



# Representation of Subaltern Consciousness in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance Stories*

Ms. S. Cynthia Juanita<sup>1</sup> & Dr. I. Ruby Merlin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar (Full-Time), PG and Research Department of English  
Holy Cross College (A), Trichy, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy, Tamil Nadu

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor & Research Supervisor, PG and Research Department of English  
Holy Cross College (A), Trichy, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy, Tamil Nadu



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## Abstract

*Subaltern studies critically examine the histories of non-western societies, challenge elitist narratives, and advocate for the rights of the oppressed. The powerful voices of subaltern studies are Antonio Gramsci, Ranajit Guha, and Gayatri Spivak, who enunciate intellectual resistance against the authoritarian structures. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is an organic intellectual who voices the challenges of Adivasi society and makes those voices heard across the world. His writings focus on the dominating power structures over the proletariats. The stories in The Adivasi Will Not Dance Stories narrate the conditions and challenges of Adivasis in Jharkhand. In addition, the stories narrate the adversities of the Santhals in coal mining lands. The developmental projects pushed Adivasis to the margins, which made them lose their identity. The stories depict the Santhals and non-Santhals belonging to the different socio-economic structures of the society. The short stories "They Eat Meat!", "November is the Month of Migrations", "Desire, Divination, Death", "Merely a Whore", and "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" discuss the challenges undergone by the Santhal Adivasis due to the domination of the power structures. In the article "Representation of Subaltern Consciousness in The Adivasi Will Not Dance Stories," the researcher analyses the miseries faced by the Santhal Adivasis due to the encroachments of their lands, challenges faced by their women, loss of identity, and extreme poverty of the Santhal Adivasis of Jharkhand.*

**Keywords:** subaltern, land, religion, food, gender

## Introduction

Literature is a powerful tool for uncovering the hidden realities of society through different literary approaches, especially the subaltern approach, which focuses on the lives of marginalized groups in the society. Power structures categorise subalterns according to class, race, gender, caste, and culture. Initially referring to low-ranking military personnel, the term now broadly describes those oppressed by dominant power structures. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist philosopher, argued that

subalterns cannot unite until they overcome their marginalization, and their history is intertwined with that of the state and civil society. In his words, subalterns "are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States" (52). Subaltern studies critically examine the histories of non-western societies, challenge elitist narratives, and advocate for the rights of the oppressed. The powerful voices of subaltern studies



are Antonio Gramsci, Ranajit Guha, and Gayatri Spivak, who enunciate intellectual resistance against the authoritarian structures.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is an organic intellectual who voices the challenges of Adivasi society and makes those voices heard across the world. His writings focus on the dominating power structures over the proletariats. Although he is a professional doctor, his writings dissect the excruciating moments experienced by Santhal Adivasis. The stories in *The Adivasi Will Not Dance Stories* narrate the conditions and challenges of Adivasis in Jharkhand. The stories depict the Santhals and non-Santhals belonging to the different socio-economic structures of the society. The short stories “They Eat Meat,” “November is the Month of Migrations,” “Desire, Divination, Death,” “Merely a Whore,” and “The Adivasi Will Not Dance” discuss the challenges undergone by the Santhal Adivasis due to the domination of the power structures.

In the article “Representation of Subaltern Consciousness in *The Adivasi Will Not Dance Stories*,” the researcher analyses the miseries faced by the Santhal Adivasis due to the encroachments of their lands, challenges faced by their women, loss of identity, and extreme poverty of the Santhal Adivasis of Jharkhand.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theories within subaltern studies shed light on the struggles endured by marginalized communities. Guha maintains that traditional Indian historiography disregards the lived experiences of the oppressed, giving precedence to the viewpoints of elites and colonizers. Gramsci observes that the subaltern remain excluded from dominant narratives due to the influence of hegemonic power structures. Spivak extends this argument by asserting that women, in particular, are deprived of agency and voice within patriarchal and colonial systems. Together, these thinkers question and resist the authority of prevailing ideologies that reinforce social and cultural subjugation.

### **Land Encroachments**

Indian society is diverse, consisting of modern and traditional, educated and uneducated, and

tribal and non-tribal people. Tribes are often misrepresented as barbarous and uncivilized and face numerous challenges. The colonized people always address tribal people as “mysterious, superstitious, uncivilised, backward” (Loomba 15). They have gone through deprivation of rights and displacement from their homeland. Corporate greed and developmental projects force them to reside on the margins, leading to the loss of their identity and livelihood. In the central and eastern states of India, marginalization impacts people in many ways because Adivasis are either portrayed as maoists or objects of lust by urban elitists.

In 2013, the Honourable President Pranab Mukherjee visited Barist village in Godda district and laid the foundation for the first thermal power plant of the Jindal Steel and Power Plant project, which created havoc in the lives of Adivasis. Due to this project, many Adivasis lost their lands. The novelist Shekhar mentions this incident in the short story “The Adivasi Will Not Dance” through the musician Mangal Murmu. He and his people faced trauma when their lands were forcefully abducted from them. Santhal Adivasis protested against the abduction of their lands but met with imprisonment. Some politicians and Christian missionaries entered the area with their interests, such as voting and converting them into Christians. Mangal Murmu is disturbed and says “no powerful voice among us Santhals. And we Santhals have no money -though we are born on lands under which are buried riches. We Santhals do not know how to protect our riches. We only know how to escape” (176). All the treasures of Jharkhand were transported to distant places. The corporates who abducted their lands led a happy life, but the natives never received any benefits and their lives were squandered.

The coal mining factories, which polluted the landscape of Jharkhand, caused harm to Santhals, the serene atmosphere of the Santhals’ environment “... become black. The stones, the rocks, the sand, all black. The tiles on the roof of (their) huts have lost their fire- burnt red....children-dark skinned as they are-forever covered with fine black dust” (174). Even the Santhals “can’t breathe properly, (they) cough blood and forever remain bare bones” (172). The entry of corporates into the land of Adivasis



turned them mute, in addition to their worsening health condition.

Mangal Murmu was invited to perform a dance performance in front of the president at the inaugural function of the thermal power plant. Later, he learned that the thermal power plant project had expelled his people from their land. He wonders as follows: "Which great nation displaces thousands of its people from their homes and livelihoods to produce electricity for cities and factories? .... 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?" (185). Tribal people are always prey to capitalistic society in losing their land. The coal mining factories destroyed farming lands due to the scattered coal particles across the region.

Murmu poignantly observes that his people "are fools?...Down the years, down the generations, the Diku have taken advantage of our foolishness"(170). The entire Santhal community has been exploited by the elites, dominant power structures, ideology of corporates, corrupt politicians, and established religious sectors. Shekhar reveals the oppressed condition of his people, who have long been used as scapegoats for developmental projects. Since the time of the British colonization, the Santhal Adivasis have pleaded for land, yet their condition remains unchanged even in the postcolonial era.

Corporate companies such as Bharat Coal Ltd., Eastern Coalfields Ltd., Central Coalfields Ltd., etc., started coal mining companies in Jharkhand, which uprooted more than seventy-eight lakh Adivasis after independence. Few received jobs at companies, but many migrated to other places and worked in menial jobs, aggravating their poverty. Although it is against the law for mining companies to encroach on the land of indigenous people with the help of local authorities, the lands were abducted. In the state of Jharkhand, 24, 15,698 acres of land were abducted illegally for power plants, mining companies, and other developmental projects.

The encroachment and forced migration turned Murmu desperate, and he raised his voice to the president as follows: " '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 all the Adivasi" (187). The marginalization of Santhal Adivasis resulted in the loss of their livelihood. The lands of Adivasis are grabbed for the development of the nation, which has never improved the lives of Adivasis.

### **Religion Marginalization**

The secular nation of India comprises people of all faiths who live together in unity and diversity. It is a socio-cultural system that includes the faith of the commoner. "Sarna" is the name of the religion of Santhals, which includes Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. Santhal Adivasis pray to trees and hills to protect their forest areas, which is called "Sarna Dharma" in Jharkhand. A resolution was passed in the Jharkhand Assembly for the Sarna code on November 11, 2021. The chief minister of Jharkhand has sent a letter to the Prime minister of India to consider Sarna as a religious code for tribal groups. The spiritual faith of other religions is not followed by Santhal Adivasis. In the short story, "The Adivasi Will Not Dance," Mangal Murmu mentions that, "[t]hey, too, want to make us forget our Sarna religion, convey us into Safa-Hor, and swell their numbers to become more valuable votebanks....In the eyes of the Hindus, we Santhals can only either be Kiristan or the almost Safa-Hor. We are losing our Sarna faith, our identities, and our roots. We are becoming people from nowhere" (173). Some misfortunes and obstacles of Santhal Adivasis lead them to lose their identity in the modern world. The mainstream people enforce their religious ideologies on the marginalized sectors.

### **Food Politics**

Food is indispensable for survival in every part of the world and is a part of the culture. Santhal Adivasis rely on available fruits and vegetables in their sustaining surroundings. Moreover, they consume more non-vegetarian foods and less vegetarian foods. They never prefer junk foods; they depend on the availability of the forests. In the short story "They Eat Meat!" Biram Soren, the central government employee, was transferred from Bhubaneswar to Vadodara, Gujarat. The house owner, Mr. Rao,



gently pointed out not to reveal his identity that he is from the Santhal community. He is stressed about not eating non-vegetarian foods. Mr. Rao remarks that “[p]eople 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” (6). Santhal Adivasis are treated as impure people in Vadodara due to the consumption of non-vegetarian foods. Gramsci represents ruling forces or elite people who determine the culture of the remaining part of society. In *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, Chris Baker reflects the idea of Gramsci that “an ‘historical bloc’ of ruling-class factions is said to exercise ‘social authority’ and ‘leadership’ over subordinate classes through the winning of consent. Hegemony involves those processes of meaning-making by which a dominant or authoritative of representations and practices is produced and maintained” (351). In “The Adivasi Will Not Dance,” Mangal Murmu says that the expectation of elite people is that “Santhals need to stop eating cow-meat and pig-meat,...” (173). The habits of ordinary people are determined by hegemonies, and Adivasis are deprived of their rights in mainstream society.

### Gender Discrimination

It is neither a biological term nor a divine construction. It is the construction of society. Women are always portrayed as submissive, weak, and secondary creatures. Since the ages, women have been colonized and controlled by patriarchal structures. Tribal women are doubly colonized because they are deprived of their rights in terms of gender and their identity as tribal women. Santhal women are exploited by other agencies, such as corporate companies. The body of a woman becomes a site where their voices are muffled on their divisions of class, tribe, and gender. In the case of ongoing Manipur tribal disputes, women are the most affected. They are sexually harassed in public places. In short, Santhal women suffer because of the hidden wealth in their mineral-rich lands.

In “The Adivasi Will Not Dance,” Mangal Murmu mentions that when their men are not at home, non-santhals or “diku” men enter into their homes and

forcibly sleep with women. He resonates that there is no protection for Santhal women because “[t]hey are raped, some sell their bodies on Koyla Road. Most of us are fleeing our places of birth” (176). Santhal women are exploited by the elite due to their poverty background.

In “November is the Month of Migrations,” a twenty-year-old Santhal girl Talamai Kisku was invited by a jawan for sex at the cost of fifty rupees and two pieces of cold bread. Shekhar points out that Santhal women are trapped in oppressed structures without choices and exploited by the structures of patriarchy. He never negatively portrayed them. The power structures forced Santhals to make decisions for the state of mere survival. Few enjoyed the freedom, but some were treated as “others.” Women, the working class, and peasants never enjoyed freedom in India.

Spivak mentions that first- and third-world feminists fail to acknowledge the ordinary women folk in their representation. In another short story, “Desire, Divination, Death,” the novelist narrates the plight of Subhashini, a Santhal woman who works in a rice mill after her husband’s death. Subhashini and other Santhal women also worked in rice mills, aluminum and soap factories, poultry farms, and various construction sites to earn their livelihood. Santhal Adivasis were the owners of the land, but later, due to encroachments, they were forced to accept menial jobs. Shekhar, through this short story “Merely a whore” picturizes the condition of women in the soil of Jharkhand. The character Sona is pushed into prostitution to earn money for her livelihood. Lakkhipur, a coal-mining town, turned into a red-light area, which overtly obliterated the dignity of women. Even Sona tried to escape the trap but was pushed into the margins. The elites exploit the voiceless for cheap labour and lust.

In “They Eat Meat!”, Shekhar narrates the incident in 1999 at Godhra. Fifty-eight pilgrims returned from Ayodhya on Sabarmati Express and met with a fire accident. Some miscreants set fire to the train, which claimed fifty-eight lives. Later, the miscreants were identified as Muslims. Following this incident, a violent dispute raised between Hindus and Muslims. Many Muslims were attacked, including Mohammed’s widowed mother, his wife, and his teenage daughters, who were attacked by a



mob at Subhanpura colony. This incident exposes how communal violence intensifies the vulnerability of subaltern groups, particularly women. Spivak says that “[t]he subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with ‘woman’ as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” (104). The critic emphasises that intellectuals should not turn women’s issues into a spectacle; instead, they should stand with them and work to subvert their marginalization. Spivak points out that women are silenced and misrepresented within dominant power structures, losing their voice and agency. She asserts that the voices of the suppressed must be heard without the interference of political or ideological interests.

### Resistance and Reclamation

All the characters who have faced marginalization resisted it and subverted their marginality into reclaiming their space. Mangal Murmu narrated their encroachment of lands to the president and claimed a solution. The Santhal Adivasis’ Sarna code was not accepted by the mainstream communities, but they continuously took measurements to consider the Sarna code as their religion. Non-vegetarian foods are not allowed in Gujarat, but Panmuni jhi resisted it by consuming non-vegetarian foods. Women characters like Subhashini emerged from the trap of poverty by going for work, and women were attacked at Subhanpura colony; the house owner, Mrs. Rao, and other women attacked the mob by throwing household utensils on them. Some victims of marginalization tried to emerge out of their trap but failed in it. Many Adivasis were displaced and migrated for jobs in distant places, working menial jobs. By resisting, the characters expressed their issues and reclaimed their space.

### Conclusion

Shekhar’s writings reveal the torments of the Santhal Adivasis, whose suffering is excluded from government records. The agony of Mangal Murmu and his community, the pain of Talamai Kisku, Subhashini, and Sona, and the hardships faced by Biram Soren and his wife compel them to conceal their identities. The projects initiated by corporate powers, the ideologies of self-centered elites, and the policies of the government have never provided assurance to the Adivasis; instead, they have forced them to live in obscurity. The actions and proposals of the government and the mainstream society should aim to challenge and overcome the backwardness imposed upon the marginalized. The novelist asserts that the Adivasis are not ignorant; rather, they are determined to elevate their status to be equal with the elites, and their plea should be considered legitimate. To sum up, the short stories of the novelist Shekhar give voice to the problems of the Adivasi people in order to bring about upliftment in their lives.

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