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Title: *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey: A Novel*

Author: Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

Publisher: Aleph Book Company

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Reviewed by:
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Independent Scholar.

The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey is a debut novel of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. His style is easy, straightforward and fascinating. The story moves forward and backward in time with fluidity. This is a story about the place Kadamdihi with no kadam trees. It is the story about “the strongest woman of Kadamdihi” who suffers from a mysterious ailment. Though mystery of Rupi’s ailment is never disclosed, the story reveals many facets of the lives of the Santhal people and their culture. The novel is bold in depicting the supernatural beliefs and rituals of the tribal community in a matter of fact manner. It narrates the family history of Baskeys which is scandalous, ridden with flaws and incomprehensible to the people of the village. Their family issues are the topic of the gossips going around in the village. The legacy that the patriarch Somai-haram leaves for the family is deftly dismantled piece-by-piece and the nonchalance of each member towards the consequences of their acts is disturbing. Showing a lack of a moral compass that defines a society is not the aim of the author here but bringing a revelation to the readers far-removed from the culture and beliefs of these tribes about a completely different social setup, yet the same intricate feelings of the heart and the mind that binds them together.

Shekhar has the art of telling a beautiful story that weaves the lives across generations and the gradual changes that seep in from external influences. The practice of dhani-bidya by women in the village is as real as the fact that men keep women outside their homes. The question here is not about locating the genuineness of their beliefs in witches and witchcraft or how likely a woman can give mysterious ailment to her rival in love but how far a woman can go to get something she wants. What agency do women have in dealing with a situation that discomforts them? Rupi feigns ignorance till the end and does nothing to get her husband and son back. In short, she does not take up witchcraft to remove the spell that Gurubari has placed on Sido and Jaipal. She lays suffering in bed and pretends nothing has happened.

Every doctor she visits fails to diagnose any disease in Rupi's body and suggest it is all in her mind. Every person in village knows that it is the doing of Gurubari who flourishes while Rupi withers away like "an alakajari vine which engulfs the tallest, greenest trees of the forest and sucks their hearts out". But the real ailment, about which there is nothing mysterious, is that Rupi fails to empower herself. She does not fight for what belongs to her. Unlike Dulari, who dispenses with her husband's keep with haste, Rupi does not resort to any method at all to get her husband back. "...though Rupi is desperate to protest the hold Gurubari has on her family, she cannot. For every time she tries, she is overcome by an insurmountable enervation." She believes that she will get her health back somehow which does not happen. She never fully recovers from her ailment because she never finds empowerment though everything settles by the end. The life comes full circle with the entry of Bishu's wife Rupali who is strong headed and does not cow down to Dulari's rebukes and interruptions. Yet Rupi remains an observant in the background. She is not the heroine of Shekhar's novel but merely a case to study the Santhal women and their positions in society.

So how does Shekhar depict the dynamics of gender roles in Santhal society? In the battle between good and evil who gets the final victory? What is the importance of religion and how faith defines the reality that people live out? How societies cope with the powerful women? These are some of the questions that outline the intent of the novel. At the core of the novel is the practice of dhani-bidya by women of the society. The women are either the perpetrators or the victims of witchcraft. The reason is either the man or the child. The secret of witches is no secret in the village and yet the witches are not put at stake because the villagers believe they will bring their own downfall. There is a blind-faith in the people in natural justice. They strongly believe that good shall eventually overcome evil. And the consequences of greed and overreaching are bound to be monumental failure. Same is the case with Rupi; she does not fight against the evil ways of Gurubari but waits patiently for things to take their course. The people in Kadamdihi socially ostracize such women who cast evil eyes on others but Sowvendra Shekhar is not so harsh in dealing with these women who believe in action. Dulari, for instance, is appreciated for her will to get rid of her husband's lover. If for an instance, it is believed that the society tags the witches for their strange ways and prosperity, it does not stand the test of women confessing themselves to be witches. The dreams, hallucinations could easily be a part of Rupi's agitated mental state and stories feed her delusions but as the dhanis are a manifestation of women's unfulfilled desires so is Rupi's ailment. At one time, even Rupi is declared to be a witch after she sees hallucinations at the memorial ground near the railway station. With limited understanding of bodily functions, Santhals take refuge in their religion and supernatural explanations. And Sowvendra Shekhar being a physician himself has brought out the true picture of Santhal life without adulterating it with his understanding of modern science and medicine.

Besides this, there is political struggle to get a separate Jharkhand state. There are references to Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and other such parties which take up the political stage of Santhal identity. It only works to highlight how far removed these movements are from the daily struggles of the tribes. The bus ride that Rupi and Sido take to go to Nitra has various ores and mines as the stops like Jadugora, Rakha Mines, etc. bringing attention to the

mindless extraction of minerals that crowd the landscape of Jharkhand. But this is not a story about this issue, which Shekhar deals better in his next novel *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2016) but about the very ordinary lives of Santhals who lead an extraordinary reality. Their own concerns weigh so heavily on their chests (like a dahni) that they do not have time to deal with larger ones. The ordinariness of the story hits hard with outsized problems. Men are often drowned in debauchery or out at work or simply carrying disability in the body but the women are fearless. Be it Putki who has great adventures during her youth, or it is Della who hits the spirit in her house with indomitable character. Gurubari arises as the strongest witch of them all, rescuing her influence on Sido from an ojha by arising naked from behind Sido when he is talking to the ojha. Such powerful images which dazzle the characters in the novel and the readers have a formidable effect. The writing of Sowvendra Shekhar fascinates as well as scares with its disproportionate rendering of reality. The Santhal culture offers an insightful study and ensures a joyful read. The book was shortlisted for The Hindu Prize 2014 and as the author mentioned in an interview to The Hindu newspaper more and better work is now expected from him.