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MAHASWETA DEVI'S LITERARY WORKS FOR TRIBAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Mahasweta Devi, an astounding literary figure, worked hard for the upliftment of the tribals by projecting their glorious culture to the world. She dedicated her entire life for the welfare of tribals. Her works i.e. Chhoti Munda and His Arrow, Aranyar Adhikar, Mother 1084, The Queen of Jhansi, The Fire Within, and Prothom Path are the reflection of tribal people's culture, their history and identity. Her fictional oeuvre attempts to overthrow the domination of mainstream society's biased history writings and filled the gaps and absences which are the symbols of marginalization of tribals. Ranajit Guha precisely states, "History of Indian nationalism is a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian elite." He opined that the history written by the mainstream society's people is prejudiced as it failed to depict the struggle of tribal as well as other subaltern people.

Mahasweta Devi was a writer who never followed traditional path of writing. She meticulously interweaves the history and fiction in the context of untold history of tribal and uncovered the real history of tribal people's revolt against their exploitation by upper caste people. Aristocratic people located the history of tribal revolts as a myth but Devi explored these facts with shrewd techniques of writing. She thoroughly researched the history of tribal people "Human rights" is defined as "those minimal rights which every individual must have against the state or other public authority by virtue of his being a member of the human family, irrespective of any other consideration". (Durga Das Basu,8). But what is theirs (tribals) by right? Nothing. Puran and Bikhia in the novel represent two different worlds, that would never converge. Mahasweta rightly says, "For a few thousand years, we have n't loved them, respected them where is the time now"(PPP,197). Again what Harisharan the BDO says is true, "I can't turn the clock by five hundred years" (PPP 120). But despite these barriers the only remedy is "a tremendous, excruciating explosive love" that Mahasweta suggests for the tribals. Puran true to his name, is ready to fulfill their dreams, not as the superior, progressive, rational and civil man, capsuled in colonial framework, but as a true human extending his love for the other.

Their unique location in the history of India's society and polity, Mahasweta, however, considers the tribal people, around 8.2% of the population, to be the most exploited among the subaltern classes of India. In the official discourse of the Indian nation, tribes are considered to be a distinct ethnic category of people, with specific constitutional rights and privileges conferred on them due to their marginalized and endangered status, meant to guarantee them their economic, social and cultural autonomy. But the long history of domination and oppression from pre-colonial times to the present day has reduced Indian tribes into one among the most exploited, deprived and dispossessed groups of people in India today. During pre-colonial times, tribes had enjoyed a fair degree of insularity and autonomy, but as civilizations grew and urban centres and villages developed, the tribal people began to fall into confrontational and exploitative relationships with other groups or "dikus" (meaning "outsiders"), both in their material and cultural lives. Although it remains an undisputed fact that her works have received wide critical attention under the label of "subaltern" literature, Mahasweta herself does not attach much significance to the term itself. "I write about a country which is class-divided, class-exploited, class-oppressed...I believe in class ...("I am Interested in History" Kakatiya Journal 93-99). The subaltern, for Mahasweta, is any human being who is oppressed, deprived and marginalized by virtue of his/her class, caste, tribe or gender and whose voice has been silenced in his/her own country. Her activism involves ground-level interaction with the tribal people, detailed documentation of their problems, negotiating with the authorities and helping them to fight legal battles for basic concerns like land, housing, employment, education, health care and so on, documented in the collection Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi. In her fictional works, however, she relates class issues like land, labour and wages to the socio-cultural aspects of tribal life, thereby providing a holistic picture of the different dimensions of the tribal experience.

However, she never loses sight of the specificities of the situation and characters being represented, whether of historic period, region, caste, tribe or gender. Tribal dialect, ritual practices, belief system, custom and tradition are all important aspect of tribal culture, and placed in unique position in the Indian society and culture. The wide spread of modern technical, professional education as well as impact of western education and culture have changed the traditional cultural practices in urban, semi-urban and industrial social milieu. Besides these, there is an impact of religion that have changed tribal attitude on belief system. The tribal way of life is somehow far different from the traditional way of life in those environments. The cultural

identity of tribal is about to be disappeared in the urban, semi-urban and industrial environment. There are other factors too responsible for the changing of tribal culture, the factors are as such; rapid industrialization, urbanization, western education and mega developmental projects and displacement etc.

These tribal societies were usually groups of people who had kinship bonds. These tribes were mostly involved in primary activities related to agriculture or animal husbandry. Some of them are also hunter-gatherers. Out of these tribal societies few tribes were also Nomadic. This meant that these tribes or groups of people move from one place to another and search for livelihood or other reasons. The settled tribal groups on the other hand had land and animals which they owned jointly as a tribe. The Tribe leader divided the animals and lands according to the needs and requirements of his people. These tribes were spread all across the country. Most of the tribes lived in forest Hills desert and far-fetched places. There are even shreds of evidence of tribal clashes amongst themselves as well as societies of other religions. The tribes continue to keep their freedom and culture separate from the rest of us. On one hand, they kept their societies separate from us but on the other hand, they were also dependent on us for their needs. We also traded in many handmade articles and wares from them. This led to a gradual change in both societies.

Tribal peoples constitute 8.6 percent of India's total population, about 104 million people according to the 2011 census (68 million people according to the 1991 census). This is the largest population of the tribal people in the world. One concentration lives in a belt along the Himalayas stretching through Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh in the west, to Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland in the northeast. Another concentration lives in the hilly areas of central India (Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and, to a lesser extent, Andhra Pradesh); in this belt, which is bounded by the Narmada River to the north and the Godavari River to the southeast, tribal peoples occupy the slopes of the region's mountains. Other tribals, the Santals, live in Bihar and West Bengal. There are smaller numbers of tribal people in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, in western India in Gujarat and Rajasthan, and in the union territories of Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. [Source: Library of Congress, 1995]

Tribal people in India are called "adivasi". Adivasi is an umbrella term for a heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups considered the aboriginal population of India. Although terms such as *atavika*, *vanavasi* ("forest dwellers"), or *girijan* ("hill people") are also used for the tribes of India, *adivasi* carries the specific meaning of being the original and autochthonous inhabitants of a given region and was specifically coined for that purpose in the 1930s. Over time, unlike the terms "aborigines" or "tribes", the word "adivasi" has developed a connotation of past autonomy which was disrupted during the British colonial period in India and has not been restored.

The so called "tribal belt" embraces central and northeast India, which extends across the center of India from Pakistan in the west to Bangladesh and Myanmar in the east. The belt is home to 81 million indigenous people, whose ancestors may have inhabited India before Aryan invaders, the ancestors of Hindus, arrived around 1500 B.C.

The tribal belt is one of India's most impoverished regions. Many tribals traditionally lived off the forest. But the forest are shrinking and they have been forced to try and cultivate fields. But where they live land is often in short supply and not enough to go around. In some cases tribals are prevented from chopping trees here and there while loggers and miners work illegally or bribe politicians to gain access to resources.

Details about the demography of India's tribal people are lacking. Most national census don't gather information on a tribe by tribe basis. In some cases researchers have to go back to British data collected on the early 1930s and extrapolate from that. While few tribes are in danger of extinction, they are being challenged by the encroachment of other groups on their territory and threats from modernization, Westernization, secularization and Christian missionaries.

Origin of Tribal People of India

Tribals, black aborigines similar to those found in new Guinea and Australia, are believed to be the original inhabitants of much of southern India. DNA evidence from the Negrito tribes of the Andaman Islands spans back 70,000 years and suggests they originated from people from Africa who migrated to India, Southeast Asia and Indonesia. DNA evidence also indicates that they are direct descendants of the first modern humans to leave Africa but lack a distinctive feature of Australian aborigines, another early group to leave Africa.

The Onge from the Andaman Islands carry some of the oldest genetic markers found outside Africa. The tribes of the Andaman Islands are believed to be related the Negritos of Southeast Asia and the Philippines (See Malaysia and the Philippines). Some scholars theorize that they arrived in the Andaman Islands from Burma or Malaysia at some time in the distant past by sea, or perhaps arrived from Sumatra by way of the Nicobar Islands. However there are no firm evidence to back this up and is regarded mostly as speculation.

The Bhil tribe is regarded by some as "the oldest of the aboriginal tribes comprising India's original inhabitants. They are regarded as the original inhabitants of the forest of central India and were driven into their current homelands by Muslim invaders. Their name is believed to be derived from word in Dravidian languages for "bow," which until fairly recent times they always were seen carrying."

Some anthropologists hypothesize that the region was settled by multiple human migrations over tens of millennia, which makes it even harder to select certain groups as being truly aboriginal. One narrative, largely based on genetic research, describes Negritos, similar to the Andamanese adivasis of today, as the first humans to colonise India, likely 30–65 thousand years ago. Sixty percent of all Indians share the mtDNA haplogroup M, which is universal among Andamanese islander adivasis and might be a genetic legacy of the postulated first Indians.

Some anthropologists theorise that these settlers were displaced by invading Austro-Asiatic-speaking Australoid people (who largely shared skin pigmentation and physiognomy with the Negritos, but had straight rather than curly hair), and adivasi tribes such as the Irulas trace their origins to that displacement. The Oraon adivasi tribe of eastern India and the Korku tribe of western India are considered to be examples of groups of Australoid origin. Subsequent to the Australoids, most anthropologists and geneticists agree that Caucasoids (including both Dravidians and Indo-Aryans) and Mongoloids (Sino-Tibetans) immigrated into India: the Dravidians possibly from Iran, the Indo-Aryans possibly from the Central Asian steppes and the Tibeto-Burmans possibly from the Himalayan and north-eastern borders of the subcontinent. None of these hypotheses is free from debate and disagreement.

Ethnic origins and linguistic affiliations in India match only inexactly, however: while the Oraon adivasis are classified as an Australoid group, their language, called Kurukh, is Dravidian. Khasis and Nicobarese are considered to be Mongoloid groups and the Munda and Santals are Australoid groups, but all four speak Austro-Asiatic languages. The Bhils and Gonds are frequently classified as Australoid groups, yet Bhil languages are Indo-European and the Gondi language is Dravidian.

Differences Between Tribes and Castes

In South Asia, tribals are often portrayed as being distinct from castes even though castes often meet the same criteria as a tribe. Tribals were traditionally considered below untouchable in the caste system. A number of traits have customarily been seen as establishing tribal rather than caste identity. These include language, social organization, religious affiliation, economic patterns, geographic location, and self-identification. Recognized tribes typically live in hilly regions somewhat remote from caste settlements; they generally speak a language recognized as tribal.

Unlike castes, which are part of a complex and interrelated local economic exchange system, tribes tend to form self-sufficient economic units. Often they practice swidden farming — clearing a field by slash-and-burn methods, planting it for a number of seasons, and then abandoning it for a lengthy fallow period — rather than the intensive farming typical of most of rural India. For most tribal people, land-use rights traditionally derive simply from tribal membership. Tribal society tends to be egalitarian, its leadership being based on ties of kinship and personality rather than on hereditary status. Tribes typically consist of segmentary lineages whose extended families provide the basis for social organization and control. Unlike caste religion, which recognizes the hegemony of Brahman priests, tribal religion recognizes no authority outside the tribe.

Any of these criteria can be called into question in specific instances. Language is not always an accurate indicator of tribal or caste status. Especially in regions of mixed population, many tribal groups have lost their mother tongues and simply speak local or regional languages. Linguistic assimilation is an ongoing process of considerable complexity. In the highlands of Orissa, for example, the Bondos — a Munda-language-speaking tribe — use their own tongue among themselves. Oriya, however, serves as a lingua franca in dealings with Hindu neighbors. Oriya as a prestige language (in the Bondo view), however, has also supplanted the native tongue as the language of ritual. In parts of Assam, historically divided into warring tribes and villages, increased contact among villagers began during the colonial period and has accelerated since independence. A pidgin Assamese developed while educated tribal members learned Hindi and, in the late twentieth century, English.

Education of Tribal People in India

Extending the system of primary education into tribal areas and reserving places for tribal children in middle and high schools and higher education institutions are central to government policy, but efforts to improve a tribe's educational status have had mixed results. Recruitment of qualified teachers and determination of the appropriate language of instruction also remain troublesome. Commission after commission on the "language question" has called for instruction, at least at the primary level, in the students' native tongue. In some regions, tribal children entering school must begin by learning the official regional language, often one completely unrelated to their tribal tongue. The experiences of the Gonds of Andhra Pradesh provide an example. Primary schooling began there in the 1940s and 1950s. The government selected a group of Gonds who had managed to become semiliterate in Telugu and taught them the basics of written script. These individuals became teachers who taught in Gondi, and their efforts enjoyed a measure of success until the 1970s, when state policy demanded instruction in Telugu. The switch in the

language of instruction both made the Gond teachers superfluous because they could not teach in Telugu and also presented the government with the problem of finding reasonably qualified teachers willing to teach in outlying tribal schools.

The commitment of tribes to acquiring a formal education for their children varies considerably. Tribes differ in the extent to which they view education positively. Gonds and Pardhans, two groups in the central hill region, are a case in point. The Gonds are cultivators, and they frequently are reluctant to send their children to school, needing them, they say, to work in the fields. The Pardhans were traditionally bards and ritual specialists, and they have taken to education with enthusiasm. The effectiveness of educational policy likewise varies by region. In those parts of the northeast where tribes have generally been spared the wholesale onslaught of outsiders, schooling has helped tribal people to secure political and economic benefits. The education system there has provided a corps of highly trained tribal members in the professions and high-ranking administrative posts.

Many tribal schools are plagued by high dropout rates. Children attend for the first three to four years of primary school and gain a smattering of knowledge, only to lapse into illiteracy later. Few who enter continue up to the tenth grade; of those who do, few manage to finish high school. Therefore, very few are eligible to attend institutions of higher education, where the high rate of attrition continues.

Self-identification and group loyalty are not unflinching markers of tribal identity either. In the case of stratified tribes, the loyalties of clan, kin, and family may well predominate over those of tribe. In addition, tribes cannot always be viewed as people living apart; the degree of isolation of various tribes has varied tremendously. The Gonds, Santals, and Bhils traditionally have dominated the regions in which they have lived. Moreover, tribal society is not always more egalitarian than the rest of the rural populace; some of the larger tribes, such as the Gondas, are highly stratified.

Mahasweta's narratives thus define the various socio-historic-political hegemonic structures that led to the tribals' status as a marginalized class in all its discursive plurality. As Kumkum Yadav observes, Mahasweta's concern is not just with setting the political and historical record straight, but also with "the human predicament involved". (Narratives on Tribals in India 59) Her first published novel, *The Queen of Jhansi*, was about a royal queen and high caste widow who joins the ranks of "the other side of the people" as she displayed the courage to take on the powerful British army in defence of her kingdom and people. Characters like Maghai Dom in "Water", Patan in "Ajir" or Dulan Ganju in "Seeds" are all characters from the lower castes who suffer the double yoke of class and caste exploitation. Women, for her, are an exploited class in themselves and the boundaries of caste and tribe often appear irrelevant in the larger picture of class exploitation portrayed in Mahasweta's women-centric stories like "Rudali", "Bayen", "Jamunabati's Mother", "Dhouli", "Sanichari", "Statue", "The Fairytale of Mohanpur" etc. In one of her most popular stories, "The Breast-Giver", the protagonist Jasoda belongs to the Brahmin caste, but is exploited in the name of both class and gender. Her definition of the category of class therefore, brings into its ambit the concerns of all people oppressed on the basis of class, tribe, caste or gender. Even as she presents the realistic picture of the tribals' economic and political marginalization within the larger discourse of class-exploitation, she shows the tribal negotiating with this marginalization and resisting it through the agency of their own unique ethnic cultural discourse. She adopts the innovative narrative techniques to weave the tribal's story in their own voice, taking recourse to the various narrative strategies of story.

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