

Interplay of Power and Resistance in “The Adivasi Will Not Dance”

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"The position of the Santhals," says Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar in a conversation with Sujit Prasad "is still not worth singing or dancing about. Those who have the means to better themselves, they're doing well. Those who have nothing, well, they have nothing — not even a word of respect, kindness and acknowledgement from other people. Other people patronize the Santhals and that's all" (Prasad). A doctor by profession, Shekhar is the author of many important works including the novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* which won the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar and was nominated for The Hindu Prize and the International Dublin Literary Award. However, his collection of ten short stories titled *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, which was shortlisted for The Hindu Prize, stands out as a major work. Wry and pungent, this collection deals with the tale of exploitation and subjugation of the aboriginal Santhals hailing from Jharkhand, and comprises a variety of characters spread across the socio-economic spectrum. They include - doctors and daily wage workers, sex workers, and government officials. Troupe-master Mangal Murmu refuses to perform for the President of India and is beaten down; Suren and Gita, a love-blind couple, wait desperately outside a neonatal ward, hoping that their blue baby will turn pink; Panmuni and Biram Soren move to Vadodara in the autumn of their lives, only to find that they must stop eating meat to be accepted as citizens; and Talamai Kisku of the Santhal Pargana, migrating to West Bengal in search of work, must sleep with a policeman for fifty rupees and two cold bread pakoras.

There have been a variety of readings by Abin Chakraborty, Priyanka Tripathi, Vitthal V. Parab, and Kalekar Sanjay Shriram, ranging from the examination of the subalternity of the Santhals, the representation of the Adivasi consciousness, and conflicts of different

natures to the analysis of the dialectic of tribal voices in the stories. Tripathi writes that these stories portray:

...the lives of *Santhals* from the Jharkhand region, constantly struggling to live their life with dignity in this mineral-rich land where corporate takeovers and development anthem is trending. The characters in the collection may/may not be real but the issues, the violence and the treatment that he depicts in his fiction is surely relevant to our times as the Ideologies of State has the potential to be major threat to the democratic and diverse fabric of the Indian society (195).

The majority of these readings focus on the history of oppression, exploitation, and alienation of the Adivasis from the mainstream societal discourse. However, my paper aims at exploring the complex interplay of power and resistance underlying the final act of resistance by the narrator and protagonist Mangal Murmu of the title story, "The Adivasi Shall Not Dance" through his refusal to dance before the President of India which is a subversive act in itself.

The story opens with a baffling and brutal description of violence inflicted upon Mangal Murmu as he is being held to the ground by force while his fellow musicians are being beaten up ruthlessly after he refused to dance on stage. This exposition is in line with the title, as this violence blatantly points out the consequences an individual might face when (s)he, as a subject, questions the pervasive nature of the power of the Nation-State. The discourse constructed around the Adivasis by the mainstream caste-Hindu society, presents to us, the urban romanticised stereotypes of them. This discourse which makes them the Other to this society, is poignantly pointed out in Mangal Murmu's remarks: "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" (Hansda 170). To this world, to the caste-Hindu society, Santhals have been known for their dances only. This is how the world has exploited them, snatched away their very own lands for industrialization which are rich in natural resources and minerals. In the words of Mangal Murmu, the Adivasi dance and music are sacred to their community, but they have been forced to sell this for food. The

exoticization of the Other in the name of culture has been a recurring and constant trope of the elite Savarna dominated Bengali intelligentsia. The representation of the Adivasis in literature, popular media, TV, and films that have contributed to their marginalization as the eternal Other, demands a systematic and critical study. Satyajit Ray's *Aranyer Din Ratri*, *Agantuk* are replete with these stereotypes where overt romanticization and the representation of them as the colonial paradigm of the "noble savage," (Chakraborty 4) antithetical to the caste-Hindu civilization are to be found. Adivasi women have been stereotypically portrayed as the object of lust for the upper-caste, urban elite *Bhadraloks*. Hari who wants to forget rejection from a girl, seduces and makes love with Duli, an Adivasi woman, in the forest, in the film *Aranyer Din Ratri*. But after this, the audience is left to wonder about what happens to Duli next. The Adivasi woman must be the one to satisfy the *Bhadralok's* lust during his momentary escape from the din and bustle of the city to the village of Palamau in Bihar. Mangal Murmu's commentary is of utmost importance in this context: "in the name of Adivasi culture and Jharkhandi culture, it is necessary to make Adivasis dance" (Hansda 179). This is how they have been subjected to subjugation for centuries. The Adivasis have remained the perennial Other, also a threat to the colonial modernity of the Hindu society and this is evident when the narrator says if Santhals make up their mind, they can stop all the business in the mines. The coal mafias are aware of this fact too: "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" (Hansda 174).

Foucault, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* argues that discourse gives birth to a plethora 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: a plethora of the 'signified' in relation to a single 'signifier'. From this point of view, discourse is both plenitude and endless wealth" (134). Therefore, the discourse that has been carefully constructed about Adivasis throughout the centuries, is capable of generating various connotations and meanings that are likely to be understood in a network of references to the other discourses that ultimately contribute to further marginalization and victimization of the Santhal community. This can be understood in reference to Maroona Murmu's article "There is Caste

Discrimination in West Bengal? Exactly Like Santhals” where she writes about the traumatic experiences of discrimination that a Professor (who comes from the Santhal community) of a prestigious University in Calcutta has faced throughout her life starting from the childhood: “She ‘suffered’ from a unique disqualification of possessing fair complexion. Seeing such a strange adivasi, the *bhadralok* observers would patronisingly greet her with a grin – “Oh! You look like us!”. She retorts – “You don’t even have the ability to understand how insulting your praise is to me”. When she was appointed as Assistant Professor in a university, the head of her Department informed her that the students did not wish to study grammar and dense theoretical papers with her. O yes, these subjects are the ancestral professional preserve of the educated elites of our society.”

This experience of Otherization is also described by Mangal Murmu in the story. Santhals are dependent mostly on Government schools or Christian missionary schools for their children’s education. In these schools too, the children are given new names such as “David and Mikail and Kiristofer and whatnot” (172). The process of interpellation is at work here. In the words of Althusser: “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject” (173). The process of renaming Santhal children is a way to ensure the erasure of their cultural roots and identity to make them obedient subjects to the dominant ideology of the State. Murmu is also repelled by caste-Hindus who want them to forget their Sarna faith, to stop eating beef and pork, to stop consuming alcohol:

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. They too want to make us forget our Sarna religion, convert us into Safa-Hor . . . the pure people, the clean people, but certainly not as clean and pure as themselves, that’s for sure. Always a little lesser than they are (Hansda 173).

The process of familiarization and defamiliarization are both occurring here, by erasing their very own identity and roots, on one hand, and the other, by making them part of the dominant discourse through the act of giving them Christian names. Ideological State Apparatus such as schools, systems of the Churches, the Law, the media (press, radio, TV) interpellate the subjects of the Nation-state in the dominant ideology. There is a plurality of

ISAs and they belong to the private domains. Private and public domains are determined by the bourgeoisie law. The State is above the law exercising its authority through ideology or by repression and violence (Repressive State Apparatus): “the Repressive State Apparatus functions ‘by violence’, whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses function ‘by ideology’” (Althusser 145).

In this context, the refusal to dance becomes an act of resistance which is of immense importance. The denial flies in the face of the State Power, as well as the ISAs and RSAs. The refusal to dance is, thus, so infuriating to the President of India that he orders police, the RSA to beat up Mangal Murmu and his troupe. At the same time, his refusal to dance offers a counter-discourse to the popular discourse made by the upper-caste and upper-class about Santhals that I have discussed before. This denial is also a challenge to the State Power that had oppressed them and is still continuing to do so by snatching their lands away for industrial projects rendering them homeless, rootless, identity-less: “We are losing our Sarna-faith, our identities, and our roots. We are becoming people from nowhere” (173). He is shocked at the way the President who hails from the neighbouring district of Birbhum behaves with him and his troupe. Rabin-Haram (Hansda 170) or Rabindranath Tagore who had set up Shantiniketan in Birbhum used to treat Santhals with the utmost respect while the President of India doesn’t which is incomprehensible to Mangal Murmu. The President is the representative of the State Apparatus here. He acts on behalf of the State and anyone who doesn’t obey its orders is bound to be punished. Therefore, Mangal Murmu’s defiant call operates as a negation that not only rejects the capitalist logic of development that dispossesses tribal, minority communities of their homes, of their lands, but also asserts the agency of the subaltern consciousness that can not only speak but also can reject colonial modernity, industrialization, and interpellation of the State Apparatus at once, if necessary.

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