



Chotti Munda and his Arrow – A Saga of Microscopic Marginality

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the marginalised condition of the Adivasis as represented in Mahasweta Devi's Chotti Munda and His Arrow (first publication in 1980, translated in English in 2002). The idea of marginality is dynamic, cross-disciplinary and multifaceted. Generally marginality insinuates to the condition of dwelling in the margin of society. Societal marginality is characterised by the dearth of resources, skills and opportunities and by reduced level of participation in main-stream society. Such marginalised people are neglected on the basis of race, gender, culture, religion, education, and ethnicity. Spatial marginality occurs when people are removed from main-stream activities because of geographical isolation. Spatial marginality is of two types – macro-spatial marginality, and micro-spatial marginality. In society the gay, the lesbian, the transgender, the black, the physically challenged, the minorities, the women are supposed to be marginalised. Apart from these multifaceted layers of marginality, the Adivasis (the tribal people or the nomad) are ethnically the worst marginalised microscopic section of society who is removed from the main stream power-politics. They are the so-called 'Other' in society. Their life and the impact of the main stream cultures on them have poetically been presented in Mahasweta Devi's Chotti Munda and his Arrow. My article will explore how they are exploited as well as marginalised and how they become the subaltern in the main stream history. Chotti Munda is a member of tribal people but the scheduled tribe of the area believed that Chotti has magical arrow. Chotti had learnt the process of throwing arrow from Dhani Munda. Thus the

tradition of arrow-throwing descended from Birsha to Dhani and then to Chotti. But, the simple ethnic life of the Munda, Oraon, Chagan becomes the prey of Tirathnath Lala, Partap Chada. Cultural marginality is also traced in the novel as found in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958).

Keywords: Marginality, Cross-disciplinary, Adivasi, Societal marginality, Spatial marginality, Macro-spatial marginality, Micro-spatial marginality, subaltern.

Introduction

The word – ‘marginality’ – has been constructed from the word – ‘margin’. Now margin means at the edge. But, “‘Marginality’ is the position of people on the edges, preventing their access to resources and opportunities, freedom of choices, and the development of personal capabilities. Being excluded, not only from growth but also from other dimensions of developmental and societal progress, is an indication of the extremely poor being at the margins of society and in many cases marginality is a root cause of poverty”¹. Now marginalisation is a process of excluding poor people from the main stream. There are various types of marginality. Societal marginality is characterised by the dearth of resources, skills and opportunities and by reduced level of participation in main-stream society. Such marginalised people are neglected on the basis of race, gender, culture, religion, education, and ethnicity. Spatial marginality occurs when people are removed from main-stream activities because of geographical isolation. Spatial marginality is of two types – macro-spatial marginality, and micro-spatial marginality. Macro-spatial marginality occurs ‘between central location and areas distant from economic activity i.e the metropolis-countryside divide’². Micro-spatial marginality occurs ‘between geographically closer locations and areas i.e urban township within metropolitan areas’³. In addition to this there is in situ-spatial marginality which is found ‘within very small areas of urban gentrification where wealthier people move into less prosperous neighbourhoods’⁴. In society the gay, the lesbian, the transgender, the black, the physically challenged, the minorities, the women are supposed to be marginalised. Apart from these multifaceted layers of marginality, the Adivasis (the tribal people or the nomad of India) are ethnically the worst marginalised microscopic section of society who is removed from the main stream power-politics. They are the so-called ‘Other’ in society. Even they are marginalised from education policy, health, the pattern of economics. These multi-layered marginalisations of the Adivasis have been

¹ (Assefa Mehretu 3)

² (Stodulka 23)

³ (Stodulka 23)

⁴ (Stodulka 23)

revealed in Mahasweta Devi's Chotti Munda and his Arrow.

In Chotti Munda and His Arrow we find the saga of Chotti Munda from the beginning of the twentieth century to the post emergency period of India. Actually the novel projects the social position of the Munda, Oraon, Dusad, Dhobi, Kurmi communities and the novel also presents how these Adivasi communities like the Munda and Oraon and the lower caste Hindu untouchables like Dusad, Kurmi and Dhobi have been marginalised from mainstream socio-economic systems of India. . The story of the novel commences with Purti Munda who was the great grandfather of Chotti Munda. Purti Munda came by Chotti river and settled there. Purti Munda had the experience that whenever he had gone, he found valuable metal there. So, upper class people like the 'Whites- Bengalis – Biharis' would come there to snatch the resources from the hand of the Munda. Such marginalisation was found in the humble life of Purti Munda. Bisra Munda is the father of Chotti Munda. By the river Chotti they dwelt with other communities. The village is known as Chotti village. Rail station is constructed there. There were many neighbouring villages like Murudi, Kurmi, Khuntkatti, Tohri, Barn, Komandi, Sarahi, Dhutra, Chas. Chotti is under Tehar Police Station. Bisra Munda had two sons, named Chotti and Koel and a daughter, named Daski. The humble Munda people live in Chotti by cultivating paddy, rye, maize, pepper, brinjal, squash plant, papayas, guavas and myrobalan. They also tend poultry and sell eggs in the market. They believed in Haramdeo and there was a Pahan (priest) in every village of Munda community. They respect Pahan and Pahani for their religious belief. They love the animal and birds of the forest surrounding the village. They do not hunt female animal. Chotti got married to Pahan's granddaughter and later Chotti became the father of three children – Harmu, Somchar and Sukhni. Koel got married to Mungri and they had a son, named Etwa. Chhagan, Parash, Sana, Donka, Motia Dhobin, Rupa, Jita lived together in the village. Chotti had learnt archery from Dhani Munda who was a Birsaiter. There was a popular belief that Chotti had magical arrow. This simple life has been prey of bonded labour from generation to generation. There was Lala Baijnath under whose authority the Munda, lower caste Hindu untouchables, and the Dhobi community work as bonded labour. So, they work but they do not get worthy money for their work. The poor people are impoverished by keeping the poor Mundas in the trap of bonded labour by the upper class people like Lala Baijanath, Partap Chadha, the king of Narasingharh. They go to work in the field of the upper class people and instead they do not get their proper wage. If any person of a family had taken a loan for crisis from the upper class, the tradition of giving bonded labour goes from generation to generation. Thus they are doubly marginalised. Gaya Munda says –“ Our heart's torn with givin' bond labour. And fines for

everything”⁵. . Once there was drought and people have no food and in that time they were thinking whether they would go to put thumbprint in bonded labourer. At this time Pahan says –“Ye’ll gie bonded labour for a thumbprint, f’r a bit of rice-wheat to eat, I’ll not say ‘yeah’ to that. This bonded labour won’t be quit in ten generations. Everyone falls into its trap. See all t’ Ganjus, Dusads, Chamars, Dhopas – all the oppressed, tribals and out-castes –tied up in bonded labour”⁶. Whenever they go to the market to sell their natural products, they have to pay money as toll to the land owner. In addition to this they have to pay fines on diverse issues. Hence they were the prey of financial marginalisation.

The workers of Lala Baijanath insulted Bisra Munda and sent to police station. Bisra Munda could not accept this and ultimately committed suicide in front of the house of Lala Baijanath. Lala Baijanath’s son Tirathnath Lala was a shark. He wanted to put every Munda, Kurmi, Dhobi in to the pattern of bonded labour. They provided gifts to the Munda in festivals where the competition of archery takes place. Chotti had won rice, money, cloth in many archery competitions. Daroga, Harbans Chadha, Station Master give prizes to them. The humble Mundas were happy with this though it was the tradition of the Munda community. There was school but the students from Munda, Ganjus, Dusads, Chamars, Dhopas family do not get space there because of the presence Upper class students and their negligence and stigmatization. The upper class people thought them low-minded, wild, black and these stigmatizations were instrumental for making them marginalised socially and educationally.

Many youths like Dukhai, Bikha and Sukha from Kurmi village came to Chotti to learn archery so that they can show their worth in fair. Later Dukhai killed the manager of the King of Nakata. The manager, named Siaram exploited the local Munda to a great extent and even he showed audacity to them. He wanted more money from the local Munda. Dukhai could not tolerate this to make them financially more impoverished and hence he killed him. People spread the rumour that Chotti taught them archery and so he had been able to kill the powerful man. Later Puran Munda killed a local agent. Budha Munda and Bharat Munda fought against the Diku. One day there was a brawl between the Munda people and the manager of Tirathnath. The gatekeeper of Tirathnath fired and it wounded a policeman in front of Daroga, the Station master and an Advasi officer, named Dilip Tarwe. So the gate keeper was jailed but Harmu was also jailed because he was engaged in the protest. Harmu was punished without any criminal offence. Despite of this Chotti did not do any harm of

⁵ (Devi, Chotti Munda and His Arrow 97)

⁶ (Devi, Chotti Munda and His Arrow 45)

Tirathnath but rather he saved his life from a running train. So, it is categorical that many of the archery learners under Chotti's guidance thwarted the decade-spanning administration of exploitation made by the Diku. This tribal resistance depicts how far they have been marginalised from the main stream of society. This is also an example of racial marginalisation. As the macro-spatially marginalised are stigmatized as black, 'subcaste', 'lowcaste', outcaste, Adivasi by the Diku, the civilized people dwelling in the main stream, they are not given scope to come in the new economic pattern of the country. So, Sana Munda views – "Violent thinking comes to mind. But our village is all mixed kinds. We are minority, so I have no confidence. I'm scared of polis"⁷.

In the draught Tirathnath had several wells in his house but the Munda, Chhagan, Kurmi had no water to drink. There was no arrangement of water there. Even the Government officers were not ready to declare Chotti as draught-affected area. Ronaldson's elder brother who was the secretary to the Governor of Bihar did not take any attempt for the people. Ultimately under Chotti's guidance the people dug ditch in the sand of the river. Clear water came out. Even the secretary prohibited Ronaldson to go into the area.

Time moves on. Harbans Chadha builds brick kiln in the area. The Munda people get daily wage for working in the kiln. So, Tirathnath did not get workers for his land. People avoided to work as bonded labourer. Harbans advised Tirathnath to think of new policy to plunder the poor people. In the mean time Koel died of Meningitis. The area has no health centre. Bisra's wife died of snake-bite. Anwar, a fruit seller, Trishan, a contractor, Japu Singh, a local money lender Khublal, a colliery owner appeared in the land to deprive the people of their natural resources, animal, wood by giving them low wage. Chotti says to Harmu "Yeah elephants! In t' old days, yet get into t' forest, there's tigers, there's deer, so many animals. Now not a one can be seen"⁸. So marginalisation from natural resource, health arrangement, and economics goes on. New policies by new people were being sketched to dupe and thereby to marginalise them. The centre does not come forward to pull them. The middle men like the Diku throw them in the margin.

After Independence people became the cruel prey of these sharks. The Munda people thought that they would get daily wage but they did not have any knowledge about the proper wage. The contractor collected huge amount from the Government for digging a ditch by the rail line but he gave very low wage to the people.

⁷ (Devi, Chotti Munda and His Arrow 103)

⁸ (Devi, Chotti Munda and His Arrow 292)

During 1970s the tribal people expected much from the Independent country. The members of Congress visited the area and promised many things to them. They came there to collect money from the zamindar, Kings, businessman. Later a new wing of Congress party, called Youth League appeared under the leadership of Arjun Modi and Vijaya Modi. They did not like the Commis, the Naxalites. “When Chotti and his people go to vote, they see that their votes have already been cast. There’s fighting at the booth to hold back the voters. Armed Mundas hold back the voters with stout sticks”⁹. They were marginalised from voting right.

After the victory of the Youth League in election the tribal communities found much scope of working. Central Government abolishes bonded labour. But the local Diku wanted to create a different atmosphere to prevent them from the knowledge of the new amendment. The process of making them marginalised went on with new form and face. Romeo, Pahlwan and Dildar turned up there with their dark past life of corruption and criminality and with politically backpowered. They killed many people. Romeo raped a girl in a city. They demanded cut money from the agent of Tirathnath and Harbans Chadha. Whenever the tribal community protested against low wage, problem is found. In Kanata village there was quarrel between Rabidas untouchables and the zaminder, Daridranarayan Misir on the problem of low wage. Romeo says – “Tell every landlord money-lenders, we will teach these harijans – God’s people –such a lesson in five years that will take them 5,000 years to raise their head again. Remove these harijans, these tribals”¹⁰. . . In the Emergency period the condition of the tribal life became spoilt. Villages were burnt. Pahan and Pahani of Chotti were killed. Many people became injured. Ananda Mahato reported the tragic incidents and the corruption of the hooligans, government officers in Adivasi Samachar but he was brutally put to death in a planned accident. Tirathnath carried on his cultivation with the labourers. Partap Chadha and Harbans Chadha became the owner of cement factory, Chadha Bus service, brickfield, motor service repairing workshop. Romeo, Diladar, Pahlwan carried on their hooliganism, murder, collection of cut money. The tribal people become more and more marginalised from the Post Independence development planning. Chotti made Romeo and Pahlwan severely injured by his arrow. Dildar died of tetanus. Dr Amalesh Khurana was sent on behalf of the Central Government to prepare a socio-economic report of the area. The nephew of Harbans Chadha, named Rajbans gave shelter to Dr Khurana. Swarup Prasad wanted development of the tribal through his Adivasi Welfare Bharati but he was wounded severely. There was IAD Shankar. But under the political matrix of Youth

⁹ (Devi, Chotti Munda and His Arrow 214)

¹⁰ (Devi, Chotti Munda and His Arrow 230,231)

League, Congress, Police and IAD the tribal had to suffer more. Dr Khurana wanted to prepare a good report but Government told his different history. "The Minister says, No, Doctor Khurana. The Central Government understands nothing. Just passes Acts. Look, the Central Government knows full well that if an Act is passed for the welfare of adivasis or untouchable, it should never be implemented. Why not? Because that will light a fire. Are untouchables and adivasis a factor? And landlord, moneylender, landed farmer these are the pillars of the government. Who gives campaign funds? Who controls the vote?"¹¹ Meanwhile Romeo tried to rape Basmati but Chotti and a few tribal people saved the girl. In 1977 election Janata Party came into power. Romeo, Pahlwan went into the shelter of Janta Party. Somchar, Upa and Disha who were the members of Adivasi Welfare Bharati murdered Romeo, Pahlwan and their four new goons in a deep forest to reduce the oppression.

The local police wanted to catch the murderer of Romeo and his people. They arranged a fair on 'the last day of the Goddess feast – Bijoya Dashimi 1978' where all the tribal people of the area assembled. 250 armed police came to keep an eye over a thousand adivasis, SDO, Daroga, Tirathnath, Harbans. Chotti says –"Munda – Oraon – Dusad – Dhobi have never broken trust! And what did we get for that Lord? What did you give to us? You'll raise terror over us They went to take t' honour of our daughters, all t' daughter of t' families of t' pahan, his wife, of Motia, of t' railway porter, of Dukha, Jugal, Chhagan – they dies"¹². They did not tell anything about the murderer but the question of septuagenarian Chotti makes the civilized world reflective about their marginalised condition.

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¹¹ (Devi, Chotti Munda and His Arrow 279)

¹² (Devi, Chotti Munda and His Arrow 325,326)