

Rolling Eyes, Rejected Subalternization,  
Reimagining Justice: A Reading of  
Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The  
Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*

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## Introduction

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's (Sowvendra, hereafter) 2014 novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (*Rupi Baskey*, hereafter) constitutes the story of the Santhal community. The novel depicts a course of triumph and success of the indigenous community. It is a deviation from the usual trajectory of victimizing or infantilizing the community. The aim of this paper is to explore the narratives around the agency and autonomy of Santhal community through a reading of *Rupi Baskey*. In particular, the paper situates the author Sowvendra within the scope of indigenous literature while highlighting the idea of oral narratives and literary autoethnography. It analyzes the portrayal of the Santhals as an empowered community through their un-subalternizing and accentuates their contribution in India's historic freedom struggle by portraying the Santhal 'side-up'. Further the paper explores the physical and cultural geography of the Santhal space to show the distinct identity of the Santhals. Finally, it discusses the use of the paranormal within the indigenous space.

## Indigenous Moorings

Indigenous writers across the world have had to struggle to find a place of recognition in the world of literature and otherwise. While the 1969 Pulitzer Prize to N. Scott Momaday for his *House Made of Dawn* threw the floodgates of publishers open to indigenous writings in America, indigenous writings in English in India have still to find a strong moment of reckoning. Barring a few writers from the North-East, most of the other indigenous communities have not received the limelight that they should have, both within the regional and the Indian English literary canon. It is within this context that Sowvendra, a medical doctor, arrived with his *Rupi Baskey*, which won the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar in 2014. In an interview, Sowvendra says, “*Rupi Baskey* is the first full-fledged Santhal novel written in English, and published by a mainstream publisher like Aleph Book Company. I think this is a huge enough representation of the Santhal life in the mainstream Indian English writing. And I think this is good. There should be more Santhal stories told in English now” (Prasad, 2017). Ironically, his next book, a collection of short stories called *The Adivasi will not Dance* (2015), was banned in 2017 on the allegation that it tarnished the image of Adivasi (the indigenous peoples of India) women and Santhal culture. He was suspended from state service as a medical officer but later reinstated in 2018. Sowvendra showcases the Santhal Community in a light hitherto unknown in English Writings. Binoo K John writes in *Scroll.in*, “The twin life he leads, as doctor and then a writer at night, comprises struggles against various impossibilities – a throw of the dice in the dark for a Santhal writer battling against both prejudice and ignorance” (John, 2015).

## Literary Autoethnography and Oral Story-Telling

*Rupi Baskey* gives a bird’s eye view into some aspects of Santhal culture and society which had hitherto been found only in books related to anthropology. By demonstrating the everyday life of the Santhals, an agrarian community, he demonstrates an insider’s perspective. Sowvendra says he writes what he has lived through; the stories come from life around him during his years growing up in Ghatshila (John, 2015). “I have grown up on stories my family told

me - stories about kings and gods and ghosts” (Prasad, 2017). Within the Native American space, many writers have turned to *creative nonfiction or literary autoethnography* to express how tribal affiliation, myth, ancestry, gender, life stages, education, geographical locales, and historical moment impress their consciousness and inform their identity and works. These authors have become anthropologists of their own experience. Notwithstanding, these Native American authors see themselves “in relation to collective social units or groups rather than as isolated individuals” (Arnold Krupat 212 as quoted in Lundquist 8). Sowvendra’s works *Rupi Baskey* and *The Adivasi will not Dance* seem to reflect this exposition. Manasi Shah writes, “The history of the Adivasis has always been written by others - the mainstream historians. While the Adivasis treasure their cultural and historical legacies, there is next to no documentation of this by themselves” (Shah, 2019). She further states that one of the reasons for this negligence was because the Adivasis were not themselves writing in English. However, writers such as Sowvendra who write in English are akin to storytellers of the past who have passed on their stories to various generations. Additionally, Ruby Hembrom, the founder and Director of Adivaani (first voices), an archiving and publishing outfit of and by Adivasi, insists on publishing in English and says, “Choosing English was a strategic move to ensure we were paid attention to. Choosing English is not about whether our people can read or write in it; it’s about existing, nudging our way onto bookshelves and libraries, as some day, this will be the database and collective memory of the authentic Adivasi voice” (Mitra, 2019). Sowvendra too writes primarily in English although he translates from Santhali to English, and Hindi to English. His opponents challenged his authority to narrate creation stories. While both these writers have been criticized for writing in English, they have unequivocally maintained the power of oral narrative traditions too within this context. The backlash which Sowvendra received for his books, compelled his supporters to comment on the power of oral narratives endemic to indigenous cultures. In an article in *Scroll.in*, they said:

“These erudite protestors forget that we come from an oral tradition and that there are several versions of the Karam-Binti which are different from the written versions. (Karam Binti, according to Ruby Hembrom, is a ritualistic retelling and recalling of the Santhal-creation stories (Hembrom, 2018). There are Santals who say some sequences in the creation narrative are missing or not recognisable

in the printed versions. Do they intend to say that these Santals are not the 'true' Santals because their belief of the myth is different from that of the objectors? They're using the arrogance of printed text to subjugate people of orality, like the 'dikus' (Diku is a non-Santhal) have been doing" (Scroll, 2017).

In an interview, Ruby Hembrom says, "Adivasi literature is oral, written, graphic, animated, sung and performed...We never needed to write because we were living documents ourselves. But now, armed with literacy, we need to record, document, express and challenge what has incorrectly gone down as history, set records straight and even defend ourselves" (Mitra, 2019). Hembrom asserts the importance of singers, storytellers and family in preserving the Santhal knowledge systems. They, through their oration and singing, nurture and re-create the idea of the community itself. She further adds, "The oral tradition is a distillation of the shared community and corporal experience that gives language and culture meaning" (Hembrom, 2018). Since each narrator revises and improvises while narrating a story it re-creates a sense of a community.

## **(Un)-Subalternizing the Santhals**

Sowvendra refuses to portray the Santhals as subalterns. He shows the community as people with agency who lived with pride as a farming community, until the place was swallowed by land sharks who wanted their pound of flesh from the mineral-rich land of Jharkhand. I would argue that Sowvendra showcases the Santhal community as a people who were a triumphant lot – they had their own way of living which was both meticulous and accommodative. Although currently many members of the community live in abject poverty, I would argue that poverty was thrust on them for no fault of theirs. In *Rupi Baskey*, where Sowvendra traces the lives of the Santhals from the pre-independent era, one wonders, why do the women practice black magic against anyone who appears better than them? Since we are attuned to Western/European discourses, it is difficult to view the Santhal community from any other lens and that is indeed a fallacious notion. Santhal culture, traditions and rituals are viewed through the filter of the Euro-Western perspective which leaves no scope for any discussions on witchcraft

and black magic. The answer lies also in the undeniable connection between those beautiful women and the beautiful land called Jharkhand. *Rupi Baskey* is inextricably connected to the exploitation of Jharkhand which has rendered the place into an ailing space.

Rupi is a strong woman married to a promising man with great prospects because he is a teacher in a Government school. In her in-laws' house, a pregnant Rupi contributes during the rice-transplanting season along with other women. The novel opens with Rupi giving birth in the paddy field – “*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*” (Shekhar 2014, 1). However, not only Rupi, even Sido Master (her husband) and Jaipal (her eldest) are captives of Gurubari (Sido's colleague's wife) through the evil spell that she has cast on them. ‘She has sucked the life out of Rupi bit by bit and Rupi, once the strongest woman in Kadamdihi, is bedridden for no apparent reason’ (Shekhar 2014, 6). Further, even before Jaipal was born to Rupi and Sido, Gurubari extracts a promise from Rupi that the latter will give away her first-born son to her – ‘You will give me your eldest,’ she said (Shekhar 2014, 105). If Rupi is Jharkhand, then one can see her territories being leased out to outside parties for mining at the cost of her own natives. Rupi's condition appears incorrigible but hope arrives in the form of Rupali, her second son Bishu's wife, who is pragmatic, resourceful and stable in her thoughts and action. It is Rupali who finally becomes the cause for Rupi and the Baskey household's rejuvenation. With her ability to lead without arrogance, she is able to tame even her aunt-in-law, Dulari. She is able to convince her husband and others to enroll the children in school, a facility Rupi's children were deprived of despite their own father being a school teacher.

In reality, while all the corporates grew fat on the riches of the land, the Santhals or the indigenous became impoverished. Additionally, the dehumanization of the Adivasis continued unabated with their rich culture being effaced with the construction of the idea of the uncultured savages. Through Rupi's original status of being a promising wife at the threshold of a new life, Sowvendra depicts the un-subalternization of not only the Santhals, but also Jharkhand.

## Re-creating History – Santhal side-up

In *Rupi Baskey*, Sowvendra foregrounds the leaders from the community who do not find themselves highlighted among the luminaries of the freedom movement. Della [daughter of Naikay (who is Rupi's neighbour and Putki's best friend)] and Putki (Rupi's mother-in-law) rejoice with the others over the freedom gained from the "Ingrej" and the possibility of an Indian "Sarkaar" (Shekhar 2014, 48). It not only focuses on the Indian independence, but also highlights the promise of a new space for the Adivasis – "Much more exciting than national freedom was the prospect of a separate land for the hor people, for the Adivasis" (Shekhar 2014, 48).

Sowvendra highlights the roles played by Santhal leaders who initiated a sense of political consciousness within the community during the freedom struggle and after. These are much needed glimpses of the Santhals who are shown to have agency, unlike their representation in other works where they are victims of the system trying to survive. The representation of history showcases the triumphant status of the Santhal community within the political spectrum as India burgeoned into a nascent nation. The dream of a state exclusively for the Adivasis is bolstered by the roles played by leaders such as Jaipal Singh, a member of the Munda tribe, who formed the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1938 and sought a separate state called Jharkhand for Adivasis of the Chota Nagpur Region. Educated at Oxford University, he captained the Indian hockey team to win the gold in the 1928 Olympics held in Amsterdam. While serving as the member of the Constituent Assembly he had sought reservations for the Adivasis all over India (Shekhar 2014, 48-49).

While privileging Santhal leaders of post-independent India, Sowvendra indirectly reminds the readers of some other historical figures of the past for example, Sido Murmu. It seems too much of a coincidence to avoid discussing the name Sido, *Rupi Baskey's* husband although he is nothing like Sido Murmu who led the rebellion against the British. The name Sido however, is a reminder of the historical legend whom the Adivasis of the Chota Nagpur plateau can never forget. Beumer, an art historian at the University of Amsterdam writes that Sido and Kanhu Murmu were the champions of the Santhal community and led the first war of independence against the British and the zamindars in the years 1855-56 although, official versions vouchsafe for the 1857 rebellion against the British as

the first war of independence. Sido along with his brothers Kanhu, Chand, Bhairat, Jhano and Phulo put up a tenacious resistance (Beumer, 2017). Beumer says, “The Illustrated London News dated 23 February 1856 under the headline ‘Suppression of the Santhal insurrection’, found a detailed report on a mass uprising that had taken place in November 1855 and was brutally put down: 15,000 Santhals lost their lives and dozens of villages were destroyed” (Beumer, 2017). In 1992, the Sido Kanhu Murmu University was established. In 2002, Indian Post released a four-rupee stamp commemorating Sido and Kanhu Murmu the leaders of the “Santhal hul” (Beumer, 2017).

Returning to the novel, Sowvendra discusses the political awareness created among the Santhals by the likes of Khorda Baskey, Rupi’s father-in-law. He is Sowvendra’s mouthpiece as he recounts for his people the role of Jaipal Singh and his Jharkhand party. Further, he reminds his community about the Kharsawan massacre of January 1, 1948 in which “more than a thousand Adivasis were killed” (Shekhar 2014, 70). Khorda asserts that the tribals who were shot at during the Kharsawan massacre were united in their dream for a new Adivasi state called Jharkhand. His assertion of brotherhood and empathy is reflected in the following words: “They were our brothers...They were hor like us. Some were Santar like us, others were Larka” (Shekhar 2014, 71). While lamenting the loss of his fellow Adivasis, Khorda says, “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?” (Shekhar 2014, 71). It is upon Khorda Baskey’s motivation that Putki went to vote for “the first general elections of the country and became part of history” (Shekhar 2014, 71). Sowvendra’s voice merges with that of Khorda’s when he recounts the history of the Adivasi struggles. The narrative privileges the Adivasi perspective of history rather than the official narrative propagated by the dominant players of the Nation. Although the dream of a state for the Adivasis was deferred to appease the more dominant stakeholders, the dream remained a sustained one to come to fruition later on in the course of time. With the reorganization of the states on a linguistic basis, and while the mineral rich parts were being divided between Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha, the issue of Jharkhand was pushed to the corner – “When such big barbers were taking place, why would anyone bother to see who or how many spoke Santhali, Mundari, Ho or Kurukh?” (Shekhar 2014,

72). The state of Jharkhand was only formed in 2000, more than half a century after India became independent. Thus, by creating a space for the Santhal history, Sowvendra creates a space for the Santhal side-up in history and asserts the agency which the Santhals have always exercised under various situations of distress. While historicizing narratives is significant, the geographies (physical and cultural) that play a part in this become equally important.

## **Physical Geography and its transitions**

Sowvendra's subtlety in portraying the transition of Jharkhand from an agrarian space into a mining territory is a veiled attempt at probing the idea of environmental injustice. The mines and the factories were gradually impacting people's health and the environment. The mining centres are seen through Rupi's eyes as she travels with Sido for the first time to Nitra, the place where Sido is a school teacher. Through her, the writer shows the concentration of factories and mines that had mushroomed in that area. Sido points out to her the copper factories, the Subarnarekha river (The River of Gold). She had heard stories about it, about the gold nuggets in its bed and the Jadugora Uranium mines (Shekhar 2014, 87-88). The mines provided employment to the people in the neighborhood. The Majhi (the village-head) with whom Sido and Bairam lived was not only a prosperous farmer in Nitra, he also worked at "the mines in Rakha as labourer, like many of the other Santhal men of the village" (Shekhar 2014, 97). Although these factories and mines are meant to help in development of the area/country, it sooner or later has detrimental effects on the local communities residing in the places for ages together.

Rupi's journey to Nitra heralds her sickness – her mysterious ailment for which there is no cure. The ill-effects of uranium mining in Jadugora, the hazards caused by copper mining are well-documented facts. The mining in the area has had serious health hazards and environmental disasters including contamination of the water bodies, air pollution and so on. The land is rich in mineral resources. Just as Rupi entered the Baskey household as a beautiful bride kindling everyone's interest in her beauty, so also was Jharkhand generating interest in anyone who

wanted to partake of her riches. Rupi thus becomes a metaphor for Jharkhand which has been getting exploited from the time of the discovery of the mineral resources. When Rupi is presented to the neighbours as was the custom, many women from the neighborhood come to bless her. Among all the women, Rupi could never forget one of them – Naikay’s widow (Rupi’s neighbour) – ‘The woman could look right through her, Rupi felt. And even more strangely, her large eyeballs would not stop rolling for a single second’ (Shekhar 2014, 74). From time to time, the narrative describes women with “rolling eyes” gazing at Rupi. It is the gaze of the greedy devouring the rich heritage of Jharkhand, its mineral resources – ‘Jharkhand is one of the richest areas in the whole country, rich in mineral deposits and forests. The region has huge reserve of coal, iron ore, mica, bauxite and limestones and considerable reserves of copper, chromite, asbestos, kyanite, china clay, manganese, dolomite, uranium etc’ (Government of Jharkhand, 2021).

Therefore, even the place becomes a metaphor for the illness that grips Rupi who has entered the place with a sense of openness to start a new life with her husband. However, just as the mines and factories have the ability to destroy a place beyond redemption, Rupi is caught in the quagmire of witchcraft, black magic and various other spells. Her sickness is closely connected to the sickness that grips mining areas literally and metaphorically. The transition of Jharkhand’s geography from being a river of gold to an exclusive mining territory, not only depicts that the place has been reduced to just being a mine for the greedy, but also the degradation of the land and its people. This degradation compels one to explore the cultural aspects of Santhal landscape because that is the last vestige that is left of a community that has been stripped of its land and riches.

## **Cultural Geography**

In *Rupi Baskey*, the focus is on the cultural geography pertaining to the Santhals. Sowendra recreates the physical and cultural geography of the Santhal villages in order to portray the culture of the place. Briney writes, “Some of the main cultural phenomena studied in cultural geography include language, religion, different economic and governmental structures, art, music, and other cultural

aspects that explain how and/or why people function as they do in the areas in which they live” (Briney, 2020).

Sowvendra explores naming of villages (dih) to show that these villages are connected to nature. Each of the villages is named after an aspect of nature. For instance, Tereldih, Rupi’s home-village, is a wholly Santhal village. It is named after a tree – the terel or the kendu, the leaves of which are used to roll bidis (thin cigarette or mini-cigar filled with tobacco flake and commonly wrapped in a tendu leaf) (Shekhar 2014, 18). Likewise, Kadamdih which is an important location within the novel is named after the kadam (burrflower-tree, laran, Leichhardt pine) tree. Lowadih- named after lowa, the fig tree. Sowvendra creates a sense of place by locating the Santhals in a space that imbues the Santhali culture.

In another instance of using elements of nature, Sowvendra traces the meanings of the surnames and their role within the Santhal space. For instance, he says “The paaris or surname, of Somai-haram’s gushti (household) is Hansda. The eldest male of this clan was chosen as the majhi of Kadamdih” (Shekhar 2014, 13). Further, he adds how each paari has its own story of its origin thus etching into the novel the creation stories about the Santhals. “Hansdas, for instance, are said to have hatched from the eggs of the mythical swans, Hans and Hansli, while Murmus are believed to be the kids of the sacred nanny-goat, Murum-Enga. Since all Hansdas are considered to be fellow nestlings, a Hansda man can never marry a Hansda woman. And so it is with others” (Shekhar 2014, 14). It introduces the origin of surnames with mythical or sacred elements.

Sowvendra not only discusses the use of nature in names of villages (dih) or surnames (paaris), but also traces the life of the Santhals from pre-independence times and embodies the perception of Santhals as the ‘other’. In demonstrating the divisions, the camaraderie and animosities that existed between the Santhals and the other communities, Sowvendra highlights the resentment harbored by the Kamar (the blacksmiths) and the Kunkal (the potters) against the Santhals. The culinary and marital choices of the Santhals were cited as primary reasons for their ‘impurity’ and ‘uncleanness’. Despite their own marginalized status, the Kamars and Kunkals were contemptuous of the Santhals because they consumed “cow and pig meat, drank *haandi* (rice-beer) and *paura* (spirits distilled from the dried

mahua blossom) and practiced polygamy” (Shekhar 2014, 14). The others would refuse to eat or drink in the presence of a Santhal. The Santhals however, ignored this behaviour because of their implicit belief in the fact that it was ultimately their village. At junctures, where they were challenged to the hilt, the Santhals would put up a tenacious resistance, collectively in the manner of Khorda Baskey: “We are the ones who have let you live in this village; we can very well force you to pack up and leave. One more word against our women, children and religion, and see what happens to you all. Don’t forget” (Shekhar 2014, 17). Culinary and marital choices have increasingly become matters of contentious public discussions in India. It is thus even within the contemporary Santhal space. However, their past history would show otherwise. For instance, *haandi* is a welcome drink or a regular drink but the others stigmatize it. Sowvendra portrays women drinking *haandi* without any apology, however, he also highlights the shame in Putki for drinking *haandi* without any control. The discrimination based on these choices is highlighted by Sowvendra because these were aspects that were used against the Santhals to dehumanize them at different points in history. Besides the *haandi*, there are other cultural aspects of the indigenous groups that are held up to ridicule and portrayed as being ‘unscientific’, such as paranormal beliefs.

## Paranormal Beliefs

The Santhals believe in animistic practices by following the Sarna religion which is the “worship of nature and the spirits” (Shekhar 2014, 14). The Santhal pantheon is highly accommodative of every aspect that affects human life including the representation of evil. The free will to choose is an important aspect of this pantheon. While some of the Gods profess goodness and peace, some do not. The Gods of the pantheon closely align with the human tendencies and possibilities. The pantheon also reflects the longevity of the tribe as it has existed from ancient times. This section analyzes the animistic practices that exist within the community.

The Gods are part of everyday lives of the Santhals. Rupi attends the annual Buru-Bonga – the Worship of the hill and her occasional visits to the ancient shrine to

Marang-Buru on the top of the hill (Shekhar 2014, 2). Sowvendra highlights the most adored couple of the Sarna pantheon the shrine to Marang-Buru and Jaher-Ayo – the Father and the Mother and their sacred spot in the jaher, the place where the sacrifices are made (Shekhar 2014, 25). In addition to the father and the mother, there are five more shrines – shrine of feminine power and fertility; Five Great Warriors–the Moray-Ko; Sendra-Ko – the Hunters and masculine power; Dharma (duty) (Shekhar 2014, 25-26). The (fifth) shrine of Sima-Bonga was devoid of any embellishments. ‘While the other gods represent positive energy, Sima-Bonga symbolizes the negative forces’ (Shekhar 2014, 26).

Although Sima Bonga or the Dhonkundra-bhoot is revered along with the other deities, it is not worshipped on regular days and therefore becomes the privileged God (Shekhar 2014, 27). Although this God brings great wealth, it extracts a heavy price for its favors – people who are worshippers of this God suffered from strange illnesses, men become sterile – they cannot sire or bear children (Shekhar 2014, 27). Another aspect related to religion is the practice of black magic and witchcraft by Santhal women. According to Somai Haram, Putki’s father, “Santhal men drink *haandi*, Santhal women practice *dahni-bidya* (black magic) and no one speaks about it” (Shekhar 2014, 37).

Like the God who occupies a place in the Santhal pantheon, the *dahni* (witch) also seem to form part of the Santhal world. They straddle both the real and the Other world of the paranormal, or so it seems in *Rupi Baskey*. No one questions the existence of *dahni-bidya* or the *dahni*’s ways. They elicit a sense of fear among people and people seem to believe that they have powers that can bring about destruction. There is retribution in this world for the evil that is perpetuated through *dahni-bidya* and ultimately it is the choice of each person to follow a certain God. For instance, Naikay’s (Rupi’s neighbor) daughter Della does not follow her mother’s practice, instead she threatens the God with dire consequences. She follows her heart, falls in love with a man, elopes with him. *Rupi Baskey* encounters *dahnis* from the time of her entry into Khorda and Putki’s household as their daughter-in-law. Everyone knows that the Naikay’s wife is a *dahni* and practices black magic and witchcraft, and so does the latter’s daughter-in-law. However, they are not ostracized. There is a calculated distance that people maintain but they are part of every ritual and celebration in the village.

In *Rupi Baskey*, the dahnis mingle with Khorda Baskey's household but Rupi is warned about them and their ways. She unwittingly is caught in their spell once, but her general sense of trust makes her a prey to Gurubari, who is Bairam Master's (Sido's colleague and neighbour) wife, and lives as a parasite literally and metaphorically off her family – including her own children. Her deterioration into nearly a sickly invalid is attributed to the evil spell cast by Gurubari. She is also presumably the woman with whom Sido Master is having an affair. The white-haired woman emanating the scent of Jasmine oil appears (only to Rupi) at regular intervals to warn Rupi. Her trips to various doctors from the homeopath to the shaman is a reminder of the influence of another force altogether that has engulfed her into submission. Her fears of various apparitions – the tall man outside her house in the night, the sudden appearance of the white-haired woman coupled with stories of the Majhi's wife who practices witchcraft explores the impact of the belief in the paranormal. Further, her sister-in-law Dulari, Doso's wife practices witchcraft too to decimate her husband's lover. Doso, primarily marries Dulari in order to make her a house-help, batters her and carries on his affair with another woman. Dulari's transformation into the dahni is shown as a step towards empowerment. Her question to Rupi is poignant and a sharp reminder of the violence that she had experienced as Doso's wife. She asserts, "What was mine was being taken away from me. I had to claim it for myself...I had to help myself...If it meant using dahni-bidya, I was ready for that. I had to reclaim what was rightfully mine" (Shekhar 2014, 185).

Further, there is a mention of the beautiful Jugni spirit in Lowadihi, said to cause disease, and who lived under the talay tree (Shekhar 2014, 65). Additionally, Sowvendra portrays one of the Saat- Bohoni, the Seven Sisters – goddesses of ponds and lakes who drag attractive young men down with them into the depths of the pond. Having made them their consorts, they compel them to make love to all the seven sisters. The day after, the man's soulless body emerges from the depths of the pond and floats on its surface (Shekhar 2014, 68-69). These goddesses who form part of the daily legends are embedded in cultural landscapes and people believe them unquestioningly. Thus, there is no distinction between humans, and non-humans including these paranormal beings.

Dreams too find an important part in this relation between humans and the other-worldly experiences. It is hardly a Freudian interpretation of dreams. The dreams that Rupi or any other character sees are an indication of the truth that they cannot see in real life. Dreams become the medium for the characters to understand the diabolic nature of human existence. Rupi or Somai Haram's dreams awaken them to the realities of life. For women who are dahnis, the recourse to evil is almost a weapon to be used during desperate times; some use it to survive and some use it to prosper at others' expense. They too become metaphors for the land and the way land is used or abused. These paranormal beliefs are entrenched within the Santhal space as a part of the community's identity.

## Conclusion

*Rupi Baskey* enabled me to explore the agency and autonomy exercised by the Santhals. By contextualizing Sowvendra within the Santhal space, it was not difficult to examine the autoethnographic elements in the form of personal anecdotes or stories passed down over generations. Retelling these stories in one's own words is presumably liberating and can boost the morale of the community. Sowvendra, although much criticized for his writings, uses every other aspect of the community to showcase the autonomy of the community. *Rupi Baskey* shook a lot of people's complacencies. By centering the Santhals, Sowvendra mainstreams the Santhals by foregrounding the cultural dynamics of their position. It shatters the image of powerless, infantilized subalterns trying to survive within a society.

The 'rolling eyes' of the dahnis can be perceived as metaphors of the greedy gaze of people who wish to devour the rich mineral heritage of Jharkhand. These 'rolling eyes' are also fundamental to the 'mysterious ailment' of Rupi. Gurubari with her rolling eyes extracts an unfair promise from Rupi that the latter will hand over her eldest son to the former. This forcible extraction stands out as a metaphor for the way Santhal land was given away, without any or adequate compensation. This spotlights the injustice that is meted out to Rupi and the Santhal community.

Sowvendra's reimagining of history from the Santhal perspective helps in further bolstering faith in the potential of the Santhals. The cataloguing of historical figures from Jharkhand is an assertion of their prominence. It is a way of paying tribute to them at least now, and rectifying the negligence shown to them earlier. Additionally, the mention of the historical figures from Jharkhand counters the dominant narratives of adulation around some specific leaders.

The physical geography of the place highlights the stories of environmental injustice that is perhaps the unwritten norm. Although Nitra has electricity, there are other areas of darkness in the place. The women of the place using *dahni-bidya* for killing or sacrificing people or in general harming unsuspecting persons is an indicator of the dangers that lurk in the mining spaces. Black magic is but a metaphor for the morbidities that surround the people. The cultural geography underscores the aspects of the tribe which have only been recorded in books written by anthropologists. Literary writers too can sometimes function as record-keepers of cultures and cultural practices. Both the men and the women drank *haandi* and this information is released in the most matter-of-fact manner. There is no taboo in women 'drinking alcohol'. Similarly, autonomy that women exercised in choosing partners or in engaging in sexual companionship is woven into the narrative to highlight the original culture of the Santhals which allowed women an immense degree of freedom.

The belief in the paranormal is a seamless idea which surprises no one in the world of the Santhals. Black magic, witchcraft and the likes are part of the socio-cultural fabric of the community. The pantheon of Gods of the Sarna religion engender the acceptance of the good and the evil without any dichotomy. After all, it is the freedom of choice that is ascribed to the Santhals and therefore it is a matter of great irony that they were never consulted before their lands were leased away or they were displaced in the name of developing the country. The Santhal community rejects being subalternized in every sphere – historical, geographical, cultural and paranormal beliefs.

The Santhal community has experienced untold misery due to 'rolling eyes' that continues to engage at their land with a colonizers' gaze. Sowvendra, through *Rupi Baskey*, reimagines justice by painting the picture of the Santhals with autonomy

and agency. He patches the unequal narrative of Santhal community through Rupī and her daughter-in-law Rupali, thus creating justice for the community as a whole. Sowvendra's subtlety and restraint in discussing issues pertaining to land and the people endear him to the reading audiences across the world. His straightforward narration has been instrumental in representing the Santhal world from a fresh perspective. Thus, *Rupī Baskey* is Sowvendra's personal tribute to his land, his people, his ancestors and his tribe.

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