Good evening, Jhargram

Meet the RJ who is making it fashionable to speak Santali

The onset of spring has dressed Jhargram, the district on the western corner of West Bengal, in the flaming colours of the palash flower. The flowers of the mahua tree are also scattered everywhere; women are collecting them in buckets to brew wine as the sun dips into the horizon. The radio is on to keep them company, tuned in to Radio Milan, 90.4 FM where RJ Shikha Mandi is hosting a programme called ‘Johar Jhargram’ (Greetings, Jhargram), which focuses on Santali language and culture.

A man, speaking in Bengali, calls in with a request for a Santali song. The RJ urges him to speak in Santali since, it turns out, the caller is Santali. The man says he understands Santali but can’t speak it properly. Mandi’s enthusiastic voice asserts that it’s better to speak broken Santali than not to speak it at all. It’s their mother tongue after all.

Santals are the largest tribal community in Bengal, which has more than two million Santali speakers. The language was included as an official language in the eighth schedule of the Constitution in 2003, but only a few schools in Bengal use it as the medium of instruction.

Best interests

The Bengali-speaking population of Jhargram also tends to look down upon the language and the community. “We speak Santali among ourselves. The Bengalis here don’t know our language, and it’s in our interest to learn to speak Bengali — most businesses here are owned by Bengalis,” says Shibu Soren of Kalaboni village near Jhargram town, taking a sip of mahua wine.

Given such realities, it is not surprising that the number of Santali speakers is dwindling. Outside Bengal, Santali is spoken in Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, and some parts of Tripura.

It’s in this milieu that the twenty-four-year old Mandi of Radio Milan has been trying to make Santali fashionable. From the Santali community herself, Mandi has lived most of her life in Kolkata, but returned to Jhargram after completing her studies to become an RJ. In the few months of its existence, the programme she hosts, ‘Johar Jhargram’, has become hugely popular, crossing the boundaries of Jhargram to reach Kolkata, which may be only five hours away but far removed culturally and linguistically. People also tune in to ‘Johar Jhargram’ from different parts of India, Canada and the U.K. on a mobile app.

Mandi says it’s her bitterness at being seen as ‘inferior’ by her Bengali classmates in her Kolkata school that inspired her to take up the cause of Santali.

“I was often dismissed as a tribal, and for slipping into Santali in school. I made it a rule to never speak Santali outside the four walls of home.”

Mandi was born in Belpahari, 40 km from Jhargram, and sent to Kolkata for schooling when she was four. In Jhargram, regular classes would have been impossible. Part of the Red Corridor, the area has seen a lot of Maoist violence in the last two decades.

Mandi’s two-hour radio programme, which airs between 4:00 and 6:00 pm from Monday to Saturday, takes up different issues relevant to the community — from education and child labour to traditional harvest festivals.

Songs are played in between; listeners call in and participate, sometimes in Bengali, but Mandi responds in Santali. Mandi’s accent is itself imbued with traces of Bengali, but she has been
reading and writing Santali and talking to native speakers to improve her skills. “But in truth,” she says, “no one now knows the language as well as our grandparents do.”

Most parents, in fact, discourage their children from speaking Santali because only Bengali and English can fetch them jobs.

Quiet optimism

Arun Kumar Ghosh teaches at Burdwan University. He has been working on Santali language for three decades now. “It is one of the world’s oldest languages,” he says, “and, interestingly, it still preserves linguistic features that are as old as 150 years.” There is a growing interest in the world outside the Santali community to study the language and absorb the culture, but the community is hesitant to let this happen. “The low literacy within the community is a major cause behind this unwillingness,” says Ghosh.

But the younger generation is slowly beginning to embrace the mother tongue. Usha Soren from Kalaboni tells me while cleaning her courtyard that she sends her son to a Santali language teacher twice a week so that he learns to write in the Ol Chiki script.

Young people like Mandi want to learn about their history and culture in Santali rather than in Bengali. They want to learn to be a Santal in Santali language. Ghosh is optimistic that programmes like ‘Johar Jhargram’, which bring entertainment and information in Santali, can go a long way towards mainstreaming the language.

A journalist based in Uttarakhand, the writer explores the lives of those who walk mountains.