

The Realistic Picture of the Tribals in *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*: Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

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Abstract:

This paper presents before the literary world a review kind of investigation in the short stories 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance' of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. There has always been lack of literary pursuits to explore the different layers of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's stories. Social, economic, educational as well as moral issues of the tribals have been touched by very less number of writers. Tribal India is the 'other world' for sophisticated writers who focus more on intellectuals than dealing with the harsh reality of tribals. Nevertheless, a few Indian English writers have dealt with the theme of Tribal India in their writings. Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971); Kamala Markandaya's *The Cofferdams* (1969); Manohar Malgonkar's *The Princes* (1963); Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* (1993); and Ruskin Bond's short stories are a few examples of work that deals with different aspects of Tribal India. Mahasweta Devi, Kiran Desai, and few more writers have dealt with the life and struggle of the Tribals in their literary works. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is the latest color in the rainbow of tribal literary horizon.

Keywords:

Adivasi, Tribal, Dance, Conflict, Jharkhand, Dalit.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Dalit literature in India has had a extensive presence in the literary horizon but one cannot assert the same about Adivasi literature as it has largely been bound to regional languages. Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam, Orissa, South Indian states have so far contributed a lot in the field of tribal voices in their works. In this connection, a new stalwart from Jharkhand has added new taste in literary food.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a medical officer by profession, is one of the veteran contemporary Indian writers who dared to touch the sensitive topics relating to the down trodden condition of the tribals of Jharkhand in particular and India in general. Though, his very first collection of short stories *The Adivasi will not Dance* published in 2015 earned him fame but he also raised the fire among socio-political critics for his too realistic presentation of the pitiable condition of the fair sex of tribals. In fact, his works proved to be more realistic than a mere fictional work. It was nominated for *The Hindu Literary Prize* in 2016. This book has been translated into Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, and Gujarati, while the Malayalam, Bengali, and Austrian German translations are forthcoming. Not only this but his novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, which won him the *Sahitya Akademi Yuva Purashkar*. The Jharkhand government banned *The Adivasi will not Dance* saying it had shown Santhal women "in a bad light." He was suspended and the government of Jharkhand also asked him to explain his actions.

They Eat Meat!

The communal riot, love for food, migration and with a touch of homesickness is the crux of very first story *They Eat Meat!* It is about a Santhal family who moved to Vadodara, Gujarat in the early 2000's. The undercurrent of communal violence lurks throughout the story as the Soren family is forced to quit eating meat so as to not upset the sentiments and caste purity of their neighbours.

In the story, we hear:- *'Vadodara is a strongly Hindu city,' Mr Rao continued. 'People here believe in purity. I am not too sure what this purity is, but all I know is that people here don't eat non-veg. You know? Meat, fish, chicken, eggs. Nor do they approve of people who eat non-veg'* 1

Later on, as the story moves on, we also see the dual act of the urban and upper strata of society. When we hear Mr Rao say, *'You see, even we used to eat meat and chicken. And eggs. We used to have eggs for breakfast almost daily. My sons, they eat non-veg. But not when they are here. When we decided to settle here- because this place is so neat and tidy- we had to pay a small price. I hope you understand.'* 2

This relinquishment is embellished by the protagonist, Panmuni-jhi's ardent love for the food from her native land. The landlord also advises the Sorens to hide the fact that they are tribals from the rest of the neighbourhood. This just reflects the vagueness of the so call sophisticated society. An outrageous Panmuni-jhi utters, *'How can people dislike those who eat meat? We need haku or sim-jill every Sunday, and eggs nearly every day!'* 3

Mrs Rao surprised Panmuni-jhi by saying, *'Please, Mrs Soren, can I fry an egg in your kitchen? Mr Rao won't let me.'* 4

The interlinking of communal tension, caste and food practices in the story offers a telling commentary on how minority communities in the country have to toe the line to be accepted in different parts of the country. Amid communal tension, we see women power, their caring and daring act to protect the people even if they belong to minority community.

'But if you are your father's sons, you will come for the men. You will not hurt any woman in that house.' And *"Kill us first! We are coming downstairs! Kill us first! Then you go for those women.'* 5

November is for Migration

One of the stories, *November is for Migration*, is in fact a brutal, raw, harsh description of the lives of ordinary Santhals, it tells the story of a Santhal girl Talamai who sells her body for ₹50 and two cold bread pakoras to a Diku, and a jawan of the Railway Protection Force.

'Are you hungry?' the jawan calls out as Talamai rounds the corner. 'You need food?', 'You need money?', 'Will you do some work for me?' 6

Talamai just lies- passive, unthinking, unblinking- as cold as the paved ground she can feel through the thin fabric of the gamcha as still as an inert earthen bowl into which a dark cloud empties itself.

Talamai is given two pieces of cold bread pakora and a fifty-rupee note and walks away. She re-ties her sari and lungi and stuffs the fifty-rupee note into her blouse. She then eats both the bread pakoras before walking back to her troupe.

It's very heart touching as well as aching to see the plight of the Santhal girl. We find ourselves just speechless, motionless being the mere reader. It's about need and hunger, desperation and utter poverty; her plight is a distressing read.

The Adivasi Will Not Dance

The last story of the collection is called *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. It contains the lengthy musings of Mangal Murmu, a musical artist and troupe-master, on the wretched condition of his people after he is beaten up by the police for protesting the state-sponsored theft of Santhal land for a power plant project.

'They pinned me to the ground. They did not let me speak, they did not let me protest, 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. I felt sorry for them. I had failed them. Because what I did, I did on my own. Yet, did I have a choice? Had I only spoken to them about my plan, I am sure they would have stood by me. For they too suffer, the same as I. They would have stood by me, they would have spoken with me and, together, our voices would have rung out loud. They would have travelled out of our Santhal Pargana, out of our Jharkhand, all the way to Dilli and all of Bharat-disom; the world itself would have come to know of our suffering. Then, perhaps, something would have been done for us...7

I only said, "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? 8

His thoughts summarise the various ways in which Adivasis are used and exploited by land grabbers, merchants, missionaries, the media, corporations and the government. The story is inspired by actual incidents in 2013 when Adivasi farmers were arrested for protesting the building of the Jindal Power Plant in Godda, Jharkhand, as then-president Pranab Mukherjee laid the foundation stone.

In fact, the protagonist's thoughts, feelings, emotions are the reality of the pitiable conditions of the tribals in Jharkhand. Mangal Murmu helplessly claims, *'I have no patience anymore. Only anger. So, what was I saying? Yes there are no shouters, no powerful voice among us Santhals. And we Santhals have no money-though we are born on lands under which are buried riches.'* 9

Joyfulness of Santhals can be found in the music, song, dance reflected in the story. *'The troupe, young men and women, they used to bring my songs to life through their dances, through their voices, through the rhythms of the tamak and the tumdak and the trilling of the tiriyo and the banam.'* 10

As someone at the inaugural ceremony shouts "Bharat mahaan!" Murmu deconstructs this deceptive take on patriotism. He ponders, "Which great nation displaces thousands of its people from their homes and livelihoods to produce electricity for cities and factories?...An Adivasi farmer's job is to farm. Which other job should he be made to do? Become a servant in some billionaire's factory built on land that used to belong to that very Adivasi just a week earlier?"

'Johar, Rashtrapati-babu. 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 –' 11

The characters and settings of the stories are mostly from the community of Santhal people of Jharkhand, particularly in relation to Coal mining in India. Prominent themes include the condition of women in a patriarchal society, poverty, middle-class Santhal life, the situation of Adivasi people, organized crime, tensions between traditionalism and modernity, the social damage caused by mining and sex-work.

In fact, through his collection of short stories and novels Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar has brought before us the tribal life, culture, their exploitation without adding spices. His presentations being too realistic make the reader awake from the slumber. Our emotions unifies with the characters of stories and novels of Mr. Hansda. We feel both pain and pleasure with the characters. The dialogues, behavior and thoughts of the characters are so well knit that we, the readers are mingled with them. In a nutshell, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* is one of the best literary works produced so far depicting the plight of the tribals.

Reference:

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