



“Inscribing Tribe and Class: Intersections in Mahasweta Devi’s Selected Works”

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Abstract

The term “class” refers to hierarchically structured social groups, differentiated on the basis of economic criteria. The subaltern classes in India are constituted by numerous and varied groups of people marked by differences of race or tribe, caste, region and gender. Mahasweta’s activism, journalistic work and fiction deal primarily with the tribal subject, but also articulates the particular intersections of the category of tribe with the larger picture of class-exploitation in colonial and postcolonial India. Her narratives depict characters from different castes and tribes, who constitute India’s depressed classes, without losing sight of the specificities of historic period, region, caste, tribe or gender. Even as she presents the realistic picture of the tribals’ economic and political marginalization within the larger discourse of class-exploitation, she shows the tribal negotiating with this marginalization and resisting it through the agency of their own unique ethnic cultural discourse. This paper discusses her general oeuvre, the novels *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977), *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (2002), *The Book of the Hunter* (2002), and selected short stories.

Keywords: Class, tribe, discourses, marginalization, intersections, ethnic cultural discourse,

Mahasweta Devi

Introduction

Raymond Williams observes that the modern use of the word “class”, referring to hierarchically differentiated social groups (such as upper class, middle class and lower class), can be traced to the period between 1700 and 1840 in Britain, when the Industrial Revolution was underway. During this period social groupings were redefined in economic terms, replacing the earlier hierarchies based on birth and rank, in view of the “increasing consciousness that social position is made rather than merely inherited” (61). Marxist theory identifies class as the primary basis of social organization, relating it to the means of production in a particular society. Thus there is one class of people, usually in a minority, that controls the means of production and, therefore, possesses wealth and power, and the other class of people, usually in the majority, who do the productive labour, but has access to neither power nor wealth. Marx divided history into three epochs -that of slavery, feudalism and capitalism- based on the way class was structured in societies. Class-divided societies were characterized by relations of exploitation and of domination and subordination, operated through the hegemonic structures of society and the state. Social classes can thus be defined as:

... those distinct social formations made up of groups of people who have a similar relationship to the means of production in society and, as a result, a common social and cultural position within a unequal system of property ownership, power and material rewards. (Hartley 39)

Contemporary postcolonial theorists use the term “subaltern classes” to refer to those social groups who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling/elite classes in a society or nation. The term “subaltern”, first used by the Italian political thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), was a military metaphor which meant “of inferior rank”. (Ascroft et al *Key Concepts* 215-219) It has become popular in academic and non-academic discourse with the rewriting of both colonial and nationalist histories of postcolonial nations from the point of view of the subaltern classes by the “Subaltern Studies” group of historiographers from South Asia, particularly India. Mahasweta Devi’s works have been read by such postcolonial critics as attempts to reinsert the suppressed histories of the subaltern classes of India into the grand narrative of Indian history. But as critics like Gayatri Spivak point out, the category of class is not a homogenous and autonomous entity in a country like India. The subaltern classes in India are constituted by numerous and varied groups of people marked by differences of race or tribe, caste, region and gender. Mahasweta’s fiction that deals with the tribal subject articulates the particular intersections of the category of tribe with the larger picture of class-exploitation in colonial and postcolonial India.

Tribe and Class in India

Because of their unique location in the history of India’s society and polity, Mahasweta, however, considers the tribal people, around 8.2% of the population, to be the most exploited among the subaltern classes of India. In the official discourse of the Indian nation, tribes are considered to be a distinct ethnic category of people, with specific constitutional rights and privileges conferred on them due to their marginalized and endangered status, meant to guarantee them their economic, social and cultural autonomy. But the long history of domination and oppression from pre-colonial times to the present day has reduced Indian tribes into one among the most exploited, deprived and dispossessed groups of people in India today. During pre-

colonial times, tribes had enjoyed a fair degree of insularity and autonomy, but as civilizations grew and urban centres and villages developed, the tribal people began to fall into confrontational and exploitative relationships with other groups or “dikus” (meaning “outsiders”), both in their material and cultural lives. The British introduced new land regulations and promoted the feudal system and private ownership, which replaced the system of communal land holdings by the tribals and made them strangers in their own lands. The erstwhile tribal areas were earmarked by the British for plantations, mines and industries. Deprived of their lands, traditional occupations and burdened by new taxes, the tribals fell prey to rapacious money lenders and exploitative landlords, many of them becoming victims of the evil of bonded labour and slavery, along with the lower castes. The loss of their lands and eviction led to many tribal revolts and peasant rebellions in the nineteenth century, which were mercilessly suppressed by the colonial army. Kaushik Ghosh observes that the introduction of alien land tenures in tribal areas by colonial administrators lead to the incorporation of tribes like the Santhals, Mundas, Hos, Oraons and Paharias of the Chotanagpur area and other hill tribes of the North East into the indentured labour market as “dhangars” or “coolies”, both in India and overseas during colonial times. “This transformation was neither inevitable nor an evolutionary progression from tribe to peasant to wage- labourer. New imaginations and discourses of primitivism had to be created in place of the older discourse of savage hill-men as an inseparable part of the transformation of the Chotanagpur peoples into a stream of coolie labourers”. (Kaushik Ghosh, 13-14)

Postcolonial studies have shown how colonial discourse, especially the “scientific” and anthropological theories of race served as a handmaiden to the economic and political goals of imperialism, ensuring that the labour of colonized people was appropriated to further the capitalistic growth of the empire. The tribes were pictured as being “naturally suitable” to hard

labour because of their wild and hardy nature, their “castelessness” and so on. The overlapping of the category of tribe into that of class has its historical reasons, which has been explored by postcolonial scholars and critics. Ania Loomba observes that the “ideology of racial superiority translated easily into class terms... Certain sections of people were thus racially identified as the natural working classes” (126). The proud, independent indigenous people of India were thus reduced to near slavery as docile and hardworking coolies, mere fodder for the well-oiled imperial machine, and in the process losing their lands and livelihoods, their unique cultural identities and their rights to a dignified human existence.

Mahasweta Devi’s works

Although it remains an undisputed fact that her works have received wide critical attention under the label of “subaltern” literature, Mahasweta herself does not attach much significance to the term itself. “I write about a country which is class-divided, class-exploited, class-oppressed...I believe in class ... (“I am Interested in History” *Kakatiya Journal* 93-99). The subaltern, for Mahasweta, is any human being who is oppressed, deprived and marginalized by virtue of his/her class, caste, tribe or gender and whose voice has been silenced in his/her own country. Her activism involves ground-level interaction with the tribal people, detailed documentation of their problems, negotiating with the authorities and helping them to fight legal battles for basic concerns like land, housing, employment, education, health care and so on, documented in the collection *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*. In her fictional works, however, she relates class issues like land, labour and wages to the socio-cultural aspects of tribal life, thereby providing a holistic picture of the different dimensions of the tribal experience. However, she never loses sight of the specificities of the situation and characters being represented, whether of historic period, region, caste, tribe or gender.

Mahasweta too identified the tribals' right to their land and its loss through forceful means as the primary issue in the saga of their transformation from proud, autonomous, ethnic communities into the ranks of the "depressed" classes of modern India. She observes, "... there are several reasons for this, including the poor level of development among the tribals, lack of literacy and education among them, and their deep-rooted mistrust and fear of the legal system. But the real cause is their class position". (*Dust on the Road* 70) The eviction of the tribal from his traditional forest and agricultural lands thus marks the starting point of their marginalization. Though written later in her career, it is in the novel *The Book of the Hunter* (2002) that Mahasweta goes furthest back into history and brings alive the lives of the reclusive hunting tribes, the Shabars, who are one of the most marginalized tribal groups in India today. This novel is set in the sixteenth century and depicts a picture of a tribal world that was still more or less autonomous and isolated, where the tribal lived in their traditional forestlands, in harmony with his environment. But the first effects of alien cultures were beginning to be felt and the tribe's existence becomes increasingly threatened in the face of more powerful and dominant groups in the village societies. The forest has shrunken as the village has advanced and the children of the forest are forced to mingle with other people and are increasingly made aware of their "inferiority" both in cultural and material terms. The tribal protagonist Kalya's burning but impotent anger, and his reckless attempt at asserting his identity are tragic reminders of the slow but inevitable victory of the mainstream over the subaltern. Kalya's participation in the traditional hunt is his attempt at resisting this imposition of a lower class status by the more powerful mainstream society, on his ancient heritage as a proud hunter and the sentinel of the forests and the forest goddess Abhaya. With Kalya's death, the tribal begins his saga of loss, deprivation and death that will get worse as time goes on. The Shabars (along with the Lodhas and Kherias of West Bengal) are today one of the

most deprived of all tribes, having been “notified” as “criminal tribes” by the British. Although “denotified” by the Indian government in 1976, they still continue to suffer from social stigma and are the targets of unmentionable cruelty and atrocities at the hands of society. (*Dust on the Road* 114-137, Preface *The Book of the Hunter* vi-ix) The short story “Arjun” represents the present condition of the Kheria Shabars as they live increasingly deprived lives, having lost all touch with their traditional lands and ways of life. They are now just casual labourers who are exploited by the wily politicians of the village, who force them to cut down trees, pushing them into conflict with the authorities. Ketu, the hero, is in and out of jail all the time, for performing the “all important task of land encroachment, crop theft, disposal of corpses and clearing government owned forests”, the authorial voice tells us. (185) The story dramatizes the Shabar’s successful resistance to the efforts of the exploiters to get them to cut down their sacred “arjun” tree.

In her first novel on tribal history, the Sahitya Akademi Award -winning *Aranyer Adhikar*, (1977) Mahasweta going right into the heart of the tribals’ forest lands and picking up the tale of the tribal uprising, the “Ulgulan” led by Birsa Munda against the British, to regain their rights to their lands in the forests of Chotanagpur, during the period between 1895 and 1901. Mahasweta builds up Birsa’s character by juxtaposing the two main aspects of his evolution as a revolutionary leader of the Mundas- his poverty-filled life and his legendary status as the divine saviour of the Mundas. On a momentous night, he hears the cry of the forest mother and pledges to save her honour that has been defiled by a procession of conquerors. He launches his agitation, called the “ulgulan”, to reclaim the tribals’ right to their forests and farmlands. (87-88) For the next five years, (from 1896-1901), Birsa and his fellowmen waged a valiant but losing battle with the colonial forces, which ended with Birsa’s capture, arrest and subsequent death in prison. Mahasweta’s narrative

treads the narrow, wavering path between the legends of the mystical, god-like Bhagwan Birsa and the sad facts of a failed tribal revolt. But, Mahasweta also brings in the intersections of tribal identity within the class struggle by foregrounding the intrinsically indigenous nature of their resistance- with the “primitive” but deadly bows and poisoned arrows, using their knowledge of the forest to survive in hiding and to surprise the enemy. She also shows how the tribal people use their oral discourse of song, tale and myth to embody the spirit of the struggle and to script their resistance into history as well as into myth.

Mahasweta continues the narration of the history of the transformation of the tribes into the category of exploited laboring classes from the beginning of the twentieth century right into post-independence India in her “best-beloved” novel, *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (2002) initially published in 1980. The novel traces the momentous events of Indian history- British rule, independence struggle, the first Congress government, the emergency, and the 1977 elections. These events do not touch the Munda’s lives in any significant way as they remain on the periphery and watch one set of masters replacing another, making no difference in their poor, marginalized existence. The struggles of the tribals led by Chotti Munda and the untouchables led by Chhagan take different forms, from digging wells during drought, fighting the combined forces of landlords, money-lenders, corrupt officials and political leaders and their goons. The novel brings alive the ground situation where the differences of caste and tribe are overridden by the constructions of class. An awareness that there is a need for solidarity among the different untouchable castes and tribals who form the labouring class if they are to put up any meaningful resistance to the exploitation of the state and society is foregrounded. As Gayatri Spivak says, “*Chotti Munda* repeatedly dramatizes subaltern solidarity: Munda, Oraon, and the Hindu outcastes must work together” (Translator’s Afterword *Chotti Munda* 366). Mahasweta

lampoons the academician whose is looking for “pure” adivasi villages to illustrate his “theories” on the problems of caste and tribe. Chotti reminds them, “But all adivasis don’ live in such villages lord. In our Chotti village untouchable-adivasi live together. In work-sweat, in joy-pain, we’re one” (*Chotti Munda* 306). Chotti’s story represents the swift changes that overtake the lives of the Munda tribes, transforming them from a distinct ethnic group into a major part of India’s subaltern classes.

Their tribal identity is evoked through the legend of Birsa Munda, which is linked to the story of Chotti through the figure of Dhani Munda, the old man who had fought with Birsa in his “ulgulan”. Dhani hands over to Chotti the “magic” arrow and the machete that once belonged to Birsa as a symbol of tribal identity, anointing him as the current leader of the Mundas. (12) Chotti knows that his unique tribal identity, here represented by his prowess with the bow and arrow, is well on its way to being “museumized”, and will now be confined to archery contests in tribal fairs, as symbolic artifacts of tribal culture and identity. When Dhani is killed in a police encounter, Chotti assumes the mantle of the tribe’s leader and his growing reputation instills fear and a grudging respect even from the all-powerful police and the landlord. His steady arm and continuous practice are the reasons behind his success with the bow and arrow, but for his people, it is a symbol of power and of hope. Fearing another tribal revolt, the officials ban Chotti from participating in archery contests and he is made a judge instead. But as Chotti is well aware, his everyday reality is that of a poor, marginalized tribal eking out a hand-to-mouth existence as a wage labourer. Mahasweta’s narrative thus suggests the complexity of the reality of the tribal in India today as they are caught between a harsh, deprived life and the memory of a proud, ancient past. The tableau-like ending where Chotti’s and Chhagan’s groups stand together, up in arms, facing the powerful state machinery, epitomizes this standpoint of the author. The use of the

tribal oral discourses of song, story and myth too is part of this resistance as Chotti's unique tribal identity is foregrounded from the general discourse of class.

Conclusion

Mahasweta's narratives thus define the various socio-historic-political hegemonic structures that led to the tribals' status as a marginalized class in all its discursive plurality. As Kumkum Yadav observes, Mahasweta's concern is not just with setting the political and historical record straight, but also with "the human predicament involved". (*Narratives on Tribals in India* 59) Her first published novel, *The Queen of Jhansi*, was about a royal queen and high caste widow who joins the ranks of "the other side of the people" as she displayed the courage to take on the powerful British army in defence of her kingdom and people. Characters like Maghai Dom in "Water", Patan in "Ajir" or Dulan Ganju in "Seeds" are all characters from the lower castes who suffer the double yoke of class and caste exploitation. Women, for her, are an exploited class in themselves and the boundaries of caste and tribe often appear irrelevant in the larger picture of class-exploitation portrayed in Mahasweta's women-centric stories like "Rudali", "Bayen", "Jamunabati's Mother", "Dhouli", "Sanichari", "Statue", "The Fairytale of Mohanpur" etc. In one of her most popular stories, "The Breast-Giver", the protagonist Jasoda belongs to the Brahmin caste, but is exploited in the name of both class and gender. Her definition of the category of class therefore, brings into its ambit the concerns of all people oppressed on the basis of class, tribe, caste or gender. Even as she presents the realistic picture of the tribals' economic and political marginalization within the larger discourse of class-exploitation, she shows the tribal negotiating with this marginalization and resisting it through the agency of their own unique ethnic cultural discourse. She adopts the innovative narrative techniques to weave the tribal's story in their own voice, taking recourse to the various narrative strategies of story, song and

myth that are the unique features of the tribals' oral discourse, setting it dialectically against the dominant discourses of history and culture.

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