CHAPTER 5

Overview of the Munda Languages

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1 Introduction

The Munda languages are a group of Austroasiatic languages spoken across portions of central and eastern India by perhaps as many as ten million people total. The Munda peoples are generally believed to represent autochthonous populations over much of their current areas of inhabitation. This is codified in one of the common terms used locally to describe them, *adivasi* or ‘aboriginal’.

MAP 5.1 Location of the Munda languages in India.

Approximate Distribution of Munda languages
Originally, Munda-speaking peoples probably extended over a somewhat larger area before being marginalized into the relatively remote hill country and (formerly) forested areas primarily in the states of Odisha and Jharkhand; significant Munda-speaking groups are also to be found in Madhya Pradesh, and throughout remote areas of Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra, and through migration to virtually all areas of India, especially in tea-producing regions like Assam. Of course much of the original Munda-speaking territory was subsequently settled or colonized by Indo-Aryan-speakers and Dravidian-speakers.

1.1 On the Prehistory of the Munda-Speaking Peoples

The prehistory of the Munda languages remains obscure. Munda languages constitute the westernmost representatives of the far-flung Austroasiatic linguistic phylum. Two other Austroasiatic groups are found in the present-day territory of India, the Khasian-speaking groups of Meghalaya and the Nicobarese-speaking groups of the Nicobar Islands. The other subgroups of Austroasiatic are all found outside of India, and it is generally believed that the Austroasiatic ancestral language was not to be found in India but rather further to the east. Thus, at some point the ancestors of the Munda-speaking peoples must have migrated westward into the Subcontinent. When, how, and by what path they entered India remains a subject of considerable debate. Indeed, it is not even clear that there was a single migration of pre-Munda speakers, but there may even have been two or more such movements.

1.2 Internal Relationships among Languages of the Munda Family

Consensus has not yet been reached on the internal relationships of the Munda languages, but several subgroups have been proposed and some of these appear to be sound. It is hoped that further work in comparative Munda grammar and lexicon may shed light on this issue. The northern-, eastern- and westernmost groups of Munda languages are clearly related and appear to fall into two broad groupings. The first of these is the westernmost Munda language Korku which appears to be a sister to the remainder of this subgroup, the large and complex Kherwarian dialect/language chain, the better known varieties of which are Santali, Mundari and Ho. Kherwarian also includes a number of minor varieties as well, e.g. Turi, Asuri, Birhor, Bhumij, Korwa, etc. Korku and Kherwarian together are conventionally known as North Munda.

The remaining Munda languages are almost only found in the state of Odisha, which appears to be the epi-center of diversity of the family, although some Kharia speakers are found in Jharkhand, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh as well and some of the southernmost groups like the Gtaʔ or the Gorum