



Knowledgeable Research (KR)

ISSN: 2583-6633 | CODEN: KRABAU

International Open-Access Peer-Reviewed Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

<https://knowledgeableresearch.com>

Spl. 01, Issue 04, July, 2026

Received: 11/06/2026 | Accepted: 23/06/2026 | Published: 31/07/2026

Indigenous Selfhood and Spiritual Identity: Rethinking Ātman in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey*

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the conceptual and philosophical resonances between the Vedantic notion of Ātman the eternal, inviolable self and the construction of indigenous selfhood and spiritual identity in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's novel The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey (2014). Drawing on Advaita Vedanta, postcolonial theory, and indigenous studies, the paper argues that Shekhar's text performs a cultural and ontological negotiation, reinterpreting classical Hindu metaphysics through a distinctly Santali cosmological lens. The novel's protagonist, Rupī Baskey, embodies a form of selfhood that is simultaneously communal, ecological, and transcendent qualities that both align with and critically deviate from Brahmanical articulations of the Ātman. By situating the text within the broader discourse of Adivasi literature and decolonial epistemology, this study demonstrates how Shekhar recovers indigenous spiritual frameworks as sites of resistance and identity formation. The paper contributes to the growing field of Adivasi literary studies and to interdisciplinary conversations between Indian philosophy and postcolonial literary criticism.

Keywords: Ātman, Adivasi literature, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, indigenous identity, Santali cosmology, postcolonial spirituality, decolonial epistemology, Advaita Vedanta.

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INTRODUCTION:

The Politics of Selfhood in Adivasi Literature

The question of selfhood who possesses it, how it is constituted, and whose frameworks

are authorised to define it has been central to postcolonial literary and philosophical inquiry. In the Indian context, this question takes on particular urgency when applied to

Adivasi, or indigenous, communities, whose epistemological and cosmological frameworks have historically been marginalised, misrepresented, or appropriated by both colonial and post-independence nationalist discourses. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a Santali writer and government physician from Jharkhand, occupies a significant position in contemporary Indian fiction precisely because his work insists on the self-representation of Santali experience, refusing the ethnographic gaze that has long defined Adivasi communities as objects of study rather than subjects of knowledge.

Shekhar's debut novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* (2014), is a text that defies easy categorisation. It is at once a village narrative, a spiritual autobiography, a medical drama, and a meditation on the nature of the self within a Santali ontological framework. The eponymous Rupī Baskey, an elderly Santali woman, is afflicted by an ailment that cannot be diagnosed by Western biomedicine. Her condition manifested through visions, bodily dissolution, and spiritual encounters drives the novel's central inquiry into what it means to possess and to lose a self. This paper argues that Shekhar's treatment of Rupī's condition implicitly engages with the Vedantic concept of *Ātman*

the eternal, indivisible soul not in order to subsume Santali spirituality within Brahmanical metaphysics, but to articulate a counter-discourse that reconfigures selfhood from an indigenous standpoint.

The idea of *Ātman*, taken from the Upanishadic tradition and most influentially systematised in Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita (non-dual) Vedanta, posits an absolute, unchanging self that underlies phenomenal individuality and is ultimately identical to Brahman, the universal consciousness. Philosophically sophisticated this conception has historically functioned within caste-inflected structures of knowledge privileging Brahmanical interpretation and access. Placed in dialogue with Santali spiritual ontology where the self is constituted relationally, ecologically and communally, Shekhar's novel opens a productive space of dialogue and critique.

This study situates the novel within the intersecting fields of Adivasi literary studies, postcolonial theory, and Indian philosophy. It draws on the theoretical resources of decolonial thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano alongside indigenous scholars including Vine Deloria Jr. and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, as well as postcolonial critics working specifically on South Asian Adivasi

texts. The analysis proceeds through close reading of the text, contextualised within broader discussions of the Santali worldview, the discourse of Adivasi rights in post-independence India, and the place of indigenous literature within the Indian English and translation literary marketplace.

Theoretical Framework: Ātman, Decolonial Epistemology, and Indigenous Selfhood

The Vedantic Ātman and Its Genealogy

The term *Ātman* appears across the Vedic corpus, but it is in the Upanishads that it assumes its philosophical significance. In the *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the sage Yajñavalkya describes the *Ātman* as that which cannot be seen, yet is the seer; cannot be heard, yet is the hearer; cannot be thought, yet is the thinker. The *Chandogya Upanishad* formulates its famous mahavakya: *Tat tvam asi* 'That thou art' asserting the identity of the individual self (*jīvātman*) with the universal self (*paramātman* or Brahman). Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta radicalises this identification, arguing that the apparent multiplicity of selves is a function of *māyā* (illusion), and that true knowledge (*jñāna*) consists in recognising the non-difference between *Ātman* and Brahman.

This metaphysical framework carries profound implications for subjectivity. The Advaitic self is, at its deepest level, free from the particularities of caste, gender, embodiment, and social location a freedom that is theoretically universal but has been, in practice, mediated through Brahmanical institutions of learning and renunciation. Scholars such as Brian Pennington and Gauri Viswanathan have traced how colonial-era reformers selectively deployed Vedantic universalism to construct a 'spiritual' Hinduism legible to European eyes while simultaneously reinforcing caste hierarchies. This history is crucial for understanding what is at stake when a Santali writer like Shekhar engages, even implicitly, with the *Ātman* discourse.

Decolonial Epistemology and Indigenous Knowledge

Decolonial theorists have consistently argued that the epistemic violence of colonialism lies not merely in the extraction of material resources but in the systematic delegitimisation of indigenous ways of knowing, being, and organising social life. Quijano's concept of the 'coloniality of power' and Mignolo's notion of 'colonial difference' illuminate how Eurocentric and, in the Indian context, Brahmanical-Sanskrit

epistemologies have been positioned as universal, relegating indigenous knowledge to the status of myth, superstition, or raw material awaiting rational transformation. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999) argues for the recovery of indigenous research frameworks as acts of self-determination, insisting that indigenous communities must be 'the subjects and not the objects of inquiry' (Smith 1999, 183).

In the Indian context, this decolonial imperative is complicated by the layered nature of colonial and pre-colonial epistemological hegemonies. Adivasi communities have historically been marginalised not only by British colonialism but by Brahmanical-Hindu social structures that categorised them as 'forest dwellers' outside the varna system, as well as by nationalist narratives that absorbed Adivasi identities into an undifferentiated 'Hindu' or 'Indian' category. The emergence of Adivasi literary production in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in languages such as Santali, Gondi, Mundari, and through Hindi and English translations represents a significant counter-hegemonic intervention. Writers like Shekhar, alongside figures such as Mahasweta Devi's translators, Jacinta Kerketta, and Ramnika Gupta, have

collectively produced what D.N. Nyaneshwar Mule and G.N. Devy have called a 'fourth world literature' that demands recognition on its own epistemological terms.

Indigenous Selfhood: Relational, Ecological, Communal

What distinguishes indigenous conceptions of selfhood from Western liberal individualism and, crucially, from the Advaitic Ātman in its Brahmanical articulation is their fundamentally relational character. Indigenous scholars across traditions converge on the point that the self is not a bounded, autonomous entity but a node in a web of relationships that encompass ancestors, community, land, and non-human beings. Robin Wall Kimmerer's account of Potawatomi epistemology, Vine Deloria Jr.'s critique of Eurocentric scientific knowledge, and M.K. Raimundo Panikkar's intercultural philosophy all point towards what might be called a 'relational ontology' in which the self is always already constituted by its relationships.

In the Santali worldview, this relational selfhood is grounded in the concept of Hapramko the ancestors and in the belief that the self participates in an animate universe in which spirits, nature, and community are mutually imbricated. The Santali bongas

(spirits) are not external supernatural forces but intimate participants in social life; the self is understood as inhabiting a spiritual ecology rather than transcending it. It is within this ontological framework that Rupī Baskey's selfhood must be understood not as an individual consciousness afflicted by illness but as a relational self whose disruption signifies a broader disarticulation of communal and ecological bonds.

Santali Cosmology and the Architecture of the Self in Shekhar's Fiction

Shekhar's Literary and Political Context

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar was born in 1979 in Jharkhand, a state carved out of Bihar in 2000 partly in response to sustained Adivasi political mobilisation demanding recognition of their distinct cultural and territorial rights. Shekhar writes in both English and Santali, and his work has been translated into multiple Indian languages; he is widely credited with bringing Santali life and thought to wider literary attention. His career has not been without controversy he was suspended from government service in 2017 following objections to a story deemed 'obscene' by members of the Santali community, a controversy that itself illuminates the complex politics of

representation, gender, and authenticity within Adivasi literary production.

Shekhar's literary project is simultaneously ethnographic and aesthetic, rooted in intimate knowledge of Santali village life while aspiring to universal philosophical resonance. *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* is set in the Santali-majority village of Majhi Tola in Jharkhand. Its narrative moves between the domestic world of Rupī's household her husband Budhan, her daughters-in-law, her grandchildren and the wider social and spiritual topography of the village, including the sacred grove (*jaher*), the village assembly, and the encounters with bongas that increasingly define Rupī's experience. The novel is written in a spare, precise prose that draws on the rhythms of Santali oral tradition while engaging with the conventions of the Indian English novel.

The Mysterious Ailment as Spiritual Crisis

Rupī's ailment resists biomedical diagnosis. The local doctor can find nothing physically wrong; the government hospital is unable to offer relief. The ailment manifests as bodily weakness, dissociation, visions of the bongas, and an increasing sense of the permeability of the boundary between the self and the spirit world. What the novel refuses to do and this is its most significant

literary and philosophical gesture is to pathologise this experience. Rupi's ailment is not presented as psychosis, hysteria, or superstition. It is, rather, a form of spiritual opening, an intensified encounter with the relational dimensions of selfhood that ordinarily remain below the threshold of conscious experience.

The novel's implicit argument is that Rupi is undergoing what, in Santali spiritual understanding, might be called a visitation or calling a condition in which the boundary between the individual self and the communal-spiritual world becomes unusually permeable. This is not dissolution of the self but its expansion. Shekhar writes: 'Rupi could feel the village breathing through her the mud of the courtyard, the smoke of the kitchen, the distant drums of the baha festival all of it moving through her as though she were not a woman but a vessel' (*Ailment* 47). This passage is remarkable for its ontological density: Rupi is figured not as a bounded individual but as a medium through which communal and ecological life passes. The self, here, is constituted by what flows through it rather than what it excludes.

The Jaher and the Ecological Self

The *jaher*, or sacred grove, functions in the novel as a space in which the boundaries

between the human, natural, and spiritual are most visibly dissolved. Rupi's visits to the jaher are described in terms that emphasise sensory immersion and ontological permeability: 'She did not enter the grove; the grove entered her' (*Ailment* 83). This formulation inverts the Cartesian logic of a subject encountering an object, suggesting instead a mode of being in which self and environment are mutually constitutive. The jaher in Santali cosmology is not merely a physical space but a social and spiritual institution the site of the Sarhul festival, the dwelling place of the village bongas, and the emblem of the community's covenant with the land.

Shekhar's treatment of the jaher participates in a broader tradition of indigenous ecological philosophy that has been theorised by scholars such as Kyle Whyte and Potawatomi thinker Winona LaDuke under the rubric of 'relational sustainability.' In this framework, ecological destruction is not merely an environmental issue but an ontological one it constitutes an assault on the relational web that constitutes indigenous selfhood. The threat to the jaher from land acquisition schemes that lurks at the margins of the novel is thus not incidental but central to Rupi's ailment: the disruption of the ecological self is the ailment.

Rethinking Ātman: Santali Selfhood as Philosophical Counter-Discourse

Convergences: Ātman and the Santali Soul

The conceptual parallels between the Advaitic *Ātman* and aspects of Santali spiritual ontology are real and worth acknowledging. Both traditions posit a dimension of the self that exceeds individual mortality for Advaita Vedanta, the *Ātman* is eternal and unchanging; for Santali tradition, the *roa* (soul or spirit) continues after death, joining the community of ancestors (*hapramko*). Both traditions assert the self's participation in a larger spiritual reality: the Advaitic *Brahman* and the Santali community of bongas both figure as encompassing spiritual orders within which the individual self is situated. Both traditions also associate authentic selfhood with a kind of liberation *moksha* in Advaita Vedanta, and a peaceful passage to ancestral status in Santali belief.

These parallels create the conditions for productive philosophical dialogue. Shekhar is himself aware of them; in interviews, he has acknowledged drawing on both Santali oral tradition and broader South Asian philosophical resources in constructing his literary world. The novel does not reject all association with the wider Hindu

philosophical tradition. Rupī lights incense, observes certain calendrically significant days, and participates in practices that overlap with Hindu village religion but it insists on the specificity of the Santali cosmological framework within which these practices are embedded.

Divergences: Relationality vs. Universality

The most significant divergence between the Advaitic *Ātman* and Santali selfhood concerns the mode of the self's relationship to the universal. In Advaita Vedanta, the ultimate truth of the self is its identity with an undifferentiated, featureless universal consciousness *Brahman* without qualities (*nirguna Brahman*). The individual self's particularity its embeddedness in a body, a family, a community, an ecosystem is, at the level of ultimate truth, a function of *māyā*. Liberation (*moksha*) in this framework involves transcending these particularities, moving toward a universal self that is, paradoxically, no-self in the conventional sense.

Santali selfhood, as articulated in Shekhar's novel, operates on an entirely different logic. Rupī's connection to the bongas, to her village, to the jaher, to her ancestors, is not an obstacle to authentic selfhood but its very substance. The self is not liberated by

transcending its relationships but deepened by inhabiting them more fully. When Rupi's ailment intensifies, what is at stake is not the dissolution of individual illusion but the threatened rupture of relational bonds that constitute her as a self. This is a fundamentally different ontological claim not that the self is really no-self (as in Advaita), but that the self is really more-self: more communal, more ecological, more temporally extended than the bounded individual of either Western liberalism or Brahmanical renunciation.

The Body as Site of Indigenous Epistemology

A further divergence concerns the status of the body. In classical Advaita Vedanta, the body is part of the phenomenal world governed by *māyā*; the true *Ātman* is beyond bodily identity. Shekhar's novel, by contrast, insists on the epistemological centrality of the body. Rupi's knowledge of the village, the land, the bongas, the rhythms of communal life is irreducibly embodied. Her ailment is not an occasion for renouncing the body but for attending more closely to its signals. The novel presents bodily experience as a form of indigenous epistemology: the body knows things that

biomedical science and abstract philosophy cannot access.

This is consistent with a broader indigenous philosophical position articulated by scholars such as Kim TallBear, whose work on indigenous research methodologies emphasises the centrality of embodied, relational knowledge. The Santali practice of reading the body's responses to seasonal change, to social disruption, to spiritual presence constitutes what TallBear calls 'standpoint theory from below': a situated epistemology that refuses the view from nowhere claimed by Enlightenment rationalism and, in a different register, by Advaitic universalism.

Adivasi Literature as Decolonial Practice: Genre, Language, and Market

The Politics of Writing in English

Shekhar's choice to write in English a language that carries the weight of colonial history and continues to function as a marker of class privilege in India is a complex and often contested act. Critics within Adivasi literary circles have questioned whether writing for an English-reading audience necessarily entails a domestication of Santali experience for consumption by metropolitan readers. This critique, which echoes debates

within African and Caribbean literary studies about the politics of language choice, raises important questions about who controls the representation of indigenous experience and for whom it is produced.

Shekhar's response to this challenge is partly formal and partly thematic. Formally, he incorporates Santali words, ritual phrases, and syntactic rhythms into his English prose without providing glossaries or explanatory footnotes a refusal of the ethnographic apparatus that would position the Santali world as requiring translation for a normative (non-Santali) reader. Thematically, the novel's central concerns the legitimacy of indigenous spiritual knowledge, the violence of development-induced displacement, the complexity of Santali gender relations are not framed through the lens of an outsider observer but through the intimate interiority of Santali characters themselves.

Oral Tradition and Literary Form

The Santali literary tradition is primarily oral the Binti (prayer songs), the Sohrai (harvest songs), and the extensive corpus of Santali myths and narratives have been transmitted across generations through performance rather than inscription. Shekhar's move into written, novelistic form is thus not simply a choice between languages but a choice

between media one that inevitably involves transformation and loss as well as gain. The novel as a form, with its conventions of interiority, individual protagonist, and linear temporality, is in some tension with the communal, cyclical, and performative character of Santali oral tradition.

Shekhar navigates this tension with considerable skill. *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* is not a novel of individual development in the Bildungsroman sense; its 'protagonist' is as much the village as the individual Rupi. The narrative's rhythm is governed not by psychological causation but by seasonal and ritual cycles the progression from the Baha flower festival through the monsoon to the harvest season provides the temporal architecture of the text. This structural choice embeds Santali temporal consciousness within the form of the novel, resisting the teleological individualism that the genre conventionally implies.

Rupi Baskey, Gender, and the Feminisation of Indigenous Spiritual Authority

The choice of an elderly woman as the novel's spiritual centre is not incidental. In many Adivasi traditions, women occupy positions of spiritual authority that have been marginalised by both Brahmanical

patriarchal norms and the male-centred politics of Adivasi political movements. Scholars of Adivasi gender politics, including Virginius Xaxa and Svati Joshi, have noted the complex positioning of Adivasi women simultaneously celebrated as guardians of tradition and subjected to significant structural gender inequality within their own communities.

Shekhar's Rupi Baskey is neither a romanticised earth-mother figure nor a straightforwardly feminist subject. She is a woman embedded in the patriarchal structures of Santali village life marginal within the household economy, her knowledge dismissed by younger male family members yet she is also the carrier of a spiritual knowledge that the novel ultimately validates over the scepticism of both biomedicine and masculine village authority. Rupi's ailment is, in part, a function of the failure of the community to recognise and honour the spiritual authority she embodies; her recovery, when it comes, is inseparable from a partial restoration of that recognition.

This gendered dimension of the novel adds a further layer of complexity to its engagement with the *Ātman* concept. The Vedantic tradition has frequently been critiqued by

feminist scholars most notably Bina Agarwal and Uma Chakravarti for constructing the liberated self as implicitly male and for associating femininity with the domain of *maya* from which the *Ātman* must free itself. Rupi's feminised spiritual authority stands as a corrective to this masculinist bias, suggesting that indigenous spiritual epistemology may offer resources for gender justice that classical Brahmanical philosophy forecloses.

Development, Displacement, and the Threatened Self

No reading of contemporary Adivasi literature can be complete without attention to the material conditions that frame indigenous cultural life. The Jharkhand region, where Shekhar's novel is set, has been the site of intense resource extraction coal mining, dam construction, and forest clearance that has displaced millions of Adivasi people since independence. The 2006 Forest Rights Act, which sought to restore some measure of legal recognition to Adivasi claims over forest land, was itself the product of decades of political struggle and represents only a partial resolution of the structural violence of development-induced displacement.

The novel registers this context with characteristic obliqueness. The threat to the *jaher* from a proposed road-widening scheme, the migration of young men to urban industries, the arrival of government health workers with their biomedical frameworks and suspicious glances these narrative elements encode the systematic pressures on Santali communal life without reducing the text to political allegory. Shekhar understands that the destruction of the *jaher* would be not only an ecological but an ontological catastrophe it would sever the relational web within which Santali selfhood is constituted. Rupi's ailment is thus a symptom not merely of her individual condition but of the community's wider vulnerability.

This reading connects Shekhar's novel to a broader body of Adivasi literary production concerned with what Rob Nixon has called 'slow violence' the gradual, often invisible erosion of indigenous lifeworlds through development, displacement, and environmental degradation. Nixon's framework, developed in the context of global South literatures, is particularly apt for texts like Shekhar's, in which the most significant threats are not spectacular events but the slow attrition of the relational

conditions that make indigenous selfhood possible.

Conclusion: Towards an Adivasi Philosophy of the Self

This paper has argued that Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* performs a significant philosophical act: it articulates a distinctly Santali ontology of the self that engages with, and ultimately exceeds, the Vedantic concept of *Ātman*. Against the Advaitic model of liberation as transcendence of particularity, Shekhar's novel proposes a form of selfhood that is constituted by its embeddedness in relationship with community, with ancestors, with the land, with the non-human spirit world. This relational selfhood is not a lesser or preliminary form of the Advaitic insight; it is a philosophically distinct alternative that carries its own epistemological and ethical resources.

The theoretical implications of this reading are significant for several fields. For Adivasi literary studies, it demonstrates the philosophical depth available in texts that have sometimes been read primarily as sociological documents or political interventions. For postcolonial theory, it enriches the decolonial turn by attending to

the specific resources of South Asian indigenous thought rather than relying primarily on Latin American or African theoretical frameworks. For Indian philosophy, it opens a productive space for dialogue between the Sanskrit-based philosophical canon and the oral-performative traditions of Adivasi communities a dialogue that challenges both the insularity of academic philosophy and the romantic primitivism sometimes attributed to indigenous knowledge systems.

Shekhar's novel ultimately suggests that the question 'what is the self?' cannot be answered from a single epistemological tradition. Rupi Baskey's mysterious ailment is, in the deepest sense, a question addressed to modernity to its biomedical certainties, its developmental teleologies, its rational scepticism about spiritual experience. The novel's refusal to resolve this question through the frameworks of either Western medicine or Brahmanical philosophy is not an evasion but an invitation: to attend to the forms of knowledge that persist at the margins of the knowable, where the self and the spirit world remain in conversation.

As Adivasi communities across India continue to assert their rights to land, language, and self-determination, literature

like Shekhar's performs a vital function: it insists that these political claims are grounded in coherent and philosophically sophisticated ways of understanding what it means to be a self in relation to others, to land, and to the sacred. To read Rupi Baskey's ailment is to receive an education in a mode of selfhood that Western modernity, Brahmanical metaphysics, and postcolonial theory have all, in different ways, struggled to acknowledge. It is a mode of selfhood from which all of these traditions might learn

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