

SCRUTINIZING HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR'S *THE ADIVASI WILL NOT DANCE: STORIES IN A POSTDEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE*

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Abstract

The research article “Scrutinizing Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories* in a Postdevelopmental Perspective” brings out the sufferings underwent by the Santhal tribes of India as presented in the writings of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar from the perspective of the post-developmental concept that has due consideration for the Fourth World. The tribal communities in India are losing their cultures due to developments brought into their territory. The Santhals are losing their identity and their lands that transform them into people of nowhere. Enlightening oneself with the concept of postdevelopmentalism would assist in comprehending the root cause of the issues faced by the tribal societies. The hardships experienced by the tribal people are brought to limelight by contemporary tribal writers like Shekhar. The tribal cultures are overshadowed and are subjected to the westernized lifestyle. Modernisation that followed colonisation still has its negative impact on the lives of the tribal and the indigenous societies.

Key words: Impact – modernisation – Santhals – fading tribes – postdevelopmental.

Fourth World Literature includes the works written by the colonised Fourth World natives like the Tribes and Dalits of India, First nations of Canada, Native people of America, Aborigines of Australia, and Maoris of New Zealand. Literature produced by the people who are marginalized based on ethnicity, race, caste, language, gender and economy are categorized under Fourth World Literature for it reflects the cultural and socio-economic circumstances that affects the life of tribal communities. Fourth World Literature explains the ongoing discrimination experienced by the fourth world people who are dominated by the imperial power under the disguise of modernization, progress and development. Modernization is solely based on western ideas and practices that were unknown to the third world and fourth world countries.

Colonialism paved way to modernisation by introducing modern technologies into the tribal territories and this alters the tribal lifestyle. Globalization and urbanisation got its roots from modernization and it is looked at as the by-products of westernization, says Dean C. Tipps. He further comments that modernization is a European or American process that makes development ethnocentric in the form of progress and civilization. The ethnocentric notion behind modernization is explicit as stated by the post-modernist anthropologists Katy Gardner and David Lewis in *Anthropology, Development and the Post-Modern Challenge* “Modernization, as both a theory and a set of strategies, is open to criticism on virtually every front. Its assumption that all change inevitably follows the western model is breathtakingly ethnocentric and empirically incorrect” (14).

Modernisation spread by the colonisers during the colonial period sounded the death knell of many indigenous cultures in various parts of the world. The concept of exalting one culture and looking down upon other cultures is called cultural ethnocentrism in anthropology. Through the concept of colonisation the colonisers oppressed the people of the colonised nations and exploited their wealth by enslaving them. The concept of development is obstructive as Wolfgang Sachs demarcates in his *The Development Dictionary* that “it is high time to dismantle this mental structure” (1). The colonisers promoted their culture by ignoring the traditional lifestyle of the native communities that blemishes the originality and transforms the tribal culture to a point where it becomes difficult to even identify the changes. The northeast Indian tribal writer Mamang Dai in *Stupid Cupid* details the modern lifestyle of her tribal people who moved from their tribal native to Delhi and embraced the westernized way of life.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s famous short story collection *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories* encapsulates the challenging issues faced by the Santhal community. Shekhar, a Santhal by community and a medical officer by profession, works for the Jharkhand state government. Through the character of Mangal Murmu in the title story of “The Adivasi Will Not Dance”, Shekhar sheds light on the negative impacts of modernisation endured by the Santhal farmers. Murmu belongs to the Santhal tribe and had once been a farmer and now with no proper source of living has changed his profession. He explains that not many Santhals farm anymore and only a few of them still have farmland and most of it has been acquired by a mining company. The Santhals, the third largest tribe in India, belong to the Pre-Aryan period and are known as great fighters during British regime. Presently, the Santhals are forced to give up their lands and occupation for the upcoming factories and mines.

Mangal Murmu gives up farming due to the growing mining companies on the tribal habitat. The tribal people are losing their identity as agriculturalists for something they had not even dreamt of. Shekhar details the contemporary state of the Santhals that is suffering due to industrialization. Land is the major source of living that has been snatched from the tribal people. The tribal people live in harmony with their habitat. With the advent of the colonisers the tribes have been deprived of the rights over the land. The Santhals are

deracinated for raising industries like mining companies that exploit the wealth of the land. Mangal Murmu narrates that the district administration orders the villagers to “vacate their land—their village, farms, everything. Eleven villages! Can you imagine? (181).

The people are forced to make way for the thermal plant. Moreover the victims are asked to sing and dance for the initiation of the project which is built on ruins of their dwellings. Murmu on watching his people suffer uses the opportunity to press forward to the President. Over the microphone, he expresses all the feelings that he had hitherto controlled “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” (187).

The Santhals resorted to art and music for their livelihood. Tribal people are good at dancing and singing but the hunger and poverty compel them to sell it. Murmu composes songs and runs a dance troupe with musicians and dancers performing in famous towns. He says that their dance and music were once honoured, but as of now most of the dancers are migrating due to the loss of lands. Murmu spotlights the current state of their art that has brought them “displacement, tuberculosis” (178). The possessions of the tribal people including the art are usurped. Around the world the tribal folk artists are invited to perform dance and music for their unique skill. Their performances are reduced to mere entertainment that lacks intrinsic value.

Industrialisation does not leave the women folk of the communities untouched. The women are pushed to the verge of selling their bodies to save themselves from hunger. Modernisation has curtailed their sources of income and lifestyle. They are subjected to poverty and pushed to prostitution by giving up their traditional norms. The short story titled “November is the Month of Migration” delineates the life of Santhal women that travel to the neighbouring village named Namal to work in the fields of the zamindars. On their way to Namal, the women are exploited sexually by the policemen and the truck drivers. Shekhar narrates the story of a twenty year old girl named Talamai who is aware of many girls being sexually utilised by the men on their way to Namal. Shekhar narrates that the Santhal women do this at the railway station work for food and money that are given to the women in return for the pleasure they offer.

The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories details the story of a whole village being transformed into a red-light area due to the changes brought by industrialisation. The changes affected women more than the other gender. The tribal villages are altered into a coal-mining town, which is evident in the district of Lakhipur where the story plot is set. Girls are taken from the villages with fake promises that they would be provided education and job. In reality they are sold in the cities to men and women who earn money by misusing them sexually. The girls weep every day thinking of their life being drenched in this business but they have no other option to survive. It fetched them money, which in turn takes care of their other needs. Researchers Jacqueline Lynne and Melissa Farley in

“Prostitution of Indigenous Women: Sex Inequality and the Colonisation of Canada’s First Nations Women” explicate the social conditions that draw tribal women towards prostitution as “. . . sexism, racism, and colonialism via invasions of people’s lands, causing agricultural and community dislocation and environmental destruction. These events then result in poverty and rural-to-urban migration which produces huge urban labour pool available for labour exploitation generally as well as prostitution of women and children (2).

Shekhar narrates that it was the colony of the outcasts that has been transformed into a red light area. Long back the zamindars of some villages visited the colony of outcasts to “smoke hookah, drink, and watch the girls dance to the beats of the dholak” (146). As time passed the village was transformed for the betterment of the city dwellers that ended the life of the tribal societies. The deplorable state of the Santhal women due to modernisation is chronicled in the story as “Villages fell, a town rose: Lakkhipur, the coal-mine town. Mud houses fell, concrete ones mushroomed. Roads, police outposts, a railway station, a bus depot, shops, market, a slum and the busiest red-light area in the whole of the mining zone” (147). With the modern developments the villages were replaced by towns. Modernisation has worsened the long-standing tribal norms.

The postdevelopment concept voices out the essential criticism of the modernisation from a postcolonial angle. Modernisation had been often labeled to propagate ethnocentric ideas. Scholars like Arturo Escobar, Wolfgang Sachs, James Ferguson, Gustavo Esteva, Majid Rahnema, Gilbert Rist and Serge Latouche are the leading members of the postdevelopment school of thought. The concept accuses the models of development to be ethnocentric and Eurocentric because they are deliberately exterminating the indigenous cultures as Latouche describes in *In the Wake of the Affluent Society* that the West is “a steamroller crushing all cultures in its path” (22). In the name of modernisation the native cultures are jeopardised as the process of development is more of loss than benefiting the indigenous societies for it destructs their traditional lifestyle. Erica Prosser in “Applied Post-Development Theory: Case Study of Enda Graf Sahel” expounds the effects of Western culture being imposed on the indigenous population as “. . . locals are exposed to what they do not have, and are subsequently labeled as “underdeveloped” (43). Prosser further describes in the same article that rejecting development because of its attempts to eradicate indigenous culture, impose Western lifestyle and change the people’s perceptions towards themselves. The native communities are made voiceless by the outsiders who rule out the tribal systems and replace it with their own set of regulations.

The tribal habitats are replaced by the industries and companies, and the lands of the Santhals are forcefully taken away. The companies that have grabbed the lands of these poor Santhals have increased their social status by building big houses in town and send their children to good schools. Murmu reports that the non-tribals get treated by the best doctors “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 bare bones” (172). Land and water resources are ruined by the mushrooming industries and factories that dump boiler-ash

in the banks of the Subarnarekha River. The lower caste women pick boiler-ash and use it as fuel. The impact is worse on the tribal people comparing to the city dwellers. The tribes live one with nature: they conserve the water resources and are dependent on the nature.

The tribal people, during the upheaval of modernization, agitate with their unexpressed feelings because they did not welcome strangers. The non-tribals speak in favour of the tribals with other plans in mind; the tribals are not in need of others' sympathy for they would be happy if the intruders stop disturbing their environment and lifestyle. They were against the intrusion that destructed their peaceful life. The indigenous and the tribal people are cheated by the outsiders. It has been narrated that "If coal merchants have taken a part of our lands, the other part has been taken over by stone merchants, all Diku—Marwari, Sindhi, Mandal, Bhagat, Muslim" (172). The dominant groups weaken the condition of the tribal communities.

With the growing civilisation the tribal people and the indigenous groups are projected in bad light, paves way for further exploit of the wealth in and around them. This involves several stages like breaking down the image the city dwellers have on the native people, which automatically make the modern people look down upon the natives as uncivilised and barbaric. Tribal people are falsely accused and the accusations are believed by the non-tribals. The tribal people lose their religious identity along with their land, women and culture. In the words of Murmu: "We are losing our Sarna faith, our identities, and our roots. We are becoming people from nowhere" (173). This pitiable state of the tribes needs to be paid heed by the rest of the nation. Murmu adds on that the monstrous heavy vehicles that enters their villages could run down any vehicle comes their way. The deaths caused by these vehicles are solved by giving money to the family of the dead.

Education is one of the systems that alter the tribal lifestyle. The need for survival makes them attain academic knowledge. In the story "Baso-Jhi" Bijoya, a girl of marriageable age is not preferred as it scared the suitors. Another challenge involved in acquiring education is that the Santhal school going children are constantly asked to stop worshipping their Gods and "start revering Jisu and Mariam" as mentioned in story "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" (172). Education relocates them to new cities and constrains them to give up their traditional culture and eating habits. The work details the condition of Soren family that shift to Gujarat and are advised not to reveal their Santhal identity. Initially the family finds it difficult to avoid meat and eggs in their diet but later they get accustomed to the life there. Shekhar effectively explains the adversities faced by the tribals and how they tackle it.

The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories grants the reader an opportunity to read the life of Santhals in the state of Jharkhand, which is rarely fictionalised in mainstream. The tribal groups in India are exploited by outsiders especially the upper class members, land grabbers, merchants, missionaries, the media corporations and the government. It vividly depicts the Santhal culture and the hardships undergone mainly due to urbanization. Two years after the publication of *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories* it was banned and Shekhar was

suspended from his job on the grounds that it portrayed Adivasi women and Santhal culture in a bad light.

Tribal communities are hardly supported by the rest of the world; so they have started to voice out for the welfare of their lives and to safeguard their group. In *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories*, through Mangal Murmu the author speaks to the world about the situation of the tribal people. Thus it is argued that these sorts of development brought calamities into tribal lifestyle that made the villagers restless for these issues are new to them because they have never been subjected to changes by the outsiders to this level. Modernisation intrudes the traditional lifestyle by extinguishing the ancient tribal norms which has been blemished from its pristine state as noted in the novel. This is the tricky attitude of the colonizers who dominate the innocent natives to expand their territory and misrepresent the tribal communities to the world.

The colonisers operate the natives and their land according to their needs by ignoring the tribal traditional values. The developments introduced by the colonisers bruised the tribal values making their lives vulnerable to the intrusion of alien culture. The tribal people had survived without the modern inventions and western lifestyle. The indigenous communities are trying to cope with the changes that affect the mere existence of traditional practices. The tribal people being the self-sufficient group have not depended on other societies but the current epoch has made them demand help from non-tribal societies with a reduced amount of benefit to the tribals. Currently his people are witnessing the disfigurements done to their culture and surroundings that were being transformed in the face of modernisation.

Shekhar through his writings register the impact of development leading to the shrinkage of traditional practices as voiced out by the postdevelopment supporters who conclude that the principles of development are prejudiced and the only solution is to get rid of the entire form. The development that benefits the indigenous societies can be welcomed but a process that profits the privileged societies by usurping the treasures of indigenous communities cannot be encouraged. The article has concentrated on the crucial issues that are mostly ignored to be trivial and not duly considered by the society which is made to believe the fabricated image of the tribal communities who are undergoing serious challenges due to the imposition of alien cultures.

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