

The Enduring Echo: Language, Identity, and Cultural Survival in Select Fictions of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

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Abstract

Language is never neutral. For historically marginalized communities like the Adivasis, it is the first domain of erasure and the final frontier of resistance. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, writing from within the Santhal community, navigates the fault lines of power, representation, and survival in a literary landscape that has long spoken about Adivasis but rarely with them. His fictions perform a double move: they destabilize the homogeneity of Indian English while preserving the cadences and consciousness of Santali life. This paper examines how his works, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014) and *My Father's Garden* (2018), utilize language as a tool of resistance against cultural erasure while navigating the tension between oral tradition and written form. Throughout his fictional works, Shekhar weaves Santali words and phrases into his writing, often without providing direct translations for his English-speaking readers. This choice serves two main purposes: it authentically conveys the Santhal experience, immerses readers in the community's language, and acts as a subtle resistance against linguistic assimilation into English, asserting the validity of Santali in literature. Drawing upon recent theories of linguistic resistance by scholars like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Adivasi cultural theorists such as

G.N. Devy, the paper argues that Shekhar's strategic code-switching, narrative ambiguity, and vernacular embeddedness serve as acts of linguistic decolonization. Writing, in his fiction, becomes a battleground where cultural survival is not just thematized but actively performed. Through this lens, Shekhar's work can be read as an insurgent archive, challenging the coloniality of Indian English literature and re-centering Adivasi epistemologies.

Keywords: vernacular embeddedness, Santhal identity, language, resistance, cultural survival, decolonization

Introduction

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a significant voice in contemporary Indian literature, distinguished by his deep connection to the Santhal tribe of Jharkhand, India. His literary works primarily focus on the lives, experiences, and struggles of Indigenous communities, with a particular emphasis on the rich and complex tribal cultures of his region. Shekhar's debut novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* (2014), garnered widespread critical acclaim for its authentic and nuanced portrayal of tribal life and the social issues prevalent within these communities. His unique perspective is further enriched by his profession as a medical officer with the government of Jharkhand, providing him with an intimate understanding of the social, cultural, and health-related realities of the Santhal people. Notable among his contributions to Indian fiction are *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey*, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories* (2015), and *My Father's Garden* (2018). His literary achievements have been recognized with prestigious awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar in 2015 for *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey*.

The Santhal community, one of the largest indigenous groups in India, primarily resides in the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha, communicating through their native Austroasiatic Santali language. Like many Indigenous communities worldwide, the Santhals face the pervasive threat of cultural erasure, a process involving the systematic suppression or elimination of their distinct cultural practices, traditions, and language, often driven by the forces of modernization, industrialization, and the dominant cultural norms of mainstream society.

These external pressures manifest in various forms, including the loss of ancestral lands, disputes over land rights, and the significant impact of urbanization on their traditional ways of life. The Santhal community, despite its long history and substantial population, is confronted with considerable and persistent challenges to its cultural identity and long-term survival due to these overwhelming socio-political and economic forces. The historical context of exploitation, as evidenced by events like the Santhal Rebellion and the enduring legacy of land alienation, underscores the deep-rooted vulnerability of their cultural heritage.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's fiction emerges as a critical site for examining the intersections of language, identity, and cultural survival within Adivasi lifeworlds. As one of the few Santhal authors writing in English, Shekhar reclaims narrative authority in a postcolonial India where dominant literary and cultural discourses continue to marginalize tribal voices. This paper explores how his works—particularly *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* and *My Father's Garden*—use language as a tool of resistance against cultural erasure, while negotiating the tension between oral tradition and written form. Drawing upon recent theories of linguistic resistance by scholars like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Adivasi cultural theorists such as G.N. Devy,

the paper argues that Shekhar's strategic code-switching, narrative ambiguity, and vernacular embeddedness serve as acts of linguistic decolonization. Writing, in his fiction, becomes a battleground where cultural survival is not just thematized but actively performed. Through this lens, Shekhar's work can be read as an insurgent archive, challenging the coloniality of Indian English literature and re-centering Adivasi epistemologies.

In this context, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's fiction emerges as a powerful and vital response to the threats of cultural erasure. His literary endeavours utilize language not merely for communication but as a potent instrument to assert Santali identity and as a crucial means of cultural survival. Shekhar's unique approach to language, encompassing his strategic incorporation of Santali, his innovative adaptation of English to reflect Santhal linguistic sensibilities, and his compelling narrative strategies, plays a pivotal role in challenging dominant representations and preserving invaluable oral traditions. By engaging with contemporary theoretical frameworks concerning linguistic resistance and the function of writing in cultural preservation, this study illuminates Shekhar's significant contribution to indigenous literature and his crucial role in amplifying the often-marginalized voices of the Santhal community.

The Santhal Community: A Tapestry Under Threat

The traditional way of life of the Santhal community is deeply intertwined with the natural world, characterized by a historical reliance on agriculture and an intimate connection with the forests and the surrounding environment. Their rich cultural heritage is expressed through vibrant traditions, including distinctive forms of music, song, dance, and unique festivals that mark significant events in their social and agricultural cycles. The Santhal society traditionally operates through a well-defined structure of various clans, each with its own customs and responsibilities, bound together by strong social cohesion and animistic religious beliefs that center on the worship of nature and ancestral spirits. The primary mode of communication within the community is the Santali language, belonging to the Austroasiatic language family.

Historically, Santali was predominantly an oral language, with knowledge and traditions passed down through generations through spoken narratives and songs. Only later, through European missionaries' efforts, written forms using Bengali, Odia, and Roman scripts were developed, preceding the eventual adoption of the indigenous Ol Chiki script in 1925.

The Santhal community possesses a long-standing history characterized by episodes of significant marginalization and exploitation, particularly during the British colonial period. Policies such as the Permanent Settlement contributed to widespread land alienation, wherein traditional Santhal territories were often allocated to zamindars and moneylenders. This practice compelled many Santhals into precarious socio-economic conditions, undermining their traditional livelihoods and autonomy. They were often subjected to forced labor under

exploitative conditions and faced social discrimination from moneylenders and other non-tribal outsiders. The Santhal Rebellion of 1855-1856, a significant uprising against British rule, stands as a powerful historical testament to their enduring resistance against such injustices. This historical context of systemic exploitation and marginalization has profoundly influenced the continuity of Santhal culture, creating a present-day reality in which cultural survival requires active and conscious efforts to preserve their traditions and identity.

Contemporary Santhal communities continue to grapple with the ongoing impact of modernization, urbanization, and industrialization, particularly in resource-rich regions like Jharkhand. These processes often lead to displacement from their ancestral lands, forcing many to abandon their traditional forest-based livelihoods and integrate into urban environments that frequently clash with their deeply rooted cultural practices. This transition results in the erosion of traditional ecological knowledge, which has been passed down through generations, and an increased vulnerability to prejudice and marginalization within urban settings. Furthermore, these forces contribute to cultural erasure by disrupting the crucial intergenerational transmission of the Santali language and traditional customs, weakening the bonds of social cohesion within communities, and gradually eroding long-held belief systems and practices. The decline in the observance of traditional festivals and the neglect of sacred spaces serve as poignant examples of this cultural erosion. Adding to these challenges is the historical and ongoing pressure that leads to the suppression of the Santali language in favor of dominant regional and national languages in crucial domains such as education, administration, and public life. The persistent lack of adequate infrastructure and trained teachers dedicated to Santali language education further exacerbates this linguistic vulnerability. The gradual weakening of the Santali language, combined with the significant disruption of traditional ways of life brought about by modernization, poses a substantial and continuous threat to the very core of Santhal cultural identity and its vital transmission to future generations.

Against this backdrop of cultural threat, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's literary work stands as a vital form of cultural witness and a deliberate endeavor to document, represent, and ultimately preserve the rich experiences, unique perspectives, and intricate cultural nuances of the Santhal community. His unique position as a Santhal writer provides him with an invaluable insider perspective, enabling him to offer an authentic and deeply nuanced portrayal of his community that is often absent or misrepresented in mainstream literary and cultural representations.

The Power of Language: Asserting Santhal Identity

A key element in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's assertion of Santhal identity is his strategic incorporation of the Santali language into his English narratives. Shekhar's use of English—a colonial language—to narrate Santali experiences creates a "minor literature" (Deleuze and Guattari) that subverts dominant power

structures. By embedding Santali vernacular terms (*Hopna*, *Sombrai*) and cultural practices (e.g., *Chhau* dance, *Sohrai* festivals) into English prose, he *detrterritorializes* the language, making it a vehicle for tribal expression. This mirrors debates in African postcolonial literature, where writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe grappled with linguistic decolonization. For Shekhar, English becomes a tool to reach wider audiences without sanitizing the Santali identity. Throughout his fictional works, Shekhar weaves in Santali words and phrases, often without providing direct translations for his English-speaking readership. This deliberate choice serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it aims to convey the native Santhal experience with a high degree of authenticity, immersing the reader in the linguistic landscape of the community. Secondly, it functions as a subtle yet powerful act of resistance against complete linguistic assimilation into the dominant English language, asserting the presence and validity of Santali within the broader literary sphere. This practice aligns with the principles of critical language theory, which examines how language both shapes and reflects societal hierarchies, and how marginalized communities strategically employ their languages as a form of resistance against dominant norms and pressures. Shekhar's unapologetic and liberal use of untranslated Santali words and phrases acts as a direct challenge to the hegemony of English, firmly establishing the inherent value and presence of the Santhal language within the context of mainstream Indian literature.

The language employed in *My Father's Garden*, particularly the use of Santali alongside Hindi and other regional dialects, serves as more than just a cultural marker; it is a profound political and linguistic act of reclamation. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's intentional use of Santali, even if infrequent, resonates powerfully with the work of esteemed linguists like G.N. Devy, who have long championed the cause for recognizing and preserving India's myriad marginalized languages. This linguistic choice is not merely a superficial aspect of the protagonist's identity; rather, it is intricately woven into the fabric of their being, manifesting through language, memory, and desire. The sporadic inclusion of Santali phrases, coupled with references to caste and tribal affiliations, enriches the narrative, reflecting a lived experience that is grounded in a unique linguistic reality. This choice exemplifies a subtle yet impactful resistance against the homogenizing forces that threaten to erase diverse identities—a stand that Devy might describe as an affirmation against being linguistically diminished. In particular, the phrase “Maadarchod Sudhrega nahin” (29) stands out as a potent example of Hindi vulgar slang, emphasizing the performative aspects of masculinity. Its inclusion serves to construct power dynamics that navigate the realms of insult and endearment, illustrating the complexities within male relationships. In moments of tenderness or betrayal, linguistic code-shifts—from English to Hindi to regional slurs—mirror the narrator's psychological fluctuations, forming a kind of acoustic memoir. Devy emphasizes such tonal shifts as evidence that languages carry emotional registers, not just utilitarian meaning.

Similarly, the Bhojpuri-inflected Hindi phrase “*Laura ka baal*” (10) introduces a layer of crude, caste-inflected speech that explicitly aligns with the Mahato identity, evoking regional tropes of masculinity that are often fraught with social stratifications. Moreover, the occasional use of Bengali phrases such as “*Neeche ja Boss*” (10) signals a shift in conversational dynamics, transitioning from crude interactions to those steeped in notions of junior-senior hierarchy. This linguistic transition adds further texture to the interplay of power and intimacy, revealing how language can serve as a vehicle for both reinforcing social structures and fostering connection among individuals. Through these varied linguistic choices, Shekhar not only depicts the protagonist’s Santhal identity but also invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of language in shaping cultural and social landscapes. The narrator often reflects on his Santhal identity (“I thought his Santali was crass”)—this conveys internalized stratification even within tribal speech patterns, aligning with Devy’s idea of “invisible hierarchies” within marginalized languages. Finally, the narrator notes:

that once sex began with Sunil, they “no longer talk to each other in chaste Santali.” Devy would argue this is symptomatic of how dominant social structures silence tribal languages when intimacy gets politicized or commodified.

Esterino Adami in his paper entitled “More than Language and Literature: Postcolonial Connections and Linguistic Paradigms in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s Indian English Fiction” dives deep into the interplay between language and literature in postcolonial India, using Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s short story collection *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* as its focal point. Adami argues that linguistic analysis—especially sociolinguistics and stylistics—can unlock powerful insights into identity, marginalization, and cultural resistance in Indian English fiction.

According to him, Shekhar doesn’t romanticize Adivasi life. Instead, he exposes internal tensions, exploitation, and painful truths, even at the cost of controversy within his own community. In the text Words like *Diku*, *tamak*, and *tumdak* are left untranslated, forcing readers to engage with Adivasi culture directly. Misspellings like *Kiristian* and *Jisu* mimic local pronunciation and highlight religious conversion pressures. Adami’s article is a compelling call to read postcolonial literature through a linguistic lens, showing how language itself becomes a battleground for identity, memory, and resistance. Shekhar’s fiction is not just storytelling—it’s a layered, linguistic rebellion against erasure.

In *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, Shekhar delicately intertwines the intricate threads of the Santali language, creating a vivid canvas that showcases the unique culture and experiences within the world of Kadamdih. At the heart of this narrative lies Rupi Baskey, a remarkable woman embodying strength and resilience. Her life unfolds against the backdrop of her marriage to Sido Master, a government teacher deeply committed to his profession and community. The novel opens with a striking scene that immediately draws readers in: Rupi, whose

formidable presence once commanded respect throughout Kadamdih, experiences the life-altering moment of childbirth amidst the lush greenery and fertile fields of a rice paddy.

Surrounded by nature, she reflects on her past, incredulously pondering, “Rupi Baskey cannot believe she was once the strongest woman in Kadamdihi, who bore her eldest squatting in the middle of a rice paddy, shin-deep in slush” (*Rupi Baskey* 1). This moment not only illustrates her physical endurance but also symbolizes her profound connection to her agrarian roots and the community that nurtured her. Moreover, the novel has garnered critical recognition for its depth and complexity, described as being “pregnant with the reluctance to translate the signs and symbols of his Santhal language-culture” (Behera 25). Throughout the text, readers encounter a rich mosaic of untouched words, idioms, and phrases drawn from Santali, Bangla, and Hindi, as well as colloquial expressions often regarded as trivial or insignificant in other contexts. However, in Hansda’s masterful storytelling, these linguistic nuances take on significant meaning, providing layers of authenticity and cultural richness that enhance the overall narrative experience. The deliberate inclusion of these elements invites readers into a world where language serves as both a bridge and a boundary, offering a profound understanding of Rupi’s identity and heritage.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s engagement with tradition and indigenous customs in *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* is deeply rooted in the Santhal worldview. The invocation of deities like *Marang-Buru* and *Jaher-Ayo* reflects the spiritual consciousness that governs Santhal life. This passage is not merely ritualistic—it serves as a bridge between the characters and their ancestral roots, underscoring the omnipresence of faith in their everyday lives. Through such expressions, Shekhar immerses readers in the indigenous customs of the Santhals, portraying their belief systems with authenticity rather than exoticism. For readers of other languages and cultural backgrounds, this invocation serves as a window into Santhal identity—their reverence for nature, their connection to spirits, and their understanding of illness and healing through spiritual and communal means. It invites outsiders to see that indigenous traditions are not relics but living, breathing aspects of identity. The novel provides a counter-narrative to dominant cultural discourses by emphasizing that Indigenous customs are just as layered and profound as any other belief system.

The mention of the *gonong* custom in the text delineates the Santhal tradition of bride price, “The gonong he had paid then was a bull calf and a heifer along with three rupees. The logic behind giving cattle is that when a man takes away a woman as his bride, he takes away a working member from the family” (46). This passage encapsulates an important aspect of Santhal cultural practices, particularly in relation to marriage and societal obligations. The reference to the *gonong*, or bride price, reflects the Santhal community’s understanding of marriage as both a social and economic transaction. The bride price in the form of cattle and money is a tangible acknowledgment of the labour the bride contributed to her parental home.

Santhal traditions uphold the idea that women are integral to the workforce, tending to fields, raising livestock, and managing household duties. Thus, the practice of giving cattle as compensation speaks to a structured economic reciprocity. By incorporating such customs into the text Shekhar presents Santhal traditions authentically, grounding the novel in indigenous realities. For non-Santhal readers, this passage serves as a cultural window, illuminating the nuanced ways in which tribal societies perceive gender, labour, and economic exchange.

The mention of *dahni-bidya* in *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* plays a crucial role in exploring themes of indigeneity, gender, and supernatural beliefs within Santhal society, “she hates Gurubari and she hates Dulari, for both know *dahni-bidya*” (20). *Dahni-bidya*, often associated with witchcraft, is deeply embedded in the Santhal worldview, where illness and misfortune are sometimes attributed to supernatural forces rather than medical conditions. The inclusion of *dahni-bidya* serves as a cultural bridge, offering insight into how Indigenous communities perceive health, spirituality, and interpersonal conflicts. It challenges mainstream notions of rationality and invites readers to consider alternative epistemologies—ways of knowing that differ from Western medical frameworks. Shekhar’s nuanced portrayal ensures that Santhal traditions are neither dismissed nor romanticized, but rather presented as an integral part of the community’s lived experience. Indigenous theorists like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argue that indigenous languages carry unique epistemologies. By embedding this term in the novel, the author resists the erasure of indigenous belief systems, ensuring that Santhal cosmology remains visible in mainstream literature.

Language in Shekhar's narratives functions not just as a means of conveying information but as a fundamental and intrinsic marker of Santhal identity for the characters that inhabit his fictional worlds. The consistent use of Santali, even when it appears as code-switching within conversations primarily conducted in English, serves as a powerful signifier of cultural belonging, solidarity, and shared heritage within the community. Conversely, the forced or even voluntary abandonment of the Santali language by certain characters like Sido and Jaipal within his stories can poignantly reflect the complex pressures of alienation, the desire for assimilation into dominant cultures, or the intricate negotiation of shifting identities in a society that is both multilingual and often characterized by linguistic hierarchies. In *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, Sido and Jaipal gradually distance themselves from the Santali language as they integrate into different social and cultural spaces. Sido, despite his Santhal heritage, spends much of his time away from Kadamdihi, engaging with Gurubari and her family, which influences his linguistic choices. Jaipal, Rupi’s eldest son, also moves away from Santali, reflecting a generational shift where younger Santhals adopt dominant languages for education and social mobility.

While giving birth, Rupi screams, “She yelled in agony, and the impending ordeal gave her screams power. ‘Yo-go! Yo-go! Goij inan go!’ Words, syllables, nonsense, she screamed whatever came to mind” (17). In the middle of a rice paddy, shin-

deep in slush, she screams in agony, and her cries gain power as the pain intensifies. The phrase itself is a mix of syllables and expressions of distress, reflecting the raw, unfiltered emotions of a woman enduring labor in a physically demanding environment. It highlights Rupi's strength and resilience, as well as the communal nature of childbirth in her village. G.N. Devy highlights the importance of endangered languages in preserving indigenous knowledge and worldviews. He argues that the decline of tribal languages leads to the erosion of cultural heritage. The Santali phrase in the novel reflects this struggle—it is a remnant of a linguistic tradition that faces marginalization in mainstream discourse. By embedding such phrases in literature, the novel contributes to the preservation of the Santali language and oral storytelling, reinforcing Devy's argument that language is central to cultural survival.

In the novel, another character named Putki, in her drunken state, decides to tell the stories of Kadamdihi through songs: "*Aalay bargay ray ma, kocha bargay ray ma/Kadam mulin baha poroi-poroi*" (22). The phrase is rooted in the oral traditions of the Santhal community, preserving their linguistic heritage within the novel. It reflects the deep connection between language and identity, as characters use Santali expressions to evoke emotions and memories. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonising the Mind*, argues that language is not just a means of communication but a carrier of culture and identity. He critiques the colonial imposition of European languages, which alienates people from their indigenous roots. In this context, the Santali phrase serves as an act of resistance—it preserves oral traditions and asserts the cultural identity of the Santhal people. The lyrical nature of the words aligns with Ngugi's belief in the power of indigenous languages to maintain historical memory and communal solidarity. Devy describes such writing as an "alternative modernity" that sustains indigenous knowledge within contemporary forms (*Indian Literary Criticism* 82). In Shekhar's fiction, the act of storytelling becomes a mode of cultural survival—not merely representing the Santhal world but preserving its rhythms, rituals, and resistances in the face of erasure.

Another phrase, "*Alakjari reyat muchad do okoy e nyaam keya?*" (19) appears in *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* as a metaphor for the parasitic forces that drain vitality from a once-thriving entity. In the novel, Rupi Baskey, once the strongest woman in Kadamdihi, suffers from a mysterious ailment that gradually weakens her, much like the *alakjari vine*, which latches onto the tallest trees and slowly saps their strength. This phrase is used to describe Rupi's decline, as she becomes bedridden while Gurubari, her rival, flourishes. The *alakjari vine* symbolizes oppression, decay, and the slow erosion of identity, whether personal, cultural, or communal. It reflects the novel's themes of power struggles, illness, and the unseen forces that shape people's lives. It embodies the Santali worldview within an English-language novel, disrupting the dominance of English by inserting indigenous linguistic elements. Through the lens of "minor literature", as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, this phrase becomes an act of resistance. For

them, a minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. It challenges linguistic dominance, asserts Indigenous identity, and transforms personal suffering into a collective struggle. The novel, by embedding such phrases, aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's vision of literature as a revolutionary force. The golden vine metaphor reflects the slow erosion of Santhal identity, mirroring how colonial and dominant languages suppress indigenous tongues. The phrase is not just a poetic expression; it is deeply political. It symbolizes the parasitic forces—whether colonialism, caste oppression, or cultural erasure—that weaken indigenous communities. The novel itself, by preserving Santali phrases, resists linguistic homogenization.

In the Santhal community, *Pata* and *Baha* are significant cultural and religious concepts. *Baha*¹ refers to the Flower Festival, one of the most important Santhal celebrations. *Pata*² is associated with Pata Bonga, a deity worshiped by the Santhals. Both terms highlight the Santhal people's deep connection to nature, tradition, and communal life. These terms function as tool of linguistic and cultural survival. For Devy, "When a language dies, a way of understanding the world dies with it, a way of looking at the world" (*When a Language Dies* 18). He emphasizes that indigenous languages encode traditional knowledge, worldviews, and ecological wisdom.

Baha, the Flower Festival, is deeply tied to nature and seasonal cycles, reflecting the Santhal people's intimate relationship with their environment. Pata, associated with annual gatherings and rituals, reinforces communal identity. By preserving these terms in literature, the novel resists the homogenization of Indigenous traditions by resisting the forces of assimilation that ensures that Santhal ecological knowledge remains visible. They preserve Santhal history, ensuring that future generations remain connected to their heritage.

Beyond the mere insertion of Santali vocabulary, Shekhar actively refashions the English language at the very structure of his sentences to reflect the distinct speech patterns, rhythms, idiomatic expressions, and underlying cultural nuances characteristic of the Santhal vernacular. This involves more than just translating words; it entails adapting the syntax and incorporating expressions that resonate with the Santhal way of speaking and thinking. By doing so, Shekhar creates a unique and readily recognizable Santhal voice within the realm of English literature, effectively challenging the dominance of standardized, often culturally unmarked, forms of English. This linguistic strategy can be understood as a powerful example of postcolonial writers appropriating and creatively transforming the language of the colonizer to authentically articulate their own experiences and deeply felt cultural realities, a concept that lies at the heart of postcolonial theories of "writing back". Through this innovative adaptation of English, Shekhar effectively "writes back" to the dominant literary tradition, skillfully carving out a unique and significant space for authentic Santhal self-representation and directly challenging the homogenizing forces of linguistic imperialism.

Furthermore, the historical suppression of indigenous languages in colonial contexts powerfully underscores the profound significance of language maintenance as a cornerstone of cultural survival for marginalized communities. In Shekhar's narratives, therefore, language transcends its role as a mere tool for communication; it becomes a deeply felt and profound marker of Santhal identity, and the active assertion and consistent maintenance of this linguistic heritage emerges as a powerful and crucial act of resistance against the ever-present threat of cultural erasure.

Writing as a Form of Resistance and Cultural Preservation

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's fiction directly confronts and challenges long-standing hegemonic and often deeply ingrained stereotypical representations of Adivasi communities that have historically permeated mainstream Indian literature and popular discourse. His literary work deliberately moves beyond the simplistic and often reductive portrayals of indigenous people as either romanticized "noble savages" or the exoticized and inherently "other," instead offering complex, nuanced, and profoundly humanizing depictions of Santhal individuals and their vibrant communities. Shekhar demonstrates a clear commitment to portraying the multifaceted realities of Santhal life, fearlessly addressing critical issues such as pervasive poverty, systemic social injustice, various forms of exploitation and the often-devastating consequences of displacement and development projects on their traditional ways of life. His unique position as an insider within the Santhal community grants him an unparalleled ability to offer a powerful and authentic counter-narrative, one that directly challenges the frequently misinformed and often prejudiced perceptions of the Santhal people that have historically dominated mainstream representations. This commitment aligns strongly with the fundamental postcolonial imperative for Indigenous writers to actively "write back" to the dominant cultural center, asserting their own unique perspectives, lived experiences, and deeply held truths.

Shekhar's *My Father's Garden* is a visceral, unapologetic act of literary resistance—one that challenges caste hierarchies, sexual norms, linguistic erasure, and institutional violence through the very act of narration. The protagonist—a queer Adivasi doctor—narrates his life through fragmented memories, erotic encounters, caste shame, and emotional vulnerability. His Santali identity is both central and suppressed. His discomfort with "crass" Santali and his longing for chaste speech reflect G.N. Devy's notion of "linguistic citizenship"—the right to speak and be heard in one's mother tongue. Shekhar's writing doesn't just depict resistance—it enacts it. The narrator's body becomes a site of caste, gender, and linguistic struggle, and the prose itself refuses to conform to literary respectability. In doing so, *My Father's Garden* becomes what Barbara Harlow might call a "text of urgency"—a literature that doesn't wait for permission to speak.

My Father's Garden subtly but powerfully stages Santali language as a form of resistance to cultural erasure—an act that resonates deeply with Ngũgĩ wa

Thiong'o's radical linguistic politics. Though Santali appears sparingly in the text, its presence is charged with emotional, political, and epistemic significance. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonising the Mind*, argues that language is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Writing in indigenous languages, he insists, is not just a literary choice—it's political defiance against colonial and neo-colonial domination. The narrator recalls speaking "chaste Santali" with Sunil before sex changed their relationship. This moment marks Santali as a language of pre-sexual innocence, trust, and cultural kinship, a space untouched by caste shame or erotic commodification. After intimacy begins, they stop speaking Santali. This silence mirrors Ngũgĩ's idea of linguistic alienation, where colonial or dominant languages (Hindi, English) replace indigenous tongues in moments of power, shame, or assimilation. The narrator critiques Sunil's Santali as "crass," revealing internalized hierarchies. Ngũgĩ would call this a symptom of colonial linguistic conditioning, where native speakers devalue their own language through imposed standards of "refinement."

G.N. Devy, in his work on linguistic diversity, emphasizes that indigenous languages encode traditional knowledge. He notes that India's tribal languages are "living traditions" tied to oral epistemologies, and their marginalization in mainstream discourse signals a form of *epistemicide* (*After Amnesia* 24). Devy argues for a decolonized literary practice that recognizes orality as an epistemic system rather than a primitive predecessor to writing. *Mohni-vidya* (Shekhar 115) represents indigenous healing practices that contrast with Western medicine. Its inclusion in the novel asserts the legitimacy of Santhal medical traditions, resisting the dominance of colonial and modern healthcare narratives. Another important phrase from the text *Haandi-togoi-maiju* (Shekhar 22) reflects the oral storytelling traditions of the Santhal people. Indigenous theorists like Linda Tuhiwai Smith highlight how Indigenous languages preserve social norms and histories. The phrase critiques excessive drinking while reinforcing communal values, ensuring that Santhal moral codes persist despite external influences.

Using the term *Gada-dharay* (21) reflects Indigenous perspectives on death and the afterlife. For Walter Dignolo, "Decoloniality is not a new paradigm; it is a set of practices that delink from coloniality and opens up other possibilities of being, knowing, and doing" (*On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*). In his work on decoloniality, Dignolo's idea of "epistemic disobedience" (*The Darker Side of Western Modernity* 45) argues that Indigenous languages challenge Western epistemologies. *Gada-dharay* resists the imposition of dominant religious narratives by maintaining Santhal conceptions of death and spiritual continuity. Dignolo introduces the concept of *bilanguaging*, where Indigenous speakers navigate between dominant and Indigenous languages. The novel's use of Santali within English disrupts colonial linguistic hierarchies, ensuring that Santhal identity remains visible. The presence of Santali phrases asserts *pluriversality*, which focuses on the multiple ways of knowing and being coexist, rather than being erased by dominant narratives.

Indigenous theorists argue that language is central to spiritual identity. *Buru-Bonga* preserves Santhal religious practices, resisting the dominance of institutionalized religions. Its presence in the novel ensures that indigenous spirituality remains visible and valued. This phrase reflects the communal traditions of the Santhal people. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson emphasizes that Indigenous languages encode collective memory. She emphasizes that Indigenous languages are central to reclaiming identity. The Santali phrases in the novel are acts of linguistic resistance, ensuring that oral traditions remain embedded in literature rather than being lost to mainstream cultural dominance. She connects Indigenous knowledge with the land, “Resurgence is not about going back to the past, but about reclaiming, reimagining, and reinvigorating Indigenous ways of being.” Santali phrases related to nature, such as *Reyar-Baha* (Winter Flower), reflect a worldview where land and culture are inseparable. Their presence in the novel resists the detachment imposed by colonial narratives (*Indigenous Resurgence and Co-resistance*). It aligns with the Santali language’s role in the novel—it’s not just preservation, but an active reinvention, ensuring that these traditions remain relevant even in the future.

Shekhar's writing acts as a crucial and enduring repository for the rich tapestry of Santhal oral traditions, including folklore, traditional myths, deeply held supernatural beliefs, and the intricate details of their everyday cultural practices. By carefully transcribing and skillfully embedding these vital cultural elements within the very fabric of his compelling fictional narratives, he makes a significant contribution to their preservation for future generations, particularly in an era marked by rapid cultural change and the gradual decline of traditional oral transmission in increasingly modernized societal contexts. In this critical context, the act of writing assumes profound significance as a powerful tool for cultural survival for communities with strong and vibrant oral traditions, enabling the essential documentation and widespread dissemination of invaluable knowledge and cultural heritage that might otherwise be irretrievably lost due to the relentless pressures of cultural assimilation or the inevitable passing of knowledgeable elders. Shekhar's literary work, therefore, transcends the boundaries of mere storytelling, functioning as a vital and enduring archive of Santhal cultural heritage, ensuring its continuity in a rapidly transforming world.

The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey creates a crucial and much-needed platform for the often-silenced voices and lived experiences of marginalized members of the Santhal community, fearlessly shedding light on critical and often overlooked issues such as pervasive poverty, systemic social injustice, and the myriad forms of exploitation they endure, including the horrific realities of sexual exploitation and the insidious practice of human trafficking. He also critically examines the often-devastating consequences of displacement and so-called "development" projects on their traditional ways of life and their deep connection to their ancestral lands. This powerful act of giving voice to the subaltern, those historically marginalized and denied agency, can serve as a potent tool for

community empowerment, raising critical awareness among wider audiences who may be unaware of these realities, and ultimately challenging the deeply entrenched dominant societal structures and inequalities that perpetuate this marginalization.

Conclusion

Shekhar employs a distinctive writing style often characterized as direct, simple, precise, and unaffected, focusing on the tangible actions and attitudes of his characters rather than relying on elaborate descriptions or overt emotional embellishment. This stark and honest approach avoids romanticizing or sentimentalizing the often-harsh realities faced by the Santhal community, lending a powerful sense of authenticity and immediacy to his storytelling. This allows the experiences of his characters and the gravity of their situations to resonate deeply with readers without resorting to overt emotional manipulation. The texts stand as a powerful testament to the enduring strength and resilience of the Santhal community in the face of significant cultural pressures. His masterful use of language, encompassing the strategic and unapologetic incorporation of Santali, the innovative adaptation of English to mirror Santhal linguistic patterns, and the rich preservation of oral traditions and cultural knowledge within his narratives, serves as a vital means of asserting Santhal identity in a world often characterized by cultural erasure. Shekhar's literary contributions actively challenge dominant and frequently stereotypical representations of indigenous communities, offering authentic, nuanced, and deeply humanizing portrayals of Santhal life. By providing a crucial platform for the often-marginalized voices and lived experiences of Santhals, his writing transcends mere storytelling, becoming a potent instrument for social commentary, community empowerment, and a powerful act of resistance against the silencing effects of dominant societal structures. Through his distinctive narrative strategies, including the intimate perspective offered by first-person narration and the seamless integration of folklore and myth, Shekhar ensures that the unique cultural heritage of the Santhal community continues to resonate and endure within the contemporary literary landscape, leaving an enduring echo for generations to come.

¹ It marks the arrival of spring and is deeply tied to nature and spirituality. The festival involves worship, music, dance, and rituals to honor deities like Marang Buru and Jaher Era. It is believed that collecting Sal or Mahua flowers before the festival can bring misfortune to the village

² It is celebrated alongside other festivals like *Sohrae* and *Dansae*, which are primarily agricultural in nature. The term "pata" can also refer to annual community gatherings or events, reinforcing the collective identity of the Santhal people.

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