

CHAPTER III

TRIBAL RECOGNIZING THE UNRECOGNIZED

Since 1980s, I have been vocal about the daily injustice and exploitation faced by the most marginalized and dispossessed of our people: tribals, the landless rural poor who then turn into itinerant labour or pavement dwellers in cities. Through reports in newspapers, through petitions, court cases, letters to the authorities, participation in activist organizations and advocacy, through the grassroots journal I edit, Bortika, in which the dispossessed tell their own truths, and finally through my fiction, I have sought to bring the harsh reality of this ignored segment of India's population to the notice of the nation, I have sought to include their forgotten and invisible history of the nation. I have said over and over our independence was false: there has been no independence for these dispossessed peoples, still deprived of their most basic rights. (Mahasweta Devi)

Introduction

Although India is said to be a country of 'unity in diversity', the reality is far bitter than this sweet slogan. Contemporary Indian society is clearly divided into two different categories— one is the caste-based social order which follows a certain hierarchy and second is the tribal section which is almost cut-off from the mainstream social order.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word 'tribe' as a racial group (especially in primitive and nomadic culture) united by language, religion, custom, etc. and living as a community under one or more chiefs. Some other reference books define the word tribe as a group of primitive or barbarous clans under the recognized chiefs. Tribal people are known by different names as 'Vanyajati', 'Vanvasi', 'Adivasi', 'Adimjati', 'Anusuchit janjati' etc. 'Adivasi' is the most common name and 'Anusuchit Janjati' (Scheduled tribes) is the constitutional name covering all of them. Many contemporary authors have depicted the colourful culture of the tribals. For them, the tribals are the people with exotic customs, clothes and ceremonies. But a few have talked about their ancient pride and the downfall they faced due to the invasions.

Some critics consider the tribals as the pre-Aryan inhabitants of India who have preserved a modified but distinguishable shape. They believe that in the first part of the Book-1 and Book-10 of the *Rigveda* there are signs of the mingling of the ideas and themes of the Aryans and the Adivasis. The non-Aryan indigenous people and their practices are beautifully depicted in the *Atharvaveda*. The *Rigveda* depicts the aborigines as the *Dasas*. There are also references towards their wealth and skills. Further, two important epics the *Ramayana* & the *Mahabharata* throw light on the classical examples of tribal characters. Who can forget the names of Guha, the Nishadraj and Sabari of the *Ramayana*. The characters of Kirat and Eklavya and Abhiraj are also immortal. Ekalavya, who mentally worshipped the great Dronacharya as his Guru and mastered the science of archery, is memorable for his devotion. In the seventh century, Banabhatta depicted tribal life in his book *Kadambari*. The writer has depicted the communities of the Sabars and Bhils in a

majestic manner. The hero of the Sabars' army Matangaka is shown as a strong and stout character. His personality as well as his skills make him undefeatable leader. His body has been depicted as if made of wood. His strength has been said to be equal to gods. Not only the ancient texts but also the novels of contemporary writers refer to the tribals. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffee Dam* talk about the challenges and problems that the tribes are facing. Mahasweta Devi herself gives the every essential information about the tribals in an interview to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak titled "The Author in Conversation":

The tribal population of India is about one-sixth of the total population of the country. The tribes are divided into many groups. India belonged to these tribals long before the incursion of the Aryan – speaking peoples. The *Ramayana*, one of India's two ancient epics, seem to contain evidence of how they were oppressed, evicted from their homeland, and then forced to occupy the lower reaches of the mainstream culture. Bits of their old culture can still be glimpsed. In the nineteenth century, for example, mainstream Indian reformers had to struggle to pass a Widow Remarriage Act in caste-Hindu society, the society that is generally called 'Indian'. Among the Austric and Dravidian tribes of India, on the other hand, in the states of West Bengal and Bihar alone there are Oraons, Mundas, Santals, Lodhas, Herias, Mahalis, Gonds, and more-widow remarriage has always been the custom. In tribal society, there is no dowry system, only bride-price. (Devi, *Imaginary Maps* i)

Although the state and Indian governments have made the rules regarding the prevention of the expropriation of the adivasi-land by some land-grabbers, the fact is that their resources are diminishing and they are forced to live as landless labourers. While doing menial jobs of the mainstream society, they are looked upon at and treated as outcastes. Although tribal communities have great culture and their way of living can be a lesson for other so-called developed cultures, they are forced directly or indirectly to leave their honour.

The exploitation, oppression and abject poverty of tribal people like the *Santhals, Lodhas, Shabars and Mundas* make the core theme of Devi's writings. Despite the political propagandas of the development of all castes and creeds in independent India, truth is harsher than our presumptions. In an interview titled "In Conversation with Mahasweta Devi," she speaks to Nandini Sen,

In 1998 Budhan Shabor of Purulia was brutally killed by the police. The British declared them as criminal tribes. After independence in 1952 the government of India declared them as de-notified i.e. they were no longer notified as criminal tribes but Denotified Tribes. After Budhan's death something snapped in me. I went to the Kolkata court and filed a PIL against the State Government. Fortunately we won the case. Budhan's wife received a compensation of 1 Lakh. Unfortunately in 1999 Bhadra Shabor was stoned to death. Why? To be a de-notified tribe the police kills them, the neighbours kill them and anybody can kill them. In between 1997 to 1999, 37 Lodhas were brutally killed in Medinapur. The government did nothing. (Sen 64)

Mahasweta Devi has taken up the case of these dispossessed tribes through her social activism and writing. She has spent many years working with these tribes as a journalist, editor and author and all the roles played by her led to the aim of making some grass root changes in the pathetic condition of these tribal people. She herself has found that in tribal people she gained 'an endless source of ingredients for her writing. Mahasweta Devi does not present a fake and pleasing picture of the tribals to please her readers. She says in the preface of the *Bitter Soil*:

I believe in documentation. After reading my work, the reader should face the truth of facts, and feel duly ashamed of the true face of India.

(Devi, *Bitter Soil* viii)

Of course, she really does so. In her story "Little Ones", the relief officer is shocked to see the horrible picture of the starving tribals,

The relief officer has been appointed to do this work for just three months. He is on loan from the Food Department. Never in his life has he seen such an arid, uninhabitable place. The sight of those who come for relief, the near naked shriveled, worm-ridden, swollen bellied adivasi men and women, repels him. He had had the impression that adivasi men played the flute and adivasi women danced with flowers in their hair, singing, as they pranced from hillock to hillock. ("Little Ones" 2)

She also tells about the role of the British in isolating the small tribes. The British branded the small tribes as criminal tribes. In the 1950s, Indian government de-notified these tribes. Our writer-activist fought for these two de-notified tribes of

West Bengal – the *Lodhas* of Medinapur and the *Sabars*. She also formed the group (DNT-RAG). The exploitation, oppression and abject poverty of tribal people like the *Santhals*, *Lodhas*, *Shabars* and *Mundas* make the core theme of Devi's writings since we all know that despite the political propagandas of the development of all castes and creeds in independent India, reality is quite different. There are some tribal groups who are struggling to survive due to this so-called modernization. The *Sansis* of Punjab and Delhi, *Parhaiyas* of Bihar or the *Lodha Shabar* and *Kheria Shabras* of West Bengal are some of those de-notified tribes who are doubly suffering because of the label 'criminal' once attached to them. There are other tribes like *Santhals*, *Oraons*, *Mundas* and *Hos* who are rather proud of the identity of their tribal communities because they have their rich culture and tradition. Although they have also been oppressed yet they have not lost their traditions and fortunately they are free from the labels of criminals.

For her, tribal people are like an undiscovered continent which is on the verge of extinction because of our ignorance. They don't even know that India is independent and slavery is against the law. A few writers in our country today are writing for the cause of tribes. Mahasweta Devi is a unique combination of writing and activism. In fact, she always gives her activism the first place. She writes as well as fights for the rights of these tribes. She has even tried to re-vision the roles of the tribes in history. The dignity and pride of the tribal people have always been hurt. Therefore, our writer takes up their cases to bring their honour back to them.

The Book of the Hunter: Life of Honour

Mahasweta Devi wrote her novel *The Book of the Hunter* with the mission of seeking out the tribal identity and lost dignity of the *Shabar* tribe as she states in the preface:

Such is my goal, but I don't know whether I will accomplish it. This is however a beginning. The encroachment of towns and non-Adivasis upon their territory, Adivasis abandoning their lands and going away, the heartless destruction of forests, the search of the forest children for a forest home, and the profound ignorance of mainstream people about Adivasi society –these are all truths about our own time. (*The Book of the Hunter* viii)

The author acknowledges her debt to Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarti, a 16th century Bengali poet whose epic poem '*Abhaymangal*' and specifically the '*Byadhkhanda*' section of this book is the source of this novel. She explores the cultural values of the *Shabars* by documenting the oral histories related to them. In the honour of Kabikankan Mukundaram, she says:

Mukundaram somewhat lightened the burden of mainstream society's sins by writing his *Byadhkhanda*. He was Aryavrat, the king of elephants, whereas I am a tiny ant who has undertaken this task with my meager means. Whether I have done the right thing or wrong is for Jaladhar and the other *Shabars* to say. (*The Book of the Hunter* ix)

The narrative of the novel is set in medieval Bengal and tells the story of the poet Mukundaram Chakraborty who is born in the family of erudite parents but is

not set to writing since he is so busy in the practical chores of the household with his mother. After the death of his mother, he is forced to leave his village Daminya and taking his wife and children with him, makes his way across the strange landscapes to the land of Ararha. Although the new soil and new rule prove to be very kind for him yet in the bottom of his heart, he craves to write something, a story that he is meant to tell.

In Ararha, he comes to know of the Shabar couple Kalya and Phuli who are full of intense but sometimes painful love for each other. He also gathers knowledge about the Shabar traditions from Kalya's mother Tejota who worships Abhaychandi, the goddess of the forest who also becomes Mukundaram's muse for his epic *Abhaymangal*. He asks Tejota:

‘Ma! Abhaychandi’

‘some call her Abhaychandi ,and others call her a desolate forest. The forest itself is our mother, what d’ you say?’

Tejota touched her folded palms to her forehead in reverence for the goddess! ‘She gives us fruits ,flowers ,tubers, leaves, wood, honey , raisin, medicine , herbs, barks, leaves and roots, even animals to hunt. She gives us everything, keeps us alive-doesn’t that make her our mother?’ (62)

Although Kalya and Phuli become the protagonists in *Byadhkhanda* of Mukundaram's epic, the novel tells us about the whole *Shabar* community and their intrinsic relation with the forest in which they live and die. It tells us of Kalketu who was the founder of *Shabar* community, of the forbidden and mysterious abode

of goddess Abhaya and the rules of hunting laid down by her. Even in the 16th century, women enjoyed a high status in the *Shabar* community. When Kalya beats Phuli, his mother questions her:

What kind of Shabar woman are you, anyway? Why do you put up with it?' Tejota had grounds for saying that .in this kalilyuga, when the world was filled to the brim with human sin, the Shabars still abided by their ancient roles. (83)

The novel also describes the strange tale of a brahmin stealing the image of the *Shabars'* deity and that is why brahmins are unworthy of a *Lodha's* obeisance. There are proofs supporting the authenticity of this tale that even today a *Shabar* is the first to perform the 'pooja' at the Jagannath temple in Puri. In fact, the *Shabars* are resistant of any encroachment upon their lives .They have their own world in which they are happy to live. Mukundaram wonders while watching Kalya and Phuli:

What do they eat? How do they look so healthy? What do they wear? How do they manage to walk off with their heads held high like royalty? People are so different in other communities. There are people selling liquor in the market, and there are prostitutes too. How does Shabar life remain so innocent? The women know no fear-how gaily she walked off with that snake! (103)

The *Lodha Shabars* enjoyed a life of dignity and self-respect for quite a long time until in 1871 the British rulers declared them to be criminals for unknown reasons.

The novel finally tells about the intrusion of mainstream settlements into their sacred area, which destroys the equilibrium of nature. Tejota worries about the whole situation pondering:

There was no stopping the times from changing. A Shabar understood that the more others encroached the more his existence would be threatened. Then, that was it. He'd pick up camp, sticks and all and calling 'Ma, Ma!' go off into the shelter of some virgin forest.

(106)

Even in the 16th century, this intrusion was so serious that the *Shabars* had to abandon their settlements and move from one place to another. Thus, like Wordsworth, *The Book of the Hunter* also makes a powerful appeal not to destroy nature as Wordsworth suggested his sister Dorothy to move with gentleness in heart since there is a soul in the woods.

The novel is also a strong plea to regain the lost respect for the *Shabars* since under the label of criminals they are being oppressed for quite a long time. The most burning example of this stigma is of Chuni Kotal who was the first woman graduate among the *Lodhas*. After graduating, she worked as superintendent of a girls' hostel and even enrolled herself as a post-graduate student of anthropology at the Vidyasagar University in Manipur. People harassed her and abused her because she was a *Lodha Shabar* a 'crime prone tribe' according to the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act of the country. The continuous insult culminated in her tragic death that united the dispossessed tribes. One more example of this discrimination is that of Budhan, a Shabar who was tortured and killed in the police custody for no crime on his part.

The tragic incident inspired Mahasweta Devi to establish 'the De-notified and Notified Tribes Rights Action Group.

To conclude, the novel raises the issue of that dilemma which these tribal people are facing. They are not able to cling to their cultural norms and traditional ways of living because of the mainstream society's intrusion nor can they cope with modern ways of living since our society is not yet ready to accept them as equals. She speaks in an interview titled "The Author in Conversation" to Spivak regarding the tribals:

They are Indians who belong to the rest of India. Mainstream India had better recognized that. Pay them the honour that they deserve. Pay them the respect that they deserve. There are no dowry deaths among the tribals. And when they are called criminal tribes, I say there is crime all over the state of Bihar. All over India. All over the world. Do these tribes commit all these crimes? They are your easy victims, they are your prey, you hunt them. The system hunts them and uses them.... (*Imaginary Maps X*)

With descriptions of these kinds, Mahasweta Devi tries to prove that the tribals should not be considered as uncivilized brutes. On the contrary, they are the ones who know the ecological system better than us. Ganesh Devy, a close associate of Mahasweta Devi in fighting for tribals' causes speaks in an interview to *The Hindu*:

Our attitude should be one of learning from them as, unlike us, they lead a need-based and not a greed-based life. These people use

Nature's gifts with care never violating her riches. Animal as well as plant species are not exploited. They replace what they borrow through replanting and allow the soil to renew itself by moving on. They are skilled bonesetters and have effective herbal remedies for certain ailments. There is equality between the sexes to a great extent. Widows are encouraged to remarry and there is no imbalance in the male-female ratio. The tribals understand the environment, the climate, plant and animal life around them. They know how to preserve the grain. They have a contraption to ensure that not a single grain is lost to the rodents. But the Food Corporation of India stores its grain in godowns and loses a substantial quantity to rats. The liquor they make is the only wine made of flowers in the world. Not only is it not patented by the Government but the process is considered illegal; there is displaced notion that they get drunk. There are laws made in their favor but parallel laws take their rights away. What is the use of forest rights if they are not allowed to chop the bamboo, which is so important for their craft. (Devi 12)

Imaginary Maps: Tribal Ocean Discovered

Imaginary Maps is a collection of two stories “The Hunt”, “Douloti the Bountiful” and a novella “Pterodactyl, Pirtha and Puran Sahay”. The book has been translated by Gayatri Spivak. The book is a gist of Devi's experiences about the tribals. In her conversation, she explains the reason for writing about tribals and says:

A tribal girl asked me modestly, 'When we go to school, we read about Mahatma Gandhi. Did we have no heroes? Did we always suffer like this?' That is why I started writing about the tribal movements and the tribal heroes. Of course, I am involved with them, but it had to be written. I repay them their honour. They want to feel proud that they are tribals. (Devi, *Imaginary Maps* iii)

It is with this purpose that Mahasweta Devi writes about the tribals. Tribals have become an inseparable part of her life and she wants to spend her entire life working for them. In the story "The Hunt" she tells about an Oraon girl Mary who in a majestic manner kills the man who was after her honour. The writer was after her honour. The writer tells in the "Preface":

I know that area like the palm of my hand. I have seen the person I have called Mary Oraon. The tribals have this animal hunting festival in Bihar. It used to be the Festival of Justice. After the hunt, the elders would bring offenders to Justice. They would not go to the police. In Santali language it was the Law-Bir. Law is the Law, and bir is forest. And every twelfth year it is Janiparab, the women's hunting festival in Bihar. Every event narrated within that story is true. (*Imaginary Maps* xi)

The story is situated in Kuruda village. Mary Oraon in an eighteen years old tribal girl. She looks very seductive at the first glance but there is also an expression of rejection in her eyes. She does not look like a tribal because her father was an Australian. Mary's mother Bhikni looked after the Dixon's bungalow. Dixon's son

came to sell everything. Before going back he put Mary in Bhikni's womb. Now Prasadji from Ranchi comes to live in that bungalow. Mary's job is to graze the cattle of Prasad. She also sells fruits and vegetables in Tohri Market. Whatever she does, does in an impressive manner. The writer says:

Mary has countless admirers at Tohri market. She gets down at the station like a queen. She sits in her own rightful place at the market. She gets smokes from the other marketers, drinks tea and chews betel leaf at their expense, but encourages no one. Jalim, the leader of the marketers and a sharp lad, is her chosen mate. They will marry when either's savings reach a hundred rupees. ("The Hunt" 2)

Many men from that area wanted to be Mary's lovers but she trusted no one. She keeps a machete beside her and if anyone tries to approach her, she raises it quickly. There is a remarkable boldness in her attitude. Even Mrs. Prasad is not able to speak something in front of her. The following conversation between Mrs. Prasad and Mary shows her indomitable spirit:

Mary has given Mrs. Prasad an oil rubdown. Out of her lardy body, she looks at Mary's hard perfect frame. She says, 'So, what about your marriage? What does Jalim say?'

What do you want with poor folks' talk? Will you organize my marriage?

God be praised! With a Muslim? I run such a marriage?

Why not? The Muslim says he'll marry. Your brother wanted only to keep me.

The mistress swallows the slap and says nothing. You have to take words from a girl who works like an animal, carries a forty pound bat on her back and boards the train, cleans the whole house in half an hour. (4)

The writer praises her for her energy and the sharpness of her mind. She manages everything in Prasadji's house. She takes care of their fields. She cleans their house and also buys things for the Prasads at Tohri Market. Although born from a white father, she is accepted in the village society. She is the best dancer at the feasts. She makes fun of Mrs. Prasadji and Mr. Prasad in front of the villagers and makes everyone laugh.

Everything was going well until Tehsildar Singh, a lumber contractor comes to her village to buy Sal trees. When the agreement is settled between Tehsildar Singh and Prasadji, the contractor starts deploying work force out of six villages. He is happy at the thought of getting huge profits out of the giant Sal trees. When everything is fixed, the contractor comes to Prasad's house and there her eyes fall on beautiful Mary. Mary quickly understands his true nature and warns Prasadji and village elders about his greedy nature. But Tehsildar Singh is not able to forget her. The writer says:

But Tehsildar Singh didn't forget her. A few days later, when Mary was returning on a water-buffalo's back herding other cattle, the contractor came up to her. How pretty, he said. You look like Hema Malini.

What

You look like Hema Malini

You look like a monkey.

Tehsildar Singh felt much encouraged by such a remark and came up close. Mary didn't stop her water-buffalo. As she moved on she took out a sharp machete and said in a lazy voice, Brokers like you, with tight pants and dark glasses, are ten a rupee on the streets of Tohri, and to them I show this machete. Go ask if you don't believe me. (9)

Tehsildar is not ready to accept her rejection of him and wants to get her at any cost. He brings a nylon sari and asks Prasadji to give it to her. Mary goes to the tent of Tehsildar, throws the sari at his face, insulting him in front of everyone. Tehsildar still does not stop chasing her and one day he catches her.

At first, Mary was scared. Struggling she lost her machete. With great effort, after a good deal of struggling Mary was able to spring out of his grasp. Both of them stood up. Tehsildar did not have his dark glasses on. Long sideburns, long hair, polyester trousers, pointed shoes, a dark red shirt on his back. Against the background of the spring songs Mary thought he was an animal. A-ni-mal. The syllables beat on her mind. Suddenly Mary smiled.

... Mary's eyes and face softened. She said, on the day of the feast. Stay near that rock. The women will go far to play the hunt. I will come to you. You know which rock! You look for me from behind that stone. (13)

The feast is due on the day of Jani Parab. Every year, in the spring tribals celebrate the hunting festival. After twelve years, only women go for hunting in the forest. After hunting, they drink higher, sing songs and enjoy together. The day of Jani Parab arrives and the women are ready with machetes and the men with bows and arrows. Older women go to the abandoned bungalow with liquor and cooking material. Mary is running over with joy. All women go to the Kuruda hill and enter the forest. Mary notices Tehsildar standing behind the rock. She drinks a lot of liquor and gets drunk,

Mary caresses Tehsildar's face, gives him love bites on the lips. There is fire in Tehsildar's eyes, his mouth is open, his lips wet with spittle, his teeth glistening. Mary is watching, watching, the face changes and changes into? Now? Yes becomes an animal.

Now take me? Mary? Laughed and held him, laid him on the ground. Tehsildar is laughing, Mary lifts the machetes, lowers it, lifts, lowers. (16)

She takes all money out of Tehsildar's wallet. She washes herself and the blood stained clothes. She throws the body of Tehsildar in the ravine. After all this, she joins the women's gathering and starts eating, drinking and dancing. While dancing, suddenly she runs in the dark. Her plan is to wake up Jalim and elope with him to some city nearby. She starts walking by the railway track. The writer narrates:

The spring fires are scattered in the distance. Mary is not afraid, she fears no animal as she walks, watching the railway lines in the dark, by starlight. Today all the mundane blood – conditioned fears of the

wild quadruped are gone because she has killed the biggest beast. (17)

Jennifer Wenzel in her paper “Reading ‘Imaginary Maps’” remarks:

While the characters in 'Douloti' and 'Pterodactyl,' refer explicitly to the fairy tale as a figure of both promising fantasy and unattainable (and thus harmful) fiction, "The Hunt" makes itself available to be read as a fairy tale of the Disney PG-13 variety. With the ubiquitous “once upon a time” in the first two lines, the hero(ine) who can do the work of twelve men, the villain who metamorphoses between man and beast, and the triumph of good over evil, the story of Mary Oraon provides a brief glimpse at a happy ending! Complete with an implied marriage, in a book full of tragedy and nightmare.

‘The Hunt’ is also the most anthology and syllabus-friendly of the stories in *Imaginary Maps*. The story of a racially hybrid threat of a vulgar out-of-town member of the dominant society! All narrated in seventeen pages, is, and I must agree with Spivak here, likely grist for the mill of a naïve political pedagogy whether feminist, multicultural, postcolonial, or environmental. (Wenzel 178-179)

The next story of the book is “Douloti the Bountiful”. Like “The Hunt” and “Pterodactyl”, this one also deals with the lives of the tribals. This story focuses on two major problems. First is the bonded labour which is yet not abolished from the area mentioned in Devi's works and second is the miserable condition of women who doubly suffer because of the bonded labour system. The moneylenders drag

them into prostitution and they are forced to live like animals in the brothels of so-called upper caste rich men. The tribals accept that as their destiny. Bonded slavery is there from the time of their ancestors and they can't even dream of getting rid of it. To be a free man, to pay the loan of rich moneylender and to live a fearless life is unimaginable for them.

The story starts with Ganori Nagesia whom everyone calls Crook Nagesia. He was also firm like everyone once but now it is only a dream for him. He watches some men writing down something on their paper. In his dream Crook Nagesia talks to them:

All Work in the owner's house is yours?

Why not, sir?

Why must you do all the work in Munabar's house?

How can I not have to do it all? O learned town gentleman with glasses All munabar's work is crook's work I am his bond slave (Kamiya).

I am everything. I am his chattel slave. Come, come, write everything down. Write and get in your car, buzz off to town, and I stay behind in the jungle. Each in his own place. You and I are men of two different worlds. ("Douloti the Bountiful" 20)

Crook Nagesia is Munabar Singh Chandela's Kamiya. The writer says that nobody knows when the Rajput Brahman came to this land and usurped everything there. Ganori Nagesia took the loan of three hundred rupees for the marriages of his son and daughter and to feast his community when he returned from the jail. The

moment he took the money, he became a kamiya forever. But he did not consider it as a special misfortune since he had been seeing kamiyas since his birth. The writer ironically comments on the fate of the poor:

Our Lord Fate comes to write fate on the forehead of the newborn in the dress of a head-shaved brahman. No one can evade what he writes down on the high-caste boy's forehead he writes property, land, cattle, trade. Education, job, contract. On the outcaste's forehead he writes bond-slavery. The sun and the moon move in the sky by Fate's rule. The poor boys of Seora village become Kamiyas of the Munabars, Fate's rule. ("Douloti" 22)

"Douloti" is not only the story of Douloti alone. It is also the story of Ganori Nagesia who was made crippled by his cruel owner. It is the story of Bono Nagesia also who dared to build a house of his own and paid heavily for it. Although Bono sought the permission of Munabar before building the house, still his house was burnt to ashes by Munabar and his men. He was also made a bonded-labourer forcefully by taking his thumbprint on a blank sheet of paper. He was beaten badly.

Bhuneswar had taken his aunt, wife and son. The aunt cried out when she saw Bono. Bhuneswar stopped her. What's there to weep for? Has the master burnt down a new house put up by a poor Nagesia before this? Did a poor Nagesia never become a bondslave before this? It had happened before, and would happen again. It would go on in this way for as long as my lord the sun would rise from the Eastern Hills and set in the Western Hills. (28)

Bono leaves the village and thus refuses to be Munabar's *Kamiya*. Munabar becomes very ruthless towards all other villagers. At such a time Ganori shows his recklessness and Munabar's plough steers into tiger's belly. Munabar is quite furious at Ganori and compels him to pull the cart. Ganori tries to lift the cart but falls on his face. His friends take him to the hospital but his body is broken and he becomes Crook Nagesia.

In his absence, Ganori's wife goes to the temple of Tahar along with her daughter, Douloti. There, some relative of Misraji sees Douloti and starts showing his compassion for her. He feeds her and also gives her good clothes to wear. Then one day he comes to Ganori's shack at Seora. This man is Parmanand Mishir who asks Ganori about his period of being a *Kamiya*. The writer strongly comments on the idea of independence. Parmanand Mishir says:

Sit on the stoop. Listen Ganori. How many years have you been
Munabar Singh Chandela's *Kamiya*?

A long time

How long?

I can't reckon.

Was Douloti born then?

Yes, Douloti was tiny then.

How old is she?

When there was independence for you and the bosses, the boss fed everyone, pulled bread and stuffed bread, had a big show, went to town. Douloti was born the year after that. The paddy was ripe then.

(44)

Parmananda proposes to repay the money of loan, which is three hundred rupees, and set Ganori free. This is something unimaginable for Ganori. He thinks that Parmananda wants to make him his bonded slave. At this, Parmananda shouts:

Then Parmananda roared at him, idiot, pig, old goat! Who wants to make you Kamiya? Do I believe in bonded labour?

I really dislike bonded labour.

I am compassionate, most compassionate.

My forefathers left Kamiyas.

I have freed them.

I am compassionate after all, most compassionate. (46)

After assuring Ganori that Parmananda is against the bonded labour, he says that he is god Narayana and he needs his goddess Lakshmi and that is why he wants to marry Douloti. On hearing this, Ganori starts running in amazement. When Parmananda gets hold of him, he starts screaming. At this point Munabar appears and asks the reason for their shouting. He recognizes Parmananda Misra and starts laughing. He sends Ganori home and takes Parmananda with him to his house. After some hours, Ganori is called at Munabar's house where he is told that his loan of three hundred rupees has been paid by Parmananda who will also marry his daughter. The writer remarks ironically:

And thus a strange fairy tale was created. How the Brahman Parmananda tried to show compassion to Crook Nagesia the Kamiya. And what compassion in Munabar Chandela. The Kingdom of Heaven descended on this sinful earth, on this cursed jungle district

Palamu. Where the human beings, who are Nagesia – Parhaia – Oraon, Munda, Bhuyian – Dusad – Ganju – Dhobi – Chamar by birth, are all people who are enslaved by their burning hunger at very low wages, for very little grain, by the so – called upper castes. And the sociologists travel around Palamu and write in their files, every son of a bitch is becoming Kamiya because of weddings – funerals – religious ceremonies. That the peasant is becoming the kulak's Kamiya, this the sociologists avoid rather skillfully. (49)

However, in the lives of Nagesias there is no fairy tale allowed. Parmananda takes away fourteen-year-old Douloti with him. Everyone is suspicious of his intentions but nobody is able to do anything since Munabar has joined hands with Parmananda. Soon the secret is revealed. Parmananda takes Douloti directly to the brothel in Madhpura. The conversation between him and another man informs the reader that he is always in search for virgin harijan girls in villages since they are in great demand in his brothel. He has no fear of law. When the other man warns:

You have set up a great bondlabour trade. You know where a Kamiya has a virgin daughter in full bloom, which girl is a virgin. There will be a change of government and the police will get you.

Who will get me brother? The Police officer, the railway inspector, who can stay away from Rampiyari's house? (53)

Every conversation takes place in front of Douloti but the innocent girl is not able to understand anything. She still thinks that the Brahman 'god' will marry her. Throughout the story, the sad plight of bonded labourers has been uttered through

poetic lines. Douloti understands everything when Latiaji, a rich contractor rapes her many times in the night. In the morning, Rampiyari consoles her. Douloti notices many other women in the brothel and asks if they all are whores? And she is told that she is also a whore now and the bonded labourer of Parmananda.

The bonded labourers of Parmananda in the form of whores are worse than Munabar's *Kamiyas*. Their bodies are treated like toys. When they become pregnant, they are given strong medicines which can even kill them. Every whore there has a pathetic story to tell. Douloti too has been given a medicine. She thinks:

Who becomes a slave willingly? They do so under loan – obligations.

The landless agricultural worker or the small peasant becomes a slave. Not willingly, under loan – pressure.

The social system that makes Crook Nagesia a Kamiya is made by men. Therefore do Douloti, Somni, Reoti have to quench the hunger of male flesh. Otherwise Parmananda does not get money. Why should Douloti be afraid? She has understood now that this is natural. Now she has no fear, no sorrow, no desire. She might have died even with the medicine. (62)

Paramananda takes every bit of their earnings and makes huge profits. Even for their small needs like clothes etc., they have to borrow money. The reader is shocked to read the description of bonded labour system which is extreme cruelty hurled on poor people either in villages or in small towns.

In the bondslavery trade, the bonded-labour system, the recourse to loans is the general regulator.

If this were their homeplace, then the loan taken by the Kamiya would have been added to the principal – the original loan that has made the man a Kamiya. Here too all the later loans are added to the principal, and the interest is compounded. The day the Kamiya prostitute is evicted from this house, she starts repaying by begging or selling dried cow dung for fuel. (63)

Not only unmarried girls but even married women like Somri are caught in the net of debt and they are never free. Somri has husband and one child at home in Basha village. Her husband took two hundred rupees as a loan, which turned into four thousand rupees in one year. To repay that loan Somri was brought to this brothel. Here she has three children from Latiaji who beg in the marketplace. She has turned old at the age of thirty. She cannot go back to her village because she has to rear Latiaji's three sons. Later in the story, we come to know that Somri keeps on asking about famine. She has the hope that if famine comes, the 'missioneri' people will keep her three sons.

Every whore has a story of her own. Gohumani, Jhalo, Somri, Kalabati and Douloti all are victims of bonded labour system. When at a fair nearby, Douloti meets Bono who tells her that *Gormen* is going to abolish bonded labour, Douloti remarks, "The day bond slavery is over, the sun will rise in the west, and the rivers will flow against the current." (73)

There is a long discussion among Bono, his son Dhano and the school teacher Mohan Srivastava about bonded slavery. Bono and Mohan are positive about the abolition of bonded slavery but Dhano has no hope.

Lataji is fed up of Douloti and asks for another girl. Parmananda gets another permanent client Singhji for Douloti. Parmananda catches cholera at a nephew's wedding and dies there. Parmananda's son Baijnath Mishir looks after the whore-house now. He is worse than his father and shows no mercy towards women. They are forced to have many clients a day. Rampiyari leaves the house taking her money. One day, Bono Nagesia, Mohan Srivastava, Prasad Mahato, Father Bomfuller and Puranchand from Gandhi Mission all enter Baijnath's whore house. By taking many clients in a day, Douloti's appearance is so changed that her uncle Bono is not able to recognize her. When they ask her questions about her earnings and calculate, they are shocked to know that Douloti was purchased by paying three hundred rupees and till then she had earned over forty thousand rupees. They all discuss the abolition of Bonded-Labour system. Douloti touches Bono's feet,

Douloti fingers said, why grieve, Uncle Bono? Bond – slavery loan is never repaid. A three hundred rupee loan becomes infinite in eight years. The boss has raised more than forty thousand rupees wringing this body of mine. Still I owe. There will be a loan as long as my body is consumable. Then I'll leave as a beggar. Somni has become a beggar and she says ceaselessly. Is famine here? Famine? (87)

None of them is able to do anything for Douloti. Douloti catches tuberculosis and venereal disease. Spending all her money, she reaches the hospital at Tohri where she remains unconscious with fever. At the age of only twenty-seven, she looks quite old. The doctor there is not able to do anything and asks her to go to Mandar. Douloti's remaining money is stolen by the nurses. She decides to go to her village Seora to meet her mother and father. She is never able to reach there since in

the way, she collapses on the flag of India which has been drawn carefully on the ground for 15th August, the independence day. The story ends with the following description:

Filling the entire Indian Peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded-labour spread-eagled, Kamiya whore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs.

Today, on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India. (94)

Any sensible reader can be shocked to see the grim reality mentioned in this story. Probably, Devi did not intend to base the story on one protagonist Douloti alone. There are so many stories hidden in one story. The common theme that runs through all these stories is the theme of endless sufferings of the subalterns. Bono has a separate story in which his house is set on fire. Ganori has a different story in which he is made crippled by the landowner. Somri has a complete story of her own in which she waits for famine so that the missionary can take care of her three children. Through all these stories, we see Douloti changing from a fourteen years old girl into a twenty seven year old prostitute suffering from T.B. The endless suffering makes her so complacent that she even does not have any fear of death. Although Douloti becomes nonchalant but all these disturbing stories shake the readers very badly and make us question the very idea of independence. The remark by Douloti's father when he says that there was independence for you and the bosses

and the end of the story where Douloti falls on the national flag on the eve of independence day pose a question in front of us. Was our independence fake and incomplete? Will there be a day in the future of our country when equitable order shall prevail in society? The day seems to be very far after reading “Douloti”, an endless saga of sufferings.

Regarding “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha”, Mahasweta Devi states in her conversation with Gayatri spivak,

Pterodactyl is an abstract of my entire tribal experience. Through the Nagesia experience I have explained other tribal experiences as well. I have not kept to the customs of one tribe alone.... I have mixed together the habits of many tribes. If read carefully, *Pterodactyl* will communicate the agony of the tribals, of marginalized people all over the world. (*Imaginary Maps* xiv)

Puran, a journalist goes to Pirtha to write a report. Pirtha is a block in Madhya Pradesh. For a long time people have been dying over there but the government is not ready to declare that as a 'famine area'. Puran's old friend Harisharan, a Block Development officer invites Puran to visit Pirtha. The S.D.O. of the area informs Puran that the Government brought a team of experts but they came in rainy season and declared that there is plenty of water in Pirtha. The S.D.O. also informs Puran about the existence of a monstrous bird in that area. Puran is ready to go to Pirtha and there he meets Shankaran, an educated tribal. Shankar tells him:

[W]e were kings. Became subjects. Were subjects, became slaves. Owed nothing. They made us debtors. Alas, they enslaved and bound

us.they named us as bond slaves, Haroah, Mahindar, they named us Hali, named us Kamiya, in many tongues. Our land vanished like dust before storm, our fields, our homes, all disappeared. The ones who came were not human beings. Oh, we climb hills and build homes, the road comes chasing us. The forest disappears, they make the four corners unclean. Oh, we had our ancestor's graves: They were ground underfoot to build roads, houses schools, hospitals. We wanted none of this, and anyway they didn't do it for us. ("Pterodactyl" 119-120)

Instead of respecting their untainted culture and tradition, the mainstream society became their enemy. It tried to destroy them which is the cause of Devi's anger and frustration towards the mainstream society as she says in *Imaginary Maps*,

[P]terodactyl wants to show what has been done to the entire tribal world of India. We did not know it, it was like a continent. But we never tried to know them. This is true of every tribal. And we destroyed them. (xv)

Devi's research on tribal is quiet extensive. She knows their history, customs, language as well as the reasons of their exploitation. She knows that no government scheme has been able so far to give them their due. Devi says,

The pterodactyl is pre-historic. Modern man, the journalist, does not know anything about it. There is no point of communication with the pterodactyl. The pterodactyl cannot say what message it has brought. The journalist, the representative of the mainstream people, has no

point of contact with the tribals. Their roads have run parallel. He does not know what the tribal wants, what the tribal holds most dear to the heart. The tribal wants to stay in the place which they know as their own. They want the respect that they hold for their dead ancestors. Whatever has come in the name of development has spelled disaster for the tribes. And they do not know how to dishonour others. Our double task is to resist 'development' actively and learn to love. (xvi)

After Kurukshetra: A Subaltern's View

Not only the present condition of the tribals has been analyzed by Mahasweta Devi but their history also has been revisited by the keen eyes of the author. The mainstream writers have always ignored the cruelty done to the tribals. But the injustice done to them could not escape from the eyes of a sympathetic writer. In our sacred epic *Mahabharata*, everyone has glorified the five Pandavas and their virtuous mother, Kunti. But Mahasweta Devi deconstructs the text and finds Kunti guilty of killing six tribals in the story "Kunti and the Nishadin".

After the war, Kunti decides to live with Dhritrashtra and Gandhari in the forest. In the afternoon, she leaves the Ashram and goes into the forest. She collects the firewood and drags the bundle back to the Ashram. She also watches strong Nishadins gathering woods. On one such afternoon, she meditates on her life and thinks,

Kunti can now look back. She never knew that she carried within her such a burden of unspoken thoughts and feelings. Life in the

Rajavritta was so different. Mother of the Pandavs, wife of Pandu. The role of daughter-in-law, the role of queen, the role of mother, playing these hundreds of roles where was the space, the time to be her true self? All that while – amazingly- she never felt that anything was hers, hers alone. (“Kunti and the Nishadin” 28)

After meditating on her roles, she suddenly feels an urge to unburden herself in the form of a confession. She wants to confess everything in front of the forest, rocks, birds and insects. The author satirizes Kunti's ignored attitude towards Nishad women. Although they are living human beings, Kunti ignored them completely as if they were stones. She does not even cast a look on them. The writer observes:

How could they? Her life had been the rajavritta, Had she ever spoken to a Dasi? Had she developed any genuine bond with Hidimba? Life outside the rajavritta had not touched her at all. (29)

Kunti compares herself to Gandhari and finds herself lacking in that stately composure which she has even after the death of her hundred sons. She finds herself lacking in Gandhari's piety and righteousness. Whereas Gandhari was able to curse war and bloodshed on behalf of all the women, Kunti was not able to do so. She thinks:

That is what makes her Gandhari. This war was battle for power. A war to wipe out the other and establish oneself as all-powerful. Did dharma triumph? Was adharma vanquished? The heartrending wails of the women at the sight of all those bloodied, savaged corpses was a curse on the word 'war' itself. (31)

Addressing the mother Earth, Kunti laments over the death of Karna and curses herself for not even being able to cry over the death of her son. She considers it a sin to be the mother of Karna and yet not admitting it in society even after his death. She even considers herself weak and hollow since she could not blame Krishna for not stopping the war. She does not think herself even worthy of forgiveness. Having confessed all her crimes, she suddenly lifts her head and notices Nishad women staring at her. She stands up and starts walking towards the ashrama thinking that her language could not be understood by these Nishad women. Another day, she bathes in the forest stream and feels the desire to confess again. Addressing the Mother Earth again, she thinks about Karna. She went to Karna before battle and asked him to side with Yudhishthira. Karna did not insult her rather promised her not to touch any other *Pandava* except Arjuna. He promised her that she would always be the mother of the five sons. She feels ashamed of herself since Karna acknowledged her to be his mother whereas Kunti could not gather her courage to acknowledge Karna her son. Kunti lifted her head and found the elderly Nishadin watching her with a feeling of pity in her eyes. Kunti ties her bundle and starts walking towards her ashrama. In the cottage, Gandhari consoles her and advises her to be calm and patient.

The next day, she finds something unusual in the forest air. Everything is topsy-turvy. Nishad men, women and children were deserting the forest with all their belongings. The elderly Nishadin stands in front of Kunti and asks her to confess her gravest sin. Kunti is surprised to find out that the Nishadin was all the time listening and understanding her talk. Kunti tells her that she has confessed about her sins about Karna. The Nishadin tells her.

For you it does. Not for us. But to the people of the lokavritta, to sacrifice or harm innocents in one's own self interest is the most unpardonable sin. You are guilty of that sin. (41)

Then the Nishadin reminds Kunti of *Varnavata* and the lac house. She reminds her that Kunti stayed there for one year with her sons. Kunti knew that the house was made of inflammable things, still she stayed there. She wanted to prove that six of them were burnt to death. Although Kunti considered even the shadow of Nishad or Nishadin impure, but on one special day she invited a certain elderly Nishadin and her five sons. Nishadin asks Kunti.

Tell me, who knew of certain elderly Nishadin and her five young sons? Who invited them to her feast for brahmans? Who made sure that they were served with unlimited amounts of wine? You have held sweets for so many brahmans so many times, Kunti. How often have you invited any Nishad – Kirat – Sabar – Nagavanshi wine every time?

No.

The Nishadin eyes are her death sentences. Kunti refuses to lie.

Just that one time.

Just that one time.

Just that one time that the vratya, the outcastes, were invited?

Yes.

Drunk on so much wine, that Nishadin mother and her five sons lay there senseless. You knew this, yet you escaped through us secret tunnel, didn't you? (42)

Kunti admits that she made a plot for the Nishadin and her five sons. She doubts that woman to be the same Nishadin. But the woman tells that it was her mother-in-law who was with her five sons. Although she married someone else and has children now, she holds Kunti responsible for the death of six innocent men. She remarks:

You could not even remember this sin. Causing six innocent forest tribals to be burnt to death to serve your own interests. That was not even a crime in your book. In our eyes, by the laws of Mother Nature, you, your sons, your allies, are all held guilty. (43)

The Nishadin tells her that the forest fire is about to set that is why all animals and the tribals are fleeing towards the safe area. But Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritrashtra would not be able to make it. She says:

Yes. Three blind, weak and infirm people cannot make it there. One is blind from birth, another has chosen to be blind, and you, you are the blindest of the three. You can murder innocents and then forget all about it. (44)

The Nishadin refuses to forgive her and goes away. Kunti decides to go back and wait for the forest fire to consume them. Kunti is not sure of begging forgiveness from a dead Nishadin since killing is a normal thing in the rajavrita. Lata Chaturvedi in her paper 'Mahasweta Devi's Feminist Rewriting/Righting of the Great War in *After Kurukshetra*' remarks:

In her desperate bid of feminist rewriting/righting of the tale, Mahasweta Devi's eloquent voice can be heard when she makes

Kunti encounter Nishadin who goes to the extent of reminding a crime, the murder of a family of Nishad forest dwellers which she has complacently forgotten. (Chaturvedi 286)

Thus an untouched aspect of the sacred epic has not only been touched by the author; rather, scrutinized with the eyes of an objective observer. One is bound to think about the so-called virtues of the pandavas and their mother Kunti. Devi ends the story in the form of poetic justice. In a way, we are bound to think that whatever we have read till now with absolute devotion and belief, was it even worthy of that? Or at least was it read from the right perspective. Could it be that the mainstream authors tried to ignore the existence and importance of the tribals even in the ancient times?

From the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabhrata* to the *Kadambari* of Banabhatta, tribal life has been presented in all its beauty. Banabhatta has depicted Matangaka, a young hero of Sabar's army as very strong and brave. Guha, the Nishadraj has been presented as a man of great power in the *Ramayana*. Sabari in the *Ramayana* is considered as an idol of devotion. Eklavya of the *Mahabharata* will be immortal because of his great sacrifice. Thus the tribals have always proved themselves as courageous, loyal, devoted, honest and skilled. Women enjoy great respect in all tribal communities. Nature is revered as mother by all tribals. But despite having all these qualities, due to modernization they have become the victims of injustice and exploitation. To quote Mahasweta Devi,

[M]ainstream society is carrying on a continuous, shrewd and systematic assault on his social system, his culture, his very tribal

identity and existence...[H]istory should be re-written, acknowledging the debt of mainstream India to the struggles is not to be found only in written scripts but in their songs, dances, folktales, passed from one generation to another. So much of it has perished with the people who have died with all this history carefully protected in the very depths of their hearts. But so much still exists. (Devi, *Dust on the Road*, 109)

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