



In Quest of Modernity, Seeking Refuge in Santhal Consciousness: Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda, an Explainer of his Community

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Abstract: An indigenous writer's prime motive is to give recognition to his community and is done so by taking refuge in a literary sojourn. Usually, the indigeneity is foregrounded by expressing in native colloquialism, but when it is done in international language, the motif reaches a more comprehensive range of audiences. Even though a writer belongs to the Santhal community, Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar is one such Anglophone Indian writer who writes in English and is considered a privileged tribe. He imbibes in the spirit of modernity. The quest for the new unknown land lands him in alienation. However, he ends up finding solace in his traditional refuge. The paper analyses the author's journey in quest of the modern world and how he retreats from his tribal culture and beliefs.

Keywords: Alienation, Community, Modernity, Santhal, Traditionalism, Tribe.

Introduction

The contemporary Anglophone Indian writer Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar takes the utmost credit for being a beacon of Santali fiction writer in English. Through his works, the commoners of the mainstream society get an insight into the Santali world. What is an added patronage is that Hansda targets his wider range of readers, hence choosing the medium of writing in English instead of Santali language? Extending curiosity accompanied by the solution to the problem identified towards the subaltern group in concern, Santhal, there could never have been any better author to be chosen. Santal is a tribe that has Proto-Australoid origin and is defined as “men of middling stature ...and well made with dark skins. They have strong limbs, somewhat thick lips, and in many instances, their cast of countenance almost approximates the Negro type” (Karua 593).

Tribes, in general, do not get the privilege of being on par with mainstream society. They are streamlined and identified as different. “Tribes are primarily seen as a stage and type of society. They represent a society that lacks positive traits of the modern society and thus constitute a simple, illiterate and backward society” (Xaxa, 3589). A separate recognition is bestowed on them. The culture and anthropology of the tribe remains a mystery to the people of larger society. It doesn't become possible in daily life to have continuous interaction with them and hence little-known facts do come to the people. The novelists and fiction writers do shoulder the responsibilities to reach out to oft neglected issue and bring out to serve the platter of the avid readers.

The location determines the presence of the tribe – Santhal - Santhal Pargana of Jharkhand. They are a “large Proto-Australoid tribe found in West Bengal, northern Orissa, Bihar, Assam as also in Bangladesh” (Chaudhuri,1). As Hansda picturizes the same in his works *Jwala Kumar and The Gift of Fire! Adventure of Champakbaug, The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey, The Adivasi will not Dance and My Father's Garden*. The author in concern is responding to the current internal struggle that the majority of the Santhals are undergoing. Although being a tribe, they are striving hard to be homogeneous with the larger society. They, in the process, undergo an instability and flux. However, they thrive to attain modernity, they are summoned by their indignity and the aboriginal consciousness do pull them back to their roots. Hansda, the prolific writer, himself being a physician by profession does belong to have's category of the community. He is the privileged Santhal who has received proper education and writes in an international language to voice the thought through

his works. Even he attempts to present the strife for modernity in his characters too. Argument lies in the fact that he still does take resort to deep rooted community beliefs, faiths, ideas and cultural facts that has no answer from his modernist perspective. Although he robes himself in the attire of modernity, his latent soul does dwell in traditional faith. His characters are his mouthpiece and his strife are presented through them.

Virginia Xaxa opined that “the tribes tend to lose their distinct identity when they encounter the larger Indian society and get absorbed” (Xaxa, 1364). Hence not left with any distinct identity and space of their own due to the process of social transformation in them. In another article he affirms that “the relation between tribes and non-tribes has been described as one of mutual coexistence rather than one of subjugation and dominance” (Xaxa, 3592). However, as Hansda’s texts can be analyzed, they confirm that neither the tribe (Santhal) loses its identity in contact within the larger Indian society nor is the relation as one of mutual coexistence. Although the characters in his works do encounter the mainstream society trying to adapt themselves to the alien world but their Santhal wakefulness does bring them back to seek solace to their community. The existence is not of mutuality and cooperation but voicing the suppressed voiced against the loud and dominance.

If *Jwala Kumar and the Adventure of Champakbaug* is a children’s novel about a misplaced dragon entering Champakbaug and serving as a blessing in disguise to the protagonist’s family by providing fire, we can interpret it as the longing of the Santhals to happen something similar who can act as a savior and eradicate the pain and sorrow of the community. In *Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, the novel is set across a vast canvas, as Hansda himself said that he was much inspired by *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapoor. The novel has everything presented together – the historical background of the Santhal, the political and social scenario, the development and progress of the community as well as belief in witchcraft. *My Father’s Garden* is a young Doctor’s personal, political and social struggle. The novel foregrounds modern views that the characters are embracing. The march towards modernity, leaving behind the Santhal consciousness to be submerged in the cocoon of dominance and oppression, is emphatically presented by the author.

Jwala Kumar and the Adventures of Champakbaug

The folk tales and belief in myths form an integral part of Santhal life and Hansda stands as no exception to that. The fire breathing dragon, though, sounds unusual and preposterous, gets its entry into the literary world. Hansda himself being from medicine field does incorporate such faiths in his works. He strives to be modern but his Santhal consciousness pulls him towards such faiths and myths. Sticking to the western genre of fiction, he integrates the indigenous belief system. The family of Mohan Chandra and his wife stays in Champakbaug. The similar Champak whose historical reference we find in A.B. Chaudhuri's *State Formation Among Tribals: A Quest for Santhal Identity*. "At Champa the tribes built up 'ghars' or forts...Champagarh belonged to the Murmus" (Chaudhuri, 7) The family was undergoing crises due to continuous downpour. There was no fire. The dragon breathed out fire to give them back the metaphorical life. It was believed that a flock of dragons were migrating and Jwala Kumar dropped down in Champakbaug. When Rupa and Mohan rescued him, he was a blessing in disguise for the family. He caught food (rodents) for the children, provided fire which, otherwise, the family was deprived of. Jwala Kumar, the savior in turn helped the entire locality, all the families who were in stark need of fire. "In ten minutes, flat, all the chulhas in Champakbagh were lit. No firewood or any other fuel was needed. Now people could cook their food and also stay warm" (Hansda, 111). A day came when Jwala finally flew away to be with his lost companions.

Apparently, it might appear as a children's novel but the deeper implication suggests the ignorant Santhals trust and faith on unnatural creatures. Jwala Kumar stands as a symbol of savior to eradicate the plight of the community. He came as a gust of soft breeze that touched the parched souls and consequently parted. Rudyard Kipling's "White Man's Burden", the burden of the white man to uplift the downtrodden mass, the brown Indians, is the counter narrative in the context. Jwala Kumar, from post-colonial perspective, serves the veritable main stream society's 'burden' to aid the community in moment of crisis and requirement.

The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey

The novel is a strong interjection of primitivism and aspiration towards modernism. In the vast shade of multitude of characters, Hansda does weave the storyline meticulously by attributing various spectrum of characteristics to each one of them. There are carefree and bonhomie characters like Putki and Della, there is

the practitioner of sorcery like Gurubari, there is victim of black magic like character Rupi Baskey, there are the progressive characters painted in modern shades like Khorda-Harem and Sido. The locale too, again like his other three works, are set in historical milieu. The societal classification of Headman, Majhi, Naikey do relate to the fiction as we find their existence of them. The rebellious stalwarts like Seedho and Kanho have paved the way for the latter generation to fight for their own existence and recognition. We find the traces of such vigor and fervor in characters like Seedho and Kharda Harem, who are not submissive and docile pertaining to the demand of the community. Seedho is an educated character and he works as a school teacher. Being in the noble profession he sets up a parameter to cleanse out the eclipse of ignorance with the streak of knowledge. During his wife's illness he went to various doctors for her treatment. On the other hand, the entire village suggested to seek help from Ojha. Hansda points out the conflict of traditional faith and modernist view in this regard. Being educated and being a professional it is obvious that he will have less or no faith in such beliefs. He epitomizes progressive view of the community.

Among the sacred beliefs, the faith in spirits is most common with the tribals and so as animism. This animistic belief is rather a universal feature of the religion the tribals have, as it is said that "Tribes were thus defined as those that practiced 'animism' (Xaxa, 1519). For them, all spots and places are holy as they are the seats of spirits. Animals, plants, trees, ponds, rivers, stones, hills or mountains are all abodes of spirits. The dead are no exception to this rule as they still exist through soul or are reborn in the shape of offspring. The whole neighborhood whether village or forest in which the tribals live is full of spirits. For all, the whole world is full of spirits. It is said that "there are forces which are so far greater than the power of man, unaccountable forces, operating as it would appear, not with any regularity, but suddenly, unexpectedly, forces of destruction." (Mohapatra, 113). Pertaining to that Hansda does frame his characters who have trust on such ideas and faiths. Be it Gurubari who is keener on casting a spell of Blackmagic over Rupi by her Mohini medicine or Naikey's wife who practice sorcery to do ill of others or the presence of the village old aunt in the form of spirit entering the body of Rupi and thereby making her to behave in a weird manner – everything Hansda presents to do justice to his identity of being a tribe. Towards the end of the novel, we find the sons of Rupi and Seedho embracing modernity to step into the larger society and be a member of the mainstream society, "There were

saris and ornaments for the daughter, clothes for the son – in-law, a mobile phone, a color TV with a DTH connection for their household” (Hansda, 205)

My Father's Garden

The metaphorical ‘Garden’ stands similar as ‘Forest of Arden’ of Shakespeare’s “As You Like It”, as Hansda creates where everything is devoid of sorrow and guilt. The protagonist’s father had ‘meticulously planned his garden’. The garden is a refuge and shelter for him. He sets off on an odyssey to take on the challenge in pursuit of something that belong to the larger society. He embraced a great change in himself. He became a fan of sophisticated cinema. He started watching the films, French and Polish classics. He stood as a strong contestant to contest the election but was denied of a ticket. He wanted to take up the challenge and stepped out to be a part of the world alien to him, the world which later despised him. It is his garden that welcomes him to provide shelter to his astray self. The garden is equated to his very own community, which is always there to welcome him back, no matter if he wins or loses the battle.

The family that the protagonist belonged to is a well-educated family. Belonging to the doctor parents, he himself became a doctor by profession. The nurturing of the garden, pruning and taking care of it do have subtle reasons beneath. The foremost being the thought and hope to be in touch with the soil. The protagonist says, “I had many theories about why my father was obsessed with his garden. Chief among them was the thought, the hope, that it was his way of keeping in touch with the soil, and preparing for a return to the village” (Hansda, 180). Herein lies the essence of his community. The attachment of the tribal people to nature and soil is the quintessential factor that labels them as tribe. The protagonist’s father, though response to the summon of the alien world, cannot but, brings forth his latent desire to be close to nature by nurturing such a beautiful garden. It resonates a sense of withdrawal and submission to nature drifting away from the world that is not his own. The historical impact had been presented through various political disturbances, formation of the state Jharkhand, Vidhana Sabha Election and formation of HIP. However, having exhausted every possibility of intervention and having been stone walled everywhere he quietly withdrew his nomination. The inaccessibility imparts an image of mirage of the different world to him.

The Adivasi will not Dance:

The collection of ten short stories is assimilation of various ideas – Santhal beliefs, animist faith, migration to a different state, women empowerment, breaking the aura of male chauvinism to support women, standing as a shield to protect the fellow citizens and feeble voice of the marginals growing strong to loud against the contemporary subjugation. As the title suggests, the stories deal with the Santhal Adivasis of Jharkhand, and insightful representation of their life and culture.

The titular short story apparently might appear as a confrontation between the tribals and the state, but there is an underlying interpretation of the clash within the community between haves and have nots. The denial of the haves to stand with the have nots in the process of eviction marks the discouragement that the Santhals are facing within the community. Mangal Murmu was the only rebel when the state imposes eviction petition to the tribe. He denied giving his performance in front of the President of the country who had come to inaugurate a power plant which was established after evicting the tribes. The clash between the upsurge of urbanization but at the cost of poor tribal's shelter foretells the bleak future of the community because “the main victims of the new economic paradigm were the tribal people and the poor whose conditions deteriorated” (Judge, 241). However, Hansda adopts modern means by presenting Murmu as a spokesperson of his tribe who rebels against the hierarchy and authority, but the author cannot deny the fact that his community is put at stake by the capitalist, by the Government and the authority imposed by the mainstream society. This is just one fictional incident that Hansda highlights, there are quite many where displacement and migration steals away the serenity and stability from the life of such outcast. The peasant Santhals' land being acquired by the mining company and stone merchants, the fruitless consolation against acquisition, construction of buildings on their lands, the conversion of the Santhals from Hopna, Som, Singrai to David, Mikail and Christopher, the invasion of the Muslims into their homes – to all these, the Santhals remain passive and inoperative. This is one such chapter where Hansda lays bare his anguish, “We are losing our Sarna faith, our identities, and our root. We are becoming people from nowhere” (Hansda,173). Although the contemporary writer presents colorful picture of progression and modernism through his characters but does seek asylum to his tribal consciousness through characters like Murmu where he confides his skepticism and crises.

Hansda integrates common theme in all his four works – The yearning for his Santhal self-piety which doesn't allow him to give complete justification to his embracing of modernism. He is pulled back, forced to take resort to, and confide to his indigenous identity. The use of folk tales, animist faith and sorcery is the common theme prevailing over his all four works. If Jwala Kumar is the unrealistic fire breathing dragon, Rupi is suffering from mysterious ailment by Guru Bari's Mohini medicine, if in *My Father's Garden* the animist faith overpowers the characters as we find with the description of Jaher, in the short story collection *Adivasi will not Dance*, the identification of Basanti as witch and Suahasini's fear of Dahni – everywhere Hansda presents himself as an insider, a traditional story teller who takes the readers in a sojourn to provide an insight into his Santhal community. The urge to fit into the mainstream society, another major theme swaying throughout his works epitomizes as a role of a modern chronicler of his community. The family of Rupa and Mohan welcomes Jwala Kumar in their family. Jwala Kumar, an agent of the larger society in disguise who comes to rescue them from the situation of crisis. But the family members become so fond of him and wish to be with him forever, overpeers the indication of the assimilation of diverse culture, a conscious effort to merge with the society at large. Seedho, an educated school teacher with rational thinking is the mouthpiece of Hansda's modern view. He contradicts every time the traditional beliefs arise. The protagonist's father in "My Father's Garden" is an image of Hansda's portrayal of a Santali man suffering from isolation and alienation when he tries to embrace the different world which is called not their own. Having denied the tickets in election he seeks refuge to his garden which ignites a ray of hope to be back to his comfort place, his own community. In "Adivasi will not Dance", there are characters who project a representative of the community, treading parallel with the modern world. They affirm a progressive mindset by not absorbing in chauvinism and allowing the women to pursue their dreams. Mangal Murmu is an epitome of the voiceless indigenous voicing against suppression to reinstate his own identity in particular and of the community in general.

Conclusion:

The anglophone Indian writer presents himself as an explainer and not a representative. He is not under the responsibility of projecting either the saga of oppressive voices or the celebration of his own traditionalism. He writes about Santhal culture, politics and society because he is a Santhal. Through his works he makes conscious effort to present himself as a modern writer showcasing the progress of his character, unfortunately finding themselves as isolated and alienated, misfit in the society that is not theirs. He doesn't belong to the broader society. His inner self harks him back to find solace to his Adivasi community. The metaphorical garden, the cleaning of Jaher, the unwillingness to let go Jwala Kumar, the separation of Rupi and Guru Bari for the recovery of Rupi reiterate the establishment of the indigeneity over modernity

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