

Potrayal of Tribals in the Fiction of Mahasweta Devi

Ankita Sharma
Assistant Professor of English
Pt. NRS Govt College, Rohtak

Tribals are the original inhabitants of India. In India, there are about 426 scheduled tribe groups (Chanda 130). The tribals because they lie beyond the familiar mainstream culture (i.e. in remote areas of forests, deserts, mountains, having their own traditions, culture, rituals, dances, folk tradition, their own concept of progress and societal norms), are placed in the 'other' slot (Subaltern) i.e. the wild, the savage, the barbaric. The notions of sensuality, black magic, barbarity are associated with the tribals. In an interview with GayatriSpivak, Mahasweta Devi observes that the mainstream and the tribal cultures run parallel. They do not have a meeting point (qtd. in Yadav 157).

Deprived of their land settlements by colonialism, the tribals form an acutely marginalized section in independent India. Human Rights are non-existent for the tribals. Right to have a proper education, housing, drinking water, electricity, health facilities, communication, right over the land, they are denied everything. Elite or ruling class gets the chance to make money at the cost of tribal development. Their poverty is a big capital for the elite class as they plan big projects involving crores of rupees, gather funds but nothing is done to improve their situation.

Devi, in her Preface to *Agnigarbha*, says that the tribal groups exist in hostile, semi-colonial, semi-feudal, dominant cultural structures that carry on a continuous, shrewd and systematic assault on their social system, their culture, their very tribal identity and existence (qtd. in Yadav 157-158). She, again writes, "The tribals today are oppressed from all sides. They have lost their lands and are forced to work as migrant workers. Their culture is threatened by the vulgar onslaught of films. Political forces have created an exploitative elite class within them who exercise undue power. The dowry system has made its way into the tribal society. Faced with absolute erosion of traditional norms and culture, tribals have held on to the witch cult with a vengeance, in order to assert their identity" (qtd. in Chanda 140). Tribals have a faceless existence. Tribals are evicted from their lands to build dams or industries. Whether it was Narmada Dam or SardarSarovar project, the tribals are always

distant spectators. Their role is to see how their land is making India's wealth. In each case there is large scale tribal land eviction and the tribals receive neither land nor money in exchange.

In Indian history also they are marginalized. They are seldom mentioned. Many tribal peasant rebellions against the British in the 18th and 19th century never get a mention in the history of the Indian freedom struggle. Infact, at that time, the most militant outbreaks tended to be of tribal communities. SumitSarkar in his book *Modern India* cites several such struggles like the Santhal rebellion (1855), the Kherwar or SaphaHar movement (1870), the Naikda tribe's rebellion (1868), the Kacha Naga tribe's rebellion (1882), Koya and Konda Dora tribe's rebellion (1879-80), the *Ulgulan* (Great Tumult) of BirsaMunda (1899-1900), Chenchu tribe's rebellion (1913), the Khond rebellion (1914), the Oraon rebellion (1914), TanaBhagat movement (1920), ThadoeKuki rebellion (1917), Bhil rebellion (1913), Eka movement (1922), Tebhaga rebellion (1946), Telengana rebellion (1946-1951) etc.

The great leaders of the nation like Gandhi, Phuley and Ambedkar who worked for the lower castes seldom mentioned the tribals whose very existence was threatened under the mainstream onslaught. India is the largest democracy but discrimination goes on even after independence. The tribals are even lower than the Hindu lowest caste. The ideal of equality enshrined in the constitution remains a far fetched dream. Referring to the bias against the tribes, Dilip D'Souza illustrates a sample from a book by a British officer, MacMunn, who equates tribesmen as the "Underworld" of India, "absolutely the scum ... of no more regard than the beasts of the field" (qtd. in Yadav 157).

In 1871, the British Government "notified" certain tribes as "criminals" and passed the notorious "Criminal Tribes Act of 1871". 1871 Criminal Tribes Notification Act was repealed but Government of India introduced a Habitual Offenders Act in 1959 for every state which is nothing but a repetition of the British Criminal Tribes Act. So what happened before continues even today. That the 1871 Act is kept alive by the government of India is proved by countless instances. For instance, in Maharashtra nomadic denotified communities that sell herbal medicines can be seen fleeing from village to village as they have to obtain passes from the police to stay in one place for four days only. About six years ago, some women, belonging to the denotified 'Sansi' community were arrested by police and the word 'thief' was branded on their foreheads with hot iron. Thus, India is keeping the colonial legacy by

treating hundreds of communities as born criminals. All over India, such communities (tribals) are jailed, mob-lynched, tortured to death in police lock-ups. For instance:

1. Between 1979 and 1982, 42 Lodhatribals were mob-lynched not for crimes committed, but for being born as 'Lodhas'.
2. Between 1960 and 1998, more than 50 KheriaSabars were killed by the police or mob-lynched (Devi, "Year of Birth 1871" n. pag.).

Devi's stories are an extension of her activism and reportage. She does not romanticize the tribals. She draws upon her experience with them and her knowledge of their philosophy of living i.e., each life a confirmation of courage, wisdom and endurance. Mahasweta Devi delineates the struggle of the tribals against oppression and discrimination by the dominant. Her fiction participates in the subaltern debate by subverting the monologic authority of the mainstream history through a host of diverse deconstructive strategies. In her fiction, such as *Titu Mir*, *Operation-?BashaiTudu*, *ChottiMundaand His Arrow*, she re-excavates the margins to revise the mainstream history (Beniwal 27).

In the story under analysis, i.e. "Draupadi", tribals are shown in action, fighting for their rights, for their lands. The text exposes the "socio-economic determinacy of oppression" (Beniwal 28) engineered by the dominant. The role of the indigenous subaltern who continually challenges (Dopdi and Dulna) the consolidation of feudalism at the grassroots and organizes frequent protests against the growing exploitation of peasants and villagers is foregrounded.

In this story, Devi's subaltern historiography undertakes to uncover especially the lives of the subaltern /marginalized group. The dominant/official historiography (Senanayak and the state) which focuses on the ruling personae and the incidents surrounding them is ridiculed or satirized in the story. In presenting Dopdi's and Dulna's revolt against the landowners, Devi not only exposes the hegemonic politics of the elite, but also highlights the instances of indigenous resistance that provides the subalterns their very own historical tradition and their role models, and infuses in them a sense of awareness, enthusiasm and bonding.

"Draupadi" can be categorised under the atrocity narratives where a subaltern's or its community's trauma, pain, resistance, protest and social change is documented. Such texts like Dalit narratives document the sufferings of and atrocities committed upon a subaltern

class of the society. The writing proceeds from the issues of poverty, violence, rejection and suffering. The trauma and strategies of survival are recorded (Nayar 83).

Another example of subaltern resistance in Devi's fiction is Titu Mir who led Narkelberia uprising (1830-1831) against the British in Bengal. *Titu Mir* is Devi's probe into the socio-economic consequences of the Permanent Settlement Act, especially its impact on ordinary farmers. Such rebellions, though doomed to failure, signalled common man's (subaltern's) capacity for resistance. *ChottiMunda and His Arrow* takes this continuing battle of the tribals against the oppressive powers belonging to mainstream India further. Criminalization of politics, inhuman torture and oppression of the marginal continue unabated and hence, makes resistance inevitable. ChottiMunda's revolt dramatizes the collective revolt of the subaltern of Munda, Oraon and other Hindu outcastes. Devi's Bangla novel, *AranyerAdhikar* is again about the subaltern (Munda) rebellion (under the leadership of BirsaMunda) (Beniwal 28-30).

The experience of suffering is collective when social, historical and political structures oppress the tribals. Due to the common factors of caste and class, the individual experience can be universalized because any tribal, for that matter, would have the same experience. But a tribal woman's experience (Gendered Subaltern/ marginalized woman) necessarily differs from a man's because of the politics of gender. Gendered subaltern is a female subaltern who faces added exploitation due to her gender. The tribal women have always been at the receiving end. The forces of caste, class and gender have produced devastating results for these women.

The subordination of tribal women operates at following levels. They are 'viewed' or 'evaluated' according to the discourses of the mainstream. Tribal women do not stand up to the mainstream's conception of women's roles and social position. The tribal woman's independence is misinterpreted as immorality. Her boldness is seen as a criminal bent of mind. She is seen as an exotic, sensuous and mysterious creature. Her body is most often taken to be an object of 'gaze'. The participation in the national freedom struggle and the labour force they contribute in the economic development of the country is rarely recognized. These women face "the double jeopardy of being woman and also tribal" (Yadav 157). Their gender (and thus their body) renders them vulnerable to the kind of representation the mainstream awards to them. This is a very subtle form of exploitation or subordination which has roots in gender.

Gendered Subaltern often figures in Devi's works. Devi remarks that this does not mean that she is gender-biased. Devi says, "I never consider myself as a woman writer, as a feminist. Nothing. I am a writer and when I write, I write of such people who live much below the poverty lines. They are men, women and children. I do not isolate the woman. Women have to pay a lot. They also have their special problems. They come to my stories naturally, not just to uphold the woman Yes, a woman in the poorer class, she suffers because of her class, she suffers because of her body. That is always there, but that does not mean I am especially gender-biased" (Interview with Collu145-146).

In the story, "Draupadi", the tribals form an extremely marginalized class. They have no recourse to the benefits of political independence or democracy. But, the female protagonist (a tribal woman), faces not only social and political marginalization but also sexual exploitation at the hands of the police due to her gender. Dopdi in Devi's "Draupadi" is a gendered subaltern, oppressed due to her caste and class but more because of her gender.

In Devi's "Behind the Bodice", an ace photographer, UpinPuri sells the photographs of a beautiful, nude Gangor (a tribal woman), to be printed on calendars, posters and expensive magazines, without knowing the consequences. These photos result in the commodification and degradation of Gangor's body. Factors, such as market considerations and little chances of retaliation, lead to such careless and reductive images of tribal women. Such photos project tribal women as only 'bodies'. When these photos are repeatedly presented, they deny the tribal women dignity as humans and place them at risk. These women are degraded at every newspaper stall (Spivak, Introduction vii-xv).

AnuradhaChanda reports some real life cases of the gendered nature of exploitation, tribal women are subject to. The exploitation of tribal women working in the stone quarries in the town of Mallarpur in Birbhum district is a case in point. Large numbers of quarry workers are Santhal women who are drawn from a desperately impoverished area. Many of them are teenaged girls. They are made to work 10 to 12 hours a day; are paid a pittance and are not provided with mandatory safeguards such as masks. They receive no medical treatment and no compensation if they are injured in the course of their work. To add to the misery, many of these quarries have been dug on land which belonged to Santhals (140).

Besides, the women workers are sexually exploited by the rich owners. The police collude with the quarry owners. One such case that was widely reported in the media revealed the extraordinary clout of the owners, administrative and political. The whole incident came

to light because of an FIR lodged by HupniKishku, a Santhal woman of the area. The gender angle became clear when instead of dispensing justice to HupniKishku, the tribal council paraded her naked around the village on the allegation that in spite of her being married she had a relationship with a non-tribal man. This is a glaring example of double-edged gender oppression (Chanda 141).

The women who struggled to get themselves educated and employed feel a tremendous pressure. While they got alienated from their own kind, they were also not accepted by other communities. ChuniKotal was one such woman of Lodha tribe. Her tribe was an obstacle. Her pursuit of higher education and search for suitable employment received such a resistance that she committed suicide (Yadav 169). Tribal women are oppressed from both sides i.e. by their communities due to superstition and traditional stronghold. Secondly, they do not get support from the mainstream.

Devi is concerned with the predicament of the tribals but the gendered nature of oppression is her main preoccupation in the story "Draupadi".