

**REPRESENTING THE POSTCOLONIAL SUBALTERN:
A STUDY OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S *CHOTTI MUNDA AND HIS ARROW***

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ABSTRACT

In this research paper an attempt has been made to show how Mahasweta Devi, in line with the Subaltern Studies Group's "history from below" approach, attempts to write a history parallel to the mainstream history of Indian nation by reading between the ignored and unwritten lines of the tribal story, their experiences, rituals and songs. The paper also highlights how Mahasweta, in order to expose various faces of exploiting agencies, raises several tribal and non-tribal issues in relation to the national identity and human rights. Moreover, an endeavour has been made to show how Mahasweta provides an overdue voice to the subaltern preoccupations, and justifies their collective violent and militant resistance, thereby making her message clear to the mainstream society: either change the negative attitude towards the subaltern, or be ready for the revolt/resistance.

Everyone is oppressed here; hence everyone is a subaltern. Even those who think otherwise, are oppressed by the dominant ideology, or at least, by their own "ideology". However, in Postcolonialism the term has been used, specifically, for the social group who is socially, politically, or geographically outside of the *hegemonic power structure*. Ever since the concept of Subaltern got currency, particularly post Gayatri Spivak's influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, writers across nations have been wielding their pen to represent subaltern voices and concerns, irrespective of whether their representation makes any break through or not at the ground level. Their representation aims, more specifically, at shifting the focus of literary discourse from the "centre" to the "marginalized". It all began in 1980s when a group of South Asian intellectuals, known as Subaltern Studies Group, initiated sustained efforts to revise and rewrite Indian historiography from Subaltern perspective. The main agenda of this project was focused on a large number of issues including peasant insurgencies in colonial and postcolonial India, which they considered as strong and viable historical evidence that needed to be taken in gamut of Indian history. The same concerns can be witnessed in many main stream Indian writers like Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Bonamali Goswami, Amitav Ghosh, Aravind Adiga. and Mahasweta Devi. In this paper I intend to analyse Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda And His Arrow* where she attempts to write a history parallel to the mainstream history of Indian

nation by reading between the ignored and unwritten lines of the tribal story, the tribal experience, and their songs. Referring to the plight of these tribals Mahasweta writes:

Mainstream society is carrying on a continuous, shrewd and systematic assault on his social system, his culture, his very tribal identity and existence My contention is that history should be rewritten, acknowledging the debt of mainstream India to the struggles of the tribals in the British and even pre-British days. The history of their struggles is not to be found only in written scripts but in their songs, dances, folktales, passed from one generation to another. (Ghatak 2010: 150)

Besides she highlights various problems and predicaments of these tribals, thereby trying to intervene on their behalf, and provide them space in the hegemonic power structure. The reader, however, should not overlook the fact that her representation of the subaltern is as a part of her activism, and is in no way an infringement to their right to voice their plight themselves or to distort the “facts”. In fact, she, through her works, has been encouraging the marginalised to speak themselves for their own sake, and has indeed been giving them the opportunity for the same through her journal *Bortika*.

The novel was written by Mahasweta in Bengali in 1980 as *Chotti Munda O Tar Teer*, and was later translated into English in 2002 by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. Tracing back from the days of the legendary uprising namely *Ulgulan*, the novel presents the story and plight of Munda tribals and lower caste Hindus and celebrates their sustained and unrelenting resistance against unscrupulous, dodgy intruders and ruling oppressors through the freedom struggle of India to the post-Emergency period. “It probes and uncovers the complex web of socio-economic exchange based on power relations”, “traces the changes; some forced, some welcome, in the daily lives of a marginalized rural community”, and at its heart, “celebrates Chotti, legendry archer, wise and farsighted leader, proud role model to his young brethren” (Devi 2002: jacket). Besides, Mahasweta here debunks and deconstructs the official history of Indian Independence by highlighting the fact that the mainstream society/“Dikus” (word used by the tribals for their exploiters like landlords, moneylenders, traders, shopkeepers etc; in the narrow sense, upper caste Hindus) was always insensible to the tribals’ historic protests against the British rule. Or else how is it possible that the tribals were not sought to be incorporated into the freedom struggle of India led by the Congress Party:

It was as if that was Dikus’ struggle for liberation. Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indian. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle. In war and Independence the life of Chotti and his cohorts remained unchanged. They stand at a distance and watch it all. (Devi 2002: 121-22)

A similar reference to the stifling of marginal subaltern voices is to be found in Partha Chatterjee’s reconstruction of the Indian National movement in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Here Chatterjee reveals how once India had gained freedom, the peasants were excluded from the “national framework of politics” (Chatterjee 1986: 45). This shows how the subaltern representation has been underestimated by the “Dikus”; despite the fact that, while the mainstream India was fighting for independence from the foreign rule, the tribals’ struggle was two pronged viz. liberation from foreign rule as well as from indigenous oppressors and exploiters. As such, theirs’ was an advancement on the mainstream struggle.

While rescuing the tribal tradition and culture from being vanished and deconstructing the mainstream official history, Mahasweta all-along highlights a variety of problems and issues

afflicting this subaltern world, thereby gives space, if not “voice”, to them. The bonded labour problem is the most glaring problem in this regard, and almost every other problem is the natural outcome of this most exploitative and inhuman institution. On the one hand, the novel portrays the oppressive reign of landlords, moneylenders, and contractors who enjoy the patronage of the government and squeeze dry the tribals and lower caste Hindus through perpetual bondage; on the other hand, it portrays the gross discrimination, poverty and deprivation of this weaker section of Indian society. Such narratives of the nation help to highlight the big gaps between the “centre” and the “marginal” and lie well within the scope of Bhabha’s “continuist, accumulative, temporality of the pedagogical.” However, in *Mahasweta* the “pedagogical” is often interrupted by the “repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative,” in which the people are no longer treated as “objects” but become the “subjects” of a process of signification” (Bhabha 1994: 145). In writing the nation, *Mahasweta* focuses on the split between the “pedagogical” and the “performative” and lays out the actions of Chotti and his Comrades in their luminal space of the “in-between.” (Sen 2008: 207-208)

In the novel the portrayal of gross discrimination, casteism, poverty, deprivation and harassment is replete. Here the rich and powerful landowners like Lala Baijnath and his son Tirthnath enjoy the right to kick and harass the tribals selling their own paltry yield. Whether these oppressed are bonded or not they are forced to give market cut towards the moneylender out of their meagre produce: “Whether you’re a bond slave or not, you must give a quarter of your produce at the landowner’s court before each market day, and then sell your wares” (Devi 2002: 71). And if anyone refuses to give bonded labour or the market cut, he has to be ready for the wrath of the moneylender as well as the government officials; because, “the landlords or landed farmers and the Darogas in an area watch each others’ interests” (Devi 2002: 52). Even when natural calamities like famine strikes these poor tribals, these so-called public servants do not care to inform the concerned officials. Because that would again sabotage the interests of moneylenders and landlords: “There was a famine and the Daroga hadn’t reported it because Tirthnath wished to take thumbprints on bonded labour vouchers” (Devi 2002:58). Thus these tribals are literally drawn into the perpetual bondage, as there is no other way to survive for them during the natural calamities except to enter into bonded labour contract—a contract whereby a person is forced or obliged to give compulsory labour free or at rates much below the market rate to a specific landowner from whom s/he may have borrowed paltry sums of money or food grains. Their rationale behind their entering into bond labour is simply heart-rending: “If we put thumbprint on paper at least we’d eat” (Devi 2002: 49). In this way, these innocent naive people are trapped into the debt which is never repaid. The height of exploitation is that the Lalas and moneylenders consider it their duty and right to make the tribals and untouchables work for them for no wages. As Lala Tirthnath says, “To take bonded labour from adivasis and untouchables is my natural duty” (Devi 2002: 50). And at other occasion, Romio, a political hoodlum, says to his companion Pahlwan, “It is our right to take a cut from the work of labour” (Devi 2002: 291). All this happens before the nose of administration. No doubt there are laws, but they are only to punish the marginalized communities and not the high and mighty: “Manager rides t’ palquin, wears shoes, chews his betel leaf e’en after killin’ us. An’ Dukhia hangs if he kills manager. T’ Gormen’s law! Why no law ont’ manager” (Devi 2002: 89)?

Chotti stands firmly in opposition to this oppression and exploitation of his community and other similar groups. He cannot bear the agony and insult of working for no wages. He rationally argues that the loans should be adjusted against wages. He knows that in spite of receiving no

wages for years the loans continue to stand in their names; that the debt is never repaid. The government could sanction famine relief but only on receiving the report from the collector and the Daroga. As it is the “wish of the government” that “the news of famine will be accepted only if it comes through proper channels” (Devi 2002: 59). So he forges unity among the victim tribals and non tribals and takes a deputation to the concerned official at Tohri, who is astonished to see the tribal Mundas and low caste Hindus like Ganju and Dusad all together. Chotti reads the astonishment in the eyes of the official and clarifies that it is starvation that has united them all, and that their unity is not aimed at offending anyone: “Yes, we’re bound together. By hunger fire. I haven’ roused anyone” (Devi 2002: 52). This solidarity and togetherness of tribals and the Hindu lower-castes symbolizes the collective subaltern resistance which is the dream of our activist Mahasweta, who, it is pertinent to mention, founded India’s first bonded labour organization in 1980 and brought together thousands of bonded labourers to provide them an organised platform for raising their voice against forced labour. She wants them to raise their voice together against oppression. Because as Dhani Munda says to Chotti Munda, “If everyone labours on bond, and ye alone don’, comes to nothin’” (Devi 2002: 11). In fact the novel repeatedly dramatizes this subaltern solidarity. We observe it when Mundas, Ganju, Dusad, all together approach the government officials to inform about drought. We observe it when Chotti scolds Dukhia for his comment that “I have nobody” and asserts we are “Munda- Oraon, with us behind one there are all. Don’t you see” (Devi 2002: 67). And we observe it by the end of the novel when the tribals and lower caste Hindus headed by Chotti Munda together display unique solidarity by raising together their voice against the oppression of “Dikus”: “A thousand adivasis raise their bows in space and cry, No! The non adivasis raise restraining hands” (Devi 2002: 363). This raising of bows and hands by the adivasis and other lower-castes dramatises collective subaltern solidarity and resistance; the resistance, which our author wants them to display if they wish to carve a suitable and honourable place in this largest democracy of the world. The tribals and other lower-castes are also fully conscious about this need of solidarity and collective resistance. They know that they can last only “if we bite t’ earth together. Otherwise we’ll have to leave all and get on t’ road” (Devi 2002: 176).

But Mahasweta does not seem to be content merely with the solidarity and collective resistance of them. In order to win this war on exploitation, in order to make sure that their subaltern voice is heard and addressed, she wants them to be equal in strength as well. This becomes evident from Chotti’s (who represent Mahasweta’s beliefs) reaction to the Naxal boys’ violent resistance. Though he is all praises for them and their noble intentions, he does not approve of it. Because he knows that “if a Lala dies, ’nother Lala will come” (Devi 2002: 225). That is why he advises the Naxal boy by explaining that “the fight ya talked about, is good, but it’s not to be. Be equal to polis and then fight, no? Else in t’ end it’s t’ polis wins. Thas what I allus see” (Devi 2002: 227-28).

Once the bonded labour system was officially abolished by the Government of India and declared illegal, the step was hailed by all and sundry. But our activist-author, again representing the subaltern, raises some fundamental queries and questions with regard to this much hyped act. According to her those who were to be liberated didn’t even know of the historic decision. As Chotti says, “They’ve made t’ law fer our good, but they nev’r let it be known” (Devi 2002: 300). Besides, no provisions were made to ensure in practice liberation of the bonded labour, and no protective mechanism was built to ensure the safety of the concerned. That is why Chotti laughs at the law and out-rightly rejects it:

There're blind alleys in this law. Gormen is makin' fun o' us. I asked, if a boss still asks for bonded labour, what s'll we do? . . . T' Gormen says, Why? Ye'll go to court? Now see this! To Co-o-ourt will go Mundas, and Oraons, and Dusad, and Ganju – who caint live without bellyloans fr'm moneylender, they'll go complain agin boss. So, gie bonded labour like other years. Then there are no complaints and charges against bosses an' goons, an' they won' mek trouble. (Devi 2002: 318)

The same is the fate of the minimum wages act which is more violated than observed. Even the contractor Harbans Chadda, though gives better wages than the money lender Tirthnath, gives less than one-tenth of what should be actually given. And he sees no error in it: "Harbans sees no fault in himself, although he does not give Chotti and his people more than twelve annas wages and in bad times makes famine-struck folks dig hard ground at no more than four" (Devi 2002: 175). The result of the non-workability and non-implementability of these and other such highly laudable steps and schemes is the alienation of this oppressed community. And in the backdrop of this one feels compelled to agree with Mahasweta cynical argument that in India acts are for enactment and not for implementation. Moreover, she is of the view that if these tribals are killing their oppressors it is necessary and inevitable. The same is projected in this novel. In the novel, Chotti defends the bond slave Dukhia when the latter kills the manager Siaram: "Has he done wrong, that he should fly? . . . Why is he condemned to be hanged after a necessary killing" (Devi 2002: 70)? Similarly, the Mundas of Narsingarh under the leadership of Somchar, Disha, Upa and Lal kill the political hoodlums Romeo and Pahlwan in the heart of the forest with their arrows poisoned with Kuchila berry because they know that, "if they remain alive there'll be trouble again . . . If they die there'll be trouble as well. Since trouble can't be avoided, then it's best to kill them" (Devi 2002: 358). And when the government agents plan a strategic action to identify the killers of Romeo and Pahlwan, Chotti displays a symbolic resistance by taking the offence on himself. He does so to spare the young members of his community, who represent the future of the tribe, and who can carry forward the legacy of resistance, which, in the eyes of our activist writer, is the only way for the subaltern to get heard: "Chotti throws the bow to Harmu. Harmu catches it. Says, Why go on? Catch me? I had but that one arrow . . . [I]nstantly a thousand adivasis raise their bows in space and cry, No! The non-adivasis raise restraining hands" (Devi 2002: 363). Chotti's handing over the bow to his son Harmu represents the continuation of the protest.

Mahasweta also raises the question of religious conversion of the tribals in this novel and projects it as the direct consequence of their exploitation and oppression by the "Dikus". She holds them responsible for the conversion of lower caste Hindus and tribals to Christianity. In the novel the tribals of Kurmi village flee from their village to take shelter at the Mission. Though most of the tribals initially oppose the move on the ground that it would alienate them from the traditional ways of life, they ultimately agree to it, as it would at least save them from the unbearable burden of bondage and exploitation. As Sukha, a Munda from the Kurmi village, says:

T' new manager has bound ever'one in bond labour. And then so many demands. Give'em stuff right and left. If someone dies in t' office or his family then either give labour or pay tax . . . He goes from one court to another. We carry t' palquin, we take an' we bring back. He walks and we must run with an umbrella. Life is hell. (Devi 2002: 85-86)

So he declares, “If I go there, if I leave my faith, t’ Mission Gormens will gie us land, settle us” (Devi 2002: 86). Chotti thinks of no such escape, but even he accepts the fact that “they all go ta Mission wit’ t’ terror of Diku” (Devi 2002: 113). They know that “T’ Mission sahib will also raise profit in some way or other. But he won’ take this market cut, won’ ask for bonded work, won’ say hard words, and beat us up f’r any and ever’thin” (Devi 2002: 110).

Mahasweta also highlights the fact that even with the passage of time nothing concrete has been done to ameliorate the tribals’ lot. The only change that can be easily noticed has taken place in the domain of tribals’ consciousness. They have started perceiving things more clearly and also their interconnections—that oppression and exploitation are the fruits of the system rooted in evil. They have realized that:

It is not the wish of either the foreign or the indigenous administration that real relationships grow up between the officers and subject groups. It is more auspicious for the administration to keep the relationship completely unreal. Then in the officer’s eyes, the humans can remain a mathematical calculation of supplied census statistics. And in the eyes of the people the administration can remain the king’s elephants. Elephants that are no use to them, yet must be reared by them. (Devi 2002: 35)

They know that, besides the criminal nexus between the Dikus and the administration, their plight is the direct result of their illiteracy, ignorance, and simplicity. As Budha, a tribal says to Chotti, “They cheat cos we don’ know book-learnin” (Devi 2002: 107). But again, who is to be blamed for it? To Mahasweta it is none other than the “Dikus”. Because, as depicted in the novel, Mundas are in no way encouraged to send their children to school, and in case someone reaches there, the teacher takes no time to pack him off: “What’ll ye do with school? Go herd cows” (Devi 2002: 150). And even if the tribals get educated somehow, the chances of getting job are meagre: “Munda girls and Oraon girls go to Mission schools and still don’ get jobs” (Devi 2002: 150). Add to it, they are divested and prohibited from celebrating their age-old festivals. On the pretext of the pigheadedness of the tribals of Kurmi village, “the manager announced that the hunt festival was prohibited” (Devi 2002:89). Witnessing such cultural invasions, Pahan, the village head of the tribals, foresees the doom of their culture and declares in a very disappointing tone, “T’ archery game’s also over Now Munda’ll be Munda at festivals, and for community things like weddings” (Devi 2002:151). At other occasion Chotti laments the inevitability of his people’s loss of ethnicity in the wake of “national development work”:

In all national development work they will have to be one with those who, like Chhagan, are the oppressed of the land, and work as field hands, as sweated workers for contractor or trader. Then there’ll be a shirt on his body, perhaps shoes on his feet. Then the ‘Munda’ identity will live only at festivals—in social exchange. (Devi 2002: 139)

This is what Gayatri Spivak calls the “museumization” of “ethnic cultures”, which causes further alienation in the already alienated tribals. Under such exploitative circumstances violent resistance remains the only option for these desperate voiceless tribals. And this is what our activist author repeatedly tries to warn us off in this novel.

Mahasweta is considerably bitter and satirical while talking of the National economy and National development programs of 1960’s and 70’s of independent India. According to her, and which in fact is a reality, with these programmes and schemes emerged a new class of contractors (read exploiters), and it was via these contractors that the tribals were made

participants in these developmental (read detrimental) programmes, not for their own sake but as profit spinners for the contractors. The following lines from the novel are worth quoting in this regard:

The state has left no spot for them in this pattern. The majority of the population in independent India is low caste, and a significant percentage is adivasi. Therefore they are excluded from the national economic pattern. But even the excluded must live. (Devi 2002: 177)

Thus Chotti and his folks go to fell trees by the contractors' decision and in this way enter the national economic pattern of independent India. Mahasweta here tries to make us realize that it was actually the industrialists, landlords, contractors, and the like who had come to occupy central position in the national economy, and the most developmental plans were designed to suit their requirements and aspirations, as if they were the only citizens of the nation. Had the general masses been deemed the real constituents of the nation, they would have been the real beneficiaries of the national schemes. That is what Chotti says to his son: "If Gormen looked after Munda rights wud Munda be begger like this" (Devi 2002: 160)? Mahasweta highlights this aspect through the characters like Pratab and his son Harbans Chadda, who are opportunistic enough to identify themselves with and sub-serve the interests of the potential political forces of the day. The tribals working for them may be in a slightly better position than earlier in as much as they are getting wages, but what they are given is not even the one-tenth of what they should be getting as per the stipulation of law of which they are kept ignorant. The only thing that modern India gives to these tribals and lower-castes is posters: posters on family planning, communal harmony etc. And when it comes to make them conscious of their rights, they are forgotten. That is why Chotti says to Swarup that if he "wish ta work fer us then live wit' us. Teach us. So we know our own right" (Devi 2002: 307).

Thus, throughout the novel, Mahasweta highlights several aspirations and apprehensions of the wretched subalterns. She certainly peels "the mask off the face of the India which is projected by the Government" and exposes "its naked brutality, savagery, and caste and class exploitation" (Devi 2009: ix-x) by raising some pertinent and perennial issues like the place of the tribals on the map of national identity, land and human rights, the 'museumization' of 'ethnic' cultures etc. Finally, as a genuine subaltern representative, she, while justifying the collective subaltern solidarity and resistance, makes her message for the mainstream society loud and clear: Change the negative attitude towards the marginalised, or be ready for the revolt/resistance.

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