

## The lives of Tribal people in selected novels of Mahasweta Devi

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**Abstract-** The lives of tribal communities have been depicted in various novels by Mahasweta Devi. Several novels have been selected for discussion to analyze the reflection of tribal life in the author's works. These include Kavi Bandyaghati Gnyair Jiban O Mrityu (The Birth and Death of poet Bandyaghati Gani), Aranyer Adhikar (Rights on the Forest), Chotti Munda Ebang Tar Tir (Chotti Munda and His Arrow), Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay O Pirtha (Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha), Hulmaha. Mahasweta Devi presents the indigenous people as a protesting and struggling human group.

**Key Words-** Mahasweta Devi, Indigenous People, Tribal Society, Marginalization, Exploitation, Resistance, Social Justice.

The lives of tribal people come alive in Mahasweta Devi's various novels. The novelist has honestly portrayed the realities of tribal life in her literary works. Mahasweta Devi actively worked to improve the impoverished lives of marginalized people in real life. She has sincerely interacted with the indigenous people and has exposed the reality of their social life. The traditions of the tribal people have been depicted in her novels. Mahasweta Devi has revealed many aspects customs of the social life of tribal communities. She took an active role in improving the quality of life of tribal peoples. She has explored various incidents of the bloody struggles of protest and resistance by indigenous people in various rebellions throughout history. Tribal people carry a distinct identity in the glory of their ancient traditions. Mahasweta Devi in her novels has portrayed the heartbreaking cries of tribal people due to exploitation and oppression, as well as their overcoming of problems in their lives. I have selected a few novels by Mahasweta Devi for discussion- Kavi Bandyaghati Gnyair Jiban O mrityu (The Birth and Death of poet Bandyaghati Gani), Aranyer Adhikar (Rights on the Forest), Chotti Munda Ebang Tar Tir (Chotti Munda and His Arrow), Hulmaha, Pterodactyl Puran sahay Ebang pirtha (Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha).

Mahasweta Devi in her novel **Kavi Bandyaghati Gnyair Jiban O Mrityu** (The Birth and Death of poet Bandyaghati Gani) tells the readers about the diversity of the tribal community and folk culture of Medinipur. Through the narrative of the novel the author reveals the lifestyle, customs, rituals and the ebb and flow of beliefs and disbeliefs of the Chuar tribal people of the Bhimadal kingdom and the neighboring Nidaya forest region. Regarding the identity of the people known as Chuars the L.S.S.O'Malley commented, the word 'Chuar' means 'Low and wicked people'. The term Chuar refers to the Bhumij indigenous inhabitants of Bankura, Midnapore and Manbhum.<sup>1</sup> The Chuar people of the Nidaya forest have kept alive various traditions of ancient civilization in the lap of nature surrounded by the forest. Kalhan, a young man from the Chuar tribe dreams of living with dignity within the larger social system. The novelist presents the inner thoughts of the Chuar people to the readers: "He(Kalhan) insists on seeing the whole world, so the leader calls the boy closer and say, 'Look, you were born a Chuar, you will live and die as a Chuar, this is written in your fate. If you act foolishly, I will cut off your big toe, understand? Chuars don't fight and quarrel so much, understand?'"<sup>2</sup>

The mentality of the people of the tribal societies are driven by the traditions ancient civilizations. The development of Kalhan's consciousness is revealed through the ancient traditions of the Chuar community's virtuous way of life. The tribal young man from Chuar adopted the name 'Bandyaghati Gnayi' and showed his bravery is the tradition. King Gargaballabh of Bhimadal was impressed by the poetic qualities of Kalhan alias Bandyaghati Gnayi and recognized him as a royal poet. After the death of the Chuar king of Nidaya forest, a dark cloud descend upon the life of Kalhan, the court poet of Bhimadal. The forest dwellers reach the royal court of Bhimadal to take Kalhan with them to adorn the throne of Nidaya forest. Upon the revelation of Kalhan's tribal identity, king Gargavallabha of Bhimadal and other upper caste people begin to express intense hatred towards him. The novel depicts that the noble qualities of Kalhan's composition 'Abhayamangal' became insignificant due to his Chuar identity.

The novel, **Aranyer Adhikar** (Rights on the Forest) presents a vivid picture of the Munda community and other tribal people living in the vast forest regions of Chota Nagpur under British rule. Mahasweta Devi has written the novel against the backdrop of the Munda rebellion. The Indigenous people of ancient civilizations strived to live in self-awareness through their forest life. The novelist informs the readers that the tribal people live by establishing the 'Khutkatti' village system within the forest and strive to increase agricultural production. Various folk tradition from ancient culture are prevalent in the lives of indigenous people. The novelist shows that the non-aryan Munda community is constantly oppressed by landlords, moneylenders, landowners and outsiders under the British rule. Under the leadership of Birsa Munda, the Munda people unitedly fought to protest and resist against the unjust oppression. Birsa Munda has become a God to the tribal community. In this context K.S.Singh's comments are quoted here: "Birsa was the Bhagwan not only of the Mundas but of Chhotanagpur as a whole."<sup>3</sup>

The novel 'Aranyer Adhikar' portrays the diverse beliefs, customs and traditions of the tribal people. The novelist has presented a realistic picture of the lives of the Munda tribal people in the novel. Mahasweta Devi in her novel has expressed the pitiful condition of Munda people's lives: "In the life of a Munda, rice is a dream. Ghato is the only food that a Munda can eat, so rice is a dream."<sup>4</sup> The tribal people of this ancient civilization are plagued by deprivation and oppression. In Mahasweta Devi's novel the story of the Munda community's struggle for the right to live comes alive. The connection between the tribal people's lives and the forest is essentially an expression of their heartfelt love for nature. Through the narrative of Mahasweta Devi's novel, the rebellious spirit of Birsa Munda's Ulgulan movement is highlighted.

The novel **Chotti Munda Ebang Tar Tir** (Chotti Munda and His Arrow) spans the period from shortly after 1900 in pre-independence India to 1978 in post-independence India. In this novel the author Mahasweta Devi has presented to the readers the reality of the exploitation and oppression faced by the tribal people. The precise aim of Chotti's arrow belonging to the ancient Munda community instilled fear in the hearts of the opportunistic and self-serving people.

In tribal society men and women have equal status. Men and women of the Munda community work hard day and night for the betterment of their families. The novel depicts the Munda people protesting against low wages forcing the landlord Tirthanath to pay fair wages. The novelist Mahasweta Devi informs the readers that instigated by landlord Tirthanath Pahelwan Romeo raped Munda women. Following these barbaric acts, the organized Munda community was forced to kill the perpetrators. After this incident police brutality increased in

the Munda tribal villages. Even in the face of extreme poverty the women of the Munda community never compromised their integrity by succumbing to the temptations of unscrupulous men. Every year on the day of Bijoya Dashami an archery competition is held in Chotti village. After the murders and rapes powerful figures like Tirthanath forced all the tribals to attend the archery competition that year. It was announced with a roar that any tribal who was absent would be branded a murderer. Many police men guarded the archery competition. The novelist has narrated the heartache of the tribal Chotti Munda in the narration- "He went to take the honor of the Biti boy, the Biti boys of the Pahan-Pahani-Moti-Relkulito-Dukkha-Jugal-Chagoer house had just died, then the police did not come, Maharaj?" "...Listen now. I am killing the stars".<sup>5</sup> In reality, Chotti Munda did not kill the people who were murdered. The defiant attitude of the tribal Chotti Munda helps people become fearless.

Mahasweta Devi's novel **Hulmaha** is set against the backdrop of the historical Santal Rebellion. The 'Santal Rebellion' is one of the historic tribal rebellions in India. During British rule the people of the tribal community united against unjust oppression. In 'Hulmaha' Mahasweta Devi portrays the reality of the oppressed, exploited and humiliated tribal people of that time to the readers. Under the British administrative system the lives and livelihoods of the tribal people were devastated by the cunning schemes of landlords, zamindars and moneylenders.

The narrative of the novel shows the oppressed tribal man Dhanaram Tudu taking refuge in the jungle while ill. This tribal man was a bonded laborer of the landlord Nagin Das. Dhanaram Tudu had borrowed three rupees from landlord Nagin Das but even after seven years of forced labor he could not escape the debt trap. Under British rule thousands of tribal people and people from lower castes faced similar tragic circumstances as Dhanaram Tudu. In this way the zamindars and moneylenders reduced them to work as bonded laborers for generations.

The landlords and moneylenders began to seize the land and property of the indigenous people by trapping them in debt. The powerful continue to turn the indigenous people into bonded laborers. The people of the Santal community devastated by the oppression fell into extreme crisis. Under the leadership of Sidhu Kanu, the oppressed people began to unite in a struggle for protest and resistance to establish the Santal Raj. In protest against the injustice and oppression the Santals from various places such as Manbhum, Birbhum, Hazaribagh and Bhagalpur began to gather at Bhognadih. Sidhu, a young man from the Santal community declared in a firm voice- "We want a Santal kingdom in Santal country. We want the expulsion of all Sahibs and all outsiders."<sup>6</sup>

The novel depicts the Santal rebellion led by the four brothers Sidhu, Kanu, Chand and Bhairav from the tribal community of Bhognadih. Thousands of tribal people died in the Santal rebellion during British rule. It goes without saying that the strong role played by the indigenous Santal community in the struggle against injustice and oppression remains memorable.

The novel **Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay Ebang Pirtha** (Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha) describes the plight of the Nagasia tribal of Pirtha block in Madhya Pradesh. The novelist Mahasweta Devi informs the readers that Pirtha block is a fictional place. According to the author in this Pirtha block powerful individuals exploit and oppress the tribal people and deaths among the tribal population are a daily occurrence. The novel shows journalist Puran arriving

in Pirtha block of Madhya Pradesh to uncover the truth. The tribal people in Pirtha block are somehow surviving under famine starvation and oppression. The tribal people of Pirtha block are deprived of everything from education to health and housing. The novelist has highlighted the harsh reality of the extreme suffering of the tribal people in post independent India. The indigenous people of ancient civilizations were deprived of their rights to the forests and their resources.

In her novel, Mahasweta Devi reveals the dangers to the lives of indigenous people like the extinct reptile pterodactyl of the Mesozoic era. Landlords and moneylenders have snatched away the land and forest rights of the tribals of Pirtha block. The indigenous people have been ruined by the cunning schemes of these powerful individuals. When journalist Puran asks about the problems faced by the tribal people, they remain silent. This silence of the simple innocent tribal people is expressed through a powerful protest against oppression and deprivation. The novelist's narratives reveal that journalist Puran Sahay has published factual reports from villages like Pirtha, Dholaki, Gabhi, Derhasanga, Madhola etc. in Pirtha block. The tribal people of the Pirtha block had toiled relentlessly clearing the bushes and thickets of the forests to create agricultural land. Mahasweta Devi reveals in this novel that powerful people have forcibly seized the land of the tribal people and in some places, forced them to sell it. The privileged individuals have registered the tribal people's land in their own names. A deep darkness has descended upon the spontaneous lives of the tribal people in the hills and forests of the Pirtha block.

Mahasweta Devi through the symbol of the Pterodactyl has presented to the readers a realistic picture of the plight of these tribal people. Among the tribal people of Pirtha block in Madhya Pradesh only Shankar Nagasia has studied up to the sixth grade. Shankar's son works as a bonded laborer in the moneylender's house. The tragic condition of the tribal people is revealed through Shankar's words in the novel- "Once there were forests, there were hills, there were rivers, we were there, our village was there, our houses were there, our land was there. We were there our fields were cultivated with rice, millet and other grains. We were there."<sup>7</sup>

Shankar's words reveal that when the population increased in one area, they would settle in another place under the direction of the community leader. The tribal people could live freely in the forests. The novel's narrative reveals that with the advent of urban civilization the habitat of indigenous people has also come under the control of moneylenders. The tragic reality of the fate of the tribal people of Pirtha block is thus revealed.

In Mahasweta Devi's novel, the tribal youth Bikhia sees a strange creature. The creature has a pair of wings like a bat, a body like a snake and four clawed legs. This tribal youth Bikhia drew a picture of this strange creature on the rocks inside a cave in the mountains. In the narrative of the novel Mahasweta Devi reveals the name of the strange creature to the readers as Pterodactyl. This strange creature has become extinct from earth. Indigenous youth Bikhia watches this Pterodactyl flying over the village of Pirtha. The tribal people like Bikhia believe that the spirit of their ancestors might be carrying some ominous sign for their society. In their apprehension of this ill omen, the tribal people of this ancient civilization observe a five-day period of mourning. The tribal youth Bikhia after drawing the picture of this extinct creature from the prehistoric era, becomes mute or perhaps Bikhia simply stops speaking. Mahasweta Devi's novel suggests that the tribal people will remain like a picture of the Pterodactyl for the future world- perhaps future generations will remember that tribal people once existed on Earth.

Mahasweta Devi's novels portray the realities of the various struggles and challenges faced by tribal community. In our pluralistic India the people of the tribal communities carry the tradition of harmony in their hearts and in their way of life. The bond between the tribal people and the forest has fostered a profound love for nature. The novelist's honest thoughts are expressed in the ink of her pen and the living words of the indigenous people of ancient civilizations are expressed on the pages of the novel.

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