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“THEY EAT MEAT!”: A STUDY OF TRIBAL CULTURE IN NON-TRIBAL VICINITY

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ABSTRACT

The alien and fascinating indigeneity of tribals has been always appealing to the non-tribals and attracts researchers and writers to dig into their territory. Mostly, these tribals have been portrayed as the objects of analysis, hunger-stricken and uncivilized. Consequently, the socio-political mainstream unaccustomed to accept them as civilized human beings, tries to subjugate them. They agree to accept them as their ally only at the cost of their betrayal to their Identity. The available literature of Santhal tribe is the demonstration of the voices of the people struggling to liberate themselves from the clutches of varied suppressions that problematize the very essence of their identity.

The present paper is a critical study of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s short story “They Eat Meat!” which deals with the cultural and political ascendancy of Hindu culture and religion over the tribal culture of Santhals living in the non-tribal vicinity, and their despair on the segregation from their community and culture.

Keywords: Tribal, Ethnicity, Mainstream, Community, Cultural hegemony.

Introduction

Tribal life has become one of the popular discourses in contemporary academia. There have been intense and detailed research works on tribals carried out by the anthropologists and sociologists. The information embedded in their works supply the basis to differentiate these tribals from the so called civilized society. E.G. Man in his famous book *Sonthalia and the Sonthals* had given a firsthand report on the Santhals, a major tribal group of India. He describes them as “an uncouth, truth-telling, savage tribe differing entirely from their immediate neighbours in their physique, habits and superstitions.” This kind of differentiation which portrays them as naïve and ignorant individuals, makes them vulnerable to the suppression of ruling class. Since old times, there had been voices against

the discrimination inflicted upon them. But it is in more recent times, with the advent of education that the tribals have been able to give expression to their experiences and to articulate their demands to acquire their fundamental and legal rights.

One of the significant traits of tribal identity is the culture they follow irrespective of the location they inhabit. British anthropologist, Sir E.B. Tylor in the opening lines of his book, *Primitive Cultures* (1871) provides a simplified definition of Culture – “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” In an alien setup following one’s culture might be difficult but not altogether impossible as we see in the case of Santhals. The Santhals are known to be habitual migrants, not

sticking to one particular place. In the words of Carstairs- "They spread like the bees, sending their swarms to create a new village." Presently, they are settled in different parts of the country distant from each other. Though, they have immensely migrated from one place to another, they have successfully preserved their culture and retained the peculiarities and uniqueness of their culture. And thus, they became the largest homogenous tribal community in India. This explains the likeness of culture followed by Santhals across the boundaries of States and the country. Santhals living in Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Assam or any other part of the country are very much identical in their culture and practices to those of living in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. Commenting on the antiquity of the Santhals in this land, Biswas, an eminent anthropologist writes:

'If there is any culture which still carries on the impress of the underlying philosophic speculation and order of the thought that was widespread in India prior to the rise of the pre-Dravidian culture, it was very likely the belief and social order of the pre-Dravidian Santals. So in the pre-Aryan and pre-Dravidian culture of India Santals stands in the lime light'. (Cited in Hembrom's *The Santal and the Biblical Creation Traditions: Anthropological and Theological Reflections*)

Their geographical distribution and their co-existence with other tribal and non-tribal groups have transformed their tribality to some extent but to a very lesser degree. The essence and the rudimentary element of their very identity is still intact and therefore they stand out in the crowd of the other communities. Their distinguished culture and tradition that affirm to be their Identity are often considered as peculiar, heathen, or pagan by some non-tribals. This peculiarity of their ethnicity can be witnessed in their religion, custom, language, dress, and food-habits besides their social organization.

Tribal culture in non-tribal vicinity

Here, in the context of their food habits, certain points from Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's

story "They Eat Meat!" have been discussed to analyze their life among the non-tribals. Like most of the tribal communities, Santhals also are very fond of eating meat including beef and pork. And hence, sometimes they cannot accommodate themselves into any popular culture, neither in Hindu nor Muslim. Though, they enjoy their foods outside mainstream boundary, in the mainland among the non-tribes they encounter varied socio-political and cultural factors working in the marginalization of cultural practices of this tribe. Hence, they find themselves insecure and lost in the crowd of people belonging to different races. Because of their cultural preferences they are most often discriminated, sidelined and abused. This intolerance towards tribal community like Santhals can be unhesitatingly related to present days' mob lynching which has victimized many Muslims for consuming beef, and tribals are no exception in this case. This story "They Eat Meat!" is about a Santhal(tribal) family shifted to Varodara with all its essential and distinguishing attributes of its culture from Jharkhand, a state acknowledged for its diversity of tribal groups. This story has been taken from the book *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* written by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar who is himself a tribal.

The story deals with the moral anxiety aroused in the family members by their segregation from their people. This was further deepened by their confrontation with a constricting cultural ascendancy. As author himself belongs to the same tribal group, he excels in revealing the challenges confronted by the Santhals while settling down in a city like Varodara where Hindu culture is dominant and the Gramscian 'cultural hegemony' is very much in play. This story plays a very important role in understanding the tribal life in a completely hostile surrounding and those oppressing factors which are restraining Santhals to pursue their cultural practices and habits in a foreign cultural vicinity.

When Mr. Soren, whom the author calls Biram Kumang, his transfer to Varodara was announced, the first person to get panicked was Panmuni-jhi, his wife, the chef of their family, for settling down in a new place was itself a trouble and in Varodara, it was more than that. She had heard that people in Varodara do not eat meat and their

family like all other Santhals was extremely fond of eating non veg. This fondness had secured a firm place in their daily menu; if not meat at least eggs. So, the very concern of Panmuni-jhi was,

“What are we going to eat there?”(p.2)

She anticipates the captivation of their food habits and culture under the dominance of another more powerful ruling culture. This fear of captivation of culture is not a trouble of the Soren family alone but of all the tribals who have broken their hunger-stricken and uncivilized image and have gathered courage to stand with the Indian Mainstream, establishing a tribal middle class. However, the socio-political mainstream unaccustomed to accept them as civilized human beings, always tries to subjugate them. They agree to accept them as their ally only at the cost of these tribals’ betrayal to their identity. Vadodara is the city where majority of the population are followers of Hinduism and in order to look respectful and honorable one is expected to maintain those codes of Brahminism. The impact of this cultural hegemony can be witnessed in the constricting mentality of Mr. Rao, the Telugu landlord of Soren family. His complete submission to the orthodoxy of this popular culture makes him ensure that no tenant would cook any non-veg in his house and maintain those strict norms and principles of Hinduism. Although in a very polite manner he interrogates Mr. Soren and requests him to hide his identity as a tribal. In a very stern voice he demands confirmation from Mr. Soren:

“Can you assure us that you won’t cook any non-veg in my kitchen? No meat-mutton-egg- chicken-fish. Nothing.”(p.8)

Interestingly, Mr. Rao himself was not originally from a vegetarian family. He along with his family had settled down in Subhanpura Colony of Varodara from Andhra Pradesh. But the dominance of this Brahminical culture was so strong that he made it a rule not to cook non-veg inside his house. However, ironically, this rule was broken by his wife herself who enters into her tenant, Panmuni-jhi’s kitchen to prepare a south Indian egg curry in his absence. And from the side of Panmuni-jhi and her family, this breaching had already been done earlier but always

under the threat of getting caught by the Raos and others of their locality. The author in his best ways manifests the challenges before them if they ever wished to cook even a single egg, in the following lines:

“...Biram-Kumang or Hopon would go there, look around to make sure there were no familiar eyes spying on them, buy two eggs, wrap them up discreetly, put them in their cloth shopping bag, and return home. If buying eggs was a difficult task, cooking one was a mission in itself. Cooking more than one egg at the same time was the same as getting caught. If Hopon ate one egg on a given day, he would have the next egg only after a week or so, when Panmuni-jhi was sure that the odour of the eggs she had cooked had wafted out of the house, out of Subhanpura Colony itself.”(p.13)

The function of this power relation that allows one culture to subjugate another can be further traced from the special privileges enjoyed inside the CISF camp, the only place where meats were sold and cooked without any restriction. Soren family and Mrs. Rao’s visit to Panmuni-jhi’s cousin Jhapan at CISF camp to fulfill their appetite for non-veg clearly manifests their passive protest to break through the barriers of a culture imposed upon them.

Like all other tribals, Santhals also have their own rites and rituals related to the festivals like Baha, Sohrai, and Sakrat which they celebrate together. In the case of Soren family, devoid of relatives except Jhapan di at CISF camp, their life was isolated and their nostalgia for homeland prevails throughout the story. They feel alienated and their sense of self buried under the pressure of Hinduism. In order to maintain their civility and respectability, they avoided cooking non-veg, and they conform to the norms,

“...they went to mandirs, celebrated Hindu festivals- fasted on certain days, lit dhoop-batti in their house.” (p.15)

The manner in which their old sofa was put in the back of their house and had been replaced by new

Gujrati sofa, she had brought from the artisans of Varodara, is symbolic of how her own age old culture and practices were put aside and replaced by Hindu culture of Varodara. She also bought Lehanga-choli and other things from Varodara unaware of the fact that how these things are slowly entering into their culture subsiding the original ethnic dresses of Santhals. They are in a state of unceasing dilemma, whether to stick by their cultural identity, or to step out to surrender to the demands of modernization as we might have witnessed how due to their ethnicity tribals especially students and workers have to face difficulties in arranging accommodation in non-tribal cultural environment.

Conclusion

Hence, we can conclude that the external factors especially the dominant culture has deeply affected tribals socially, culturally and psychologically. It has forced them to adopt the alien culture in order to gain respectability among the non-tribals. Such adaptation has consequently caused the loss of self-identity among the Santhals. However, there is always an inherent desire lurking in their hearts to revive their lost self, by being with their own people in their own lands celebrating their festivals, dancing, singing, drinking and eating food stuffs of their choices. And that is why, when Mr. Soren's transfer to Ranchi was announced they were overjoyed. It was their place where Panmuni-jhi felt at home.

"It was as she said, 'our area'. 'No one minds what we eat here,'... 'And we don't mind what others eat.' " (p.27)

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