

SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE WORKS OF HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR

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Abstract

The Adivasis are the original inhabitants of India, hence the name natives. Though their significance is considered unimportant in the shaping of Indian history, tribal people have lived through the biggest historical incidents. Tribal consciousness has always been misrepresented, and in most cases, is not given any vocal agency to express tribal issues. In the works of Santhali author, Hansda Sowendra Shekhar, marginalization and subalternization of tribals has been vividly portrayed. Hansda questions the marginal existence of tribals, and attempts to understand the key factors behind their inhumane treatment in Indian society. This paper will outline how Hansda uses his works to raise awareness and resist against the dominant powers that rid tribals of their agency. Hansda justly depicts the social and economic issues faced by the tribal communities and demands their just representation.

Key Words: subaltern, marginalization, displacement, subjugation

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Hansda Sowendra Shekhar is a pioneer of tribal welfare movement who intends to rescue tribal identity from invisibility. Hansda lays emphasis on the significance and relevance of tribal culture in mainstream social system. With the use of his characters, Hansda traces tribal struggle of searching their past and claiming it. This paper explores the issues of representation and identity of indigenous people of India. Hansda writes back in response to the domination and subjugation of tribal communities to rewrite their history that allowed them to exist merely as the “other”. The over simplification of the tribal issues can be held responsible for the obliteration of tribal cultural identity. The mainstream allows the indigenous a mere subliminal existence to maintain hegemony over them. This subalternization of tribals is the main theme of Hansda’s writings. The attempts of tribal authors such as Hansda to claim a space for tribal identity has brought to light the issues of shared experiences of oppression and abuse. Hansda has created an authentic picture of contemporary India through his works. He belongs to Santhali community of Jharkhand. His works are personal accounts that share crucial elements of tribal culture and identity, and carry immense significance in tribal history.

The present research paper will study and analyze the concept subaltern in the collected works of Santhali author Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. It aims to analyze various attempts of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar to reclaim the exclusive history, culture and identity of the Santhals. Hansda's works focus on the issue of misrepresentation, homogenization, marginalization and subjugation of the tribal people in the mainstream culture, especially the Santhals. His works include *The Mysterious Ailment of RupiBaskey* (2014), *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015), *Jwala Kumar and the Gift of Fire* (2018) and *My Father's Garden* (2020) and his selected interviews with *The Kitaab*, *The Telegraph* and *The Hindu*. In the selected works, Hansda focuses closely on the issues faced by the tribal people particularly the problems encountered by the Santhal tribes of Jharkhand.

Tribal literature has always remained economically underdeveloped and misrepresented although it consists of a wealth of tribal folktales, vibrant folk songs, tales, legends, fables, epics, myths, social and historical ballads, anecdotes as well as self-narratives. Along with these narratives, it also includes various art forms such as paintings, tattooing, tribal rituals and worshipping which are expressive of the tribal consciousness. Their oral narratives are

an expression of their social and cultural life. Owing to the orality of tribal literature, memory and history are powerful devices employed by the tribals in order to preserve their narratives because it is memory that allows the invocation as well as the retention of their lived experience and fantasies. For the tribals, memory is the only source of their past due to which they have always remained at a peripheral position in the mainstream historiography. Thus, the literary output of tribal literature is to claim their own history through a combination of memory, history and imagination which are the key ingredients of tribal literature.

Hansda's works highlight, in one way or another, a comparative analysis of the life of the tribals and the life lived by the other half in India. The focus of the narrative in Hansda's writings displays the significance of the location in understanding the destitution his tribe is facing. His books are brimming with disinterested allusions to "Bharat-disom" (Hansda 169) and "Rabin-haram" (170), uniformly apparent in one of his characters-Murmu's monologue. These allusions encourage the readers to witness not only the inability of the mainstream Indian culture and identity to accommodate the tribal consciousness and culture, but also examples of "code-switching and vernacular transcription" frequently found in "postcolonial englishes" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 73-76, 38). Hansda challenges and defies against the norm, English or Hindi idiom, of modern India. There is an evident usage of Santhal expressions like "Jolha," "Safa-hor," "Diku," "Kiristan," or "Johar" (171, 173, 175, 187), which are reminiscent of the fundamental disparity of the tribal consciousness. As per Ashcroft and his colleagues, "Variance...is a signifier of radical Otherness, not just as a construct which continually re-inserts the gap of silence but as a process which relentlessly foregrounds variance and marginality as the norm"(74).

The Adivasi Will Not Dance (2015) is a collection of short stories. The stories deal with the hardships faced by the Adivasis under the facade of modernity and government's capitalistic interests. The stories illustrate the strengthening voice of the once-feeble margins forcing the centre to pay attention. The titular story "Adivasi Will Not Dance" narrates a gripping story of Mangal Murmu, a professional singer and troupe dance, who refuses to sing and dance for an elite festivity. Shekhar revealed that he found the inspiration for this story in 2013 when the then President Pranab Mukherjee visited Jharkhand for the inauguration of a thermal plant project which also foreshadowed the displacement of the tribals rendering them homeless. Murmu gives voice to the unsaid feelings of the tribals. He declares, in an attempt of breaking the stereotype:

'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? (Hansda 170)

Hansda sheds light on the consequences of the displacement and the existential angst it has caused amongst the tribals. Murmu's speculation at the end of the story raises some serious questions concerning the marginalisation of the needs of the tribals at the cost of industrial advancement:

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. 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. (187)

Taking into account Guha's concept of subaltern, the idea of subalterneity in tribal culture and literature, particularly among the Santhal tribe, the specific issues faced by them shall be addressed. The paper aims to question of portrayal of tribal consciousness in mainstream culture. In Hansda's perspective, the fight for shifting the tribal sensibility to the forefront of the mainstream culture should be a community effort. This paper aims to dissect and understand the construction and retroactive formulation of Santhal identity through Hansda's works, taking into consideration different factors of social dynamics including the cultural background of tribal India.

'Subaltern' was a term used to define the social groups belonging to a lower class in a hierarchical structure of the society. Originally, it was used in a military context referring to the junior officers. In general terms, subaltern signifies the subdued categories in context of race, age, status, gender or nationality. From a historical standpoint, the academics have more than once interpreted and analyzed the experiences of the subaltern groups from the perspective of the prevailing dominant class. Such groups are demographically and sociologically segregated and are typically placed outside the existing hierarchical colonial structure. The historians do not reproduce the past as it is constructed from their historical experience.

Edward Said, in his globally acclaimed work *Orientalism* gives a descriptive account of the false cultural representations of East provided by the West. He acknowledges the existence of a Eurocentric bias persistently apparent in the western ideologies against the eastern people and their culture and history. The elite, since antiquity, has misrepresented the subaltern with stereotypes. The misperceived subaltern and its experiences have been unrecognized by the western historians and academicians who assigned themselves the task of the production of the subaltern's cultural knowledge, implying that the colonial subaltern are unable to think, act, or speak for their own causes, to justify the writing of the history from a colonial perspective. Historians argued that the life experiences and the plight of the subaltern needs to be seen and interpreted on its own terms with individual sense of

integrity. Articulating subalterneity has now become an influential means for the colonized to voice and be in possession of their own historical identity. Subalternists, in the context of Indian historiography, shifted their focus to subalterns, defining them as the controllers of their own lives, owners of their own destinies.

Subaltern, as per Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's description, is not merely an elegant denomination to signify the 'other', in post-colonial terms, anything with limited or no access to cultural imperialistic power can be defined as the subaltern. According to Spivak, the working class is oppressed, and yet not subaltern. A minority group may or may not be subaltern. The study of the subaltern aims to investigate the exclusion of selected social groups, and their displacement from their indigenous homeland. In Gramsci's viewpoint, the exclusion denies and silences the voice of the subaltern communities. The identity of the subaltern is empirically deduced from the analytical work done by Gramsci on the dynamics of culture and hegemony.

Spivak challenges the fundamental binaries, self-other, occident-orient, central-peripheral, and majority-minority. The construction of truth, in Spivak's perspective, for the marginalised is achieved from the elite narratives. An example of Sati has been used for the demonstration of the concept in Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak*. The British abolished the ritual of sati in an attempt to save lives of Indian women, eventually laying a foundation for the British rule over India.

The population of the subaltern groups may be diverse, but one constant variable is their resistance to be dominated by the elite, regardless of their continual disregard historically and politically. In the context of colonialism, the subaltern is robbed of an authentic history and a voice. To be heard, the subaltern must use the language familiar with the elite, the language of the elite.

Commodification of knowledge is an essential component of this Euro-centric worldview, to affect and alter the perception of the other half. Spivak brings forth the issue of homogenising of the distinct issues faced by different subaltern groups, and criticises the leftists. This trend paves the way for colonialism, allowing the outside forces with an opportunity of rehabilitation. As a result, the marginalized rely on the dominant groups to voice their issues, instead of standing up themselves. The essay concludes with the inference that truth is constructed for the subaltern groups in the western framework. Describing the inability of the subaltern to use their own voice, Spivak argues that, "The historian's attempt to represent subaltern resistance was itself an act of discursive power-what was made visible in this effort was not the actual experience of the oppressed, but the subaltern historian's assumption of the right to speak 'for' the oppressed" (Guha and Subaltern Studies 5).

Ranajit Guha, in his classic *Elemental Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, defined the concept of subaltern as, "the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the 'elite'" (Guha 8). Guha's primary motive was to present a retake on history from the perspective of the population forced to the margins by the elite. History has always been a consequence of the experiences of a specific dominant group, by class, gender, or race. The elite-centered historical narratives establish the imperialist hegemony without giving any credit to the masses who endured the colonial invasion. The theory of subalternity, in Indian historiography, unbarred various approaches for interpretation of Indian historical narratives with subaltern consciousness. The overall concept of subaltern identity and the representation of Adivasi as the subaltern has been a stirring issue of debate in post-colonial studies (Beverley 25-40)

The tribals are one of the oldest inhabitants of the Indian society; therefore, they have an immense contribution to the Indian culture. The reference to the tribals is also found in the sanskrit literature as Asur, Dasyu, Nisad, RakshashandVaananar. The Scheduled Tribes face formative prejudice within the Indian social system. Their marginalisation is a consequence of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. The global population of indigenous tribals is 200 million approximately, constituting 4 percent of the population worldwide. Tribals have always been taken advantage of since the British colonisers founded their administration in India. British exercised their control over the tribals scattered across places with abundant access to natural resources. Colonizers acquired tribals' lands through the imposition of heavy taxes and other administrative tactics, exposing the regions to imperialistic control. Tribals were exposed to further exploitation by unleashing strong-arm tactics to rob them of their land rights. Adivasis continue to endure sufferings owing to their poor access to education, lack of basic health facilities, and poverty as their resources both physical and cultural are being continuously consumed by the public and private sector companies in the name of developmental projects. Consequently "the adivasis are...subjected to a sustained process of postcolonial subalternization which leads to a massive displacement, erosion of traditional structures of autonomy and debilitating poverty" (Coallateral40). The first four decades after the independence saw the displacement of Adivasis to make space for country's developmental and industrial enterprises. Coal mining projects were the main cause behind Adivasi displacements in Jharkhand, run by Bharat Cooking Coal Ltd. More than 26000 people suffered, and merely a third of them were given employment (Bhengra 19).

Such incidents have become frequent in the recent years as more mining projects are being launched on the tribal land by private companies backed by State. These projects deprive the natives of their lands resulting in aggravated protests and confrontations with the administrative authorities. As a consequence, tribals are left with no option than to resort to agricultural labour with no fixed earning. In addition, these projects have defiled the sanctity of their valuable lands and their produce because of the dissemination of the coal particles

across the fields. Apart from this, the authorities turned blind eye to the subjection of the tribals to serious health ailments, and the destruction of their local produce of mangoes and mahuaflowers (Iqbal149). These incidents elucidate the ever-going struggle of tribals against dispossession and subjugation of the Adivasis everywhere to post-colonial subalterneity which questions their fundamental existence, according to one such report, "The story of Pachwara serves to discern the newer models employed by the industry to persuade and compel communities to give up their land for mega projects. The state, apparently in pursuit of electricity and development, is deliberately overlooking the grievous crimes committed by the industry." (Coallateral42)

None of these issues have been discussed in the domain of Indian English Literature despite its being a representative national literature. Tribals have always been shown in a certain way, for instance, in Neel Mukherjee's acclaimed novel, *The Lives of Others*, Adivasis are either depicted as Maoists who remove fishplates from rails or the Adivasi women are the object of attention of the urban elite. It is difficult to find a truthful and in-depth account of the tribal consciousness from a third-person perspective through which the stories are usually narrated. Moreover, Adivasis are also represented as the 'other' by the urban elite as antagonistic to their distinctive modernity, considering them to be "really innocent and pure...closer to the pure state of mankind than [they] are, less corrupt, more noble" (Mukherjee 407).

Hansda's *The Adivasis Will Not Dance* presents itself by tapping into a field entirely dominated by the works of upper class writers. The title of this text addresses the resistance and refusal of the Adivasis to accept their marginal existence, and takes a step forward to break the shackles of the conventional norms of urban India's perception of Tribals, portrayed by the narrative of the Elite India with a defamiliarised representation of nation-space. Hansda tries to lay out the subalternized Adivasi sensibility through the voice of Mangal Murmu. The lengthy musings of Murmu summarise the manner of exploitation of Adivasis by distinct bodies ranging from land grabbers to corporations and government. In the grandiloquence of progress and advancement, robbing tribals of their rightful property is rationalised by upholding its "employment benefits" for the needy. In the text, Murmu questions:

Which great nation displaces thousands of its people from their homes and livelihoods to produce electricity for cities and factories?...An Adivasi famer'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? (*Adivasi Will Not Dance* 185)

The book deals with the dire issues including cultural genocide, state-subsidized exploitation, sexual abuse, and depicts a true account of a minority living in the margins of

their homeland. With the Adivasi literature being largely bound to regional languages, it is uncommon to find works following the Santhal migration within India. In non-tribal portrayal of Adivasis in Indian fictional works, cultural conscious being of the tribal communities is subalternized in the true sense of the word, their presence is non-existent. The homogenized depiction of tribals as savage, illiterate, and their culture is found with superstition and irrational traditions as its base.

Authors, who are positioned outside of the tribal narrative, perceive tribal living as a disruption in the normative time-space of the modern India. Adivasis, consciously or unconsciously, are subjected to the writers' censorious, patronizing worldview. In the works of such authors, adivasis are placed in an isolated time-space of national consciousness. This literary distinction is popularly considered sympathetic towards tribals. The depiction of Adivasi voices through the eyes of a non-tribal author alienates the Adivasi. The Adivasi is distinguished from the normative on the basis of the physical and the apparent. A lack of understanding of the everyday experiences of an Adivasi life leads to the incorrect portrayal of their culture and traditional living corresponding to their individual communities.

Hansda acts as a local agent who has both a specialist's knowledge of the problems faced by the Adivasis on the whole, and Santhal individuality. He has the authority to give voice to the voiceless, the subaltern. Hansda, through his works, has illuminated the misrepresented Santhal identity by using his life-like characters as his representative. The subaltern's inability to locate its self, and its lack of knowledge of the existence of its self (Poirier 15), warrants the need for an external agency to voice its issues. Hansda has had to fight battles, within and without, to attempt to say or write anything that needed to be said or written correspondingly. Indeed, Hansda's writings virtually cut through a great deal of societal, cultural and literary *mélange*.

Indian tribal literature echoes with the struggles and conflicts stemming from the structural imbalances that are a result of the unjust mainstream society. Hansda depicts the marginalization and subalternization of tribal cultures through his works set in post independent India. Hansda uses literature as an agency to analyze, understand and assert their identity. Tribal writers act as torch-bearers of tribal consciousness to bring the tribals out of their subaltern existence. This paper begins with the subalterneity of Santhals and ends with the dire need for tribals to fight back.

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