

REPRESENTATION OF TRIBAL WOMEN, MARGINALITY AND TRANSFORMATION IN HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR'S *THE MYSTERIOUS AILMENT OF RUPI BASKEY*

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Abstract

India, being a culturally diverse country, treasures numerous ethno-cultural communities. Santhal community is one of them, due to their sizeable population. Santhals of Chotanagpur region, like any other tribal community believes in numerous myths and legends, often these beliefs consider 'mysterious' and beyond the border of reason, 'dahni-bidya' or witchcraft is one of them. This eerie knowledge of spirits is practiced by few Santhal women to gain benefit from others by causing them harm. The damaging nature of such knowledge made Santhals avoid those women who participate in it, thus making them socially marginalized in their own community. On the other hand Santhals have their own set of socio-cultural and religious practices which considered under-civilized by main-stream Indians, consequently making them unequal 'other' and marginalized.

*Both the socio-ethnic marginalization of the tribals due to cultural difference outside the border of the community, and the marginalization of the women empowered by the knowledge of witchcraft inside the community find sharp literary representation in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's debut novel *The Mysterious ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014). The present paper will focus on the portrayal of the Santhal women who are the victims and practitioners of 'dahni-bidya' and marginalization as well as those who are benefitted by such practices. The paper will further convey how globalization has influenced the lives Santhals women and the future of 'dahni-bidya' in the age of 'modern' medical sciences as represented in the novel.*

Key words: Ethno-cultural difference, Tribal culture, Marginality, Transformation etc.

Tribal culture treasures numerous myths, legends and folklores. Epistemologically, the socio-cultural practices in tribal are often shaped by so-called 'mysterious' beliefs which seem to be rooted beyond the border of logic and reason. People of the Santhal tribal community, like

any other tribal community, live in close association with nature and natural elements. Their dependence on their surrounding environment for being hunter-gatherers and farmers, make them worship natural objects to prevent themselves from its wrath as well as to gain blessing. Thus the presence of spirits, good or bad and apparitions in socio-religious practices are highly expected which pave the way towards the notion of animism. Therefore according to the tribal worldview, there is always a recurrent cyclic pattern of “nature-human beings-spirit continuum” (De 235) which makes them ethno-culturally different from the mainstream non-tribal population. Since they have ‘different’ set of socio-cultural and religious practices, they are considered as the under-civilized ‘other’ and thus marginalized by mainstream Indians. But with changing time, deforestation, growing population and globalization Santhals are bound cross the margin and become a part of the center. The novelist Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, who himself is a Santhal, and also a doctor, in his novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014) has portrayed a Santhal family through four generations from his own experience to give the mainstream Indians a glimpse of Santhal society, its tradition, culture, practices and transformations. In an interview Hansda explains, “The Santhal village I have shown in my novel is how I see my village Kishoripur – where I revised Rupi Baskey – and my hometown, Ghatshila – where I wrote the book” (‘The Hindu’). Like any other society Santhals have different roles and position for men and women, this paper however will primarily focus on the portrayal of female characters as presented by Hansda in his novel.

The novel, as the title suggests, centers around Rupi Baskey, her mysterious ailment and the rumours about the cause of such ailment. The first chapter of the novel entitled ‘The strongest woman of Kadamdihi’ makes Rupi as the representative of the Santhals as well as marks Kadamdihi as the spatial setting of the novel. From this chapter we come to know that Rupi belonged to Tereldihi, a village nearby the hills, who “had grown up hunting sparrows with sling-shots ... attended the annual Buru-Bonga – the Worship of the Hill ... visited the ancient shrine of Marang-Buru ... She also never missed the annual Baraghat-pata” (*MARB* 2). When Khorda-haram, the leader of the Santhal village called Kadamdihi went to see Rupi as a potential bride for his son Sido, Rupi described as, “couldn’t read a single letter in either of Roman, Devnagari, Bangla or Ol-chiki scripts” (*MARB* 20). Though education is long introduced to the Santhals by the missionaries, remote villages like Tereldihi, where Rupi was born, failed to access it properly (Carrin 6). But what make Rupi an excellent match for school teacher Sido is “her virtues”, “tall, healthy, strong-limbed” structure, and “her complexion was lighter than that of other girls Khorda-haram had seen” (*MARB* 20). In Santhal culture both men and women are expected to participate in the process of farming, with Sido at work in Nitra, it was Rupi’s duty to work in the field and only her good health can do so. As a result Rupi ended up giving birth in the middle of the field while sowing rice, without any medical supervision but perfectly healthy, this earned her the title, “the strongest women of Kadamdihi” (*MARB* 1). The strength soon fades when she moves to Nitra, where

her husband works, closer to the town Ghatshila. It is during this period that Rupi's anxiety finds full expression and turns out to be her "mysterious" ailment. She was dressed by her mother-in-law, Putki in crisp cotton sari and bold sindur, to "show them how well-dresses a Santhal bride can be" (*MARB* 85) and to make her accepted in the new environment. The lack of guide and protection of the family members or friends, naive Rupi completely depend upon Gurubari. Though it is accepted that husband and wife can live separately from the in-laws (Bodding 89), they both take responsibilities to maintain the household. However Sido had not participated in household matters:

Rupi found it all rather strange. At home in Tereldihi, she had seen both her parents run the household together. It never seemed to her like any one of them had the upper hand. In Kadamdihi, too, her in-laws were like friends, equals, voicing their opinions, discussing them, at least talking to one another. Here in Nitra – especially in the house she was living in, for she hadn't had the opportunity to observe other people's houses intimately – there was hardly any communication between the men and their wives. (*MARB* 102)

The ailing health of Rupi, made her husband take her to several doctors, whom they never considered consulting even when she was pregnant. The failure of the doctors to diagnose her ailment made Rupi and her well wishers strongly believe that it is the result of Gurubari's witchcraft. Sido, Rupi's husband, being influenced by the cultures of dikus—the non-tribals, refuses to taking into consideration of such sorcery can exists and accuses Rupi, "you are not sick. So stop behaving as if you are" (*MARB* 127). The abandonment by her own husband and the lack of social acquaintances made Rupi felt marginalized in this unfamiliar culture of Nitra. From the "strongest woman of Kadamdihi", Rupi becomes almost a cripple, dependent on others even for movements in the domestic space of her household. Amitayu Chakraborty relates Rupi's personal transformation from strength to decay with the decaying cultural identity of the Santhals in general, as he observes: "This transformation can be seen as are presentative of the metamorphosis of a sentient being into a cultural imaginary called the adivasi" (Chakraborty 7). However, Rupi leaves Nitra to escape Gurubari's dark magic, to her own people to spend the rest of her life under the dogor tree, in misery and regret until she finds herself rejuvenated by a vision of peace and comfort at the end of the novel.

Gurubari, on the other hand, contrasts opposite of gullible and simple minded Rupi; represented as the dark and evil 'dahni', the cause of Rupi's ailment. Chakraborty's observation appears to me quite sound, as he points out: "It might then not be an exaggeration to claim that when the witches, Gurubari, Dulari and the Naikey's wife, cast their spells upon the villagers, they curiously remind the reader of the age-old intra-ethnic oppression and marginalisation of Santhal women by men" (Chakraborty 8). Rumours spread around Nitra that Gurubari, along with majhi's wife, her aunt-in-law and two other women are the chief practitioner of 'dahni-bidya' in that area. The strength of her evil power can be recognized

when she took Sido away from the 'ojha' curing him, threatening—"I pray to the goddess, and I have other gods too. And don't forget, I have made better sacrifices than you ... she is my goddess, not yours" (*MARB* 195). Despite all her misdeeds, disapproval by her in-laws, losing her husband suspiciously, she is successful and contended with life. Though she was from a poor family of sharecroppers living near a town gives her the opportunity to go to a government school and learn the basics of Hindi and Bangla. Hardships from early childhood, rejection from her own people for her dark practices made her marginalized to the extent that she was unbothered about other's speculation and focus on her own well being. Living near the center for so long in a different life style made her come to the conclusion, "I can't go back to fields and farms" (*MARB* 103) and moved to Chakuliya with her husband and family. Gurubari became an example of employed Adivasi woman, when she started working in the school as an office attendant after her husband's death. Her two daughters went to universities and are expected to find jobs too. She also took her nieces in her house in Chakuliya for their better exposure with the outer world.

The character who had seen most of the transformation in the Santhal households of the village of Kadamdihi, before the Independence and after, is Rupi's mother-in-law, Putki. She represents yet another aspect of Santhal women. After losing four children due to the dark magic of the neighbour Naikey's wife, Older Somai-budhi gave birth to Putki, but lost her own life. Though the relatives took care of Putki for some years, soon they realized the importance of mother in raising a child. Heartbroken after his wife's death, Somai-haram neither cared about giving Putki a proper name, nor interested in getting married again; but eventually does so, only for his daughter's sake. Younger Somai-budhi was also a widow, whose previous husband died ten years prior. According to Santhals the widower considered as, "They say: "As a widower snarled"; "a widower a worn-out broom, scraping, scraping, who will be fool enough to agree to be married to such a one"? ... "A widow, stallion, neighing, neighing"" (Bodding 78). Younger Somai-budhi was well aware of her fate worked tirelessly on her brothers' farm, for food and shelter, without uttering an extra word. When a little hope of having her own family came after ten years of neglect, she agreed to marry Somai-haram. Paying "a bull calf and a heifer along with three rupees", (*MARB* 42) Somai-haram married her. Soon her position in the family was explained to Putki by the older women of Kadamdihi, "This woman is a karmi-kuri your father has brought home to cook and clean for you"" (*MARB* 47). The criticism of the neighbours made it difficult to discipline the wild rebel Putki by her muted step-mother Younger Somai-budhi. When Putki ran away from home, to live with her lover Salkhu's out of wedlock, Younger Somai-haram developed a tumour in her abdomen. Putki returns the very exact day Younger Somai-budhi's died from tumour burst, unshackling her from the guilt of not raising Putki properly. With her step-mother's death, Putki had no one to defy against, and eventually made agreed respect the decision of the elders and Somai-haram to live a better life.

Being the only daughter of Somai-haram, she is spoiled and with her best friend Della, has done several mischievous and scandalous incidents they are remembered for. During the freedom movement quite a number of poverty stricken Santhals worked as labourers in the economic centers like Tatanagar, Mussaboni and Ghatshila. Hembram says in an article, “They have not been able to adjust their habits to wage-earning economy and are often unable to utilize the hard-earned money beneficially. A large proportion of the money is spent in liquor and purchases of unessential fashionable goods” (Hembram 18). This glittery lifestyle attracted the rebels like Della and Putki, not for poverty but for monetary freedom, they started working as labourers for a rice mill in Chakuliya, disgracing their families. Putki, however, was subdued once Della moved to her in-laws after her marriage and Putki’s marriage was arranged with Khorda-haram. With his positive influence Putki became one of the voters of first general elections, becoming the part of history. Though her family did everything to give her a better life, her drinking habits had never changed. Putki, “the precious child” of well respected Somai-haram, made the family a matter of gossip for her inability to keep her mouth shut in the moments of sheer drunkenness, which later coaxed by her both daughter-in-laws.

Dulari, Putki’s another daughter-in-law is allegedly also a practitioner of ‘dahni-bidya’, Doso married her only to appease his mother and elder brother, without knowing about her background. To win over Doso and his abuse Dulari performed witchcraft over her husband. Despite being looked down by all the villagers, she justifies her activities, “I had to reclaim what is rightfully mine ... did I do anything wrong?” (MARB 185). The eminent anthropologist P. O. Bodding says about the dahnis, “the women have become the absolute rulers in this age” (Bodding 160); the *bidya* empowered the women Gurubari or Dulari, as they know, good nature will not favour them with good fortune.

Nevertheless with the transforming time modern technology and science have entered the life of tribal people in the twenty-first century, as the narrator shows in the final chapter: in his wedding, Bishu – Rupi’s second son gets “a mobile phone, a colour TV with DTH connection for their household” (MARB 205). Even religio-cultural hybridity seems to take place when Bishu’s wife Rupali performs the evening rituals: “Rupali, like diku women, washed her hands and feet, sprinkled some water over her head and lit dhup-batti whose fragrance wafted through the hut” (MARB 206: my emphasis). Globalization as it is seen reaches an even more high order in the tribal society as the reader finds Sido Baskey to own a motorcycle: “Over time he had become a contented man. He was quite happy to wash and polish his motorcycle with his grandsons” (MARB 207). What is the effect of all these changes? The novelist tells the reader that the protagonist of the novel Rupi Baskey has now overcome her problems: “Rupi marveled at the changes in her life and curled up to sleep” (MARB 207), as she finds Rupali, the perfect household manager she always wished to be. A slowly but steadily transforming tribal society has been depicted with vivid details, and the

issue of marginality becomes less severe as it was earlier. As Rupi, with the assurance of the ending of witchcraft over her family, curls up to sleep and then slips into a dream of wish fulfillment and prosperity, Hansda's narrative excels in creating a space where ailment could only be replaced by happiness and a dream of peace.

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Acronym used:

MARB – *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*

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