

Resisting Stereotypes in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's

The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey

Ms. S. Cynthia Juanita
Research Scholar
PG and Research Department of English
Holy Cross College (Autonomous)
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University
Tiruchirappalli-620 002

Dr. I. Ruby Merlin
Associate Professor & Research Supervisor
PG and Research Department of English
Holy Cross College (Autonomous)
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University
Tiruchirappalli – 620 002

Abstract

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is one of the leading novelists who delineates the hardships of his community through his writings. On the other hand, his writings resist the mainstream or power structure discourses or actions, articulating for the reclaiming of the space of his people. Stereotypes are tools used by the dominant powers to suppress the marginalized communities. The Santhal Adivasis have been addressed as barbarous, savages, and uncivilized, which excludes them from political participation, educational opportunities, and social acceptance. The paper, "Resisting Stereotypes in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*," explores the resilience of the Adivasi community against the ideologies of dominance. In the novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, the characters Sido and his father, Khorda Haram, exemplify resilience because they advocated for the rights of their people.

Keywords: Stereotype, Resistance, Education, Politics, Discrimination

Grand narratives narrate the perspectives of the elites, such as rulers, political leaders, and influential institutions. The bourgeois people, so called the elites, control the society. The concept of history from below is advocated by the historian, E.P. Thompson which focuses on the marginalized, oppressed and the working-class people and showcases their lived experiences, struggles with power, oppression and resistance. History from below cares for the pastorals, folklores, personal diaries and those not on the official recorded history. The historical research from below focusses on the interconnecting of personal and collective experiences which shapes the identities and communities. In his book *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson articulates the plight of the working class thus: "Their crafts and traditions may have been dying... Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. ...But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance... Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties" (8-9). Over human history, domination, superiority, and suppression have remained unchanged while the dominant rule over the

suppressed or minority groups in the name of civilization. The elites impose their ideology on the marginalized and consider them as uncivilized.

The colonizers addressed the natives as barbarous and uncivilized to extend their domination over them and occupy their lands. Native culture and social life are disrespected by mainstream people. To abduct the treasures of Adivasis, the colonizers disrupted the lives of the colonized and spread the idea that Adivasis were uncontrollable. These Adivasis fall prey to the dominance and become victim in their own lands. Stereotypes are misinformation created by the dominance to oppose the weaker section. The stereotypes are created by the power structures to colonize a particular group of people or an individual. A psychologist, Saul McLeod, says a stereotype is “a fixed, overgeneralized belief about a particular group or class of people” (np). The main idea of stereotypes is to push people into the margins under the concept of development. Marginalized sectors neglect the idea of stereotyping. Resisting the stereotype involves in breaking the generalized ideas and beliefs which leads to discrimination. The focus of stereotypes is to avoid fixed assumptions but also promotes equality and respect. Cultural stereotyping is based on the perspectives of the elites, who strongly believe in the ideas created by the hierarchy against marginalized people.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a left-wing activist, who voices the challenges of his people. He resisted and reclaimed his space through his writings against the mainstream people. The novelist echoes the hardship Adivasis have endured since British colonization. The writings of Shekhar resist the corporates who squandered the lands of the Adivasis. The novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* depicts the resistance of Adivasis against their suppression or oppression. Moreover, the novel narrates how the Adivasis used resistance to claim their rights, which were ignored by the mainstream.

This paper “Resisting Stereotypes in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*,” analyses Adivasis’s resilience against their victimisation. The act of resistance includes fighting against their oppressors and emerging independently. The Adivasis resisted their marginalization through their participation in politics, pursued their education to subvert their identity, and raised their voice against discrimination.

The classification of Indian tribes are based on geographical location, language, and race and socio economic development. As per the records of 2022, that the tribal population of India is 20.4 crore people. Article 342 states that India has 730 scheduled tribal communities. The tribal population is divided into three territorial groups across India. They are the North-North-Eastern Zone, the Central Zone, and the Southern Zone. The Santhal Adivasis is categorized under the Central Zone, and the dialect of the Austrian Speech family is followed. The tribal communities are recognized under section 5 and are referred to as scheduled tribes in the constitution of India. The Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution protect the culture of tribals. According to Articles 15(4) and 16(4a), the scheduled tribe community has reservations in government services. Articles 330, 332, and 334 states that tribes can participate in parliament, state assemblies, and services. In addition, Article 46 of the Constitution declares thus: "The State shall promote with special care the educational and

economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation." (qtd. in Thakur 9). The Constitution of India recognizes that all individuals are equal and provides support to the marginalized sections of society.

Politics in India is a complex entity in which different groups propose different ideas for the welfare of the people. The government should be neutral in bringing changes to the lives of people, and has established various schemes to bring marginalized or subordinated groups to the limelight. Some of the schemes introduced by the government are educational schemes, healthcare initiatives, economic development, and so on. The minority groups support the government because several schemes and policies are executed by the government for their growth and welfare. These people have reservations about their education, jobs, and other aspects of life. Their livelihood is mainly based on the government and its policies. Mainstream people never allow the marginalized to participate into politics; simultaneously, these Adivasis enter politics after breaking the stereotypes that they are ignorant and savages. The person who comes to power works to uplift the weaker section and introduces schemes to claim their rights.

In *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, Khorda Haram, Rupi's father-in-law, is a social activist and never confines himself in his village. Being a keen observer of his society, he collected information from various sources to inform his people. He is interested in politics and discussed the happenings of the political scenario, but never intended to participate in politics. Also, he encouraged the residents of Lowadihi and Kadamdihi to vote in the election, which was held in 1952. As an active member of his community, he popularised Jaipal Singh, a member of the Munda tribal family, a politician and writer, with his people. Jaipal Singh pursued his education and continued working in England until his return to India. Later, in India, he assumed various roles as a hockey player, writer, and a member of essay and debate committee. When he worked as a vice-principal at Rajkumar College in Raipur, he was humiliated due to his tribal identity. Negligence in college turned Jaipal Singh's interest in politics. He voiced out for the rights of tribes as a member of the constituent assembly of India. In 1937, he started the Adivasi Mahasabha Party to promote the welfare of Adivasis; the party's name was changed to the Regional Jharkhand Party. Apparently, the party demanded a separate state for Jharkhand, where they could work to improve the progress of the nation.

Many Santhals and Ho Adivasis were massacred in the incident that happened in 1948. The Santhals demanded a separate state due to the formation of the states of Bihar and Orissa. The tribal people were on a campaign requesting a separate state for them. But suddenly and unexpectedly, the police fired on them, and more than thousands of tribes were killed. The demand for a separate state did not stop even after this incident. He evoked the spirits of his people through his powerful words: "‘They were our brothers,’ ... ‘They were hor like us. Some were Santar like us, others were Larka. They had gathered to demand what is good for us, our rights. But police came and shot them all dead. Was that right? What was their fault? We are living in a free country now. Don't we have the right to demand what is good for us?’" (Baskey 71).

The people of Kadamdihi and Lowadihi were eagerly waiting for the election of 1952. During the time, Ghatsila, Chakuliya, and Baharagore were under one assembly constituency named Ghatsila Baharagore. However, it was a double-member assembly constituency because of its size in terms of area and population. The seat of one member is reserved for an Adivasi, whom the government officially calls a Scheduled tribe or ST candidate. The other seat was unreserved. However, the Regional Jharkhand Party contested both seats, with Jaipal Singh as its president. This proves their longing for a separate state. Through Khorda's speech, all the tribes of Kadamdihi and Lowadihi also voted in favour of the Jharkhand Party. The novelist Shekhar portrays the jubilant mood of Santhals as thus: "[T]he entire constituency voted unanimously for the Jharkhand Party, stamping their choice on the party's unforgettable symbol: a proud rooster" (Baskey 71). Both the seats were won by the Jharkhand Party, which gave them confidence that they would get a separate state for the tribes.

After the elections, many untoward incidents occurred, among which a question mark was for the separate state of Jharkhand. Meanwhile, there was a problem in the recognition of Indian languages. All the official languages, including Bihari and Bengali, were recognised, but the Santhali, Mundari, Ho, and Kurukh languages were not recognised. Succinctly, the demands of tribes for a separate state, as well as their language, were ignored by the government. The lives of the Adivasis never changed in Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh, but "the leaders of the Jharkhand movement were trying to turn into their utopia, the land of their dreams. Similarly, nothing changed in Kadamdihi. Not even the hope that Jharkhand would one day be created and that all the Adivasis of Chota Nagpur would make their own laws and be their own rulers" (Baskey 72). On November 15, 2000, Jharkhand became the 28th separate state in India. Adivasi politicians' dream became a reality, marking a milestone in Indian history.

Discrimination is scattered across the world, which is based on race, class, religion, caste, and gender. Due to the injustice of discrimination, the ordinary people are vanquished on both personal and official levels. Discrimination is a manoeuvrability of power structures and a tool to suppress the weaker section. It is a deadly disease that degrades society and leads to destruction. The writings of Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy, and Bama depicted the tribulations of the weaker section. Many leaders and novelists voicing their concern about the evils of discrimination. The research article "Caste Exclusion and Health Discrimination in South Asia: A Systematic Review" talks about the denial of the basic rights to the Dalit people, it also states that "[s]tudies have reported that people from high castes experience freedom and high status, whereas people from lower caste are restricted from attending schools, temples, and courthouses. Furthermore, they are restricted in trading goods, labor, and were stigmatized through the practice of untouchability" (Thapa et al. 829). The caste-based discrimination is found in every nook and corner of India. Even though measures have been taken to eradicate discrimination, it prevails in some parts of India, where people are not aware of their rights or education. Fundamental rights like education, freedom of speech, and the expression of their pain are denied. The Adivasis are considered as untouchables by the mainstream people.

In *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, Sido, Khorda's eldest son, faced discrimination when he was young. The Adivasis gave land to the migrants Kamar, the blacksmiths, and the Kunkal, the potters. But the migrants considered Adivasis to be of the lower caste and never respected them, and treated them as inferiors. At thirteen or fourteen, Sido brushed against a Kamar woman accidentally. She shouted at Sido, but he screamed and said, “‘ Kaati de na, go, chamra-ta!’” ... ‘Did I touch your hand? Here, let me touch it again. Then you can cut it off as well’” (Baskey 16). He resisted against the lady and also untouchability. Later, the lady shouted at Sido and other people, “ These Saotal, these cow-eating, pig-eating, dirty Saotal, they know nothing about us, about our religion. They will pollute us. We must not tolerate this any more’” (Baskey 16). Agitated, Khorda furiously pointed out that they “are the ones who have let you live in this village; we can very well force you to pack up and leave. One word more against our women, children, and religion, and see what happens to you all. Don't forget’”(17). The Santhals never accepted the discrimination; they resisted and were resilient towards their humiliations.

The precursors of the nation used education as a weapon to resist against the evils of society and to transform the lives of the weaker section. Scholarly people worldwide have pronounced the importance of education and its role in uplifting a nation. Famous Greek philosopher Plato acknowledged it in his work, *Republic*, because education imparts moral values and ethics to human beings. Other than him, Roman Poet Horace, Chinese Philosopher Confucius, and former Indian President and scientist Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam have shared the need for the eminence of education. Education helps the marginalized to overcome untouchability, discrimination, and social hierarchy. It provides them an opportunity to understand their very own fundamental Constitutional rights. It also creates job opportunities for people from all walks of life, irrespective of their background, which helps them to lead a better lifestyle. As marginalized people are always expected to stand outside the power structure, education allows them to take the centre stage and participate in social, political, and cultural activities.

In *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, Sido pursues his education and becomes a teacher. When the whole village suspected his wife Rupi was affected by dahi, he never believed the supernatural elements. He resisted believing in supernatural elements and said, “‘Look, My wife's health is no one's business. She was sick and I took her to a doctor. I did not take her to an ojha, the way many of you would have done with your wives. I am not a fool like you all are.’”(Baskey 153). It vividly portrays that education transformed Sido into a rational reformer. Due to education, Jaipal Singh spoke for the rights of his own people, and he attained his goal even after his death.

Resistance is also a way of standing up against the forces that seek to oppress or destroy freedom. When the marginalized resist the stereotypes, they rediscover themselves, which gives them the confidence to face the challenges with hope. Moreover, reclaiming space is connected with geographical location and establishes the identity of the downtrodden in the world of power structures. Santhal Adivasis resisted all their challenges, which paved the way to reclaim their space. The words of power structures against Adivasis are barbarous,

uncivilized, and irrational, turning Adivasis to oppose and claim their identity. In the novel, the characters Khorda Haram and his son Sido devastated the stereotypes by questioning those who tried to humiliate them. They created awareness amongst their community to claim rights equal to those of mainstream people. Wherever the Adivasis were neglected, such as in politics, Khorda Haram reclaimed it by supporting members of his community to participate in politics. Both, father and son resisted discrimination and tried to eliminate from society. The Adivasis pursued education and were placed in responsible jobs as mainstream people. To conclude, Sanathal Adivasis resisted their stereotypes and subverted their marginalized societal position.

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