"Reading Subaltern Voice in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*"

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ABSTRACT

Subaltern Studies form a part of postcolonial theory in literature and its application is indeed very useful in the study of certain texts (for example – Dalit Literature), obviouly not excluding the Indian English Literature. Several instances in the literary tradition of India clearly indicate that whenever the feeble voice of the margins have grown loud and strong enough to be heard at the centre, the centre is left with no other option but to 'listen'. One such text that represents this phenomenon in the contemporary times is Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar recipient Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's The Adivasi Will Not Dance (2015). Set in the Pakur district of Jharkhand, the book is a voice steeped in the soil of its origin—the land of Santhals—and refreshing in its clear visualisations of his people. Shekhar's stories are powerful narratives of multiple forms of violence towards Advasis: dispossession from land and helplessness against the might of mining companies; the venality of politicians; exploitation as well as subjugation of women and the like. They speak of Adivasis being treated as heritage-toys who perform for tourists to show the 'rich' diversity of India, but are meant to forever stay as museum pieces, unable to access good education and health.

[Key Terms : subaltern; gender exploitation; voice.]

There is no denying the fact that Subaltern School has contributed a lot in the study of history, economics and social sciences in the Third World countries towards the end of the twentieth century. Subaltern Studies form a part of postcolonial theory in literature and its application is indeed very useful in the study of certain texts (for example – Dalit Literature). Incidently, the term "subaltern" stands for 'of inferior rank' or status. Subordinate, hence, of rank, power, authority and action. In other words, it refers to the subordination of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture. In general, subaltern classes include peasants, workers and other groups who have been denied access to 'hegemonic' power. The term was popularized by the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s and 1930s as a surrogate for the term "proletarian class" in order to counter Fascism. As he uses it, the term refers to the non-elite classes, including but not restricted to the

proletariat. In the early 1980s, a small group of Marxist scholars influenced by Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* introduced "subaltern" as a new analytic category within modern Indian historiography.

In her interview with Steve Paulson, Spivak says that subaltern means

It refers to those who don't give orders; they only receive orders. That comes from Antonio Gramsci, who made the word current. He was looking at people who were not in fact working-class folks or victims of capitalism. He was looking at people who were outside of that logic because he was himself from Sardinia, which was outside of the High Italy of the north. But "subaltern" also means those who do not have access to the structures of citizenship. I'm now talking about India today, where the largest sector of the electorate is the rural landless illiterate. They may vote but they have no access to the structures of citizenship. So that's a subaltern. (Paulson July 29, 2016)

Spivak in her most outstanding essay titled, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" wrote :

The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a pious. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribe task which she must not disown with a flourish. (Spivak 308)

She cited the examples of widows burnt at the pyre of the husband in her essy. She emphasized the condition of women who are doubly oppressed–firstly by patriarchy and secondly by colonialism. Leela Gandhi says;

By 'Subaltern' Spivak meant the oppressed subject, the members of Antonio Gramsci's Subaltern Classes or more generally those of inferior rank and her question followed on the work began in the early 1980s by a collection of individuals now known as Subaltern Studies group. ''The stated objective of this group was to promote a systematic and informed discussion of Subaltern themes in the field of South Asian Studies. Further they described their project as an attempt to study the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in term of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way". Fully alert to the complex ramification arising from the composition of subordination, the Subaltern studies group sketched out its wide ranging concern both with the visible 'history, politics, economics and sociology of subalternity' and with the occluded "attitudes, ideologies and belief systems- in short, the cultural informing that condition." In other words, Subaltern studies defined itself as an attempt to allow people finally to speak within the jealous pages

of elitist historiography and in so doing, to speak for, or

to sound the muted voices of, the truly oppressed. (Gandhi 1-2)

Subaltern Studies began as a revisionist historiography of peasant movements in colonial India. The Subaltern Studies Group was formed in 1979–80 under the tutelage of historian Ranajit Guha at the University of Sussex in England. In the late 1980s Guha moved to the Australian National University and the project started a new life; since then, a series of 12 edited volumes have been published by the group (Amin and Bhadra 222 - 225). The group consisted of heterodox historians of South Asia, like Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, and Gyanendra Pandey, who were critical of the nature of the historiography prevalent at that time because of its elitist biases and "bourgeois-nationalist" and "colonial" mode of history writing. Vinay Bhal in his essay *"Relevance (or Irrelevance) of Subaltern Studies in Reading Subaltern Studies"* edited by David Ludden observes:

Members of Subaltern Studies group felt that although Marxist historians produced impressive and pioneering studies, their claim to represent the history of the masses remained debatable. Their main thesis is that colonialist, nationalist and Marxist interpretations of Indian History had robbed the common people of their agency. The Subaltern Studies collectively thus announced a new approach to restore history to the subordinated in order to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much academic work in South Asian Studies. The subaltern's agency was restored by theorising that the elite in India played a dominant role and not simply a hegemoneous one. Thus, with the logic of this theory the subaltern were made into autonomous historical actors who then seemingly acted on their own since they were not to be led by the elites. (Bhal 361)

The colonialist school, led by Anil Seal and his coterie at Cambridge University, was a major trend in history writing by the 1960s and 1970s. They claimed that the Indian national struggle for independence was the work of a few elites, who were trained in Western educational institutions set up by the British in India. According to them, nationalist politics was led by elites who collaborated with the British to ensure the power of the bourgeoisie in a narrow political economic theory of "interests" as against the role of "ideas" in history. They believed that the elites mobilized the underclasses along the lines of narrow communal and caste interests, in a "vertical line" of patron-client relationships (Chakrabarty 2002). The scholars, led by Ranajit Guha, were dissatisfied with the interpretations of India's nationalist movement, which had long neglected "the politics of the people", or the subaltern classes, in the making of the Indian nation. Guha argued that the vast historiography of the Freedom Movement of the nineteenth and twentieth century was "un-historical",

"blinkered", and "one-sided" because it primarily focused on the domain of elite politics while silencing and refusing to interpret subaltern pasts. He further explained that elitist historiography was narrow and partial as a direct consequence of a commitment by scholars to a particular "class outlook" which privileged the ideas, activities, and politics of the British colonizers and dominant groups in Indian society. Guha founded the Subaltern Studies project with the specific aim of providing a corrective to the historiography by "combating elitism" in academic research and writings. (Guha 3)

In his 'Preface' to the first volume of Subaltern Studies, Ranajit Guha, who was the founding spirit and editor of the first six volumes of the series, suggested that there were two political domains: that of the elite and that of 'the people', the subaltern domain. This latter domain was autonomous insofar as 'it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend upon the latter' (Guha). It had its modes of operation, which were themselves a result of the subaltern groups having their own consciousness and forms of behaviour. In order to recover the agency of subaltern groups and their contribution to the politics of colonial India, and their role in its decolonization, the task for historians was to identify moments when the subaltern consciousness could be witnessed in action and, through a 'thick description' of such events, inscribe the subaltern as a political actor within a narrative that was not necessarily commensurable with elite narratives of colonialism and nationalism. "Subaltern Studies was", according to Peter Childs and Roger Fowler, "therefore, an attempt to write history from below" (Childs and Fowler 230).

Guha explained that the term "subaltern" would be used by the authors in the series as a "general attribute of subordination in South Asian society". However, Guha was not simply interested in examining questions of subordination in a classical Marxist framework defined by the logic of capital. Instead, he argued that the subaltern condition could be based on caste, age, gender, office, or any other way, including, but not limited to class. Guha further stated that he was centrally interested in interpreting the culture that informed subalternity, while also addressing concerns about history, politics, economics, and sociology. Needless to say, this was a departure from Gramsci's own writings on the subaltern classes in his *"Notes on Italian History"*, which, according to Guha, had directly influenced the founding of his project. Gramsci had used "subaltern" in his writings as a substitute for "proletariat" while in prison in the 1930s to avoid government censors who wanted to prevent Gramsci's political writings from entering the public sphere. But Guha and his collaborators were not

interested in simply applying Gramsci's own definition of the term subaltern or his interpretations of subaltern history within their own scholarly work (David 155 -157).

Postcolonial formations lead to the spaces of cultural consumption where it is open to scrutiny way beyond the polemical and political correctness of an individual or a State. Several instances in the literary tradition of India clearly indicate that whenever the feeble voice of the margins have grown loud and strong enough to be heard at the centre, the centre is left with no other option but to 'listen'. One such text that represents this phenomenon in the contemporary times is Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar recipient Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015). A collection of ten short stories dealing with Adivasis from Jharkhand, referred as Santhals, the book is an insightful representation of Santhali life and culture. The book may be seen as a pioneering text in the realm of Indian Writing in English, not just in terms of its engagement with the subjugation of Adivasis, but also in terms of its representation of a subaltern Adivasi consciousness which is remarkably different from those that have so far been fashioned by urban, middleclass, metropolitan or diasporic authors.

Spivak, through her cultural and critical theories, tried to challenge the legacy of colonialism. She refused to admit the notion that the Western World is having an upper hand over the Third World as it is more purified from the grossness of acute barbarism. Her critical discourse raises the issues of marginal subjects such as the place of the subaltern women in the society and their empowerment. Though the people could surpass the colonial rule, they are not actually free from its influences and power structures. Morton says:

> The social, political and economic structures that were established during colonial rule continued to inflect the cultural, political and economic life of Post-colonial nation states ranging from Ireland to Algeria; from India to Pakistan and Jamaica to Mexico. (Morton Pp. 1)

The story entitled "November is the Month of Migrations" deals with such a condition of women. It is a brief-but-powerful tale of power and powerlessness. It tells of a penurious Santhal family on its annual work-related migration from Jharkhand to West Bengal. Epitomised through a 20-year-old girl, Talamai who is going to Bardhaman district of West Bengal with her family to plant rice and other crops in farms owned by zamindars of Bardhaman depicts the extremes that poverty can lead to. The family is waiting for a train to take them away

from their local misery to a distant one. Talamai, one of the daughters, is a subaltern figure *sui generis*. She does not have, like her family, the least education :

> ...despite the promises of education the missionaries made, Talamai's parents never got to see the inside of a school and neither did she. They either gathered coal or worked in the farms of Bardhaman. (Shekhar Pp. 40)

She is beckoned by a man – a non-Santhal policeman – who holds "two pieces of cold bread pakora and a fifty-rupee note" (Shekhar Pp. 42). Talamai is hungry and her family has no food to offer. The policeman offers food in exchange for sex. Talamai endures the encounter as she has earlier learned to do. Understandably, Spivak's theory of subalternity is still relevant as people suffer in the name of gender, class and creed. When Talamai follows the policeman into a dark paved space, takes off her "lungi and saya", and at a point screams because of the bite of the man on her nipples, the policeman admonishes :

> 'Saali, you Santhal women are made for this only... 'Don't scream,' the man pants.
> 'Don't speak a word'. (Shekhar Pp. 41)

She eats the pakodas, tucks away a Rs 50 note that the policeman gives her and returns to join her family: a routine affair conditioned by the circumstances of power and powerlessness.

"Merely a Whore" traverses through the bestial terrain of prostitution. The story is set in "The buzzing red-light district of Lakkhipur, a coal-mining town..."(Shekhar Pp.145). Hansda takes his readers, almost by the scruff of the neck through the seedy, bestial world of prostitution in the mining towns of Jharkhand: here "...women, too, eat out of their sweat and labour. Only, it is mixed with the semen and the sweat of men"(Shekhar Pp. 144). Sona, the protagonist is the most coveted prostitute who has "... learnt early and honed to perfection ---- the art of making a man happy, the art of satisfying a customer" (Shekhar Pp. 145). She is working under the guardianship of Jharna-di, once a zamindaar mistress and a dancer but now turned to brothel owner who reaps profit by pimping girls like Sona or Tina. But she is always haunted by a crucial question of their life. As a caretaker of the prostitutes, she is 'conscious' of the life she is living: '' 'Even we will end up like this,' Jharna-di had sighed. 'All of us will. This life will not let us escape. All we can ensure is that we do not end up living like this'

" (Shekhar Pp. 145). Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay in *Subaltern Studies IV* points out subaltern people's basic concern with 'the thorny question of 'consciousness' and by identifying subalternity as 'the composite culture of resistance to and acceptance of domination and hierarchy' (Chakraborty 2000). What is more is that Hansda here offers his readers graphic content of the life of the subaltern girls like Sona or Tina. Nirmal, a regular visitor to Sona, was vehemently angry to her for her demand of a kiss in the lip: " Saali ! ... you want me to kiss on your lips? Speak a few kind words and they forget their place. Rendi!" (Shekhar Pp. 166). She is brutally used and has been made a victim of violent orgasm. The author says, "She felt like crying, but the last time she had cried was years ago (Shekhar Pp. 166). Its graphic content reminds one of the poetry of the late Mumbai based Dalit poet, Nam Deo Dhasal (exquisitely translated into English by the late Dilip Chitre). He knows he is depicting a terrible terrain, made worse by the apathy of the powers that be and the ignorance of the average Indian English reader.

The longer title story ''The Adivasi Will Not Dance'' is a moving tale about why 60-year old Mangal Murmu, who has trained dance troupes for years but refuses to sing and dance for a high profile government function. When the indigent Murmu first receives an invitation to perform, he is pleased. He soon learns that the occasion is the inauguration of construction activity for a privately funded thermal power plant by the President of India. Hansda writes that a major inspiration for this short story came to the writer in 2013 when President Pranab Mukherjee was visiting Jharkhand to inaugurate an ambitious thermal plant project which also implied that Adivasis will be displaced from their lands making them 'homeless'. The land on which the plant is to be built is part of a village whose residents have been evicted through official orders. Murmu's daughter Mugli and her family is part of the evictee group and has been forced to move to her father's house. ''You are making us Santhal's dance in Pakur'', Mangal Murmu wants to say to the officials who are organising the ceremony, ''and you are displacing Santhals from their villages in Godda. Isn't your VIP going to see that?....Doesn't your VIP read the papers or watch news on TV?'' (Shekhar Pp. 183). "If coal merchants have taken a part of our lands, the other part", the hapless Mangal Murmu says, "has been taken over by stone merchants, all Diku – Marwari, Sindhi, Mandal, Bhagat, Muslim. They turn our land upside down, inside out, with their heavy machines. They sell the stones they mine from our earth in faraway places—Dilli, Noida, Punjab" (Shekhar Pp.172). Mangal Murmu continues: "What do we Santhals get in return? Tatters to wear. Barely enough food. Such diseases that we can't breathe properly. We cough blood and forever remain bare bones" (Shekhar Pp.172). And this is why, Mangal

Murmu – addressing the president – announces such words that raise some deep-seated questions validating the growing industrialisation at the cost of the tribals, making the reader ponder over the booming economy:

> 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. These men sitting beside you have told you that this power plant will change our fortunes, but these same men have forced us out of our homes and villages. 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? Unless we are given back our homes and land, we will not sing and dance. We Adivasis will not dance. The Adivasi will not – (Shekhar Pp. 187)

Hansda's book has been banned by the Jharkhand government on the grounds that it is offensive to the dignity of Santhal women. Some also allege that it is pornographic. The stories, of Hansda, however, mainly depict the lives of Santhals from the Jharkhand region, constantly struggling to live their life with dignity in this mineral-rich land where corporate takeovers and development anthem is trending. The characters in the collection may/may not be real but the issues, the violence and the treatment that he depicts in his fiction is surely relevant to our times as the Ideologies of State has the potential to be major threat to the democratic and diverse fabric of the Indian society. In nutshell, these distinctive stories attempt towards sensitizing the society regarding various issues in society and especially the ones with the Subaltern Santhals.

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