
The Role of Music and Dance as Cultural Symbols in *The Adivasis Will Not Dance* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

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Abstract

This essay examines the cultural and symbolic significance of dancing and music in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's collection of short stories, *The Adivasis Will Not Dance* (2015). The study, which focuses on the Santhal Adivasi community in Jharkhand, explores how traditional performance serves as a place of cultural assertion, gendered experience, and political opposition in addition to expressing folklore and celebration. The study examines how Hansda transforms dance and music from foreign spectacles into potent symbols of protest and survival by drawing on postcolonial philosophy, subaltern studies, and performance theory. By closely examining a few chosen stories, it makes the case that refusing to perform—particularly in the narrative that serves as the title—becomes a symbol of reclaiming one's dignity in the face of structural marginalization.

Keywords: Adivasi literature, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, Cultural resistance, Cultural commodification, Santhal traditions, Subaltern voices, Tribal representation

Introduction

From earlier narratives that objectified indigenous people to those that proclaimed their lived realities, the increasing presence of Adivasi voices in Indian English literature signifies a fundamental shift. Among these voices, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a Santhal writer who portrays tribal realities with authenticity and depth. His collection of short stories, *The Adivasis Will Not Dance*, explores the intricacies of Adivasi life in Jharkhand, which is characterized by poverty, state violence, displacement, and resiliency. Music and dance are among the most powerful symbols that appear throughout the text, even if the stories touch on many important topics.

Santhal identity is deeply rooted in music and dance, which are connected to customs, the natural world, heritage, and community. But in Hansda's stories, they transcend

national customs and become symbols of remembrance, protest, resistance, and commodification. The reluctance to dance, especially in the story with the same title, is an expression of political autonomy and dignity rather than a rejection of legacy. This essay looks at how Hansda transforms dance and music from folkloric performances into acts of reclamation and resistance to examine their function as cultural symbols in the collection.

Cultural Background: Santhal Music and Dance

The Santhals are one of India's largest Adivasi communities, with a thriving oral heritage rooted in music, dance, storytelling, and mythology. Their performances are more than just entertainment; they are intertwined with seasonal festivals (such as Sohrai and Baha), agricultural cycles, and religious traditions. The tumdak (drum), banam (bowed instrument), and tiriyo accompany communal dances that celebrate harvest, honour ancestors, or ward off evil spirits. These performances frequently act as collective memory, passing down histories and traditions throughout generations.

However, in postcolonial India, the state and tourism businesses are progressively appropriating such traditional expressions. Government-sponsored festivals and cultural showcases often tokenize Adivasi dance, extracting it from its spiritual and communal contexts to turn it into exotic entertainment for outsiders. As a result, music and dance became symbols of a larger confrontation between cultural pride and governmental exploitation.

Symbolism and Protest in the Title Story

In the title story "The Adivasis Will Not Dance," the protagonist, Mangal Murmu, is a traditional singer and dancer who has performed Santhali music at state ceremonies. However, when requested to perform before the President of India, he declines, claiming that his community, robbed of land and fundamental dignity, cannot afford to dance for individuals who are involved in their oppression:

"We cannot sing. We cannot dance. We cannot make merry. We cannot Adivasi." — *The Adivasis Will Not Dance* (Shekhar 162)

This act of refusal becomes a profoundly meaningful gesture. Dance, which formerly signified joy and spirituality, devolves into a lifeless ritual when removed from its sociocultural setting. Mangal's silence and resistance represent a rejection of performative variety and a protest against the monetization of Adivasi identity. The act of not performing becomes performance in and of itself in this case, serving as a subversive weapon for reclaiming voice and agency.

He uses music and dance not just as cultural practices, but also as cultural symbols carrying deeper meanings of resistance, identity, and survival. These characteristics, which are firmly established in the Santhal Adivasi way of life, have long been associated with spirituality, rituals, and communal connection. Music, in particular, is important for sharing the

Santhals' ancient wisdom and connecting them to their land, gods, and ancestors. However, external entities ranging from the state to the tourism industry exploit and commodify these traditions, reducing them to simple spectacles devoid of their original meaning.

Hansda underlines this contradiction in the title story, in which the protagonist, Mangal Murmu, refuses to perform his traditional dance for India's President, an act of deliberate silence that indicates significant opposition. This refusal is not a denial of culture; rather, it is a recovery of agency, asserting that cultural manifestations should not be reduced to amusement for outsiders. The option to withhold performance becomes a kind of resistance to exploitation, challenging the state's attempt to convert Adivasi culture to a commodity. Furthermore, Hansda emphasizes the gendered dimension of performance, namely the exploitation of Adivasi women's bodies in cultural displays, broadening the critique to encompass the vulnerability of female performers.

His experiences show that music and dance are not only important for the Adivasis' cultural survival but also as means for political resistance—a rejection of the erasing of indigenous traditions and identities. Thus, music and dance become potent symbols that reflect Adivasi communities' battles to protect their dignity and autonomy in the face of cultural plunder and state-sponsored marginalization.

Commodification and Cultural Tokenism

Hansda's critique includes how the state and corporations abuse tribal performances. Several accounts depict Adivasi song and dance being used in public relations campaigns, cultural events, or political rallies as visual proof of India's commitment to "unity in diversity." However, this surface celebration obscures deeper injustices: mining projects uproot Indigenous communities, deny them healthcare and education, and caricature them in popular discourse.

“You dance, you sing, and they will clap. But when you need them, they are never there for you.”

— *The Adivasis Will Not Dance* (Shekhar, 167)

Mangal Murmu is well aware of the contradiction in "The Adivasis Will Not Dance." He has performed for dignitaries who then disregard his people's demands for justice. His refusal to entertain them represents a rejection of the "museumization" of culture, in which living traditions are turned into artifacts. The performance is no longer an expression of pride; it has become a show fashioned by power.

Performance and Gender: Women's Bodies, Culture, and Survival

Hansda also highlights the gendered dimension of performance. In some stories, Adivasi women dancers are shown not only as cultural bearers but also as persons vulnerable to exploitation. Performances, which were previously communal and sacred, have evolved into

survival techniques in metropolitan or semi-urban situations where women are objectified and commodified.

In the story "They Eat Meat!", which deals with prejudice and class inequality, the feminine body is scrutinized and judged. While not directly related to dancing, it does demonstrate how outsiders monitor and misunderstand women's traditional expressions. The same principle applies to dance: when women perform outside of traditional settings, they are frequently misinterpreted as entertainers rather than cultural practitioners.

Hansda does not romanticize this battle; rather, he demonstrates how performance—both physical and social—is ingrained in power dynamics. Female dancers frequently straddle a perilous territory where their traditional role collides with economic desperation and societal censure.

Silence and Withheld Performance as Resistance

One of Hansda's most effective narrative weapons is silence—the purposeful removal of performance. The absence of music and dancing in certain stories serves as a sign of mourning, protest, and pain. Rather than portraying Adivasis as "always dancing," Hansda depicts characters who deliberately avoid performing as a means of rebellion.

This undermines both literary and political stereotypes of Adivasis as always colorful, cheery, and festive. It dismantles the notion of the "noble savage" in favour of a more grounded, human portrayal—capable of pain, struggle, and refusal. In this perspective, silence represents a space of political meaning rather than emptiness.

Themes of resistance and identity

In Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasis Will Not Dance*, music and dance are transformed from mere cultural expressions to strong symbols of resistance, identity, and survival for the Santhal Adivasi people. These indigenous art forms, which are firmly rooted in the Adivasi people's rituals, seasons, and spirituality, are constantly commodified and deprived of their cultural meaning by forces of state authority, colonialism, and commercialization. Through his nuanced portrayal of characters who refuse to dance, Hansda demonstrates how withholding these performances may be a powerful form of protest against the commercialization of Indigenous culture. The reluctance to perform, notably in the titular story, represents a reclaiming of dignity and autonomy in the face of structural marginalization, rather than a rejection of heritage. In this approach, music and dance in Shekhar's work serve as both cultural heritage and political instruments, reclaiming space for indigenous voices while resisting the erasure of Adivasi identities.

“When I dance, I am not just moving my body. I am letting the spirits of my ancestors dance through me, guiding me in every step.”

— *The Adivasis Will Not Dance* (Shekhar, 155)

This quote highlights how music and dancing are seen as spiritual actions in the Santhal culture. They are not secular shows, but ritualistic acts that connect the performer to the deity, the ancestors, and the very core of Adivasi life. It underlines that dancing is more than just a spectacle; it has deeper cultural and spiritual meaning.

Music and Dance as Preservers of Identity and Ancestral Memory

The author's work frequently depicts music, particularly drumming, as the earth's heartbeat, transmitting the community's spiritual lineage. Dance rhythms and movements are more than just physical actions; they represent spiritual connections to ancestors, land, and nature. For the Santhal people, music and dance are intensely personal, communal, and religious rituals that preserve their history. Music and dance rituals provide a space for community healing and the opportunity to reclaim cultural narratives that have been lost or suppressed as a result of colonization and state-sponsored oppression.

This work demonstrates vividly that these rituals are more than just forms of entertainment; they are acts of survival, preserving history and heritage for future generations. For example, song and dance rituals at festivals like Baha (harvest festival) help to strengthen the community's connection to the land, cosmology, and intergenerational transfer of wisdom. These behaviors are critical to regaining cultural identity in the face of modernity and cultural assimilation.

Silence as a Form of Protest

Interestingly, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar similarly employs silence as a means of resistance. When Mangal Murmu and the other characters refuse to perform, the resulting quiet represents the oppressed Adivasi voice, which is frequently overlooked or erased in mainstream political, social, and cultural discourses. The absence of music and dance is just as dramatic as their presence, emphasizing the Adivasi community's invisibility and disempowerment in modern India.

By refusing to perform, the Adivasis in Shekhar's stories show extreme autonomy—they refuse to be subjected to pantomimes for outsiders' entertainment. This silent resistance reclaims a space for self-expression and advocates for a new understanding of the relationship between Indigenous culture and the modern state.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Adivasis Will Not Dance*, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar transforms music and dance from aesthetic expressions to potent cultural and political icons. By situating performance at the crossroads of identity, resistance, and commodification, he invites readers to reevaluate how Adivasi culture is represented, utilized, and frequently

abused. Through stillness, music, and refusal to dance, Hansda's characters reclaim their agency in a culture that frequently expects them to entertain but not communicate. This study tried to demonstrate that, in the hands of an indigenous writer, even the act of not dancing may become a sort of storytelling—a story of resistance, survival, and dignity.

He eloquently examines how dance and music serve as cultural emblems that represent much more than only ceremonial performances; they are platforms for identity assertion, cultural reclamation, and political resistance. Shekhar criticizes the commercialization and appropriation of Adivasi culture through his characters' refusal to perform, arguing that dance and song are deeply ingrained customs that bind people to their land, ancestors, and pasts rather than being merely presentations for an audience.

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