

WATER: A reflection to the Atrocities

by MAHASWETA DEVI

Dr. P. Shahanaz

M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D

HOD, Lecturer in English

St. Joseph's Degree College

Kurnool, A.P., India

Dr. V. Krishna Murthy

M.A., Ph.D

Lecturer in English

S.A.R.M. Degree College

Allagadda, A.P., India

Narahari Karthik Kumar

M.A., M.B.A.

Student,

Gitam University

Kurnool, A.P., India

Drama has been a very effective genre of Literature, as an audio visual medium of expression since time immemorial, reflecting the social, political, religious, philosophical, cultural and even the economic being of a community in particular. According to the observation of Martin Esslin, the author of the famous book *The Field of Drama*, drama can be defined more as an imitation of life which includes the portrayal of both reality and art, real and imaginative and above all presenting events and characters within the dimension of space and time.

Indian writings are appreciated worldwide in the twentieth century. Earlier the genre, drama did not receive any priority. But recently drastic changes are taken place in this genre, since lot of focus is being made by the dramatists regarding to its techniques, themes and so on. As a result of their innovations the genre drama is not merely confined to the stage but has gained large readership. Adequate interest is taken by the modern playwrights in translating many of the Indian regional plays into English. In the words of R. K. Dhawan, "Very recently Indian drama shot into prominence. Younger writers... have infused new life into this branch of writing".

Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Mahasweta Devi are the most representatives of the contemporary India drama not only in Hindi, Marathi, Bengali and Kannada but also on the pan Indian level.

Mahasweta Devi's one of the writer of Post-Independence era sincerely portrays the pathetic plight of the marginalized strata of the society. Tribals are the most focussed strata in her writings.

Key words: Genre, Marginalized, Strata, Tribals, water divining, revolt

Mahasweta Devi is one of the committed playwrights of the Post Independence era, who has dedicated her entire life to the cause of the Marginalized. This very commitment has enabled her for writing the works in order to educate all the sections of society. She hoped that this awareness may prove to helpful in the betterment of the society. Thorough scrutiny of her *plays like *Mother of 1084*, *Water*, *Aajir*, *Urvashi o Jhonny*, *Bayen*, and the other stories *Birsa Munda*, *Dropdi*, *The Queen of Jhansi*, *Bhasai Tudu* etc., elucidates her Social activism. She endeavors always to enlighten the people about the Social ailment of the society.

The playwright sincerely longs the readers not only to learn the pathetic plight of the marginalized but also urges them to have broad vision to assess the root cause for that social ailment and thus to have appropriate solution. This attitude of Mahasweta Devi one can perceive from the heart touching statement she speaks through the character Dhura, a Dhome, son of Maghai who expresses his helplessness about the tactful attitude of the Upper Strata who justifies their ways by blaming the victimized section for no reason As Dhura puts it: “*The cry of Naxal extremism is only to justify the harrasement on us*” (p.99) Thus *Mahasweta Devi's plays revolve round the themes of poverty, perpetual slavery, social discrimination, suppression and exploitation and the Marginalized.

Water is a play of Mahasweta Devi speaks about the struggle of the people of Charsa village in accessing Water. It highlights not only the struggle for water, but also about untouchability, exploitation, and oppression. Ultimately this unendurable exploitation has resulted in the revolt of Dhomes. In the play, Maghai Dhome is a water diviner. He is called by the Landlord of that area Santhosh Pujari, whenever well is to be dug, as he an amateur water diviner. Though his services are utilized, though he is an amateur water diviner, he and his members of the family have to struggle even for a cupful water. Accessing water is denied to him from the wells merely for the reason that he belongs to the Dhome's community. Therefore for the sake of water, his wife and other women folk of his strata have to undergo the risk. They have to go and dig at sands of the Charsa for a cupful of water, and their fingers bear unbearable pain for having scraped water. All the untouchables of the Charsa go to Santhosh and asks him to distribute all the relief stock that is given by the government and is meant for them. Besides, that they ask Santhosh to dig a well for the villagers. But Santhosh refuses their proposal of digging well. He agrees to give only ration that is adequate for a week. Thus the relief measures are usurped by Santhosh and harassment and exploitation of Santhosh reaches to its height. Maghai then with the help of Jiten, a school teacher, who is sincere follower of Mahatma Gandhi and has to his credit having gone to prison during the freedom struggle as freedom fighter, starts constructing the dam on the river Charsa. The river Charsa during the rainy season inundates the village and during the summer season it gets dried up without even a drop of water. Therefore, Jiten Maitey, the teacher, enlightens Maghai and the villagers not to waste the water during its flood but to store it constructing the dam with the boulders. Thus he has taught them how to save water and consume it at the time of scarcity. So that it may be useful during the scorching summer. Thus, the villagers have come forward to take the mighty step of constructing the dam with their collective work. But Santhosh does not like this idea. He appoints the police to demolish the dam. Then all the people under the leadership of Maghai try to resist the police with all their might. But police employed all the brutal measures like hitting with the butt of the gun at the head of the school teacher and he falls down unconsciously on the ground. And Maghai is hit with the gun in such a way he is started bleeding. Dhura shouts angrily “Kill the bastards! Kill Santhosh! The bastard couldn't stand the Domes building a dam by themselves, and he had to set police on us, Kill!”. Thus the revolt of Maghai and the other villagers is suppressed brutally by Santhosh who cannot stand by the thought of using the even the water of Charsa.

At the end Maghai was taken away by the water. This play contains of ample illustrations of the exploitation and atrocities that are afflicted to the poor-Untouchables and to overcome their hurdles how they attempt to revolt. In fact, the cause of tribals of India has become Mahasweta Devi's life mission. She has chosen the cause in part because many tribals have been for her, the most emblematic suffering in modern India.

The play *Water* has 14 scenes. Each and every scene of the play moves towards the revolt. If the oppression and exploitation exceeds its limits it results in revolt. In the words of E. Satyanarayana "When they (the oppressed) rise, get organized and fight back, only then history can be changed" ¹

The first scene of the play is about the conversation among the three members. From their conversation readers can comprehend two of them want to get away from Charsa to Purulia through the approaching train, since police is in search of the convicts who have killed Daroga. They have killed Daroga since his harassment is unendurable. In their words:

ONE. (with firm confidence). We will be back again.

DHURA. (down to earth). No, the police will kill you once they
get you .

ONE. No. The police won't have it their own way every time (with
A beatific smile) We'll kill the police too.

DHURA. Yes, you killed that Daroga at Chunakhali..... ()

DHURA. That Daroga was a man-eater. Whenever we'd go in search of work, he'd grill us (1.96)

Thus the resistance is inevitable if the oppression and exploitation exceeds its limits. Further in the play we can see this revolutionary zeal can be understood in the words of One "It's for the locals, wherever there's oppression, to resolve first that they won't bear it any more" (97).

After bidding farewell to One and Two, Dhura goes to his Aunt, Pakhi. There he is insisted to get married to Pakhi who is grown up into a young girl. But Dhura says that he will get her married when he gets settled in his life financially. At the same time he is conveyed with the information that the police officials are in thorough check in Charsa to catch hold of Naxalites, to which Dhura replies that there are no such Naxals anywhere, but to defend its killing government is misleading them with the word Naxals. In the words of Sona's husband:

SONA'S HUSBAND. The police are on the lookout for the

Three Naxals who killed the Chunakhali Daroga and slipped
away. All the day through they've made us search the wagons.

(A little Liquor spills over from Dhura's cup) NO Naxals, nothing,

Just harassment for us (99).

From the above extract it is very clear that the tactful policies of the government that is trying to suppress the people and blaming them for their no fault because offence is the best way of defense. Later, they are encountered with Santhosh, the SDO, the Daroga and other police men who are at the Railway station to check the train for the escaped convicts.. Santhosh is shocked to see Dhura in that area at that time. The other people try their level best in all possible ways to extract the information from Dhura as they have anticipated Dhura to be with those convicts. They even coaxed Dhura with the money. But, Dhura tactfully outwits them. In the words of Dhura:

SDO. Come on, out with it. You will get a lot of

money for it.

SANTOSH. Be a dear, Dhura. It'll mean money for you.

DHURA.. The Three....

SDO. (screaming with excitement). The three?

DHURA. (in the top of his voice, in the manner of declamation). The

three of us, Sona, cousin-in-law, and me, we were discussing
a marriage proposal, infact, my own....() No money at home...

if you'd give some money, sir, then ther'd be no....(2.101)

The scene is shifted to the house of Santosh where the people of the village are led by Maghai Dhome and his wife there. The clear picture of exploitation and suppression is portrayed in this scene. They urge Santosh either to give them the Panchayat well or get for them separate well, as there is a terrible drought that year especially. Santosh is neither willing to give permission to take the water from the Panchayat Well nor he expresses his willingness to get a separate well dug for them. In his words "that's impossible this year, my good men, There is one well sanctioned this year from the relief funds, but there was an earlier application from Harchand Thakur"... (105)

Dhura does not get satisfied with this and questions Santosh

DHURA. Are wells dug according to who applied first

or to where its need most

SANTOSH. You are right, yes, you are but if there's

an application, the government has to consider it –

don't you see the point? (3.105)

They further demand Santosh to give them government relief that is meant for them. The government supplies relief materials such as rice, paddy, seeds, molasses and kerosene for the tribes. As the head of the Panchayat, Santosh gets the relief, meant for the village from the government. Without distributing the ration material to the villagers Santosh keeps for himself, a large amount of relief materials greedily. He says that only one week ration they are given this week. But the people of the village protest as they have seen relief measures that is sanctioned by the government is carried very secretly by convoys of cow-carts for four days at a stretch in the dark of the night and under police guard. Phulmani further blames Santosh "Men trade in paddy, you trade in relief" (3.103). Even in the words of Dhura wretchedness of Santosh can be perceived

DHURA. The bastard draws the relief, draws a lion's share
out of it for himself, gives the rest to his brother-in-law,
and there's nothing for anybody else. At puja, he feeds
his servants and farm-labourers, has it photographed for
the newspapers, so that he can claim that he has fed so many
people (4.112)

This context reminds us of Barbara Harris White in her book *India Working* dismisses views of the state that she considers to be too formalistic, or too focused on statutory responsibilities. She contends that the official art of Indian State has been hallowed out over the course of the last thirty to forty years, and has been replaced by what she calls 'shadow state'. Further Harries has observed:

The vast assemblage of brokers, advisers, political
Workers, crooks, and contractors, surrounds "the
Official state", depriving it of its funds, and helping to
Show that it is run in part for the private benefit of some
Of its employee. The other main winners are the largely self
Employed men (and some women) who benefit from a
World of state produced shortages and sactioned frauds.
They are the top dogs in India's "Intermediate classes"
The losers are the laboring households who make up
The bulk of "India of the 88 percent".²

Phulmani talked to the gathering that if they beg Santosh more, he will run to the town and tell the police that the lower castes of Charsa have all turned into Naxals. She expresses her agony, glancing at her hand that are of full sores, scratching of the sands of the Charsa water.

The third scene of the play explains about the atrocities that are afflicted to the marginalized people of the village Charsa, who include in the untouchables are Dhomes, Chadals, the Keots, the Tiors. It can be analyzed easily that these people lack awareness about their rights consequently, they are easily getting victimized by the Upper Strata. These people are so innocent and ignorant they themselves get stigmatized as “impure” and “unclean” in the process. The words of Maghai speaks about this ignorance to law and rights of human being. “We are born and die to accept in draught. But the drought this year is terrible” (3. 102)

The Dalits and Tribals occupy the lowest place in Hindu hierarchical order. It is agreed even by the governmental agencies that inspite of the protection given by the civil rights Act 1976, which was known as ‘Untouchability Act of 1989’, the violation of human rights of the Dalits and Tribals have been on increase. The National Human Rights Commission in its 1994-95 annual report has said,

..... (....) Laws and treatises, punishments and rewards, and even systematic reforms were not in themselves sufficient to promote and protect human rights in the country or to defend in particular, the rights of its weakest and most defenseless people (and that) the nation required a vast programme of social regeneration to deal with ancient wrong—³

Generally, Society is the synonymous to the Upperstrata. Thus, there is no Identity for the people of lower strata, who are indigenous peoples’ (dalits and tribals) Their cultures, values and languages are insignificant and inferior. Consequently their rights etc., of collectives such as the Tribals and Dalits are violated; they are:

..... deprived of their rights by the very same system meant to protect them in the name of order, protection, welfare and development ⁴

There is no limit for the wickedness of Santosh. He grabs even the seeds and fertilizers that are allotted to the Landless peasants “Why does they till Santosh’s land now? How does Santosh grab all seed all the fertilizer that’s is due to against the Land that the government’s allotted to the landless” (4.113)

Dhura turns out to be very indignant at the atrocities of Santosh and asked his father not to go to Santosh to divine water, if he invites him this time. Dhura brings out the contrast between the meager lives of theirs to the lavish life of upperstrata like Santosh:

SANTOSH. Look at his house, rising from height to height.

There are twenty villages bound to him indebt forever. (p.108)

The third scene of the play has provided ample illustrations the atrocities and exploitation attributed to the people of lower strata. It is really against the law to employ the laborers from outside when the resource is available within the village but the brother-in-law of Santosh, a contractor employ a laboureres from the outside the village in order to dig the well. Even for digging the well this time they have not called Maghai to divine water. Rather they called two gentle folk from the town, the college boys are called to blast the Earth to trace out Water. The government officers are now going to locate where the water lies hidden, and where to dig.

The wickedness of the Santosh is not confined to trading the relief materials that are meant to the poor villagers but also extended in grabbing seeds and fertilizers that are allotted to the landless peasants. “Why does they till Santosh’s land now? How does Santosh grab all the seeds all the fertilizer that’s is due to us against the land that the government’s allotted to the landless? (4.113)

The fury of Dhura prompted him to entreat his father not to go to Santhosh to divine water, if he invites him this time. In the words of Dhura:

DHURA. But why? Why does father have to act the water
diviner for Santosh whenever he asks him to? And for
him, the shadow of a Dome pollutes his pitcher, and he
throw away water. That’s how he treats us. Doesn’t he? Tell me that.
(4.107)

Thus through this dramatic device Mahasweta Devi explores the anguished consciousness of the oppressed and the exploited. Harsh realities like starvation, lack of water are portrayed by her successfully. It is really pathetic to see how these people are deprived of the bare necessities in their life. This condition of the people of Charsa village reminds us of Birsa Munda, another noteworthy character of Mahasweta Devi, in her well-known work *Aranyer Adhikar* where it is a dream for this people to have minimum food. As it is stated in the novel, Birsa’s father Suguna’s idea of happiness, lies in getting two meals of boiled china-seeds, wearing an untorn dhoti above the knees and sleeping under the intact roof of a leafy hut. In his poverty stricken world the attainment of bare necessities fills life with a regal grandeur. Mahasweta Devi portrays Suguna’s world as follows:

The world of this had rigid borders. In that world
one could become a king, if one get two meals
of ghato a day, four handloom, four handloom dhotis

in a year, the warmth of husk bags in the winter, escape from the clutches of the money lender, 'mohua' oil for the lighting of the lamp, black salt for 'ghato' forest roots and honey and meat of wild rabbits and bird (Aranyer Adhikar 51) ⁵

Invoking customs is a strategy to perpetuate subordination in the subject. When the villagers express their wretched conditions due the droughts and famine Santosh psychologically weaken the villagers, he tells them that by transgressing the norm of moral behavior – by not giving free labor – for master's religious practices, the villagers have subjected themselves to God's wrath. Analyzing this context Michael Anderson observes that "customary law is notorious for its gloss over local servitude of gender, age and status but it is customary, thereby accepted by all" ⁶

The following extract from the play speaks about this concept.

The VILLAGERS TOGETHER. We have never known a drought like this.

SANTOSH. You have only yourself to blame. You have given up your religion, all the old rites, that is why the drought is so awful. This custom has been around for ages: and there was no one to offer you free service(102)

Interpreting further this context Depesh Chakrobarty says:

To speak of custom means to identify the range of activity, called privileges by the masters, assumed as rights by the slaves who flowed from the master's knowledge, that the violation of norms would carry an unacceptable risk. ⁷

The fourth scene of the play provides the clear portrayal of exploitative measures employed by Santosh. Maghai complains his wife Phulmani that he cannot make out any patched quilt as he has lost his sight and only he can weave baskets from bamboo stalks. Though he works hard for Santosh, he is unable to get treatment for his eyes. Then Dhura and Phulmani asked him not to go to Santosh, from now onwards whenever he calls – Maghai replies that it is the hunger that gnaws at one's stomach, compels him to be like this:

MAGHAI. (taking control of the situation). The one thing that's most dreadfully really is the hunger gnawing at one's stomach, Dhura. There's nothing more real than hunger.

DHURA. (softly, in pain) . Father!

MAGHAI. Yes?

DHURA. But have you ever had a full of stomach, we've never had a full stomach, neither you, nor me nor mother.

MAGHAI. (smiling) inscrutably, like one of those grand old wise men). Didn't I tell you there's nothing more than real hunger?

DHURA. All the paddy, all the lentils that Charsa grows, and Santosh's barns bursting with paddy and piles of molasses and mustard seeds, and what not?

MAGHAI. (shaking his head) That is not for us, son. (

From the above situation one can easily conclude that sometime the entire dalit and tribal community have to subsist for long periods without sufficient food. From the grievances of Maghai, that "Who will pay for my going and coming back? (107), these landlords like Santosh also hoard and trade in the medicines sent for the villagers. The doctors visit only the houses of the powerful. The paucity of healthcare makes them most vulnerable to diseases and infection. This reminds us the statement of K.C. Jacob in *The Hindu*:

The determinants of health are social and economic rather than purely medical. The poor health of people from the lower castes, their social exclusion is due to the unequal distribution of power, income, goods and services. Caste is of course inextricably

linked to and is proxy for social economic status in India. The restricted access of those from the lower caste to clean water, sanitation, nutrition, housing, education, health-care and employment is due to toxic combination of poor social politics and programmes, unfair economic arrangement and bad politics.⁸

Though Maghai is implored by his wife and his son not yield to Santosh but dismissing their request, he said he yields not to Santosh but to his profession that is entrusted to him by his ancestors. Thus belief on the Karmic fate legitimizes the subjection of the subaltern and the dominance of the privileged. In *Water*, Maghai feels offended when his son Dhura protests his humble submission to the Master injunctions for beggar – the task of divining water for no wages.

Dhura protests his father from yielding to Santosh ‘But why does father have to act the water diviner for Santosh. Whenever he asks him to? The shadow of a Dhome pollutes his pitcher, and he treats us. Doesn’t he tell me that? Phulmani tells him, But he is a Brahmin by caste’ (107)

References

1. E. Satyanarayana, *The Plays of Mahasweta Devi* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2000) 127.
2. Barbara Harris White. *India working: Essays on Society and Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
3. Quoted in R. M. Pal, “Background Paper: NHRC and Redressing Social wrongs”, p.4-5.
4. Ambrose Pinto, “Rights of the Collectives: Human Rights Violation in India”, .33.
5. http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10603/25843/12/12_chapter%207.pdf 176.
6. Michael Anderson. “Classifications of Coercions: Themes in South Asian legal studies in 1980s” In *South Asia Research*, 10 (2).1990 10: 158- 177, doi: 10.1177/026272809001000207.
7. Deepesh Chakraborty. *Rethinking Working – Class History: Bengal 1890 – 1940* (Princeton University Press, 2000) ISBN: 9780691070308, 180.
8. K. C. Jacob. “Caste and Inequalities in Health”, *The Hindu*, 22 August 2000.