

Article

Socio-Cultural Issues of the Santals in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015)

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Abstract: The Santals are struggling to achieve socio-economic progress due to socio-political exploitation and economic marginalization. Their culture face challenges due to the growing influence of Christianity. This paper seeks to explore socio-cultural issues of the Santals of India. The study highlights their current issues and claims. It consists in studying Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's text *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015). Though the text this paper reflects their issues of cultural erosion due to religious conversion and capitalistic development. Further, the paper aims at studying socio-cultural perspective of the Santals' demand of *Sari-Sarna* religion code. It tries to underline their contemporary challenges including land disputes, migration, and marginalisation. The findings of the paper centered on explaining Santal's problems of integration with mainstream society.

Keywords: Santal; Indigenous community; Tribal writing in English; social and cultural issues

Introduction

Indigenous people are the original inhabitants of India. They have their distinct languages, culture, and identity. The indigenous inhabitants live close to nature. The Indigenous people are forest-dependent communities. They are determined to preserve the land and the forest. They also always want to preserve their tradition, culture, and costume. However, the capitalist exploitation of the forests and the plunder of mineral

resources for industrialization brought ecological imbalance and destitution of the indigenous inhabitants.

Indigenous Studies is one of the genres of Indian marginalized literature. Marginalized literature focuses on the groups of Dalits, Adivasis, and women. The study addresses the issues of the socio-political situation of the Adivasis. It deals with the context of social prejudice, discrimination, economic marginalization, and identity.

Indigenous Studies has been drawing upon tribal communities of India. It is a new research field for academic and independent scholars. Adivasi Studies envisage to study of socio-economic, socio-political, socio-cultural, and developmental economics in the context of India. Adivasi Studies is interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue is a very important aspect. It consists of the representation of culture and people.

Tribes in India constitute 8.6% of the total population according to the data of the 2011 Census. Approximately, 705 indigenous groups in India are recognized. Tribes in India have been divided according to racial groups such as Negritos, Proto-Australoids, Mongoloids, and Mediterraneans. Santal, Bhill, Gond, Mnuda, Oraon, etc. tribes belong to the Proto-Australoids racial group. These ethnic groups are called the 'Scheduled Tribe.' They are often referred to as Adivasis or indigenous people of India. On the other hand, India has 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). They are found in 18 Indian states and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Every year on the 9th August International Day of the World Indigenous Peoples is celebrated worldwide. The theme for the 2024 International Day of the World Indigenous Peoples was "Protecting the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and Initial Contact".

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar ensured social, political, and economic rights to the Indian indigenous groups. Indian Constitution Article-366(25) defines Scheduled Tribes mean such tribe or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 of the Constitution to be Scheduled Tribes. Indian tribes have some Constitutional Provisions in the Fifth and Sixth Schedule and Article 46, Article 164, Article 243D, Article 243T, Article 330, Article 332, and Article 338A.

The Santals are one of the largest ethnic communities in eastern India. They are found even in Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar. They speak Santali and other regional languages. They are considered as a polyglot community. Since the British colonisation they had gone through several uprisings, revolts, and resistance. They have been struggling to survive against marginalisation, discrimination, and injustices even in the contemporary period. The continuation of exploitation of the Santals by the non-tribals in India has been a big challenge for their development and upliftment.

The Adivasi Will Not Dance (2015) is a collection of short stories by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, an Indian writer and doctor. The book, published in 2015, presents a powerful and unfiltered look at the lives of Adivasis (indigenous people) in Jharkhand, capturing their struggles, resilience, and exploitation in contemporary India. The book contains ten short stories, each exploring different facets of Adivasi life. Through these stories, Shekhar portrays the marginalization of Adivasi communities,

their interactions with mainstream society, and the complexities of identity, dignity, and survival.

Some key themes include:

- **Exploitation of Adivasis:** The title story, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, follows an Adivasi man named Mangal Murmu, who refuses to perform a traditional dance for a political event after witnessing the hardships his people face due to displacement and economic hardship.
- **Struggles of Women:** Several stories depict the oppression and vulnerabilities of Adivasi women, addressing issues like sexual violence and economic exploitation.
- **Cultural Erosion:** The stories highlight how Adivasi traditions are being lost or commercialized for the benefit of outsiders.
- **Economic Hardship:** Many characters struggle with poverty, forced migration, and displacement due to industrialization.

Materials and Methods

Literature Review

The city life of the Santals in *Adivasi Will Not Dance* is depicted as a crisis for their tribal identity (Marandi, 2). Their migration to cities resulted in social injustice, exploitation, and discrimination. Their tradition and identity witnessed a kind of threat in the city. The Santals in the crowd of the mainstream and globalisation risked their cultural history, religion, and language. They faced sexual violence, poverty, and atrocities. The challenges of socio-cultural and economic issues by the hegemonic forces changed their understanding of traditional life and practices.

The Santals remained deprived of some constitutional privileges (Roy, 6). They are oppressed by the corporate capitalist who made them miserable and dispossessed from their inhabited places. The marginalised Santal community was uprooted and overpowered by mainstream society. Subalternity of the Santals amidst the urban and elite sections created discrimination. Immense poverty made a female character in the book *Adivasi will not Dance* vulnerable to being sexually exploited by a police officer.

The impact of modernisation encountered by the Santals threatened their identity for survival (Nilofer, 89). The capitalist power led them to displacement of their lands and impoverishment. The damaging conditions of modernisation collapsed their livelihood and Indigenous identity. They struggled to cope after losing lands and natural resources. The book *Adibasi will not Dance* elucidated the exploitation of the mining companies.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar in the book tried to empower the tribal women in the context of characterisation (Ghosh & Challa, 2). He asserted voices for the marginalised tribal women in *Adibasi Will Not Dance*. He represented the contemporary socio-economic condition of the Santhal community. His dynamic storytelling technique expressed the indigenous identity of the Santals realistically. He portrayed the submerged voices of the tribal woman character through Talamai Tudu. The

subjugated position of Santal women highlighted precariousness and submissiveness in mainstream society.

The book explored the miserable conditions of tribals in Jharkhand (Khan, 2022). The indigenous Santal culture is depicted through unresolved problems of poverty, displacement, and discrimination. With the rapid growth of industrialisation and urbanisation the lives of the Santal community have been affected immensely. The control over the natural resources by the capitalist government and private agencies resulted in deforestation and displacement of the Adivasi people. The corporate exploitation of both the land and tribals increased in the name of development.

Hansda's ethnographic understanding of the Santal tribe encourages him to be a representative of his community (Ghosh, 2022). His vision marked an impact on the literary field to find out the plight of the Santals in Jharkhand. His experimentation with this book *Adivasi Will Not Dance* recognised him as an innovative writer. His works incorporated the study of Santal's religion, black magic, and child abuse.

The capitalistic economic system has been seen as a cultural and traditional change of the Santals (Lulekar, 2022). They were alienated from their land and some converted to Christianity. They lost traditional occupations to the emergence of industrialisation and urbanisation. They protested against corporate exploitation but in opposite they got beaten up. The material exploitations of the mining companies have driven them to poverty and hunger.

The Adivasis's assertion at the national and international level has some historical and representational issues (Rycroft, 2014). A new form of resistance emerged from the abuse of their lands and cultural rights. Their Indigenous rights in the context of postcolonial India are denied by the state and civil society. The re-assertion of Adivasi identities or rights is an important contemporary discourse. Adivasi as 'Indigenous and Tribal peoples' emphasizes a scope in both regional and international forums.

The Santal women suffer more marginalisation than men within their community (Kumar. T & Padmanabhan, 2020). The Santal women are harassed and assaulted by the upper-class 'diku.' They experience also inequality and social exclusion around their existing group. The Santals in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's novel *Adibasi will not Dance* portrayed realistically. The book depicted how they struggled with poverty, unemployment, landlessness, and gender inequality. They remained insecure about their ethnic identity because of capitalistic oppression. The government agencies illegally encroached lands of the Santals and displaced them from their lands. The rapid change from a tribal village into an urbanized city stood as a cultural crisis for the Santals.

Objective of the Study

To analyse the writings of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

To explore the current socio-cultural issues of the Santals

To highlight the contemporary challenges and claims of the Santals

To identify their present situation in terms of various government policies and schemes

Delimitation of the Study

The study has been limited with the selected author's writings

The study has been completed within the Santal community of India

Methodology

The paper primarily identifies the socio-cultural issues of the Santals in India. For this paper descriptive data has been used to analyse the selected texts of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. The current challenges of the Santals described in the paper through qualitative data and discourse analysis method. The research design of the paper is based on observing socio-cultural problems of the Santals. The study has been developed with the observational technique and discourse analysis. The data has been collected through selected books, journals, and articles.

Results and Discussion

The Adivasi Will Not Dance by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a collection of short stories that provides a poignant and unfiltered glimpse into the lives of Adivasis (particularly Santhals) in contemporary India. Through his stories, Shekhar brings to light several socio-cultural issues faced by Adivasis, including:

1. Exploitation and Displacement

A major theme in the book is the forced displacement of Adivasis from their land. The title story, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, highlights how industrialization, mining, and government projects deprive Adivasis of their traditional livelihoods. The protagonist, Mangal Murmu, refuses to dance for a politician, symbolizing resistance against systemic exploitation.

2. Loss of Land and Identity

The stories depict how the encroachment of industries and urbanization threaten Adivasi land, culture, and identity. The displacement leads to a loss of their traditional ways of life, leaving them economically and socially vulnerable.

3. Poverty and Economic Hardship

Many stories show Adivasis struggling to make ends meet, engaging in menial labor, migration for work, and even dangerous occupations such as mining. Poverty forces them into exploitative labor conditions, such as working in brick kilns and factories, often at the mercy of corrupt employers.

4. Gender and Sexuality

Shekhar's stories depict the exploitation of Adivasi women, highlighting issues of sexual violence, oppression, and survival. In *November Is the Month of Migrations*, an Adivasi woman is sexually exploited by contractors and landlords while working in a

far-off land. The book also explores love and desire within Adivasi communities, challenging mainstream stereotypes about tribal sexuality.

5. Cultural Erosion and Resistance

The stories reflect the tension between tradition and modernity. The younger generation of Adivasis often moves to cities, assimilating into dominant cultures and losing touch with their roots. However, resistance is also a recurring theme, as seen in the refusal to conform to expectations, whether in rejecting forced labor or refusing to perform for political propaganda.

6. Discrimination and Marginalization

The book highlights the marginalization of Adivasis in mainstream society, where they are treated as second-class citizens. They face discrimination in employment, education, and social spaces, which further entrenches their struggles.

7. Political and Corporate Exploitation

Adivasis are often used as political tools during elections, with promises of development that never materialize. In *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, politicians exploit Adivasis for cultural performances but do nothing to address their real issues, such as hunger and land loss.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* is a powerful critique of the socio-cultural issues affecting Adivasi communities in India. It sheds light on their resilience and resistance against exploitation; while also exposing the harsh realities they face in a rapidly changing world. The other significant socio-cultural issues discussed in the book including:

8. Identity and Cultural Preservation

- **Language and Script Endangerment:**

The Santali language (recognized under the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution) is often overshadowed by dominant regional languages like Hindi, Bengali, and Odia. The Ol Chiki script (invented by Pandit Raghunath Murmu) is still not widely used in formal education, limiting literacy in Santali.

- **Decline of Oral Traditions:**

Santals have a rich oral storytelling tradition, including folk songs, myths, and riddles, but these are declining due to modernization and urban migration. Christian missionary influence and globalization have altered traditional customs and belief systems.

9. Land Alienation and Displacement

- **Loss of Traditional Lands:**

Santals traditionally practice shifting agriculture and are deeply connected to forests. However, government policies, deforestation, and land grabbing by

corporations have displaced many. Land acquisition for mining and industrial projects (e.g., coal mining in Jharkhand and Odisha) has led to forced displacement.

- **Conflict over Forest Rights:**

While the Forest Rights Act (2006) recognizes Indigenous claims, bureaucratic delays and corporate pressure often deny Santals their legal rights to forest land.

10. Economic Challenges and Exploitation

- **Poverty and Unemployment:**

Santals mainly depend on subsistence farming, daily wage labor, and forest produce, but economic opportunities are limited. Many migrate to cities for work but face exploitation, low wages, and poor working conditions.

- **Exploitation by Moneylenders:**

Due to lack of banking access, many Santals rely on moneylenders who trap them in cycles of debt, leading to bonded labor.

- **Lack of Infrastructure:**

Santal-majority areas suffer from poor road connectivity, healthcare, and education, leading to social exclusion.

11. Education and Literacy

- **Low Literacy Rates:**

Although improving, Santal literacy rates remain lower than the national average, especially for women. Lack of teachers proficient in Santali language and Santali medium school makes formal education difficult.

- **Dropout Rates and Child Labor:**

Economic hardship forces many Santal children to drop out and engage in agricultural labor or domestic work.

12. Health and Nutrition Issues

- **Malnutrition and Infant Mortality:**

Santals face high rates of malnutrition, especially in Jharkhand and Odisha. Lack of access to clean drinking water and sanitation leads to diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, and diarrhea.

- **Limited Healthcare Facilities:**

Remote villages lack hospitals and trained medical professionals. Traditional healers (Ojhas) still play a crucial role in Santal healthcare, but they lack modern medical support.

- **Alcoholism:**

Alcohol consumption (Handia, Mahua liquor) is culturally significant but has led to health issues and domestic violence in some cases.

13. Gender and Social Issues

- **Role of Women:**

Santal society is relatively egalitarian, with women actively participating in agriculture and decision-making. However, modern influences and economic stress have increased gender-based violence and discrimination.

- **Early Marriages and Lack of Awareness:**

Child marriage and early pregnancies are common due to poverty and lack of awareness.

- **Witch-Hunting Superstition:**

Accusations of witchcraft (Daini Pratha) still occur in some regions, leading to violence against women, especially widows and elderly women.

14. Political Representation and Marginalization

- **Underrepresentation in Governance:**

Despite constitutional safeguards, Santals often have low political representation. Reservation policies benefit some, but political elites often fail to address real issues.

- **Movements for Rights:**

The Santal Rebellion (1855-56) led by Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu was a major anti-British uprising. Modern Santal community demand better land rights, education, and cultural preservation. The Santal (Santhal) community is one of the largest Indigenous (Adivasi) groups in India. They primarily follow the Sarna religion (also known as Sarnaism or Sarna Dharma). This faith is deeply rooted in nature worship, revering trees, rivers, hills, and the forces of nature as sacred.

Santals' Demand for Sarna Religion Recognition

For decades, the Santal and other Indigenous communities in India have been demanding official recognition of Sarna religion as a separate religious category in the Indian census and government records. Their key demands include:

a) **Separate Religious Code in the Census**

- Currently, Sarna followers have to choose from existing categories like Hinduism, Christianity, or "Other." They demand a distinct "Sarna" code in government documents.

b) **Protection of Indigenous Culture and Identity**

- The recognition would help preserve their unique religious and cultural practices, distinct from mainstream religions.

c) **Land and Forest Rights**

- Since Sarnaism is centered around nature worship, recognizing it as a formal religion strengthens their claim to protect their sacred groves (**Sarna Sthal**) from deforestation and encroachment.

d) Legal and Constitutional Recognition

- Sarna followers seek the same legal protections and benefits granted to other recognized religions in India.

Recent Developments of Sarna Religion Code

- In 2020, the Jharkhand Assembly passed a resolution to recognize Sarna religion and sent it to the Central Government for approval.
- There have been ongoing protests and movements across Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Assam, where large Santal and other Adivasi populations live.
- Many tribal leaders and organizations continue to push for national-level recognition.

The Santal indigenous tribe in India faces significant challenges in integrating with mainstream society. These issues arise from historical marginalization, socio-economic disadvantages, and cultural differences. Many Santals rely on agriculture, forest produce, and daily wage labor. Industrialization and land acquisition have left many jobless. Loss of ancestral land due to industrial projects, mining, and government policies has forced many into poverty. Traditional Santal crafts and products struggle in competitive markets dominated by mainstream businesses. Many Santal students face social exclusion and stereotypes, discouraging them from continuing education. Modernization and migration are diluting Santal traditions, yet mainstream society often treats them as "backward." Caste-based prejudices extend to tribals, making social inclusion difficult. Many Santals follow their traditional Sarna religion, but there is pressure from Hinduization and Christian missionary activities, leading to internal divisions. While integration is necessary, it should be done in a way that respects Santal identity and autonomy rather than forcing assimilation. Possible Solutions for Better Integration will encourage stronger enforcement of land laws to prevent displacement. The challenge is finding a balance between integrating Santals into mainstream society while respecting and preserving their unique cultural identity.

Conclusion

The Santals need sustainable development. Efforts are being made by the government, NGOs, and community leaders to address these challenges through land rights movements, education programs, healthcare initiatives, and cultural preservation projects. However, more sustained action is needed for their overall well-being. To address these socio-cultural issues government policies must focus on promoting Santali language and education, protecting land rights and ensuring fair compensation, improving healthcare and infrastructure, empowering Santal women through education and employment, and ensuring political representation and community leadership.

Addressing the socio-cultural challenges faced by the Santals requires sustained governmental and community efforts. Key policy recommendations include:

1. **Promotion of Santali Language and Education:** Expanding Ol Chiki script education and integrating Santali into mainstream curricula.
2. **Land Rights Protection:** Strengthening the implementation of the Forest Rights Act to prevent displacement.
3. **Economic Development:** Expanding employment opportunities and financial inclusion programs.
4. **Healthcare and Infrastructure Improvement:** Enhancing medical facilities and sanitation in tribal areas.
5. **Political Representation:** Encouraging Santal participation in governance to ensure their concerns are addressed.

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