



# Unheard voices of the Voiceless: Analysing Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*

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**Abstract**— *The displacement of people in the context of development has been a recurrent theme in the recent ecocriticism literature. Displacement is inevitable, but the victims are always the underprivileged. This paper focuses on the theme of displacement of the marginalised. The paper voices for the voiceless victims. The developmental projects are always aimed at the deprived community. There are so many social, political and racial agendas in implementing such mega projects. The paper pictures the trauma of a tribal community, in particular the protagonist, Mangal Murmu. Most of the developmental projects are opposed by the people, in particular the residents of that particular vicinity, where the projects shape out. There are many volunteers and environmental activists who join hands in opposing such projects. The writer Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's title story *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* depicts the plight of a tribal who could not even voice out his trauma. It is the tale of an old man, Mangal Murmu, a trained artist, who runs a dance troupe for many years. He denies to sing and dance for a high profile function to show his protest, which goes unnoticed. The tribal community is hailed as a heritage of a country. Every country preserves its own cultural milieu through different projects. The tribal people are accoladed annually during national or international celebrations. They are given a stage only to exhibit their cultural art. The protagonist makes use of such an opportunity to expose the plight of his people, which finally turn out to be a fiasco. This paper gives voice over to Mangal Murmu, who could not get a proper platform to put across his trauma. The paper explores the multiple exploitation of the tribal community.*

**Keywords**— *Adivasi, culture, displacement, exploitation, Santhals.*

Developmental projects are indispensable for the progress of a nation. Post-colonial India adopted LPG (liberalisation, Privatisation, Globalisation) schemes to facilitate the flow of economy. These projects tend to displace people drastically. In recent years this displacement has become more intensified due to economic policies. The victims of such projects are always the marginalised. In the name of economic development, the indigenous peoples are involuntarily removed from their lands and homes without any meaningful efforts made for their proper rehabilitation and integration into the modern development process (Mathur, 2008). Globalisation has simplified the flow of goods and capital across the world. But on the other hand, it has increased the polarisation

between the rich and the poor. The rich become richer and the poor become poorer. The projects focus on only short-term benefits but overlook the long-term impact on the victims and the environment. Development of a nation is not directly proportionate to the progress of the people. Displaced persons are at times those who are especially vulnerable by class, caste, gender or age (Kaushal, 2009). Though the projects benefit many, the prime victims are penalised.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's "The Adivasi will not dance" is a novella that depicts the plight of a tribal community, Santhals, the direct victims of a mining project. The writer belongs to Santhal community. He becomes the

voice of his community. "The Adivasi will not dance" is a collection of ten short stories. The title story is unravelled through the narration of Mangal Murmu, a veteran Adivasi. Santhals are tribes who were once farmers. They are also well-trained artists. Mangal Murmu runs a dance troupe, who regularly perform in cultural programmes. The developmental projects undertaken by evacuating the indigenous people seldom care for their emotions. Their voices are never heard neither before nor after the completion of projects. The tribes mostly consist of peace-loving people, and their attachment to the land, which was traditionally occupied either for habitation or cultivation, is unmatched. They have courageously resisted invasions on their territory and have at times reacted violently against their exploiters who were mostly moneylenders, contractors, liquor vendors, Zamindars and government administrators such as forest, excise, police and revenue officials (Verma 1990).

Multiple development projects such as industrial hubs, dams, and mines were started all over the country. Given the nature of these projects, the most exploited areas tended to be resource-rich regions with forests, river systems, and mineral bases that were inhabited largely by tribal people. The Government appropriated lands with abundant natural resources, often at the cost of the lives, livelihoods, and homes of the local and indigenous populations (Hemadri and Mander 1999).

Santhals primary livelihood was farming. They give accommodation to four Jolha families, who plead for shelter. Looking at their impoverished state, Santhals give them shelter and also livelihood. Jolhas work in the farms of Santhals for a share of the produce. The four families construct four huts in a distant corner of the village. After a decade, 'that small cluster of four huts has grown into a tola of more than a hundred houses. Houses not huts'. (p.175). But Santhals still live in mud houses. Whereas Jolha houses have brick walls and cemented yards. Jolhas who came as refugees have become a dominant group. Santhals go in search of employment to other places, especially as farm labourers. This is one of the naked consequences of displacement and development. In large mining undertakings, peasants and tribal residents lose their land not only to the project authorities, but even to the affluent non-agricultural outsiders who converge on those areas and seize both land and the new economic opportunities (Fernandes, 1994).

Only few still have farmland. Most of it has been acquired by a mining company. Initially they protest against the mining company. Few political leaders and Christian missionaries support their protest. But everything is in vain. The supporters return to their own places. The

land was taken from them. The protest rarely gets any impact or any attention among the public and the government. To nullify this protest, Santhals are blamed for the death of a Christian sister, who backed them in their protest. By false accusations, Santhals are doubly cornered. No one would dare to come forward to help them in future. And also, they are represented as barbaric and ungrateful. They fail to get the attention of the outer world. Media favours the elite. The assessment of many project sites makes social impact assessment a difficult exercise (Mathur, 2011). Murmu expresses the inability of the community to grab the attention of the public towards the ground reality:

They reported that the Kristian sister was fighting for our rights and yet our boys killed her. No one bothered to see that our boys had been fighting for our land and rights even before that Kristian sister came. Why would they kill her? Just because our boys did not have reporter friends, their fight went unseen... now that our boys are in jail on false charges of murder, who will fight for us? (p.171)

Coal merchants have taken a part of their lands and the other part has been taken over by stone merchants. Loss of livelihood makes them impoverished. Shifting the job is not a cakewalk. 'An Adivasi farmer's job is to farm. Which other job should he be made to do? Become a servant in some billionaire's factory built on land that used to belong to that very Adivasi just a week earlier?' (p.185).

The circumstances lead them to resort to stealing. 'It's the coal and the stone, sir; they are making us lazy' (p.173). They justify their act of stealing. 'After all, they already have our land, they are stealing our coal, they don't want to snatch away from us our right to re-steal it' (p.174). The proportion of stolen minerals is insignificant when compared to the mammoth exploitation by the mining companies. They take away the minerals just to satisfy their basic needs. Jolhas who takes the advantage of the situation and make money out of it. Tripathi (1998) makes an observation that the tribal people from time to time were deprived of their mere fertile lands and were subjected to ruthless exploitation by the invading people, resulting in living greater wilderness.

Mangal Murmu runs a dance troupe, which comprises singers, dancers and musicians. He used to compose songs and set them to music. His troupe used to bring his songs to life through their voices and dances. The musical instruments like tamak and tumdak added flavour to the show. They used to perform at various occasions. They were meagrely paid along with medals and certificates. Mangal Murmu is passionate about his art though he did not materialise from it. He expresses his anguish:

All our certificates and shields, what did they give us? Diku Children go to schools and colleges, get education, jobs. What do we Santhals get? We Santhals can sing and dance, and we are good at our art. Yet, what has our art given us? Displacement, tuberculosis.(p.178)

In the name of exhibiting culture, Santhals perform their dances. Their music and dance are considered as inferior by others in the state. But when it comes to displaying Jharkhand culture, they perform the dance. 'They call their culture and music and dance superior to those of Adivasi. Why don't they get their women to sing and dance in open grounds in the name of Jharkhandi culture?'(p.179). Santhals, who consider arts as sacred are forced to sell them due to poverty and hunger. They also perform in weddings to fill their empty stomachs. Artists are hungry for acceptance and acknowledgement rather than money.

Santhals are exploited initially by the so-called refugees – Jolhas. Their livelihood is hampered. Secondly, the mining merchants grab most of the farm lands to set up mines. Thirdly, the stone merchants also take advantage in confiscating the lands. Finally, the thermal power plant projects evacuate the people from their roots. Santhals undergo multiple exploitations from varied sources. Cernea (1999) mentions about eight risks that accompany displacement. Landlessness, homelessness, joblessness, marginalization, food insecurity, increased morbidity and mortality, loss of access to common property and social disarticulation.

The tribes also undergo religious prosecution along with other exploitations. Christian missionaries attempt in conversions. The Santhal 'our children are constantly asked to stop worshipping our Bonga-Buru and start revering Jisu and Mariam'(p.172). The rich Hindus consider the customs of Santhals as barbaric and insist on converting them to Safa-Hor. 'We are losing our Sarna faith, our identities and our roots. We are becoming people from nowhere'(p.173).

One of the direct consequences of developmental projects is pollution. The corporates get proper permission from pollution control board before the commencement of the project. The guidelines are mostly neglected during the implementation of the project. The victims of the project bear the brunt of it. The whole village of Mangal Murmu is painted black. The mining company takes tonnes of coals every day, kept the village at dark. A cloud of blackness surrounds the entire village. The trees and shrubs bear black leaves. Everything appears black including stones, sand and tiles on the roofs. Children look even more darker. 'Our children- dark-skinned as they are- are forever covered with

fine black dust. When they cry and tears stream down their faces, it seems as if a river is coming across a drought-stricken land'(p.175).

Santhals are abused physically and emotionally. Their representations are not only unheard but reprimanded brutally. Whoever supports them in their protests are nullified like the Christian sister. The culpability of the murder of the missionary sister fell on Santhals. The protestors are beaten up pitilessly. 'The agitators were all beaten up and thrown into police lock-ups.'(p.181)

Mangal Murmu feels that his community is inconspicuous to the outer world, especially to the media. The news of the murder of the Christian sister is warped in the newspaper. The displacement issue appears in the newspaper in a corner. The President of the country is invited to lay the foundation stone for the thermal power plant. Reporters with cameras swarm all over the place. Vans with huge disc antennae on their roofs are parked. Murmu expresses his anguish that the media is too busy to focus on them. 'I wondered if any of its reporters had visited the place where the villagers were being detained by the police'(p.186)

The Santhals live in destitution. Fellow beings and corporates impoverish them. Santhals who gave livelihood to many in the past, are desperately searching for a job. They perform their dances to feed their families. They live in a horrible state. Murmu compares their lives to the horses of the power plant owner. He feels horses live in a better condition. 'We also heard that he liked polo-some game played with horses-and that his horses were far better off than all the Santhals of the whole of the Santhal Pargana'(p.182).

Mangal Murmu tries to grab the opportunity during the performance to address his grievances. He shows his protest by announcing that he would not dance. He says that constructing the power plant would be the end of all the Adivasi. 'Which great nation displaces thousands of its people from their homes and livelihoods to produce electricity for cities and factories?'(p.185).

The project may lit up mining factories, who would never stop working for lack of power. But Santhals are thrown into darkness forever. The project has forced them out of their homes and villages. Restricted access to these natural resource systems can make survival difficult, forcing the displaced people to depend upon whatever assets they have access to in their new location, or to learn new ways of making a living. No matter which path they choose, an immediate consequence is a loss of earnings (Pandey 1998). Resettlement means uprooting people from the environments in which the vast majority of their meaningful activities have taken place and on which much of their

understanding of life is based. They may be relocated in a new place about which they have little first-hand knowledge and experience. (Oliver-Smith, 2010)

We have nowhere to go, nowhere to grow our crops. How can this power plant be good for us? And how can we Adivasis dance and be happy? Unless we are given back our homes and land, we will not sing and dance. We Adivasis will not dance. The Adivasi will not-(p.187).

The police did not let him speak. His voice goes unheard and unnoticed. Police beats him black and blue. The police put their hands on his mouth and gags him. The whole troupe is beaten up. He stands there helpless and pities his friends. His speechless expression pictures the plight of the suppressed people.

### CONCLUSION

Developmental projects are indispensable for the progress of a country. It raises the economy of a nation and also the living standards of the people. But victims of such projects are often neglected. It is always the vulnerable community targeted for such projects. They hardly voice out and their cries go unheard. *The Adivasi will not dance* is a novella that articulates the anguish of the displaced marginalised. The voiceless victims need a platform to represent their agonies and policies for rightful resettlement.

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