

Heroism And Resistance in The Socio-Political Disposition of Tribal Existence in Mahasweta Devi's Aranyer Adhikar

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Abstract

In India the word 'tribal' has a several cultural and social implications. Actually it is a watchword of political consciousness among a particular group of people. Like caste consciousness, or regional consciousness, tribal consciousness is also becomes a fast developing political tool which becomes a symbol of marginality, untouchability and diverse identity in the concept of national integrity. Mahasweta Devi concerns about their divisive identity and the clash of elitist discourse in order to prove that indigenous resistance to oppressive power in all its elite and colonial manifestations strikes at the roots of hegemonic historiography. Her writings bring out a paradigmatic shift in mainstream historiography, which is largely elite and expediently concealed the local uprisings and struggles of the subalterns and highlights the subversive stance of respective writers in their cause to excavate heroic figures, who were never the docile victims of the hegemonic forces, but resisted the dominant system that sought to victimize them. In the colonial period discontent over the loss of rights to their environment and resources such as land led to continual tribal uprisings against the dispossession of land. Even in the post-colonial period these issues have remained unresolved. Although Mahasweta's representation of the tribe's resistance to the interventions of intruders who came to defile their culture for the sake of profit might sometimes appear to be a nostalgic yearning for the pure and original. The novel "Aranyer Adhikar" brings out the past significance of Birsa Munda's great rebellion and its Contemporary relevance. The clarion call of Birsa Munda to establish Mundaraj as well as to get back their rights to the forest by waging a war against the British Raj and the Zamindars forms the core theme of this novel. This paper investigates hegemonic historiography and subaltern consciousness to bring out a comparative understanding of heroic uprising in subversive politics.

Keywords: Historiography, Subaltern Consciousness, Subversion, Uprising, Exploitation.

Introduction:

Indian Independence brings the resemblance to the sacrifice of freedom fighters who envisioned India as an independent free bird; free from the hands of all external forces and stand united as one secular, socialist, democratic republic. For Independence, each and every region was fighting their own war. Many of the protest against the British were led by tribal heroes. Their fight was for their land and most importantly for their people. The tribal revolts and rebellions represent the sacrifices of unsung heroes who increased the moral quotient of the national movement in their shared experience of colonial oppression. On the commemoration of 75 years of Independence the Government has declared

November 15 as Janajatiya Gaurav Divas which was the birth anniversary of the great tribal leader Birsa Munda, whose role in our freedom struggle change the course of modern Indian history.

Mahasweta Devi has involved in her writings deeply with this unsung tribal heroes and their life in the Chotanagpur region; she has written a number of novels, short stories and articles concerning tribal issues. Her writings on the tribal can be divided into two major themes: tribal history and the triba's struggle for existence. Devi's efforts of writings help the indigenous people in reviving their past and give them a pride of place. Her narratives highlight the rich history and culture of the tribal of the Chotanagpur region which has been unfamiliar to the mainstream society in spite of the commitment and sacrifice. Devi's writings, has professed with little interest in ideological abstractions and theorizing of Bengal. This paper is theoretically, critically and textually investigates hegemonic historiography and subaltern consciousness to bring out a comparative understanding of heroic uprising. She highlights the irrespective of caste and class, particularly on the tribal or poor working women under the contract bonded social system. The tribal communities of our country largely depended on the forests for their subsistence and sustenance. Their existence was at stake as they were being displaced from and dispossessed of the forests which sustained them nourished them and protected them like a mother.

Mahasweta Devi received several literary awards such as Shitya Akademi Award, Jnanpith Award and Roman Magsaysay Award along with Indian's civilian awards Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan. She donated her entire prize money from the Jnanpith and Magsaysay Awards to the organization she has set up for the tribal. She says, "I will continue to work for the tribals and non-tribal poor people in distress and write for them as I get magnificent inspiration for my work". She traveled extensively in the rural areas of West Bengal and wrote a sequence of articles in Bengali against the despots of the tribal people. She received much acclaim for works like Araneyar Adhikar (Rights of the Forest) based on the life of tribal freedom fighter Birsa Munda. 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. Mahasweta Devi—a former lecturer in English literature—is actively involved with human lives. 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. She gives a complete account of her views on and experience with the tribal communities that reflection also seen in her works. She widely associates with their problems, their struggles, their poverty as well as their exploitations. Mahasweta Devi has connection with a lot many tribal communities which have been ignored by the government in every respect.

In the novel "Aranyer Adhikar", Mahasweta Devi throws a flood of light on the tribal agitation which lasted from the mid - nineteenth century upto the end of the century. The reasons for this Munda uprising are not far to seek. Mahasweta Devi does not simply focus on the historical facts of this rebellion. Being a social activist-cum novelist, she penetrates deep into the true nature and character of the Munda agitation under the leadership of Birsa Munda. In the novel, she shows us how the intrusion of feudal lords, Zamindars, Police, Labour-Contractors into the otherwise happy and peaceful lives of the tribals made them captive in their own lands. The land revenue system introduced by the British Government paved the way for the influx of a huge number of people who were not tribals or should we say, they were anti-tribals. The novel also highlights how colonialism and the feudal system in India

went hand in hand to exploit the tribal people. Ranajit Guha is absolutely on the right track when he talks about this doubly articulated colonialism in India in his essay “Dominance without Hegemony: History and power in colonial India”.

Aranyer Adhikar (1978) is a meticulously researched novel which deals with the Munda insurrection of 1899-1900. Interest of being just any historical novel about a past revolution, it gives clear indications of the tribal community itself, its traditions, social customs and religion. It tells a story of the Munda tribe of the Singhbhum, Ranchi, Chaibasa region of the present Jharkhand State. The story is of “Birsa Munda and his revolution, called “Oolgulan,” to establish Munda Raj over the forests and hills, driving out all the usurpers; the British, Zamindars, missionaries and many others. The other middlemen besides the British are named by them as “Diku” who evicted them from their land, made them laborers without wages, servants without payments, leading them to a servile existence with the help and support of their common master, the British colonizers. It gives a vivid glimpse of the socio-economic condition of the Munda community through the recounting of the history of their community by Dhani Munda, an old veteran rebel. Moreover, in her foreword to the novel, Devi herself points out that before colonialism the tribal people lived a very peaceful and happy life in close contact with nature. They had abundant freedom to roam about in the jungles. They were absolutely free from the evil clutches of the Zamindars, the Police and Land-lords Contractors – “They were happier then. They used to go to the forest for hunting. They made field for farming. They had their own god - Singbhonga” (Devi, 63). But the old pristine happiness of the Munda community was lost because of the introduction of the British land revenue system. Their religious lives were also affected. The Christian missionaries and the Hindu religious gurus intruded into the lives of the tribal communities and started converting them to Christianity or Hinduism. The tribal communities were the worshippers of Mother Nature. They were as helpless as the forest, the trees which were being indiscriminately felled by the British Colonial rulers in conjunction with the indigenous elite of our country.

The historical experience of European colonization in India has justified the convergence of postcolonial discourse initiated by Said, Spivak and Bhabha with subaltern studies empowered the colonial subjects by re-visiting and re-documenting their past is aptly enunciated by David Ludden when he writes, “Subaltern historians and postcolonial critics stand together against colonial modernity to secure a better future for subaltern people, learning to hear them, allowing them to speak, talking back to powers that marginalize them, documenting their past” (Reading 20). Hence, both Post colonialism and Subaltern Studies intend to expose the epistemic stratagems which justify elitism. Therefore, in the Indian context, if racism has been propagating discrimination, Subaltern Studies investigates the social malaise of caste to comprehend the inverse relationship between high caste and knowledge production. Further, Subaltern Studies or subaltern historiography began to delve into the arena of “religious minorities, caste and gender” in order to destabilize the institutions of power and highlight how they have and continue to relegate the subaltern to the fringes.

In that politico-historical phenomenon engaged literary discourse in subversive politics which later became the cardinal rule of writing a historiography. Subaltern criticism spearheaded by Ranjit Guha delves into “the contribution made by the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite— hegemonic groups whether foreign indigenous who monopolized the hitherto historiography of the

Indian nationalist movement” (Guha 39). The rise of anti colonial nationalist movements in the twentieth century was a response to the desire for self representation of the marginalized people who rallied under the banner of common culture, language or history.

Birsa Munda, a tribal heroic figure, led one of the prominent 19th century rebellions in the Indian subcontinent known as Munda Rebellion. Named as Ulgulan meaning ‘Great Tumult’, this movement took place in Ranchi in 1899 -1900 and aimed at establishing Munda Raj and independence. Munda’s prime objective was to empower his Munda community socially, politically and economically. Devoted to the cause, he worked to put an end to the oppression of the dikus and to drive the British out of their territory. Therefore, he defiantly declared the establishment of the Birsa Raj, in which nobody but only Birsa could be obeyed. He exhorted the Mundas not to pay rent. The government decided to arrest Birsa on 22 August 1895. Birsa was convicted along with others on 19 November 1895 on the charge of rioting and 482 more cases were filed against him. As a result, he was imprisoned and later died in captivity in June 1900 at the age of 25. The British, nevertheless, declared that he had died of Cholera. But the cause of the hero did not die and made him emerge in a new incarnation as a national and as a regional hero, who became a symbol of the anti-feudal and anti-colonial struggle of the early twentieth century.

The indiscriminate destruction of the forest leading to the displacement of the tribal communities and landing them in extreme social and economic crisis finds a vibrant expression in her novel “Aranyer Adhikar”. When Birsa was born to Sugana Munda and Karmi Munda, his father was suffering from extreme poverty, having lost his land to money-lenders. As a small child, Birsa found his father trying hard to subsist somehow. In the prime of his life he developed a strong love for the forest through which he used to wander aimlessly. He felt a never-failing kinship with the forest. In the afternoon whenever he would go to the forest to fetch fresh water from the waterfall there, the pale face of his mother Karmi flashed before his eyes. The forest mother seemed to cry to him and tell him that she was being divested of her resources. Her cries would ring in his ear. Birsa felt instinctively for the forest and realized that the forest must be saved from this onslaught. From his early years Birsa happened to realize the helplessness of the tribal people due to the anti-tribal land laws of the British rulers. The exploitation of the hapless tribal communities, their financial hardships, and their displacement from their own lands found a responsive chord in the heart of Birsa.

From his early childhood Birsa came to realize that he must study in order to learn the language of the colonial rulers as well as to save tribal lands and houses from the oppressive British rulers and feudal lords. But as a small boy he could not know that there were a lot of obstacles to the fulfillment of his dream of receiving education. However, he was so eager to read and write that he was admitted to the German Mission School at Burjur to receive primary education. His life at the Burjur German Mission was completely different from his tribal life. After completing his lower primary education successfully, Birsa went to Chaibasa Mission for further studies. There he came in contact with Amulya whom he told that he wanted to get back the land of his father from the money-lenders. In the meantime the tribal Sarders started their agitation against the British rulers, the Zaminders and money lenders to retrieve their lands. Birsa was sad to know that the British Govt. arrested them, suppressed their agitation and tortured them ruthlessly.

Dhani Munda implored Birsa to leave the Mission by saying that the white men regard the Mundas as naked, barbarians and dacoits. This gave Birsa a rude shock. He believed that the Missionaries in conjunction with the Colonial rulers did not want the Mundas to get back their rights to the forest. He was greatly shocked to hear Father Notrit say that the Munda Sarders were all robbers, plunderers and cheats. This hatred of father Notrit for the Munda Sarders, who were fighting hard for their rightful demands of the land, led Birsa to give up education, leave the Chaibasa Mission and stand by the Munda Sarders for their agitation against the colonial rulers.

The social, political and economic exploitation of the Munda Community made Birsa a rebel - a rebel with a cause. He rose in rebellion against the colonial rulers with the aim of securing Mundaraj and complete independence for the tribal people. To the oppressed and depressed Munda Community Birsa appeared to be a living God. They began to believe that Birsa would be able to free them from the shackles of years of inhuman humiliation and oppression. Birsa gave a clarion call for all the Mundas to stand united and launched a rebellion, a great tumult which he called 'Ulgulan' (Devi, 38). Like a true leader, Birsa held meetings with the fellow Mundas, convinced them of their respective roles to achieve the goal of Mundaraj and succeeded in uniting them and making them believe in their abilities to fight against those Colonial rulers, Zaminders and money-lenders who were their real enemies. The Mundas all over the Ranchi region believed that Birsa was their 'dharti-aba' (Devi, 54)

Birsa Munda's all out agitation against the exploitation and plunder of the forests by the tyrannical Colonial British rulers. The whole Munda Community having been victims of injustice and oppression responded whole heartedly to the battle cry of Birsa, their 'Bagvan', under whose surveillance Munda Community gathered courage and was ready to fight against the most powerful British rulers. For the survival of his community he had no alternative but to stand up to the blood-sucking colonial rulers and feudal landlords. Ultimately, the rebellion was crushed by the Government forces Birsa along with a large number of Mundas was arrested and put into the goal. In the prison house they were subjected to inhuman torture. However, unfortunate that Birsa Munda's death by poison in his food was a sheer conspiracy on the part of the jail Superintendent Anderson. The Superintendent Anderson instructed the jailor to write the blatant lie that Birsa Munda died of cholera in the jail. The British bureaucracy was afraid of Birsa so long as he was alive. Birsa was a tremendous force in mobilizing the tribal people to fight for their basic human rights. By putting Birsa to death the British rulers wanted to crush the rebellion once for all. They also attempted to demolish the divine stature of Birsa, fondly nurtured by the tribal people in their hearts. This precisely explains why immediately after his death, the jail Superintendent Anderson ordered for the cremation of Birsa's body, flouting the Munda tradition of burying the body after death. The jail sweeper was entrusted with the task of burning the body of Birsa. But the Mundas believed that "Ulgulan has no end. Bagvan has no death." (Devi, 89) . Birsa and the other Mundas who were imprisoned and meted out physical and mental torture were the pathetic victims of the deliberate miscarriage of justice. Barrister Jacob was correct in pointing out that Birsa might be done to death but his ideas continued to burn bright in the minds of Mundas.

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. The text shows how colonialism, in connivance with the semi-feudal system in India accelerated the process of detribalization and acculturation in various ways. Ranajit Guha calls this doubly articulated colonialism in India when he avers, Dominance in colonial India was doubly articulated. It stood on the one hand for Britain's power to rule over its South Asian subjects, and on the other, for the power exercised by the indigenous elite over the subaltern amongst the subject exploitation itself...the alien moment of colonist dominance was matched thus by an indigenous moment within the general configuration of power..(Guha100)

Conclusion:

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–reflections in the root sense." 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. 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 in contemporary oppression. 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.

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