



Voicing The Woes of The Tribals in The Works of Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract: - Mahasweta Devi is a great name in the field of Tribals literature. She is the only writer among Indian writers in English who could prove her sympathy and kindness towards the tribals. Through, Devi was born and brought up in a family that produced scholars and sympathetic people. During her childhood and schooling days, she made wonders by proving herself a great scholar. After her marriage, she blossomed into a professional writer by writing on the topic of sorrows and sufferings by traveling to the areas of tribals and living with them to wipe their tears who were downtrodden and marginalized. These tribals whose stories Devi has taken into living record made Devi a famous and reputed writer of her time and among her contemporaries. She has been fully dedicated to the tribals who were voiceless or could not speak in their favor of them before the rich and zamindars. These people were so poor, if they took money on loan, could never recover, as the interest rate was so high and under such conditions, they were to work at the big forms of the money lenders and their wives were to work at the homes of the rich and landlords.

Keywords: - Equality, mainstream, suppression, marginalization, woeful tale, hunting, bond labor, etc.

Introduction: - The tribals, whose voice Devi has become, were the voiceless tribals who never stood against their suppression, oppression, and injustice. These people were to work as bonded laborers at the farms of moneylenders and upper-caste people. These people were born to be tortured, oppressed, and suppressed. Devi, the real voice of these voiceless persons, saw all these things happening with her own eyes and noticed that the people are

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fighting against the British government to bring equality in the distribution of land and property, and also with the society to bring equality so that sense of inferiority complex might be rooted out. The history of the woes and sufferings of the tribals began in India during British colonialism. These Britishers have become the chief cause of bringing all the sorrows to the tribals as they interfered in the tribal region with an object to use and exploit the natural resources of the tribals. The British Government, very early, snatched the customary rights of the tribals over land and forests in 1855. The Indian Forest Act of 1935 successively consolidated the power of the imperial Government over forests and emphasized the revenue field aspects and the resources requirement of the British military, commercial and industrial sectors. Under the Forest Conservation Act (1980), The Wild Life Act (1972), “The Government has the sovereign right to evict people for undefined public interest or larger interest but the affected people do not have the right to question the decision of the Government on forceable evictions” (ACHR, 9). This has brought a bad effect on the establishment and rehabilitation of the tribals. The question arises of their livelihood and residence. This act of the government has brought these tribals on the road that Vandana Gupta asserts in *Mahasweta Devi: A Critical Reading* in the following words:

Indian independence and political freedom didn't coincide with a liberation of the socio-economic structure of its colonial bearings. In the absence of thorough land reforms, a land system that was feudal in its fundamentals stayed put and flourished. A feudal land system matured and sustained a feudal value system which was anti-tribals, anti-woman, anti-poor, and anti-tiller; with such feudal forces at the helm of its power positions, the state simply sidetracked the issue of land reforms. (P. 32)

Mahasweta Devi, a keen observer of the sorrows and sufferings of tribals, depicts the ill-condition of Shabar tribals in her most celebrated book, *The Hunter*, where she focuses on the oldest nomadic forest tribes of India. These tribes never took agriculture as their business and fully depended on forest resources. They depended on the hunting of wild animals and when these tribes were disowned from the forest, they became unemployed. The tribes comprise the Santhals or Mundra. This was not enough for the British government to disown

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the tribes from the forest but declared them as 'criminal tribes'. *The Book of Hunter* is not the first book ever written which tells the history of the tribals but others also which have focus upon the historical background of the tribals among the tribes like – the Lodhas, Kherias, and Shabars that were targeted by the then Government of India.

It is to be noted here that the forests were the only source of income for these tribals; the sorrows and sufferings of livelihood took over them as they could not go hunting. They had a belief that the forests provide a chief source of income as the other tribe Mukunda was given the right to worship and practice agriculture which is what Kalya tells Mukunda:

We live in the lap of the jungle, Haven't you seen Chandir Bon from afar?..... Did you or I make up the way things are? The goddess Abhayachandi has given you Puja for work, books, a granary, and a cowshed, while she gave us the jungle.

We're Shabars, you hear, children of the jungle. (*The Book of the Hunter*, 52)

Their existence is freshly endangered. To survive they must mingle in the mainstream, where their social position will be on the ground floor and their sense of ethnic being will no longer be distinct. Yet there is no liberation for them if they hang on with their teeth to the hillside of Pirtha, their land and their soil have turned to dust and blown away in the wind. Who can catch dust motes from the wind and compose a village, forest, and field? (*Imaginary Maps*, 181)

Mahasweta Devi brings into light the miserable living condition of the Nagesia tribals who have nothing to eat which means they live from the hand-to mouth. Though the place gets periodical rainfall, the area is by nature deprived of all the sources of water but they are having a man-made drought in their lot. This is the chief reason these people reaching on the verge of starvation and poverty. In his lament to Puran, the tribal boy Shanker speaks of their history, even when they lead simple yet self-sufficient lives based on the sacred bonds between the earth and its inhabitants both human and non-human:

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Once there was forest, hill, river and us. We had villages, homes, land, and ourselves. In our fields, we grew rice, kudo, kurta, and soma, we lived. Then there was a game to hunt. It rained, peacocks danced, and we lived. It rained, peacocks danced we lived. People grew, the community grew, and some of us moved to a distance. We asked the earth's permission, we are setting down stakes to build a roof settling land to grow crops.....we worshipped the tree that was the spirit of our village. Then we lived, only us. (*The imaginary maps, 119*)

Mahasweta Devi depicts the present scenario of the tribals of her time. All her major novels and short stories deal with the cultural, socio-historical scene together with the particular issues which were relevant to their lives. She focuses on the tribal belts in and around West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Gujrat also. She adopts the innovative narrative technique of the tribals who were marginalized and suffering from various problems. The first bolt the tribals adopted was the loss of forest and land. She finds the tribals as the oppressed class in India. Mahasweta Devi cites the reasons for land alienation among tribals reaching alarming proportions in the following words:

There are several reasons for this, including the poor level of development among the tribals, lack of literacy and education among them, and their deep-rooted mistrust and fear of the legal system. But the real cause is their class position. India, that is, Bharat doesn't consider them to be an integral part of society. How else can one explain the role played by the dominant section of society, the administration, and the political parties, doing everything within their means to ensure that the tribals do not enjoy any right to which they are entitled (*Dust on the Road, 70*)?

Mahasweta Devi's famous novel *Choti Munda*, which appeared in 1980, translated by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak as *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 2002, comprises all the history culture, and living standards of the tribals in the post-colonial period. The novel expresses the plight of Munda tribals and lower caste Hindus and celebrates their sustained and unrelenting resistance against unscrupulous people who intrude over them and plunder their wealth and

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leave them bloodless. “It proves and uncovers the complex web of socio-economic exchange based on power relations”, “traces the changes; some forced, some welcome, in the daily lives of a marginalized rural community”, and at its heart, “celebrate Chotti, legendary archer, wise and farsighted leader, a proud role model to his young brethren (*Devi* 2002: Jacket).

Mahasweta Devi’s novel *Chotti Munda* opens with the description of the sufferings and woes of Purti Munda who was the ancestor of Chotti Munda and who suffered from the deprivation and discontinuation from the land and culture that Chotti Munda inherits from his parents. When Chotti Munda comes into contact with Dhani, an associate of Birsa Bhagwan and known as the mysterious old Munda archer he adds another ‘new and important story’ to Chotti’s life (p,8). Chotti’s association with Dhani results in making him a part of a new (Birsait) epic of Munda life’ resulting in his destiny becoming ‘as enormous and suggestive as that of epic heroes’ (p, 9)

Dhani, a depressed class person, feels in his heart as downtrodden as he does not get welcome anywhere. Where ever he goes, he brings the dissatisfaction and desperation of a dispossessed class. He is pained to see his people have lost their self-respect and dignity, working under the ‘Dikus’ in servile conditions. He is unable to see Mundas sweating off for infinite debt repayment. He knows that all the land that belongs to the Mundas and the Oraons, has been already robbed leaving them as beggars. When the tribals of the Munda community have become fed up with the torture and turmoil of the moneylenders and zamindars, they go for a revolution that is led by Chotti Munda whose revolt dramatizes the collective revolt of the subaltern Munda, Oraon, and other Hindu outcastes.

Chotti Munda gets success in organizing the tribals in one thread to make them stand against moneylenders, landlords, and contractors who are fully responsible for exploiting them even after Independence. Chotti Munda does not want to spread violence. He is not in support of it, for example, he saves the Daroga (bodyguard) of his arch-rival Teerathnath. He also doesn’t approve of the Naxal ways. But when innocent tribals are killed, he has no other way except to use his mythical bow and arrow. Chotti’s arrow hurts Haramu, his son and the latter lifts it. Then, Chotti offers himself to the police to be arrested. The sub-divisional

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officer gets up and moves. But at the moment, thousands of tribal hands with bows raised to the skies, shout “No”. The non-tribals also raise their hands in protest.

Mahasweta Devi goes on to depict the story of a villager named Chotti, the only source of all hopes and aspirations of the tribals who were the prey of all the prejudice which was the sole suffering of disenfranchisement. When the prejudice goes on above the tribal life standard, she exclaims:

These people do not find anyone writing about them and they do not have a script.....this is unwritten history. I had to learn it by being with the people. They compose the stream of events into song. Their history is like a big flowing flower going somewhere, not without a destination... tribal over to us and we never tried to explore it, know its mysteries, we only destroyed it. I have to write about tribals I have to document this period which I have experienced because it is going away, it is vanishing. (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, X)

Through these novels, Mahasweta Devi depicts whether the revolution started by Chotti Munda or Bashai Tudu, is the result of exploitation, oppression, and suppression. The text presents a counter socio-economic history that brings into light the socioeconomic determinacy of oppression as engineered by the elite. Almost all the stories of Mahasweta Devi have been focusing upon the characters coming from the unprivileged class and outcastes who fight a hard nut to crack battle in defense of their right to freedom and happiness. Her character Titu Mir is a fine example of those who faced the horrors of the Bengal famine of 1770, which low-class, low caste residents of that place confronted, and among them some of the people died like flies. The face of inhumanity has again been uncovered where the rich people bought rice at a cheap price, “stored it in their silos and sold it at an exorbitant price” (p., 8)

As regards the sequence of the short stories of Mahasweta Devi expressing the woeful condition of Dalits, tribals, and poor, the first one is “Little ones”. The famous short story has

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its setting in Lohri, a village in Ranchi. The land of this area is fully turned into a “deep brownish-red” color of earth that is said to be the colour of dry, congealed blood evoking the images of violence and death in the reader's mind (*“Little ones” Bitter soil, 1*). The story goes on to express how the tribals suffer badly and the government machinery is in full swing to help them, to save them, and to keep away from all the sufferings given by man or nature but it fails everywhere. The inefficiency of the government that Devi describes, reaches its climax. The government could not supply even the food materials that they needed during the drought. When they did not get proper food to eat the entire tribe had been condemned to die. The famine was very horrible to the mothers who found themselves helpless under the situation and left their children with the Christian missionaries hoping that they would manage to keep them alive somehow. Those who died due to the lack of food, their bodies became the prey of the vultures. Due to poverty, it was very difficult for them to survive anymore. Mahasweta Devi once again focuses on the deep gap between popular perceptions and theoretical discourses about the tribals and the bitter reality of the situation of her time:

Never in his life had he seen such an arid, uninhabitable place. The sight of those who came for relief, the nearly naked, shriveled, worm-ridden, swollen-bellied Adivasi men and women, repels him. He had the impression that Adivasi men played the flute and Adivasi women danced with flowers in their hair, singing, as they pranced from hillock to hillock. (p., 2)

The short story *‘Little Ones’* expresses the horrible condition of the Aagariya tribals who are forced to steal food to remain alive. The Adivasis of Jhujhar village which is situated on the outskirts of Palamau in the Reserve Forest is compelled to steal salt for their daily needs in the short story “Salt”. The Adivasis are completely poor, among them Mundas and Oraons are completely rewardless laborers for Uttamchand, the only owner of all the neighboring land.

These tribal's forefathers were already caught in the web of loans taken by them from the landlord and engaged themselves as bonded laborers for the whole of their lives under the

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landlord. Under the social structure of the society, the horrible and hideous condition was that the bonded laborers who were also divided in the 'Varma' system of the Hindu religious doctrine, instead of being a source of help, became a hindrance in human progress. The 'Sudras', people of another caste, were not entitled to have right over property, which means that they could not have property and education not to speak of the choice of occupation. Even today most of the bonded laborers belong to the section of society that Maitreya Ghatak in the 'Introduction' to the *Dust on the Road*, writes about in the following words:

Under the bonded labor system, a person loses his status as free labor and virtually becomes serf labor under a person from whom he has taken a loan, the amount of which may appear to be ridiculously small. He forfeits the right to seek employment elsewhere and the right to sell his labor or the products of his labor in the open market at market value. He or a member of his family has to work under the creditor till the loan is repaid. But the wages are absurdly low and the rate of interest astronomically high. Bonded laborers are not in a position to bargain over their wages and must accept whatever is compulsory for the landlords to give them. So once someone gets into bondage, he remains so till he dies and very often his son or someone in the family has to continue as a bonded labor. (pp., xxiii-xiv)

Conclusion: - As per the overall study of Mahasweta Devi's works we find that Devi's the sole voice of those who were weak and poor. Her cries for the sympathetic and kindness of the tribals and Dalits made her a famous writer on the horizon of Indian writing in English. Devi has been fully devoted to the tribals and having seen the condition of the people she wept bitterly. She did not think whether the Dalits or the tribals lived under such conditions which is fully unsatisfactory.

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