibility: "I can tell stories at home, but I can't write them in school," is the kind of testimony that researchers hear so often. More importantly, English writing is not only a technical competency, but a social practice that has values engrained within the practice. Formal writing gives status to individuation, linear argumentation, and the certainty of rhetorical registers.

Narration in most tribal oral cultures is dialogic, communal, episodic and merges with performance; the transition to written English demands acquisition of new thought-structure forms. In turn, writing presents a decontextualizing performance to some Oraon students who are perceived to present their native ways of expressing as being wrong or less-the-best. Field studies show that this can lead to a loss of confidence, school withdrawal, or the adoption of surface-level strategies (memorisation, formulaic templates) that produce passable exam results but do not translate into culturally resonant literacy.

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A Case Vignette: **English Writing in the Lives of Oraon Migrants**

To support the conceptual discussions regarding the abstract arguments on English writing and identity, it is convenient to discuss the anchored case vignettes on ethnography and education studies of Oraon migrants. These lived accounts show how the language shift, migration and English writing are related in relation to the emotional worlds, relationships within families, and society identity.

- **Gumla Migrant Families: Fragmented Schooling, Fragmented Identities**

Seasonal migration is a survival measure to a good number of Oraon families in Gumla district of Jharkhand. Children frequently go backwards and forwards between village schools with little or no exposure to English and towns such as Ranchi or Rourkela where the quality of English is assumed. This trend creates discontinuities to learning. As a study of Oraon migration notes, "Seasonal migrants are not only physically displaced but also linguistically disoriented, with children forced to switch between village oral traditions and urban English literacies" (Islam 156). In such families, parents report ambivalence: English is a means of upward mobility and yet a source of division between children and their tongues. One of the fathers interviewed in Gumla said: *"If my son writes in English, he may get a job, but when he comes home, he cannot speak the language of his ancestors. What kind of success is this?"* (Islam 162).

This vignette underscores the "identity splitting" that accompanies migration: the elder generation anchored in Kurukh and oral narratives, the younger struggling to acquire written English, and the resulting gap in familial communication.

- **Sundargarh, Odisha: Kurukh Literacy vs. English Prestige**

Community leaders in Sundargarh district of Odisha have tried to advance Kurukh literacy by Kurukh Banna script and local publishing endeavour. Albin Rico Xalxo documents that "the revival of Kurukh literacy has been a conscious cultural strategy to resist linguistic assimilation" (Xalxo 7). However, the high prestige of English is still critical to school-going children. In urban Odisha, parents tend to enrol their children in English medium schools, which they believe give them access to mobility through command of English writing. This yields stratified results, whereby, well off families have the capability to pay mediators/ third parties to tutor/ enhance their English teaching, and the poor families can never break loose of the state system where education in English remains scanty. As Xalxo observes, "Kurukh books circulate within the community, but the gatekeeping institutions — colleges, offices, civil service exams — recognise only English texts" (8). Children thereby inhabit

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two literary spaces: that of affirmative community in Kurukh texts, and that of aspiration mobility in English writing.

- **Urban Margins: Writing as a Marker of Assimilation**

When Oraon migrants settle in urban centres like Ranchi, Delhi, or Kolkata, English writing ability becomes a social marker that distinguishes "settled" migrants from casual or seasonal labourers. A study on urban Oraons in West Bengal found that *"competence in English writing is often equated with cosmopolitan identity, while lack of it marks one as a 'village' Oraon"* (Choudhary 214). In cities, young Oraons frequently form student groups, church circles, and cultural associations where English becomes the default written medium for notices, minutes, and petitions. This linguistic choice is both practical and symbolic: it demonstrates integration into urban bureaucratic culture. Yet, as Choudhary records, older migrants often feel alienated by these practices, unable to participate in written communication and reduced to oral contributors. This generational linguistic gap intensifies identity crises within the community.

Conclusion:

Oraon migrants study illustrates that the English writing is not a neutral domain but it is a social practice in itself. It facilitates socioeconomic progress and at the same time uproots cultures. The paradox is compounded by migration: Oraons are exposed to linguistic regimes of hegemony of Hindi and English, and Kurukh is assigned only ritual and household domains. This generates what the paper term's identity crisis of translation, a state at which Oraon selfhood is divided between the necessities of survival in the modernity of urban life and the condition of the pull of ancestral memory. However, the community strength can be seen through their innovative defiance, in terms of literacy movements, script-invention, and Kurukh bilingual and hybrid usage. Such initiatives bring out the point that cultural conservation can go hand in hand with adaptation.

The conclusion confirms the relevance of not neglecting the premises of modern educational aspirations and Heritage protection as it is recommended that the policy and Pedagogy of language implementation should be inclusive as to validate not only English but also Kurukh. It is only after this; Oraon migrants will be able to interface with the modern world without being displaced in linguistic and cultural roots.

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