



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## “Mundas Could Eat Rice Like Dikus<sup>1</sup>”: Food, Resistance And Identity Of The Subaltern In Mahasweta Devi’s *Chotti Munda And His Arrow*

Krishnapada Mandal  
Assistant Professor of English  
Nistarini College, Purulia, West Bengal

**Abstract:** The paper seeks to explore how the tribal people of India were/are deprived of access to one of the major staple foods— rice. It accentuates how the subaltern class took active part in challenging the Dikus/ elite’s hegemony over those food items. The food hegemony of the elite triggers the zeal of the subaltern to resist the powerful class. In Mahasweta Devi’s narrative, food, especially rice, emerges almost in regular basis. In the life of the Mundas, as Devi mentions in *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977), rice is a dream. The only food they (the Mundas) have access to is *ghato* (mealie), and that is why fantasy for rice grow in them and the fantasy led them to struggle. Displacing the Mundas from their land and capturing whole power over the land of the Mundas, the Dikus (powerful class) establish their own power and domineering system. In the ‘colonial’ and ‘elitist-nationalist’ historiography, the struggle or the resistance of the tribal people or the subaltern class is narrated without giving recognition to the resistance of this class. In Mahasweta Devi’s own word, “Tribal history is not seen as a continuity in Indian historiography.” (Devi ix) The scholars of Subaltern Studies are of the same view. Under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, a group of researchers— Goutam Bhadra, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak— insist on investigating the eliminated histories of the subaltern. The aim of this paper is to mark the role food plays both in history and story of the subaltern.

**Keywords:** Food, hegemony, subaltern, resistance, rice, class.

In his book, *Food* (2013), John Krebs gives an outline of the relationship between food and human life. According to him, cooking was one of the important inventions that caused human civilization. The use of weapons was also important factor towards human civilization. Using weapons, the ancient human beings cut off the meat of the hunted animal and then cooked. Cooking added a new taste to the meat. Thus, the ancient homo sapience advanced towards civilization. Emergence of agriculture was another remarkable incidence in human life. It gave humans scope to produce food for themselves. Initially the lands were not owned by anyone. People could harvest crops wherever the land was productive. The third remarkable change came in human life after the “invention of methods of preserving and processing food” (Krebs 7). The inventions of all these three prove how human mind was busy in thinking about food. The thought for food separates human beings from other species. It also separates one human being from another.

“In his essay, “Edible Ecriture” (1997), Terry Eagleton says: “If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food...Like the post-structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable, as gift, threat, poison, recompense, barter, seduction, solidarity, suffocation.” (Qtd. in Sahani 1) Eagleton has focused on the relationship between food and literature. Food in a text is not just what is eaten. It has more significance. It reflects on identity, culture, threat, seduction, suffocation etc. On the other hand, Roland Barthes, in his essay, “Toward a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption”, says: “For what is food? It is not only a collection of products...It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior.” (Barthes 29) Barthes emphasizes on the various different functions of food in a text. Food in a literary text communicates to psychology of the characters too. In short, food, like other literary devices, sometimes leads the readers to decipher the meaning of a text.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century gastronome, Brillat-Savarin emphasized on the relationship between food and identity. His comment, “tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are”, leads the food critics to investigate how food plays an important role as marker of identity. The paper intends to explore the food habits of the Munda folks in Mahasweta Devi’s novel, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2003). The paper also seeks to investigate how one group of people, the powerless, still struggle for food, whereas the other group, the powerful, sustain full control over that food.

In his essay, “Mahasweta: Sahityer ek Onyotoro Path” (Mahasweta: A Different Reading of Literature) (my translation), Abul Basar says: “Annatatwa chhara Mahaswetadir sahitya bojha jay na” (The writings of Mahaswetadi cannot be understood without food theory) (my translation) (Basar 127). The writings of Mahasweta Devi present food so consistently that one cannot avoid questioning why so.

2

Hunger, eating, aspiration and fighting for food are the major issues in the writings of Mahasweta Devi. Devi is one of the most serious writers, who actively participated in the lives of the indigenous people. She lived, learned their culture, and wrote about them. Mahasweta Devi says: “when I understood that feeling for the tribals and writing about them was not enough, I started living with them” (Mahasweta v). While investigating the life of the indigenous people, she discovered how the mainstream History of India eliminated the indigenous people. The indigenous people’s struggles, fighting, and movement were not narrated in the mainstream narrative. Hence, she took initiative to research and write on and about their struggles which engage multiple reasons. One of these reasons is the struggle for food and identity. What the historians of the Subaltern Studies group did in History, Mahasweta Devi did the same in literature. The subaltern is represented in her writings. The paper seeks to explore how Mahasweta Devi develops a narrative where the subaltern/ the indigenous remain at the centre, and how that narrative raises the issues like hunger, aspiration for eating and denial of food and the like.

The line quoted in the title, taken from *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2003), is indicative of how the Mundas and other indigenous communities of India were denied access to one of the major foods, especially cereal/ staple food. The quoted line also accentuates how the subaltern actively took part in challenging the Diku/ elite’s hegemony over those food items. The narrative of Mahasweta Devi is chiefly concerned with this food-hegemony of the elite. In her narrative, food, especially rice, emerges almost in regular basis. In the life of the Munda, as she mentions in *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977), rice is a dream. The only food they have access to is *ghato* (mealie), and that is why they have fantasy for rice. Displacing them from land, capturing the whole authority of their land, the Diku/ upper caste establish their power and system. In the colonial and nationalist historiography, the struggle or resistance of the peasants. Tribals or any subaltern groups is narrated without giving recognition to the resistance of this class. Under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, a group of researchers— Goutam Bhadra, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chattopadhyay et. al. enthusiastically led their

academic focus to bring out the non-historicized/ mis-historicized history. To gather historical materials and documents they went back to the database which were in the custody of the British.

3

The novel, *Chotti Munda and His Arrows* (2003), is based on the life and struggle of Chotti Munda. Chotti is the name of a river. Chotti's forefather Purti Munda had magical power. Wherever he dug the land, there emerged either mica or coal. Hearing that news, the Sahib, Bangalee or Bihari people used to come and captured those dug lands. Thus, he became a target of the elite. To avoid them (the elite) he transferred his family from Chaibasa to Palamau. Being chased by them, finally, he decided to leave home alone letting his wife and children peacefully live. While leaving home he asked his wife to give the name "Chotti" to the child who was in the womb of his wife.

The railway station is also called Chotti. Near the station live the non-tribal people like Bengali, Bihari and Punjabi. The Adivasis live at various distant villages around the station. There are thirty villages the people of which gather once in a year in the Chotti fair on Bijoya (the high Holiday celebrating the Hindu great goddess's triumph" [Devi 2]). One of the chief attractions of the fair is archery competition. The competition is the most exacting feat of archery. The prize for the winner is a pig. The main theme of the novel is based on this competition within which there remain small incidents in which there are reflections of Adivasi culture connected to food and drink.

In the fair, the Adivasi women drink *moua*. Being intoxicated they dance. *Moua* is the Adivasis' 'berry liquor' (Devi 2). Drinking of *moua* is a part of the Adivasi culture. Both the male and female members of their community drink this liquor. In the so-called civilised society, this kind of drinks is considered to be the drinks of the 'lower'/ 'uncivilised' people. For processing this kind of liquor, the Adivasis need not borrow any 'modern' technology. They have acquired the knowledge and technique of preparation of *moua* from their ancestors. Second important thing is that there is no genderization of the liquor. Both the man and woman can access to this drink and relish its impact on the body and mind. It helps them enjoy liberty. It also gives them scope to celebrate life. The third important thing is its cost of production. The raw material of *moua* is collected from the Mohua trees. Causing no harm to the trees, the Adivasis pick up the fallen mohua flowers and they keep the flowers open to sunlight for drying and finally ooze out the liquor. Thus, they themselves prepare the liquor. They do not depend on the Dikus or any other elite. They do not even depend on the so-called developed

technology for preparing/ processing such kind of liquor. This is how the Adivasis revive their legacy and tradition. It helps them preserve their identity.

Another food item that is highlighted in the text is meat— the meat of the pig. In the fair an archery competition is organised by the indigenous people. This archery competition is one of the major attractions of the fair. The organisers offer a pig for the winner in that archery competition. In addition to this prize-pig, the people (the Adivasis) kill more pigs, cook and serve the meat with rice and liquor. In the evening, they arrange a feast to celebrate the victory and share happiness with all the people of their community. This feast is a community-eating. The meat is the community food which is shared with others. The community eating also highlights the sharing mentality of the Adivasi. Sharing food with others is the marker of their cultural identity. Here again they keep on their tradition which their ancestors followed earlier.

Rice, both raw and cooked, is one of the major concerns of the Adivasi. Once they had whole access to this food item. They had their lands where they could sow/ breed paddy. Their lands were captured by the Dikus/ the powerful elite class. Deprived of their own lands, the subaltern had to borrow paddy or rice from the moneylenders (the elite) and thus they became bonded labour. In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Parmi's mother-in-law raised issue against that system. She is conscious of the policy framed by the elite. The elite take advantage of the famine. In the time of famine, the elite lend a small amount of rice ('ten seers' [Devi 9]) to the Adivasi. Giving rice, the moneylenders used to buy the labour of the subaltern. Generation after generation, the subaltern give "free labour for that bond" (9). This free labour never ends. Giving rice, the elite buys free labour and carries on their domination over the subaltern. Thus, food is hegemonized by the moneylenders/ elite class. As Parmi's mother-in-law believes, if Lord Birsa's Ulgulan had happened, the Mundas might have lived.

4

Like rice, drinks and meat, the Mundas struggle for water too. Tirathnath Lala, the landed wealthy man, allows the Munda folks to get water from his well. But the Mundas know that if the draught gets heavier, Tirathnath would apply conditions for giving them water. They know that he would say: "The water's dried up. I can't give to all, but only to my bonded labour!" ( Devi 99) He knows well that if he stops giving water to them, the Mundas would do whatever he would ask them do. He would make use of the extreme crisis of water.

“Lala has seven wells, wit’ water in ’em. Why no water in our well in the village?” (Devi 100) The Mundas raise such issue. They discover that the river flows through Lala’s land. That is why there is water there. They are fully aware of that. Their awareness helps them taunt Lala’s so called ‘dharma’ (good works). Lala always talks about good works. But he does not dig a well for the village folks. Giving water is really a good work. But Lala does not do any good work. The Mundas are also aware of Lala’s other kind of tricks. They understand well if Lala gives them water, there must be ‘some bad plan’ (100). The Mundas’ consciousness leads them to fight against the elite Lala.

“We suffer t’ same thirst as ye” (Devi 99). Chotti Munda says so. He puts question on the elite’s access to water. He knows that like the elite they (the Mundas) also have right to water. Because the source of water is the nature. But the elite hegemonize water. Their control over water pressurises the subaltern to embrace the bod of labour. Some of them have to accept Lal’s proposal, while others do protest against Lala.

“Hey, t’ pain’ll go away on its own if I eat a lotta meat and drink a lotta liquor” (Devi 80). Chotii Munda says this after killing a big boar. While hunting the boar, Daroga used gun and Chotti used bow and arrow. Being able to kill the big boar, Chotti proved that hunting was in his blood. The tusks of the boar racked Chotti’s shin. But he finally killed the boar and saved Daroga’s life. While Daroga’s wound took months to heal, Chotti thinks that his wound would take a week to heal. It happens so. Actually, Chotti believes that meat and drink would heal his wound. He treats meat and drink as medicine. He does so because he, like the other tribal people, does not have access to meat and drink. These food items are so rare that he begins to believe in that way.

“Go hungry, do work, but they won’t hear crazy words” (Devi 105). Mahasweta Devi says this about the Munda folks’ self-respect. Once Tirathnath, the wealthy landlord, called the Chotti’s folks ‘sonuvabitch’ (*khachrai*) (102). The slang insulted the folks. They told Chotti Munda about that. Being too much angry, Chotti went to Tirathnath and asked him to take back his words, i. e., ‘sonuvabitch’. Initially, Tirathnath does not agree to do so. But Chotti showed the power of his arrow and Tirathnath had to take back his words. The Mundas would go hungry but they would not hear any ‘crazy words’ (102) from a Diku. They can compromise with eating but not with humiliation. Thus, food becomes less significant than self-respect. Like for food, the Mundas fight for self-respect as well.



The Adivasis' struggle for food, among all other struggles, raises questions against the powerful's manipulation of food. Sometimes the consciousness of the Adivasis about the elite's mode of exploitation helps them lead their struggle towards its success. The food habit of the Adivasis is also crucial in the text *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. Through the food habit, eating-together, and cooking style, they preserve their cultural identity. The study of food in Mahasweta Devi's texts, thus, like many other issues, can open more scope for further critical studies.

1. Diku: The Munda tribe referred the outsiders as dikus. These outsiders include traders, money lenders, missionaries, Hindu landlords and the British. The dikus enslaved the tribal people through exorbitant interest rates.

### Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "Toward a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption."

*Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. Routledge, 2008, pp. 28-35.

Basar, Abul. "Mahasweta: Sahityer ek Onyotoro Path," [Mahasweta: A Different Reading of Literature] Aksharekha, October 2018, pp. 127-133.

Brillat-Saravin, Anthelme. *The Psychology of Taste; or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*. Translated by M. F. K. Fisher. Heritage Press, 1949.

Devi, Mahasweta. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

---. "Telling History." Interview by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp. ix-xx.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. "The Culinary Triangle." *Partisan Review* 33.4, 1966, pp. 586-95.

Shahani, Gitanjali G. "Introduction: Writing on Food and Literature", *Food and Literature*, edited by Gitanjali G. Shahani, Cambridge UP, 2018, pp. 1-35.