

Food: A Symbol of Identity, A Tool of Exploitation and an Instrument of Control in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*

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Abstract

Indian writers increasingly engage with cultural studies to investigate how cultural practices and traditions shape and express Indian identities. Within this field, food is recognized as a significant cultural marker that reflects social values, identities, power structures, and relationships. It not only symbolizes tradition and history but also functions as a tool of control, exploitation, and marginalization. In the context of the Santhal community, food plays a crucial role in understanding themes of identity, domination, and resistance. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a prominent Santhal writer from Jharkhand, foregrounds the voices, struggles, and cultural richness of the Adivasi community through his narratives. His collection *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* examines Adivasi identity by portraying the community's resilience amid displacement and marginalization. This paper analyses the cultural significance of food within the Santhal community and explores how food practices become instruments of power, control, and manipulation. It further argues that food habits are deeply intertwined with cultural identity, shaping and revealing the mechanisms through which dominance is asserted over marginalized groups.

Keywords: Food and Identity, Exploitation, Control, Santhal Community, Marginalization and Resistance.

Introduction

Cultural studies provide a critical lens through which literature examines the formation, representation, and negotiation of diverse cultural identities. When read through this perspective, literary texts reveal the complex lived experiences of marginalized communities and the cultural practices that define them. Among contemporary Indian writers, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar holds a distinctive place for his nuanced portrayal of Adivasi life and identity. His major works including *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014), *My Father's Garden* (2018), and the translated novel *I Named My Sister Silence* (2023) engage deeply with themes of tribal identity, social realities, and institutional corruption.

Shekhar's collection *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015) further strengthens his literary intervention by foregrounding the struggles, resilience, and cultural richness of the Santhal community of Jharkhand. Comprising ten stories, the anthology portrays Adivasi lives shaped by displacement, poverty, and systemic marginalization, yet also anchored in vibrant cultural practices, rituals, and an intimate relationship with nature.

Santhal traditions. They expressed through festivals, attire, oral narratives, and everyday practices reflect a world view rooted in harmony with the environment and resistance to oppression.

Since food is a crucial marker of Adivasi identity and cultural continuity, this paper focuses on two stories from the collection that reveal its symbolic and political dimensions. “They Eat Meat” highlights how food becomes a site of cultural pride as well as discrimination, while “November Is the Month of Migration” depicts how a Santhal woman is exploited under the guise of food, exposing the gendered and economic vulnerabilities within the community. These narratives reveal how food transcends its material function, becoming intertwined with power, identity, and social control.

As an insider to the Santhal community, Shekhar offers an authentic and empathetic representation of Adivasi life. His writing exposes the harsh realities of exploitation, poverty, and marginalization while simultaneously celebrating the cultural heritage that sustains the community. Through his portrayal of both Santhal and non-Santhal characters, Shekhar highlights the contrasts in their lived experiences, cultural practices, and linguistic expressions. The present study examines these cultural dynamics to promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of India’s pluralistic cultural landscape and the need to recognize Adivasi heritage within it.

Literature Review

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* stands as an important text in contemporary Adivasi writing, offering a layered representation of Santhal life in Jharkhand. The stories examine cultural identity, systemic marginalization, and the politics of resistance, with food functioning as a significant cultural and ideological marker, particularly in “They Eat Meat” and “November Is the Month of Migration.”

Adivasi Literature and Cultural Identity

As a Santhal writer, Shekhar foregrounds Adivasi consciousness by challenging dominant literary representations that historically marginalized or stereotyped Indigenous communities. His narratives echo Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s conception of the subaltern, particularly the struggle of marginalized groups to speak within hegemonic structures. In Shekhar’s stories, Santhal characters articulate agency through everyday practices, linguistic expressions, and cultural traditions, positioning themselves as subjects rather than passive recipients of oppression.

Abin Chakraborty and other scholars of tribal literature emphasize Shekhar’s contribution to reconfiguring Adivasi identity within Indian literary discourse. His stories engage with themes of displacement and exploitation while also highlighting cultural resilience, aligning with Ranajit Guha’s subaltern historiography that seeks to restore marginalized voices to the center of narrative inquiry.

Food, Cultural Marginalization and Power

The symbolic role of food in the collection reverberates with postcolonial analyses of cultural negotiation and identity politics. In “They Eat Meat,” Panmuni-jhi’s non-vegetarian Santhal diet becomes a site where cultural conflict is enacted. Efforts to suppress or alter her food practices reflect broader power dynamics is what Homi Bhabha would describe as attempts to enforce cultural homogenization through hegemonic norms. Food, in this context, becomes a tool of cultural erasure.

“November Is the Month of Migration” portrays migrant Adivasi labourers whose exploitation is framed through hunger, scarcity, and survival. The narrative illustrates how economic displacement disrupts cultural continuity. This aligns with the subaltern framework, where structural violence renders the voices of marginalized communities invisible, especially in developmental or economic discourse.

Themes of Resistance and Displacement

Recurring themes such as resistance, identity assertion, and systemic marginalization remain central in Shekhar’s stories. Food practices function not merely as cultural traditions but as subtle acts of defiance. By preserving dietary customs or questioning imposed restrictions, characters reaffirm their cultural heritage.

Reception and Impact

The Adivasi Will Not Dance received critical acclaim and was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar. However, it also faced political backlash in Jharkhand, revealing tensions around the representation of Adivasi life. The controversy underscores Spivak's argument about who can "speak" for marginalized communities and how their representation is controlled by dominant socio-political institutions.

Scholars have interpreted Shekhar's work through postcolonial and subaltern perspectives, noting how his narratives complicate simplistic readings of Adivasi identity by foregrounding internal diversities, cultural practices, and social challenges.

Methodology

This study employs a multidisciplinary critical framework to analyse Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, with particular focus on the stories "They Eat Meat" and "November Is the Month of Migration." Three interconnected approaches such as Postcolonial Studies, Subaltern Studies, and Cultural Studies form the foundation of this methodology. Together, these frameworks illuminate the layered intersections of Adivasi identity, cultural negotiation, marginalization, and resistance within the selected narratives.

Postcolonial Framework

The postcolonial lens interrogates the continuation of colonial structures in post-independence India, particularly in the state's economic, cultural, and political relationship with Indigenous communities. Drawing on insights from Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this approach helps uncover how Shekhar's narratives reflect enduring colonial power dynamics.

In "November Is the Month of Migration," seasonal migration becomes a manifestation of neo-colonial exploitation: Adivasi labour is extracted under precarious conditions, reproducing historical patterns of dispossession and displacement. The coercive structures that push Santhal families into migrant labour echo what postcolonial theorists identify as internal colonization.

"They Eat Meat" offers another perspective by illustrating cultural domination through food politics. Panmuni-jhi's compelled conformity to dominant dietary norms exemplifies Bhabha's concept of cultural mimicry, in which the subjugated are urged to approximate the cultural practices of the dominant group while remaining marked as "other." Through these narrative moments, the postcolonial approach highlights how cultural assimilation and economic marginalization operate side by side.

Subaltern Studies Approach

Subaltern Studies provides a second critical lens through which the text is interpreted. Drawing on Ranajit Guha's foundational work and Spivak's critique of subaltern representation, this study examines how Shekhar captures the voices, silences, and vulnerabilities of marginalized Santhal characters.

The narratives foreground individuals who occupy subaltern positions within socio-economic hierarchies like labourers, women, and impoverished families. Talamai's story in "November Is the Month of Migration" exemplifies the difficulty of "hearing" subaltern voices: her suffering is embedded within broader systems of labour exploitation, gendered vulnerability, and socio-political neglect. By presenting her experiences without romanticization, Shekhar resists the erasure typical of dominant narratives and instead restores a degree of agency through her emotional and cultural resilience.

Subaltern Studies thus enables a reading that centres Adivasi experiences not as peripheral but as structurally silenced voices negotiating hostile systems.

Cultural Studies Perspective

The Cultural Studies framework allows an examination of food, language, rituals, and everyday practices as markers of identity and sites of cultural negotiation. Informed by theorists such as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, this approach treats culture as a dynamic terrain shaped by power, resistance, and meaning-making.

In “They Eat Meat,” food becomes a symbolic battleground. Panmuni-jhi’s insistence on traditional food practices is not merely dietary preference but an assertion of cultural autonomy. Her resistance to imposed norms demonstrates how everyday practices serve as micro-sites of identity preservation. Similarly, the rituals, linguistic patterns, and communal customs depicted across the stories highlight the Santhal community’s rich cultural fabric, challenging homogenizing pressures from mainstream society.

This framework also underscores how cultural disruption—caused by migration, poverty, or external authority—threatens the continuity of Adivasi identity, making the preservation of cultural practices crucial to community resilience.

Text Selection

“They Eat Meat” is selected for its intricate portrayal of food as a cultural marker. The story reveals how dietary practices become symbolic terrain where assimilation, prejudice, and cultural pride intersect, making it central to the study’s exploration of food politics and identity.

“November Is the Month of Migration” is chosen for its stark depiction of economic displacement and labour exploitation. The story’s portrayal of migration demonstrates how systemic neglect disrupts cultural continuity and exposes the human cost of marginalization.

Results

The analysis of “They Eat Meat” and “November Is the Month of Migration” from Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* reveals the centrality of food as a marker of identity, a tool of control, and an instrument of exploitation within Adivasi life. The stories demonstrate how food practices both reflect and contest the socio-cultural marginalization faced by the Santhal community.

Food as a Symbol of Identity

Cultural Pride

In “They Eat Meat,” food emerges as a powerful symbol of Santhal cultural identity. Panmuni-jhi’s adherence to traditional dietary practices like meat and maruaembodies cultural pride and continuity. Her refusal to abandon these practices represents an affirmation of Adivasi identity in the face of societal pressures. Conversely, her husband’s discomfort reflects the internalisation of casteist and mainstream biases, illustrating how cultural alienation is often reproduced from within the community.

Contrasts with Mainstream Norms

Mr. Rao’s insistence on vegetarianism underscores how dominant cultural norms attempt to delegitimize Adivasi practices. The imposition of dietary discipline reflects a broader politics of cultural marginalization, where the Adivasi way of life is rendered inferior or uncivilised, compelling individuals to negotiate or conceal their identity.

Food as a Tool of Exploitation

Economic Marginalization

“November Is the Month of Migration” demonstrates how food scarcity forces Adivasi families into exploitative labour cycles. Seasonal migration disrupts traditional food systems, making communities dependent on middlemen and inadequate government rations. The fragility of their food security symbolizes systemic economic disenfranchisement.

Food as an Instrument of Control

Cultural Erasure

In “They Eat Meat,” the protagonist’s need to remain silent about her food practices in urban spaces reflects the pressure to conform to dominant cultural expectations. This silence becomes a form of cultural erasure, demonstrating how assimilation operates through everyday practices.

Gendered Exploitation

Talamai’s experience in “November Is the Month of Migration” highlights how food insecurity makes Adivasi women vulnerable to labour exploitation and sexual bullying. Her suffering is shaped by intersectional marginalization—where gender, indigeneity, and poverty converge to produce specific forms of oppression.

Cultural Assertion

Panmuni-jhi’s act of cooking traditional food becomes a quiet but powerful form of defiance, reaffirming her community’s values. Similarly, Talamai’s preparation of handia asserts cultural autonomy even within exploitative circumstances. Her story reveals that resistance often coexists with vulnerability, underscoring the high cost of cultural survival.

Key Findings

- Food functions as a powerful symbol of Adivasi identity, pride, and cultural resilience.
- Economic and cultural marginalization are deeply intertwined in situations of migration and state dependency.
- Adivasi women experience heightened vulnerability due to gendered exploitation linked to food insecurity.
- Food practices become subtle yet powerful acts of resistance, reaffirming dignity and cultural longevity.

Discussion

The first line of the story *They Eat Meat* is “our aunt Panmuni-jhi began to eat regularly in restaurants after moving to Vadodara in 2000.” The more relevant subject discussed by the writer for this story is food. The food is more symbolic in identifying the origin or nativity of an individual or a community. How food preoccupies the whole story as a tool to exploit the marginalised Adivasi.

Biram Soren was the director of Gramin Vidyut Nigam, a Central Govt. enterprise that provides electricity to villages. His job involved regular travel so he wasn’t very particular about food whereas Panmuni-jhi his wife is specific about the food she takes outside in restaurants while they travel. Panmuni-jhi never compromises and never gives up in taking outside food fearing infection and stomach upset. ‘If I don’t get food cooked to my satisfaction, I will not eat’. (2) She was capable to cook variety of dishes and had mastered latest menus available in the restaurants for her sons Hopon and Rabi.

Biram-kumang Soren gets transfer to Vadodara where the immediate concern for Panmuni-jhi is food. Family in Bhubaneswar were asking them where will they live? What will they eat? Such enquiries made both husband and wife more panic. Biram-kumang has only ten years of service before his retirement. The whole family has to totally move from the east to west, from one end of the country to the other. After knowing his transfer, Panmuni-jhi talks to her cousin in Vadodara regarding the place and food. She finds from her cousin Jhapan that the place is neat, clean and well arranged. But the problem is with the food the people take. People were not permitted to take to their wish. Jhapan says that they have to stop eating a few foods they normally take in Bhubaneswar.

Jhapan adds that people in Vadodara don’t eat meat. No fish, no chicken, no mutton, not even eggs. There were people who ate meat but only in a few places rarely available. She says that people don’t mix up with those who eat meat and eggs. After leaving Rabi their first son in medical college in Cuttack, the Sorens

take a two storeyed house of reasonable size owned by the Raos, an elderly couple in Vadodara. Raos also had two sons, the elder living and working in Germany and the younger an engineering student in other state. Knowing the surname Soren, Mr. Rao enquires the family whether he is from a tribal community. It is through Rao we come to know that Soren is rooted in Jharkhand from Santhal family.

‘Vadodara is a strongly Hindu city,’ Mr. Rao continued. ‘People here believe in purity. I am not too sure what this purity is, but all I know is that people here don’t eat non-veg. You know? Meat, fish, chicken, eggs. Nor do they approve of people who eat non-veg.’ (6)

Panmuni-jhi finds it hard to adapt to the new location with dominant vegetarian culture, which forces them to adjust their food habits. Life becomes challenging in Vadodara for Panmuni-jhi to encounter social pressures not to eat non-veg. It’s too hard as she is an explorer and an expert in finding unique food items as well as cooking them well.

When days pass by Panmuni-jhi misses the freedom of Bhubaneshwar.

In Bhubaneshwar, Panmuni-jhi remembered, she would regularly cook two-egg omelettes for Rabi and Hopon. She would make delicious katla-machh while all the Santhal women of the city would praise. And, of course, there were the regular chicken and mutton dishes. The aroma of eggs, fish, chicken and mutton dishes would waft out of her kitchen and flow all over the HIG Housing Board Colony. No one raised an eyebrow, no one came to her house to grab her husband’s collar and demand of him: ‘Soren, didn’t I tell you not to cook non-veg? No. Instead, her neighbours would only ask her: ‘Bhoujo, ei dish tawmokenitaiyarkawrochho? And she would happily tell them.

In Odisha, Panmuni-jhi could be a Santhal, an Odia, a Bengali. In Gujarat, she had to be only a Gujarati. In Bhubaneshwar, all the Santhals of the city celebrated Baha, Sohrai and Sakrat together. (14)

The above lines highlight the struggle of Adivasi to maintain their identity in different environments.

Apart from the food issue, riot breaks in Vadodara railway station. Fifty-eight pilgrims had been returning from Ayodhya by the Sabarmati express and when their train stopped at Godhra, 100 kilometres from Vadodara, the train is set fire. They lock the doors of the compartments from the outside. All fifty-eight people in the compartment were burnt to death. The culprits were identified as Muslims.

A religious clash breaks between Hindu’s and Muslims. Hindus start avenging Muslims. In return to the burning of the pilgrims, Hindus in Ahmedabad take to streets and destroy the property belonging to Muslims. They kill and burn them. It was reported that Vadodara was put to violence. There was one Muslim family consisting of five members, his wife, mother and two teenage daughters in Subhanpura colony where the Soren family lived. Some Hindu men kicked open the gate of Muhammed’s house, started throwing stones and were burning the house. All the Hindu women threw vessels on the mob to stop the violence. Men also join with them. They bring a smooth atmosphere by protecting the Mohammed family in stopping the mishap.

Soren family get shifted to Vadodara in 2000 and live for two more years after riot till 2024. Then Soren gets transfer to Ranchi. When the family shifts, Panmuni-jhi feels at home in the city. She feels relieved saying ‘our area’. Since violence haunted them, they could think only of safety or protection. Food choice becomes secondary.

Now there’s no restrictions in Ranchi. So, Panmuni-jhi has freedom for food. She states that ‘No one minds what we eat here,’ she would say, marinating silver carp with salt and turmeric powder, without a care in the world. ‘And we don’t mind what others eat.’ (27)

In November, the Santhal community start their annual migration to Bardhaman to work in the paddy fields for a month. Talamai Kisku, among six children in the family, shoulders the heaviness of unmet wishes for education despite her parents’ background. While she is waiting for the train, Talamai is spotted by Diku, a handsome railway police man.

Santhal men, women, children and the entire clan abandon their lands and farms and migrate to Bardhaman district of West Bengal to work in the paddy fields owned by the Zamindars of Bardhaman. Twenty-year-old Talamai Kisku is among forty-three people who have moved to Bardhaman.

She is not sent to school, so she collects coal or works on the farms of Bardhaman. She is separated from her family during the annual migration from Jharkhand to West Bengal. She is attracted by a young Jawan of the Railway Protection Force. Since she is hungry, he enquires whether she needs food.

Will you do some work for me?

Talamai knows what work he is talking about. She has done it a few times by the Koyla Road, where many Santhal women and girls steal coal from trucks. She knows many girls who do that work with truck drivers and other men. And she knows that on their way to Namal, Santhal women do this work for food and money at the railway station too. (40)

‘Yes,’ Talamai says, and follows the policeman into a dark paved space behind the policeman’s rooms. The work does not take much time. The policeman is prepared.... At times, he smiles. Once, he says, ‘Saali, you Santhal women are made for this only. You are good! Talamai says nothing, does nothing... She just lies-passive, unthinking, unblinking – as cold as the paved ground she can feel through the thin fabric of the gamcha, as still as an inert earthen bowl into which a dark cloud empties itself.

In less than ten minutes, the work is done. (41)

Talamai becomes a bait to the police man due to her desperate circumstances. Because of her hunger and poverty, Talamai accepts the food and bread pakora in exchange for sexual favours. He exploits her just by giving Rs. 50 and two cold pakoras. Mainly, exploitation occurs due to unequal relationships. Again, there is no support system and protection for migrant workers like Talamai that enables such exploitation.

The Santhals’ migration is driven by economic necessity and the urge for a better livelihood. The Jawan’s act typifies the exploitation faced by Santhal migrants, especially women and children their struggle for survival. As Talamai is tempted by bread pakoras offered by the policemen, her poverty is misused and exploited by the police at the railway station.

Some of the major themes in the stories highlight the resistance and protest as in *The Adivasi will not Dance*, exploitation of Adivasis in *November is the Month of Migrations*, cultural identity and displacement in *Baso-jhi*, poverty and poor health care in *Blue Baby*, desire and social taboos in *Merely a Whore*, and power dynamics and hypocrisy in *Eating with the Enemy*. These are the themes knitted around the stories, furnishing a subtle picture of Adivasis’ life and hardships in contemporary India.

In *They Eat Meat*, the Soren family battles to preserve their traditional food habits amidst societal pressure. Their tension increases while preserving the cultural heritage, simultaneously meeting the requirements of the dominant norms. The story touchingly demonstrates how food can be the cause of luxury and a combat area, emphasising the intricacies of Adivasi identity in a swiftly changing world. In *November is the Month of Migration*, food serves as a reminder of the abuse and defencelessness challenges faced by Adivasi migrants. The story accentuates how food can be used as a device of control, further establishing the power dynamics that support exploitation and marginalization. Through the lens of food, these stories shed light on the broader themes of exploitation, power dynamics, and the struggle for cultural preservation in the face of modernity and societal pressure.

Conclusion

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s narratives offer an intimate and critical portrayal of Adivasi life, underscoring the urgency of preserving indigenous cultural heritage and amplifying marginalized voices. “*They Eat Meat*” and “*November Is the Month of Migration*” reveal how literature can resist dominant narratives by centring subaltern experiences and exposing the socio-cultural mechanisms of marginalization.

The collection’s temporary ban, triggered by allegations regarding the portrayal of Santhalwomen, highlights the tension surrounding who has the authority to represent marginalized communities. Although the ban was later revoked, the controversy foregrounded the importance of indigenous storytelling and the discomfort it often provokes in dominant structures. Despite debates, the work was widely recognized, including its shortlisting for *The Hindu Literary Prize* (2016), affirming its literary and cultural significance.

Shekhar's stories serve as a lens through which readers can understand the social, economic, and cultural challenges faced by Adivasi communities. By portraying food insecurity, migration, and cultural suppression, the narratives prompt readers to reflect on social justice, empathy, and cultural pluralism.

This study demonstrates that *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* uses food and migration as critical narrative sites where Adivasi identity is negotiated, contested, and reaffirmed. Through postcolonial, subaltern, and cultural frameworks, the analysis shows how Shekhar's work reflects the complexities of Adivasi survival amid systemic exploitation.

Ultimately, the text contributes to Adivasi literature by foregrounding indigenous subjectivity, resisting cultural erasure, and sustaining conversations about identity, power, and representation in contemporary India.

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