



The Adivasi Will Not Dance: An Appalling Dissent Against Dalit Exploitation

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Abstract:

The Adivasi Will Not Dance (2015), the much-appraised *Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar* winning creation by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, is a phenomenal protest against the awful repulsion and unscrupulous measures taken by the so-called upper-class sophisticated people in the mainstream Indian society against the peripheral Santals. Through the deft delineation of ten stories, not only the hollow, shabby susceptibility of the Santal community has been reciprocated through a mode of pluralistic narrative, but also the stories portray the insecure humdrum lives of the outcast people weaved through diverse culture and class of the dominant majority. Through the moving counter narratives of Mangal Murmu, Baso-jhi, Sulochona, Sona, Talamai Kisku or Vikram-kumang, the restrictions and the repression of the usurped Santals, their economic deprivation and sexual debasement explore the acute struggle of those peripheral victims where they also penchant for an esteem of their own, disrupting the stereotyped negativity attached to their lot. Born and belonging to the same marginalised Santal community in Jharkhand, Hansda instills fine sensibility into his stories, which is actually a disguised memoir in fictional narratives, and overnight created a sensation through social and mass media leading him to several legal defilements. But they are true gems, the unearthed history that he has dared to explore. About this book, Himat Southasian has rightly said that, “Shekhar’s work in this volume is a tribute to lives of struggle and marginalisation, carefully avoiding the exotic or self-pitying tone. His craft is suffused by love for his people that reminds readers of Baba Nagarjuna’s poetry– familiar and distant, angry and lyrical.” [Cited on the cover page]

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Introduction:

Dalit or the 'untouchable' are basically those low-born, discriminated 'other' who are either oppressed or subdued, based on their lower standard, belonging and financial status. Though they consist almost 11 percent of the entire population of India, as per the 2011 census, these communities are deliberately segregated from the main stream domain and employed in meagre fields of sanitization, leather work, cremation duties and so on. About the representation of this community the author himself has admitted in an interview with Sujit Prasad, "I am a Santhal; and one person's opinion, too, matters; so, my opinion should matter; and I think that it is a good thing that a Santhal story has been written in English. And why only English, I think it will be wonderful if Santhal stories are written in as many languages as possible, so that Santhal stories may go out to as wide a readership as possible. It is the representation and the exposure that matter" [<https://antiserious.com/i-am-a-santhal-and-my-opinion-too-should-matter-hans-da-sowvendra-shekhar-8b8d226e7153>]. So, basically, they are those subaltern unheeded voices who are needed to be placed before the global scenario. Though the Dalit community got much approbation from the initiatives and patronage of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, but the inhuman bestiality towards them is still in use. The Government has attributed reservation for the Scheduled Class and Scheduled Tribe primitives, yet their growth in education, vocation and employment are running at a much lower rate. Feminism, which is a blazing issue in contemporary India, applies to the Santal women much dreadfully than the main stream females. Apart from the domination of the male gaze, the Santal women are compelled to be victimised by domestic violence and cultural discord. Mostly they are seen to sell their bodies as prostitutes and get rigorously humiliated at their meagre workspace milieu. Jyotiba Phule, the prime mover of the Satya Shodak Samaj in Maharashtra has pioneered the term "Dalit" which suggest a 'split' or 'broken' or something 'rotten' in the society. After the Independence from the British Raj, mostly since 1970s, the Dalits started various movements for their individuality; various writers like Om Prakash Valmiki, Bama, Urmila Pawar, Aravind Malagatti, Yashwant Manohar, Meena Kandasamy, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and many others have radically



protested for the rights of the Dalit commoners in the fields like politics, culture, religion, art and literature. Mostly famous for the eminent publication of *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* in 2015 that won him the prestigious *Sahitya Academy award*, a Medical Officer by Profession, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is also a social activist, who collected factual tragedies of Santal people and gave them literary sketch. Though he was utterly criticised for the representation of women in his stories as mere 'porn' characters, and was suspended from service; ultimately the decree headed by Chief Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul announced that there is nothing obscene that has been superimposed on his writings. Therefore, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* is at once a chronicle of the daily courses of Santal untouchables as well as a penchant for uplifting their subaltern consciousness towards modernity, industrialization and societal equipoise.

The first story of this volume, "They Eat Meat" portrays an unusual attack on the usual food habit of the family of Panmuhi-jhi and Bikram-kumang in Vadodara. Panmuhi-jhi was a master in the art of cooking, she rather abhors outside food and makes uncommon dishes with deft expertise. Vadodara, though was a neat and clean place to live in, had several restrictions on habitation. Non-veg items were strictly forbidden there, except the CISF campus, and people generally do not mix with those who eat and cook non-veg. Not only that, the city is extremely orthodox about maintaining purity in the upper-class Hindu society, for which they looked down upon the Tribals and Dalit communities as well, "Muslims and Christians, they don't stand a chance here. They have separate areas where they live. Cities with a city. Separate bastis for Muslims, for Christians". (p 6) Thus, not only the food-habit but also their very existence was found critical there. The things got more critical where the news of a burning train was reported as an aftershock of a riot. Some pilgrims were returning from Ayodhya by Sabarmati express when at Godhra, some people from other religion set fire to the train. More than fifty pilgrims were burnt to death as the doors were closed from outside. The supposed culprits were identified as 'Muslims' and naturally the stubborn Hindus are now preparing to avenge against such massacre. In the community of Bikram-kumang there was a house belonging to a Muslim family. The man worked in city, while the lady managed the house along with her widowed mother-in-law and two teenage daughters. The violent mob has attacked this house and pulled the door with a sudden explosion. The women were suffocated with the fume and crying bitterly for help. Finally, Panmuhi-jhi along with other women of the locality, started throwing their heavy kitchen utensils and hot water on those attackers, as a result, 'Many of the mob were hurt. The heavy irons landed on heads, the glass bottles cut legs, and the frying pans hit eyes, noses and necks'. (p 24) Finally, the attack suspended, the mob boarded their truck and left cowardly. The calmness regained after nearly a month, and the local people of Subhanpura thought to guard



their locality every night respectively. The story ends with the transfer of Bikram-kumang to Bhuwaneswar again, where they finally felt at home, without any restriction, super-imposition of thrust practices: “No one minds what we eat here. . . And we don’t mind what others eat”. (p 27) So, ‘Live and let live’ is the ultimate solution the narrator aspires for, and finally, being scattered for a long time against their wish and choices, the sense of poise is restored at the end.

The second story, ‘Sons’ is about the upbringing of male child in society. There is no doubt that male offspring is much prioritised over the female one. But this is not limited to the upper-class main-stream society; rather the same norm of substandard debasement is followed in Dalit communities as well. Here, the primary character, Kalpana’s only son is found missing after committing a bank robbery. Her husband is an established bank employee, and they used to live a luxurious life full of cosy comforts. But the greed and over-ambitiousness of Suraj, the 10th standard failed son of Kalpana, his drunkenness and crimes had led to a raid to their palace, ultimately diminishing their reputation and status in the public. Another boy, Raghu, a distant relative of Kalpana ji is also mentioned here. Despite the differences of fortune, Raghu appears to be more obedient and family-oriented. Though his upbringing was average and he majorly grew up using Suraj’s old clothes and tattered notebooks, cracked all his examinations on time and secured a medical seat in Jharkhand. He was more like the mango tree that borne sweetest fruit without any alms. Even when, Kalpana was terribly suffering with dysfunctional level of blood-pressure, her own son was seen nowhere but it is Raghu who took proper care of her health and hazards.

The third story, “November is the Month of Migration”, is a pertinent tale of acute poverty and sexual exploitation. This story describes the very migratory movement of the nomadic tribal life, who use to travel from their villages and hills from the distant Santal parganas to the paddy fields of Bardhaman. Talamai Kisku, the central female character of this narrative is a part of such nomadic troop along with forty-three other people of her region. Being the second daughter in a family of three girls and three boys, her name holds no extra-ordinary significance, as ‘Tala’ suggests middle and ‘mai’ stands for girl child. None of her siblings were ever enlightened by the aura of education and they were meagre labourers of a coal mine. The story narrates how the twenty-three-year-old Talamai, driven by irresistible hunger and destitution, got attracted by a handsome Diku policeman with a bread-pokora in his hand. She was seduced by the man for a scanty amount of food and money in lieu of her flesh and body. The dire sexual encounter is an appalling mortification of the entire sect of the Adivasi girls who are compelled to sell their bodies in exchange of food and comfort. Even after the physical and mental torture is over, she is



bitterly disgraced as, “Saali, you Santal women are made for this only. You are good.” (p 41) The passivity of Talamai explicates the treatment of the male perverts against those marginalised suffrages. Talamai accepts the money and devours two cold bread pakora before joining her mates in fear of sharing her hard-earned wage with her siblings. Such severe commodification of the Santali women thus not only reflects the painful quest of the Adivasi women for their survival but also criticises the male carnivorous for their pervert sexuality.

The next story, “Getting Even” is a pathetic tale of child abuse. Narrated in the first-person omniscient narrative, the incident speaks about an innocent boy of ten years belonging to a Santal community has allegedly assaulted a girl belonging to a higher class. The doctor, who is also the narrator of this story, has reported about a lot of people accumulated in the premise of Sadar hospital along with some police officials. The girl was merely four, while the boy was just ten, an age which is beyond the understanding of sexual manipulation. The medical examination has traumatised the little boy, he didn’t even have any trace of sexual erection or pubic hair; neither there was any mark, trace or wound of sexual bruises. He was just trapped to touch the girl by the insinuations of his friends; but the girl ran away and reported to her parents. Therefore, the alleged rape was just a lie; while the actual story tells something else. The elder sister of the boy was sold by the girl’s family in Delhi for money, and she was later rescued by her parents three days later. Basically, they are avenging against each other because both the parties were belonging to different class, caste and religion. The clash between Hindu and lower-class Christian society consists the root-cause of this upheaval. Thus, this story with its fictitious narrative points to the very fact that in various part of India, every day, so many Santal girls are being sold and thrown to the path of prostitution which needs to be legally addressed and stopped with immediate effect.

The fifth story of this collection, “Eating with the Enemy” is woven with the eternal theme of jealousy and hatred between rival wives. Sulochona Behera was a lower-caste, Harijan woman of the Ghassi community. She was working as a regular maid because her mother was forsaken by her father and later on, she married again leaving Sulochona to her tragic fate. The step-mother was evil incarnated, and she almost tried to commit suicide by devouring poisonous Calotropis shrub. But life is too valuable to throw away, and therefore, she was subsequently married to Dinanath Behara, another drunkard like her father. But marriage could never pacify her inner agonies. After giving birth to the two daughters, Sitamata and Mathabhangi; her husband has brought another wife, a much younger and more good-looking one, named as Mohini, who used to sell alcohol to earn her living. But both their lives were equally savage,



Sulochona used to get thrashed physically while Mohini was sexually tormented by their same alcoholic husband. After the death of Dinanath due to a liver failure, Sulochona finally got the control over her life as aspired. She arranged Dinanath's pension and became more aggressive to fulfil her demands. Mohini later got married to a Telegu businessman much older than her for financial comfort. The man was a sexaholic pervert, in spite of keeping Mohini as his mistress, he used to exploit other women for erotic pleasure. Mohini had no say over such debauchery, otherwise Babu would throw her on the ground, hit and strip her with his belt. Thus, her place in Babu's life was no better than Dinanath's. Both wanted her physically, while her psychological agonies remained untold, unheard and unanswered. Later on, impressed by her economic prosperity, Sulochona insisted her to take Mathabhangi along with her, though she had barely any idea about the sexual trauma Mohini was living with. The situation became more troublesome when the Babu tried to forcibly persecute the timid Mathabhangi repeatedly, the terrified girl appealed repeatedly with unbridled tears and helpless protests and collapsed with unfettered vulnerability. When Mohini restored her later to Sulochona, she out of rage pounced on her and drove her out of the house. The same Mohini returned after six years beaten by her abusive husband. Sulochona thus not only sheltered her and but also fixed her trouble with Babu. She also greedily accepts the money offered by him forgetting that the same man was responsible for her daughter's traumatic rape. Thus, though their first relationship was the relationship of abhorrence, resentment and spiteful abuses; at the end, their mutual hatred transforms into the epitome of imperishable solidarity that refuges pained hearts.

The sixth story, "Blue Baby" is a tale of unfulfilled love and miscarriage. Gita, the central female character of this story meets her vagabond lover Dilip last time just time a day before her marriage with Suren. Her plan was to be spoilt, to be used by that 'jobless oaf' so that later when she would deliver their child, she would reunite with her lost love. She had even threatened Dilip that, "Look, if you don't come, then I'll come to you. And I'll come with this. And then you'll have to accept both of us". (pp 94-95) Her husband, Suren was a genuine academician, and chose the profession of a Chemist. He was a good husband who not only devoted himself for the wellbeing of his wife, but also never doubted her fidelity. After getting pregnant, when the desperate Gita wanted to contact Dilip, he snubbed her and never came back. Gita's husband has admitted her to a teacher's training course so that she could establish her own career of a teacher. He used to drive her to the college everyday amidst the rusty road and took care of all her concerns. Gita finally understood the mistake she has committed by cheating on Suren. But finally, when she tried to bridge the gap with her husband, she lost her baby. She deleted Dilip's contact number and was finally determined to erase every single memory of that imposter from her existence.



Thus, though it may seem a disheartening and excruciating experience for her, but in another way, it paved a way for her better future. The child, which was the last totem of her illicit affair was lost to give her another chance to start afresh with her devoted husband.

The next story, “Baso-jhi” is again a tale of anguish, severe debasement and painful experiences of a Dalit woman victimised by the superstition in the Adivasi society who was cursed as ‘dahni’ and was thrown away from the society. Baso-jhi was a favourite among children in Sarjomdih, where men mostly worked as indentured labourers. The unskilled and superstitious Adivasis were merely the offspring of industrial revolution and the development of copper factories. Some of them got privilege to get through bank and other offices, while others remained ‘coolie and reja’. As a person, Baso-jhi was a timid, naïve, insecure and a downcast distant relative of Soren-babu who took care of all his household chores. Soren-babu and his wife Pushpa were happy to have this whole-time household help to take care of the family and their two children. Two years later, first a child in the neighbourhood got infected with high fever, and he died that very night in the hospital. This was the third death in their locality after the arrival of Baso-jhi. Baso-jhi’s husband died when her elder son was just nine; but survival was the only thing she aspired for and took care of her husband’s farm singlehandedly. She proved herself to be a capable mother of two fatherless sons and did not allow any desperation or deprivation in their way of upbringing. But her own sons called her a witch after one of her grandsons died of diarrhoea. Her sons ransacked her room, abused her and all her things were thrown out. The younger son grabbed her by the hair and kicked her in the abdomen; her daughters-in-law insinuated their husbands to kill this ‘dahni’, but not a single villager came for her rescue. Destitute, desolate and penniless Baso-jhi was trembling in hunger and fear in a railway platform where Soren babu saw her and brought her into their household. At the end of the story, we found that Baso-jhi has left the household of Soren babu again leaving all her articles received from the family. This inhuman tale of ignorant malpractice thus points to the very pertinent social disease where innocent women are still burnt in the name of witchcraft or black-magic. The poignant life of Baso-jhi who dearly loved her children and grand-children met a tragic end for the lack of education and unfounded concavity administering over the boorish peripherals.

“Desire, Divination and Death”, the next story in chronology, is another poignant tale delineating the dilapidated poverty of the downcast marginals. Subhasini, the poor mother used to bring every Saturday some laddu, singara and alur chop for her three children; and to buy this, she had to cross miles on foot after a hard day’s labour at the rice mill. The buses and



trekars were so full of passengers that mostly it was too risky for the females like Subhasini to get along. When her younger son Kunaram was just four, their father died; and the entire responsibility of breadwinning came to the shoulder of Subhasini, where her two daughters immediately became the mothers of the little child. The day she was rushing for home and did not get a bus, Kunaram was terribly ill. That sick boy requested to bring some jalebis from the bazaar. The mother was hurriedly walking, and met a sick boy on road, asking for some food. The tonga of jalebis bought for Kunaram was still in her hand, and the boy was repeatedly imploring for food. She thought superstitiously that perhaps her misfortune had taken an illusory bodily form which was tormenting her and she needed to be rid of such illusions. Finally, she got a bus but did not find the begging boy anymore. Reaching home, she found her son dead, who was eagerly waiting for his mother to bring some jalebis. He died without food or medicine, unattended and woefully alone. Like Maurya who visualised her dead sons Michael and Bartley in J.M.Synge's "The Riders to the Sea" and understood the damn fate waiting for them, here, Subhasini also understands that even after his death, Kunaram asked for the jalebis which she refused considering him to be an outcast beggar. The indomitable pangs of the mother's heart thus recapitulate the agonizing postulation of the despondent destitute which the main stream upper class people often disregard to notice.

"Merely a Whore" traverses through the dark terrain of a prostitute's heart. Sona, the most craving possession of Jharnadi's brothel, is the protagonist of the next story of this volume. In spite of being a prostitute in the red-light district of Lakhhipur, a coal mining town, she used to invite those 'shirtless, sweaty, black with cold-dust', khaini-chewing, port-bellied customers into her 'eight-feet-by-eight-feet room painted in garnish blue and green, curtained off with old terry-cotton saris, illuminated by hundred-watt bulbs'. (p 144) She was much different from the common prostitutes who sell their bodies for money, 'Sona was a dream; everyone else was merely a whore'. (p 145) The prostitutes have no return to the main stream society, even Sona in her initial days, used to weep bitterly for the life she could never return, but gradually she has perfected the art of making men happy which also made her forgetting her past identity. Therefore, every customer in Jharnadi's house would demand for the service for Sona, who not only honoured her invited guests but also made them feel satiated with their demands. The tragic motto of a prostitute's life is the concern for survival, and Sona was well adept into this nasty vocation of subsistence. But this same girl was trapped into a love affair with a young transporter called Nirmal. She started dreaming of the life of a wedded wife, taking care of the household and children of Nirmal, the handsome hunk who always made her feel special: "She began dreaming of a life in which both Nirmal and she could be fully dressed and walking on the



streets of Lakhhipur, hand in hand, laughing and talking freely, not whispering to each other lying naked in Sona's tiny curtained cubicle'. (p 152) But Nirmal was a regular to prostitutes, he never loved Sona though promised many things to her to start their new dwelling. Sona started neglecting her other customers in her infatuation, while Nirmal was keeping another two affairs, one with a middle-aged wife of a mining officer and another with an eighteen-year-old daughter of a union leader simultaneously. Sona was eager for an earnest kiss from Nirmal, a pure, blissful one devoid of all perversity. She was not only snubbed and humiliated at her request, but was inhumanly abused as Nirmal took another prostitute in front of her for satisfying his carnal desire. He even agrees to an arranged marriage for financial benefits. The dream world of Sona thus got shattered and she regains her tragic life, stoically, in her initiatives of satisfying the hunger of other customers. Thus, the story may apparently sound vulgar, as there are too many incidents of obscenities, but the tragic narrative of the prostitutes who sell their bodies to sustain their families is thus not only appalling but also points to the fitting rationales leading those hapless souls to this perilous quest: illiteracy, ignobility, impoverishment and unemployment.

"The Adivasi Will Not Dance", the final story of this collection on the Santal lives, is a touching tale narrated by Mangal Murmu, a farmer as well as a musician who dared to refuse for a dance performance before the President of India. This tale is a poignant rendering of the inhuman debasement the Santals are situated in. The story opens with the harsh treatment the narrator has to undergo for his protest: "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 cry for mercy". (p 169) He was feeling helpless and restless, but he could not defend their lot. Actually, they were asked to perform before the President but were not allowed to speak about their pangs. They are farmers, but they don't have any right on their lands. All coal merchants, belonging to Diku, Marwari, Sindhi, Mandal, Bhagat and Muslims have turned their land upside down, and in spite of adopting Christianity, the missionaries could not bring their land back. Even, the Christian schools insinuated them to stop worshipping their 'Bonga-Buru' and compel them to chant in favour of Jesus Christ. Rape, changing of names, beatings, loot and murders were common practices where the guileless Santals suffered tacitly. The upper-class Hindu majority even enforced constraints upon their eating and drinking habits; they must give up eating beef, pork and haandi otherwise they will be converted to 'Safa-Hor', a 'mimic man', losing their own root, religion, identity and nationality; they are just like the people belonging from nowhere. In this respect, I want to quote Homi Bhabha's lines relevant to his text as well:



Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both "normalized" knowledges and disciplinary powers. (Bhabha 126)

Therefore, the Safa-hor people are neither Hindu, nor Christian, and in-between they lose their Santal identities. To sustain themselves, they need to steal coal from mines, but a few quintals from tons of coals hardly matters. Generations after generations they are compelled to steal because the Government is rather aloof to their anguishes. The Santal children never get to be admitted into schools, though literacy and education are considered to be the primal birth-right of every citizen. Even when another impoverished community Jolha comes and invades their land, the Santals are beaten wrongly, assaulted and arrested for false FIR charges. They have neither money, nor employment, not any place to ask for shelter. Mangal Murmu, who was beaten black and blue for sharing these pathetic words has no more patience left to survive. He has only complied to this proposal of dancing so that he could plead before the Government so that the order for immediate evacuation will be suspended. A thermal plant is going to be built and the Santals are forcibly driven away from their villages, which is the violation of the Tenancy Protect Act. The son-in-law of Mangal Murmu was arrested along with many other people for creating agitation against the district administration and his daughter Mugli had to take shelter in her parents' house along with her in-laws. Everybody was hopeful that the thermal plant would bring electricity to every house and factory of the Santal Parganas and the place will soon be turning into Delhi and Bombay. But the narrator wonders, how could a nation be prosperous by driving hundreds of its people from their homes and livelihoods. Singing and dancing generally occurs at an ecstatic moment, but they did not have a single reason to be happy. Therefore, the final words of protest came with sudden resignation: "We will sing and dance before you but tell us, 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. . . Unless we are given back our homes and land, we will not sing and dance. We Adivasis will not dance. The Adivasi will not –". (p 187) Therefore, the last lines of the story pinpoint some deep-rooted questions where the need for the growth of industrialization has been contrasted with the misery and the wellbeing of the Santal community and the unspoken sentiments of the subaltern Adivasis are rendered voiceless under the tyrannical jeopardy of the precipitating elites.



Conclusion:

Thus, the stories of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, in fictional narrative, address the pitiable condition of the wretched untouchables who are victimised socially, politically, economically, racially, even from a gender centric subversive gaze. The stories mostly capture the humiliation, disgrace and torment they face physically and psychologically for belonging to the peripheral ostracism. The final story, therefore, casts as an ultimate resistance against the upper-class bourgeois puppetry where the denial of the menial Santals is a challenge against the stereotypical fetish in existing society. The ultimate message that the volume offers is synonymous with its pertinent title, 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance', i.e., they will no more dance to satiate the public whims. This volume, therefore, rejects the Fascist capitalism benumbing the poor Santals operating through the tormenting agencies of State and aspires for a caste-free, unbiased purity where they can live with unviolated modesty and democratic multifariousness.

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