



Indigenous Culture in Mahasweta Devi's Novel

AranyerAdhikar

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Abstract

Indigenous people are the relatives of the conventional proprietors and occupiers of a nation or locale. They show decent variety in culture, religion, and financial association, both historically and presently. In India, the Northeast region Tribals have with an incredible cultural diversity which traces their ancestry to distant lands in Mongolia and Southeast Asia, it feels important to bring awareness about these indigenous cultures. Mahasweta Devi's writings focus on the lives of tribal poor and indigenous Indians. Her work exposes the ignorance of the richness of the tribal culture and civilization. The tribals have traditionally enjoyed a close kinship with the forest. In the novel AranyerAdhikar (The Rights of the forest), Devi talks about how the Munda culture has been a forest related one for hundreds of years. The forest gives these tribals food in the form of roots, seeds, grass seeds, tubers, flowers, and fruits. They trade in forest products like honey, leaves, and tussar cocoons. They dance and drink their handia (country liquor) in the forest clearing. Devi claims that the forests near Domabari and the Sailarekab mountains hear the Chotanagpur plateau once enjoyed a bio-diverse environment. She emphasizes that for the tribals to find the full meaning of his ethnic existence, he must understand each stratum of that mixed vegetation of trees, plants, creepers, shrubs, bushes, and undergrowth of grass and lesser plants.

Keywords:*Indigenous, cultural diversity, civilization, handia, tussar cocoons.*

Introduction:

Mahasweta Devi is a Bengali novelist, short story writer, playwright, essayist, columnist, editor, and above all a socio-cultural activist. She has relentlessly worked for four decades highlighting the problems of the rural poor and tribals. The tribals and their history have become an integral part of Devi's life and mission. Her empathy for the rural poor and tribals coupled with her intense anger against their exploitation has made her a committed activist writer. She has not come from downtrodden community, but she is always with the downtrodden and therefore the exploited and the persecuted find their voice through her works. She is associated with about two dozen voluntary tribal welfare organizations that the



tribals can be empowered to stand up for themselves, see things with their own eyes and take charge of measures that can provide redress to their grievances. Devi's engagement with the tribals is more sustained and more fruitful. Her representation of the tribals differs from that of Mohanty and Karanth. In her fiction one sees the tribals as humans and not as idealized characters. She portrays the poverty-stricken, insecure lives in the tribal areas where rice remains an eternal dream, where life means wandering from one village to another due to their ceaseless eviction by the 'dikus' (outsiders), where the land and the forest has been the basis of tribal life, where the forest holds the tribal economy, and where the issue of rights of the forest raises a tempest and causes a blood-spilling fight. Her mission has been to help the tribals realize their rich and significant history. She also urges the mainstream to recognize the rich cultural heritage of Tribal India. As a social reformer and activist, she wants to do away with the injustice and oppression inflicted on the tribals by the dominant class. In her novels, she lays bare the oppression suffered by the tribals, especially the atrocities against tribal women. She also exposes the exploitative behaviour of the dominant class on the tribals in general.

Indigenous People in India

Indigenous people are a significant and important portion of humanity. In India, Tribals are mostly considered as the Indigenous people and their culture is considered an Indigenous culture. Their heritage, ways of life, stewardship of this planet, and cosmological insights are an invaluable treasure house for all. The word Indigenous has many meanings. In every region of the world, many different cultural groups live together and interact, but not all of these groups are considered indigenous or inherent to their particular geographic area. In fact, it is only in the face of a collective or shared sense of identity that the term indigenous peoples have been internationally recognized. Indigenous people live in every region of the world. They live in climates ranging from Arctic cold to Amazon heat and often claim a deep connection to their lands and natural environments. Most of the indigenous peoples' the natural world is a valued source of food, health, spirituality, and identity. Their Land are both a critical resource that sustains life and a major cause of struggle and even death. Each indigenous culture is distinct and unique. While many peoples can express similar worldviews and a common indigenous identity, their cultures are nonetheless based on different histories, environments, and creative spirits.



Tribal Culture

The tribal culture in India is to understand the uniqueness of their culture. Some traits that mark the tribal cultures of India are Warm hospitality and simple ways of living and sincere judgment of the opinions, their custom depicts their belief in simplicity. Most of the tribes in India have their own gods and goddesses that reflect the dependence of Tribal people on nature. Except for the few, most of the tribes in India are sociable, hospitable, and fun-loving along with strong community bonds. Mostly, tribes share patriarchal cultural ties and some of the tribal societies are women- oriented. They have their own festivals and celebrations. The tribal people are clinging to their identity despite the external influences that threatened the tribal culture, especially after their post-independence turbulent period. However, it is seen that Christianity has brought a change that can be termed as a total transformation in the tribal lifestyle and outlook particularly in the North Eastern states of India. Later, it has been discovered that the efforts of the missionaries were not at directed in changing the basic customs of the tribal society.

Jaswant Rathod in his article “Positioning the Subaltern in Post- Colonial India: A Socio-Cultural and Environmental Study of Mahasweta Devi’s Pterodactyl,” observes:

Focusing on the recent questions to the extinction of the tribal people and their culture, Devi writes on the lives of these poor and indigenous Indians. Her work exposes our ignorance of the richness of the tribal culture and civilization. Without thinking of the consequences, we exploit the nature and natural resources and have an anthropocentric pride. Our hubristic denial of subaltern rights exposes our weakness as a modern man. The tribal culture, which has hitherto been hidden from the gaze of civilization, emerges as a chief centre of attention in Devi’s work. She opines in her work that these poor adivasis love to lead a life undisturbed by the ruthlessly invasive modern civilization and culture. (51)

Tribals are the group who belong to the forest and their chief occupation are hunting, gathering of woods, and forest products. The control of the inborn is transcendent in India. Tribal people are not approached with deference and are not given any significance in society.

Most of Devi’s literary works are dedicated to the struggle for the revival of tribal culture, indigenous knowledge of the forest, and the histories of tribal uprisings throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She wishes to stress to these peoples’ outcome of these



insurrections is not as important as the need to restore belief in one's own tribal identity. These tribes, who are today an oppressed, disinherited lot, were once fiercely independent, jealously guarding the ethnic purity of their race. One of the main concerns that emerge from Devi's own works relates to tribal independence, self-possession and the historical possibility of peasant insurgency. It is in how the tribal can be recognized as citizens of the post-colonial state, even special citizens, without losing a sense of their own history and cultural identity, and in how they can benefit from the ameliorative institutional structures of the nation while retaining a degree of control over self-definition without capitulating into bourgeois democracy. Her concerns for tribal history are re-articulated in the present, in the urgent need to resolve how the tribal can progress without getting alienated from its own habitus and social formations.

The novel *AranyerAdhikar* chronicled a colonial peasant uprising, a millenarian tribal revolt launched against the British in the Chhotanagpur plateau. It revisits the little-known events of the 1890's Munda Movement in which the Munda tribe of Bihar's Chotanagpur region waged a war of AbuaDisan (self-rule) both against the British and the nontribal landlord shave known as Babu or Diku (outsiders). The Munda warriors led by BirsaMunda, (1875-1901) known to his followers as Bhagawan Birsa (God Birsa) or Dharati Aba (father of the earth), waged a mass revolt or uprising (ulgulan) for two years in Ranchi and Khunti against the missionaries, the police, and the outsiders. After the killing of a few policemen and destruction of property in the area, Birsa and his followers, the Birsaites retreated to the forest of Dumbari Hill, where they were surrounded and fired upon by two company of army led by the superintendent of police, commissioner, and Deputy commissioner; The death toll of the Mundas was high, even though the accurate number was debated. BisaMunda was captured and sent jail, where he died a suspicious death.

The narrator of the novel, *AranyerAdhikar* comments about Birsa's realization that history is written from the perspective of the victors:

The sahibs have not always won, not all battles. Santhals, Kohls, Kharuwias, and Sardars won a few that battles; the ones they lost have proved that only victors are included in history books; the defeat is planted like rice plants in the blood of the vanquished, and in their unemployment, hunger and exploitation. The names of the defeated make way into the songs

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of the vanquished, into their insipid and coarse meals, the naked and discolored skin of their children and the bloated stomachs of the Munda mother. (224)

Devi's grassroots activism rests not only in invoking the songs of the defeated Mundas, but also in unearthing the history of their displacement and destitution, their hunger and exploitation saved like rice plants in their body.

The novel portrayed about the tribal as a colonial subject who was doublycolonized, first by the mainstream, dominantly Hindu caste society which sought to occupy forest and agricultural land belonging ancestrally to the tribes such as the Mundas, Kols or Santhals. Other demographic and sociological disturbances were caused by the British administration extending the land revenue system to the tribal belts. Permanent Settlement Act that introduced an economic system of recompense and colonial reassessment of the system of land revenue led to large-scale demographic shifts disadvantageous to tribals. Not only the system of taxation was new to the land, but all accompanying matters of governance and colonial policing brought the interests of the tribals and the colonial Raj in stark opposition to each other.

Birsa is an approximation of a sovereign subject a self-originating, self-determining individual. He has a logical mind that may be traced back not only to the Descartian cogito ergo sum but also to the wisdom contained in traditional tribal culture. His consciousness is not centred on self or subject but on his community. His concern for his own community spills over to other tribes as well. He fights for the forest not only for the Munda but also for the Kol, the Ho, the Santal, and the Oraon. His rational mind is manifest in his strategies for fighting against the colonial rulers, for instance, in his reliance on experienced fighters like SomuMunda, Gaya Munda, and KanuMunda rather than on his more inexperienced followers. Birsa also tells his brother Komta that the private is to be sacrificed for the public: Should I think more of her because she is my mother? Or should you? If you do, know it yourself that through the hole of such a thought a termite will enter your thought process and in course of time it will eat out your thinking faculty, rendering you incapable of participating in Ulgulan.(184)

Birsa's thinking mind is partly inborn and partly honed by experience and education. Education has provided him with the necessary perspective of difference from where he can know his tribal culture. His knowledge has the sanction of Spivak whom we have quoted



extensively earlier: "...knowledge is made possible and is sustained by irreducible difference, not identity" (111-112). The failure of Birsa's revolt can be attributed, theoretically of course, to his drastic simplification of how education works on learners and also to his project of putting an end to all transactional knowledge and communication with the outside world.

The forest was the sacred preserve of the Mundas. Their small hamlets clung to its edges. The tribals followed the slash-and-burn pattern of agriculture, which allowed them to pursue their nomadic way of life. They were not dependent on grain cultivation and the large and clumsy agricultural implements and livestock that are associated with plough agriculture, which brings me back to the original image of loss in the smell of hot rice that dominates many of Devi's stories and becomes the source of betrayal of the Munda rebel Birsa, in *AranyerAdhikar*. Even today, most of these tribes follow migratory patterns and if they do practice forming, it is primitive, using the most primitive tools. Moreover, the barter system is still active in the tribal economy, including such forest produce as mahua, honey, lacas opposed to cash movement.

The tribals are totally outside the accepted Hindu pantheon of gods and their religion is circumscribed by physical factors that determine their lives. The worship of these tribal deities is performed at the village shrine known as Jahanthan, a cluster of the same sal trees which makes up the principal vegetation of their forests. These sacred groves are revered as the abode of their presiding disturbing the sylvan spirits. The tribal is a hunter and almost entirely dependent on the forest for his food and fuel sources, the observation of these taboos automatically preserves his forest mother. On the other hand, the agricultural community of the village practices largely earth-related festivals, stressing the food-growing, rather than the food-growing, nature of its economy.

Hunting is an essential part of the Munda and Oraon culture, practiced even by their women. Sociologist K.L. Bhowmick, in *Tribal India*, says that the Oraons celebrated seasonal changes in the forest through their types of hunts, the spring hunt (phagu-sendra), and the hunting in May and June (jaith-sendra). The Santhal, on the other hand, practiced one-day hunts (por-sendra) and annual hunts (lo-birsendra). The tribal's festivals and religious ceremonies have distinctly sensual and primitive aspects to them, forbidden to the Hindu. Uninhibited sexual intercourse, drinking, hunting, and meat-eating are part of their festivals.



The dancing in the forest to the tune of the madal, or torm-tom, with sal flowers in their hair, the ritual hunts are all part of the tribal's celebration of forest life as sacred and his own identification with it. The women beautify themselves with forest products and are far more conscious of their statuesque black bodies than the rural women are, of theirs. We see this in Devi's *AranyerAdhikar*, it is a negation of the desire of civilized people to dominate and denude nature and her life forms and processes, which environmentalist Vandana Shiva decries as a reductionist process. In the reductionist paradigm, a forest is reduced to commercial wood and wood is reduced to cellulose fiber and pulp for the paper industry. The tribal, on the other hand, does not treat the forest as a marketable commodity. He believes that it has a life of its own, which he respects and his own life is an inextricable part of it.

The forest gives the tribal a tremendous capacity for survival even in famine and drought conditions. Devi recalls how on one of her frequent trips to tribal areas. She was offered a live snake for lunch by a Kheria tribal child. He explained that it was delicious when cooked with spices. The particular importance in the life of the tribals of this area is the Mahua tree (*Bassialatifolia*). The fruit of the mahua (called mowa by the tribals), is crushed and fermented to make country liquor. The black seeds of the fruit are peeled and ground by women folk in Birsa's family in *AranyerAdhikar* for oil for their earthen lamps and for their hair. Not only is the fruit a food-source, but the fleshy corollas of the flowers, when pulverized, providing a convenient grain substitute. Brides of the Lodha tribe are first married to the mahua tree and then to the groom who in turn, must be married to a mango tree. Moreover, these tribals have a vast knowledge of the medicinal properties of forest herbs that form a part of their oral tradition.

In *AranyerAdhikar* Devi draws heavily on the scattered oral traditions, the songs of the tribals around Chotanagpur, celebrating their hero-god Brisa Munda. The author's intimate knowledge of the traditions and lifestyle of the Mundas give her historical novel its basis in reality. Birsa is the hero-god whose life is the myth of courage, endurance, honesty, and strength for the Munda people. This is a myth rooted in the reality of Munda existence and gives them hope and strength. Birsa is the first of a number of such figures drawn by Devi. A serious leftist intellectual, Devi knows no deity other than the godhead achieved by man through fortitude, faith, courage, and integrity. Birsa is such a man. He is a man who keeps his head high and bows to no power on earth. Thus, he is killed but not defeated, and he is



aptly worshipped by the Bengali Christian, Amulya, and the deputy superintendent of Ranchi jail. Barrister Jacob, a British lawyer sympathetic towards the Mundas, asks Amulya why he considers Birsa to be a god, and Amulya says: "why? Because of betrayal and treachery. Whenever man attains godhead, he is always defeated by some traitors, wasn't he?"(9).

Colonial era brought with it not just the legal regime but also material technologies that were introduced in assessing and exploiting natural resources for industrial consumption. The onslaughts of the steadily encroaching complex societies led to rupture within the social organization of the forest dwellers. The tribals' extraordinary sensitivity to natural processes had led to a specialized body of knowledge possessed by tribals alone, giving them unique access to the hidden, deeper parts of the jungle, forest gathering and cultivation being their primary means of sustenance.

Devi's ideas about the Munda struggle of land as identity have many contemporary overtones. The struggle is not only about arable land that has productive value, this productive value being measured in terms of agricultural yield and its price in market economy. The struggle, then as now, is about forest as a resource of their livelihood but also that their relationship with forest was a central aspect of their traditional system of farming. This was a contract with one's environments, imbued with religious sentiment and expressed in mythical terms; it was the basis of their exclusivity against the outside world of the land pilfering dikus. Colonial understanding of principles of ownership led to a highly competitive, rapacious claiming of land to demarcate and settle its ownership. From his very childhood, Birsa is attracted to education. Education offers him a sphere of knowledge that can enable him to save his land and house from the Dikus. His vision of future happiness made possible by education is contrasted with the ageold Munda aversion to education, a view represented in the narrative by the husband of Joni, Birsa's maternal aunt. He believes that Mundas die when they try to become Dikus by acquiring an education, and he cannot tolerate educated Mundas.

Conclusion

In *AranyerAdhikar*, Devi calls of how Birsa grinds the bone-break creeper from the forest and puts a plaster of the paste on the fractured leg of a goat. Several such remedies are perfected by him. Stagnant pools are purified by the roots of the apang tree, neem leaves are

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used during a small pox epidemic as a protection against infection. In the novel, Birsa uses these remedies not only for their therapeutic purpose but also as instruments of protest against a hierarchical Establishment and a white government that seeks to deny and suppress tribal culture. The tribal's intimacy with his forest habitat was repeatedly threatened by successive waves of invasion as noted earlier. It established a feudal hierarchy and the rights of the land were divided among chiefs of state, the village communities and the individual cultivators as opposed to the earlier community landholdings and largely classless organization of these shifting cultivators. Devi's *AranyerAdhikaris* in addition to the feudal autocracy of the landlords and owns hierarchical structure of the raja, the sardar, the manki, all tribal chieftains, even pahan or priest, who further deprived the poor tribal of his rights to the land at the edge of the forest.

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