

Examining Subalterneity in Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar's "The Adivasi Will Not Dance"

Abin Chakraborty
Chandernagore College, India

In his discussion of Adivasi¹ assertions in India, Daniel J. Rycroft remarks:

In states such as Jharkhand (Koel-Karo dams), Madhya Pradesh (Forest rights), Orissa (Kashipur aluminium mining), Andhra Pradesh (Birla Periclase project) and Kerala (Wayanad wildlife sanctuary) etc., the coercion of the federal governments against those Adivasis protesting against the injustices of development exemplifies how Adivasis are frequently brutalised, criminalised and marginalised in the political, legal and economic discourses of the postcolonial nation... In India today, the routine abuse of land rights and cultural rights conferred to Adivasis leads to heightened claims for various forms of decentralised governance, as well as to the emergence of new forms of resistance, new dynamics of power between state and civil society, and new interpretations of subaltern pasts. (Rycroft 3-4)

In this paper I read Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar's short story set in the Pakur district of Jharkhand, "The Adivasi Will Not Dance," in light of these evolving contexts of victimisation and resistance, while being mindful of the intersections of subaltern politics and the politics of the nation-state, the general absence of Adivasis from the domain of Indian English Literature, and the vexed question of representing subalterns.

Adivasis and the History of Subjugation

Considered to be the original inhabitants of India, who even preceded the Aryans, the Adivasis, a vast heterogeneous population dispersed across various regions of India, have been subjected to continuous exploitation since the establishment of British colonial rule. Since many of the Adivasi settlements are scattered across regions rich in natural resources, the British, through their various revenue systems and administrative measures, exposed the regions to external dominance and control, mostly at the expense of the land rights of the Adivasis who were subjected to further immiseration owing to the extensive coercion which the colonial administration regularly unleashed against them with impunity. It is the combination of their socio-economic exploitation and unchecked atrocities against them that led to the continuous resistance of the Adivasis to the British administration, beginning with the Mal Paharia uprising of 1772. Since then, the Adivasis have been involved in several uprisings against British and colonial rule, such as the Santhal Rebellion of 1855 led by Sidho and Kanho Murmu, the Koli uprising of 1873, the Munda rebellion led by Birsa Munda in 1899 and many others

which proliferated well into the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the situation did not improve after India's independence and while the regions populated by the Adivasis continue to suffer from extensive poverty, minimal access to education, electricity and healthcare, the precious mineral resources of such areas are regularly utilized by public and private sector companies at the expense of the land rights of Adivasis. The Adivasis are thus subjected to a sustained process of postcolonial subalternization which leads to massive displacement, erosion of traditional structures of autonomy and debilitating poverty. In fact, in the first four decades after independence, more than 76 lakh Adivasis had been displaced owing to the construction of dams, mining projects and other industrial enterprises (Bhengra 8). In the province of Jharkhand, such displacements were mostly caused by coal mining projects run by Bharat Cooking Coal Ltd, Eastern Coalfields Ltd and Central Coalfields Ltd. These mining companies displaced more than 26 thousand people, and only one-third of them were provided with jobs (Bhengra 19). This is an ample indicator of the extent of subjugation experienced by the Adivasis and those deprived of income opportunities have no other option but to undertake seasonal migration to work as agricultural labourers which only aggravates their intense poverty.

Such processes have been further exacerbated in recent years: since the turn of the new millennium, more mining projects have been launched in the areas by private companies like Panem Coal Mines Pvt. Ltd and Arrow Energy India Ltd. Despite the fact that such mining projects encroach upon Fifth Schedule Land which cannot be bought and sold by outsiders, the companies, in alliance with local authorities, using the colonial Land Acquisition Act, have usurped acres of land all across both Jharkhand and other parts of Central and Eastern India, often depriving local Adivasis of their lands in the face of intense protests and brutal confrontations with police and local administration. Not only does this inevitably lead to the abject deprivation of the Adivasis, who are transformed from farmers with steady incomes into agricultural labourers with uncertain incomes, but the coal mining projects often destroy local agricultural fields and crops on account of the dispersal of coal particles across the region from the trucks that are used to ply coal.

In the process, the Adivasis are plunged into a life of black rice, blackened streams, a spate of respiratory diseases without cure and near-complete destruction of profitable local produce such as mangoes and *mahua* flowers (Iqbal 2012). Since the coal mines supply fuel to local thermal power stations, the administration often turns a blind eye to many of these problems and instead indirectly fosters the unofficial but deadly regime of coal mafias. Furthermore, spaces of democratic dissent against such injustices are regularly endangered, as is evident from the murder of Sister Valsa John (allegedly at the behest of the local coal mafia), who was instrumental in securing a compensation package from Panem Coal Mines Pvt. Ltd. for the Adivasis through organised struggle. Six of the seven accused for her murder were local inhabitants who held contracts for housing or transportation with Panem Company. Alongside Sister John, the last few years have also witnessed the death of local Adivasi leaders like Joseph Soren or Janus Hembrom, who died

after being hit by dumper trucks carrying coal; no action has been taken against anyone in this regard (*Coallateral* 34-38). Such events represent in brief the matrix of dispossession, oppression and administrative collusion which subjects the Adivasis, whether in Jharkhand or elsewhere, to a process of postcolonial subalternization that threatens their very survival. As the report of the Independent People's Tribunal makes clear:

The story of Pachwara serves to discern the newer models employed by the industry to persuade and compel communities to give up their land for mega projects. The state, apparently in pursuit of electricity and development, is deliberately overlooking the grievous crimes committed by the industry. Such models, as we understand from the case of Pachwara, pose challenges to democracy, judiciary, the Indian Constitution and the role of the welfare state. It also raises questions on the state's acceptance of undemocratic models of business and growth...with its share of large displacement of people, exacerbated landlessness, increased monetisation of economies, fragmentation of sustainable local economies and large-scale migration of marginalised communities to the fringes of urban spaces. (*Coallateral*, 42)

Adivasis and Indian English Literature

None of these aforementioned concerns, however, is generally explored within the domain of Indian English literature, which has its own discursive blinkers and representational hierarchies despite its claim to be a truly representative national literature. Tabish Khair laments "the almost complete absence of those unacknowledged Indians, the non-Sanskritized tribes" in Indian English fiction and goes on to add that

it can actually be shown that the tribal in general has been even more obscured in Indian English fiction than in Anglo-Indian (colonial) fiction. In the latter, the tribal sometimes appeared (most complicatedly in Kipling's fiction and poems) as a combination of the "noble savage" and the true Indian and was often used to denigrate the "cowardly" and "untrue" (in both senses) colonial Babu. (Khair 159-60)

Even when the tribal has been represented, as demonstrated by Rashmi Varma's analysis of a particular episode in Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel *English, August*, such representation is rendered through "the idiom of an urban Indian English that is made to fabricate a distinctive Indian modernity in ways that are fraught with contradiction and paradox" (Varma 123). Similarly, in Neel Mukherjee's recent, widely acclaimed novel, *The Lives of Others*, Adivasis either operate as Maoists involved in removing fishplates from railway tracks or objects of urban elite male lust. In either case, the readers do not get any glimpse into their consciousness from the magisterial third-person narratives through which the episodes are presented to us. Furthermore, the narrative also informs us how urban intellectuals often see Adivasis only as an antithesis to their own troubled modernity and consider them to be "really innocent and pure...closer to the pure state of mankind than [they] are, less corrupted, more noble" (Mukherjee 407). In other words, contemporary representation of Adivasis still follows the colonial

paradigm of the “noble savage,” and in accordance with urban Indian stereotypes this romanticising view finds its crystallisation through a representation of Santhal dance, an emblem of “collective harmony,” with a “hypnotic” effect which resembled “a bud blooming into a day-long flower, then collapsing into a shrivelled prepuce at the beginning of nightfall. Expanding and contracting, expanding and contracting” (Mukherjee 408). Such representations reveal the pervasive nature of a dominant *savarna*² and elitist ideology which either objectifies or romanticises Adivasis and thereby ensures the “erasure of the tribal” (Spivak 126) as a conscious and agential being in constant negotiation with evolving material circumstances. Incidentally, this trope of tribal dance, whether in fiction or in acclaimed films such as Satyajit Roy’s *Agontuk* (The Stranger), remains ever present as a signifier of urban India’s quest for a metaphor of lost purity which ultimately robs the Adivasis of their autonomy by transforming them into objects of affective solace for alienated urban middle classes.³

It is in this context that Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar’s short story “The Adivasi Will Not Dance” becomes such a crucial intervention. The title deliberately flies at the face of conventional expectations of elite India, whose concerns Indian Writing in English generally caters to, and through its first-person narrative offers a defamiliarised representation of the nation-space. This becomes possible because of the author’s attempt to ventriloquise the consciousness of subalternized Adivasis through the voice of the narrator Mangal Murmu, a musician and former farmer from the village of Matiajore in the Amrapara Block of Pakur district in Jharkhand. While the specific location of the characters is crucial in understanding the material context of deprivation on which the narrative focuses, such focus is aptly supplemented by the authorial refusal to reproduce the kind of urban Indian English idiom which we encounter in the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee or Neel Mukherjee. Instead, the reader is struck by the nonchalant references to “Bharat-disom” and “Rabin-haram” which are frequently sprinkled across the monologue of Mangal Murmu. Such references to India and Rabindranath Tagore not only serve as defamiliarising instances that force us to acknowledge our encounter with a consciousness and culture that cannot be accommodated into any essentialised Indian cultural identity, but also as examples of “code-switching and vernacular transcription” which are common enough in “postcolonial englishes” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 73-76, 38), with the major difference that what Shekhar’s narrative challenges is not Queen’s English, but the acceptable English or Hindi idiom of urban India. This is further enhanced through the use of expressions like “Jolha,” “Safa-hor,” “Diku,” “Kiristan,” or “Johar” (171, 173, 175, 187), which constantly remind us of the radical alterity of the narratorial consciousness. In the words of Ashcroft and his colleagues, “Variance ... is a signifier of radical Otherness, not just as a construct which continually re-inserts the gap of silence but as a process which relentlessly foregrounds variance and marginality as the norm” (74).

Representing Subalterns

However, linguistic alterity is only one component of the representational matrix through which the radical Otherness of the Adivasis as subalterns is foregrounded in the text. The term “subaltern” gained provenance in postcolonial studies owing to the use of the term by Ranajit Guha and other members of the Subaltern Studies Collective. Guha defined subalterneity as “the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or any other way” (Guha, “Preface” vii). While Guha’s intervention opened the avenues for understanding Indian history by taking into account the agency and consciousness of the subaltern, this entire issue of representing the subaltern and the Adivasi as a subaltern is the source of a vexed debate within postcolonial studies, inaugurated and sustained by Spivak’s assertion that “The subaltern cannot speak” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 104). Although she later concluded that the remark was “inadvisable” (*Critique of Post-Colonial Reason* 308), elsewhere she has claimed that “there is something of a not-speakingness in the very notion of subalterneity” (Landry and Maclean 289), in the sense that “even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard” (Landry and Maclean 292). Spivak’s insistence, however, on such constitutive “not-speakingness” (Landry and Maclean 289) is consistent with her attempt to represent the subaltern as an absolute “other,” which again leads to conclusions that are entirely incommensurate with Marxist or Gramscian analysis, generally associated with subalterneity. For example, in “Supplementing Marxism” Spivak writes:

Subalterneity is the name I borrow for the space out of any serious touch with the logic of capitalism or socialism...Please do not confuse it with unorganized labour, women as such, the proletariat, the colonized, the object of ethnography, migrant labour, political refugees etc. Nothing useful comes out of this confusion. (qtd. in Moore-Gilbert 101)

Such assertions attempt to detach the subaltern from precisely those material conditions which enforce his/her subalterneity in the first place. In the process, much like her definition of the proletariat, the subaltern also becomes nothing other than “a theoretical fiction” (Spivak, *Postcolonial Critic* 148) or a “subject-effect” (Spivak, “Subaltern Studies” 341). This creates a crucial problem for both representation and committed engagement because, as Bart Moore-Gilbert explains, Spivak leaves the would-be non-subaltern ally of the subaltern in a seemingly impossible predicament, simultaneously unable to represent the subaltern in an “uninterested” fashion insofar as this necessarily, at least initially, at least to begin with, entails assigning the subaltern subjectivity and a (subordinate) subject-position and yet—as ethical and political agent—unable not to represent the subaltern. (102)

It is therefore imperative to return to Gramsci in order to arrive at an understanding of subalterneity and representation that is neither so limited nor so paralyzing. In this context, it is important to note

Gramsci's full explanation regarding the methodological criteria for the history of subaltern classes that the "integral historian" must consider:

1. the objective formation of the subaltern class through the developments and changes that took place in the economic sphere; the extent of their diffusion; and their descent from other classes that preceded them;
2. their passive or active adherence to the dominant political formations; that is, their efforts to influence the programs of these formations with demands of their own;
3. the birth of new parties of the ruling class to maintain control of the subaltern classes;
4. the formations of the subaltern classes themselves, formations of a limited and partial character;
5. the political formations that assert the autonomy of the subaltern classes, but within the old framework;
6. the political formations that assert complete autonomy, etc. (Gramsci, *Selections* 52)

As Marcus Green cogently explains, this does not simply refer to methodological criteria but also to the phased development of subaltern groups. Citing one of Gramsci's own statements, Green states:

This is not a complete, ahistorical, or essentialist methodology since Gramsci contends that these phases of study could be more detailed with intermediate phases and combinations of phases, and he states: "The historian must record, and discover the causes of, the line of development towards integral autonomy, starting from the most primitive phases" (Notebook 25, §5; 1971, 52). From this statement one can deduce that these six phases do not just represent the methodology of the subaltern or integral historian, but also represent the phases in which a subaltern group develops, from a "primitive" position of subordination to a position of autonomy. That is, the phases represent the sequential process in which a subaltern group develops and grows into a dominant social group or, in other instances, is stopped in its ascent to power by dominant social groups or political forces. (Green 9-10)

What such evidences suggest is that not only was Spivak's use of the term subaltern entirely in contradiction to Gramscian principles, but also that her use of it was extremely limited and parochial. This is precisely why her simplistic response, "If the subaltern can speak, then thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern anymore" (*Post-Colonial Critic* 158), is entirely untenable in the context of the nuanced exploration Gramsci had already offered, which stressed the presence of various intervening stages between subalterneity and hegemony.

Furthermore, returning to the Gramscian roots of the term, while avoiding the Spivakian detour, also helps us to understand the role to be played by intellectuals, artists and critics in engaging with the question of subalterneity. In his discussion of the formation of intellectuals, Gramsci argues that the revolutionary party, which acts as a representative of subaltern groups, is "responsible for welding together the organic intellectuals of a given group—the dominant one—and the traditional intellectuals" and even states that "[an] intellectual who joins the political party of a particular social group is merged with the organic intellectuals of the group itself and is linked tightly with the group" (*Selections* 15-16). What this basically emphasizes is the possibility of the non-subaltern intellectual, who is not "organic," to become one,

provided he or she is committed enough and is willing to learn from subaltern allies.

Therefore, we can conclude that like the historian, the artist too can explore—whether in poetry, novel or drama—various aspects of the development of subaltern consciousness, and it is the task of the critic to explain and evaluate the significance of such endeavours. Spivak herself later admits this, and articulates the need for what she calls the “moral love” of the activist (*Critique* 310) in order to ensure the success of such endeavours. Collectively, all such attempts can contribute to the growth of that counter-hegemonic thought which is essential for the subalterns’ ascent to hegemony through a radical refashioning of socio-political structures. The task of all artists and critics, as conscious explorers of subalterneity, is therefore akin to that of the “organic intellectual” who must provide educational leadership by examining the material and ideological conditions that go into the making of subalterneity so that both the subaltern and the would-be non-subaltern ally may work together to resist the many facets of subalternization. As Gramsci explicitly states, “If it [philosophy of praxis, i.e. Marxism] affirms the need for contact between intellectuals and simples it is not in order to restrict scientific activity and preserve unity at the low level of the masses, but precisely in order to construct an intellectual moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the mass and not only of small intellectual groups” (Gramsci, *Selections* 332-33). It is from this perspective that I seek to analyse the significance of Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar’s representation of subalternized Adivasi consciousness through the monologue of his protagonist, Mangal Murmu, in “The Adivasi Will Not Dance.”

Representing Adivasi Consciousness

“The Adivasi Will Not Dance” is the anguished monologue of Santhal farmer and musician, Mangal Murmu, as he explains to his unidentified interlocutor (perhaps a journalist) the multidimensional exploitation and suffering faced by Santhals across the state of Jharkhand, which culminated in his desperate act of defiance. The entire narrative thus becomes an account of pervasive immiseration brought about by material deprivation, on the one hand, and eroding cultural identity, on the other. This is evident from the very beginning as his attempt to introduce himself as a musician and a farmer soon gives way to a bitter acknowledgment:

Was a farmer. Was a farmer is right. Because I don’t farm anymore. In my village of Matiajore in Amrapara block of the Pakur district, not many Santhals farm anymore. Only a few of us still have farmland; most of it has been acquired by a mining company. (170-71)

Such remarks are entirely in accordance with the kind of deprivation that has been recorded by the Independent People’s Tribunal, which states: “Depositions and testimonies provided by people indicate that the process of awarding compensation was arbitrary, leaving several

families without being compensated for the land already acquired. People reported a variety of reasons for not having received compensation including internal disputes, improper and/or unrecognized land records, technical errors and affiliation with RPBA [Rajmahal Pahar Bachao Andolan—a group resisting forced land acquisition]” (*Coallateral 25*). In one such testimony, an old man from Chilgo remarks,

I have been to the Land Acquisition Office, which is quite a distance away, thrice already. They neither tell me that I won't receive my compensation, nor do they give me my compensation; they merely tell me that I will receive it. I do not know when that will be. The truth is that unless we pledge ourselves like slaves to PANEM, nothing will happen. (*Coallateral 26*)

Such testimonies, however, only offer a partial glimpse of the problem, and the problem is certainly not limited to villages that come under the ambit of the PANEM project. Up to 2007, 3,789 cases have been filed with the Special Area Regulation Court for recovery of tribal lands (*Coallateral 17*), which again illustrates the pervasive trend of displacing Adivasis from their lands. Furthermore, not only have the Santhals been forced to give up land which, in accordance with the Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act, the government or private companies should not be able to acquire, they have also been cut off from alternate rural employment avenues which have sustained them so far. Much of this is due to the burgeoning coal mining industry which has an extremely debilitating effect on the entire environment of adjacent villages. As Mangal Murmu says,

It is this coal, sir, which is gobbling us up, bit by bit. There is a blackness—deep, indelible—all along the Koyla road. The trees and shrubs in our village bear black leaves. Our ochre earth has become black. The stones, the rocks, the sand, all black ... 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 cutting across a drought-stricken land. (174-75)

Javed Iqbal's report in *The Guardian* on 15th January, 2012, corroborates the same phenomenon by narrating experiences of two brothers, Badan and Darbo Soren, who have no other option but to steal coal: “‘We eat the black rice ourselves. No one will buy it,’ said Badan. ‘Earlier we used to make some Rs 15,000 or Rs 20,000 per year. And there is no more *mahua* seeds, no more mango in the trees,’ continued his brother” (Iqbal). Various diseases have also escalated in the area owing to the rapid increase in pollution levels brought about by the airborne dispersal of coal dust. As the IPTR report states, “People testified that cases of jaundice, malaria and typhoid and black fever have doubled in the same period. Illnesses that are unusual and unknown in the area are also being reported” (*Coallateral 31*). In the process, “development” only ensures further deprivation for Santhals and other Adivasis who already inhabit some of the most economically backward regions of India as the state refuses to address their concerns.

The callous unconcern of the administration in this regard also becomes evident from the frequent accidents caused by coal-carrying

trucks which have already led to the death of many Adivasis. As Mangal Murmu says,

When the monstrous Hyvas ferry coal on the Kyla Road, there is no space for any other vehicle. They are so rough, these truck drivers, they can run down any vehicle that comes in their way... And what if they kill? The coal company can't afford to have its business slowed down by a few deaths. They give money to the family of the dead, the matter remains unreported, and the driver goes scot-free, ferrying another load for the company. (173-74)

While one report says that more than 150 individuals have been killed since 2005, there is no official record and most of the accidents have not even been registered. And while PANEM has regularly paid monetary compensations, there have been no police investigations and no one has been arrested for lack of evidence and witnesses (*Collateral* 35). All such elements cumulatively build a scenario of administrative indifference and multifaceted deprivation. An anguished Mangal Murmu therefore exclaims, "What do we Santhals get in return? Tatters to wear. Barely enough food. Such diseases that we can't breathe properly, we cough blood and forever remain bare bones" (172).

However, Mangal Murmu's monologue does not only highlight material deprivation; it also links it to insidious socio-cultural processes. The Adivasis have historically been antagonistic to extrinsic forces that have repeatedly sought to exploit them and their natural resources. Their quests for self-assertion, during Hul or Ulgulan, have always been built upon not just autonomy but also a refusal to allow others to exploit and utilise their ancestral lands for profiteering mechanisms that not only run counter to Adivasi lifestyle but also the Adivasi perception of man-nature relationships. Quite naturally, Mangal's ire is directed towards, "all Diku—Marwari, Sindhi, Mandal, Bhagat, Muslim. They turn our land upside down, inside out ..." (172). He is also keenly aware that the minerals excavated from Santhal lands are sold in places like "Dilli, Noida, Panjab" which bring in prosperity for the merchants who secure best medical treatments for themselves in places like "Ranchi, Patna, Bhhagalpur, Malda, Bardhaman, Kolkata" (172). Such statements not only reveal a subaltern's antagonistic attitude towards other regions of the nation-state but also that for such subalternized sections, the nation-state itself appears to be an exploitative framework that refuses to endow them with freedom, dignity and welfare. It is such experiences that force us to recognise the liminal nature of the "internally marked" nation-space where, as Bhabha points out, "the discourse of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference" jostle for space (*Location of Culture* 148). This becomes all the more evident from Mangal Murmu's representation of local Muslims, whom he identifies as Jolhas.⁴ His account of Muslim settlement in his Matiajore village is particularly interesting:

A decade earlier when the Santhals of Matiajore were beginning their annual journey to share crop in the farms of Namal, four Jolha families turned up from nowhere and asked us for shelter. A poor lot, they looked as impoverished as us. Perhaps worse... Today, that small cluster of four huts has grown into a tola of more than a hundred houses. Houses, not huts. While we Santhals, in our own village, still live in our mud houses, each Jolha house has at least one brick wall and a

cemented yard...Sometimes I wonder who the *olposonkhyok* [minority] is here. (175-76)

Such comments not only signal a certain degree of jealousy but also a certain degree of hostility against the increased population and prosperity of another community, which only highlights by contrast their own deprivation. However, there are other reasons for hostility as well. At one point, Mangal even asserts how, "... Muslims barge into [their] homes, sleep with [their] women, and [they] Santhal men cannot do a thing" (172). According to Mangal, such helplessness is also a product of the hike in Muslim population which renders Santhals outnumbered in their own lands: "Village after village in our Santhal Pargana—which should have been a home for Santhals—are turning into Muslim villages" (173). Such statements highlight how the group "which was dominant in one area ... could be among the dominated in another" (Guha "Some Aspects" 8) and thus add new dimensions to Hansda's representation of subalterneity.

However, this does not mean that in Hansda's representation Adivasis' antagonism is directed only against the Muslim community. The same sense of hostility is also directed towards Christian missionaries and caste-Hindus, who are both seen as agents of cultural erasure. While on the one hand he feels dismayed by the Christian missionaries' attempt to convert the Santhal children or to rename them as "David and Mikail and Kiristofor and whatnot" (172) as opposed to Hopna, Som or Singrai, he is equally repelled by the caste-Hindus who also want them to give up their Sarna faith: "They too want to make us forget our Sarna-religion, convert us into Safa-Hor, and swell their numbers to become more valuable vote banks. Safa-Hor, the pure people, the clean people, but certainly not as clean and pure as themselves, that's for sure" (173). Caught in this vortex of political manoeuvring, religious conversion and numerical one-upmanship, the Santhals find themselves both materially and culturally endangered. As Mangal Murmu ruefully remarks, "We are losing our Sarna-faith, our identities, and our roots. We are becoming people from nowhere" (173).

This looming sense of cultural erasure becomes even stronger in relation to the dance and music traditionally performed by Santhals, including Mangal Murmu's own troupe. While on the one hand the nature and functioning of the troupe itself is challenged by worsening material circumstances which force Adivasis to migrate seasonally in search of agricultural jobs, on the other hand their performances are neither materially rewarding nor accorded the dignity and appreciation they deserve. It is out of this sense of disillusionment and despair that Mangal exclaims: "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?" (178). Such interrogations reveal a sense of bitter betrayal experienced by the Adivasis of Jharkhand who have come to realise that, despite all the campaigns for an Adivasi province, the establishment of Jharkhand has only been an exercise in tokenism ("Tribal: Victims of Development"). It is this sense of betrayal and hypocrisy and the attendant commodification of Adivasi

art that Mangal Murmu challenges: “For every benefit, in job, in education, in whatever, the Diku are quick to call Jharkhand their own—let the Adivasi go to hell. But when it comes to displaying Jharkhandi culture, the onus of singing and dancing is upon the Adivasi alone” (179). What is even more ironic is that the cultural misappropriation of Adivasis coexists with their forced displacements, illegal incarceration and state-sponsored violence, often for forcible acquisition of lands.

This is precisely the kind of irony which Sekhar’s narrative seeks to explore. Mangal Murmu’s climactic moment of defiance arrives when he and his troupe are supposed to perform in front of the President of India and various central and state-level ministers, in a ceremony celebrating the laying of the foundation stone for a large thermal power plant. However, it is for this power plant that inhabitants of eleven villages, mostly Adivasis, are being forcibly evicted and subjected to incarceration and violence. The fictional event possibly alludes to the actual setting up of a power plant in Godda by Jindal Steel and Power Limited, whose foundation-stone was indeed laid by the President of India, amidst protest from Adivasi inhabitants from various villages who were detained at the Sundarpahari police station, less than a kilometre away from the venue of the ceremony (Yadav 2013). For Mangal, within the context of Sekhar’s representational framework, such an event lays bare the foundational inequality at the heart of the Indian nation-state, where the Adivasis continue to be subalternized through developmental models that alienate the indigenous without either acknowledging their agency or providing them with democratically acceptable rehabilitation and compensation packages. Quite naturally, the conventional political slogan “Bharat Mahaan” (India is Great) seems rather ridiculous to Mangal who asks,

What mahaan?... Which great nation displaces thousands of its people from homes and livelihoods to produce electricity for cities and factories? And jobs? What jobs? 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? (185)

Such questions not only interrogate the self-congratulatory and entirely misleading rhetoric of “Shining India” or “Emerging India,” but also problematize the techno-capitalist logic of development itself, which has devoured indigenous communities across the world. In the process, Mangal Murmu comes to represent the subalternized Adivasi consciousness not only in India but also the world over.

It is Mangal Murmu’s holistic awareness of these manifold processes of dispossession confronting Adivasi existence that finally finds expression in the violently interrupted speech which he addresses to the President of India:

Johar Rashtrapati-babu... You will now start building the power plant, but this plant will be the end of us all, the end of all the Adivasi. These men sitting beside you have told you that this power plant will change our fortunes, but these same men have forced us out of our homes and villages. 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. (187)

Such a defiant declaration operates as a twofold negation that not only rejects the discourse of neo-liberal development, but also the illusion of inclusion that Adivasi performances in official programmes of the nation-state often serve to create. What makes such negation so remarkable is that as an incipient organic intellectual it is through such negation that Mangal Murmu becomes a representative of a resistant subaltern Adivasi consciousness which refuses both interpellation and primitive regression. Instead, his coherent, though sometimes prejudiced, articulation of the manifold processes of subjugation confronting Adivasi existence may be seen as the kind of “critical elaboration,” generally offered by intellectuals, which might become “the foundation of a new and integral conception of the world” (Gramsci 9).

As Gramsci also points out, the task of an “organic intellectual” is to endow his/her corresponding social group with “homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields” (Gramsci 5). Mangal Murmu’s repeated invocation of Adivasi identity, as opposed to exclusive identification with Santhal, Lodha, Paharia or any such groups, obviously gestures towards such a homogeneity which is reinforced by his affective solidarity with the displaced villagers of Godda and eventually triggers his defiant outburst. Similarly, his representation of the material and cultural crisis faced by the Adivasis, the changing socio-political circumstances, his distrust of political parties and their “chor-chuhad leaders” (thieving, robbing leaders; 176)—all suggest his holistic awareness regarding his social group’s position which becomes the platform for his stern refusal.

However, one must not forget that mere articulation is not enough for an “organic intellectual” in Gramsci’s sense of the term. Gramsci’s use of the term also focuses on “directive” attributes through “active participation in practical life, as organiser, constructor, ‘permanent persuader’” (Gramsci 10). This is precisely what Mangal Murmu lacks, as is evident from his own admission: “But I did not share my plan with anyone. I went ahead alone, like a fool” (169). But even such failure is filled with potentiality. Mangal also admits:

Had I only spoken to them about my plan, I am sure they would have stood by me. For they too suffer, the same as I. They would have stood by me, they would have spoken with me and together, our voices would have rung out loud. They would have travelled out of our Santhal Pargana, out of our Jharkhand, all the way to Dilli and all of Bharot-disom; the world itself would have come to know of our suffering. (169)

Such a possibility marks a move towards what Gramsci would have called “the humanistic conception of history” which defines an organic intellectual who provides intellectual and moral leadership towards emancipatory collective movements. Ernst Bloch explained that “truth is not the reflection of facts but of processes; it is ultimately the indication of the tendency and latency of that which has not yet become and needs its activator” (qtd. in Zipes xix). Sekhar’s exploration of subaltern consciousness through the character of Mangal Murmu not only offers us the figure of an incipient Adivasi “organic intellectual,” probably the

first of his kind in Indian Writing in English, but also foregrounds, following Bloch's analysis, the kind of "anticipatory illumination" which is vital for sustaining hope for future struggles. Herein perhaps lies the significance of "The Adivasi will not Dance" as a text that confronts the "determined negation" which Adivasi existence faces in various contexts and yet serves to circulate anticipatory illumination through its exploration of subaltern consciousness. It may also be noted that, according to Jack Zipes, in Bloch's theorisation "[l]iterature and art contain the anticipatory illumination of that which has not yet become, and the role of the writer and artist is similar to that of a midwife who enables latent and potential materials to assume their own unique forms" (Zipes xix). Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar, as an author, performs a similar role.

Conclusion

"The Adivasi will not Dance" may therefore be seen as a pioneering text in the realm of Indian Writing in English, not just in terms of its engagement with the subjugation of Adivasis, but also in terms of its representation of a subaltern Adivasi consciousness which is remarkably different from those that have so far been fashioned by urban, middle-class, metropolitan or diasporic authors. In the process, the text also offers a stringent critique of the postcolonial nation-state in its neo-liberal avatar, which echoes the experiences of indigenous communities or members of the Fourth World in other countries and continents as well. Moving away from stereotypes and romanticisation, the text in all its historicised details, offers a unique insight into subaltern Adivasi consciousness that not only forces one to take note of Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar's astute grasp of the material and cultural conditions of subalternized Adivasis, but also illuminates new avenues for the growth of Indian Writing in English, especially at an age when it has often come under criticism for either pandering to the expectations of a Euro-American market, or for being confined in ivory towers.

Notes

1. The term "Adivasi" is used here to designate members of indigenous communities who are identified by the Indian Constitution as people of "Scheduled Tribes." In popular parlance they are often identified as "tribals," a term that has become freighted with various derogatory associations and assumptions of cultural and civilisational hierarchy. Since the history of these communities often predates that of the Aryan civilisation, the term Adivasi, denoting their original ties to the land ("Adi" means original and "vasi" means inhabitant), carries greater historical truth and has been used here instead of "tribals." For further discussion, see Rycroft (2014).

2. The term "savarna" refers to communities who fall within the caste-system endorsed by Orthodox Hinduism which divides the

community into four different castes or *varnas*: Brhamin, Kshatriya, Vishya, Sudra. The Adivasis stand outside caste-systems.

3. A significant exception is of course the writings of Mahasweta Devi. Devi's fiction, in the words of Spivak, gives us glimpses of "an impossible, undivided world without which no literature should be possible" (Landry and Maclean 273). However, it also needs to be noted that Devi originally wrote in Bengali and not in English.

4. The term "Jolha" which now refers to Muslims in general, originally referred to Muslim weavers of the Chhotonagpur area who often shared a symbiotic relationship with local Adivasis as evident from the popular slogan "Kolha-Jolha Bhai Bhai" (Adivasis and Muslims are brothers). See Kathinka Sinha-Kerkoff, "Partition Memories and Memories of Muslims in Jharkhand, India," *Critical Asian Studies* 36:1 (2004), 125, 131. The contrast between the once-popular slogan and the attitude represented by the narrator is part of a larger network of fissures haunting the subcontinent.

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