

THE COURAGE NOT TO DANCE: PARRHESIA, POWER, AND ADIVASI DISSENT IN HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR'S *THE ADIVASI WILL NOT DANCE*

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ABSTRACT:

This research paper attempts to read Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's seminal book of short stories, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* through the lens of Foucault's conceptual framework of the Greek parrhesia, which translates as "free speech", or act of truth-telling in the face of power and the risk of harm. In the story, Mangal Murmu, the protagonist, refuses to perform with his Santali troupes at an inauguration of a state-owned thermal power plant and thus engages in Foucauldian "parrhesia" (publicly declaring) that the Adivasi will no longer dance, as the authorities are attempting to dispossess them, which disrupts the spectacle of development that romanticises indigenous culture but destroys its materiality. His refusal to dance, then, becomes a form of symbolic counter-conduct, upsetting the smooth narrative of development. In this article, the author places the story within the larger historical context of displacement in the Santal Parganas and explains how mining and thermal power projects have rendered Adivasi communities vulnerable to losing land and to ecological degradation by showing how development often works through the targeted dispossession of indigenous populations, making them precarious. In this way, Mangal's refusal to dance is a form of ethical non-cooperation with a biopolitical regime of life and death. By turning tribal performance into political dissent, Shekhar challenges the romanticization of Adivasis culture and stresses the people's agency. Thus, this paper shows how the courage to not dance becomes a powerful statement of self-worth within structures designed to silence and marginalise the underprivileged.

KEYWORDS:

Parrhesia, power, biopolitics, governmentality, resistance, Adivasis, displacement, development, resistance

INTRODUCTION:

The last chapter of Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar's book, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* begins with the discourse of no metaphorical land but a land with soil, forest, stone and coal. The Santhal Pargana (which includes the districts of Dumka, Deoghar, Jamtara, Pakur, Sahibganj, and Godda) is a territory populated by the Santhal community, whose memories of the Hul rebellion (1855), a massive insurgency against exploitative revenue policies, moneylenders, and colonial expansion, remains vivid in the political imagination of the region. The territory was first given recognition by law in 1949 in the Santal Pargana Tenancy Act, which prohibits the transfer of tribal land to non-tribal persons (Tenancy Laws 1947). This Tenancy Act legalized the land not only as a property for Adivasis, but also as a means of livelihood, memory and social identity. Dipanwita Pal in her article, "*The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Delving Deep into the Heart of Marginality*" mentions that the tribals rely mostly on agriculture and forest produce for their livelihood and thus, land becomes the fundamental natural resource for their livelihood (Pal). But in the post-independence era, this protectionism was loosened, and in the name of development, state acquisition, industrial growth, and mining interests invaded this tribal heartland.

Almost the same narrative is shown in Hansada's fiction, where Mangal Murmu, as a speaker in a dramatic monologue, reveals to a passive audience the horrors of his tribe. Through his story, an ancient story of dispossession and exploitation of his adivasi brothers is being reverberated: "Only a few of us still have farmlands; Most of it has been acquired by the mining company" (171). Thus, ironically, the Tenancy Act, which was supposed to protect Adivasis from non-Adivasis, remained paper-limited, rendering tribal lands economically vulnerable.

Mangal, who is no longer a farmer, but a troupe master, a composer of music, a trainer of dancers, a performer at official functions, epitomizes the shift from land to spectacle, from agricultural self-sufficiency to precarious labour and cultural performance. This shift is not unexpected; rather, it is the result of extensive and extended extractive modernity in tribal belts that are rich in minerals. Felix Padel, in his article titled, “In the Name of Sustainable Development: Genocide Masked as ‘Tribal Development’” observed that the relationship of the tribal people with the land is deeply rooted, and their expulsion from it is akin to “cutting this cord-sort of a psychic death”. Padel further argues that “development projects” are antagonistic to Adivasi living and that their displacement is called “investment-induced displacement” (Radhakrishna 160). This paradox is starkly evident as most tribal people live in the resource-rich areas where they are not included in the benefits of the industrial and mining projects. This sociological reality is depicted in Hansda's fictional landscape. To compare and contrast both the situation of the coal and stone merchants and the situation of the Adivasis, Mangal Murmu asserts : “we cough blood and forever remain bare homes” is not hyperbolic (172). He is recounting how health is impacted by mining and environmental degradation, transforming the body into an extraction site. This leads to what might be termed “Adivasi political consciousness”, which does not need to be expressed in academic terms or cited through constitutional provisions. But it concedes injustice. Mangal’s shock problematizes the very question of Adivasi existence: “how can anyone force Santhals to vacate their land in the Santhals Pargana? Didn’t we have the Tenancy Act to protect us?” (181). He's shocked politically. It's a sign of betrayal. Cultural degradation and economic loss can create political awareness. In this way, Mangal Murmu highlights the glaring asymmetry: “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).

It is quite clear that being visible culturally does not necessarily translate to being empowered structurally. Adivasi bodies are seen as ornaments but not as equal rights sharers. Hence, the narrative of mangal is not just the historicity of the region but the ethical dilemma in question itself. The inauguration of the thermal power plant by the President is not a unique and rare occasion. It reflects a continuous, lengthy stretch of industrial encroachment on tribal lands. Mangal's rejection posits the crossroads of modernity and memory.

DISCOURSE, REPRESENTATION, AND THE MAKING OF THE ADIVASI BODY:

If Mangal Murmu's narrative revolves round the materiality of land, then discourse creates the symbolic terrain. As Foucault in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge* argues that discourse does more than merely describing pre-existing subjects- it shapes the objects, it speaks about and governs the circumstances in which they may manifest (Foucault 1972). From the confines of what it can be said, "the cultural tribal", Adivasis are frequently depicted in popular discourse as being primitive, musical, and more in harmony with nature: "...be it an athletic meet, some inauguration, or any function organized by someone high and mighty-in the name of Adivasi culture and Jharkhand culture, it is necessary to make Adivasis dance" (179).

Although this romantic formulation seems complimentary, it obstructs Adivasis' political claims and restricts them to an aesthetic role. With Mangal Murmu's rejection, this discourse formation is shattered, and the Adivasis are re-shaped as political subjects rather than performers. Prabal Bhowmik in his well-written article "Interplay of Power and Resistance in *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*" rightly says that Adivasis are often portrayed in the urban imagination as "exoticization of the Other in the name of culture" as the tribals are praised for their dance and music but are excluded from significant socio-political agency (Bhowmik 2021). This simplifies the situation. It turns the Adivasi identity into a spectacle. Mangal Murmu uses a witty metaphor to explain this reduction: "We

are like toys-someone presses our 'ON' button, or turns a key in our backsides, and we Santhals start beating rhythms on our tamak and tumdak, or start blowing tunes on our tiriyo while someone snatches away our very dancing grounds" (170).

The mechanical action of a puppet is revealed by the above metaphor. This shows that the Adivasi culture is mechanized or regulated by outsiders, without intervention of any tribal agency. This is once again justified by Mangal Murmu's own words: "But we Santhals are fools, aren't we? All of us Adivasis are fools. Down the years, down the generations, the Diku have taken advantage of our foolishness" (170). When the state authorities arrange for some high-profile celebrations and invite the Santhals to perform, they are not merely asking for entertainment, rather they are upholding the Jharkhand cultural representation. The very performance gives the testimony for a joyous indigeneity. But surprisingly and ironically enough, the same state-authority asks the Adivasis to "vacate their land-their village, farms everything"(181). In the book review of this text by Priyanka Tripathy, she mentions a very valid point saying that "The Stories mainly depict the lives of Santhals from the Jharkhand regions, constantly struggling to live their life with dignity in this mineral -rich land where corporate takeover and development anthem is trending" (Tripathi). The most important word relating to this commentary is the word, "dignity". Every individual-every community deserves dignity and respect. The Adivasis represent Jharkhand culture through their dance and music performance but inwardly they are dispossessed of their lands undermining their dignity. Mangal Murmu's parrhesiastic voice went high due to this paradoxical way of living which the tribals can hardly afford to bear.

In Foucault's later talks on governmentality which is included in his books, *Security, Territory, Population* (2007) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), he advocates that modern power does not only prohibit or punishes in an overt way but also manages through a range of subtle techniques aimed at constructing anticipated behaviors of its subjects or encouraging engagement with development narratives (Foucault 2007). Thus, Mangal Murmu's

invitation to perform before the President is framed in terms of honour, to symbolically show the inclusion and participation of the Adivasis with the nation-state and this is how governmentality operates. This is evident in Murmu's acknowledgement:

What does a hungry man need? Food. What does a poor man need? Money. So, here I was, needing both. And recognition, too. We artists are greedy people. We are hungry for acceptance, some acknowledgement, some remembrance. So, without thinking, I sent back a reply the very next day saying yes, I would be happy to perform... Nearly all of us travellers were blackened by the dust from the Koyla Road. Yet I was so happy that I did not notice it at all. (180)

Mangal Murmu could examine the paradox that lies beneath-the same state that celebrates the Adivasi dance, is relentlessly occupying their lands; the same officials who value their culture are in fact supervising the tribal eviction. But his refusal to dance and sing denotes an act of ungratefulness and non-cooperation of the Adivasis against the developmental orgy of the state-kind of a disruption of the coalition between cultural representation and political consent.

It is through language; the purpose of discourse is served. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar strategically uses some Santhali vocabularies like *tiriyo*, *tamak*, *tumdak*, without maintaining any glossaries in English narratives that fully resist assimilation to metropolitan English to implicate the presence of local words within global language. This accords with what Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin identify as the twin strategies of abrogation and appropriation in postcolonial writing. They argue that postcolonial texts seize the language of the centre and re-place it in indigenous contexts, rejecting the normative authority of Standard English while adapting it to local realities (Ashcroft et al. 37-39). Shekhar appropriates English and simultaneously abrogates its claim to linguistic supremacy.

PARRHESIA AND THE ETHICS OF DANGEROUS SPEECH:

In his final lectures at Berkeley and the Collège de France, Michel Foucault resorts repeatedly to the ancient Greek concept of parrhesia, which he translates as “fearless speech” or “frank truth telling”. However, parrhesia is not mere honesty- it is a particular ethical practice- the parrhesiastes speaks openly, directly, and without rhetorical camouflage, in situations where truth is unwelcome, and at risk to himself (Foucault 2001). Foucault describes three components of parrhesia: (1) the speaker believes what he says to be true and correct; (2) parrhesiastic speech is dangerous, since the speaker speaks against power; (3) a moral bond is established between the speaker and the listener. Foucault notes:

Parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy (*ibid.*).

These elements are reflected in Mangal Murmu's address to the President. He neither presents a ready-made manifesto nor resorts to any data. Like a true parrhesiastes, without weeping any choking up, he speaks in front of power and let the power know what he had in his mind:

Johar, Rashtrapati-babu. We are very proud and happy that you have come to our Santhal Pargana and we are also very proud that we have been asked to sing and dance before you and welcome you to our place. We will sing and dance before you but tell us, do we have a reason to sing and dance? Do we have a reason to be happy? 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 behind you have told

you that this power plant will change our fortunes, but these same men have forced us out our homes and villages. We have nowhere to go, nowhere to grow crops. (187)

The simplicity of Mangal Murmu's verbal deliverance to power amplifies its impact. The speech eliminates every sort of ceremonial language. It gives birth to contradictions to which the authority in power was not ready to receive. There is an immediate risk. Mangal is physically subdued and beaten at the beginning of the story (169). The violence takes place swiftly. Thus, it is made clear that speaking the truth in a biopolitical state when it tries to disrupt development spectacle, is not protected speech. The danger is even amplified by the President's presence. He does not speak from the traditional village platform but rather from the presidential one where the President sits; hence his parrhesia is antithetical to power insofar as he occupies a weaker position than that of the addressee (Mangal is an old Adivasi troupe master, the addressee is the President of India), and precisely this asymmetry comes into view. It is also important because Mangal's refusal has not been couched within the language of ideological revolution: He does not declare war on power; rather he asks for justice (and land) to which Adivasis are entitled, only then can they achieve happiness (for them it means material security): "Unless we are given back our homes and land, we will not sing and dance. We Adivasis will not dance" (187). The conditional clause here is critical, because it highlights that the rejection is not based on anti-culture but on expropriation; the state expects the Adivasi dance to be emblematic of an inclusive development, but the refusal disrupts the carefully crafted image of cultural unity. Mangal Murmu exposes the nullity of this inclusion. He shows how representation without compensation is futile.

Hansda's depiction of Magal Murmu also problematises the notion of subaltern silence as described by Gayatri Spivak, who asserts that the subaltern cannot simply be heard within hegemonic epistemic structure-Speech may not equate to recognition: "Subjugated knowledge," "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve

knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (Spivak 35).

In Hansda's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, Mangal becomes a parrhesiastes, but he is beaten, and his voice does not stop the thermal power project; however, the narrative itself certifies that the subaltern speech circulates beyond the event, and it travels through literature.

CONCLUSION:

Consequently, Hansda's Adivasi body is doubly constructed; it is fashioned on the outside as an exotic performer and on the inside as a suffering and thinking subject. Mangal tears through the first construction but affirms the second in his speech. At the level of narrative structure, Mangal Murmu's story begins with violence and ends with unfinished speech. The last line, "The Adivasi will not", fades away (187). The lack of completion of the sentence marks a symbolic break-the power enters. However, the words have already entered into the domain of discourse; it cannot be deleted.

This refusal to dance is not, therefore, merely personal obstinacy but an extensive insurgency. Mangal Murmu is battered but standing upright and ethically grounded as a genuine parrhesiastes of the margins. His parrhesiastic voice may not jam the wheel of progress but it will definitely problematise the script that anticipates Adivasis to play a mere background role of ceremonial decor in the theatre of development.

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