



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Ho Language Movement in Mayurbhanj District of Odisha: Language, Identity, and Tribal Education

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Abstract

Language is one of the most important markers of community identity, cultural continuity, and social communication. For tribal communities, language is not only a medium of expression but also a carrier of history, oral tradition, belief, memory, and collective identity. The Ho community of Odisha, particularly in Mayurbhanj district, has made sustained efforts to preserve and promote the Ho language and its script, Warang Chiti. The Ho language movement in Odisha developed in close connection with similar efforts in Jharkhand and became an important cultural and educational movement from the 1970s onward. The movement gained greater significance during the 1990s and 2000s through the leadership of individuals and organisations such as Kayera Singh Bandia, Manoranjan Tiria, Kanda Charan Biruli, Adibasi Ho Samaj Mahasabha, Adivasi Ho Students' Union, and other community-based bodies. Their demands included recognition of Ho language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, promotion of Warang Chiti script, preparation of textbooks, recruitment of Ho language teachers, and implementation of mother-tongue-based multilingual education. This article examines the historical background, leadership, demands, organisational activities, educational importance, and contemporary relevance of the Ho language movement in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha.

Keywords: Ho language, Warang Chiti, Mayurbhanj, tribal identity, multilingual education, language movement, Odisha, indigenous culture

Introduction

Language is a fundamental medium through which human beings communicate, express emotions, transmit knowledge, and preserve culture. It is closely connected with the social life, worldview, history, and identity of a community. In the case of tribal communities, language has special significance because it carries oral traditions, myths, songs, rituals, customary knowledge, ecological understanding, and collective memory. Therefore, the decline of a tribal language often results in the weakening of cultural identity (Mahapatra, 1997; Pasayat, 2008; Satapathy, 2012).

Odisha is a multilingual and multicultural state with a large tribal population. The state has recognised many Scheduled Tribes, each having its own cultural and linguistic traditions. However, several tribal languages have remained marginalised because they are mainly oral, lack institutional support, or are overshadowed by dominant regional languages. In this context, the Ho language movement in Mayurbhanj district is an important example of tribal assertion through language and script (Government of Odisha, 2004; Mahapatra, 1997; Satapathy, 2012).

The Ho people, also known as Kolha in Odisha, are mainly concentrated in Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Sundargarh, and adjoining regions. They speak the Ho language, which belongs to the Austroasiatic or Munda language family. The Ho community has developed and promoted its own script known as Warang Chiti. The movement for the recognition and development of Ho language has been closely linked with the preservation of indigenous identity, promotion of tribal education, and demand for constitutional recognition (Anderson, 2008; Soy, n.d.; Satapathy, 2012).

This article studies the Ho language movement in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha with special attention to its historical development, major leaders, organisations, demands, educational significance, and cultural importance.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this article are:

1. To examine the historical background of the Ho language movement in Odisha.
2. To analyse the role of Warang Chiti script in the preservation of Ho identity.
3. To study the contribution of leaders and organisations in Mayurbhanj district.
4. To discuss the demand for inclusion of Ho language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.
5. To examine the importance of mother-tongue-based multilingual education for Ho children.
6. To assess the cultural and educational significance of the Ho language movement.

Methodology

This article is based on a historical and analytical method. It uses secondary sources such as research articles, government reports, community publications, books, and available documentation on tribal language and education. The study also uses descriptive analysis to understand the role of language in the formation of tribal identity and the development of education among the Ho community.

Language, Culture, and Tribal Identity

Language and culture are deeply interconnected. Language transmits cultural values from one generation to another, while culture strengthens language through everyday use, songs, rituals, festivals, oral traditions, and social practices. For tribal communities, language is not merely a tool of communication; it is also a symbol of belonging, identity, and cultural continuity (Mahapatra, 1997; Pasayat, 2008).

The Ho language carries the cultural memory of the Ho people. Their songs, myths, folktales, rituals, and customary practices are preserved through language. When a community loses its language, it also risks losing its traditional knowledge, oral heritage, and cultural confidence. Therefore, the Ho language movement should be understood as a movement for cultural survival and dignity (Satapathy, 2012; Soy, n.d.).

In a multilingual state like Odisha, tribal languages often face pressure from dominant languages used in administration, education, and public life. Many tribal children enter schools where the medium of instruction is different from their mother tongue. This creates learning difficulties and contributes to educational backwardness. The demand for Ho language education is therefore both a cultural and educational demand (Lotz, 2009; Mahapatra, 1997; Satapathy, 2012).

Linguistic Classification of Tribal Languages in Odisha

The tribal languages of Odisha may be broadly classified into three major linguistic groups: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, and Austroasiatic or Munda. Several tribal communities speak Odia or Odia-related varieties, while others speak Dravidian and Munda languages. The Ho language belongs to the Austroasiatic or Munda language family (Mahapatra, 1997; Satapathy, 2012).

The Munda language group includes languages such as Santali, Mundari, Ho, Kharia, Juang, Bonda, and Saora. These languages have distinct phonetic, grammatical, and cultural features. Like other languages, tribal languages possess systems of sound, grammar, meaning, and symbols. They also show creativity, cultural transmission, and social use (Anderson, 2008; Mahapatra, 1997).

The Ho language has a strong oral tradition and has also developed a written form through the Warang Chiti script. This development has strengthened the movement for literary production, education, and official recognition of the Ho language (Satapathy, 2012; Soy, n.d.).

Warang Chiti Script and Lako Bodra

The Ho language movement is closely associated with the development of Warang Chiti script. Lako Bodra, a prominent scholar and cultural leader of the Ho community, is credited with introducing and popularising the Warang Chiti script. He was born in 1923 at Paseya village near Chakradharpur in the Singhbhum district of present-day Jharkhand.

Lako Bodra emerged as a major spokesperson for the Ho people. He established the Adi Samaj in 1954 to promote Ho language, script, culture, and identity. The Warang Chiti script consists of letters used for writing Ho language and has played an important role in creating a literary base for the community. Through this script, books, primers, journals, and cultural materials have been prepared.

The script became a symbol of identity for the Ho community. It gave the community a sense of pride and strengthened the demand for recognition. The promotion of Warang Chiti also helped the Ho language movement expand from Jharkhand to Odisha, especially Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts.

Historical Development of the Ho Language Movement in Odisha

The Ho language movement began in Jharkhand in the mid-twentieth century under the leadership of Lako Bodra. In Odisha, the movement developed particularly in Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts, where the Ho population is significant. The movement became more organised from the 1970s and gained political and cultural importance during the 1990s (Mahapatra, 1997; Satapathy, 2012).

Mayurbhanj district became one of the important centres of the Ho language movement in Odisha. The movement was led by educated Ho youth, cultural activists, community organisations, and social leaders. They demanded recognition of Ho language, promotion of Warang Chiti script, introduction of Ho language in education, and inclusion of Ho in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution (Soy, n.d.; Satapathy, 2012).

The movement was not limited to language alone. It represented a wider struggle for cultural identity, educational rights, and community dignity. Through meetings, conferences, memoranda, agitations, and organisational activities, the Ho community attempted to draw the attention of the state and central governments (Pasayat, 2008; Soy, n.d.).

Role of Kayera Singh Bandia

Kayera Singh Bandia was one of the important leaders of the Ho language movement in Mayurbhanj. He studied Ho language at the postgraduate level from Ranchi University. His academic background and community commitment helped him become a major resource person for Ho language and script (Soy, n.d.).

In 1996, he established Adi Sanskruti and Bigyan at Sarat in Mayurbhanj to promote and preserve Ho language and Warang Chiti script. He also established the Warang Chiti Teachers Training and Research Centre at Sarat in 2001. Through these institutions, he worked for teacher training, script promotion, and educational development (Soy, n.d.).

His contribution brought him recognition from the Government of Odisha. In 2010, he was felicitated with the Adibasi Prativa Samman. His work shows how community leadership can contribute to language preservation and educational reform (Soy, n.d.).

Role of Manoranjan Tiria and Other Leaders

Manoranjan Tiria was another important leader of the Ho language movement in Odisha. He was associated with Adibasi Ho Samaj Mahasabha, one of the largest social organisations of the Ho people. He established the Mayurbhanj district wing of Adibasi Ho Samaj Mahasabha in 2011 to strengthen the language movement in northern Odisha (Soy, n.d.).

He also established the Adivasi Ho Students' Union in 2007 to mobilise Ho students and youth. The involvement of students gave the movement new energy and helped spread awareness among the younger generation. Manoranjan Tiria was also a member of the expert committee on Ho language constituted by the Government of Odisha in 2010 (Soy, n.d.).

Kanda Charan Biruli and other leaders also played important roles in organising conferences, appeals, and community mobilisation. Together, these leaders helped transform the Ho language movement into a broader cultural and educational movement (Soy, n.d.; Satapathy, 2012).

Organisations and Agitations

Several organisations played an important role in strengthening the Ho language movement in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. These organisations worked to preserve the Ho language, promote the Warang Chiti script, spread awareness among the Ho community, and demand official recognition from the state and central governments (Soy, n.d.).

The major organisations associated with the movement include Adibasi Ho Samaj Mahasabha, Adivasi Ho Students' Union, Sida Hora Susar Akala, Adi Sanskruti and Bigyan, and the All India Ho Language Action Committee. These organisations mobilised students, youth, intellectuals, and community leaders for the protection and development of Ho language and culture (Soy, n.d.).

Different agitations, meetings, and conferences were organised in Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts. Important programmes were held at Barbil, Baripada, Rairangpur, Karanjia, Bhanjania, and Jashipur. These gatherings created awareness about the importance of mother-tongue education and the need to include Ho language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Soy, n.d.; Government of India, n.d.).

In 2011, the All India Ho Language Action Committee organised a two-day All India Ho Language Conference at Rairangpur. The conference discussed the future of Ho language, Warang Chiti script, tribal education, and constitutional recognition. These organisational efforts gave the Ho language movement a strong collective character and helped transform it into a wider cultural and educational movement (Soy, n.d.).

Ho Language Publications and Magazines

The growth of Ho language literature is an important achievement of the Ho language movement. Books, primers, religious texts, grammar works, magazines, and cultural publications have helped to preserve the Ho language and promote the Warang Chiti script. These publications also show that Ho is not merely an oral language but has a growing written and literary tradition.

Table 1: Published Books and Journals on Ho Language

Sl. No.	Author/Publisher	Name of Ho Book/Publication
1	Kaira Singh Bandia	<i>Ol Initu</i>
2	Lako Bodra	<i>Baha Buru-Bonga Buru</i>
3	Lako Bodra	<i>Halang Halpung</i>
4	Lako Bodra	<i>Saraswati Gwari</i>
5	Bible Society of India	<i>Jiban Reya Hora</i>
6	Dhanur Singh Purty	<i>Ho-Dishum Ho Honko</i> (Seven volumes, 1982), Xavier Ho Publication
7	Soneya Kumar Tiu	<i>Re-ed-Ranu: Practice of Medicine, Birth Control and Ho Vocabulary</i>
8	Laxman Purty	<i>Elabu Palawa</i>
9	Paliyar Paleya	<i>Landa Bagan</i>
10	D. R. Hembram	<i>Sishu Halang, Part II</i>
11	J. J. Deeney	<i>Introduction to the Ho Language: Learn Ho Quickly and Well</i>
12	Ghanashyam Gagarai	<i>Parichaya</i>
13	Singhrai Tiu	<i>Warang Chiti Chinab</i>
14	Lako Bodra	<i>Sahar Hora, Part I</i>
15	L. Burrows	<i>The Grammar of the Ho Language: An Eastern Himalayan Dialect</i>
16	Ghanashyam Bodra	<i>Aarshi</i>
17	Kali Charan Tiriya	<i>Susar</i>
18	D. R. Soneya Kumar Tiu	<i>Turtung</i>
19	Lako Bodra	<i>Kol Rule</i>

Table 2: List of Ho Magazines

Sl. No.	Name of Magazine	Place/Organisation
1	<i>Susar</i>	In Odia script
2	<i>Turtung</i>	Ho language publication
3	<i>Kolhan Sakam</i>	Jamshedpur

4	<i>Otorong</i>	Smarika, Adibasi Ho Samaj Mahasabha, Chakradharpur, 2000
5	<i>Seteng</i>	Smarika, Adibasi Ho Samaj Mahasabha, 2003
6	<i>Saranda Sakam</i>	2009
7	<i>Omon</i>	Adibasi Ho Samaj Mahasabha, Chakradharpur, 2005
8	<i>Aarshi</i>	Dishum Ho Organisation, Delhi
9	<i>Singhbhum Sakam</i>	Singhbhum Adibasi Samaj, Ranchi, 2007
10	<i>Dama Dumeng</i>	Jamshedpur

Source: *Aarshi*, Ho magazine published by Dishum, a socio-cultural organisation of Ho people in Delhi.

Discussion

The above list of books and magazines shows the literary growth of the Ho language. These publications have played an important role in preserving oral traditions, cultural values, religious beliefs, folk knowledge, and social memory of the Ho community. Works written in Warang Chiti, Devanagari, Odia, and Roman scripts have helped to expand the reach of Ho literature among different readers.

The publication of grammar books, primers, vocabulary works, magazines, and cultural texts also proves that Ho language has the capacity for formal education and literary development. Such works are useful for preparing teaching materials, training teachers, and promoting mother-tongue-based education among Ho children.

The magazines such as *Susar*, *Turtung*, *Aarshi*, *Kolhan Sakam*, and *Singhbhum Sakam* have created a platform for cultural expression and community communication. They have helped connect Ho-speaking people across Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and other regions. These publications also strengthen the demand for inclusion of Ho language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

Additional Points

1. Ho language publications have helped transform Ho from a mainly oral tradition into a written and literary language.
2. Warang Chiti script has become a strong symbol of Ho cultural identity.
3. Books and magazines have supported the spread of literacy among Ho-speaking people.
4. Ho publications are useful for mother-tongue-based multilingual education.
5. Literary activities have strengthened the Ho language movement in Mayurbhanj and other regions.
6. Magazines have connected Ho intellectuals, students, writers, and cultural activists.
7. Documentation of Ho language is necessary for preserving tribal history, songs, myths, and traditional knowledge.
8. More research, dictionaries, grammar books, textbooks, and digital materials are required for future development.

Conclusion

The Ho language movement in Mayurbhanj district is an important movement for tribal identity, cultural preservation, and educational development. The publication of books, journals, magazines, primers, and grammar works has strengthened the written tradition of the Ho language. These publications prove that Ho language has a rich cultural base and strong potential for academic and literary growth.

Language is an ethnic marker and an important part of community identity. For the Ho people, the Ho language and Warang Chiti script are closely connected with their history, culture, and self-respect. However, the dominance of state and national languages has created challenges for tribal languages. Many

Ho-speaking people are compelled to become bilingual or multilingual, while their mother tongue receives limited institutional support.

Therefore, government officials, policy planners, educational institutions, linguists, and community leaders should give proper attention to the development of Ho language and script. More linguistic research, documentation, teacher training, textbook preparation, and publication work are necessary. Literate members of the Ho community should also take active responsibility for promoting their language. The preservation and development of Ho language will not only strengthen the Ho community but also enrich the linguistic and cultural diversity of Odisha and India.

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