

## TRIBAL HISTORY AS OTHER HISTORY: A READING OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S *CHOTTI MUNDA AND HIS ARROW*

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### Abstract

*As Ranajit Guha observes, colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism have dominated the historiography of Indian nationalism. The history of the tribals has been barely recorded. I wish to study how Mahasweta Devi uses the discourse of fiction to narrate the history of the tribals in her novel, Chotti Munda and his Arrow. The novel is critical of the failure of the leaders of the mainstream freedom movement to draw the tribals into the freedom struggle. The novel brings to light the eviction of the tribals from their land. The economic policies of independent India neglected the interests of the tribals; only the interests of the middle and upper classes were taken into account. I wish to examine how the text illustrates that the ruling class stuck to its interests and the interests of the tribals were neglected. This class could not rule by consent. The only weapon it used was that of coercion. Chotti represents the united struggle of the tribals and the lower castes. The text illustrates that subaltern solidarity is the only hope for them.*

**Key words:** *elitism, historiography, consent, coercion, subaltern*

## TRIBAL HISTORY AS OTHER HISTORY: A READING OF MAHASWETA DEVI'S *CHOTTI MUNDA AND HIS ARROW*

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**M**ahasweta Devi (born 1926), a prolific Bengali writer, has been closely associated with many tribal movements around the problem of bonded labour, feudalism in rural India, the indifference of the state and the forceful acquisition of tribal land. Tribal mobilization is an important issue for her. Her writing and her commitment to social work are closely associated. The use of folklore in her historical narratives produces opposition between official historiography and folk tales. In order to write her novel, *Jhansir Rani*, she met the locals in the area where Rani Laxmibai had lived. She also met Bundelkhandi bards who sang songs of the Queen. Devi sees the possibility of counter-revolutionary action in these counter narratives. She has documented anti-colonial struggles in novels like *Titu Mir* and *Aranyer Adhikaar*. *Aranyer Adikaar* is her major historical work. She was given the Sahitya Akademi prize for this novel. A lifelong engagement with tribals began with this novel. She travelled deep into the tribal areas of Bihar and West Bengal to understand the miserable condition of the tribals (Sen and Yadav 11-12).

The present paper attempts to examine how Mahasweta Devi depicts the history of the dispossessed and displaced tribals in her novel, *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*. Colonial and Indian historians have chosen to erase the voice of these adivasis. The history of the tribals has remained the other history. The history of the subaltern classes largely exists in the form of folk-tales, legends and oral narratives. Since the discourse of history is based on written evidence, history cannot accommodate the lives of these classes in its discourse. The fictional discourse provides an alternative as well as opposition to the historical discourse in Devi's works. The analysis of the novel focuses on how the bourgeoisie failed to become a truly hegemonic class in India after independence as it did not make economic and corporate sacrifices to exercise hegemony over other classes. The bourgeoisie could not get rid of its corporatism and stuck to the interests of its class only. It failed to take into account the interests of the tribals and the poor peasants. The paper proposes to examine how Mahasweta Devi mixes history with fiction to narrate the untold tale of deprivation of the tribals. The novel is deeply critical of the politics of exclusion.

The novel refers to the Indian freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. The tribals see some passengers wearing white caps in some of the compartments of the train. They are unable to understand when they hear these passengers shouting something. Sana Munda gets the news that they are the followers of Mahatma Gandhi. It shows a disconnect between the mainstream freedom movement which was basically led by elite leaders like Gandhi and Nehru and the adivasis. The adivasis were kept away from this movement, and the movement became a negotiation between the elite leaders and the British. The scene which is depicted in the text is set in 1930. An intelligent tribal like Chotti Munda does not know who Mahatma Gandhi is: 'King Gandhi, Chotti says, Who's that?' (CMA 62). The novel is critical of the failure of the leaders of the mainstream freedom movement to draw the tribals into the liberation struggle. The Quit India movement of 1942 does not touch the lives of the Mundas in Chotti: 'It was as if that was the Diku's struggle for liberation. Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indian. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle' (122). The text brings out a sense of alienation among the adivasis. The elite leaders could not mobilize the tribals for the liberation struggle.

Chotti Munda is an emblem of subaltern solidarity in the novel. He tells Chhagan 'Our lot's t' same as y'all. The old days wit' real Munda villages r' gone. . . Ye and us dies together in famine, drought, and bonded work' (127). He wants the tribals and the lower castes to come together in their fight against the moneylender. He is aware of the caste divisions among the Hindus. He also takes pride in the unity of his community. Commenting on the theme of subaltern solidarity, Spivak writes:

*Chotti Munda* repeatedly dramatizes subaltern solidarity: Munda, Oraon, and the Hindu outcastes must work together. Today such a solidarity has a name: dalit. The seduction of an identitarianism in the name of the dalit can learn a lesson here. With a degree of regret, Chotti accepts that cultural identity must be . . . museumized. (Afterword 366)

The novel also depicts the loss of Munda identity. Pahan regrets the loss of Munda identity. The archery game is over for the Mundas: 'Now Munda'll be Munda at festivals, and for community things like weddings. Bow 'n' arer are now toys to win games at t' fair. What used to be a weapon's now a toy' (CMA 151). When Chotti sees new stations coming up and more houses being constructed, he feels that Mundas are losing their identity:

The day is coming. Mundas will not be able to live with their identity. 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 and 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. (139)

The failure of the tribal welfare department to change the lives of the tribals is also depicted in the text. Chotti Munda sends Udham Singh to the town to ask the tribal welfare officer whether Puran Munda's land could be recovered. The answer that Chotti gets is disappointing for the tribals. It shows that the government has not addressed the real issues that the tribals face. The issue of the displacement of the tribals has not been resolved. The department restricts itself to handicraft training and cottage industry:

The official responsible for tribal welfare and development can give handicraft training to a displaced Munda, not support him in recovering his lost land. . . . It's quite beyond the powers of his office to recover Puran's land. Apart from that, if a few from each group of Munda, Oraon, Dusad, Kurmi, Ganju, and washer-caste live together, the region doesn't come under his power. If he gets a pure tribal area he can explain the importance of cottage industry to them. (144)

The struggle of the tribals for the ownership of land is one of the important themes of the novel. Chotti Munda and Jita Munda buy barren land from Paranchand Bania on an instalment plan. Land becomes an anchor in the life of a tribal. Chotti brings this out: 'Be it barren, be it stony, a bit of land means tying one's drifting existence to an anchor' (186). Power relations are upset when a tribal acquires land. Chotti's acquisition of land does not go down well with Tirathnath and Harbans. They perceive a potential threat to their power over the tribals. They cannot imagine a landowning Munda:

It's not correct that Chotti and company should own even stony land. (201) This might alter the balance of their mental make-up. They may get a sense of property rights in land. This is not desirable. They should be kept like spectres without any recourse, without any materiality, forever dependent. Like those who are kept apart by earth, by water, by air. (187)

Chotti feels that Chadha and Lala can buy the whole earth. It is justice for them. When the tribal buys land, it becomes unjust. When Chotti buys land with paperwork, he gives hope to other Mundas and Hindu low castes. They begin to feel that they too

can have land. Tirathnath buys all the barren land because he does not want the Mundas to know the taste of land. He does not want to farm this barren land. For Tirathnath, more people will starve if less land is farmed, then he can give loans and trap the free ones in bonded labour. The indifferent attitude of the mainstream society towards the tribals is brought out by Chotti: 'E'en if all Mundas died, Diku-Hindus don't give a damn. They'll be happy. They're surprised that we don't die after all this. Think we're made of stone' (220).

After India got independence, democracy was the only hope for the deprived sections. Democracy promised liberty, fraternity, and equality. What happened after independence is another story. The novel tells this story. The election is rigged in the Chotti area. When Chotti and his people go to cast their votes, they come to know that their votes have already been cast. The candidate from the Youth League wins with a huge margin. The novel throws light on how the lives of the tribals were affected by the invasion of the outsiders. The Mundas lost their freedom with the arrival of the administrative machinery. Chotti 'didn't get to hear of the time when the Mundas were free, when Diku and Gormen and contractor and recruiter and missionary hadn't entered their lives' (42). The novel is also critical of the arrival of modernity in the lives of the tribals. Modernity should have brought a change for the better in the lives of the tribals, but modernity brings violence, fraud, and corruption to the Chotti area. Chotti is a microcosm of the entire country: 'The Chotti area graduates into modernity through the way in which the former member was removed, the elections were won through fraud and armed robbery, and the post-election contracts were divvied up' (240). The new regime should have changed class relations. Sadly, the new regime made the people to adopt appropriate class roles. Independence promised happiness and better lives, but it brought despair and disillusionment for the tribals. Chotti says: 'Ye'll now see what ye've never before seen. Ye'll think how happy we were before' (240).

The novel records the history of post-independent India from the point of view of a tribal. Indira Gandhi came to power with a huge majority in 1972. The novel is deeply critical of the Congress rule under the leadership of Indira Gandhi. This government made many tall promises to the people, but the lower castes and the adivasis continued to lead miserable lives. The rich became richer and the poor poorer:

Within the five years of the plan, all the shoutings, proclamations, legislations et cetera launched by the Central Government help India 'take a high seat in the World Assembly' and the image of the liberating Sun is as delightful as the Egyptian god Amon

Ra. But like the god he needs fresh blood. As a result, the hollers like 'eliminate poverty', 'bond labour's illegal', 'now moneylenders' loan for agriculture is illegal' (259) become posters and get stuck on trees and stations and bus bodies in the remotest parts of the country. But in reality people like Chotti and Chhagan continue to get ground down. These five reigning years are dedicated to the task of making the rich richer, keeping the lower castes and the adivasis crushed underfoot, and, above all, turning those designated hoodlums without portfolios into cannibal gods with police support. Objective, to renovate India as Baby's playroom. (241)

The advice that the Secretary of the Party gives to the elected member of the Chotti area reminds one of Gramsci's comment on the subaltern classes. Gramsci observes that the subaltern classes are subject to the initiatives of the ruling class (Notebook 3, §14, 21). The ruling class does not want the subaltern classes to come together. This class tries to break the unity of the subaltern classes. The Secretary says to the member: 'Adivasis and untouchables pull together in Chotti. It'll be good if you can strategically divide them (CMA 243)'. What the State Secretary tells the elected member shows that the Congress was not interested in ruling by consent. It believed in the use of force only. The Secretary advises the member not to listen to the advice of the party Secretary: 'No, no, we must get rid of the oldsters. Their love for the tribals and the untouchables and their counsel to be cautious doesn't work in today's Indian politics. Go on fighting' (246).

The novel is critical of the economic policies of independent India. These policies neglected the interests of the tribals; only the interests of the middle and upper classes were taken into account: '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' (177). The text also challenges the stereotypical images of the tribals. One such stereotype is that Mundas are violent people. The Secretary says: 'I know this business of moneylenders and landed farmers. If they were not ceaseless exploiters, we would have seen peaceful tribal villages' (56). The Mundas are basically peace-loving people. They indulge in violence only when they are instigated by the moneylenders. Hugh says: 'The Mundas are a peace-loving people of a happy disposition' (57).

The Ordinance of 24<sup>th</sup> October, 1975 which made the bonded labour system illegal was a momentous event in tribal history. Bonded labour could not be forced. No debts were to be repaid. Home and land that were in hock with the moneylender were to be

returned. The debtor could complain at the Courts if the boss took bonded labour and did not return the land. But the tribals were sceptical about the law. They knew that the police and the judiciary would support the moneylenders. The tribals did not have the money to fight court battles with the moneylenders. Chotti says: 'Lord. They've made t' law, t' law's made, but they put a stone in t'law, an' t'law tumbles. T' debtor, t' labourer, will charge that boss? By what strength lord?' (300). Chotti knows that the law is never applied. The debtor would not be able to press charges against the moneylender. Mundas do not know how to read and write. They do not grasp the law and the rights. There is no one to support them. For Chotti, the government is far away. The government does not come to know when a Munda or a lower caste person dies in the forest. The government does not want to know. This reality of tribal life is recorded on a tape recorder. Ironically, Chhagan's elated disposition about the law is kept, and Chotti's words which depict the reality are erased from the cassette. The cassette is broadcast in India and abroad. It shows that the government was more interested in projecting its benevolent image. It was not interested in implementing the law. Chotti knows that the laws are made by the ruling class. As long as the ruling class makes the laws, the tribals would continue to live in slavery: 'As long as Diku has t' power to make t' law work, so long will Diku watch Diku's rights' (304). Gramsci's idea of corporatism is instructive here. If the ruling class sticks to its class interests, the creation of expansive hegemony in which the interests of all the groups are taken into account is not possible. If the Dikus watch their rights only and neglect the rights of the tribals, they cannot exercise hegemony over the tribals; they cannot rule by consent. The only weapon that they use is that of force.

The implementation of the law making the bonded labour system illegal becomes an illustration of how the ruling class sticks to its class interests and neglects the interests of the deprived sections of the society. A meeting is called to discuss the implementation of the law. Khurana is shocked to know that the Minister does not want to strengthen the law. He does not want to give the orders to the Head Officer of the district to make the law strong. For the district-in-charge, adivasis and lower castes are like pests to be destroyed. The Minister is more interested in finding the loopholes in the law. The Minister thinks that an Act which is passed for the welfare of the adivasis and lower castes should not be implemented because the implementation of the law might create trouble. Tribals and adivasis do not matter much to him. He is more concerned about the interests of the landlord, money lender, and landed farmer: 'These are the pillars of the government. Who gives campaign funds? Who controls the vote?'

(310).The justification that the Minister gives for not implementing the law is equally ridiculous. He says that he does not want the law to be implemented to save the tribals and the lower castes from being killed at the hands of the moneylender. Amlesh compares the ministers with the white racists of the U.S. The text is also critical of the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, who passed this law during Emergency. She knew well that the law would not be implemented during Emergency. She wanted to project the image of the liberator of the poor.

Another example of the ruling class sticking to its class interests that appears in the novel is that of the Minimum Wage Act for farm workers. The Minister reveals that no State Labour Department has implemented this act. If this act had been implemented, the rich farmers would have been enraged. The text also holds the Left responsible for not working for the implementation of the law: 'The ones who wave the red flag and make peasant movements have also said no word about the minimum wage' (311). The political parties were interested in protecting the rights of the classes to which they belonged. The interests of rich farmers were more important for them than the rights of the poor farm labourers.

Chotti Munda plays the role of an organic intellectual in the novel. He becomes the leader of all the struggles. It is Chotti who tells the villagers that the government has passed the law for field workers, and they should demand the wages according to the law. This law is an illustration of how laws are passed, but the rich farmers and the moneylenders do not let the labourers know the laws: 'They don' wan' us ta know, we don' know. . . It's cos we don' hav booklarnin''(320). Chotti knows that only education will save the tribals from the tyranny of the administration. Education would enable them to understand the laws. Chotti reveals that many tribals have been languishing in jail for land right cases. These tribals do not know the law that they have broken. They grow old in jail. The example that Chotti gives is shocking: 'Two were field hands, t' man for whom they worked t' fields, sold his field land. They didn' know. They went to plough and t' new boss put force on 'em, send 'em to je-hell' (321).

Thus, tribal history is a history which has been underwritten. It is a history of the erasure of the tribals from the narrative of the nation. It is a history of the eviction of the tribals from their land. It is a history of the forceful imposition of modernity on their lives. This history shows that the ruling class failed to take into account the interests of the tribals. Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav observe:



*Chotti Munda* charts Chotti's quasi-mythical life-parallel to the narrative of the nation. It negotiates and sometimes directly confronts the power of the state from its colonial to nationalistic to postcolonial transitions. Chotti's own identity in and as a tale is responsible for activating self-determining collective action as disintegration of tribal societies continues, through the period of putative land-reforms to later Naxalite uprising leading up to the period of Emergency. The textual conflict between temporality of the tale and historical temporality seems to push towards an end where it precipitates into a real clash between tribal militant and coercive police action. (32-33)

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