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Mahasweta Devi a Voice of Adivasi and Marginalized

Dhiraj Manohar Gobre

Assistant Professor,
Arts, Commerce College Ralegaon, Dist. Yavatmal.

Abstract:

Literature has been flourishing far and wide. It has widened its horizon and the branches of literature have been emerging swiftly. One can observe that the literature is coming from all directions. Not a single corner of a society remains unaffected by literature. People started expressing themselves. Whatever the theme or purpose or intention they have they started reacting and writing. Therefore there are many newly introduced trends in literature and Adivasi or Tribal Literature is one of them. Adivasi Literature is a literature which is written by Adivasi or Non-Adivasi to uncover the lives, society, culture, arts, music, songs, painting, norms, rituals, plights, struggle, and so on of tribal. Many writers have been emerging in accordance with Adivasi writing. Writers like Alice Ekka who is known as the first Adivasi Women story teller belonged to the Munda tribe, Ram Dayal Munda from Chota Nagpur belongs to the same tribe, Sushila Samad also comes from the same tribe, young writers like Jacinta Kerketta belongs to Oraon tribe which is famously known as Dhangad tribe in Maharashtra, made this genre of Adivasi Literature popular among literary canon. We have many non-Adivasi writers as well who brought this genre into light and Mahasweta Devi falls under this particular category. Being born in a Brahmin family Devi devoted herself and most of her writing for the sake of Adivasi. Mahasweta Devi uncovered many facts regarding Adivasi, the sufferings they undergo, the treatment they receive from the Government, Police, Landowners, Upper Caste and many other dominant institutions. She experienced and observed the plights of Adivasi closely. Her way of depiction and uncovering the realities about Adivasi left us spellbound and shocked. That's why her name is renowned and taken with regards as far as the Adivasi writing is concerned. The present research paper will be focusing on some of Mahasweta Devi's works which deal with moreover expose the actual status of Tribal Communities in the so called modernized and literate society.



Keywords: Adivasi, Non-Adivasi, Trends, Tribes, Upper Caste, Dominant Institutions.

Introduction:

Literature is the best critique of society and through the medium of literature most of the unknown stories and hidden truths get discovered. All the credit of revelation goes to those authors who dare to pen it down. Eventually tribal people have also been coming forward to write about them. They started describing their status in society, their problems, and their relationship with the outer world, their plights and agonies and so on.

Mahasweta Devi is one of such authors who didn't belong to the Adivasi community but wrote for the cause of Adivasi and made them publicized. Mahasweta Devi was born to a Brahmin family on January 14, 1926, in Dhaka (now in Bangladesh). Mahasweta Devi came from a family that strongly appreciated literature and culture. The early fifties marked the onset of Mahasweta Devi's writing career through novels and short stories. For instance, *Jhansir Rani* which was published in 1956 narrated the life of Rani Lakshmibai. Mahasweta Devi has written extensively about marginalized communities like tribal people as well as Dalit for decades. Consequently, she used them as protagonists who were victims of atrocities perpetrated by other groups within society such as tribesmen or untouchables whereby they tried resisting any subjugation level against them. She writes with deep empathy for other characters and a strong commitment to social justice. In an interview with Gaytri Spivak, Devi clearly states:

Gayatri, I've been doing this for many years; Wherever there is exploitation, I report it immediately. I write directly to the pertinent ministerial department. I send a copy to the area, they make a mass-signature effort and go to the local authority. Each minister has one or two hundred of my letters. I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty toward society. Yet I don't really know why I do these things. This sense of duty is an obsession, and I must remain accountable to myself. I ask myself this question a thousand times: have I done what I could have done? My house is full of them, they write to me, they come and stay with me, I go and stay with them. And this journalistic exposure is very necessary. The government officials admit that they are afraid of me. What will I write next? (*Imaginary Maps*, p. xvi)



Hajar Churashir Maa (Mother of 1084), the 1974 story talks about the Naxalite uprising and how the victim's families had to bear the brunt of the politics of violence. *Aranyer Adhikar (The Rights of the Forest)* portrays the life of the tribal leader Birsa Munda. *Rudali*, First published as a short story in 1979 and later adapted into a successful film, this piece is about the low-caste woman who gets her job to weep at funerals. *Breast Stories* is a comprehensive volume whose themes reflect the exploitation of the female body and resistance through masterpieces like *Draupadi*, *Breast-Giver* and *Behind the Bodice*. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* is another novel from the year 1980. It's a biography of a tribal community, which talks about the daily life of the people over several decades.

Mahasweta Devi a Voice of Adivasi and Marginalized:

Mahasweta Devi not only was a writer but also a wholehearted, committed social activist. She devoted most of her life to the struggles of the tribal people in West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, as she was against their exploitation, and wanted to help them to fight for the rights. In many local movements, she was a major participant and often, through her writing, brought these folks into the public eye. Several organizations she established, the 'Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti' amongst others, worked for the welfare of the Kheria Sabar caste in West Bengal. Her activism made her popular among the people and she was famous not only in India but overseas as well. Mahasweta Devi was the recipient of countless literary and social work accolades; the awards include Sahitya Akademi Award in 1979, Jnanpith Award in 1996, Padma Shri in 1986 and Padma Vibhushan in 2006. With the closing of her life, Mahasweta Devi maintained her writing alongside her steady campaigns for social justice. On July 28, 2016, she took her last breath in Kolkata, West Bengal, at the age of 90. Her descendants have kept the faith of Mahasweta Devi alive through her long list of writings and her contribution to the world of literature for social activists in India. Such was the image of Mahasweta Devi in the people's mind that by the people's saying, she was ranked very high on the list as one of the most important literary figures in modern India, as her writings and activism revealed the hardships of the poorest strata of society and thereby motivated future generations to struggle for fairness and justice in society. As per the article published in 'Hindustan Times', Devi is quoted as having described her source of inspiration as follows:



I have always believed that real history is made by ordinary people. I constantly come across the reappearance, in various forms, of folklore, ballads, myths and legends, carried by ordinary people across generations. The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used and yet do not accept defeat. For me, the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly noble, suffering human beings. Why should I look for my raw material elsewhere? (*Hindustan Times*)

Mother of 1084 is a novel by Mahasweta Devi which is translated into English by Samik Bandyopadhyay. It is not just a novel but a searing critique of social and political oppression, encapsulated through the story of a grieving mother, Sujata Chatterjee. While the novel is often discussed in terms of its portrayal of Naxalism and the anguish of a mother, it also deeply engages with themes of tribal revolt and resistance, albeit through a more implicit lens. Set against the backdrop of the Naxalite movement in West Bengal during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The novel follows Sujata as she uncovers the life and death of her son Brati, who was killed as part of a state crackdown on the Naxalite uprising. Brati's death symbolizes not just the loss of a child but also the erasure of a revolutionary ideology that sought to challenge the existing socio-economic hierarchies. While the novel's central narrative revolves around Sujata's personal grief, it also opens a window into the larger socio-political turmoil that Brati was a part of, which includes the plight of the tribal communities. In *Mother of 1084*, tribal resistance is woven into the fabric of the Naxalite movement, which itself had strong connections to tribal revolts. The Naxalite movement drew heavily from the anger and frustration of the marginalized, including the tribals, who were alienated from their land and livelihood due to the encroachment of state policies and capitalist enterprises. Mahasweta Devi, known for her deep engagement with the struggles of tribal communities, subtly integrates this theme into the novel. The novel can be read as a narrative of tribal revolt, where Brati's involvement in the Naxalite movement reflects a broader struggle against the dispossession of the marginalized. Moreover, the novel critiques the bourgeois society that remains indifferent to the suffering of the tribals and the poor. Sujata's family represents this apathetic middle class, more concerned with maintaining social status than addressing the systemic injustices that lead to movements like Naxalism. Through Sujata's journey,



Mahasweta Devi exposes the moral decay of the middle class, which turns a blind eye to the plight of the tribals and the revolutionaries who stand up for them.

Draupadi by Mahasweta Devi is a significant short story from a collection *Breast Stories*, translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It brings the tribal community's unfortunate reality and resistance to light within one of India's most surface rich tribal areas. This story is a strong depiction of the systemic physical violence and exploitation that is faced by tribal, as well as their resistance against it. Dopdi Mejhen is the protagonist, whose name is an allusion to the famous "Draupadi" from the Mahabharata and who is a Santhal tribal female and a Naxalite insurgent. The narrative conveys the brutal exploitation and oppression of the tribal people by the oppressive authorities. Dopdi and Dulna, her husband, are part of the Naxalite group that is fighting back the exploiters. "The starving land of the Santhal village... transformed into rich soil with the blood of the tribals." (*Draupadi, Breast Stories*, p. 398) This quote from the story describes utmost situation of the tribals.

Despite her suffering from death threats, Dopdi constitutes her solid ego still, and remains unshaken. Her commotion at climax is the most powerful one, where, when she was sexually abused in a terrible manner, she insubordinates to it. The story also discusses the topic of dehumanization where the officials observe Dopdi as a threat and do not recognize her as a person. But beside this, she asserts her humaneness through her opposition. The character of Dopdi's revolt, standing nude and fearless in front of her torturers goes against the societal notions of female weakness and disgrace. *Draupadi* is a hard piece of evidence against the state's violence towards marginalized groups.

What is this? He is about to cry, but stops. Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. What is this? He is about to bark. Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me? (*Draupadi, Breast Stories*, p. 402)

After bearing immense torture from so called the Defender of the law, Dopdi, without showing any sign of distress, confronts it bravely.



She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, there isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me-come on, counter me-? Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (*Draupadi, Breast Stories*, p. 402)

Through Dopdi's personality, Mahasweta Devi brings out the tenacity and power of the tribal women. Quotation above proves that the person who has nothing to lose becomes more dangerous just as unarmed Dopdi who stands before Senanayk without any sign of fear. Senanayak himself is frightened by the stature of the naked Dopdi. The story is a mournful analysis of the interplay of oppressive factors from gender to class, and to ethnicity as well as the indomitable human spirit of resistance in the face of systematic injustices.

The novel *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* by Mahasweta Devi is an extremely valuable text that imparts information on the life and struggles of tribal societies in India with the focused on one of the Munda people being on the limelight. Gayatri Spivak is credited for translating the text into English. Resistance, identity, and socio-political issues are the main topics of the story. The story follows Chotti Munda, a tribal leader who stands up to the oppressive system that rules the tribe. Through Chotti Munda's fight, not only local, socioeconomic and political rights are at stake but a bigger fight for justice and existence as well. The words of praise for Chotti Munda and the respect his people give him are the central motifs; he represents his cause with them. Chotti Munda's arrow is a splendid example of resistance and formidability. Arrows and other classic weapons reflect the tribal culture, so they are symbols that have a potentially important impact on their spirituality. However, in the story of Devi, Chotti Munda's arrow comes to mean not only his decision to face oppression and protect his community but it becomes a symbol of the broader struggle of the tribal people against exploitation and marginalization. Devi, through Chotti Munda's character, depicts the lives of the people living in the community in a very real and grim way, as they continue to struggle to establish their rights and recognize their own identity. The material also embodies the general themes of resistance to colonialism, feudalism, and modern exploitation.



Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* (*The Rights of the Forest*) can also be seen as a tribal text, reflecting the indigenous perspective and the socio-political issues faced by tribal communities. Nandini Sen has translated this novel into English. The story is a critique of modernization and industrialization of tribal societies, their struggle for land and cultural survival.

Aranyer Adhikar gives us a rich picture of tribal life, their deep connection with the forest. For tribal communities the forest is not just a resource but a part of their existence, providing sustenance, cultural practices and spiritual fulfillment. Devi's narrative captures this relationship, how displacement affects every aspect of their life. The central theme of the text is the right of tribal communities to their ancestral lands and forests. Devi critiques the systematic encroachment on these lands by external forces like industrial developers and government projects. This theme is very relevant to the tribal experience, as it reflects their real life struggle against displacement and dispossession. The forest is the source of the tribal people's identity and culture. Devi portrays the forest as a sacred space where their traditions and way of life is located. Loss of land means loss of identity and cultural disintegration. The characters' fight for their land becomes a fight for justice and recognition. The narrative shows how the forest is embedded in their rituals, customs and social structures. As a tribal text *Aranyer Adhikar* gives voice to the marginalized communities who are often invisible in mainstream narratives. The text is a powerful assertion of the tribal perspective in the face of systemic exploitation. The fight to hold on to the forest is a fight for survival and autonomy. Devi uses this symbolism to deepen the readers' understanding of the tribal experience and the stakes involved in their struggle.

Conclusion:

Mahasweta Devi's lasting impact as a champion for tribal and marginalized communities is both deep and varied. Through her powerful and insightful literary works, she shed light on the harsh realities and systemic injustices faced by some of India's most overlooked groups. Her stories, filled with genuine depictions of resilience and resistance, went beyond simple storytelling to become significant tools for social critique and change. In addition to her literary accomplishments, Devi's hands-on involvement in grassroots activism and her unwavering advocacy for tribal rights highlighted her dedication to social justice. She not only documented



the challenges faced by the marginalized but also actively supported their cause, advocating for meaningful reforms and increased societal awareness. Mahasweta Devi's legacy continues to motivate and resonate, acting as a strong reminder for empathy, equity, and justice in a world that frequently neglects its most vulnerable individuals.

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