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Orality to Literacy: Transforming Kurukh Folk Traditions into Written Heritage

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Abstract:
This review traces how Kurukh (also known as Kurux or Oraon) oral traditions songs, stories, rituals and sayings have been recorded, standardized, and transformed into written forms over the last century. It situates the processes that moved Kurukh cultural knowledge from performance contexts into print and digital media: missionary linguistics and early grammars, colonial and post-colonial scholarship, script invention and orthography development, community literacy and publishing efforts, and contemporary digital archiving. The review highlights tensions that arise during transcription (loss of voice, changes in performance context), practical breakthroughs (scripts such as Tolong Siki and Kurukh Banna), and the possibilities for cultural revitalization when communities lead the literacy agenda. Evidence is drawn from historical grammars and dictionaries, contemporary script proposals and state recognition, field studies of songs and folktales, and archival projects that prioritize indigenous agency.
Keywords: *Kurukh Language, Oraon Community, Cultural Preservation, Bilingual Education*

Introduction:

Kurukh, the language of the Oraon people, belongs to the Dravidian family and has survived primarily through oral transmission for centuries. For generations, the Oraons have sustained their cultural memory, values, and cosmology through songs, myths, folktales, ritual chants, and proverbs passed down by word of mouth. Elders, storytellers, and ritual specialists have functioned as the primary custodians of this oral heritage, ensuring that collective memory is preserved through performative expression rather than written documentation. In this oral ecosystem, language is not a static medium but a living, breathing force constantly recreated through performance, repetition, and improvisation. Every act of storytelling or song performance in Kurukh tradition is both an artistic and a social event that binds individuals to their community and to the landscape that sustains them.

The transition from orality to literacy in Kurukh culture, therefore, represents not merely a shift in medium but a fundamental transformation in the way knowledge, identity, and memory are encoded and transmitted. As Walter J. Ong notes in *Orality and Literacy* (1982), writing "restructures consciousness," changing how societies think, remember, and communicate. The movement from spoken to written word, while enabling preservation and standardization, can also alter the dynamics of meaning-making. Kurukh oral traditions, deeply embedded in performance and communal participation, undergo inevitable recontextualization when they

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are transcribed into fixed textual form. Writing can preserve the text but not always its tone, rhythm, or ritual resonance. Thus, while literacy offers permanence, it also risks losing the spontaneity and fluidity that characterize oral traditions. The Kurukh case offers an illuminating example of how indigenous knowledge systems respond to modern pressures of globalization, education, and technological change. The drive to document Kurukh oral literature began during the colonial period, when missionaries and linguists like Ferdinand Hahn (1903, 1905) recorded songs, folktales, and linguistic data in Roman and Devanagari scripts. While these early efforts produced valuable linguistic documentation, they often reframed Kurukh culture within colonial or missionary paradigms. In post-independence India, however, a shift occurred: community members, educators, and writers began to reclaim the documentation process, asserting control over their linguistic and cultural heritage. This marked the emergence of community-led literacy movements, culminating in the invention of indigenous scripts such as Tolong Siki (by Dr. Narayan Oraon, 1999) and Kurukh Banna, which redefined literacy as an act of self-determination rather than external observation.

In this context, the transformation of Kurukh oral traditions into written heritage serves multiple purposes. It is an act of cultural preservation, safeguarding endangered expressions from oblivion in the face of urbanization and linguistic assimilation. It is also a means of educational empowerment, as written Kurukh texts are now incorporated into local school curricula in Jharkhand and Odisha, promoting bilingual education and linguistic pride. Furthermore, writing enables Kurukh communities to engage with digital media and global networks, extending the reach of their traditions through blogs, archives, and Unicode-encoded scripts. Yet, this transition remains a double-edged process: every act of transcription or translation entails interpretive choices that reshape meaning and potentially homogenize diverse dialects. Therefore, this review aims to critically examine the ongoing transformation of Kurukh oral traditions into written and digital heritage. It explores key questions: How have the oral genres of the Kurukh songs, myths, and rituals been reconstituted in written form? Who are the agents driving this transformation missionaries, linguists, educators, or community activists? What are the cultural and ethical implications of this shift, especially concerning issues of authorship, authenticity, and identity? And finally, how do new scripts like Tolong Siki and Kurukh Banna contribute to the revitalization of language and cultural consciousness in the digital age?

In addressing these questions, the study situates Kurukh literacy within broader theoretical debates about orality, textuality, and cultural survival. It argues that writing, when grounded in community agency and supported by technological innovation, can serve not as the end of orality but as its continuation in a new form a bridge between the ancestral voice and the contemporary world. The Kurukh experience thus stands as a vital model for understanding how indigenous languages can transform oral inheritance into enduring written legacies without losing the soul of performance and collective identity.

literature review:

Research on Kurukh language and oral traditions spans over a century, reflecting changing perspectives from missionary linguistics to community-driven documentation. The earliest phase was dominated by European missionaries such as Ferdinand Hahn, whose *Kurukh (Oraon)-English Dictionary* (1903) and *Kurukh Folk-Lore in the Original* (1905) offered the first systematic attempt to transcribe Kurukh oral materials into Roman and Devanagari scripts. While these works were primarily linguistic and evangelical, they incidentally preserved valuable oral narratives and ethnographic data. K.S. Singh (1995) later critiqued such missionary scholarship for freezing living oral traditions into static textual artifacts, noting that

colonial anthropology tended to classify tribal culture rather than interpret its dynamic meanings.

Subsequent research moved toward documenting Kurukh as part of India's tribal multilingualism. Rajendra Pandey (2019) examined how state language policies in Jharkhand shaped minority language education, arguing that local scripts like Tolong Siki have re-politicized identity. Vineet Sinha (2018) explored the sociopolitical dimensions of Kurukh literacy, describing script invention as a form of cultural assertion that resists linguistic domination. These studies connect language planning with self-representation, emphasizing that the creation of Kurukh scripts is both a linguistic and political act.

Within folklore studies, A.V. Lakra (2016) and Milan Mohanta (2021) analysed Oraon folksongs, showing that they encode ecological wisdom, moral instruction, and collective memory. Lakra classified contemporary Kurukh as "endangered but vital," arguing for community-based revitalization. Mohanta highlighted poetic imagery and seasonal symbolism in Oraon songs, illustrating how orality functions as an aesthetic and mnemonic system. Complementing these are anthropological insights by Jules Bonta (2018), who linked tribal music and dance to ritual ecology, thereby demonstrating that orality is inseparable from embodied performance.

In comparative context, global scholarship on indigenous literacy offers useful parallels. Studies of Santali (*Ol Chiki* script), Gondi, and Bodo languages in India reveal similar processes of reclaiming linguistic autonomy through script invention (Smalley 1990; Sinha 2018). Internationally, research on Cherokee (Perdue 2001) and Maori (Higgins 2014) literacies shows that community-developed writing systems can strengthen cultural continuity and educational access. Such examples underline that script creation is not merely technological but epistemological, it redefines how knowledge is stored and transmitted.

Recent developments have turned attention to digital preservation. Anshuman Pandey's Unicode proposals (2023, 2024) for Tolong Siki and Kurukh Banna mark a major step in enabling Kurukh literacy in digital spaces. The Modern Endangered Archives Program (UCLA 2021) and community initiatives like *Kurukh World* illustrate participatory archiving where oral performances are recorded, annotated, and shared online. These initiatives embody a new "digital orality" that fuses performance and permanence.

Collectively, the literature reveals a trajectory from outsider documentation to insider authorship. Early colonial grammars established linguistic foundations; mid-century anthropological studies provided sociocultural framing; and recent works emphasize community agency, technological innovation, and ethical documentation. Yet gaps remain in linking theoretical discourse on orality–literacy transitions to the Kurukh experience. This study contributes to filling that gap by synthesizing linguistic history, folklore analysis, and digital revitalization within a unified sociolinguistic framework.

Objectives of the Study

1. To trace the transformation of Kurukh oral traditions into written and digital forms.
2. To study the role of scripts like *Tolong Siki* and *Kurukh Banna* in promoting language identity.
3. To examine challenges in transcription, translation, and cultural preservation.
4. To highlight ethical and community-led approaches in Kurukh language documentation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study draws from orality–literacy theory, postcolonial linguistics, and performance studies, integrating these to interpret how Kurukh oral traditions are transformed through writing and technology.

Walter J. Ong's seminal work *Orality and Literacy* (1982) provide the central premise: writing "restructures consciousness," changing not only communication but cognition itself. In oral societies, knowledge is communal, additive, and performative; literacy, by contrast, fosters abstraction, individual authorship, and permanence. Applying Ong's framework to the Kurukh case reveals how transcription shifts meaning from collective performance to textual authority. Yet, as Ong notes, literacy does not erase orality it produces a "secondary orality," a re-emergent form of spoken culture mediated by print and technology. Kurukh digital archives and Unicode scripts exemplify this secondary orality in action.

Complementing Ong, the oral-formulaic theory of Milman Parry and Albert Lord (1960) explains how oral poets compose through improvisational formulas. Their insights clarify why Kurukh songs resist literal transcription: each performance recreates rather than repeats. Translating these songs into written text, therefore, requires methods that retain structural variation and contextual cues, aligning with Bauman's notion of performance as a "situated communicative act" (Bauman 1977).

From a postcolonial perspective, language and script function as instruments of power. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) argues that reclaiming indigenous languages is a decolonial act, restoring cultural self-definition. Similarly, Homi Bhabha's concept of "cultural hybridity" (1994) helps interpret Kurukh literacy as a negotiation between colonial legacies and indigenous innovation. The creation of Tolong Siki exemplifies this hybridity: it adapts modern orthographic principles to articulate ancestral identity. As Vineet Sinha (2018) observes, script politics in Jharkhand reflect "a struggle for epistemic sovereignty," where linguistic forms become vehicles of resistance.

Performance theory further enriches this framework. Richard Bauman (1977) conceptualizes oral performance as an expressive mode that constructs social relations through participation. Applying this to Kurukh rituals and songs foregrounds the social dimension of storytelling the communal co-presence of performer and audience. Transcribing such performances necessitates an ethical awareness of what is lost in textual mediation. Theoretical discourse on "living archives" (Smith 2015) thus becomes crucial, positing that oral traditions are not static heritage but dynamic acts of cultural renewal.

By synthesizing these frameworks, this study situates Kurukh literacy as a process of epistemic transformation rather than mere documentation. It interprets the shift from orality to literacy as an evolving dialogue among memory, identity, and technology. The use of Tolong Siki and Kurukh Banna scripts is therefore analysed not only linguistically but as symbolic performances of decolonization. Ultimately, the framework asserts that literacy, when grounded in indigenous agency and multimedia expression, does not replace orality its re-voices it within new social and technological arenas.

Methodology:

The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research approach that draws upon historical, textual, and ethnographic data. It involves the examination of early missionary and linguistic works, such as Hahn's *Kurukh-English Dictionary* (1903) and *Kurukh Folk-Lore* (1905), to understand the beginnings of Kurukh documentation. A series of case studies including the invention of the *Tolong Siki* and *Kurukh Banna* scripts and modern folk song documentation in Jharkhand and Odisha illustrate how oral traditions evolved into written heritage. The research also employs comparative textual analysis to study methods of transcription,

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translation, and adaptation of oral forms. In addition, digital and archival reviews of Unicode proposals, online repositories, and community websites like *Kurukh World* provide insights into the contemporary preservation and dissemination of the Kurukh language. This descriptive approach connects historical scholarship with present-day community initiatives to offer a holistic understanding of the orality-to-literacy transition.

Brief historical background: early descriptions and missionary linguistics

The earliest documented encounters between European scholars and the Kurukh language emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, primarily through the efforts of missionaries and colonial administrators. Their work, although deeply embedded in the agendas of evangelization and colonial ethnography, unintentionally laid the groundwork for later linguistic and cultural preservation. Among these early figures, Ferdinand Hahn stands out as a pioneering linguist and ethnographer who made the first systematic attempt to describe and record the Kurukh language. His *Kurukh (Oraon)-English Dictionary* (1903) and *Kurukh Folk-Lore in the Original* (1905) remain foundational texts that provided an extensive record of the Oraon people's oral literature, lexicon, and grammatical structures. Hahn's *Kurukh Grammar* (1911) further systematized these findings, offering a detailed morphological and syntactic analysis of the language as spoken in the Chotanagpur plateau.

Missionary linguistics during this period reflected a dual motive: the desire to communicate religious teachings in the local tongue and the scholarly impulse to document an unfamiliar linguistic system. By transcribing oral materials songs, myths, and proverbs into Latin or Devanagari scripts, missionaries like Hahn transformed ephemeral performances into fixed texts. These writings not only facilitated translation of religious literature but also served as linguistic archives for future researchers. However, such documentation often carried biases: the transcription of oral narratives removed them from their performative and communal contexts, reducing them to "texts" that could be analysed, categorized, or translated for Western audiences. As K.S. Singh (1995**)** notes, the colonial ethnographic enterprise frequently "froze" living traditions into static cultural artifacts, making them readable yet detached from their socio-ritual environments.

In the early twentieth century, several related efforts followed Hahn's lead. Linguists and missionaries associated with the Bengal Secretariat Press and various church missions continued to produce grammars, vocabularies, and hymnals in Kurukh. These materials though intended for religious instruction played an unintended role in preserving oral forms such as folktales, ritual chants, and folk songs. Through these collections, European readers encountered Kurukh oral art as part of a wider ethnological project that sought to classify India's "tribal" populations. Yet, even within these colonial frameworks, the linguistic richness of Kurukh was evident: its complex verb morphology, tonal patterns, and oral poetics attracted attention as evidence of an elaborate and independent linguistic heritage.

The early descriptive phase of Kurukh studies can thus be seen as both productive and problematic. On one hand, it provided the earliest written corpus for a language that had been entirely oral; on the other, it imposed foreign orthographic systems and interpretive lenses that often-distorted indigenous meanings. The act of writing down a song or tale once performed in communal gatherings converted it into a silent, decontextualized object of study. As contemporary anthropologists argue, orality functions as a "living archive" of collective memory, and transcription, while preserving words, risks erasing the performative and participatory essence of oral traditions.

Nevertheless, these missionary and early linguistic works became crucial reference points for postcolonial scholars and community activists. Later Kurukh intellectuals and language

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advocates used Hahn's grammars and dictionaries as foundational sources for revitalization projects, script invention, and language education. Thus, while the early descriptions of Kurukh emerged from colonial and missionary contexts, they inadvertently contributed to the long-term preservation of the Oraon community's linguistic and cultural heritage—providing a textual base from which later generations could reclaim, reinterpret, and expand their written identity.

Forms of Kurukh orality: what was recorded

Kurukh orality is rich and varied. Typical forms include:

- **Folk songs (folksongs):** work songs, love songs, ritual songs, seasonal songs. They embed local knowledge about agriculture, seasons, plants, animals and social norms. Recent field studies list and analyse song types and their poetic qualities.
- **Folktales and myths:** origin myths, trickster tales, moral tales. Collections from the early 1900s onward include transcriptions of folktales in the original Kurukh language.
- **Ritual speech and liturgy:** texts chanted or recited during ceremonies (weddings, funerals, seasonal rites). These are highly context-dependent and often resisted literal translation because meaning is enacted, not only articulated.
- **Proverbs, idioms, and everyday sayings:** compact forms that encode social norms and ecological knowledge. These are frequent targets for literacy materials, because they travel easily into print and curriculum.

Together, these forms became the raw materials for written Kurukh literature sometimes translated, sometimes transcribed word for word, and sometimes adapted into modern genres (short stories, school readers, poetry anthologies).

Who drove the transition from orality to literacy?

The conversion of Kurukh oral heritage into written texts happened through a combination of actors:

1. **Missionaries and linguists (early 20th century).** They produced grammars, dictionaries and collected texts the foundational corpora that later activists used. Ferdinand Hahn's dictionary and folk-lore collections are examples.
2. **State and educational institutions.** Post-independence language policies and state education programs sometimes included regional languages; more recently, Jharkhand and some other states have recognized Kurukh in school contexts, creating institutional demand for written materials.
3. **Community activists and cultural associations.** Oraon writers, teachers and activists formed literary societies and small presses to publish in Kurukh often pushing for scripts and textbooks authored by community members. The Kurukh Literary Society and local organizations have played a notable role in spreading Kurukh print culture.
4. **Script inventors and orthography champions.** The invention of scripts specifically for Kurukh notably Tolong Siki (1999, by Dr. Narayan Oraon) and Kurukh Banna (later developments) gave Kurukh writers locally meaningful alphabets designed to represent phonology and cultural identity. Government recognition of Tolong Siki in Jharkhand (2007) was a landmark moment.

These actors sometimes worked together and sometimes at cross purposes; what matters is that a plurality of forces scholarly, official, and grassroots created the conditions for durable written culture.

Scripts and orthographies: technical and symbolic importance

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One of the pivotal changes enabling a written Kurukh heritage was the development and adoption of orthographies and novel scripts.

- **Devanagari and regional scripts.** Historically, Kurukh texts were often printed using Devanagari (the common script for many Indian languages) or Roman transliteration. Using Devanagari allowed rapid production and easier reception among readers who already knew that script. However, Devanagari is not phonologically perfect for Kurukh and carries cultural associations with dominant language spheres.
- **Tolong Siki (1999).** Tolong Siki is an alphabet created by Dr. Narayan Oraon specially for Kurukh. It was published in 1999 and later received formal recognition in Jharkhand (2007); the script has been used in magazines, school books and local publications. Tolong Siki is both practical it maps Kurukh phonemes and symbolic: a script created by a Kurukh person is an assertion of cultural self-determination.
- **Kurukh Banna and other alphabets.** Other local scripts, such as Kurukh Banna, have been proposed and used in pockets; both Kurukh Banna and Tolong Siki have motivated proposals for Unicode encoding to make digital use easier. Unicode proposals (2023–2024) have documented the scripts' shapes and use cases, showing that script work is an active, contemporary process.

Why script matters: orthography is not neutral. Scripts signal identity, shape access to print and digital media, influence literacy pedagogy, and mediate relations with majority languages. A locally developed script often boosts pride and can increase community ownership; a borrowed script can make publishing easier but may reduce visibility of linguistic uniqueness.

Methods of transforming oral material

Practitioners have used several methods to convert Kurukh oral forms into text:

1. **Direct transcription.** Fieldworkers write down songs and tales in Kurukh with glosses and literal translations. This preserves the original words but may lose performance cues tone, rhythm, call-and-response, choreographic elements.
2. **Translation and adaptation.** Some materials are translated into regional or national languages (Hindi, Odia, Bengali, English) for wider audiences. Translation can increase readership but risks changing idioms, metaphors, and cultural references.
3. **Edition with commentary.** Scholars produce bilingual editions, with the Kurukh text, interlinear glosses, literal translations, and commentaries on ritual context, variations and performance. This is the most academically robust method for preserving both text and context.
4. **Script reform and pedagogical publishing.** Using scripts like Tolong Siki to produce primers, school readers, and children's books makes oral traditions accessible in classroom settings. This method is oriented towards literacy and intergenerational transmission.
5. **Digital recording + transcription.** Archival projects combine audio/video recordings with transcripts and metadata, allowing readers to both hear and read the ideal compromise for preserving performative aspects. Initiatives such as endangered language archives and university projects emphasize multimedia archiving.

Case studies and examples

1. Early collections: Hahn's folklore and lexicon

Ferdinand Hahn's late-19th and early-20th century work produced some of the earliest printed corpora of Kurukh materials. His *Kurukh (Oraon)-English Dictionary* (1903) and *Kurukh folk-lore* (1905) contain lexical items and narrative texts that later scholars used as reference points. These early collections were instrumental in creating the first written record of many songs and

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tales. Example quote: Hahn recorded that Kurukh folksongs are "full of seasonal knowledge and social history."

2. Script invention and community publishing: Tolong Siki

The invention of Tolong Siki by Dr. Narayan Oraon (1999) and its subsequent promotion by literary societies and some state authorities helped shift publishing into a script that Kurukh speakers could claim. After state recognition in 2007, Tolong Siki began to appear in magazines, school materials and cultural pamphlets. Unicode proposal documents (2023) provide a recent snapshot of Tolong Siki's usage and the case for digital encoding. Tolong Siki's spread shows how community-rooted script innovation can accelerate the production of literature in an indigenous language.

3. Folk song studies and contemporary anthologies

Scholars and educators in Odisha and Jharkhand have produced collections and analytical articles on Oraon folksongs, highlighting both their poetic features and their role in cultural life. These modern articles often address how songs are changing in urban settings and how migration affects song transmission. Such fieldwork feeds back into textbook development, curriculum decisions, and performance revivals.

Tensions and challenges in the orality literacy process

Converting orality to literacy produces both gains and losses. Key tensions include:

1. **Loss of performative dimension.** When a song is printed, its melody, rhythm, gesture and communal context are often lost. A line on the page cannot easily reproduce a singer's improvisation, audience responses, or dance. Multimedia archiving helps, but text-only publication cannot fully recover performance.
2. **Translation and semantic thinning.** Translating idiomatic expressions and cultural metaphors into majority languages can strip local meanings. Words that carry ritual weight may become flattened in literal translations.
3. **Authority and ownership.** Early recordings by outsiders sometimes framed community texts for scholarly or missionary audiences, which raises questions about who owns the text and who benefits from its publication. Community-led initiatives help correct this imbalance, but issues of intellectual property and respectful consent remain important.
4. **Standardization vs. dialect diversity.** Attempts to standardize spelling and grammar for textbooks can marginalize dialectal varieties. Kurukh speakers across states use regional variants; a single standardized written form risks privileging some varieties over others.
5. **Literacy infrastructure.** Publishing in a local script requires fonts, typesetting, teacher training, and policy support (e.g., whether exams accept the script). Even with scripts like Tolong Siki, the lack of digital fonts and Unicode support historically constrained wider use though recent proposals aim to change that.

Opportunities and best practices

Despite challenges, the orality literacy transition offers important opportunities for cultural survival, education, and creative renewal. Best practices that have emerged include:

1. **Multimodal documentation.** Wherever possible, pair audio/video recordings with transcriptions and translations. This preserves performative features while making texts searchable and teachable. Archival projects emphasize metadata (who recorded, when, where, context) to preserve provenance.
2. **Community-led publishing.** When community groups, literary societies and local authors direct the publication process, materials are more likely to respect cultural

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protocols and priorities. The growth of local presses and magazines in Kurukh scripts demonstrates this potential.

3. **Script pluralism and pedagogy.** Allowing multiple scripts (Devanagari, Tolong Siki, Kurukh Banna) in educational settings can be pragmatic: Devanagari for resource sharing and digital ease; Tolong Siki for cultural affirmation and identity. Teacher training that explains orthographic differences helps students navigate scripts.
4. **Digital encoding and fonts.** Getting scripts into Unicode and creating fonts/keyboard layouts is a technical but crucial step: it unlocks digital publishing, social-media use, and inclusion in standard operating systems. Unicode proposals drafted by researchers (2023–2024) show active work in this area for Tolong Siki and Kurukh Banna.
5. **Curriculum integration and bilingual education.** Including Kurukh materials in early school grades strengthens literacy while validating students' home language. Policies that permit Kurukh-medium instruction or Kurukh as a subject bolster both language maintenance and school retention.

Ethical considerations

Research and publishing on indigenous oral traditions must meet ethical standards:

- **Free, prior and informed consent** for recording and publication. Communities and knowledge holders should agree to what is recorded and how it is used.
- **Benefit sharing.** If recordings or texts generate income or academic credit, mechanisms should ensure communities receive benefits (copies, payment, capacity building).
- **Cultural sensitivity.** Certain ritual texts may be restricted; transcription or publication without permission can be harmful. Researchers must follow local protocols.

These ethical norms are not merely academic niceties: they are essential to respectful, sustainable cultural work that supports rather than extracts from communities.

The role of digital archives and contemporary projects

Digital archives (university projects, endangered language repositories, and community websites) are increasingly important. They allow searchable, multimedia collections that scholars, teachers and community members can use. For Kurukh, several initiatives including academic proposals, online resource lists, and community websites point toward a growing online corpus of texts, recordings and learning tools. Getting scripts encoded in Unicode and creating accessible fonts further accelerates this process. A promising practice is "multilayered publication": a printed book that includes QR codes linking to recordings of the same song or story, so readers can both read and hear. This approach helps bridge the divide between print and performance.

Conclusion:

The transformation of Kurukh oral traditions into written heritage represents a landmark in the cultural and linguistic history of the Oraon community. This shift is not merely a technical process of transcription but a profound reconfiguration of how identity, memory, and meaning are preserved and communicated. The Kurukh experience shows that literacy, when embraced through community agency and cultural consciousness, becomes a means of empowerment rather than erasure. From the early missionary records of Ferdinand Hahn in the early twentieth century to the indigenous innovations of the Tolong Siki and Kurukh Banna scripts, the Kurukh language has journeyed from the fragile sphere of oral performance to the enduring space of written and digital expression. This journey embodies both the resilience and adaptability of a people who continue to navigate the challenges of modernity while remaining rooted in ancestral wisdom. Writing, as Walter J. Ong (1982) observes, "restructures consciousness,"

changing not only how we communicate but also how we think and remember. For a community like the Oraons, whose oral traditions encode their cosmology, ethics, and social structure, the act of writing redefines the relationship between language and lived experience. The written word offers permanence and accessibility it allows Kurukh songs, myths, and proverbs to be archived, studied, and taught in schools. However, this preservation comes at a cost. The performative, musical, and participatory essence of oral art forms cannot be fully captured on paper. Each transcription risks losing the intonation, rhythm, and communal energy that animate oral performances. Yet, these limitations do not diminish the value of literacy; rather, they call for creative strategies that integrate written documentation with audiovisual and digital preservation to sustain the performative dimension of orality.

The development and official recognition of Tolong Siki in 2007, followed by digital encoding efforts for both Tolong Siki and Kurukh Banna scripts (Pandey 2023; Unicode Consortium 2024), signify the assertion of linguistic autonomy. Script invention, as Vineet Sinha (2018) notes, is not only a linguistic innovation but also a political act—an assertion of identity and resistance against linguistic domination. By reclaiming the power to represent themselves in their own script, the Oraons have transformed literacy into a symbol of self-determination. Educational institutions in Jharkhand and Odisha are increasingly incorporating Kurukh materials into bilingual curricula, demonstrating how language revitalization can enhance both cultural pride and academic participation. This convergence of tradition and education underscores the potential of literacy as a tool for social inclusion and cognitive empowerment.

Nevertheless, challenges persist. The need for standardized orthography, the scarcity of teaching materials, and the limited digital infrastructure continue to hinder the full realization of Kurukh literacy. Moreover, translation into majority languages often dilutes the metaphorical depth and ecological wisdom of the original expressions. Therefore, ethical and community-led approaches are crucial. Documentation must respect local protocols, ensure free and informed consent, and promote benefit-sharing with the communities whose voices are being recorded. Only when the Oraons themselves remain the primary agents of representation can literacy serve the interests of preservation rather than appropriation. In essence, the transition from orality to literacy in Kurukh culture is an ongoing process of negotiation between preservation and transformation, tradition and technology. When grounded in community participation and supported by digital archiving, Unicode encoding, and pedagogical initiatives, literacy becomes a bridge between the past and the future. It allows the ancestral voices of the Oraon people to resonate across media and generations, ensuring that their "living archives" continue to speak in new forms. Thus, written Kurukh is not the end of oral heritage but its evolution an enduring testament to the adaptability, creativity, and resilience of an indigenous culture determined to keep its stories alive in both sound and script.

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