



The Tribal Question And The Cultural Dilemma: Reading Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's The Adivasi Will Not Dance

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the intricacies of the Santhal identity and the multifarious challenges posed to it since the inception of British colonial advances on the Indian subcontinent, navigating through a travesty of memories, which leave only footprints on the socio-political textual knowledge canvas. Landscape, as the 'poetry of earth' (Keats 83), partakes a garb of a neo-liberal fatality as and when the all-intrusive idea of 'home' transcends the wistful spatial limit. Focusing on Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015), the paper alludes to the materiality of the Adivasi life in motion, exiting the historical stereotypes and pervading into the realms of morbid locales. The Adivasi is always amidst a cultural dilemma, trying to establish its own place within the demarcations of post-colonial scholarship and the rudimentary legitimacy that is granted by the elite intelligentsia. The Adivasis have been, at times, treated as heinously as Naxalites and marginalized as the Dalits, so much so that a distinguished section of litterateurs still consider them incapable of contemplation and decision-making. I explore Shekhar's story in this realm, treating the text as a fragmentation of the environment that becomes immobile with circumstances embedded in the Santhal lifestyle. The preservation of a settled landscape renders 'fleeing' impossible and the indigenous population endures a fermenting suffocation, 'unsettled' with the change of domesticity. This paper aims to travel with the narrator, grafting a constellation of this unprecedented derogation of development and adapting the reflective narratives into a memorial landscape of its own.

Keywords: Adivasi, Indigene, Santhal, Tribal history, World Commons, Environmental Protection, Development Politics

1. Introduction

"Our world and our lives are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity" - Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (1997)

It is imperative to recognize the category of identity as a self-knowledge that is seldom separable from the need to be known by others in certain radical ways. The belongingness of an individual within a communitarian setting is not bereft of an essentialized or aggrandized axis, typically leaning on the 'group-ist' tendencies of caste, clan, religion, language, and region, engineered by deep factions or antagonistic histories. For certain sections like Adivasis, it is an assault of powerful techno-economic forces and reformist social movements that formulated a semantic location for their existentialist milieu. According to Arvind K Mishra, a researcher at ICSSR, psychological research proclaimed that no conglomerate study on the 'peripheral presence' of an identity as the route to empirical associations is a journey from the individual to the collective/social affairs (Mishra, 54). This priority constructs a meaning specific to the cultural attribute that maintains a contradiction between 'roles and role-sets' (Merton, 6). Castells divides this notion into three origins catering to identity formation, namely: Legitimizing Identity- Dominant institutions with rational actors; Resisting identity- Devalued positions that are stigmatized, dominated, and politically fecund (for opposition); Project identity- The transformational wing that acts on the basis of dispositions redefined by the cultural materials available to the group (Castells, 8). The resisting and projecting identities are conspicuously manufactured due to the paramountcy of the British regime. It forebears the consolidation of a movement that effectively rebels against the naivete of the intelligentsia.

The knowledge system acquired from the tribals was based on lived experience. The word Adivasi designates two indigenous words, namely 'Adi' (ancient) and 'Vasi' (dwellers). Their local complexities have been circumscribed into a monolithic system, even though their cultural footprint has been extensively dedicated to a holistic worldview. Ranajit Guha writes in *Dominance Without Hegemony* (1997) that the Board of Revenue Records of the 1770s and 1780s showcase the sentiment 'anticipated by East India Company's administrators in their desperation to make up for the hurt they felt on being denied access to a body of indigenous knowledge they believed they had a right to use as 'official intelligence'' (Guha, 162). The mannerism was twofold. Firstly, there was widespread guilt on the failure of attaining the convergences, ritual procedures, anecdotes and annals into a history. The tribal people were denied the right of expression, but dipped their past into a diachronic flow. Secondly, the inaccessibility was blamed into a nativity of cunning, deceptive and secretive defeat.

2. Who are the Adivasis? Identity and Dilemma

The Adivasis can be referred to as a homogenous group of tribal people residing in the Indian subcontinent, first coined in the 1930s to give a political identity to their indigenous origin. Although it is commonly used for Bangladeshi Chakmas, Nepali Khasas and Sri Lankan Veddas, the Constitution of India has opted for a special status for the community under the aegis of the Scheduled Tribes or Janjati. Prior to Indo-Aryans as well as the Dravidians, the Adivasi community was prevalent in areas like Telengana, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal. Their ancestry can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization, where they survived as hunter-gatherers. For instance, the Mundas were found to be South-East Asian migrants, traced around 3000-4000 years ago. Although India ratified the International Labour Organization Convention 107 on Indigenous and Tribal People of the United Nations (1957), the Government refused to sign the ILO Convention 169 (1989). Self-designated as the autochthonous inhabitants of the forests, the term got juridical recognition by Justice Markandey Katju in 2011 judgement.

The Adivasis have been repeatedly demanding an internal reservation that would grant them special rights, especially after a million were threatened to be evicted by the Supreme Court in a hearing held on February 13, 2019. The trampling of the dignity and autonomy of the Adivasis was an inherent move by the State that needs to be rectified if the victims of land alienation and displacement are to be restored/ rehabilitated in their homeland. The Adivasi areas are considered to be the topmost spots that attract tycoons, wherein a number of steel companies and industrial-power projects have been ideated. The plundering of the forests and usage of harmful radioactive materials violate the fundamental way of living for an Adivasi. The 53rd National Sample Survey has reported that the percentage of India's rural poor has exorbitantly increased from 35 to 38.5 % in a span of just 6 years, between 1991-97. The issue of the tribals plays a major role in the same.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's book is a layered documentation of the innate characteristics of humanity in terms of exploiting the underprivileged and the stigmatized. It deals with sensitive issues like abuse, human trafficking, prostitution, witch-hunting as well as the confrontation between the powerful and the powerless. According to an interview by the author in *The Hindu* on 2nd December, 2016, the book 'is not political in the electoral sense' but touches on sociopolitical themes throughout. Embedded with Santhali words like 'pitha', 'jowan', 'mathabhangi' and 'gamcha', the author manages to bring over the colloquial sentiments, re-attiring them into destructive glossaries. The depiction of the struggle holds true in all revolting/dissenting contexts as and when the society needs to be sensitized, for art can never claim to be chaste.

The cultural dilemma is entailed by the lack of implementation of social justice measures, especially those pertaining to land rights after the proclamation of the 'Scheduled Tribes And Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. The earliest evidence of the land revenue arrangement is found in Vijaywada (Krishna district), Visakhapatnam. Baken writes in the 1840s about the high-caste groups in each village who 'had the exclusive right to the possession and yield of the soil, in return for paying taxes' (Baken, 121). In Chhotanagpur and Santhal Parganas, the ethnic-cum-cultural pluralism has been incorrectly integrated into a faulty system. The locally influential Muttadars have displaced the native community with the help of constitutional mandates, extending the common loophole of industrialization and instantaneous beneficence. As shown by the cultural theorist Patrik Oskarrson, nominal tribal landholdings have completely eradicated the cooperative collective of regulatory measures (31). The 'benami' titles, even though prohibited, instigate long-standing rebellions with no possible resolution. As Sanjukta Das Gupta elaborates, different communities like Hos, Bhuiyas, Bhumijes, Kherias, Paharias, Lodhs, and Savarias were all involved in a constant flux of migratory practices. Since the feudalistic systems of the 8th Century CE, the densely-forested area was acquired as a frontier zone. Even the Mughals did not construct a formal fiscal network within the area (due to low agricultural productivity). The dwellers of Chhotanagpur existed as a quasi-independent kingdom, paying tribute to the Mughals. It was only after the advent of the Hinduized peasantry that service tenures were granted and intermediary landlords began to be created (Dasgupta, 46).

3. Tribals and Hegemony of Nation-State

Antonio Gramsci writes in his 'Prison Notebooks' (1930-32) that the traits of individuals as a 'crystalized social category' which thinks of itself as 'the continuation of an uninterrupted history that places it above the struggles of groups and not as an expression of a dialectic process... is precisely that of reattaching itself, in the ideological

sphere to a prior category of individuals... by means of a common conceptual terminology” (332). The struggle of the Adivasis reminds one of Lord Curzon’s speech in the House of Lords, dated September 27, 1909. It is what manipulates the knowledge of subject races towards a goal of familiarity and a mockery of what was known as the ‘Genius of the East’ (Marcus du Sautoy, *The Story of Maths*). As Edward Said reiterated, the general administration exploiting the dialectics of knowledge was pushed to acquire power over the aboriginals, the ‘Adi’ (oldest) inhabitants of the nation (Bhukya 103). There was a widespread revolt against the colonial expansion into ‘Reserved’ forest lands, beginning with the Pahariya Sirdars in Bihar (1778), Assam Adivasi’s revolt (1816-24), and Santhal Revolt (1855). The approach towards such an Adivasi anthropology was deeply castigated into the following knowledge umbrellas, namely: Darvian or Official anthropology; Missionary anthropology; Romantic anthropology; Hindu nationalist anthropology (20th Century). Darvian anthropology castigates the etymological basis of a structure in an instant photographic image. It tries to maneuver mechanical historical materialism into a determined and permanent reflection of a leading group. The religious association of Missionary anthropology tries to bring about organizational primacy outside the realm of the Church. It stems from a politico-economic fiction that insists on the Procession of the Holy Spirit (right from Byzantium and Rome) to free the people. Romantic anthropology gives rise to the modern bourgeois systematization of humankind, whereas the Hindu nationalist anthropology, prevalent since the last few years, tried to build up on a forcible suppression of any opposition or falsifiability of historical evidence. Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak in *Who Sings The Nation-State?: Language, Politics and Belonging* (2007), ask whether the nation-state establishes a firm ground by maligning its minorities or does it presume a border ‘aligning its territory with the assertion of nationality’ (33). The ‘civilizing mission’ was evidently branding many tribes as ‘criminal’. Walter Elliot, a European, noting his experiences through an Anglican missionary journal called “Church Missionary Intelligencer” (1861), assimilated tribes like Kallars, Marvars, and Meriahs of Ganjam district in Odisha to be barbaric, performing human sacrifices as a hereditary profession and supposedly encouraging dacoits as a family profession, revered by many. Influenced by the dominant Hindu castes, the marriage ceremonies of Savara tribes were often considered similar to the wedding of Lord Krishna with Rukmini. Also known as Sora, or Saora, these tribes reside mainly in the states of Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh and generally speak the Oriya language. The Savara boy was supposed to go to a girl’s house and plunge an arrow on her thatched roof. When the girl went to the river to fetch water, he would capture and bring her into the forest, after which he would marry her. The masculine gestures are quite similar to the Hindu mythological realm and Krishna’s influence is clear in this tribe’s praxis. Lambadas in South India were benumbed of originality when they were coerced to include the Brahminical Saptapadi as a binding element for unions. Saptapadi means ‘seven feet’. The literal connotation designates the pair of grain-grinding pestles that were to be covered seven times on foot by the groom and his bride. This ritual has its roots in essential Hindu ceremonies.

4. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and The Adivasi Question

The *Adivasi Will Not Dance* is a book of short stories by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, who himself belongs to the Santhal Community. It is to be noted that this book has been banned by the Government of Jharkhand claiming that it is “unfriendly to the honesty and goodness of Santhal ladies” (see Sujit Prasad’s interview). The author brought the readers face-to-face with the harsh realities of Santhals highlighting their battle which started with the Santhal Rebellion of 1855 against the British and the imposed Zamindari system, directly related to the transfer of land. He discovered that Santhals had the possibility of being attacked by the status quo (musclemen and powerful dignitaries in the village) due to the lack of unity within the tribe. The characters of the stories are Santhali by origin. They are set in Chhota Nagpur where the tales portray the agrarian lifestyle of the tribe with each narrative having a central human character within it. As mentioned by the author, the lack of integration and ignorance of their own language system are the reasons for why Santhals do not have a strong perception of their identity. Sowvendra Shekhar indicates that they always end up being subordinates. And for him being a Santhali was largely the precursor and motivation to write the book that centers around the lifestyle and adversities of his community.

The egalitarian values of the tribals are celebrated for their indigenous values but sold to the world in an ethnocentric manner. Ajay Skaria illustrated in his book *Writing, Orality and Power in the Dangs, Western India, 1800-1920* (1996) that the subalterns have taken up the practice of writing as a weapon. Otherwise, the idea of having illiterate communities develop a knack for writing was unprecedented and considered magical by many scholars. The Adivasi ‘free-hunter’ was similarly dismembered from his native work and teamed with the British trophy-hunters, compelled to forget the elementary task to celebrate the wild. G S Ghurye wrote in *The Aboriginal- So Called - And Their Future* (1944) that the Adivasis were to be designated the position of caste-Hindus only due to their ritualistic actions, eg, worshiping Hindu Gods, giving birth on Indian soil and speaking common regional languages. The prevalence of orality and subsequent primitive, participatory, and redundant literary spheres were considered appropriate for the Adivasis, thus depriving them of assertive skills. Srinivas in *Religions and Society Among the Coorgs* (1952) talked about the inclination towards the praxis of Sanskritization, defining it in negative terms - “Sanskritization is a process by which ‘low’ Hindu-castes, or tribal or other, changes its customs, ritual ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, a ‘twice-born’ caste” (Srinivas, 481).

5. Change Towards Development or Destruction?

Mrinal Miri in "Continuity and Change in Tribal Society" (1993) and Dev Nathan's "From Tribe to Caste" (1997) concentrated on the transmutation of tribes to caste. The violence that is visible in this venture puts a direct threat of extinction to the native identity of any tribal community. The Telangana peasant struggle, Naxalite armistice and the secession of Jharkhandis in the formation of a new state - all play a major role in the development of this integrative process. In order to extract the forest resources, the British Government in the 19th century made a revenue-centric mindset and gradually began with the destruction of forest ecology which caused a massive devastation. By killing large numbers of flora and fauna and by evicting tribals from the forest, the holistic nature was completely shattered and done away with. Several tribes, such as the Nagas, tribes of Bastar, the Kuki, and the Santhals started numerous rebellions against the British.

Even during May' 2016, there was a violent breakdown and widespread protests after the Government of Jharkhand issued the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act 1908 (Amendment) Ordinance and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act 1949 (Amendment) Ordinance. Moreover, the implementation of the Indian Forest Act in 1927 marked another hindrance to the members of tribal groups. For the tribal communities living in the forests in India, no particular system of settlement rights was formulated in this act which ultimately stopped the practice of hunting and agriculture which is a native practice for them since time immemorial. The 200 years of struggle took over the garrulous world of Otherization into a fold of righteousness and self-awareness. Literate and dogmatic plots have circumscribed a plethora of non-Adivasi clans into the resistance narrative. 'Adivasi Swasathan' calls for "Humara Gaon, Humara Raj", first against the Dikus (tribal rivals) and then the colonial regime, leading to the constitutional rights (Louis 4090). In Jharkhand alone, there are 60 lakh tribals (27.67%) divided into 30 subgroups. In 18 districts, they cover over 70% of the population and Santhals constitute the biggest strength that reaches nearly 35.47% of all tribes. In terms of literacy, Kharias has emerged as the most educated with 24.86 %, according to the reports covering the last 23 years (Louis 4087). The Baigas are still at an obscure level with 4.22% literacy. Quite conspicuously, the former are the most socially mobile, comparatively diverse, and explored by the world.

6. How Jharkhand Represents Resistance Literature

Jharkhand comes from the combination of the words, 'Jhar' (Bush or forestland) and 'khand' (tract or piece of land). The people composing this name, however, vary across classes and clans. Andamans and Assam witness a huge flux of migrants that increase the differences in the historical evolution of the mobile tribes. The preservative factors have been linked to organizations like Adivasi Mahasabha (1938) and Chhotanagpur Unnati Samaj (1915). KS Singh illustrated the Utopianism of Christian appropriation by focusing on the narrative of "the Golden Age". It is often blamed on the coal mafias, Marwari (Baniya traders), and National Corporations like Tata who have been the main plunderers within the sacred land. Prakash Louis writes in *Marginalisation of Tribals* (2000) that dialogues had been started with backward caste groups, Dalits, and Muslims so that Jharkhandi consisted of an identity establishing itself as the "land of the destitutes".

With the creation of the East India Company in 1771, the upper-Caste Hindus had also made it a major investment to uproot the natives and opt for a change in the ownership of forest produce. Businesses, educational institutions, courts, and kachhari are the fruits of their initiatives. The nomenclature of such a way of life is 'development-induced displacement'. There have been hugely degrading steps taken against the tribals by the Authorities, like a field firing range that was proposed in Netarhat, a region in Palamu, Jharkhand. The 1950s also saw a major upsurge called 'Jal, Jangal, Zamin' claiming land back for the 'jungles' or the forest dwellers. Certain reactionary factions emerged out of it like Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams or Birsa Seva Sadans. Birsa, Sidhu and Kanhu have been instrumental in certain revolts like Chero Uprising or Bhumij Revolt. Ironically, it's interesting to note that Kar Sevaks for the 1996 demolition of the Babri Masjid have been employed from the most dilapidated Palamu district in Jharkhand.

In the story, Shekhar gives us a glimpse of the abominable practice of regarding the tribal people as a source of entertainment and celebration. The hardship is unquestionable, but the inhumanity of the spectators can rarely be surpassed. He writes in the guise of an elder performer - "And because I had some fame in the past, I am still invited to perform at public functions in Pakur and Dumka and Ranchi. But I keep putting together new troupes, though the members constantly change. I have a dancer today, tomorrow he is growing potatoes for some Bengali Zamindar in Bardhaman" (119). While performing for the President, the Adivasi rebukes in anger. He mocks the pomp and the show that is superficial in its entirety. Shekhar writes, "The 'Bharat Mahaan' man announced the welcome dance, and my troupe was ushered into the open space before the stage. We entered with our tamak, tumdak, tiriyo and banam. The President seemed impressed. The businessmen looked bored" (124).

The story gives us a clear representation of the life cycle of the Santhals, which is completely based on natural resources and their accumulation. One fails to question their coexistence with nature. In the name of development, Britishers carried out violent acquisition of Santhal lands and also their dispossession and displacement from their own clan-spaces. This led to rebellions by Santhal leaders against the Britishers with an aim to form a humane and exploitation-free Jharkhand. The Adivasi people were permitted to exercise

ownership rights over the natural resources as they used to. Eviction of Santhals just for the sake of progression has caused serious problems like a decrease in the life expectancy rate of the local people, decreasing rate of per capita income, etc. Thus, the text starts with lamentation: "They pinned me to the ground. They did not let me speak, they did not let me protest., and they did not even let me raise my head and look at my fellow musicians and dancers as they were being beaten up by the police. All I could hear were their cries for mercy" (114).

7. Constitutional Rights, Criminalization & Survival

An addition to this context would be the Annual Report 2004-2005 released by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. It mentions 86,291 Adivasi land alienation cases involving 10,48,93 acres of land (with Jharkhand topping the list). In a similar manner, poor implementation of the constitutional rights, the provisions for the Sixth Scheduled Areas, and the Extension of the Panchayat Act in 1996 were also witnessed in the state. The tribal institution of 'Santhals' started acting aggressively in order to sacrifice their lives just to protect their own land rather than giving it away to alien forces for carrying out developmental projects which were of no help to the native inhabitants. The story's character, Mangal Murmu is bereft of an identity that he can call his own. It strikes him, "I am a musician. No, wait... I am a farmer. Or... was a farmer... Only a few of us still have farmland; most of it has been acquired by the mining company" (115). This enmity has penetrated such a deep ground that they have been turned into outlaws in their own land - "Kiristan missionary schools ... constantly asked to stop worshipping our Bonga-Buru and start revering Jisu-Mariam. If our children refuse, the sisters and the fathers tell our boys that their Santhal names - Hopna, Som, Singrai - are not good enough" (116).

It has rather posed extensive threats to the marginalized section. Even in some cases, the hazardous situations of the environment threatened the existence of the communities that were quite dependable on the uses of natural resources. They, in fact, have preserved them for centuries. It is true that in order to carry out certain developmental projects in Jharkhand the Santhal lands were evacuated, but the fact remains that it still ranks poorly in comparison to the economic as well as State reports and National social indicators. Fourteen Lok Sabha constituencies had already been steady by the year 2000. As soon as Jharkhand was made known as a separate state in the month of August, it was the Chhotanagpur Chamber of Commerce that held a meeting at Ranchi. The future of the state was decided immediately and went into a prolonged period of industrialization soon after. The neoliberal economy induced a recession and enabled the mega-cities to employ more domestic workers. Simultaneously, the Asiatic Society of Bengal released a document on Santhal medicine as early as 1925. It was also noted by Louis that small tribes like Paharias have been expiring in large numbers despite the use of ancient medicines to diseases like cerebral malaria which still has no resolution in remote zones. These terrible atrocities add to the irony when the Adivasis are recognised for their dance - "First, all members of my troupe are now old. Some have even died. Many have migrated, or migrate seasonally. The ones who remain hum songs, sing to each other, but a stage performance? No, not again. Like me, even they are tired, disillusioned... Yet, what has our art given us? Displacement, tuberculosis" (119).

8. Conclusion

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's story *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015), arrives at a time when 'materialism' is obscured through over-consumption and 'immanence' rejected because of its narrow historical-cultural content. The Adivasi is not part of any conceptual parameter, which asks questions with typical philosophical dilettantism. On the contrary, they constitute a historical sense that creates a dilemma in belonging. Gramsci proclaimed that synthetic explosions can and do occur, but if you look closely, they appear as more destructive than constructive. (Gramsci, 346). The identity of the Adivasis is not autochthonous but spontaneous. The struggles that they have endured with direct confrontation, especially with abstract obstructions like colonial knowledge (as an instrument of power), go on to show the unprecedented scale of internal dilemma.

Land acquisition policy in the disguise of numerous developmental projects creates nothing but deprivations for the masses man, significantly separated from their resources in which the concern remains not only confined to their livelihoods but to their cultural dimensions, myths, ethics, and most importantly, their communitarian sentiments. Being the products of the same soil, we must understand that their emotions cannot be compensated at any cost. Hence, the story ends with a note of direct appeal to the President. The Adivasis are not quiet but they speak up. Even if the President is deemed to be the most important person in the ceremony, the Adivasis do not stop informing us about their woe- "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 the Adivasi... And how can the Adivasis dance and be happy? We Adivasis will not dance" (125).

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Statements and Declarations:

We hereby declare that:

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