

**ADIVASI SUBJECTIVITY AND IDENTITY IN *BIKRAM*  
*HEMBROM* AND *SHANA BAURIR KAWTHOKAWTA***

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**Abstract**

This paper records a few aspects of *adivasi* experience based on its interfaces with colonial and postcolonial Indian society (immediately after 1947) by critically interrogating two untranslated Bengali short stories, Samaresh Basu's *Shana Baurir Kawthokawta* (1958)<sup>1</sup> and *Bikram Hembrom* (1965)<sup>2</sup> by Dr. Balaichand Mukhopadhyay (pseudonym: Banaphool). The disparate experiences of two *adivasi* characters – Bikram Hembrom and Shana Bauri, belonging to separate (Santhal and Bauri respectively) tribal communities—are seen as constituting two strands of *adivasi* identity. Bikram Hembrom is an embodiment of the aspirational *adivasi*, a recipient of colonial state's developmental, welfare and missionary policies. His conditions represent the consequences of the Nehruvian state's efforts to assimilate-integrate indigenous people into the larger Indian society. Contrary to this, Shana Bauri, perceptive towards adversities and exploitations, undergoes a subjective transformation from a voiceless to a resolute self, determined to fight against oppression. Based on these experiences, two different identities among indigenous subjects seem to emerge – Bikram Hembrom constituting a passive subjectivity; and Shana Bauri constituting a challenge to the hierarchical social organization of the nation.

**Key words:** Adivasi identity, Bengali Literature, Adivasi, Santhal, Bauri, Subjectivity, Bhadrakok

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<sup>1</sup> First published in a literary journal titled *Notun Sahitya Patrika*; I have used a different edition.

<sup>2</sup> First published in an anthology titled *Chhitmahal*; I have used a different edition.

## 1 Textual overlaps

Written by *Bhadraloks*<sup>3</sup>, *Bikram Hembrom* and *Shana Baurir Kawthokawta* reflect changing conditions from colonial to postcolonial India and their impact on indigenous peoples<sup>4</sup>. Both stories overlap in time and space, narrating the immediate post-independence experiences of the indigenous communities of Santhal Pargana in Birbhum district of West Bengal, bordering the province of erstwhile Bihar, now Jharkhand. Both stories narrate events of a time when India was simultaneously in the throes of countless possibilities, challenges, and paradoxes. The texts reveal complex relationships not only between the indigenous groups and other communities that constitute the nation, but also within the specific indigenous groups.

## 2 Delineating an ‘aberration’ in *Bikram Hembrom*

*Bikram Hembrom* narrates first-person episodic accounts about the protagonist whom the author meets a few times during the latter’s stay as a doctor in Santhal Pargana. Banaphool begins, “It has been ages. I was then a doctor at a dispensary in Santhal Pargana”<sup>5</sup> (Banaphool 395). He finds Bikram to be exceptional, “... Strange man! I have never met anyone like him” (400). He is Santhal in *jati*<sup>6</sup> and Christian by religion, an educated man who retires as Honorary Magistrate of Santhal Pargana. Bikram’s physical appearance, sartorial choices, clarity of thought and competence over Bengali surprises and impresses Banaphool when they first meet at an event organized by the Forest Department. He describes Bikram thus:

His clothes and appearance attracted attention. With a huge pig-stick hat that adorned the head, he wore full-sleeves shirt, heavy boots and khaki trousers. He had handsome features with calm-composed manifestation ... He had a heavy round clean shaven face. His eyes were sharp. He seemed to be in forties. Later I heard he was close to seventy (396).

From their successive meetings and encounters the writer discovers Bikram’s unflinching memory, commitment towards inculcating punctuality in people, knowledge of Nature, dedication towards protection of forest lands and his ideological critique of certain agents of State for misusing forest resources. These traits leave a lasting impression on Banaphool, who not only etches them in the text, but also understands Bikram, articulates his emotions and even his silence, in an economic, matter-of-fact and objective manner. After Bikram tells Banaphool how his late wife had arranged the hat that he always wears except while sleeping as a gift, the latter observes that, “Bikram was lost in other thoughts” (398). Without revealing Bikram’s emotions Banaphool leaves “to attend his patient” (398). The language reverberates with understated human emotions.

Perhaps Banaphool’s appreciation of Bikram stems from perceiving him to be different from other Santhals. Their relation is due to cohesive socio-cultural factors wherein Bikram conforms to popular appreciative, paternalistic and patronizing ideas of the *Bhadralok*. Banaphool notices Bikram Hembrom due to the latter’s imbibed values that erase cultural distinctions. It translates into the writer’s assessment of Bikram as exceptional, despite being a Santhal and thus, arguably is a clear aberration. In fact, Banaphool is surprised to hear him

<sup>3</sup>*Bhadralok* (*Bhadra* = Genteel; *Lok* = People) refers to a category of educated, cultured and genteel Bengali men. For more see Parimal Ghosh. *What Happened to the Bhadralok* (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Questions of legitimacy of non-*adivasi* writers writing on *adivasi* lives and their inclusion within the category of *Adivasi* literature are beyond the scope of the paper.

<sup>5</sup> Passages from Bengali have been translated by the author.

<sup>6</sup>*Jati* specifically here refers to *adivasi* identity. The term has wide and complex associations with caste, ethnicity and religion.

speak sanitized Bengali, “I was surprised to see and hear Bikram Hembrom speak with such clarity” (396). Clearly, he did not expect this – it is only after this surprise ushers in a rejection of the cultural expectations, that the two bond. Bikram’s individuality is further intensified by Banaphool’s method of addressing other Santhals – “Santhal patients” (396), “every Santhal patient” (396), “Santhal young girl” (399), “a Santhal” (400) and “that Santhal” (401). His overuse of the word ‘Santhal’ indicates an identity marker to which others conform except Bikram.

His religious affiliation enabling an upward mobility that attaches him to the colonial state, Bikram appears to be an Anglicized *adivasi*. He respects the Western idea of time that is linked with economic productivity. Therefore, he mends people’s clocks and watches. According to him, “Presently, I happen to control only clocks and watches; their absence erodes punctuality that spoils entire life” (400). Moreover, the habits of preserving gifts as memorial indices, obsessing over health by avoiding eating food cooked outside, and drinking only boiled water indicate Bikram’s integration with British societal-health codes. Through this wide array of practices, Bikram socio-culturally engages with the colonial and the emerging nation-state.

Bikram occupies a liminal<sup>7</sup> space in terms of the hierarchical organization of communities within newly independent India. He gains acceptance from within and outside his community through negotiations and is reluctant to part with privileges granted to him. Though Bikram enjoys “unadulterated respect and adoration” (397) from other Santhal members, and appears hesitant at receiving such privileged treatment, he fails to explicitly dissociate himself from them. Once, at the hospital, Banaphool requests him to sit and observes, “...he began to hesitate. He behaved as if he did not want me to extend special treatment by requesting him to sit on a chair. He would prefer standing with others. Finally he sat, yielding to my persuasion,” (397). According to the hospital’s compounder, Bikram’s influence had reduced over time. He informs Banaphool:

During those times he had significant authority and power. Due to his characteristic dedication everyone respected him a lot, even top British officials. Everybody trusted his verdicts and judgments. During the British era he was the sole arbiter of justice in this area. After independence, his authority has receded. (397)

Consequently, Bikram is not keen on ruffling feathers and hence occupies a politically inactive position. He does not advocate conflict with the state. Despite knowing about the misuse of forest resources by government officials, he remains silent and helpless. At the Forest Department’s event, Bikram declares:

We love this forest . . . When we had right over this forest, we took utmost care and protected it from every danger . . . But now we have no right over the forest. Now the country is independent and you look after it. No one listens to us regarding the forest. Legally you are the protector of the forest. Had you truly been the protector, if you would have genuinely taken care of the goddess-forest then it would not have made us sad. But now we feel very sad at your consumptive nature towards the forest. Everybody is exploiting the forest by looting it for vested commercial interests. We stand at a distance and watch helplessly since no one even listens to us even if we speak. You should learn how to love the forest, only then can you feel my pain. (396)

He fails to mobilize and unite the Santhal community against such misuse thereby keeping away from public forms of protests against these issues. During his personal conversations

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<sup>7</sup> Bikram is experientially located at the threshold of Santhal and other caste groups residing in Santhal Pargana.

with Banaphool, he opines, “No one has any soft corner towards the forest, everybody is a thief” (399). But, neither the protagonist nor the writer feels enraged about these violations, “Both of us sat quietly” (399). They emote through ‘silence’ and ‘quietness’ instead of trying to alter such practices. Bikram constitutes the moderate *adivasi* subjectivity in post-independence India who expresses public and personal dissatisfaction with the state’s approach towards the forest. However, he fails to build or advocate a concrete course of action to challenge that.

### **2.1 The social reality of Santhal Pargana in *Shana Baurir Kawthokawta***

*Shana Baurir Kawthokawta* narrates in third person the story of a few hours’ journey undertaken by Shana Bauri, Sundor Ray, Jiban Banerjee and Haran Ganguly from a village around the same Santhal Pargana to the highway leading to Jamshedpur. Shana, a member of the Bauri community, drives a buffalo cart for a living and sometimes supplements his income by doing temporary, casual jobs. The rest are professionals in the modern service sector that originated in colonial India and contributes towards nation-building after independence. The three characters seek Shana’s assistance to carry their luggage from the village to the bus stop from where they will board buses to Jamshedpur. The narrative records the conversations among them during the journey and their impact. These conversations are not mere casual exchanges but mark the historical, social and everyday relationship of Shana, his family and community with the decadent Bengali feudal landlords with whom Ray, Banerjee and Ganguly share close cultural ties. Shana and his family’s relation with the Bengali community is that of subordinate-superior (Shana addresses them formally while they address him informally) resulting in mutual benefits and occasional tensions.

The exchanges between Shana and others before the journey indicate the undercurrent of social tension due to abolition of *begar* (bonded labour) and *Zamindari* (feudal landlordism) rights. These legal-administrative steps reduce the landlords’ erstwhile power in society. However, Shana regards these changes as either superficial or ineffective since they fail to guarantee his meals. Yet Shana teases Sundor, Jiban and Haran, “So *begar* has been abolished after all . . . why, has the zamindari been abolished?” (Basu 140) and “Oh young lord, why, zamindari is abolished?” (140). His digs draw furious responses from them who, being aware of the changing social landscape, want to avoid the topic.

Shana slowly reveals, “I have become stubborn and my soul is engulfed in flames” (142). The admission enmeshes every possible human emotion. The story unfolds with shifts between past and present within the narrative. Shana’s wife Sukhi cannot stay with him after three consecutive incidents of sexual exploitation by local powerful Bengali men. Once, Sukhi trades her body in return for “two baskets of rice” (143). Shana’s mother mediates the transaction which earns her the pejorative of “a pimp” (142). After knowing about it, Shana “started burning in anger” (144), helplessly assaults his wife and tries to beat his mother who manages to escape. Within a month of the incident Sukhi leaves home. Though Shana convinces her to return, she again undergoes a discomfoting experience. Kedar Mukherjee, Narayan Mukherjee’s grandson, one of the influential members of the village comes to Shana’s house when Sukhi is alone. Shana’s mother accidentally witnesses it and blames Sukhi for inviting him during everyone’s absence. Consequently, Sukhi leaves home again. Shana blends satire and irony while narrating the entire episode:

He has eighty *bighas*<sup>8</sup> of land, so why would not he feel thirsty on a full-blown afternoon? Kedar Mukherjee is conscientious as he asks for water at Bauri household. Standing at the door he calls out, “Hey woman! Where are you? Give me little bit of water to drink.” He has rice at home, therefore enters Shana Bauri’s house. He has rice; hence the wife’s mother-in-law arrives home right at that moment. She threatens the wife, “Your mother-in-law is not at home and on this afternoon you have got a *Babu*<sup>9</sup> into the house and now shedding crocodile tears!” We don’t know such immoralities, why? He has rice; for consumption, to sell and so the entire household is swept away by Kador’s waves. (145)

Shana assaults his mother in a fit of rage while Sukhi goes to her parent’s house only to return again. However, Samaresh Basu does not mention her leaving for the third time – probably she leaves after another similar incident. During Sukhi’s absence, Shana realizes that the grave social depravations would never let him experience a normal conjugal life. He understands that, at the pretext of token material benefits like Kedar giving Shana’s mother money to drink and enjoy during festivities (146), they will face ceaseless exploitation. Hence, when Roy, Banerjee and Ganguly try to persuade him to fetch Sukhi back, he refuses. But after they leave for Jamshedpur, he decides to bring her back and annihilate Kedar. He mutters to himself “... still will bring the wife back, why? But then Kedar would die at Shana Bauri’s hands, you all don’t understand” (148). Sukhi and other Bauri women stare perennially at the cultural risk of being exploited by local powerful Bengali men. Shana tells Sundor Ray, “Your sons and grandsons lurk around in Bauri locality, salivating on seeing women just like kids do on seeing ripe fruits in others’ yards” (143).

Shana’s anger and violence upon his mother and wife display the tribal cultural archetype of impulsive existence and absorption of patriarchal chauvinism of caste society within the liberal tribal society<sup>10</sup>. Shana realizes the unevenness that constitutes his community’s existence against the Bengali hegemonic community. Basu writes, “Three Bauri members were lynched to death in the last one fifty years to maintain the social respectability of the *Babus*” (147). Basu weaves accounts of individual and collective exploitation into the text in the form of Shana’s questions and demands for ethical explanations. Shana’s most striking question comes almost at the end of the journey when he suddenly and vehemently asks the three, “There were so many sacrifices before Mother Goddess, then why couldn’t you sacrifice Kedar the goat?” (146). The question encompasses a violent but layered structure of thought that consists of first, bestializing Kedar Mukherjee; and second, seeking his blood as a sacrificial rite steeped in punitive moral retribution for his actions. It completes Shana’s transformation leading to the resolution of annihilating Kedar Mukherjee.

Shana Bauri’s evolution occurs through his *kawthokawta*, a Bengali oral episodic narrative of popular myths. He narrates certain episodes to the Bengali characters and himself, to confront and negotiate with the temporal-social realities. They appear ironical and paradoxical in the context of the optimism surrounding India’s recent independence<sup>11</sup>. Shana’s advocacy of a reversal in the traditional violence perpetrated on Bauris gravitates towards a modern sensibility wherein the subjugated *adivasi* individual faced with the stark conditions of

<sup>8</sup> An Indian unit of measuring land where 1 acre = 1.6 *bighas*.

<sup>9</sup> The culturally specific term refers to a respectable individual but sometimes can be used in a pejorative sense also.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the socio-cultural changes in *adivasi* life, see VirginiusXaxa. *State, Society, and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India* (2008).

<sup>11</sup> For more on counter narrative to the positive and optimist thoughts surrounding the moment of India’s independence in 1947, see Aamir R. Mufti. “A Greater Story-writer than God: Genre, Gender and Minority in Late Colonial India”. *Subaltern Studies Volume 11* (2001). 1-36. I am indebted to Dr. M. Parthasarathi for drawing my attention to this article.

existence, determines to draw resistance and initiate a social transformation through acts of annihilation.

### 3 Two strands of *Adivasi* subjectivity and identity

*Bikram Hembrom* and *Shana Baurir Kawthokawta* capture the radically different *adivasi* experiences in India from colonial times to the years immediately succeeding 1947 which contribute towards the formation of separate strands of *adivasi* subjectivity.

The appearances of Bikram Hembrom and Shana Bauri are starkly contrasting. Contrary to Bikram, Shana has “Pitch dark complexion and a well sculpted body, thick lips and curly hair. His eyes were red, similar to those of a cuckoo. Clad in a thin loin cloth and a separate old cloth around his shoulders ...” (140). Shana’s ‘faceless’ image recurs throughout – “one couldn’t see his face” (141), “the face couldn’t be seen” (142). Shana “... did not require light. He saw clearly in the dark” (143). The burden of the luggage reduces Shana to a bodily existence where “it was only his face that remained invisible” (145). Shana is carrying a metaphorical weight – a socio-cultural burden that bears and breeds persistent exploitation. The ‘facelessness’ could be argued to constitute a ‘lack’ of an agency for him. However, this historically produced ‘lack’ through the cycle of continuous exploitation and perennial darkness, actually constitutes his agency – the subjective human identity. Contrastingly, ideas of Western enlightenment, Christian missionary religiosity and education provide the necessary impetus to Bikram’s agency formation. Thus, two separate strands of subjectivities evolve from the radically disparate experiences of the two protagonists.

### 4 Conclusion: Beyond the *Adivasi*

The different subjectivities of Bikram Hembrom and Shana Bauri reflect the complex dissimilar experiences of *adivasi* communities in India. Beyond the question of *adivasi* experience, subjectivity and identity, it is interesting to look at the ways in which the writers perceive the *adivasi* social group. Banaphool’s etching of Bikram Hembrom as a fluent Bengali speaker with an urban diction indicate the narrator’s perception of Bikram as similar to him and the writer’s desire to see the Santhals integrated with the society and nation at large. However, Samaresh Basu’s characterization of Shana Bauri recognizes the deep inequalities, deprivations and exploitations to which Bauris are subjected. Shana’s literary representation highlights the gulf between the powerful-dominant social groups on the one hand and the powerless-subjugated communities on the other. The socio-cultural differences and unequal power equation between Shana and upper caste Bengali community heavily limit him and his kin from access to the social, political and state institutions through which the nation regularly functions. *Shana Baurir Kawthokawta* concludes with a desire for a reversal of this unequal history.

The strand of *adivasi* subjectivity encapsulated in *Shana Baurir Kawthokawta* in a nascent form is further explored in certain literary works of Mahasweta Devi and Samaresh Basu himself during the seventies and eighties. While the *adivasi* experience and subjectivities in India have undergone significant changes with time and historical developments, the ideas of assimilation-integration and difference-autonomy explored in *Bikram Hembrom* and *Shana Baurir Kawthokawta* are still relevant. Moreover, Bikram Hembrom and Shana Bauri constitute the two fundamental strands of *adivasi* subjectivity and identity. Other contemporary subjective positions and identities emerge from the interaction of these strands with specific historical and temporal conditions.

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