

**POSITIONING THE SUBALTERN IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA:  
A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDY OF  
MAHASWETA DEVI'S "PTERODACTYL"**

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The term “subaltern” was first introduced by the Italian Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci. He used the term to refer the people of inferior rank without any class consciousness. It was originally used by him for ‘proletariat’ and other working class groups. It also refers to the condition of general subordination in terms of class, caste, age, gender etc. Now, the term is used generally to denote the people who are from the marginalized or oppressed classes. The subaltern might be summarized as spaces cut off from the lines of social mobility, or as women and men outside the lines of socio-economic class mobility, particularly rural illiterate women and men, the tribals, the dalits etc. In the present story, the myth of the pterodactyl is accurately used Mahasweta Devi. It substantiates Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak’s claim that we cannot understand the subaltern. As subalterns these Indian tribals are merely spectators in the twenty-first century, just as “Assia Djebar has written that women remained largely spectators as Algeria moved toward Independence.”<sup>1</sup>

Though they seem different, arts and activism are not different domains. In the post colonial age of search and research of the roots, we can find a combined expression of art and activism or literature and politics in the works of many contemporary writers. Like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, James Baldwin and Ken Saro-Wiwa, Mahasweta Devi also follows the trend of politically active creative literature. She traverses the world of fiction, history, journalism, socio-political activism with equal élan. Her literary work is motivated as well as fuelled by her activism, journalistic skills and humanitarian concerns. To get an experiential understanding of the harsh living realities of the indigenous masses, she travels to remote tribal regions of India. Involved with a number of grassroots organizations to fight for justice, she writes journalistic reports on exploitation and expropriation, deprivation and degradation and edits journals carrying subaltern voices. She accurately translates the issues of these poor people in her narratives. Analyzing the environmental issues, the article examines the troubled subaltern spaces occupied by the tribal people in the modern society. Exploring the themes of marginalization and otherness in Mahasweta Devi’s story, “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha” (1995), it analyses the cultural and environmental issues of the tribal people in modern India.

As a literary artist and social activist, Mahasweta Devi has won the Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan awards. Her active participation in the liberation of the movements of the ‘criminal tribes’, and the tribal people of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal is significant. Although her work for the tribal people of India has been widely received and appreciated

throughout the world, she has also faced some harsh criticism for it. She was also branded as Naxalite by many critics. As she has worked for the poor tribal people of India and lived with them, her work is based on the lives, problems and the struggle of them. Her work mostly revolves around the lives of these poor people from colonial times to the post-modern age. Her literary art has an obvious self-declared agenda of achieving certain activist aims:

A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take stand in defense of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him . . . I desire a transformation of the present social system . . . After thirty-one years of Independence, I find my people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labour. An anger, luminous, burning, and passionate, directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints, is the only source of inspiration for all my writing . . . Hence I go on writing to the best of my ability about the people so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt or shame.<sup>2</sup>

Demographically, the tribal people form about 8.2 % of the total population of India. They have a close affinity with nature. They are the original inhabitant of the land. Their exploitation began with the concept of various development projects from the colonial period. The colonizers, the Government of India as well its citizens did not understand man's holy and holistic affinity with the nature. In the colonial times, the natural resources were looted by the British to fuel the process of industrialization taking place in India as well as in Britain. To fulfill the economic and industrial needs of Britain, they dominated the poor Adivasis. By depriving them of their land, the British exploited them. As a result, the Adivasis had resisted and revolted against the intrusion and subjugation of the tribal lands and culture by the colonizers. As per their policy of "Divide and Rule", they successfully divided the minor tribes of the Adivasis and named them "Criminal Tribe" The people from these tribes were intentionally prevented to assimilate with the mainstream Adivasis. With a purpose to rule out the colonial imprints, the Indian Government de-notified the 'criminal tribes' in 1952. Activists like Mahasweta Devi and Ganesh Devy have pointed out the pathetic lives of these 'criminal tribes'.

In India, most of the tribal people live in forests and mountains. Their lives are dependent on forest and agriculture. The large population of tribal people in Madhya Pradesh lives in its largest forest cover. With a purpose to develop the post-independent India, the government started many projects of industrialization hurriedly and the industrialization resulted in the destruction of forests. To meet the increased demands of the developed countries and to fuel our mainstream economy, we cut down trees and devastate the forests of India. Industrialization, globalization, population and modernization are the factors responsible for the deforestation in India. Moreover, most of our plans of development were either implemented hurriedly, or lacked the vision for future. Many of these projects were unplanned. During the time of implementation, many of them have been changed drastically. Therefore, many environmental issues like soil erosion, global warming, scarcity of rain etc have emerged due to deforestation. The forests have been cleared and the croplands have become a private property to build industries. We have replaced a jungle full of trees with the jungle full of constructions. We ignored the dwellings of the poor Adivasis and their love with the nature. With a purpose to serve the interests of the rich, these poor people are exploited. The transformation of ecological spaces into the contested space marked by political interests has necessitated the change of power from the adivasis to the rich.

With a sole purpose to earn money to feed their family many tribal persons have to migrate from their land of origin and they have migrated to villages and small towns of India. They work as labourers. The forceful eviction of the Adivasis from their land of origin, due to the greed of the powerful, has resulted into the destruction of their culture and society. They were ruthlessly marginalized by the mainstream discourse of development. They were treated as “the other”. Anil Agarawal, the famous Indian environmentalist notes that “the displacement and dispossession has raised questions for social injustice and conflicts.”<sup>3</sup>

Focusing on the recent questions of the extinction of the tribal people and their culture, Mahasweta 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 resource 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. Her work is primarily centered on the conditions of the “subalterns” or “the others”. Her work produces a kind of deconstructive, counter-historical and counter-hegemonic discourse which aims to centre the subaltern. Counterpoising the personal histories of the individual subaltern with the broader socio-political, economic and historical context, she rewrites some dominant myths and replaces them with the local tribal myths.

Being a spokesperson for the poor Adivasis, Mahasweta Devi has a cause to write. She is of the view that every writer must have a social consciousness. He/she is answerable to the society in which he/she lives. Her polemical writing is fuelled by her crusading activism and her sincere attempts to improve the condition of the marginalized class of India. Some Indian critics believe that her primary concerns about the tribals overrides her nationalist concerns. But this is not true. By pointing out the weaknesses of the modern Indian society and criticizing it for its exploitation of the poor, she is doing a great work. Her attempts to wipe out the colonial imprints from our mindsets and to make us think about those who were marginalized from centuries must be appreciated. With a sole purpose to highlight the plight of the subalterns, she employs local narratives in her discourse. In her short story “Pterodactyl”, she makes apt use of the myth of the extinct pterodactyl to depict the misery of the Nagesia tribals of Pirtha region. Beniwal and Vandana note, “Her stories are no propagandistic illustrations of ideology; rather the situation speaks for themselves, and as they evolve, ideology emanates from them as much as they themselves emanate from it.”<sup>4</sup>

Devi’s stories are iconoclastic. She skillfully uses myths and empowers them to serve the tribal cause. Like, “Pterodactyl” her famous story entitled “Draupadi” is one of her iconoclastic stories. In it, the name of Draupadi is taken from the mythical name of the queen of Pandavas in the great Indian epic *The Mahabharata*. Here, in Devi’s story, Draupadi is a rebellious tribal leader who is subjected to the sheer brutality of the police. She is molested and gang raped by the police officials. The incident reminds us the recent gang rape on a Dalit girl occurred in Harayana in which a police constable is accused. But, Draupadi asserts herself and her tribal identity like her mythical counterpart. Similarly, the title of her story “Pterodactyl” is quite suggestive and significant. The pterodactyl of the story, an extinct creature is resurrected and brought back to emphasize the ancient tribal way of life. Through the use of the myth of the

pterodactyl, Devi accurately highlights the hazards of modernity and its impact on the natural and simple lives of the poor Adivasis. The obvious results are disharmony and alienation.

Presenting the tribal culture, history and rituals, Mahasweta Devi creates a kind of creative historiography of this poor community. Pervading with Adivasi history, she creates literature of the marginalized. She “deliberately dilutes the boundary-line between the poetics of history and story.”<sup>5</sup> In the present story, she depicts the tribal world as a continent dominated by the main stream but instead of exploring it and knowing its mysterious culture and rituals, the main stream culture disrupts it. To achieve their demands, the dominant class tries to devastate the ancient culture of the tribal people.

Being true to the existing history Mahasweta Devi aptly uses myths and metanarratives to point out the idea of the subaltern. The tribal myths deny the supremacy of the man as concerning his origins. They do not distinguish man, animal and spirit. The Tribal people believe that the world was created in phases by a number of heavenly bodies, not by one Creator-God. The common belief included the notion that every living being had its own life and hence there is no national difference between humans and the others. The short story “Pterodactyl” is a part of the collection *Imaginary Maps* (1995). It is translated into English by Gayatri Spivak. Mahasweta Devi’s encounter with the rock painting and Pithora painted by her *adivasi* friend from Tejgadh inspired her to depict the pterodactyl. The figures represented in the paintings echo the voices of tribal memory for it reconstructs the timeless voice which constitutes the tribal history. The forces of modernity have successfully devastated the paintings of pterodactyl, the ancestral soul of the tribal people.

Remembering the past age of pastoral plenty, the story depicts the loss of the tribal culture. Shankar is a literate tribal who contemplates on the transformation that has taken place in the lives of Nagesia tribals and their history. He contemplates that situation when the tribals lived in perfect communion with the natural surroundings. Before constructing anything, they always sought the consent of the Mother Earth. Living in the lap of the nature, they always felt fear of destroying the sanctity of the land. The intrusion of the outsiders brings a drastic change. The pastoral peace is lost. The nature is violated. The outsiders invade their natural world as “white ants fly in teeming swarms before the rains.”<sup>6</sup> They disrupt the peace and serenity of the place. Offering a terrible vision of the desecration of the tribal land, it is described that “Our land vanished like dust before storm, our fields, our homes, all disappeared. The ones who came were not human beings.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, “the forest disappears, they make the four corners unclean. Oh, we had our ancestors’ graves.”<sup>8</sup> According to Shankar, they were not able to provide the due respect to their ancestors as the result of transgression by the outsiders. It is an echo of tribal dismay after their loss because the graves of their ancestors are the holy sites for tribal people. They performed rites and rituals to propitiate the ancestral souls. But the outsiders dug up the ancestral graves to construct inroads to the tribal world. Therefore, Shankar and the other tribals believe that the souls deprived of their rights hovered around the place to articulate the loss of ancestral piety: “And so the unquiet soul casts its shadows and hovers. We didn’t know how it would look. This is surely the ancestors’ spirit!”<sup>9</sup>

In this story, Mahasweta Devi expresses her serious concern for the mountain-dwelling tribes of Madhya Pradesh who are being gradually erased from the map of the world. In order to present the situation from multiple points of view, she knits a complex tapestry in which the characters from various walks of life are drawn in order. Puran Sahay, a radical journalist, belongs to the region of Palamau. Pondering over the issues of tribals in India, he has been

created by the writer as one of the voices to make us aware of the tribal condition of the area. Harisharan, the Block Development Officer and his intimate friend invites him to Pirtha. He requests Puran to write a report on the drought and famine and hence make the government aware of the dire condition of Pirtha. The story of finding out the truth begins now and we find some suggestive references to an extinct animal right from the beginning. The survey map of Pirtha resembles an extinct animal of Gondwanaland. Puran is unaware of the shadow of the extinct pterodactyl looming over Pirtha, but is aware of the painting drawn by Bikhia, Shankar's nephew. Through Puran, we come to know about the miseries and agonies of the tribals along with the greed and atrocities committed against the tribals by the mainstream. Pirtha is a tribal region having a unique history of its own. Since their experience of outsiders has been traumatic in the past, the tribal people are quite alarmed by the arrival of Puran. The encroachment of the forests and building of roads has resulted into the easy access of the tribal lands by bourgeoisies and other profiteers. The cave paintings found at Pirtha clearly reflect the devastation of their land. They explore how the intrusion of the outsiders has brought a destruction of their culture. The agony of these tribal people, as expressed in the cave paintings, is echoed in the words of the SDO:

I didn't see the pictures five years ago. I hadn't gone looking for pictures then anyway. And pictures of drunkenness, of communal dancing with drums, painted by the people....that's awful hard, Puranji. Can one measure the distance from the sun by releasing a kite? <sup>10</sup>

Moreover, the issues like the drought, famine and the change in agricultural practices madden the people of Pirtha. Their lives are severely affected as they are deprived of the use of natural resources like the rivers and lakes which are their main sources of sustenance. The government is informed about the drought and famine of the area by the officials concerned. Ironically, the government sends officials for inspection to Pirtha in the rainy season when Pirtha gets flooded. The government is unable to resolve the problems regarding the drought and famine of the tribal areas but they are insistent on watching the tribal dancers and singers during the Independence Day. Here, we find that these poor people are objectified. They are portrayed as mere puppets dancing to the tunes of the powerful classes. The SDO's ironical comment clearly exposes the thingsification of the "other" by those who are at the "centre":

It's a district, even a Block, with an Adivasi majority, how can there not be Adivasi dancing and singing? Who will sing? The government can do anything if it wants to. Well!<sup>11</sup>

Their close communion with nature has helped the tribals to understand their land and cultivation patterns. They have survived on the land of their ancestors since time immemorial by following a conventional agrarian policy suitable for their land structure. With a purpose to promote the tribal agrarian society, the government implements its policies to provide fertilizers and pesticides to the poor community. But, the implementation is not done transparently and honestly. These facilities, actually allotted for the tribal people, are utilized by mainstream society by posing as fake tribals. To suit the needs of the rich and the powerful mainstream, there requires a drastic change in the traditional cultivation patterns. The cultivation of kodo, kutki, soma and khajra was substituted by high yielding variety of crops such as soya beans, rice, jawar and bajra. These changes in the agrarian style have not helped the poor tribals. It has increased the number of tribal suicides though it is a sin according to the Adivasi beliefs. Khajra forms an important diet of Pirtha region. The trees are about three feet tall with edible tubers. The

prevailing drought raised the concern of the officials and the barren lands were sprayed with pesticides in preparation for cultivation. The unexpected rains washed away the sprayed pesticides making it to gather in the roots and tubers of Khajra and in the wells and rivers used by the tribals. This resulted in the death of some of the tribal along with the deterioration of their health conditions. “The rain water fell on the fields and fallow lands on the hillside and the poisonous water flowed into the wells they had dug.”<sup>12</sup> They died of drinking that poisonous water. The fleshy tuber of the Khajra is their chief hope. The roots sucked up that water. They died eating the fleshy roots of the Khajra.

These people view that the arrival of the outsiders has caused these problems. Before their invasion they reigned as kings. It has resulted into their marginalization. They feel that they are enslaved. Many of them are victims of the debt. According to Shankar, the subjugation process was made easier by the construction of roads because it paved the way for the easy access to the area for the moneylenders, landholders and recruiters. The sanctity of the tribal people has been wiped out by these commercial and modern forces. Serving the needs and requirements of the mainstream, they have now become bonded labourers. Shankar, therefore, is highly skeptical about the arrival of Kaushalji and his filming of the tragic condition of the tribals. Kaushalji’s aim is to get the attention of government and foreign aids through his film but the tribals remain concerned at such a decision. They are distraught at the help provided by the outsider. Jennifer Wenzel observes:

Kaushalji cannot begin to take this subaltern logic seriously, as he assumes an absolute gulf between a benevolent (international) audience and a self-interested local one.<sup>13</sup>

The people of the poor Nagesia tribes in the story believe that they must protect their own culture from the onslaught of the outsiders. They also believe that the ancestral soul is highly disturbed by the plight of tribals and therefore it chooses to manifest itself in order to warn the community of the impending danger. Puran delves deep into the tribal culture by observing the pterodactyl and becomes aware of the concealment in the tribal culture. Only the tribals and Puran can sight the extinct pterodactyl. The writer clearly suggests us that a better understanding of the tribals would require an “ethical responsibility in singularity.”<sup>14</sup> To communicate with them, one must have a love for the tribals, their culture and history. Puran has visited Pirtha for making a report on the tribals. He does so without giving any reference to the image of the pterodactyl. His comprehension of tribal culture prevents him from accomplishing a task because he thinks that it would endanger the tribal community. For him, Pirtha is a claustrophobic and self-enclosed world. Puran feels dilemma after getting the hidden knowledge about the pterodactyl. Considering the pterodactyl to be the first and the last messenger of the prehistoric world, he comes across the cruel truth that the wheels of time will destroy as much as it can on its path of advancement. Bikhia, Shankar’s nephew takes the pterodactyl to be a fact. He feels a deep pain when shares the fact with Puran:

Bikhia looks with pained eyes. His eyes are quite impenetrable now. A precious incredible mystery (for Bikhia the ancestral soul is a fact, the scientific definition of pterodactyl is without value for him), that was only his at first, must now be taken in an equal share with the outsider, this has hurt him.<sup>15</sup>

After getting the knowledge of the secret of the Nagesia tribals, Puran cannot assume the role of a distant spectator. Moreover, he is a journalist and his duty is to report the secrets of

Pirtha to the outer world. But he is afraid of doing so. He is afraid that the investigation which would follow his report may further disrupt the pristine tribal culture by the outsiders. Thus, he finds himself being “forced to confront the inadequacy of the textbook knowledge, which has left him unprepared for the experiences that await him there.”<sup>16</sup> Harisharan is taken aback by the sudden decision of Puran. Puran avows a new value to Harisharan, which includes love of the tribal culture. According to Puran, “love, excruciating love”<sup>17</sup>, paves the way for understanding and propagating the sanctity of the tribal culture to the modern civilized world. Mahasweta Devi highlights the sacredness of the tribal culture in “Pterodactyl”. Sacredness, as denoted by her is the reverence and love of the tribals for nature. Time is continually bringing about changes in the tribal world. The less privileged tribal groups remain truthful to ancient beliefs of nature being a sacred object. The writer points out her opinion that although the Adivasis and the powerful people of the mainstream have their own parallel ways of culture and living, the gaps between them can be abridged through the dissemination of values of love. The pterodactyl therefore is not only the cultural symbol of the poor tribal world but it also represents the values of responsibility, love and commitment of the mainstream culture towards the tribals. Using subaltern history, the writer promotes the idea that tribal people also have a valuable and enriching history of their own. She highlights the idea of “learning from below”<sup>18</sup> which suggests that one has to approach the indigenous tribes in order to learn about the nature. The character Puran, as portrayed by Devi, accomplishes the act of writing the subaltern into being. Through the description of his own experience in the tribal universe, Puran make the reader aware of the condition of the tribals as the ‘subalterns’ who are dominated, captivated, ignored, exploited and enslaved by the main stream. Due to their association with the nature, they are seen as “jungle”, “brute” and “ignorant”. Mahasweta Devi’s purpose is very clear. She aims to improve the tribal condition without destroying their culture. Since the modern world has failed to understand the significance of the tribal culture Devi uses the image of the pterodactyl in an apocalyptic fashion to warn the outer world that the tribal culture would be wiped out of history like the extinct pterodactyl.

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