

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*: Narratives of Subjugation and Displacement

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The Adivasi Will Not Dance (2015) by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar presents a distinct plea to revisit the discourse surrounding tribal subjects with deliberate clarity. The term "Adivasi," framed within a context of hegemonic power dynamics, typically depicts the marginalised "other," relegated to minor narrative structures convenient for social, political, and geographical exploitation. About the representation of the adivasi community, the author himself has admitted in an interview with Sujit Prasad:

I am a Santhal; and one person's opinion, too, matters; so, my opinion should matter; and I think that it is a good thing that a Santhal story has been written in English. And why only English, I think it will be wonderful if Santhal stories are written in as many languages as possible, so that Santhal stories may go out to as wide a readership as possible. It is the representation and the exposure that matter. (Shekhar)

This hierarchical placement of superiority over inferiority has tinted discussions on the diverse ethnicity of the Adivasis, perpetuating their perpetual exclusion from the dominant power structures. Their voices, historically subdued, have been overshadowed by the elite's control over discourse, leaving little room for alternative perspectives or a third space of expression.

The collection of short stories by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar portrays the lives of Adivasis from Jharkhand, specifically the Santhals. The text highlights the postcolonial formations and the spaces of cultural consumption, emphasising the representation of the feeble voices of the margins growing loud enough to be heard at the centre. The title story, "Adivasi will not Dance," depicts the resistance of the Adivasis against displacement from their lands due to industrialisation, depicting their struggles and sentiments. The article also delves into other stories in the collection, shedding light on themes of poverty, helplessness, unity, and societal hierarchies. Furthermore, it addresses the use of Santhali language in the stories and the socio-political themes explored by Shekhar, emphasising the relevance and impact of his work in sensitising society towards the issues faced by the Santhals.

The first story of the volume, "They Eat Meat", recounts the unconventional dietary habits of Panmuhi-jhi and Bikram-kumang's family in Vadodara, where non-vegetarian items are strictly

forbidden. The narrative explores the city's orthodox attitudes toward purity and its implications for marginalised communities like the Adivasis and Dalits. It also delves into the aftermath of a violent attack on a Muslim family in the community, highlighting the solidarity among women in resisting the mob. The story concludes with Bikram-kumang's family relocating to Bhuwaneswar, where they find acceptance and freedom from societal restrictions.

The subsequent stories in the collection delve into various themes such as gender bias, poverty, sexual exploitation, and social ostracism. "Sons" depicts the challenges faced by a mother whose son gets involved in criminal activities, contrasting him with a more obedient relative who achieves success through education. "November is the Month of Migration" portrays the plight of nomadic tribal communities forced into sexual exploitation due to poverty. "Getting Even" exposes the injustice of false accusations of sexual assault and the underlying tensions between different social classes. "Eating with the Enemy" explores the complexities of jealousy and solidarity among rival wives. "Blue Baby" narrates the tragedy of unfulfilled love and miscarriage. "Baso-jhi" reveals the dehumanising treatment of a Dalit woman accused of witchcraft. "Desire, Divination and Death" depicts the struggles of a poor mother to provide for her children amidst superstitions. "Merely a Whore" delves into the life of a prostitute trapped in a cycle of abuse and exploitation. Finally, "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" highlights the systemic oppression faced by Santal communities and the narrator's defiance against it.

Hansda Sowvindra Shekhar explores several major themes in his collection of short stories entitled *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. These themes include:

Displacement and Industrialisation: A central theme is the displacement of Adivasi people from their lands due to industrialisation. This is exemplified in the title story, where the construction of a thermal power plant leads to the potential loss of homes and livelihoods for the Adivasis.

Cultural Preservation vs. Modernisation: The stories often deal with the tension between maintaining traditional ways of life and adapting to modern societal changes. This is highlighted by the character Mangal Murmu's refusal to perform traditional dances at a state function, symbolising resistance against the erosion of cultural identity.

Socio-Political Inequality: The collection confronts societal hierarchies and the stark contrast between the lives of the rich and the struggles of the poor. It addresses the marginalisation of the Adivasi community and the political and economic forces that perpetuate their subjugation.

Gender Dynamics and Women's Issues: Issues such as human trafficking and prostitution are explored, particularly in the stories "November is a Month for Migrations" and "Merely a Prostitute," which delve into the exploitation and abuse of women.

Tribal Identity and Language: Shekhar incorporates Santhali language and culture into the stories, highlighting the importance of preserving tribal identity. This is seen in the use of Santhal vocabulary and the portrayal of the community's resistance to external pressures.

Corruption and Morality: The stories touch upon corruption, both in the sense of moral decay and systemic corruption. For instance, "They Eat Meat!" and "Sons" illustrate the contrast between the lives and values of the Adivasi community and the corrupt practices of the dominant society.

Revenge and Justice: The theme of revenge is explored in "Getting Even," where a boy is falsely accused of rape, and the community's response to such injustice is portrayed.

Superstition and Belief: Stories like "Baso-Jhi" illustrate the impact of superstition and the struggle between traditional beliefs and rational thought within the Adivasi communities.

Unity and Solidarity: The collection shows moments of unity and solidarity, such as the Sorens' neighbours standing by them during the Gujarat Riots in 2002, highlighting the potential for community strength in the face of adversity.

Overall, Shekhar's stories serve to bring attention to the plight of the Adivasi people, the threats they face to their land, culture, and identity, and the broader socio-political issues that impact India's marginalised communities.

Each story encapsulates the harsh realities and injustices experienced by marginalised individuals in society, shedding light on the complex intersections of caste, class, gender, and religion in India. Through vivid storytelling and poignant narratives, the collection exposes the myriad challenges faced by those on the fringes of society and calls for empathy, understanding, and social change.

Shekhar's work is incisive in portraying the struggles of the Santhals amidst the challenges posed by corporate takeovers and development in the mineral-rich land of Jharkhand. It touches upon the portrayal of various societal issues such as human trafficking, prostitution, and women's abuse, while also addressing the author's approach to using the Santhali language liberally in the stories. The article emphasises the relevance of the stories to contemporary times, highlighting the potential threat posed by the ideologies of the state to the democratic and diverse fabric of Indian society. Additionally, it discusses the author's intention to bring about change through his writing, echoing the sentiment that art should not be chaste but should strive to evoke transformation and societal sensitization.

In essence, the review article provides a comprehensive analysis of Shekhar's collection, emphasising its socio-political relevance, the depiction of Adivasi struggles, and the author's use of language to authentically convey the native experience. It also underscores the broader impact of the stories in sensitising society to the challenges faced by the Santhals and the potential for societal change through art.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar uses language and cultural elements in his writing to authentically represent the Santhali experience. Shekhar liberally incorporates words from the Santhali language without providing translations, allowing the native experience to be conveyed without altering the language. He is unapologetic about refashioning the English language to suit Santhali sentiments, emphasising the importance of using words common in the Santhali vocabulary within the sentences. This approach serves to provide a genuine representation of the Santhali culture and life. Additionally, Shekhar's stories depict the struggles and experiences of the Santhals from the Jharkhand region, addressing issues such as displacement due to industrialisation, corporate takeovers, and societal hierarchies. Through his writing, Shekhar aims to sensitise society to the challenges faced by the Santhals and provoke reflection on the societal issues they encounter.

In an article, Dr Debalina Sengupta says:

Feminism, which is a blazing issue in contemporary India, applies to the Santhal women much dreadfully than the main stream females. Apart from the domination of the male gaze, the Santhal women are compelled to be victimised by domestic violence and cultural discord. Mostly they are seen to sell their bodies as prostitutes and get rigorously humiliated at their meagre workspace milieu. (16).

There is a clear objectification and stereotyping involved whereby the adivasi women are taken as commodities for use, negating their right to individuality and choice. In “Merely a Whore” we see Sona in a dehumanised condition where she has no choice except compliance to the male desire and to condition herself to that.

The Adivasi Will Not Dance by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar delves into various societal and political issues that are relevant to contemporary times. The stories depict the anomalies and predicament of the Santhals, an Adivasi community from Jharkhand, as they confront a rootlessness as they struggle to come to terms with the rapidly changing times, quite different from the values and ethos of the one they have to leave behind them. The narratives address events such as human trafficking, prostitution, women's abuse, and witch-hunting, shedding light on the socio-political themes that affect the Adivasi society. Shekhar's writing also explores the confrontation of societal hierarchies, emphasising the power dynamics between the powerful and the powerless, the rich and the poor. The stories serve as a reflection of the challenges faced by the Santhals in a mineral-rich land where corporate takeovers and development are prevalent, highlighting the potential threat posed by state ideologies to the democratic and diverse fabric of

Indian society. Overall, the collection aims to sensitise society to the issues faced by the Santhals and provoke reflection on the societal challenges encountered by marginalised communities in contemporary times.

In her work *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography* (1987), Gayatri Spivak contends that efforts to amplify the voices of the Adivasi are inherently fruitless because the subaltern cannot emerge independently of elite constructs. The elite, especially within political spheres and their affiliated apparatuses, exercise discursive dominance, allowing them to distort the narratives of marginalised groups such as the Dalit and Adivasi. Dominic Strinati's rightly concludes in *Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*:

...Dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous consent' of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups (165).

Consequently, the Adivasi's voice is stifled by the lack of access to this discursive power Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's work challenges power dynamics and societal hierarchies in several ways. Shekhar portrays the plight of a subjugated people who are constantly grappling with displacement due to the conflict and compromise with the forces of the world of money and the city. The stories depict the confrontation between the powerful and the powerless, the struggle in which the adivasi community with their heritage of a simple life that has to transform and adapt in the face of the more complex, self-obsessed, and utilitarian aspects of the modern civilization. Shekhar's narratives serve as a critique of the societal and political structures that perpetuate these power imbalances, challenging the dominant narratives and ideologies that marginalise the Adivasi community. In the article "Dismantling the Hegemonic Structure through the War of Manoeuvre: Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance' as a Dogma of Adivasis" Arya A says:

The text draws attention to the religious and cultural articulations that made its progressive root into the adivasi settlements to unsettle their indigenous cultural orientation. The narrator in the text progresses from the complacent adivasi exploited by the historic blocs to the representation of resistance and revolution within the adivasi tribes. The text adheres to Gramsci in its political and cultural understanding and revolution of position. The text through its strong rendering of the cultural intricacies of the Santhal community establish the uniqueness of the tribe as a foil to the concept of altering identities of the factual nuances of a superior cultural context (137).

Shekhar utilizes the text to underscore the significance of dance, music, and songs within the cultural fabric of the Santhals. However, the state's gaze upon these Adivasis is tainted by corporate interests, reducing these cultural expressions of the Santhal Adivasi community to commodities ripe for exploration, exploitation, and potential exportation. It is clear that the protective and pervasive presence of the authoritative state has gaps in it; the Adivasi identity

and interests are subsumed by the larger interests wherein the state uses strategies of dilution and neglect. The unspoken diktat or logic is not that of the greater interest but of power and money, and who wields them. The struggle for survival also leads to a crisis of space and sustenance. Says the distraught narrator: “We Santhal can sing and dance. We are good at our art. Yet, what has our art given us? Displacement, tuberculosis.” (Shekher 178) Not only this, there also is conversion and change of faith involved. Shekhar presents this change which is disguised as subtle suggestions through the musings of the narrator “Sathal names- Hopna, Som, Singrai- are not good enough. They are renamed David and Mikail and Kiristopher” (172). “The Adivasi Will Not Dance”, the final story of the collection, portrays comprehensively the predicament of the Adivasis, the overt and covert pressures and subjugation that not only subject them to violence, rape, and plunder but also make them leave their religious practices and cultural ways, and finally, to lose their identity in the face of an invasion and dominance they are too powerless to resist. The resulting Adivasi is a mimic person, his condition as that explained by Bhabha:

Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both "normalized" knowledges and disciplinary powers. (Bhabha 126)

Furthermore, Shekhar's writing confronts the postcolonial formations and spaces of cultural consumption, highlighting the struggle of marginalised voices to be heard at the centre of society. By authentically representing the Santhali experience through the use of the Santhali language and cultural elements, Shekhar challenges the traditional power dynamics that have historically silenced the voices of the margins. The last story in the volume “The Adivasi Will Not Dance” ends with a desperate anguish, vocalised but apparently cut short: “And how can we Adivasis dance and be happy? Unless we are given back our home and land, we will not sing and dance. We Adivasis will not dance. The Adivasi will not—” (Shekher 187). His work aims to sensitise society to the challenges faced by the Santhals and provoke reflection on the societal issues encountered by marginalised communities, ultimately challenging the existing power structures and hierarchies within Indian society.

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