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10
Theorizing Tribal Resistance in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's short story 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance'

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Page No. 68-73

Abstract: *A postcolonial nation develops when it opens its doors to challenge the ideologies of a state or an individual. This is how a truly democratic government form. However, in this paper, I would discuss the 'paradigms of tribal resistance in Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda's short story 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance'. In Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography (1988), Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak argues that although essentialism is highly problematic for the knowledge it creates about the "other", there is sometimes a political and social need for what she calls "strategic essentialism". It refers to a political tactic in which minority groups, nationalities, or ethnic groups mobilize based on shared gender, cultural, or political identity to represent themselves. Adivasis have been alienated from mainstream society throughout the ages. Hansda believes whenever the dim voice of marginalised people has grown louder and stronger together to be heard at the centre, the state is left with no other option but to listen. So, it is necessary to stand together in ethnic groups to be heard at the centre as it is seen in the final scene of resistance by the narrator and protagonist Mangal Murmu refuses to dance before the President of India which is a devastating action to represent the entire community's voice.*

Keywords*: Resistance, Ideologies, Adivasi, Subaltern Studies, Strategic Essentialism.*

INTRODUCTION:

A medical officer by profession, Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar has authored many important literary works that detailed the Santhal lives or the Adivasi lives. *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey (2014)* was his first book which earned him many honourable awards including Sahitya Academy Yuva Puraskar in 2015. However, his next book *The Adivasi Will Not Dance (2015)* was shortlisted for the Hindu Prize, stands out as a major work. This is a collection of ten short stories, that enlighten the readers with the understanding of Santhali lives: the tale of their exploitation, alienation and subjugation. Each story portrays the minute details of the Santhal people in the Indian state of Jharkhand, particularly in relation to coal mining in India. The title story 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance' is one of them.

The title term "Adivasi" implies the "tribals or scheduled tribes" groups across the Indian subcontinent as identified by the Constitution of India. In fact, the term Adivasi is a Sanskrit word, borrowed from two words: 'Adi' meaning 'beginning, first, or origin' and 'vasi' meaning 'dweller or inhabitants.' Thus, literally, it means "original inhabitants." Claiming to be among the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent, many present-day Adivasi communities formed after the decline of the Indus Valley civilisation, screening various degrees of ancestry

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from ancient hunter-gatherers, Indus Valley civilisation, Indo-Aryan, Austroasiatic, and Tibeto-Burman language speakers.

The conflicts in the title story, 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance', rose when these original inhabitants were not getting their minimal rights to live in their lands. Thus, they are gradually raising their voices and themselves for their rights. The Adivasi will not dance before the President of India during the inauguration programme of the power plant until their rights are properly implemented for them. This helps us understand the reality of the community and its reclaimed past, as well as the growing influence of Westernization. The community has undergone various forms of rebellion in pursuit of its rights and identities. To name a few, the Koli uprising of 1831, the Santhal rebellion of 1855 led by the four brothers, especially by Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, and the rebellion of Birsa Munda (the hero of the tribals) of 1899. Hence, the Adivasis are continually suffering in an extensive manner from poverty, education, electricity, and healthcare. Their land rights are frequently infringed upon by both the government and private companies. They are forcibly made to leave their places. Thus, they are always subjugated and exploited. The title story, 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance', is selected from the story collection of Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar set in the region of Jharkhand. The people who have faced a conflict due to being deprived of their own rights, either for the settlement of coal mines or for other power plants. From the time of the establishment of British colonial rule, these tribal communities have been exploited incessantly. Since most Adivasi settlements were widely dispersed across resource-rich regions, the British, through various revenue systems and administrative measures, exerted external dominance and control over these areas. This was primarily achieved at the cost of Adivasi land rights, leaving them increasingly impoverished under the restrictive colonial policies. Such practices reflected not only their socio-economic exploitation but also the unchecked atrocities inflicted upon them, which collectively gave rise to persistent resistance movements—beginning with the Mal Paharia uprising of 1772. Despite their repeated uprisings to safeguard their rights, the conditions of the Adivasis remained largely unchanged even after India attained Independence.

Post-independence, their natural resources continued to be exploited by both public and private sector enterprises, again at the expense of their basic rights. Records indicate that more than 7.6 million Adivasis were displaced due to the construction of dams, mining projects, and other industrial ventures (Bhengra 8). In particular, coal mining operations by Bharat Coking Coal Ltd., Eastern Coalfields Ltd., and Central Coalfields Ltd. displaced over 26,000 people, of whom only one-third were provided with employment opportunities (Bhengra 19). Such displacements and inadequate rehabilitation measures illustrate the deep-rooted subjugation endured by the Adivasi communities. Deprived of sustainable livelihood options, many have been forced into seasonal migration, engaging in precarious forms of labour in cities—further intensifying their cycle of poverty.

The title story revolves around Mangal Murmu, an elderly man who has trained a dance troupe for many years but refuses to perform before the President of India. His act of defiance leads to him being forcibly pinned to the ground, while his fellow musicians are brutally assaulted. Such an incident reflects what happens when a single individual dares to resist the ideologies or authority of the state. Hansda notes that the story draws inspiration from a real event in Jharkhand, when the then President of India, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, came to inaugurate a thermal power plant. Although the local inhabitants were assured that the project would

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transform their fortunes, its underlying implication was the displacement of Adivasis from their ancestral lands, rendering them homeless and landless.

As Daniel J. Rycroft comments in his discussion of Adivasi assertions:

In India today, the routine abuse of land rights conferred to Adivasi leads to heightened claims for various forms of decentralised governance, as well as to the emergence of new forms of resistance, new dynamics of power between state and civil society, and new interpretations of subaltern pasts. (Rycroft 3-4)

The story opens with the violation against the protagonist, Mangal Murmu, and his fellow musicians and dancers. He was unable to resist the exploitation. He wished he had a choice to tell his troupe about his plan. But all he could do was by himself. He even hoped his troupe might have stood by him if he could have shared his plan. He says,

"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 Bharot-disom; the world itself would have come to know of our suffering…Then, perhaps, our President would have agreed with what I said to him". (Page-169)

In 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography' (1988), critically engages with the interventions of the Subaltern Studies Group, whose objective is to reconstitute Indian historiography by foregrounding subaltern perspectives and destabilizing the hegemonic imperial narrative. She characterizes their project as "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak, 13). The concept of *Strategic Essentialism,* as articulated by Spivak, designates a provisional political maneuver through which marginalized constituencies—whether defined by ethnicity, gender, culture, or nationality—temporarily consolidate a collective identity to secure visibility and political agency. In this context, Adivasis have been persistently inscribed within mainstream discourse as the "other," a position that both reflects and reinforces their historical marginalization. They are also seen as a threat to the civilization of the upper-caste Hindus as well as to the capitalist logic of development. Yet, in many instances, Adivasi ways of life demonstrate a civilization that is far more ecologically attuned than that of the modern upper castes. This is clearly manifested when the narrator says, "They know that if we—the descendants of the great rebels Sido and Kanhu—make up our minds, we can stop all business in the area. So they behave sensibly, practically. After all, they already have our land, they are already stealing our coal, they don't want to snatch away from us our right to re-steal it". (Page-174)

Hansda asserts that whenever the faint voices of the marginalized converge and acquire collective resonance, they disrupt the hegemonic order at the centre, leaving the state with no alternative but to acknowledge their rights. As Mangal Murmu remarks,

"All of us Adivasis are fools… 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." (Page-170)

He expresses his grudges against the mainstream society which always alienated the Adivasis culture from their own. He says,

"I thought I was speaking to the best man in India, our President. I had thought he would listen to my words. Isn't he our neighbour? His forefathers were all from the Birbhum district next

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door. His ancestral house is still there. Birbhum, where Rabin-haram lived in harmony with Santhals. I have been to the place Rabin-haram set up. What is it called? Yes, Santiniketan. Santiniketan is in Birbhum, and our President is also from Birbhum. He should have heard me speak, no? But he didn't." (Page-170)

He calls himself a musician but hesitates to identify himself "a farmer" because a significant portion of the farmland has been brought under a mining company for the contruction of a thermal power plant. Even sometimes, they are falsely accused by the leaders or the people, who were telling them that they are the well-wishers of the Santhals as he mentions, "Now that our boys are in jail on false charges of murder, who will fight for us? Where are the missionaries and their friends now? If the missionaries are our well-wishers and were fighting for us, why did they run away?" (Page-171)

He again mentioned even the media; the papers did not support them. They only work for their own benefits. He says, "This coal company and these quarry owners, they earn so much money from our land. They have built big houses for themselves in town, they wear nice clothes; they send their children to good schools in faraway places, when sick, they get themselves treated by the best doctors in Ranchi, Patna, Bhagalpur, Malda, Bardhaman, Kolkata. 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 barebones… For education, our children are at the mercy of either those free government schools where teachers come only to cook the midday meal…" (Page-172) This only challenges Karl Marx's egalitarian view of the state and support his fears of "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer."

Christians, Muslims, and the most importantly, the upper caste Hindus constantly suppressed them to forget their own culture. Even if they come to help them, they put certain conditions on them. After those conditions, only they are going to help them. So, in the story, the protagonist Mangal Murmu says, "If they come to help us, they will say that we Santhals need to stop eating cow meat and pig meat, that we need to stop drinking haandi." (Page 173) Here, Louis Althusser's interpellation is clearly evident. The process of interpellation can also be seen in renaming the Santhali children with Christian names like "David and Mikail and Kiristofer and whatnot". (Page-172) As a result, they are losing their Sarna faith, their identities, and their cultural roots, leaving them people from nowhere. It is merely a strategy of transforming them into obedient subjects of the state's dominant ideology, aligning them with popular discourse and culture, while reducing them to nothing more than electoral vote banks.

Mangal Murmu laments, "there are no shouters, no powerful voice among us Santhals. And we Santhals have no money—though we are born in lands which are buried riches. We Santhals do not know how to protect our riches. We only know how to escape." (Page-176) They often remain unaware of how to resist even in defense of their own property and rights. The very etymology of the term Santal traces back to the inhabitants of Saont in erstwhile Silda, in the Midnapore region of West Bengal. The Sanskrit Samant or Bengali Saont denotes the 'plain land,' signifying them as people of the plains, unacquainted with the complex dealings of mainstream society. In Bengali, the word Santal also resonates with Santa—meaning 'calm'—suggesting a community characterized by simplicity and non-violence. Ironically, however, it is precisely against these calm people that violations have been committed, particularly through the dispossession of their lands.

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When the district administration ordered the inhabitants of eleven villages to vacate their lands—their homes, farms, and livelihoods—the first question that arose among the people was "What will the sarkar do with so much land?" (Page-181) At first, they believed it as rumour. But later, "police were sent to the villages. They came with written orders from the district administration. The villages would have to be vacated to make room for a thermal power plant." (Page-181)

When they refused to vacate their ancestral lands and asserted their rights through protest, the response of the state was one of brutal repression: they were beaten, dragged into police lock-ups, and ultimately rendered homeless. When Mangal Murmu got a call letter to perform the songs and the dances before the President with his troupe, he became hopeful, not knowing that it was the very inauguration program of the thermal power plant project for which they were suffering, for which they lost their everything. He was still thinking it will be benefitted for them. He thought, at least he and his dancing troops got an opportunity to express their troubles and all other needs. With hope, they kept on practicing, despite all their troubles. He said, "All of us tried to concentrate on our practice, but how could we sing and dance with such a storm looming ahead?" (Page-182)

The final act implies that there is always growing industrialization at the cost of the lives of the tribals. Hansda writes,

"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—'" (Page-187)

CONCLUSION:

To conclude with Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses such as schools, systems of the churches, the law, and the media interpellate the subject of the Nation-state in the dominant ideology. The forceful acquisition of land and violence against the Adivasis are the Repressive State Apparatuses exercised by the dominant Nation-state for personal benefits. By erasing their identity and roots, by making them part of the dominant discourses through the act of giving them Christian names, all are the ways of repression that Hansda asked to resist throughout this simplified short story. Michel Foucault in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969)* argues that discourse gives birth to abundance of meanings. He says, "Each discourse contains the power to say something other than what it actually says and thus to embrace a plurality of meanings." The refusal to dance, thus, represents the tribal resistance which is of immense importance. It gives answer to the question put by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' that, if necessary, subaltern can not only speak but also can reject capitalist logic of development in order to resist interpellation of the State Apparatuses. For, this interpellation of the dominant ideologies have become the laws to exploit and ensure the further deprivation of Santhals in the name of development.

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