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THE ACTIVIST WRITINGS OF MAHASWETA DEVI - A STUDY OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S *CHOTTI MUNDA AND HIS ARROW*

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ABSTRACT

In this research paper an attempt has been made to show how Mahasweta Devi, in line with the Subaltern Studies Group's "history from below" approach, attempts to write a history parallel to the mainstream history of Indian nation by reading between the ignored and unwritten lines of the tribal story, their experiences, rituals and songs. The paper also highlights how Mahasweta, in order to expose various faces of exploiting agencies, raises several tribal and non-tribal issues in relation to the national identity and human rights. Moreover, an endeavour has been made to show how Mahasweta provides an overdue voice to the subaltern preoccupations, and justifies their collective violent and militant resistance, thereby making her message clear to the mainstream society: either change the negative attitude towards the subaltern, or be ready for the revolt/resistance.

KEYWORDS: Mahaswetha Devi, Gayatri Spivak, tribal identity, Bengali, India etc.

INTRODUCTION

Everybody is mistreated here; thus everybody is a subaltern. Indeed, even the individuals who suspect something, are mistreated by the prevailing belief system, or possibly, by their own "philosophy". Nonetheless, in Post imperialism the term has been utilized, explicitly, for the social gathering who is socially, politically, or topographically outside of the domineering force structure. As far back as the idea of Subaltern got money, especially post Gayatri Spivak's powerful article *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, scholars crosswise over countries have been using their pen to speak to subaltern voices and concerns, independent of whether their portrayal makes any achievement or not at the ground level. Their portrayal points, all the more explicitly, at moving the focal point of abstract talk from the "inside" to the "underestimated". Everything started in 1980s when a gathering of South Asian intelligent people, known as Subaltern Studies Group, started continued endeavors to amend

and rework Indian historiography from Subaltern point of view. The primary motivation of this task was centered around countless incorporating worker rebellions in pilgrim and postcolonial India, which they considered as solid and feasible verifiable proof that should have been taken in extent of Indian history. Similar concerns can be seen in numerous standard Indian scholars like Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Bonamali Goswami, Amitav Ghosh, Aravind Adiga. also, Mahasweta Devi. In this paper I plan to investigate Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda And His Arrow* where she endeavors to compose a history parallel to the standard history of Indian country by perusing between the disregarded and unwritten lines of the innate story, the ancestral experience, and their tunes. Alluding to the situation of these tribals Mahasweta composes:

Mainstream society is carrying on a continuous, shrewd and systematic assault on his social system, his culture, his very tribal identity and existence...

My contention is that history should be rewritten, acknowledging the debt of mainstream India to the struggles of the tribals in the British and even pre-British days. The history of their struggles is not to be found only in written scripts but in their songs, dances, folktales, passed from one generation to another. (Ghatak 2010: 150)

Other than she features different issues and situations of these tribals, in this way attempting to intercede for their sake, and give them space in the authoritative power structure. The peruser, notwithstanding, ought not disregard the way that her portrayal of the subaltern is as a piece of her activism, and is not the slightest bit an encroachment on their right side to voice their predicament themselves or to mutilate the "actualities". Actually, she, through her works, has been urging the underestimated to talk themselves for the wellbeing of their own, and has in fact been giving them the open door for the equivalent through her diary *Bortika*.

The epic was composed by Mahasweta in Bengali in 1980 as *Chotti Munda O Tar Teer*, and was later converted into English in 2002 by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. Following back from the times of the incredible uprising to be specific *Ulgulan*, the novel introduces the story and predicament of Munda tribals and lower station Hindus and praises their supported and unwavering obstruction against corrupt, dodgy gatecrashers and decision oppressors through the opportunity battle of India to the post-Emergency period. "It tests and reveals the mind boggling web of financial trade dependent on power relations", "follows the changes; some constrained, some welcome, in the day by day lives of an underestimated country network", and at its heart, "observes Chotti, legendry toxophilite, shrewd and farsighted pioneer, pleased good example to his young brethren" (Devi 2002: coat). Plus, Mahasweta here exposes and deconstructs the official history of Indian Independence by featuring the way that the standard society/"Dikus" (word utilized by the tribals for their exploiters like proprietors, moneylenders, brokers, businesspeople and so on; in the tight sense, upper position Hindus) was constantly torpid to the tribals' noteworthy challenges against the British principle. Or then again else how is it conceivable that the tribals were not tried to be fused into the opportunity battle of India driven by the Congress Party:

It was as if that was Dikus' struggle for liberation. Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indian. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle. In war and Independence the life of Chotti and his cohorts

remained unchanged. They stand at a distance and watch it all. (Devi 2002: 121-22)

A comparable reference to the smothering of negligible subaltern voices is to be found in Partha Chatterjee's remaking of the Indian National development in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Here Chatterjee uncovers how once India had picked up opportunity, the laborers were avoided from the "national system of legislative issues" (Chatterjee 1986: 45). This shows how the subaltern portrayal has been belittled by the "Dikus"; in spite of the way that, while the standard India was battling for autonomy from the outside principle, the tribals' battle was two dimensional viz. freedom from outside standard just as from indigenous oppressors and exploiters. All things considered, theirs' was a progression on the standard battle.

While protecting the ancestral custom and culture from being disappeared and deconstructing the standard authority history, Mahasweta from the beginning features an assortment of issues and issues besetting this subaltern world, in this way gives space, if not "voice", to them. The fortified work issue is the most glaring issue in such manner, and pretty much every other issue is the common result of this most exploitative and cruel foundation. From one viewpoint, the novel depicts the harsh rule of proprietors, moneylenders, and contractual workers who appreciate the support of the legislature and crush dry the tribals and lower position Hindus through unending subjugation; then again, it depicts the gross segregation, destitution and hardship of this more fragile area of Indian culture. Such accounts of the country help to feature the enormous holes between the "middle" and the "negligible" and lie well inside the extent of Bhabha's "persistent, aggregate, transience of the instructive." However, in Mahasweta the "academic" is regularly hindered by the "dull, recursive system of the performative," in which the general population are never again treated as "objects" yet become the "subjects" of a procedure of connotation" (Bhabha 1994: 145). Recorded as a hard copy the country, Mahasweta centers around the split between the "instructive" and the "performative" and spreads out the activities of Chotti and his Comrades in their luminal space of the "in the middle." (Sen 2008: 207-208).

In the novel the portrayal of gross discrimination, casteism, poverty, deprivation and harassment is replete. Here the rich and powerful landowners like Lala Baijnath and his son Tirthnath enjoy the right to kick and harass the tribals selling their own paltry yield. Whether these oppressed are bonded or not they are forced to give market cut towards the moneylender out of their meager produce: "Whether you're a bond slave or not, you

must give a quarter of your produce at the landowner's court before each market day, and then sell your wares" (Devi 2002: 71). And if anyone refuses to give bonded labour or the market cut, he has to be ready for the wrath of the moneylender as well as the government officials; because, "the landlords or landed farmers and the drogues in an area watch each others' interests" (Devi 2002: 52). Even when natural calamities like famine strikes these poor tribals, these so-called public servants do not care to inform the concerned officials. Because that would again sabotage the interests of moneylenders and landlords: "There was a famine and the Daroga hadn't reported it because Tirthnath wished to take thumbprints on bonded labour vouchers" (Devi 2002:58).

Thus these tribals are literally drawn into the perpetual bondage, as there is no other way to survive for them during the natural calamities except to enter into bonded labour contract—a contract whereby a person is forced or obliged to give compulsory labour free or at rates much below the market rate to a specific landowner from whom s/he may have borrowed paltry sums of money or food grains. Their rationale behind their entering into bond labour is simply heart-rending: "If we put thumbprint on paper at least we'd eat" (Devi 2002: 49). In this way, these innocent naive people are trapped into the debt which is never repaid. The height of exploitation is that the Lalas and moneylenders consider it their duty and right to make the tribals and untouchables work for them for no wages. As Lala Tirthnath says, "To take bonded labour from adivasis and untouchables is my natural duty" (Devi 2002: 50). And at other occasion, Romio, a political hoodlum, says to his companion Pahlwan, "It is our right to take a cut from the work of labour" (Devi 2002: 291). All this happens before the nose of administration. No doubt there are laws, but they are only to punish the marginalized communities and not the high and mighty: "Manager rides t' palquin, wears shoes, chews his betel leaf e'en after killin' us. An' Dukhia hangs if he kills manager. T' Gormen's law! Why no law ont' manager" (Devi 2002: 89)

Chotti stands immovably contrary to this persecution and abuse of his locale and other comparative gatherings. He can't manage the anguish and affront of working for no wages. He normally contends that the advances ought to be balanced against wages. He realizes that regardless of accepting no wages for quite a long time the advances keep on remaining in their names; that the obligation is never reimbursed. The legislature could endorse starvation alleviation yet just on getting the report from the gatherer and the Daroga. As it is the "wish of the administration" that "the updates on starvation will be acknowledged just in the event that it comes through legitimate channels"

(Devi 2002: 59). So he produces solidarity among the unfortunate casualty tribals and non tribals and takes a nomination to the concerned authority at Tohri, who is astounded to see the ancestral Mundas and low position Hindus like Ganju and Dusad all together. Chotti peruses the awe according to the authority and clears up that it is starvation that has joined them all, and that their solidarity isn't gone for culpable anybody: "Truly, we're bound together. By craving fire. I shelter' energized anybody" (Devi 2002: 52). This solidarity and fellowship of tribals and the Hindu lower-positions symbolizes the aggregate subaltern opposition which is the fantasy of our dissident Mahasweta, it's identity, appropriate to make reference to, established India's previously fortified work association in 1980 and united a great many reinforced workers to give them a sorted out stage to raising their voice against constrained work. She needs them to raise their voice together against persecution. Since as Dhani Munda says to Chotti Munda, "If everybody works on bond, and ye alone wear', comes to nothin'" (Devi 2002: 11). Truth be told the novel over and again sensationalizes this subaltern solidarity. We watch it when Mundas, Ganju, Dusad, all together methodology the administration authorities to illuminate about dry season. We watch it when Chotti reprimands Dukhia for his remark that "I have no one" and declares we are "Munda-Oraon, with us behind one there are all. Don't you see" (Devi 2002: 67). Furthermore, we watch it before the finish of the novel when the tribals and lower standing Hindus headed by Chotti Munda together showcase extraordinary solidarity by raising together their voice against the persecution of "Dikus": "A thousand adivasis raise their bows in space and cry, No! The non adivasis raise limiting hands" (Devi 2002: 363). This raising of bows and hands by the adivasis and other lower-ranks performs aggregate subaltern solidarity and opposition; the obstruction, which our creator needs them to show in the event that they wish to cut a reasonable and respectable spot in this biggest vote based system of the world. The tribals and other lower-positions are likewise completely cognizant about this need of solidarity and aggregate opposition. They realize that they can last just "on the off chance that we nibble t' earth together. Else we'll need to leave all and jump on t' street" (Devi 2002: 176).

But Mahasweta does not seem to be content merely with the solidarity and collective resistance of them. In order to win this war on exploitation, in order to make sure that their subaltern voice is heard and addressed, she wants them to be equal in strength as well. This becomes evident from Chotti's (who represent Mahasweta's beliefs) reaction to the Naxal boys' violent resistance. Though he is all praises for them and their noble

intentions, he does not approve of it. Because he knows that “if a Lala dies, ’nother Lala will come” (Devi 2002: 225). That is why he advises the Naxal boy by explaining that “the fight ya talked about, is good, but it’s not to be. Be equal to polis and then fight, no? Else in t’ end it’s t’ polis wins. Thas what I all us see” (Devi 2002: 227-28).

Once the bonded labour system was officially abolished by the Government of India and declared illegal, the step was hailed by all and sundry. But our activist-author, again representing the subaltern, raises some fundamental queries and questions with regard to this much hyped act. According to her those who were to be liberated didn’t even know of the historic decision. As Chotti says, “They’ve made t’ law far our good, but they nev’r let it be known” (Devi 2002: 300). Besides, no provisions were made to ensure in practice liberation of the bonded labour, and no protective mechanism was built to ensure the safety of the concerned. That is why Chotti laughs at the law and out-rightly rejects it:

There’re blind alleys in this law. Gormen is makin’ fun o’ us. I asked, if a boss still asks for bonded labour, what s’ll we do? T’ Gormen says, Why? Ye’ll go to court? Now see this! To Co-o-ourt will go Mundas, and Oraons, and Dusad, and Ganju – who caint live without bellyloans fr’ m moneylender, they’ll go complain agin boss. So, gie bonded labour like other years. Then there are no plaints and charges against bosses an’ goons, an’ they won’ mek trouble. (Devi 2002: 318)

The same is the fate of the minimum wages act which is more violated than observed. Even the contractor Harbans Chadda, though gives better wages than the money lender Tirthnath, gives less than one-tenth of what should be actually given. And he sees no error in it: “Harbans sees no fault in himself, although he does not give Chotti and his people more than twelve annas wages and in bad times makes famine-struck folks dig hard ground at no more than four” (Devi 2002: 175). The result of the non-workability and non-implementability of these and other such highly laudable steps and schemes is the alienation of this oppressed community. And in the backdrop of this one feels compelled to agree with Mahasweta cynical argument that in India acts are for enactment and not for implementation. Moreover, she is of the view that if these tribals are killing their oppressors it is necessary and inevitable. The same is projected in this novel. In the novel, Chotti defends the bond slave Dukhia when the latter kills the manager Siaram: “Has he done wrong, that he should fly? Why is he condemned to be hanged after a necessary killing”

(Devi 2002: 70)? Similarly, the Mundas of Narsingarh under the leadership of Somchar, Disha, Upa and Lal kill the political hoodlums Romeo and Pahlwan in the heart of the forest with their arrows poisoned with Kuchila berry because they know that, “if they remain alive there’ll be trouble again If they die there’ll be trouble as well. Since trouble can’t be avoided, then it’s best to kill them” (Devi 2002: 358). And when the government agents plan a strategic action to identify the killers of Romeo and Pahlwan, Chotti displays a symbolic resistance by taking the offence on himself. He does so to spare the young members of his community, who represent the future of the tribe, and who can carry forward the legacy of resistance, which, in the eyes of our activist writer, is the only way for the subaltern to get heard: “Chotti throws the bow to Harmu. Harmu catches it. Says, Why go on? Catch me? I had but that one arer [I]nstantly a thousand adivasis raise their bows in space and cry, No! The non-adivasis raise restraining hands” (Devi 2002: 363). Chotti’s handing over the bow to his son Harmu represents the continuation of the protest.

Mahasweta also raises the question of religious conversion of the tribals in this novel and projects it as the direct consequence of their exploitation and oppression by the “Dikus”. She holds them responsible for the conversion of lower caste Hindus and tribals to Christianity. In the novel the tribals of Kurmi village flee from their village to take shelter at the Mission. Though most of the tribals initially oppose the move on the ground that it would alienate them from the traditional ways of life, they ultimately agree to it, as it would at least save them from the unbearable burden of bondage and exploitation. As Sukha, a Munda from the Kurmi village, says:

T’ new manager has bound ever’one in bond labour. And then so many demands. Give’em stuff right and left. If someone dies in t’ office or his family then either give labour or pay tax . . . He goes from one court to another. We carry t’ palquin, we take an’ we bring back. He walks and we must run with an umbrella. Life is hell. (Devi 2002: 85-86)

So he declares, “If I go there, if I leave my faith, to Mission Gormens will gie us land, settle us” (Devi 2002: 86). Chotti thinks of no such escape, but even he accepts the fact that “they all go to Mission with’ t’ terror of Diku” (Devi 2002: 113). They know that “T’ Mission sahib will also raise profit in some way or other. But he won’ take this market cut, won’ ask for bonded work, won’ say hard words, and beat us up for any and everything” (Devi 2002: 110).

Mahasweta also highlights the fact that even with the passage of time nothing concrete has been done to ameliorate the tribals' lot. The only change that can be easily noticed has taken place in the domain of tribals' consciousness. They have started perceiving things more clearly and also their interconnections that oppression and exploitation are the fruits of the system rooted in evil. They have realized that:

It is not the wish of either the foreign or the indigenous administration that real relationships grow up between the officers and subject groups. It is more auspicious for the administration to keep the relationship completely unreal. Then in the officer's eyes, the humans can remain a mathematical calculation of supplied census statistics. And in the eyes of the people the administration can remain the king's elephants. Elephants that are no use to them, yet must be reared by them. (Devi 2002: 35)

They realize that, other than the criminal nexus between the Dikus and the administration, their predicament is the immediate consequence of their lack of education, numbness, and effortlessness. As Budha, an innate says to Chotti, "They cheat coos we wear' know book-learning" (Devi 2002: 107). In any case, once more, who is to be accused for it? To Mahasweta it is none other than the "Dikus". Since, as portrayed in the novel, Mundas are not the slightest bit urged to send their kids to class, and on the off chance that somebody comes to there, the educator sets aside no effort to pack him off: "What'll ye do with school? Go crowd dairy animals" (Devi 2002: 150). Also, regardless of whether the tribals get taught some way or another, the odds of landing position are pitiful: "Munda young ladies and Oraon young ladies go to Mission schools and still wear' land positions" (Devi 2002: 150). Add to it, they are stripped and precluded from commending their deep rooted celebrations. On the affection of the tenacity of the tribals of Kurmi town, "the chief reported that the chase celebration was restricted" (Devi 2002:89). Seeing such social attacks, Pahan, the town leader of the tribals, predicts the fate of their way of life and pronounces in an extremely disillusioning tone, "T' arrow based weaponry amusement's likewise over Presently Munda'll be Munda at celebrations, and for network things like weddings" (Devi 2002:151). At other event Chotti mourns the certainty of his kin's loss of ethnicity in the wake of "national advancement work":

In all national development work they will have to be one with those who, like Chhagan, are the oppressed of the land, and work as field hands, as sweated workers for contractor or trader. Then

there'll be a shirt on his body, perhaps shoes on his feet. Then the 'Munda' identity will live only at festivals in social exchange. (Devi 2002: 139)

This is what Gayatri Spivak calls the "museumization" of "ethnic cultures", which causes further alienation in the already alienated tribals. Under such exploitative circumstances violent resistance remains the only option for these desperate voiceless tribals. And this is what our activist author repeatedly tries to warn us off in this novel.

Mahasweta is considerably bitter and satirical while talking of the National economy and National development programs of 1960's and 70's of independent India. According to her, and which in fact is a reality, with these programmes and schemes emerged a new class of contractors (read exploiters), and it was via these contractors that the tribals were made participants in these developmental (read detrimental) programmes, not for their own sake but as profit spinners for the contractors. The following lines from the novel are worth quoting in this regard:

The state has left no spot for them in this pattern. The majority of the population in independent India is low caste, and a significant percentage is adivasi. Therefore they are excluded from the national economic pattern. But even the excluded must live. (Devi 2002: 177)

Thus Chotti and his folks go to fell trees by the contractors' decision and in this way enter the national economic pattern of independent India. Mahasweta here tries to make us realize that it was actually the industrialists, landlords, contractors, and the like who had come to occupy central position in the national economy, and the most developmental plans were designed to suit their requirements and aspirations, as if they were the only citizens of the nation. Had the general masses been deemed the real constituents of the nation, they would have been the real beneficiaries of the national schemes. That is what Chotti says to his son: "If Gorman looked after Munda rights would Munda be begger like this" (Devi 2002: 160)? Mahasweta highlights this aspect through the characters like Pratab and his son Harbans Chadda, who are opportunistic enough to identify themselves with and sub-serve the interests of the potential political forces of the day. The tribals working for them may be in a slightly better position than earlier in as much as they are getting wages, but what they are given is not even the one-tenth of what they should be getting as per the stipulation of law of which they are kept ignorant. The only thing that modern India gives to these tribals and lower-castes is posters: posters on family planning, communal harmony etc. And

when it comes to make them conscious of their rights, they are forgotten. That is why Chotti says to Swarup that if he “wish ta work fer us then live wit’ us. Teach us. So we know our own right” (Devi 2002: 307).

Consequently, all through the novel, Mahasweta features a few desires and misgivings of the pitiful subalterns. She unquestionably strips "the cover off the essence of the India which is anticipated by the Government" and uncovered "its stripped mercilessness, viciousness, and standing and class misuse" (Devi 2009: ix-x) by raising some relevant and perpetual issues like the spot of the tribals on the guide of national character, land and human rights, the 'museumization' of 'ethnic' societies and so on. At last, as a certifiable subaltern agent, she, while defending the aggregate subaltern solidarity and obstruction, makes her message for the standard society boisterous and clear: Change the negative frame of mind towards the minimized, or be prepared for the revolt/opposition.

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