

The Echo of Hul: Memory, Displacement, and the Politics of Refusal in Hansda Sowendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intertextual and political connections between the historical Santhal *Hul* (Rebellion) of 1855 and the contemporary socio-political realities depicted in Hansda Sowendra Shekhar's short story *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015). Drawing on postcolonial theory and indigenous environmental critique, the analysis demonstrates that Shekhar's narrative frames historical memory as an active, dynamic force in contemporary resistance rather than a static archival artifact. The study focuses on the protagonist, Mangal Murmu—a Santhal troupe leader who disrupts an official state event—to examine how state-driven resource extraction, forced land acquisition, and internal colonialism in post-independence Jharkhand mirror the oppressive structures of British colonial rule and *diku* (outsider) exploitation. By analyzing Murmu's performative refusal to dance before state officials and corporate representatives, the paper illustrates how cultural art forms serve as sites of counter-hegemonic political agency. Ultimately, the argument is advanced that Shekhar's work constitutes an ongoing project that redefines Adivasi identity beyond victimhood through radical acts of refusal and resistance.

Keywords: Santhal Hul, Hansda Sowendra Shekhar, Adivasi literature, subaltern agency, Jharkhand, displacement.

Introduction

On July 30, 1855, the Santhal Parganas witnessed one of the most formidable anti-colonial uprisings in Indian history: the Santhal *Hul*. Spearheaded by the legendary Murmu brothers—Sido, Kanhu, Chand, and Bhairav—alongside their sisters Phulo and Jhano, the rebellion mobilized tens of thousands of Santhals against the triad of oppressive forces: the British East India Company, money-lenders (*mahajans*), and non-tribal landlords (*zamindars*). The uprising was fundamentally an assertion of indigenous territorial sovereignty (*Swaraj*), human dignity, and the defence of ancestral land (*Lalmati*) against total systemic alienation. While colonial historiography and postcolonial state narratives have frequently categorized the *Hul* as a closed, historicized event safely contained within the 19th-century archive, contemporary Adivasi literature vigorously challenges this containment.

Hansda Sowendra Shekhar's title story, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015), reactivates the historical memory of the 1855 *Hul* to illuminate the contemporary realities of Santhal life in post-independence India. Set in Jharkhand, a region marked by both resource abundance and persistent poverty, the narrative centers on sixty-year-old Mangal Murmu, a Santhal master musician and troupe leader from Jharkhanda village. When invited to perform a traditional welcome dance for the President of India at the inauguration of a large thermal power plant on corporate-leased Santhal land, Murmu enacts a public act of defiance: he interrupts the performance, confronts state dignitaries, and declares that his troupe will not dance while their lands, rivers, and lives are being destroyed. This paper examines how Shekhar's short story connects the historical memory of the 1855 Santhal *Hul* with contemporary neo-colonial resource extraction, demonstrating that Murmu's performative refusal constitutes a modern expression of anti-colonial indigenous resistance.

Literature Review

The academic discourse surrounding Adivasi representation in Indian literature has undergone a significant paradigm shift over the past two decades. Historical and subaltern scholarship, pioneered by Ranajit Guha in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), laid the groundwork for reading indigenous uprisings like the Santhal *Hul* not as spontaneous, mindless outbursts, but as deeply political, organized confrontations against structural violence. Guha highlighted how the colonial archive systematically erased subaltern consciousness, reducing rebellions to law-and-order disruptions. Extending this

historical critique into the contemporary postcolonial nation-state, Felix Padel and Samarendra Das (2010) argue in *Out of This Earth: East India Uprising* that the post-independence state has inherited and intensified colonial patterns of land grab, orchestrating a form of "cultural genocide" through large-scale mining and industrial projects in tribal belts.

In literary studies, scholars such as K.S. Singh (1982) and G.N. Devy (2002) have highlighted the significance of oral traditions and literary expressions in preserving Adivasi collective memory. Early postcolonial literature on Adivasis, predominantly authored by non-tribal writers, often exoticized tribal subjects or depicted them as passive victims of developmental modernization. The rise of self-represented Adivasi writing in English and regional languages—by authors such as Alice Ekka, Nirmala Putul, and Hansda Sowendra Shekhar—has significantly transformed this discourse. Critical responses to Shekhar's short story "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" have focused on its contentious reception, including a temporary ban by the Jharkhand state government in 2017 due to allegations of misrepresentation of Santhal women and culture. Scholars such as Rakhshanda Jalil (2017) have defended the work as a bold critique of internal colonialism and state hypocrisy. Building on this body of scholarship, the present paper examines this short story as a continuation of the transhistorical memory of the Hul rebellion and its enduring spirit of defiance and vocal autonomy.

Societal memory is fundamentally a cultural phenomenon rather than a neurological process. For personal experiences to become collective memory, they must be transmitted across generations. This transmission occurs through various means, including literature, oral and historical narratives, as well as physical forms such as statues, monuments, and museums. Cultural memory is not preserved within a single artifact or medium; instead, it is reproduced and transformed as stories circulate across diverse texts and media. No single medium can sustain cultural memory independently, necessitating its continual adaptation to remain relevant. Ann Rigney observes, "stories only gain traction in society at large when they are subsequently repeated in part or as a whole across different media platforms and in ever new material forms; in short, when they are not only mediated (brought into circulation using a particular medium), but also remediated." (372) Literature serves as one such medium, remediating cultural memory by translating historical experience into narrative form. To analyze the thematic and structural connections between the 1855 rebellion and Shekhar's contemporary narrative, this paper synthesizes critical frameworks, including:

Subaltern Agency and Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?": Spivak's seminal inquiry into whether subaltern subjects can achieve institutional voice and agency informs the critique of Mangal Murmu's speech act. While state elites construct the Adivasi as an exotic, silent ornament meant only to perform folklore for foreign dignitaries, Murmu's sudden disruption of the state spectacle represents what Spivak terms the catastrophic rupture of subaltern silence. By using the very stage provided by the state to articulate political grievance, Murmu forces the sovereign power to confront the living subaltern subject.

Audra Simpson's "Politics of Refusal": Anthropologist Audra Simpson, in her work *Mohawk Disruptive: Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (2014), theorizes "refusal" as a critical indigenous political posture that stands in opposition to state-sanctioned modes of "recognition." Simpson argues that when state recognition is contingent upon indigenous subjection and cultural commodification, refusal becomes a potent form of sovereignty. In *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, Murmu's declaration—"We will not dance"—functions precisely as an Audra Simpson-esque 'act of refusal', withholding cultural labor to expose the illegitimacy of the state's developmental narrative.

Literary Analysis

Shekhar's short story operates on two temporal planes, constantly juxtaposing the heroic past of the Santhal *Hul* with the present degradation of Santhal life. From the very outset, the narrative establishes that Mangal Murmu is not just an isolated individual, but a vocal beacon of ancestral history. Belonging to the same surname group as Sido and Kanhu Murmu, Mangal's lineage explicitly connects him to the historical leaders of 1855. Shekhar writes of Murmu's great pride in his Santhal heritage, grounded in the historical memory of an invincible spirit that once stood against the world's most powerful empire.

However, the story's tragedy lies in the stark contrast between historical memory and contemporary reality. While the state constructs monuments and lays floral wreaths at the feet of Sido and Kanhu's statues during official anniversaries, it simultaneously authorizes the clearance of Santhal villages for coal mining and power generation. Shekhar highlights this profound state hypocrisy as dignitaries arrive. The local administration mobilises Santhal artists to perform traditional dances to entertain the President, treating Adivasi culture as a benign, decorative artefact while stripping the Adivasis of their physical survival base: land, water, and forests (*Jal, Jangal, Jameen*).

The narrative's central thematic turn is the transformation of cultural performance into a site of struggle. In traditional Santhal society, dance and music (played on Santali drums *tumdak* and *tamak*) are sacred, communal expressions of life, harmony with nature, and spiritual grounding. By demanding that Santhals dance for the inauguration of a power plant that will displace their own families from Jharkhanda village, the state demands that the Adivasi celebrate their own destruction. Shekhar masterfully builds the tension as Mangal Murmu stands on stage before the microphone. Mangal Murmu offers his *johar* and questions the president, “We will sing and dance before you but tell us, do we have a reason to sing and dance? Do we have a reason to be happy? You will now start building the power plant, but this plant will be the end of us all, the end of all the Adivasi... We have nowhere to go, nowhere to grow our crops. How can this power plant be good for us? And how can we Adivasis dance and be happy?” (187)

Murmu's direct address to the President, though potentially perceived as both courageous and reckless, emerges from profound desperation in response to systemic marginalization. By improvising in Hindi, Mangal Murmu transcends linguistic barriers to articulate dissent. This character disrupts the infantilized portrayal of tribal communities prevalent in mainstream literature. He interrogates the reduction of India's Adivasi population to mere objects of display in state-sponsored projects, highlighting their relegation to the status of cultural showpieces. His statements become increasingly resolute, incisive, and purposeful:

“But we Santhals are fools, aren't we? All of us Adivasis are fools. Down the years, down generations, the Diku have taken advantage of our foolishness... We Adivasis will not dance anymore- what is wrong with that? We are like toys- someone presses our 'ON' button, or turns a key in our backsides, and we Santhals start beating rhythms on our *tamak* and *tumdak* or start blowing tunes on our *tiriyo* while someone snatches away our very dancing grounds. Tell me, am I wrong? (170)

This speech act directly resurrects the spirit of 1855. Just as Sido and Kanhu declared the invalidity of British revenue laws over Santhal territories, Murmu declares the invalidity of a modern developmental regime that requires the destruction of indigenous life. The state apparatus responds immediately, brutally, and revealingly. Murmu is not listened to or engaged in democratic dialogue; instead, he is instantly tackled by police personnel, dragged off stage, beaten severely in custody, and branded a disruptive troublemaker—and implicitly accused of being an anti-national or Naxalite insurgent.

Through this violent state reaction, Shekhar exposes the democratic state's authoritarian core when confronted by subaltern refusal. The beating of sixty-year-old Mangal Murmu by modern Indian police mirrors the British colonial forces' brutal suppression of Santhal archers in 1855. The narrative underscores that the identity of the ruler has changed from white colonial officers to brown state elites. Still, the structural violence directed against the Santhal body remains virtually identical. The term *diku*, historically used by Santhals to designate predatory non-tribal outsiders, expands in Shekhar's story to encompass the corporate-state nexus that views Adivasi land merely as mineral wealth to be excavated.

Furthermore, Shekhar utilises the motif of physical decay and environmental degradation to illustrate the modern consequences of land alienation. Unlike the 1855 era, where land loss meant feudal tenancy, modern land alienation in Jharkhand results in complete ecological devastation. The story describes how coal dust coats the leaves of the Sal trees, how local streams run black with industrial slurry, and how young Santhal men and women are forced into migrant labour, quarrying, or prostitution in nearby urban centres. In this context, Murmu's refusal to dance is an act of profound ecological and human preservation. Dance, detached from land and freedom, becomes meaningless, grotesque theatre. By refusing to dance, Murmu preserves the sacred integrity of Santhal art, refusing to allow it to be appropriated as a decorative veneer for corporate land grabbing. Until then, as Mangal Murmu's resonant declaration echoes across the dusty fields of Jharkhand, the Adivasi will refuse to dance to the tune of neo-colonial power.

The Adivasi Will Not Dance explores the multiple forms of tribal exploitation that persist to the present day, with the issue of land remaining central to this discourse. An important aspect of the story is the pointed commentary offered by Mangal Murmu; the author employs a vocal protagonist to reveal the detrimental effects of Santali exploitation. With the exception of the protagonists in Mahashweta Devi's fiction, it is challenging to identify parallels to a character such as Mangal Murmu, as Santals have predominantly been depicted in positions of subservience and idealized innocence within mainstream narratives. This story and its protagonist depart from such stereotypical representations and introduce a new chapter of tribal dissent. This dissent does not manifest physically as it did during the Hul rebellion, and Hansda Sowendra Shekhar rearticulates it through vocal expression for an English-reading audience, representing a world that is often displaced and marginalized.

Conclusion

Hansda Sowendra Shekhar's short story *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* serves as a powerful literary monument to the enduring spirit of the 1855 Santhal *Hul*. By centring the narrative on Mangal Murmu's courageous act of public refusal, Shekhar shows that the Santhal rebellion was not a singular historical event that concluded in the 19th century, but an ongoing, unfulfilled struggle against structural oppression. *Hul* has to be understood as a symbol of continuous resistance, the remembrance and reiteration and remodelling of this event is done through various mediums whether political, socio-economic or literary, in the case of Hansda Sowendra Shekhar. It marks a mental position of semblance, which is a source of hope for a better future. The story critically exposes how the modern Indian nation-state, operating under the banner of neo-liberal development, replicates the extractive and coercive practices of colonial rule, treating Adivasi land as resource frontiers and Adivasi bodies as disposable or decorative subjects.

Through the lens of internal colonialism and the politics of refusal, the paper has shown how Murmu transforms the stage from a space of subjection into an arena of radical subaltern agency. By refusing to perform for the state elites who are actively authorising the displacement of his village, Murmu reclaims the true heritage of Sido, Kanhu, Phulo, and Jhano. Shekhar's text ultimately suggests that genuine honour to the memory of the 1855 *Hul* cannot be paid through empty state rituals, statues, or ceremonial dances. It can be realised only through the unconditional recognition of Adivasi land rights, territorial sovereignty, and human dignity. The *Hul* struggle of 1855 holds profound symbolic significance for the Santal community. It established a foundation for future leaders to voice opposition to injustice. The event occupies a central place in Santali consciousness, serving as a primary point of reference in situations of distrust. As such, it functions as an event of enduring transhistorical memory and importance.

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