

Mahasweta devi as a socio-political activist: A study

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Abstract: *The present research paper aims to bring out Mahasweta Devi stand different from her contemporary writers is her sincere commitment and strong will-power in supporting the suffering societies, especially the tribal people and women. Tribal people have a different place in Indian society. For many ages, they have been treated unfairly by the despots. Even after independence of India, they are still striving to come to the mainstream of the society. Their voice should be heard. There have been many attempts by many people to hear them. Mahasweta Devi is one of those writers in making such an attempt. The present paper tries to show how Mahasweta Devi through her writing brings the tribal people's unheard voice to the society to be heard.*

Key Words: *Tribal community, despots, Suffering, Tribal women.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Mahasweta Devi – the 36th woman and 35th Indian to receive the Magsaysay award – says, the tribals would be happy to find out about the award which carries with it a cash prize of \$ 50,000. "I get magnificent inspiration from them," she says (qtd. in "Mahasweta").

In seventies she travelled extensively in the rural areas of West Bengal and wrote a sequence of articles in a Bengali daily against the despots of the tribal people ("Mahasweta"). She says, "I will continue to work for the tribals, non-tribal poor and people in distress and write for them" (qtd. in "Mahasweta").

She received much acclaim for works like *Araneyar Adhikar (Rights of the Forest)* based on the life of tribal freedom fighter Birsa Munda, and *Rudali* besides other novels.

"Unlike many Indian writers who prefer to observe the hurly-burly of existence from a lofty distance, Mahasweta Devi—a former lecturer in English literature—is actively involved with human lives" ("Independence has failed"). She has worked with the Kheria-Shabar tribals in Purulia, West Bengal, for over a quarter of a century and speaks of them with passion. Totally committed to their cause, she donated her entire prize money from the Jnanpith and Magsaysay Awards to the organisation she has set up for the tribal ("Independence has failed").

In an interview Mahasweta Devi gives a complete account of her views on and experience with the tribal communities. In fact, her views and experience shared in the interview are also seen in her works. She says (1997),

- About her work – "I am working for denotified tribes. I don't know any other organisation in India that is working for denotified tribes." About tribal's economic status – "The tribe with which I work is landless."
- About tribal's poverty – "To get even one meal is very difficult." About tribal's right – "What I think or you think does not matter, but it is true that the minimum human rights – having roads, livable huts, drinking water; if they have land then irrigation; health, literacy – they should get it."
- About landlord's exploitation – "tribals all over India are getting evicted from their land like anything."
- About tribal's rootlessness – "For any industrial project like dams that come up, tribal land is taken. When they take land, it is never land for land or money for land, so in this condition they become a nomadic migrant mass of people in search of work. Then they cannot retain anything of their own culture because all they are concerned with is *ek waqt ki roti*."
- About what she wants – "I see that they get the minimum human benefit, food, electricity, water, education, work, training for women, for men also, childcare, ICDS centres. Things like that. And since many will not get job opportunities, it is best to make them self-employed by giving various kinds of training."
- About tribal's need – "Security. Security that they are not evicted. Education, at least functional literacy. Drinking water, irrigation water, doctor and medicinal facility, crop training. These things."

Mahasweta Devi has connection with a lot many tribal communities which have been ignored by the government in every respect. Tribal communities have always been soul of her works. *The Hunt*, *Araneyar Adhikar*, *Imaginary Maps*, *Rudali*, „Draupadi“, *Why-Why Girl* etc. are the works depict the life of tribals in India.

The Hunt is a story of the Munda tribe of the Singhbhum, Ranchi, Chaibasa region of the present Jharkhand State. The story is of “Birsas Munda and his revolution, called „Oolgulan,” to establish Munda Raj over the forests and hills, driving out all the usurpers; the British, Zamindars, Jotedars, Bargadars, missionaries and many others. The other middlemen besides the British are named by them as “Dikus” who evicted them from their land, made them labourers without wages, servants without payments, leading them to a servile existence with the help and support of their common master, the British colonizers” (Aju 2014). As Mukhopadhyay Aju observes, their story of creation goes like this:

Once upon a time hills were inhabited by the Mundas, Onraos, Hos, Kols and Santhals. That was millions of moon nights ago when the earth was not so hard; it was then under the direct rules of Haram Asul. He doused the fire of the earth by pouring plenty of water on it. First he created the creatures of water and ordered the fishes to bring soil from the floor of the sea but the waves of the sea carried away all that the fishes brought. Finally, the earth worms excreted soils. And that became the base on which he built everything (“Mahasweta’s ‘Aranyer Adhikar,”). Munda’s belief was to the extent that “When the first child of the Mundas was in its death bed, Haram Asul advised them to worship him by sacrificing white cocks and drawing his image covering the entire doors by coal. That was done and the child was saved. Their first deity was Bongabungi or Bongas, precisely, Singbonga (Aju 2014).

From China grass, Mundas prepared their staple food, Ghato. And they had plenty of fruits, leaves of friendly trees and animals to satisfy their hunger. Boiled rice was a luxury to them. Gradually days were changed for them. They were driven out from their habitat. Mundas often went to churches for the immediate benefit of living with food and shelter but in adverse circumstances they would come out to become what they were. They embraced other religions too but never really became anything but Mundas (Aju 2014).

Chalki while giving birth to a child died. They did not take out the silver ring from her finger so that she could sell the ring to buy food for herself and her child Roa, while in the other world (Aju 2014). “Birsas came back extremely hungry but had no food at home. His parents were starving losing all right to the forest. They had nothing to give. He went to the burial ground, dug up the grave of Chalki and took out the ring. Selling it in a fair he bought rice and offered it to his mother but she refused to eat it, threw it out for fear of raging their deity, the Bongas. He quarreled with his mother, rebuked her for refusing the rice telling that nothing exists like Roa. Roa is not a human being” (Aju 2014). It has no hunger. A human has hunger. “You have thrown it out? Have you?” (qtd. in “Mahasweta’s ‘Aranyer Adhikar”). With extreme hunger, in a strange mental condition, defying the restriction of not entering the forest he entered it and moved deeper into it.

The Mother of the forest, appearing as a naked Munda girl, appealed to him to free her from the clutches of the Dikus and the other usurpers. He agrees. When his mother addressed him as Birsas, he said, “Mother, don’t tell me Birsas. I am God. I am He. I shall not lull the Mundas on my lap but shall win the forest and land for them. They wanted me to be God and I have become” (qtd. in “Mahasweta’s ‘Aranyer Adhikar”). As the adivasis could not be saved by their old deity, Singbonga or by the Christ, they longed for a new God and found it in Birsas.

Birsas motivated his community against British and was arrested and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for two years on 19 November 1895 (Aju 2014). His companions were fined. As a result, as Mukhopadhyay Aju observes,

Many went back to their root and sacrificed fowls and cocks to Singbonga again and poured the sacrificial blood in dry wells or dried streams of the rivers, as was their custom. Again the witches took hold of the situation and became strong uttering their mantras. Some went back to churches, some turned to the other religions; their life flowed backwards. Scanty rains in 1897 brought total drought; starving was their fate. Money lenders were too eager to lend and get their land mortgage papers signed by the borrowers to make them ever debtors, losing all right to lands. Losing all, they were on the point of extinction. Discontents were brewing up everywhere. Birsas sought opportunities. When asked, he smilingly agreed that he would never again incite others to revolt (“Mahasweta’s ‘Aranyer Adhikar,”).

Mundas never wanted to give up; they were again ready when motivated by Birsas to fight for their lands. They attacked British. The Deputy Commissioner admitted in rough tone, “Yes, drought, loss of crops, famine, the greed of the Zamindars, money lenders, Rent Law of Chhota Nagpur; everything supplied fuel to the fire” (“Mahasweta’s ‘Aranyer Adhikar,”). Mundas gathered big stones to roll down on soldiers. Poisonous arrows and other weapons were ready. They were ready for the final confrontation with courage and hope as instilled in them by Birsas Munda, present among them. He gave a lecture at the last confrontation date, telling that fear was wiped out fear from them (Aju 2014). In “Mahasweta’s ‘Aranyer Adhikar,” Mukhopadhyay Aju describes Munda tribe’s fight against British: When police–military combined force faced the innumerable Munda force consisting of women galore, children tied to their backs, the British captain wanted their surrender. Mundas replied that it was their Raj and not that of the British so they would not drop their weapons, nor surrender.

The writer weaves the story of the Munda tribe with their own legendary thread and faith, in their way of expression in spoken Bangla and sometimes in their own tribal tongue, specially the songs. The author tells the story from their view point with her own arguments, supporting their right to live and enjoy life as the other Indians (Aju 2014).

Another important theme in the works of Mahasweta Devi involves the position of tribal communities within India. She is a long-time champion for the political, social and economic advancement of these communities, whom she characterizes as “suffering spectators of the India that is traveling towards the twenty first century” (qtd. in “Devi, Mahasweta”). These concerns can be seen in works such as *Aranyer Adhikar (Rights of the Forest)* and anthologies such as her 1979 *Nairhite Megh (Clouds in the Southwestern Sky)*.

As Neeta Gupta observes, Mahasweta Devi’s visit to Palamau, a remote and extremely poor district in Bihar, proved to be a turning point in her life. It brought her face to face with the dismal conditions being faced by the indigenous tribal people of Palamau (“The Hunt”). Neeta Gupta also adds: There was no education, no healthcare, no roads, and no means of livelihood. People were reduced to a subhuman existence. It was a vicious combination of absentee landlordism, a despoiled environment, debt bondage and state neglect.” Palamau was not unique. In fact Devi calls it „the mirror of India,“ (“The Hunt”).

Her Palamau experience motivated her towards what became the main focus of her subsequent writings. She now concentrated all her literary energy in exposing the dark living conditions of the tribal people in India, to highlight their social exploitation and in the process she became a champion for their political, social and economic advancement (Gupta 2014). Her concerns resulted in works like *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977) and *Choti Munda O Tara Tir* (1979) and collections like *Agnigarbha* (1979) (Gupta 2014). *Imaginary Maps*, the collection of three stories which contains „The Hunt“ is also a part of her efforts to expose the condition of the marginalized tribal people in various parts of India (“The Hunt”).

Recounting her experiences to Gayatri Spivak in an interview Devi throws some light on her close ties with the tribal people and their cause: “When I understood that feeling for the tribals and writing about them was not enough, I started living with them. Tried to solve the problem by seeing everything from his or her point of view. That is how my book about Birsa Munda [*Aranyer Adhikar* – the right of to the forest] came to be written” (qtd. in “The Hunt”). She actually feels deeply about the people and issues she is writing about. There is therefore a strong connection between her literary writings and her activist efforts.

In fact Devi has become a major spokesperson for the tribal people. Writing in her Preface to *Imaginary Maps*, Gayatri Spivak rightly observes „It has always fascinated me that although her writing and her activism reflect one another, they are precisely that –“a folding back upon” one another–re–flection in the root sense.“ (qtd. in “The Hunt”). Devi’s creative expression and her activist concerns are not different from one another. Not only has she written regularly about the tribals and their plight in newspapers, journals and magazines she has also been instrumental in the formation of a number of organizations that fight for their right. „The Hunt“ forms part of a collection published as *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi* in 1995 (Gupta 2014). The other two stories in the collection are namely „Douloti the Bountiful“ and „Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha“. All three stories describe a fictional interpretation of situations that are very real in the lives of the tribal people. While „The Hunt“ is about a half tribal girl’s bold attempt to put a violent end to her personal exploitation as well as to the threat of ecological devastation. „Douloti“ deals with the problem of bonded labour, particularly the women who are exploited endlessly and mercilessly through the system. The heart wrenching image at the end of the story with Douloti’s rotting and bleeding body covering the map of India raises many disturbing questions and speaks volumes for what independent India has failed to do for one sixth of its population (Gupta 2014). In Devi’s words, “Decolonization has not reached the poor. That is why these things happen. Women are just merchandize, commodities” (qtd. in “The Hunt”).

2. CONCLUSION:

In the third and concluding story „Pterodactyl“ Devi attempts to show what has been done to the entire tribal world of India. As the author says: “If read carefully, „Pterodactyl“ will communicate the agony of the tribals, of marginalized people all over the world” (qtd. in “The Hunt”).

Like any of Devi’s works, “The Hunt” too is about homeless tribal communities and destruction of their environment and tribal traditions and a celebration of tribal traditions at the same time (Gupta 2014).

Neeta Gupta: “The story begins with a brief but instructive description of the place in which it is set. Albeit Kuruda is connected by a railway line it is nevertheless declared as abandoned. The billboard at the station announces: „Kuruda Outstation Abandoned“” (“The Hunt” 2014). Neeta Gupta, in her “The Hunt,” says, “One can understand why Kuruda has been abandoned. Unlike Tohri which is a coal mining halt, Kuruda is not profitable at all. All of this is set to change however, as the subsequent events of the story unfold” (2014). Tehsildar Singh comes into the picture. Tehsildar is only the first in line of the many contractors and developers who are just waiting to fall on Kuruda’s forest resources. The story reveals how insidiously and subtly in the name of development, plans are made to take away the livelihood of indigenous tribal people whose lives revolve around these forests (Gupta 2014).

In post-colonial India the white imperialists have simply been replaced by the ruthless landowners and crafty merchants and developers who together carry out a systematic destruction of the forests which have been home to these

tribal people for centuries. A destruction of environment poses a threat to a whole way of life. It threatens to destroy age old tribal traditions that are closely bound with the land (Gupta 2014). In the story, we see how this resistance demonstrates itself in the form of a revival of one such tradition. Mary Oraon becomes the vehicle for this resistance and revolt and the hunting festival which is a festival of justice too, becomes her weapon. She hunts down and kills Tehsildar who is her aggressor alright but a threat to the land and its people as well. Devi is obviously suggesting here that indigenous practices such as these myths can still prove to be potent missiles that can be deployed to combat contemporary oppression (Gupta 2014). Devi says, People say that in the story I have gone too much for bloodshed, but, I think as far as the tribals or the oppressed are concerned, violence is justified. When the system fails in, justice, violence is justified. . . . When the system fails, an individual has a right to take to violence or any other means to get justice. The individual cannot go on suffering in silence (qtd. in "The Hunt").

"What Mary did that day had been done in that area again and again" (qtd. in "The Hunt"). Devi explains further: „Among the tribal, insulting or raping a woman is the greatest crime. Rape is unknown to them. Women have a place of honour in tribal society" (qtd. in "The Hunt"). It is therefore understandable that when this honour is attacked or is under threat and the system is of no help then a person is left with no choice but to take matters in one's own hands. In such a situation, Devi sees no harm in an individual resorting to violence to combat that threat. In this context it is worth remembering that one of the causes of the great Santhal revolt of 1855–56 was the raping of tribal women (Gupta 2014).

There are other works of Mahasweta such as 'Draupadi', *Rudali*, 'The Why–Why Girl' also speak about the tribal communities. 'Draupadi' is a story of a tribal woman who has been victimized by her oppressors in custody. The story is taken from Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*, wherein she makes wounded breast as a symbol of wounded society. Draupadi – who has been raped by uncountable army men – makes terrible wounded of her breast as weapon to encounter her oppressor. Consequently, her oppressor is speechless; though armed remains unarmed before this strategy of his subaltern (*Breast Stories*).

Mythological, Draupadi – who had been a victim of polyandry by the Aryan men in Mahabharata – was saved by lord Krishna, who was from a lower class, when she was tried to unclothe by Aryan men. She was offered Akshaya vastra, which clothed her completely. Ironically, here, a tribal woman named Draupadi was shared by many Aryan men, but found no single Aryan man to clothe her even a single piece of cloth. However, the condition of women remains the same in patriarchal Indian society whether it is Mahabharata or west Bengal.

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* speaks about the poor and struggling tribal people whose economic condition is controlled by their landlords; the landlords, once upon a time, had snatched the tribal's land and now they are ruling it. The worst act by the landlords is they make tribal women as their kept–women; they are made prostitutes.

'The Why–Why Girl' is a short story based on real event by Mahasweta Devi. The story centers around many issues: the economic condition of tribal people and their suppression by their landlords, about whom no one complains, the food habits of tribals, the curiosity of tribal children to know answers to their doubts, the education system and the step taken to educate the tribal children.

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