

## THE THEME OF OPPRESSION IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S "WATER"

**K. R. Athista**

Assistant Professor of English  
Mepco Schlenk Engineering College  
Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu, India

### Abstract

Mahasweta Devi is a contemporary Indian woman writer who tries to depict the life of the ordinary men and women particularly of the *Adivasi* (tribal) people like the *Santals*, the *Lodhas*, the *Shabars*, and the *Mundas* in West Bengal. Although dramatic writing is not Devi's forte, her dramatic output deserves critical attention. She adopts the medium of drama to explore the anguished consciousness of the oppressed and the exploited. She makes an accurate portrayal of the harsh realities of poverty, exploitation, and death in the contemporary tribal societies in India. The present paper aims at presenting Devi's "Water" as a representative drama encapsulating the oppressive forces hampering the betterment of the tribal communities in India. The exploitation of the tribes continues unchecked in India. Tribal people are humiliated, oppressed and impoverished further. The government welfare schemes do not benefit them. It is the bureaucrats and the politicians who really benefit by the welfare schemes. Hence, the condition of the tribal communities remains status quo. The possible way to check this is to organize a revolt against the oppression.

**Keywords:** oppression, exploitation, poverty, humiliation, impoverishment, revolt, welfare schemes.

Mahasweta Devi is a major contemporary woman writer who has made significant contribution to Indian literary and cultural studies. She makes use of her creative energy to give an artistic expression to the harsh realities of poverty, exploitation and death in modern Indian society. Profound humanism imbued with a deep-rooted love for the suffering humanity is the core of Devi's philosophy. In all her writings, she tries to depict the life of the ordinary men and women particularly of the *Adivasi* (tribal) people like the *Santals*, the *Lodhas*, the *Shabars*, and the *Mundas* in West Bengal.

Devi's "Water" has fourteen scenes. The scenes have stage directions and there are references to places of action and time of action. The use of songs, chorus, and the movement of the characters on the stage seem to suggest that Devi originally intended "Water" for stage productions. Fittingly, it is considered a play in the anthology Five Plays. As there is no

performance history for “Water”, the author has treated it as a drama. Neither professional theatre artists nor academicians have so far performed “Water”.

Although dramatic writing is not Devi’s forte, her dramatic output deserves critical attention. She adopts the medium of drama to explore the anguished consciousness of the oppressed and the exploited. She makes an accurate portrayal of the harsh realities of the poverty, exploitation, and death in the contemporary tribal societies in India. Oppressive forces hamper the betterment of the tribal communities in India. The present paper aims at analysing Devi’s “Water” as a representative drama encapsulating such oppressive forces against the tribal communities.

Indian society is caste ridden. *Varnashrama Dharma* acknowledges a four way social hierarchy, namely, the *Brahmins* (Priest), the *Vaishyas* (merchants), the *Kshatriyas* (warriors) and the *Sudras* (untouchables). Social discrimination is a powerful oppressive force against the tribes in India. According to Devi, caste distinction is a social construct and it has no Constitutional sanction. Law treats every individual as equal. Social inequality, therefore, has no legal validity.

ONE (a Naxalite) rightly points out,

ONE. . . . The castes, upper and lower, don’t mean a thing.  
 They are labels designed by men. The Constitution’s clear  
 on that. But who cares to uphold the Constitution?

(1. 126-27)

In “Water”, Santosh is a *Brahmin*. The *Maghais* are the *Domes*. The other untouchables in the drama are the *Chandals* ( mixed tribe, a *Sudra* father and a *Brahman* mother), the *Keots* (fisher-folk caste), and the *Tiors* (low-caste agricultural labourers). Jiten, the Primary School Teacher is a *Mahishya* (Hindu agricultural caste). The untouchability myth is exploded in scene 4. Dhura Dome says that the three Young *Brahmans* from the city take water and rice given by him. The evil of untouchability seems to spring from the attitude of the rural *Brahmans*. Santosh represents the upper class society. He claims himself to be pious. According to him, the *Domes* who rear pigs for their living are supposed to be unclean and thereby will pollute the water in the well. Untouchability is being perpetuated down the ages. Also the upper caste people segregate the tribal community by not allowing them to stay near their huts. Dhura explains the pathetic life of the tribes thus:

DHURA. . . . When we (tribal people) go to distribute the ‘prasad’  
 from the Dharam Puja, in the village they wouldn’t let us  
 stand under the ledges of their huts. (1. 126)

Only the lower caste boys attend the school at *Charsa*. *Brahmans* do not want their children to mix with the lower caste children. So they send their boys by bullock carts to school in Patul. Santosh pulls strings to stop the grant for the school at *Charsa*. He will not let the *Dome* and the *Chandal* children compete for scholarships. He has piles of books, pieces of chalk and slates wearing out in his stores but will not give the children any of them.

“Water” explores the sufferings of a tribal community that is socially, politically and economically oppressed. The drama deals with an untouchable, Maghai Dome, a water-diviner. He has drawn out hidden water from the earth. In spite of Maghai’s own diving skill, he fails to provide water for his people. He is in conflict with the feudal society. Santosh Babu, the exploiter has his cattle washed in the *panchayat* well. The tribes, on the other hand, are not allowed to draw water from the *panchayat* well to quench their thirst. The resources of the earth

are meant for common enjoyment. Ironically, Santosh and his relatives use water for their exclusive benefit. In the close of scene 3, Phulmani complains to God thus:

Phulmani. . . . God, you are not there. If you had been there once, you're dead now. Else how'd Santosh alone have all your water, your gift to all living creatures? (3. 141)

Scene 4 opens with the chorus "Give us water, give us water." (141). All the wells in the *Charsa* river are dug with money from the government drought relief. Hence they belong to the public. Denying water for the lower castes is the height of injustice. A pitcher used by the lower castes is supposed to pollute the water in the well.

The government supplies relief materials such as rice, paddy, seeds, *chida*, molasses and kerosene for the tribes. As head of the *panchayat*, *Santosh* gets the relief materials meant for the village from the government. Without supplying the ration materials to the poor villagers *Santosh*, a keeps for himself a large amount of relief material greedily. He carries away ration materials in convoys of cow-cars in the dark of nights. He also hoards and sells the drugs supplied by the government for treating the villagers. *Santosh's* barns are full of paddy, molasses and mustard seeds while the Maghais always starve.

*Jiten*, a selfless servicer inspires the community by constructing a dam across the river to quench the eternal thirst. *Aghorilal*, *Jiten's* friend, solved the problem of water at his *ashram* at *Kasunda*. *Jiten* advises the Maghais to build a dam on *Aghorilal's* model. The tribes were supposed to put in free labour to build the dam with boulders in the hills. Foreseeing a threat to his existence, *Santhosh Babu* informs the authorities that all the untouchables have turned into *Naxalites*. Marching along with the police, *Santhosh Babu* breaks the dam. The drama ends with *Maghai* being carried away on the crest of the waves of the furious river *Charasa*.

"Water" provides a powerful indictment of the existing social values and *Devi's* unfailing commitment and passion for the uplift of the tribes. The social discrimination and the bureaucratic indifference exert oppression on the tribal communities. The Sub Divisional Officer says,

SDO. . . . it's better to keep people where they are, as they are. (11. 191)

The description of the cruel treatment of the upper caste bureaucrats against the *Domes* and the *Chandals* touches the hearts of the readers:

MAGHAI. . . . We have been told that there's no untouchability in our subdivision, and yet *Santosh Babu*, you your caste brothers and your relations won't let us draw water from any well. (3. 138)

Pretending to be unconcerned, *Santosh* says:

"*Santosh* . . . the dam's a good thing for everyone

.....  
 I don't mind, if it helps you. I wish you all luck" (9. 184).

In his heart of heart he could not see the untouchables quenching their thirst with plenty of water from the dam. Sensing a threat from a community that has learnt to control nature, *Santosh* turns the authorities against the *Domes*. He informs the SDO that *Jiten* had no business to serve. The SDO orders the police to open fire at the slightest provocation during the opening ceremony of the dam.

Illiteracy is another factor that adds to the pathetic condition of the tribal communities. Government laws which favour the tribal uplift are not known to them. Phulmani, the wife of Maghai states,

PHULMANI. We do not set eyes on the magistrate. We know nothing of the governments laws for us. We know only you.  
(Santosh) (3. 139)

Benefits of the well-intentioned government laws do not reach the tribal people. Instead, the upper class bureaucrats and the politicians swindle the money for themselves.

Santosh Babu is a representative of two exploitative forces – bureaucracy and politics. The bureaucrats and the politicians are supposed to co-work for the uplift of the tribal community. Ironically, they join hands to oppress and impoverish the tribal communities in India. This is represented powerfully in “Water”. Politicians are expected to remove the pathetic condition of the tribes. Contrarily, Santhosh Babu collects the relief money for the tribes from the government and keeps it for himself. Dhura accuses openly thus:

DHURA. . . . He goes to the town, collects money for relief, and wouldn't spend a paisa for the stricken village itself. Look at his house, rising from height to height. (1. 125)

Thus, he exploits the tribal group. There is gross misuse of government funds. The government money meant for social development activities reach the hands of exploitative forces.

The tribals are tortured psychologically. This can be understood by the torture experienced by Maghai when the dam is broken by the police forces. This even makes the tribal people rise against the men in power. Maghai encourages his men to go forward and beat the police at this situation. For a while, the place is full of brutal attack and resistance. The stage direction describes them vividly thus:

The police enter with the men beating them mercilessly with the butts of their rifles. Maghai is not with them. Jiten, Dhura and some of the others try to hit back. . . . A policeman brings down a crushing blow with the butt of his rifle on Jiten's head. Jiten falls to the ground with a wail. (14. 197)

The final speech of Maghai with his bleeding chest is heart breaking. Not to die an ordinary death, he declares:

MAGHAI. . . . I can't let them carry me as a corpse into a bloody Morgue. My last journey will be with the water. . . (14. 198)

The passive acceptance of the fact of being an untouchable acquires a turn when Dhura makes an appeal to his father to stop serving the upper-caste people. He says,

DHURA. . . . Why does father have to act the water-diviner for Santosh whenever he asks him- to? . . . for him, the shadow of a Dome pollutes his pitcher, and he'd throw away the water. (4. 143)

Santosh corrupts officials and police officers. The inaction of the officers support Santosh's vile motives against the tribes. The officers responsible for recording cases of oppression against the tribes fail in their duty. Maghai says,

MAGHAI. . . . If you go by the government records, there's no oppression of harijans in West Bengal. This is no Madras. (7. 170)

The conversation between Jiten and the SDO in scene 8 highlights the gap between the laws and their enforcement:

SDO. It's no use. Laws are made because they have to be made. They're never enforced. The laws have abolished agricultural debt, the system of bonded labour is banned. But what do you find in reality?

JITEN. Isn't it your job to enforce the laws?

SDO. The landowners and the moneylenders still lend money and live off the interest. They still extort forced labour from their debtors. (8. 173)

The SDO, a bureaucrat, is supposed to enforce government laws. Surprisingly, he expresses helplessness owing to political intervention. He admits,

SDO. . . . I'm powerless. If I threaten a moneylender, the minister will jump on me. Do you think I don't know? There are millions of rupees lent out on interest in this district, multiplying continuously, but there are no papers.

(8. 173)

To conclude, the exploitation of the tribes continues unchecked in India. Tribal people are humiliated, oppressed and exploited. The government welfare schemes do not benefit them. The landlords, the moneylenders, the bureaucrats and the politicians really benefit by the welfare schemes. Hence, the condition of the tribal communities remains status quo. The possible ways to check this is to organize a revolt against the oppression. Devi's foreward to **Rakasi Kora** in *The Plays of Mahasweta Devi* runs thus: "When they (the oppressed) rise, get organized and fight back, only then history can be changed" (qtd. in E. Satyanarayana 127). The revolt of the tribes implicitly suggests the importance of education and enlightenment for their uplift. It also liberates the tribal people from humiliation, oppression, and exploitation. Thus, "Water" presents the problems of the tribal people and hints at the possible solution to end their afflictions.

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