



Tradition and Transition: Exploring Changing Tribal Lives in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's Narratives

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Abstract

*Indian tribal literature has increasingly gained scholarly attention for its powerful representation of socially excluded and their socio-cultural realities. Among contemporary tribal writers, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar stands out for his vivid depiction of the Santhal community and their experiences of dislocation, exploitation, and cultural transformation. His literary works provide perspective of insiders on tribal life, reflecting both the continuity of traditional values and the profound impact of development and modernization. This research paper examines the dynamic relationship between tradition and transition in Shekhar's narratives, focusing particularly on works such as *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories* and *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*.*

The paper focuses how Shekhar portrays the transformation of tribal society under the pressures of industrialization, migration, and socio-political marginalization. It also explores the themes of identity, gender dynamics, cultural memory, ecological consciousness, and resistance embedded within his narratives. Through qualitative textual analysis and a socio-cultural framework, the paper analyses how tribal traditions—such as communal living, oral storytelling, and close relationships with nature are challenged by external forces such as capitalism, urbanization, and state-driven development. The research further highlights how Shekhar's works contribute to the broader discourse of native literature by reclaiming tribal voices and challenging stereotypes about Adivasi communities.

Ultimately, the paper concludes that Shekhar's narratives function as both literary expression and socio-political commentary, illuminating the evolving identity of tribal communities in contemporary India. His works bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, offering valuable insights into the on-going transformation of indigenous lives.

Keywords:

Adivasi Identity, Cultural Transition, Modernization, Displacement, Postcolonial Studies..



Introduction:

Tribal communities in India, commonly referred to as Adivasis, represent some of the oldest inhabitants of the subcontinent. Despite their rich cultural heritage and strong ecological traditions, these communities have historically been marginalized in mainstream socio-political and literary discourse. Over the past few decades, however, tribal literature has emerged as a significant field of study, bringing attention to the lived experiences, cultural traditions, and struggles of indigenous communities. One of the most prominent voices in contemporary tribal literature is Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a writer belonging to the Santhal tribe of Jharkhand. His works are known for their realistic portrayal of tribal life, addressing issues such as land alienation, social exploitation, migration, and cultural transformation. Shekhar's narratives provide a rare insider perspective that challenges stereotypical representations of tribal communities often found in mainstream literature.

The central concern of Shekhar's writing is the tension between tradition and transition. Tribal societies have traditionally maintained close relationships with nature, communal social structures, and oral storytelling traditions. However, the rapid expansion of industrialization, mining, and infrastructure development has profoundly altered the socio-economic conditions of these communities. These changes have led to displacement, loss of ancestral lands, and the erosion of cultural traditions. In works such as *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories*, Shekhar portrays how tribal communities struggle to preserve their cultural identity while confronting the forces of modernization. The stories reveal the complexities of tribal life, highlighting both elasticity and sensitivity. Themes such as poverty, gender discrimination, migration, and resistance recur throughout his narratives, offering readers a deeper understanding of the socio-political realities faced by Adivasi communities.

Similarly, his novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* explores the intimate aspects of tribal life, including family relationships, community beliefs, and the influence of traditional healing practices. The novel reflects the intersection of traditional cultural values with modern medical and social frameworks, illustrating how tribal communities negotiate change while retaining elements of their heritage. His narratives depict the tensions between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to changing socio-economic conditions. By foregrounding lived experiences and emotional realities, Shekhar's writing not only documents the struggles of tribal communities but also emphasizes their resilience and agency.



The present paper seeks to analyse the representation of changing tribal lives in Shekhar's narratives. It examines how his works capture the complex relationship between tradition and transition, exploring the ways in which tribal identity is reshaped in response to contemporary challenges. The paper also analysis and evaluate the contribution of the author and impact of modernization and development on tribal communities focusing on the themes of identity, displacement, and cultural transformation in his works with the resilience and resistance of tribal communities.

Review of Literature-

The research centres on the concept of self censorship as depicted in the writings of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. The following is a review of the existing research on the works, which bridges the gap between tradition, transition and modernity, offering valuable insights into the on-going transformation of indigenous lives. This study highlights the broader discourse of native literature by reclaiming tribal voices and challenging stereotypes about Adivasi communities as revealed through the literature review.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a Doctor employed in a Government Primary Hospital in Pakur, a remote area in Jharkhand. Being a Santhali tribal, he gives us an insider's account of tribal world view through a raw and sensitive depiction of tribality. Hansda is the winner of Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar in English (2015) and the joint winner of the Muse India-Satish Verma Young Writer Award (2015). Besides being a practicing doctor, Hansda has published many works in English. He is the most celebrated writer of Santhali community and adivasis at large. His book *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories* (2017) established Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar as one of the most prominent writers of tribal literature in contemporary times. Through this book, he not only provides us with an insider perspective but gives us a voluminous account of the plight of adivasis across India. The very act of assertion through the line "the adivasi will not dance" in the title of his collection of short stories is the voice of the subaltern who is trying to defy and resist mainstream culture.

A majority of the narratives within the text featured female protagonists. A limited number of these female characters exhibit audacity and resistance, while the majority are encumbered by the inequities imposed upon them by a system that subjugates them. Furthermore, the study by Koduri and Raju examines the depiction of women's status in patriarchal civilisations, the clash between modernisation and traditionalism, and the detrimental impact of sex labour and mining on society. Shekhar garnered substantial literary



attention and received negative criticism for his book, particularly from community members. His work, primarily focused on depicting Santhal women, was deemed upsetting and uncouth (Koduri & Raju, 2022).

Hansda's major literary achievement is his debut novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupri Baskey* that has won him several accolades. He won the 2015 Yuva Puraskar and was shortlisted for the 2014 Crossroad Book Award, shortlisted for the 2014 Hindu Literary Prize, long listed for the 2016 International Dublin Literary Award, and has jointly won the 2015 Muse India Young Writer Award. This novel has also been translated into Tamil and Bengali. The story revolves around a central theme i.e. the mysterious ailment of Rupri Baskey and around the central theme hovers a socio-economic and political cultural equations that cut across the broader discourses of identity politics.

Tribal Tradition in Shekhar's Narratives

One of the defining features of Shekhar's writing is his detailed depiction of tribal traditions. These traditions are not merely cultural practices but form the foundation of tribal identity and social organization. Tribal communities traditionally maintain a deep connection with nature. Their livelihoods depend on forests, rivers, and agricultural land. In Shekhar's narratives, nature is not just a background setting but an integral part of tribal life.

Community and Collective Identity

Unlike individualistic societies, tribal communities emphasize collective living. Social relationships are built around cooperation, mutual support, and shared cultural practices. Oral traditions play a crucial role in preserving tribal history and cultural values. Elders in tribal communities act as custodians of collective memory, passing down stories, myths, and rituals from one generation to the next.

Transition, Industrialization and Displacement

Despite the resilience of tribal traditions, the forces of industrialization have significantly transformed tribal societies. Development projects such as mining, power plants, and infrastructure construction have resulted in the displacement of tribal populations from their ancestral lands. In the story, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, Power plants project has taken the tribal communities place in the name of development, where they used to live peacefully by celebrating their all rituals and festivals. Under the great pressure of government and modernization they had to leave their loving place reluctantly.



Migration, Urbanization and Cultural Hybridization

An empty stomach invites plenty of questions of living. So economic hardships often force tribal families to migrate to urban areas in search of employment and to get bread and butter. This migration leads to the erosion of traditional cultural practices. Exposure to urban lifestyles and modern technologies has created new cultural identities among younger generations of tribal communities.

Representation of Women

Shekhar gives a significant place to women in his narratives. His works portray the complex realities faced by tribal women, including poverty, social discrimination, and vulnerability to exploitation. At the same time, his female characters display resilience and agency. Shekhar portrays Santhal women not just as victims, but as individuals with agency, strength, and complexity. He presents them as fighters who navigate extreme economic hardships, survival anxieties, and patriarchal structures within and outside their community.

Shekhar writes about the struggle of tribal women for survival. His characters often highlight the daily, painful struggles of tribal women, including issues of sexual exploitation and the necessity of selling their labour. In *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, The titular character, Rupi, is a middle-aged woman navigating illness and social antagonism in her village. His depiction of women in *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* was controversial, leading to a temporary ban by the Jharkhand government in 2017, with critics alleging he portrayed Adivasi women in a negative light.

Resistance and Assertion of Identity

A recurring theme in Shekhar's works is resistance against exploitation. The title story of *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories* symbolizes this resistance, as the protagonist refuses to perform for authorities responsible for dispossessing his community. This act of refusal becomes a powerful expression of dignity and protest. Shekhar has given plenty of examples of resistance and assertion of identity in his works. The protagonist, Mangal Murmu, in his work "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" refuses to perform at an event honouring the President of India because his village is being uprooted by a power plant. His refusal to sing and dance a sacred, communal act is a direct, conscious act of resistance against the commoditization of Adivasi culture and the injustice of displacement.



The character Dulari, in his novel "The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey" serves as a model of active resistance against gender inequalities and patriarchal structures within the Santhal society. The novel also asserts Adivasi identity by weaving in the community's history, their struggle for a separate state (Jharkhand), and their connection to the land, defying the erasure of their culture. "They Eat Meat!" Short Story asserts the validity of Adivasi food habits and cultural practices in the face of prejudices held by "mainstream" Indian society (Diku), particularly when the characters are forced to adapt to a different environment. Resistance to Development Through characters who face displacement due to mining and industrial expansion, such as in "November is the Month of Migrations," Shekhar highlights the "slow violence" of economic policies that destroy Adivasi livelihoods.

Conclusion

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's narratives provide a compelling exploration of the changing realities of tribal life in contemporary India. Through his vivid storytelling and authentic portrayal of Adivasi communities, he highlights the tensions between tradition and transition. His works reveal the profound impact of modernization, industrialization, and socio-political marginalization on tribal societies. At the same time, they celebrate the resilience, cultural pride, and resistance of indigenous communities. Ultimately, Shekhar's narratives contribute significantly to the field of tribal literature by bringing marginalized voices into the mainstream literary discourse. His writing serves as both a cultural archive and a powerful critique of the forces that threaten tribal identities and livelihoods.

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