

CHAPTER V

HISTORY REVISIONED

Introduction

Without past, there is no present and without present, future is unimaginable. A study of the past is mandatory to recall our successes and our failures, our shames and our prides, our traitors and our heroes. *Wikipedia* defines history as,

History is the study of the past, specifically how it relates to humans. It is an umbrella term that relates to past events as well as the memory, discovery, collection, organization, presentation, and interpretation of information about these events.... History can also refer to the academic discipline which uses a narrative to examine and analyse a sequence of past events, and objectively determine the patterns of cause and effect that determine them. (Wikipedia)

Mahasweta Devi who is a rare mixture of writing and activism, goes beyond the boundaries of place and time in search of the heroes who stood alone for the causes of subalterns. They led the thousands of other people who sacrificed their life in the fight for their rights. India was invaded again and again by the foreigners and Indians were made subalterns in their own land. When the British in the name of trade invaded India, Indian people started striving for their freedom which they ultimately gained in 1947. But the inequitable order in society continued and gave birth to many revolts. The chapter discusses three works by Devi in which she makes alive three heroes who belonged to different times but sacrificed their lives for the same purpose.

The Queen of Jhansi: A Saga of Valour

In the history of India, one chapter will always be unforgettable and that is the chapter of the first freedom struggle of India. In fact, the freedom struggle of India reminds us that for more than two centuries, billions of Indians were tied in the chains of the British Empire. They suffered endless miseries in the hands of the colonizers. On their own land, they worked as slaves. Their money, their resources and even their talents were exploited and nothing could be done for hundreds of years.

Our first freedom struggle was the first effort to be united against the British who had made us subaltern in our own country. The works analysed in this chapter show the revolt of subaltern before and after independence. The first freedom struggle will also be remarkable from another point of view and that is the role of women in India's struggle. The moment we talk about women of our entire freedom struggle, one name which appears in the mind of even a child is the Rani of Jhansi. The name inspires billions of minds even today and I cannot help myself quoting a poem in Hindi by Subhdra Kumari Chauhan, which aptly describes the charisma of the Queen. The first and last stanza of the poem read as:

सिंहासन हिल उठे राजवंशों ने भृकुटी तानी थी,
बूढ़े भारत में आई फिर से नयी जवानी थी,
गुमी हुई आज़ादी की कीमत सबने पहचानी थी,
दूर फिरंगी को करने की सबने मन में ठानी थी।
चमक उठी सन सत्तावन में, वह तलवार पुरानी थी,
बुंदेले हरबोलों के मुँह हमने सुनी कहानी थी,

खूब लड़ी मर्दानी वह तो झाँसी वाली रानी थी।।
.....जाओ रानी याद रखेंगे ये कृतज्ञ भारतवासी,
यह तेरा बलिदान जगावेगा स्वतंत्रता अविनासी,
होवे चुप इतिहास, लगे सच्चाईकोचाहेफाँसी,
हो मदमाती विजय, मिटा दे गोलों से चाहे झाँसी।
तेरा स्मारक तूही होगी, तू खुद अमिट निशानी थी,
बुंदेले हरबोलों के मुँह हमने सुनी कहानी थी,
खूब लड़ी मर्दानी वह तो झाँसी वाली रानी थी।

It was probably this magic of the young Queen which inspired our writers to research and write about the Queen of Jhansi. Her tireless pursuit resulted in her work *The Queen of Jhansi*. *The Queen of Jhansi* is not only a piece of the fiction or the biography of a Queen, the extensive research done on this topic by the writer makes it a saga of the first freedom struggle of India. The writer heard the story of the Queen of Jhansi from her grandmother. When she decided to write on her, she found a complete dearth of authentic documentation of the first freedom struggle. Obviously the English have removed all traces of their brutality done at that time. Whatever material was available was written from their point of view. That was why, the writer tore all the pages which she wrote taking help of the books and decided to do a research herself. She went to Jhansi and talked to the natives there. They told the writer with full belief, “*Rani margay na houni, abhi to jinda hou.*”
(The background xv)

There are countless people in Jhansi, Kalpi, Bhandir and Gwalior who tell with full conviction that the Queen of Jhansi is not dead. Some of them even claim to see her even today. After meeting such people, the writer remarks:

If the essence of our land could be personified, that embodiment would be Rani Lakshmibai. If for a hundred years ordinary people have known that in her hands, soil turned into brave soldiers, wood become swords, and mountains got transformed to speedy horses, what kind of woman could she have been? We invoke the goddess Durga as *Shakti* once a year. But even today, Rani Lakshmibai is invoked and worshipped daily in Bundelkhand. Is all the reverence people feel towards her just an overflow of emotions? Was there no basis for it? (The Background xvii)

The writer tells that the capital of Jhansi was 142 miles south of Agra; 245 miles to the west on the road from Allahabad to Banda, and 740 miles North West of Calcutta. The writer gives a detailed account of the history of Bundelkhanda region and how the Marathas arrived there. Chattrasal, the king of Bundelkhand had invited Bajirao to save his kingdom from the Mughals. On winning, he gave a piece of his kingdom to him. When Raghunath Hari became the Subedar of Jhansi, it became very prosperous. When Gangadhar Rao ascended the throne of Jhansi, the city started flourishing. He started searching for a wife since his first wife had died long back.

Manikarnika or Mannu was born in the house of Moropant Tambe and Bhagirathi Bai on 21st Nov 1835 in the house built on *Assi Ghat* at Banaras. When

Manu was two years old, her mother died. Moropant decided to go to Bithur near Kanpur with his daughter. When Manu was eight years old, her father thought of her wedding. It was custom in their caste to give their daughter in marriage when she was eight years old. It was the same time when Tatia Dikshit from Jhansi arrived in Bithur searching for a bride for Gangadhar Rao. Manu's horoscope was analysed and it was revealed that the girl was destined to be a great Queen. Moropant and his daughter were invited to Jhansi and Manu was married to Gangadhar Rao in 1842.

Manu was named Lakshmibai after marriage. A detailed description is given of Jhansi's splendour in those times. In 1851, the Queen gave birth to a boy and he was named Damodar Gangadhar Rao but the child could not live for more than three months. Gangadhar broke down at his son's death and his health started deteriorating. Gangadhar decided to adopt a son and Vasudev's son Ananda's name was changed to Damodar Gangadhar Rao. British authorities were informed of this adoption. The king personally requested the authorities to approve of this adoption.

On the 21st November, Gangadhar Rao through Major Ellis, the representative of the British sent this news to Malcolm who further wrote about this to the Governor's Secretary. The writer gives the detailed account of the exchange of letters among authorities. In the end, Lord Dalhousie made the decision to annex Jhansi to the British Empire based on doctrine of Lapse. Although the writer has quoted many letters, here is the last notice for the public of Jhansi from Malcolm;

At the death of Gangadhar Rao on 21st November 1853, after his sudden adoption of a son on 20 November 1853, I have received the following orders from the Governor:

The resolution of Jhansi's adoption has not been approved. On the grounds of Doctrine of Lapse, the British Government is joining Jhansi with British India. For now, I have appointed Major Ellis as the administrator of Jhansi. The general public is now under the British rule and the taxes are payable to Major Ellis.

Signed: D.A. Malcolm 15-3-1854 (*The Queen of Jhansi* 67)

The next morning when Major Ellis went to the palace, everyone's heart was throbbing with anxiety. The writer narrates:

Suddenly Major Ellis arrived and everyone at court was startled. A long row of stairs led to the hall of the court and he started walking up them. He drily greeted the Queen sitting behind the screen and then proceeded read aloud Dalhousie's order and Malcolm's notice. Everyone present was taken aback, shocked Ellis enunciated his words as surely as bolts of tightening. As soon as he stopped reading, Lakshmibai, from behind the screen, uttered four definitive words with controlled articulation. Her voice was familiar to Ellis, but completely unfamiliar in its strength tinged with deep sadness- '*Meri Jhansi doongi nahi.*' I will not give up my Jhansi.'

It was a historic utterance, because it was the first and only protest during a time when rulers Indian kingdoms, which were gradually disappearing into the terrible, ever-widening maw of the English all over the subcontinent, never offered any resistance at all. (68)

Despite her determination the Queen had to accept the decision and the Union Jack was now flown over the fort instead of the royal flag of Jhansi. The Queen was given only the stipend of 5000 rupees. She was not even given the right over her husband's private property. And to add insult to injury, Colvin, governor of the north-western Provinces, worked out some detailed accounts in order to claim that the King of Jhansi still owed 36000 rupees from a past debt, Colvin informed the Queen that the amount would be deducted out of her monthly pension. The Queen argued that since Jhansi had been taken over by the British now this debt also belonged to the British but her arguments had no effect over the cruel British government.

When Damodar turned seven, the Queen wanted to perform the sacred thread ceremony for him. She asked the government to grant her one lakh rupees from the fund which was in Damodar's name. But the government rejected her request.

The year 1857 arrived and there were numerous voices of dissatisfaction coming from all over India. Flatterers of the British Raj thrived but otherwise everywhere there was naked dance of exploitation and cruelty. Separate rebellions were breaking out in the every region of the country. There was utter dissatisfaction amongst the Hindu and the Muslim soldiers of the army. They were sent to Afghanistan to fight a war. They were made the promises of double payments which were never paid to them. Labourers and overburdened farmers were lured into armies but were always treated with disgrace. It was at this time that the secret signal of 'chapatti and lotuses' were being distributed among the soldiers. The writer comments:

The names of Ahmedullah, counselor to the Nawab Wajid Ali Shah(ousted from the throne of Ayodhya), Nana Saheb, Ajimullah, Tatia Topey, the Rani of Jhansi, Kunwar Singh and Feroz Shah should be mentioned as the leaders of this rebellion.

There is a popular impression that the Queen of Jhansi and Nana Saheb plotted along with the others. Marreson, a dependable historian, has even said that the circulation of the chapatti and louts petals were introduced by the Queen to spread rebellion in northern India. The date of the uprising was also personally decided by her. (101)

The discontentment among the soldiers also reached the camp at Jhansi. There were four hundred infantry men with bayonet. On 4th June, the 7th company of the 12th Regiment, under the leadership of their Havildar Jauna Gurubaksh took over the Star Fort. All military and non-military officers took refuge in the fortress along with their families. The Queen requested the English officers to leave for some other place for their safety but they did not pay any attention. After three days of siege, the situation became worse and they decided to surrender. Sixty four English men, women and children emerged from the fort at the promise of their safety but they were killed at the orders of Risaldar Kale Khan. The writer observes:

The Jhansi massacre was very significant event in the chronicles of 1857-1858. Although she herself was never involved directly or indirectly with the massacre, it created an even more difficult situation for the Queen. (113)

The Queen was considered to be responsible for the cruel massacre of all the Englishmen. The Queen explained her condition in letter to Major Erskine and also the unprotected state of Jhansi. Erskine in a circular asked the Queen to take command of Jhansi. The Queen took over the charges and immediately started working for the welfare of her Jhansi. She increased her power by appointing various individuals to various posts. She increased her army power by giving training even to women. The writer observes:

Disregarding caste and religion, the Queen called upon and organized a women's troop. On the palace grounds, she would practice *Malkhamba* or climbing up a wooden pole and wrestling with the women. Marking coconut trees with white for targets, they would practice pistol-shooting with the women in the palace grounds; they also practiced sword-fighting and horse riding regularly. Women were trained to fight as equals with men in order to aid the artillery section. In later chapters of history and in countries outside India, women have fought shoulder to shoulder with men: we can be right fully proud that years ago an Indian woman pioneered this glorious tradition. (128)

At this time, the Queen suffered from many internal attacks. Watching the unprotected state of Jhansi and governed by a woman, everyone surrounding, considered it to be, vulnerable and tried to win it. But the Queen dashed everyone's hopes. She rules very decisively, encouraged her soldiers and won every war. Gradually the double-policy of the English became clear to her. She was held guilty

for the Jhansi massacre of the English. The English provoked the neighbours of Jhansi like the Queen of Orchha to attack Jhansi.

Not only in Jhansi, the revolt was spreading all over the north and central India. In central India, rebellion spread in Bundelkhand and then in Sagar Narmada division. It was at this moment when Sir Colin Campbell was called from London to suppress the rebellion in all over India. He examined the situation all over British India for ten weeks and then appointed three military officers: Major General Hugh Rose, White Lock and Robertson. Hugh Rose was given the command to suppress the rebellion in Central India. Hugh Rose had started his military career in 1820. He had proved his worth in many battles in Ireland, Syria, Crimea and Sebastopol. He left Sihori with the second brigade on the morning of 15th January. He arrived in Bhopal and was given a warm welcome by the Queen of Bhopal. On his way to Sagar, Hugh Rose encountered the formidable fort of Rathgarh. Not only the soldiers but also the common farmers in a great number fought with Hugh Rose. Despite very limited resources, they prevented Hugh for three days to move further. The writer tells:

In Rathgarh Fort, a letter written by Raja Thakur Mardan Singh of Banpur to the crown prince of Mandasore was found. The reason for believing, that all of Bundelkhand was getting ready in a planned way to resist the British, is in that letter. The First Brigade faced resistance without fail in every notable fort, city, village and forest on their way to Jhansi. The Indians did not allow the British to advance without a fierce struggle at every stage. (165)

After fighting in Rathgarh the king of Banpur fought with the British at Barodia. After the battle in Barodia Hugh Rose left for Sagar and took over it. In the image of the Queen of Jhansi, people found an ideal and this is what the British feared the most. Many flatterers helped the British in their mission of suppressing the rebellion in Central India;

That fear led them into organizing themselves in Central India at the cost of many millions in Indian currency. The English lost no times at all in striking at the root of any possibility of an anti-British movement that could assume enormous proportions under the Jhansi Queen. And in this mission, they were aided by the Sindhia of Gwalior, the Holkars of Indore, the Gaikwars of Baroda, Jangbahadur of Nepal, the Queen of Orchha, the Begum of Bhopal, the King of Panna and umpteen other puppets of the British crown. (174)

In this hour of crisis, the Queen started preparing for war. She approached the people of Bundelkhand for help from the common men like kacchis, koris, and Telis to the Afghani and Pathani soldiers were asked for help. She even declared that women should not be considered weak or helpers at this time. The people of Jhansi showed their devotion in her and they were all ready to face the British.

Hugh Rose won every battle despite the resistance at many places. However, when he saw the Jhansi Fort, he thought that it would not be easy this time. The writer says in capitals:

WHEN HE SAW THE FORT OF JHANSI, Hugh Rose realized that he was facing a genuine resistance this time. Built from the strongest

granite, the fort stood on a low hill, and the cannons installed in its tall spires watched over the surroundings. On the fort wall, there was room for the artillery men to stand and square openings in twos and threes for shooting guns. (191)

All around the fort, there was lying the city. On 23rd March, Hugh Rose started a barrage of fire against the south tower. There was an answer of fire against fire from the Indian side. Gulam Ghaus Khan was the supervisor of all the cannons in Jhansi. At this time the Hindu and the Muslim both worked together for the downfall of the British women clad in men's dresses even fired the cannons when necessary. Hugh Rose said after watching this scene;

It was clear that the people have plunged into this-struggle of resistance with a strong determination which is apparent everywhere. Politically, it could be said that the leaders knew fully that the rebellion in Central India would end as soon as Jhansi, the wealthiest Hindu city and the strongest fort, fell. (195)

But despite all heroic efforts from the Indian side, the Queen became weakened day by day. On 29th March, Khudabaksh Khan was killed at the Sainwar Gate. His death was a great loss to the Queen. Gulam Ghaus Khan was also shot in the chest and his death was even worse blow for Jhansi. He was the commander of all the cannons named Bhawani Shankar, Karkabijli, Samudrasamhar, Arjun etc. Both of them were buried with the heroic honor in the fort. The Queen had lost many soldiers but her determination was unshaken.

On 30th March, Hugh Rose was extremely happy to see the South tower and Shankar fort quiet. He decided to enter the city by blasting the south tower with his 102 cannons of the latest model, Hugh Rose decided to attack Jhansi on 31 March. But on 31st March, a news of advancing Tatia Tope with his twenty thousand soldiers reached the British camp.

On 1st April thousands of soldiers led by Tatia Tope came marching. Although Tatia Tope was a brave soldier, but he lacked leadership in this war whereas Hugh Rose in an instant judged the weak points of his army and acted accordingly. Tatia Tope's army had to retreat. The writer observes:

The defeat at Betwa was a heart-breaking event in the 1858 annals of Bundelkhand and of Central India. Hugh Rose and all the other English officers there praised the heroic Indian soldiers over and over again. Despite having brave and patriotic heroes among his 22,000 men, 28 cannons, 10 elephants as well as valiant's compatriots like the kings of Shahgarh and Banpur, Tatia Tope had lost the day due to his lack of leadership. He was a fearless and tireless worker, but if he had been able to skillfully direct the battle of 1 April, then the possibility of the English regaining power in Central India would have been remote. (202)

On 2nd April, after the defeat of Tatia Tope, Hugh Rose decided to enter the city. On 2nd April at 3.a.m. the English soldiers started climbing the city walls. A Brahman traitor opened the Sagar Gate for the British. And what happened hereafter was too cruel to describe. The English killed everyone in their sight. Streets were

filled of the blood. Everywhere these were cries for help because the Britishers set houses on fire. But the residents and soldiers of Jhansi did not yield easily. Hugh Rose declared *vijan* or massacre on a large scale. Devi observes:

What is history? What is history made up of? If history is about people, then I would say that the history created on the roads of Jhansi that day is unparalleled. On the cobbled streets and alleys between the closely packed houses, everyone from young boys to Pathan, Afghan, Bundela and Maratha soldiers fought to the end as the ground became slippery with blood. Children cried in horror when they saw the terrible sight. Bricks and other debris fell into the streets from the burning houses. The history that was made that day by thousands of Indians is the real history of India. In comparison to that, what the English did for us or gave us during their rule of 200 years is negligible. All the achievements of the English, one of the most accomplished people of the world, were marred by the scandalous day. (209)

The Queen decided to escape and fight with the Britishers later in joining Rao Saheb and Tatia Tope. The Queen set fire to the remaining munitions and took four hundred soldiers with herself. She was accompanied by Damodar Ramchandra Rao Deshmukh, Jawahir Singh, Raghunath Singh, Gul Muhammad, Kashi and Mandar. When the moon rose at midnight of 4th April, the Queen and her companions emerged silently. Her mare Sarangi was quietly brought outside. At 2 a.m., Hugh Rose came to know that the Queen had escaped Major Forbes and Captain Robinson with three cavalry troops and cannon went to follow the Queen.

The Queen reached Bhandir at dawn which was hundred miles from Jhansi. But she had to leave Bhandir because the English troops followed her there also. There was a fierce battle but they were not able to catch the Queen. Hugh Rose was mad at his failure and he ordered indiscriminate slaughter in Jhansi. Hugh Rose himself stated later:

After the palace was seized, the rebels started leaving the city. Not a single person was allowed to get out alive, which should speak for the success of the siege. The collapses of rebels filled the forests, gardens and roads around the city. Everyone was in haste to leave Jhansi immediately after the Queen escaped. At dawn on 5 April, I stationed two lines of soldiers to encircle the whole city. The rebels were mainly Afghans and Pathans by race. (219)

There was a naked dance of plunder for three continuous days. Not even the ornaments of the gods and goddesses in the temple were spared. Women jumped into wells to save their honour. Every day, thousands of men were hanged or murdered. Even the hangmen were tired after carrying out the orders of hanging.

The Queen reached Kalpi where Tatia Tope and Rao Saheb also arrived. Hugh Rose left Jhansi and reached Kunch on 1st May. The Britishers had a fight with the Indian soldiers but Tatia Tope again left the battlefield without a notice. This caused confusion among the Indian soldiers and they had to retreat under the Queen's command. Although the Queen worked hard to drill the soldiers, Rao Saheb had changed his mind. He appointed himself the commander-in-chief. The writer remarks:

It is obvious from this turn of events that the disunity among the Indian leaders was the sole cause of the failure of the whole war effort. Witnessing the dissent among the leaders, the soldiers lost their faith in them as well. (238)

Anyhow, the battle was again fought at Kalpi but was lost again despite of the Queen's heroic valor. All Indian leaders gathered again at Gopalpur which was forty six miles away from Gwalior. The Queen suggested that after losing many battles, the only ray of hope was winning Gwalior, the supreme Maharashtrian city of Central India. Tatia Tope agreed with this plan. Gwalior was next to the Nizams of Hyderabad in matters of wealth and influence. The fort was so powerful and beautiful that it was called the Gibraltar of the East. The British always tried to be friendly with this powerful state. In 1857, Sindhia had 10,000 soldiers but many of them were discontented after the uprising in conflict between the soldiers and the king.

There was a proposal from the Rani, Rao Saheb and Tatia Tope: to Jayaji Rao Sindhia to join them Instead of helping them. Sindhia informed Robert Hamilton of their plans. He even thought of fighting the Indian leaders and bringing fame to himself by capturing them. He even attacked the Indian leaders but at the last moments his troops joined the Indian side. He had to escape with a few bodyguards.

Tatia Tope and Rao Saheb were so delighted at this victory that they ignored the Queen of Jhansi and were busy in celebrations. The British knew the severity of the situation and immediately made plans to suppress the rebels in Gwalior. Hugh

Rose reached these and Indian leaders were surprised at his sudden arrival. On 13th June, Rao Saheb, Tatia Tope and the Nawab of Banda came to the Queen and asked for her help. The writer narrates:

The Queen sighed and said, 'when you should have been preparing for war, you were absorbed in victory celebrations. What can I say? I am just an ordinary woman. But I am alarmed at the thought of what awaits us.' The leaders bowed their heads in self-reproach. Tatia Topi took his turban off and placed it in front of the Queen. (274)

The Queen accepted their request and took the charge of Kotah-ki-Sarai. All soldiers were rejuvenated under her leadership.

On the dawn of 17th June, the Queen dressed herself in a red Kurta, white churidar and carried her sword in her hand. An intense battle began between the Indian and the British side. The Queen advanced with the Gwalior cavalry while fighting. Although the Indian side under the brave leadership of the Queen fought ferociously, yet after the attack of 8th Hussar, there was confusion among them. The Queen, Mandar and Raghunath Singh got separated from the original division with only a dozen soldiers. The Queen tried to escape by crossing the Sonerekha. The Queen's friend Mandar was shot dead. The Queen killed Mandar's killer but she herself was wounded badly. Finally she crossed the Sonerekha but unfortunately, a bullet pierced her chest. She fell over her horse. All her companions; Gul Muhammad, Ganpatrao Maratha, Nanne Khan and Raghunath Singh started searching for her. Gul Muhammad found the Queen full of blood lying on the horse's back. She was unconscious and regained her consciousness only in the night

and uttered her final words, “Be as loyal to Ananda as you have been to me. Pay my troops their salary out of my remaining jewelry and money. Make sure the foreigners don't get hold of my body after my death.” (283)

These were her last words and thus a brave woman who only physically died on that day still lives in the memories of lakhs of people. They still sing the songs of her heroism and say:

She made soldiers out of soil,
And Swords out of wood;
She picked up mountains and made horses,
And off she rode to Gwalior. (The Background xv)

Such a lady with undaunted courage got only a small monument in Gwalior. But despite the small monument, the praises which she deserves are quite huge. Hugh Rose, after winning the war remarked about the Queen, “Although a lady, she was the bravest and best military leader of the rebels. A man among the mutineers.” (289)



Bashai Tudu: Revolt Personified

Devi says in the preface to *Bashai Tudu*,

The long history of peasant insurgency in India (Where the landless peasantry number nearly fifty million and constitute 26.33 percent of the country's total labour force) has shown up, time and again, the nature of the exploitation that has been the fate of the peasants. The uprisings, from the sannyasi revolt, the wahabi movement and the Indigo revolt to the Naxalbari rebellion, have voiced almost the same fundamental demands. (xv)

It is the same peasant insurgency that forms the base of *Bashai Tudu*. Bashai Tudu seems to be not only a man but the symbol of never-ending revolt. Like a phoenix bird, he dies many times and resurrects every time to face his opponents. Kali Santara, a selfless party man who has seen Bashai Tudu is every time given the duty of recognizing Bashai Tudu's dead body. He identifies him five times and every time Bashai Tudu resurrects again, giving a new direction to the protest. Samik Bandyopadhyay says in the introduction:

Out of several tribal heroes of the actual Naxalite movement, Mahasweta Devi constructs her tribal hero, Bashai Tudu, who stands outside the Naxalite movement as well as the constitutional political parties, to fight exclusively and doggedly for the cause of the agricultural labourers. Once she conceives Bashai Tudu, she lets him grow into a myth, who dies at every encounter and is reborn to lead the next one. Even as the magic of the myth runs through the narrative and lends it coherence and unity, one has only to read

between the lines to discern the revolutionary project that keeps the myth alive as a strategy by making it obligatory for every successor to Bashai's image to take the place of the dead man. (introduction xi)

We see the story of Bashai Tudu through the eyes of Kali Santara. When he is called repeatedly to identify Bashai Tudu, he is frustrated and the last time he decides to go on his own before the police. The Sub Inspector of the police is given the news of Bashai Tudu dying again by Mato Dom. The SI is really nervous over the news,

The SI stroked his own neck once again. There was something seriously wrong somewhere. After years of faithful service, he had the nagging feeling that the administration did not really care for him. How else could it send him off to catch Bashai with a description that would fit so many of them? Bashai Tudu A Santal. One of those who could turn monstrous once they got angry. Keen archers. Everyone of them. Bashai was not a Naxalite when it all began. But once he became one, he was a leader. The very thought gave him a scare. As a leader he formed his own army of the landless tribal agricultural labourers and the migrant labourers. (10)

On his way to Charasha forests, where Bashai Tudu is expected to be found, he, in a nostalgic manner, recalls his own life. He joined the party in 1943 and distributed all his land to his farmhands Kali wanted to show his adherence to the party beliefs and secondly he thought that the revolution was imminent and there would be no question of private property after that. His family members strongly

opposed this charity and they all, in one voice, criticized him. Even the labourers didn't get this land and it went into the hands of the moneylender. The writer, in her particular satirical manner, comments on this land-grabbing system:

The moneylender's book of accounts is like a python that can swallow its prey, but cannot disgorge it. Once a plot of land had got into the book of accounts, there was never a chance of its coming out again. Any kind of land dry or fertile, with one crop a year or with more than one, was like Abhimanyu in the Mahabharata, the one who knew the way into the destructive formation made by the enemy but did not know how to get out of it, or like food in the maws of a python. Land once entered in the account book of the moneylender was irretrievable. The devourer-devoured relationship between the moneylender's account book and land was as ancient as the churning of the ocean or the legendary Homa bird in the Vedas, and there was no way Kanthamani Santra's land could be recovered. (15)

With these thoughts in his mind, Kali Santara left for the Charasha jungle taking help of Betul. Betul had worked at Kali Santara's farms. His son became a Naxalite after the police declared him so. He took his brother-in-law's buffalo to cross the river. While crossing the river Kali, he again becomes nostalgic and recalls his meeting with Bashai Tudu. In a Philosophical manner, he meditated at that time,

Kali could never quite understand how there could be poverty with so much water there for the taking. He was still too young and naïve to know that the condition of men did not depend either on the bounty or the miserliness of nature. People could be as poor in east Bengal, a

land of Plenty, as in Jagula, *the cradle land of drought*, for poverty was created by man. (20)

Bashai Tudu organizes the action wherever there is exploitation on poor landless farmers. Since the police support the rich and the landlords, Bashai is also against them. He is on the hit list of the police for his anti-government moves. But Bashai does not stop working for the tribals since he strongly believes in his ideals.

There are two answers to that why should I forget? How can you make a Santal forget that he is a Santal? You are yet to know your country, your people. Can you give us a country where the party comrades at least will not make distinctions between Santal comrades, Kaora comrades, and comrades from the upper castes? Can you? Can you have all of them flying to Delhi, the Soviet Union and America, siding motor cars, wearing nylons? Can you? Can you have all of them wearing a lion-cloth around their waists, being kicked by Surja San, and desolation burning in their hearts to see the paddy they had sown being harvested by others? If you can change it either way, the Santal will forget that he is a Santal. (25)

The protagonist of the novella fights against the authorities for many reasons like the demand for minimum wages, water from the canal and the freedom of bonded labourers. Between 1970 and 1976, he remains at the 'top priority' in the list of the police. The struggle of the tribal with the army men reminds one of the struggle between the Indians and the British. Whereas army men fight with their

mindless machine guns, Bashai's men fight with their bows and arrows, sickles, axes and spears with the cry of 'Maaa---hooo.'

Every time Bashai dies, the truck full of *adivasis* comes to recognize and identify his body. Every time the body is in a terrible state and is identified as Bashai's body. Each time he dies, he makes a gesture which is particular of Bashai Tudu and that is 'wringing the neck of the wind with hands'. The death becomes the symbolic of the revolt which never dies and lives again in the form of next Bashai Tudu. Thus the voice of the subaltern gains a new meaning through dying and living like Bashai Tudu.

Titu Mir: Forgotten Hero

India's history, as it is written today suffers from the gross negligence. Unwritten oral folk material is equally important as source of history... Today I am doubly convinced that the local elements, the vast wealth of locally written and oral folk material are not only rich in language and thought, but are also important historical elements. We, being one-eyed deers, have not used this vast legacy of myths, beliefs, social laws, narration by professional story tellers, ballads and songs. The folk material and the common people's version of events are assets to literature. In using them- and I do not use them as decoration – I have found salvation. (Devi, Untapped Resources 16)

One such ignored piece of history was the Nakshalbari uprising. The revolt of 1857 is considered as the first freedom struggle against the British, but almost

twenty-seven years before that Titu Mir inspired thousands of men to rise in revolt against the British. As a peasant leader, he led a revolt against the British in Bengal. He sacrificed his own life in his mission to unite the peasants and make them stand against the British. As usual, Devi presents the socio-economic situation of that time and tells about the evil effects of the Permanent Settlement Act. From the very beginning of the novel, we see Titu as an undaunted, heroic and restless young boy who gradually changes into a messiah of the poor:

The people of Hyderpur spent a good deal of their time grumbling about Titu. They had many complaints. Titu was a rogue, he was foolhardy, a mischief-maker with a band of young wastrels keeping him company. But he and his friends were the ones people called when they were in trouble. When the weavers' houses caught fire Titu and his friends were first on the scene, ahead of the village elders. When Tajuddin's 18 - Month - old daughters fell into the pond, all her mother and aunt could do was stand on the bank and wail each louder than the other while the child drowned. But Titu climbed the *jamsul* tree and dived from its branches into the water; he saved that little girl's life. (*Titu Mir* 6)

The author tells us about the Sanyasi revolt of 1763 in which despite its name, fakirs, sadhus, weavers and farmers participated. The fakirs cried 'Din! Din!' while the sanyasi had cried, 'Har! Har!' while fighting the soldiers of the company. Cornwallis introduced Permanent Settlement to bring more nervousness to farmers. It is amidst these situations that Titu grew up. He changed his profession many times. He became a 'lathial' to protect the landlord's land from outside attacks. He

went to Calcutta and met Syed Ahmad whose life's mission was to overthrow the foreigners. He wanted to cleanse Muslim society of its disbeliefs. Titu Mir gets the mission of his life when Syed Ahmed tells him:

It is too much to expect the rich landlords, the mollahs and maulvis, or the saints and pirs to heed your call. But I believe unshakably that the poor weavers, both Hindu and Muslim, the farmers, cotton ginners, fabric dyers, all these folk will definitely respond to your call. It is always they who come forward. Our fight is against injustice of all kinds, against all torture and oppression. And who but they suffer all of society's injustice, and endure its harshest oppression? So they will come. (61)

The text throws light on the beliefs of 'Wahabi' sect. On one hand it tried to remove Islam from its superstitions and disbeliefs, on the other hand its followers were determined to throw out the foreigners from our country. Titu found his way when he heard the preaching of Syed Ahmed about the forbidding of ostentatious festivals, his denial of any spirits and djinns and the belief in one God, the author states,

Titu Mir had found the path he was looking for. His circumstances and the times had been moulding him for a long time. When people had tried to frighten him with ghost stories as a child, he would demand that a ghost be brought and shown to him. The boy Titu had wanted a leopard as a pet. And now, after so many years, he had found the charm, the incantation that banished fear. (64)

After this revelation, Titu's personality was changed completely. He got the mission of his life. He even changed his style of clothing and started wearing a *tahband*. He started listening to the problems of poor farmers, weavers and landless labourers. He preached them to break the shackles of slavery. He told them about one God. People from surrounding places started coming to him and started believing in this new creed. Gradually, Titu was able to make people stand together against the zamindars and Indigo planters. Due to Permanent Settlement Act, these zamindars settled in Bengal and started looting poor farmers. East India Company supported both the zamindars and the Indigo planters, which added curse to the poor's fate.

Titu declared that the British had taken away the empire of the Muslims which will be ruled by a Muslim king Titu again. He started demanding tax from the zamindars. At this proclamation, the rich zamindars joined hands with the British and attacked Titu Mir. Initially Titu defeated all the zamindars and the British who came to attack him. Their strength increased as more and more people were trained under the brave leadership of Titu to fight. And one day he got the news of the death of Syed Ahmed. According to the instructions of the Syed Ahmed, Titu Mir formed his government.

At this rapid power accumulation by Titu, all zamindars were alarmed. They sat together and wrote a letter to the collector of Nadia. Governor General Sentinck ordered to deal with Titu Mir. Magistrate Smith and Judge Andrews of Nadia attacked Titu Mir and his followers with two or three hundred riflemen. But both of

them were defeated pathetically and this was intolerable to General Bentinck. Titu Mir remarks in the following words:

Now Bentinck had no option but to muster troops. That so near to Calcutta, so near the army base at Barrack pore, these common farmers should organize themselves and dare to trounce white men so thoroughly was insupportable. Any more of this and the British would be shamed beyond recovery. (72)

Now the British were prepared to attack Titu Mir with much more preparation. They collected their cavalry, infantrymen and artillery. Titu knew that after three victories, the fight would be really tough this time. He collected everyone in his bamboo fort on 19th November 1831 and prepared them to fight against the British. Devi comments on the wrong version of the history presented in front of us and she says,

History will be rewritten from today. Some months later the English and Bengali newspaper will get wind of the story and vilify Titu Mir; they will buy for what little remains of the Wahabi's blood. And hired historians will swear that Titu was a thorough communal fanatic.

All This will be history after today, Titu. After a rigged trial by a kangaroo court, Masum will go to the gallows. He will look fearlessly into his mother's eyes, here in Narkelberia, and say, Ma! A mujahid's mother never cries. Then he will turn to the Sahib and say with scorn, Hang me! Then, see for yourselves that a mujahid knows how to die. (107)

Titu and his followers fought with undaunted bravery. They were asked to surrender by the British but none of them even thought of it. Lathis were waved against bayonets and spears were against guns. *Lathi* was the first and last weapon for Titu which he waved against the British. The British on recognizing Titu, fired their cannon aiming him. Titu Mir died waging a war against the British whom he considered the enemy for bringing the zamindars and the Indigo planters. Titu was burnt along with his followers inside his bamboo fort on 19th November, 1831 at Narkelberia. Vandana Gupta states in her book *Mahasweta Devi: A Critical Reading*

Titu's revolt signifies the capacity of the subaltern to stand up against the imperialist forces. In *Titu Mir*, Mahasweta draws upon a combination of history, folk tale and legend to re-write the story of a man with an innate sense of justice as well as the courage to fight against odds for the rights of the ordinary poor. The text seems to function as a vehicle to assist the process of the subaltern identity formation by countering the negation of their identity formation in the dominant historical narratives. (Gupta 58)

Thus all the three works discussed in this chapter give us a new insight into the less explored passages of history. The Queen of Jhansi acquires a visual form in front of us and with deep determination utters the historical line that she will not surrender her Jhansi. After reading about the cruelties inflicted upon Indians at that time, we are bound to count our independence as most precious. How the foreigners from a distant land made us subalterns in our own country makes us think of our weaknesses. The reference towards the lack of decision of Tatia Tope, the over-confidence of Indian kings after winning a fight were some of the few reasons

mentioned by the writer. The writer has not only described the complete family history of Gangadhar Rao, the King of Jhansi, she has also told about the inevitable destiny of Manu, which brought her from Banaras to Jhansi. The undaunted valour of the young Queen, her indomitable spirit, her bravery while fighting the British enchants as well as inspires us. As Hugh Rose rightly said that the Queen was a man among the mutineers, her 'manhood' will keep on encouraging many women across the country to fight for their due rights.

Whereas many heroes found place in the books of history, many were left out. They were never appreciated for what they contributed for their coming generation. The one among such was Titu Mir about whom our writer not only thought but she also paid her homage in the form of a book. Devi as usual brings alive the socio-economic situation of that time when Bengal was going through a transitional phase. Permanent Settlement Act was showing its evil effects on the people. Indigo plantations were eating up the fertile land of the farmers. At such a time, Titu Mir appears as a hero standing against the injustice and turns into a leader after encountering the *Wahabi* sect. The resistance against the wrong is innate in him and we see him a fearless child from the beginning. Inspiring thousands of other people against the inequality and cruelty of the zamindars and the British, he even sacrifices his life.

Bashai Tudu again proves Mahasweta Devi as an outstanding writer of having profound sense of history. Mixed with fiction and that also in a mythical manner, the story enchants the reader. Like a filmy hero, Bashai Tudu appears everytime whenever landless farm labourers are in crisis. In the process of revolt, he gets killed but surprisingly resurrects himself again at some other crucial moment. Always making a gesture of wringing neck with his hands, he confuses those who

come to recognize him. Interestingly, Mahasweta Devi thought of this gesture while riding a rickshaw and directing the rickshaw puller to the translator's home. Devi again excels in writing about unsung revolutionaries and she has been successful in bringing them their lost honour. And such has been the purpose of the writer's life. She is a chronicler of truth and in her efforts to bring the justice to the subalterns she transcends the boundaries of time and place. She peeps into history and her research finds out such people who in different times at different places raised their voice for the welfare of their fellow beings.

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