

An Anthropological Critique of The Santhal Tribe in Hansda
Sowvendra Shekhar's Novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī*
Baskey

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Abstract

In modern civilization, the analysis of isolated communities in provincial environments has become increasingly important. The Santhal tribe is one such group. They are officially recognized by the Indian government and live on the Chotanagpur plateau in states like Orissa, Bihar, West Bengal, and Assam. The objective of this paper is to bring out the history and cultural tradition of the Santhal Tribe through the novel of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. According to the latest census, the Santhal tribes are estimated to be 6.5 million. The primary source of income for members of the Santhal culture is farming to survive. This paper highlights their struggles and how they faced the defeat of the British regime. They live an especially straightforward and unique life. Their superstitious beliefs are the primary reason

for their subnormality. This paper discusses the belief systems, practices, and customs of the Santhal tribe. The findings aim to capture their cultural heritage and history of the Santhal Tribe.

Keywords: Santhal, Cultural heritage, history, superstition beliefs, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

Introduction

The Santhal tribe is one of the largest tribes in India. They inhabit the northeast and central parts of India. Their major population is in Santhal Parganas, Jharkhand. Each tribe in India has different cultures, traditions, and rituals. The indigenous belief system, mythical stories, and oral tradition unite them all despite their variety. These maintain and enhance the rich traditional knowledge of the marginalized people. They mostly transform their history and culture through oral forms. The oral tradition helps to know their life experiences and preserve their cultural tradition in the 21st century. This paper aims to undergo a critical examination of the Santhal tribe through a book, which acts as an archive for the ethnic community. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a Santhali author and a doctor by profession. He examines the resilience of the Santhal tribe through his novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey*. The term “Anthropology” is the study of the history of man (Topinard 2). This paper examines the life trajectory of the Santhal tribe. It aims to analyze the life of the Santhal tribe through Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s novel ‘The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey’. It creates strong emotions and feelings toward readers about the enculturation of the Santhal tribe.

History and Cultural Customs of the Santhal Tribe

The Santhal tribe, otherwise called Santhals, Santals, Saontar, or ho. Ho means man. The names of the cities belonging to the Santhal tribe are derived from the names of trees like Kadamdihi and Tereldihi. They mainly live in West Bengal, Odisha, Bangladesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand. These tribes fought against the British from 1855 to 1857 (Datta 1). Hasdak’,

Murmu, Kisku, Hembrom, Marandi, Soren, Tudu, Baskey, Besra, Chore, Pauria, and Bedea are the subgroups of clans. The last two clans had been lost. They can marry from another clan. If they marry from the same clan, they would be cast out of their community and village. These Santhal tribes live in dense forests and have no stable place to live. Due to displacement, they learned about ploughing and started farming. They were known as an agrarian community. Some of the other known work for them is hunting, collecting, and fishing. These tribes in precolonial Santhal society used Santhali as their common dialect to communicate among themselves. But now the Santhali language is used in a particular area of Jharkhand. The Santhali language is a part of the Munda language family. Both belong to the Austro-Asiatic subfamily of languages. These energetic tribes have written a script called the Ol-Chiki script by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in 1925. It contains 30 letters and is arranged in 6 rows and five columns. It was created to replace reliance on Bengali or Oriya scripts. They believed human beings had come from Has Hasil (Poding 5). Historically, they used to live in a small village consists of fifty households. The streets of the Santhal tribe are so broad that the doors of the houses are open in front of the street. The tolas are the division of the village, which was led by the Mukhiya. The houses are in three different colours. It is constructed of clay with bamboo and wooden slabs for ceilings. They used to be extreme neat and clean condition. They follow the Sarna religion. Thakur is their presiding god, the creator of the universe. Marang buru or Buru bonga are the main deities. Sima Bonga, the deity of a mysterious, isolated shrine, is considered to be an evil worshipped by the Naikay family, situated at the end of the street. Animal sacrifice is common to these ethnic tribes of India. In the Santhal tribe, they promote sororate. Their tradition of marriage is giving a bride price. The ancestors of the Santhal tribe derived some of their customs from the Hindus, the Dekos. They were separated from the Santhals. Dekos got their own language. There are some of the major festivals like Ashadh and Saan, Aghan, Baha, Karam, Baha Bomga, and Sahari. Dancing is the most important part of

their life. After doing heavy work, they dance to relax. It is their entertainment. They also use musical instruments like Tamak, Tumdak, and Singa to get relaxation. Women wear a red-bordered white sari. They formed a line and started to dance. Karam festival is considered to be an important festival for the Santhal tribe. It occurs in the months of September and October. They believed that the Karam festival is celebrated to increase their wealth and get rid of enemies. In every Santhal house, there will be a Karam tree. They grow the Karam tree after the completion of the purification process. The Santhal tribe is best known for making handicrafts like mats, hats, and using bamboo, leaves, grass, and other raw materials. The hunting tool is the bow and arrow, collectively known as Ak Apari. A catapult is an instrument used to hunt birds and other creatures.

Vignette of the Plot

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a Santhal author and doctor by profession, belongs to Jharkhand. In his literary works, he has transformed the oral tradition of the Santhal tribe into an archival form. *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupri Baskey* (2013) enriches the nature and wellness of the Santhal tribe and connects the natural world and the mysterious spiritual world. The author shows the real-life experiences of the Santhal tribe through his writings. It makes the readers experience by their own. He explains the authenticity of the Santhal tribe's lifestyle, food habits, worship of their deities, and festivals. The novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupri Baskey* (2013), portrays the resilience of a woman named Rupri. She has been affected by a mysterious disease that was unknown to the village people. Rupri has given birth with the help of dhai-budhi. The character Rupri shows the simplicity of the Santhal community. In every village of the Santhal tribe, dhai-budhi helps woman confinement. Rupri did not visit the hospital when she was in her village, Tereldihi. The village name of Rupri is Tereldihi, which comes from the name of the Terel tree or Kendu tree (Shekhar 2). Through oral tradition, the author transforms knowledge to succeeding generations. Rupri had been living in Sido's home,

her husband, without having nutrients. Shekhar compares the relationship between two women to nature. The Santhal tribe's characteristic features are the worship of nature. In the Santhal community, there is division among clans. Hembram is one of the subdivisions of the clan, do not share their husband's name as their surname. "Santhal men drink haandi, Santhal women practise dahni-bidya, and no one speaks about it"(37). Women involve them more in sorcery and witchcraft. Shekhar, through his storytelling, skilfully portrays the uniqueness and tradition of the Santhal tribe. Women believe witchcraft brings them negativity in their lives. The novel has a story of three generations, where the readers can get an allure. The marriage between Somai-haram and younger Somai-budhi was simpler. The customs of bride price are important in the Santhal tribe. The bride and groom are lifted, and the groom applies the sindoor on the bride's head. As they are considered an agrarian community, they grow cattle in their homes. At the time of the wedding, the groom's family should give cattle to the bride's family, they are considering it as the mutual exchange of labour. Women are considered labour as the groom's family gives cattle, and they take the bride. The bride's family lost a pair of hands by giving their daughter away; to compensate for this, the groom's family gives cattle. Shekhar tries to safeguard the traditional culture of the Santhal tribe from being eroded. "As Rupī bowed, she could see that the woman's hand had tattoos etched just below the thumbs" (94). Rupī settled in Nitra, the traditional village of the Santhal, where she would see tattoos on women's hands. The Santhal man wears tattoos like scars on their hand. Women have markings on their hands, floral patterns. They greet their family members in different ways. Rupī and Sido, the bridegroom, new to village Nitra, were greeted by the members of the village. Both of them bowed over the cupped hand of Majhi's wife. She blesses them to love happily. The woman brings lota of water in her hand, Rupī bowed in front of her, she kissed her hand and blessed Sido with her cupped hands. Shekhar explains the importance of deities through his writings. Saat-Bohoni, goddesses of ponds and lakes. It is considered the seven sisters, who

live in the depths of stagnant ponds. The dieties' feet are turned back, who are waiting for young men to come to bathe. They drag a young man if they find him attractive (68). The author includes other characters, such as Putki, who depends on haandi and paura to get relief from her worries.

She was elegantly dressed in a pnaahnaar, the traditional four-piece ensemble worn by Santhal women. Her neck was adorned by a long silver necklace - tiny flowers connected in a chain. The woman's hair was oiled and neatly combed into a large bun. Despite her age, the woman had stuck a large, pink joba flower to one side of her bun (Shekhar 81).

The physical appearance of the Santhal tribe is mentioned by the author in *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* (2013). Their complexion is dark brown to black. They usually have curly hair. They are using silver ornamentals like hair clips. They have a flat nose and a long head. Santhal tribe cultivation and farming will be different according to climate change. The Santhal houses are decorated with multi coloured paintings. The bottom of the house is of black soil, the middle portion is constructed of white soil, and the upper part is of red soil. The wall of the house is made up of wooden planks applied with cow dung and mud. In the Santhal house, there is a long verandah. There is a place called Bhitar, worshipping the deities. The storage of grains and rice is held on the wooden platform, which is inside the room, with a mud wall. The Santhal tribe's cultural identity is shaped by supernatural elements, the natural world, and other features. *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* (2013) is the reservoir of the indigenous belief system of the Santhal tribe. Due to archival documents, their indigenous knowledge and customs have not been eliminated from society.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the preservation of the Santhal tribe's cultural heritage in modern civilization. It also analyses the lifestyle and cultural traditions within their community. This

novel highlights the primitive life of the Santhal tribe. This novel serves as an archival document to preserve the ethnic community. It can protect their ancient history, lifestyles, civilizations, and belief systems, and it helps to transform into the next generation. Everywhere in the world, the rapid process of globalization is eradicating the traditional customs and behaviors of its citizens. It safeguards their community from the modern world.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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