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Socio-cultural Marginalization and Tribal Resistance: A Reading of *Bitter Soil* and "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha"

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Abstract
A discussion of the socio-political and historic constructions of the subaltern classes in India involves the particular intersections of the categories of class, caste, tribe and gender within its framework. A long history of domination and oppression from pre-colonial times to the present day has transformed most of India's tribes to poverty-ridden, exploited and dispossessed groups of people, robbed of the material and cultural basis of their lives. Mahasweta Devi, the iconic Bengali writer articulated the particular intersections of the issues of tribe with the larger picture of class-exploitation in colonial and postcolonial India in her powerful, trenchant fiction, activism and her journalistic writings. From *The Book of the Hunter* to "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha", Mahasweta Devi's texts chart the history of the downward spiral of the tribal's dispossession and their struggle to uphold their identity, from pre-colonial times to the present day. In a series of short stories, titled *Bitter Soil* (2002), Mahasweta Devi articulates the painful truth of the lives of rural India's poor and marginalized people, mostly tribals, in modern India from the 1970s to the 1990s, centered in the region of Palamau. Each of the four stories in this collection, "Little Ones", "Seeds", "The Witch" and "Salt", dramatizes a particular region, its tribal inhabitants and a specific issue that brings to the fore the magnitude of their suffering and the mobilization of their resistance. The long story "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha", portrays the unbridgable gap between the intentions and claims of the state viv-a-vis the welfare of the tribal population, in all its complexities. Through the innovative use of the oral tribal traditions of song, tale and myths in the thematic and aesthetic elements of her fictional narratives, Devi achieves the foregrounding of tribal identity and resistance. Her narratives not only re-write the tribals' past and contemporary history, but also uphold the relevance of the subaltern's resistance against the dominant authoritative and discursive structures of the nation that seek to erase their distinct tribal identity through the powerful shackles of class oppression.

Key Words: Subaltern, class, tribe, marginalization, discourse, tribal identity, subversion, oral traditions, tribal resistance

The subaltern classes in India are constituted by varied groups of people marked by differences of race or tribe, caste, region and gender. A discussion of the socio-political and historic constructions of the subaltern classes in India therefore involves the particular intersections of these categories within its framework. A long history of domination and oppression from pre-colonial times to the present day has transformed most of India's tribes to poverty-ridden, exploited and dispossessed groups of people, robbed of the material and cultural basis of their lives. Ruthless exploitation at the hands of the colonial administrators, landlords and traders, forced the tribals to leave their traditional lands and migrate to other places as peasants and labourers. Though this resulted in many tribal revolts and peasant rebellions in the nineteenth century, they were mercilessly suppressed by the colonial army. The discursive constructions of race and caste helped further this process. The tribes were pictured as being naturally "suitable" to hard labour because of their wild and hardy nature, their "castelessness" and so on. (Ania Loomba 126; Kaushik Ghosh 13-14; Chaudhari) The proud, independent adivasis of India were thus reduced to near

slavery as coolies, mere fodder for the imperial machine, and in the process losing their lands and livelihoods, their unique cultural identities and their rights to a dignified human existence. Mahasweta Devi, the iconic Bengali writer and winner of the Magsasay Award articulates the particular intersections of the category of tribe with the larger picture of class-exploitation in colonial and postcolonial India in her powerful, trenchant fiction, her activism and in her journalistic writings. For Devi the 'subaltern' is any human being who is oppressed, deprived of rights and marginalized by virtue of their class, caste, tribe or gender and whose voice has been silenced in their own country.

From *The Book of the Hunter* to "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha," Mahasweta Devi's texts chart the history of the downward spiral of the tribal's dispossession and their struggle to uphold their identity from pre-colonial times to the present day. The social, political/ historical and economic reasons behind their fall from being independent, autonomous ethnic communities to the ranks of India's lowest classes of people are embodied in her narratives. Her texts are woven out of the different discourses, linguistic and socio-cultural dialects and registers that embody these hegemonic structures, constructing, imposing and maintaining the tribal in a subaltern condition. The claims of official and academic discourses about the 'special status' accorded to tribes are nullified in their ironical juxtaposition in her narratives with the stark picture of the class oppression faced by the tribal protagonists. The class-exploitation figuring tribal communities in modern India from the period of the late 1970s to the 1990s finds expression in a series of short stories by Mahasweta Devi, titled *Bitter Soil* (2002). Centered in the region of Palamau, which Devi calls "a mirror of India" they reflect the painful truth of the lives of rural India's poor and marginalized people, a sizeable percentage of whom are tribal. She describes Palamau as "a vast crematorium" where the land and its people are so dry, arid and lifeless that it is difficult to conceive of how they survive ("Preface"*Bitter Soil* vii). Devi locates the root of the tribals' marginalization in the unfair and unenforced land reform system and the caste and class hierarchies that pushed the lower classes into debt, bondage and poverty. She says, "For the last five decades, one India has remained basically feudal, while the other has remained a victim of class and caste oppression. "'Land is not yours by right, land belongs to the privileged'" ("Preface"*Bitter Soil* vii). There are four stories in this collection, "Little Ones", "Seeds", "The Witch" and "Salt". In each of the stories, Devi dramatizes a particular region, its tribal inhabitants and a specific issue that brings to the fore the magnitude of their suffering and the mobilization of their resistance. The contemporary feel of the stories reminds us that this is the India of the 1980s where people still suffer unspeakable oppression in spite of the presence of a democratically elected government, its machinery and resources, and its legal apparatus.

The first story titled "Little Ones" (*Bitter Soil*1-20) is located in Lohri, near Ranchi. The area resembles a desert and the "deep brownish-red" colour of the earth is the colour of dry, congealed blood, evoking the images of violence and death in the reader's mind. ("Little Ones" *Bitter Soil* 1) The government machinery is in full working order, with an efficient and sympathetic Relief Officer arriving with supplies to help the tribals survive the drought. He is shocked at the sight of the poverty and deprivation that confronts him, upsetting all his acquired "knowledge" on adivasis and their culture. As elsewhere in her fiction, Devi focuses on the wide gap between popular perceptions and theoretical discourses about tribals and the stark reality of their contemporary situation, as is evident in this excerpt:

> Never in his life had he seen such an arid, uninhabitable place. The sight of those who came for relief, the near-naked, shrivelled, 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. (*Bitter Soil*2)

The Relief Officer's ears, pricked up to hear the lilting songs of the adivasis, only hears a continuous keening sound, "like the lonely wailing of an old witch" (2) which seems to him something like a dirge. He realizes that their oral discourses have almost been wiped out, the empty wailing echoing the emptiness of their lives. From the BDO he learns the history of the local Agariya tribals and the significance of the said "hillock," which sounds like an unbelievable fairy tale, a "*junglee* tale" (5) to his "civilized" mind. The Agarias, belonging to the Asur tribes who mined iron and coal in the old days, are now one of the poorest of all tribal communities. They explain away their present poverty through a myth involving a conflict between their legendary king Logundih and the sun god. The only survivor, a boy called Jwalamukhi, fights with the sun god again and the whole land is burnt in the combat and the sun

god curses the Agarias to a life of poverty. The three gods who live on the hillock-- that of iron, fire and coal--do not smile on them anymore. This tale that embodies their history gets enmeshed with the contemporary tale of the Indian government leveling the hill to establish coal mines in the 1960s. A whole village of Agarias rise up in defence of their hill and kill all those who were involved. And then they mysteriously disappear into the surrounding forests, never to be seen again. All these stories seem to belong to the realm of fancy to the Relief Officer who cannot seem to square it with the actual sight of the poor, hungry, disease-ridden people whose lives depend on these relief supplies alone. He does all he can in his official capacity to ensure that the relief actually reaches the people and is not appropriated by middle-men and corrupt officials.

But there is another story doing its rounds now which holds everyone's fearful attention. According to the BDO, as soon as the relief supplies are arranged in the tent, a few sacks are stolen by "small children" who appear out of the forest at night and disappear back into it. The Relief Officer stays awake and spots the "children" stealing the bags of food and, overcoming his fear, decides to follow them. What confronts him is a grotesque and almost unreal scene in which small, naked, shriveled, white-haired men and women advance upon him, screaming and dancing around him. "Fear, terrible fear. Terrible, terrible fear. He feels a terrible fear." He realizes with a shock that "explodes like Hiroshima-Nagasaki in his mind" that they are "Not children, *adults*!" (18). They are the Agarias who had disappeared into the forest after the conflict with the government, the revolt at Kubha, and have been reduced to pygmies from years of starvation. They tell him that there are now only fourteen of them left and there is no hope for the future as their sexual capacities have dried up. They rub their dry, shriveled bodies and genitals on the body of the relief officer, cackling and reveling in his horror and fear.

Mahasweta Devi's articulation of the tribals' resistance is all the more powerful for the irony implicit in the scene of the small, shriveled Agarias holding up the relief officer in paralytic fear:

> Counter-violence, revenge…
> Against what?
> Spreading across their dancing silhouettes, his shadows shows against what.
> Against his 5-foot 9-inch being.
> Against the natural growth of his body…
> He can't say a word. Standing under the moon, looking at them, hearing their laughter, feeling their penises on his skin, the undernourished body and laughable height of the ordinary Indian male appear a heinous crime of civilization. (20)

Unable to speak, the relief officer realizes the terrible lie that is India's claims of freedom, equality and development. "Because if this is true, then all else is false. The universe according to Copernicus, science, this century, this freedom, plan after plan." (19) He realizes that it is the resistance of the Agarias against a system that forces them to steal the very food that is earmarked for them as relief. The highly charged narrative is an indictment of the post- independence Indian nation that allows its tribal people to be "literally and figuratively crippled"(Loomba, 10) In the Preface, Devi justifies her use of the image of the stunted tribals with scientific evidence that long periods of starvation can actually cause it to happen. (*Bitter Soil*ix)

If in "Little Ones" the Agaria tribals are forced to steal food to stay alive, the adivasis of Jhujhar village on the outskirts of Palamau Reserve Forest are forced to steal salt for their daily needs in the sort story "Salt". (*Bitter Soil* 123-145) They are all extremely poor tribes, the Mundas and Oraons who do '*betbegari*' or wageless labour for Uttamchand, the sole owner of all the neighboring land. His forefathers had bought up all the tribals' lands and they are now bonded to him for life, caught in the web of loans and the debt ledger. During the elections, they come to know through the youth activists of the party that the system of *betbegari* or bonded labour is illegal, and are made aware of some of their rights to amenities like water, education and minimum wages through the Inspector of the Adivasi Welfare Office. Under the hesitant leadership of Purti Munda, the people demand fair wages from Uttamchand who decides to teach them a lesson. "Not by hand, or by bread, *nimak se marega*- I'll kill you by salt, Uttamchand Bania had said." ("Salt" *Bitter Soil* 124) Since he owns not only the land, but also all the trading outlets and shops, the tribals suddenly find themselves deprived of salt.

The lack of salt in an already inadequate diet slowly begins to affect their health, making hem breathless, weak and dizzy. Devi's effective use of irony can be seen in a passage in scientific discourse by a medical representative about the functions of salt in the human body, which, when juxtaposed with the harsh reality of the nearly starving tribals, sounds pompous and quite meaningless:

-What can go wrong if one doesn't eat salt?

-What can go wrong? If you eat *high calorie* foods instead, you'll be able to make do with a minimum salt intake.

-*Arrey*, there are people who have no connection with *calories.* (132)

The tribals inadvertently get to know that there are places in the Reserve Forest where salt is spread out in the soil for the elephants to eat. They decide that they will steal the salt from these salt licks. This pushes them into a situation of conflict involving not just the forest guards but the elephants themselves. Devi's narrative highlights the injustice of a system that forces the tribals into a confrontation with their immediate environment, the forest and its inhabitants, with which they have always lived in harmony. They are now forced to play a dangerous game of hide-- and--seek with the elephants, stealing the muddy salt from their salt licks. The game goes horribly wrong when they encounter a rogue elephant, a lone tusker, who kills them. The death of three poor tribals does not cause much of a dent in the life of the area, they being the most expendable among the people of India. For Uttamchand, it as just a power-game and when he tires of it, he stops it, but by then the tribals have paid for his game with their lives. Stealing salt from the elephants seems to be an "irrational" thing to the *daroga* (the police officer) who records their deaths and it is explained away as just another example of the unfathomable ways of "uncivilized" adivasis. (14) But for the tribals, it is a reiteration of the awareness of their expendability, their distance from the life of mainstream India, "They feel at ease only when they return to their own life, a life in which there is no disbelief, no easy explanation for the deaths of Purti and the others…" (145)

Another story in the collection, titled "Seeds" (*Bitter Soil*21-56) also depicts the class-exploitation faced by the lower castes and adivasis in the dry, desert-like Kuruda village. The narrative focuses on the life of the low caste protagonist Dulan Gangu who uses his wits to survive the daily struggle against hunger and deprivation. The question of land and bonded labour is again placed at the centre of the narrative. Dulan is given a piece of barren land by Lachman Singh the landlord, as part of the Sarvodaya movement. Mahasweta's ironic style is at its peak here:

> This gifting of land has many uses. Barren land can be got rid of. The recipients are bought over. One's position with the sarkar becomes stronger. Above all, like *rossogolla* after a meal, there is the added satisfaction of knowing that one is compassionate. ("Seeds" *Bitter Soil* 26)

The irony takes on a deadly hue when Lachman Singh unleashes violence to quell the resistance of the labourers demanding higher wages. He forces Dulan to help him bury the corpses of his fellow workers who were killed in the violence on that "boat shaped" piece of land, with the help of goons and the concurrence of the police. The people do not understand where their fellows have been disappearing, and Dulan's son Datua's song expresses his incomprehension at the injustice in their lives in this song, not knowing that one day he too will become part of his song:

Where is Karan gone?
And Bakuli?
Why is there no news of them?
They are lost in the police files… (43)

One day however, Dulan is forced to bury his own son Datua. In the deep grief of his soul, Dulan decides to work out his revenge. In a deadly and almost ritual -like act, Dulan sows paddy seeds on the land, watering and nurturing the crop, converting all the dead men into an abundant harvest of paddy, "Scattering seeds on the land, he chants, like a mantra- I won't let you be just aloe and *putush.* I'll turn you into paddy. Datua? I'll turn you into paddy." (51) The burden of his soul is lightened when he kills Lachman Singh, burying him in the same piece of "barren land", and then letting his fellow labourers harvest his bumper crop. The narrative reverberates with the agony of the lower class labourer for whom paddy has now become a symbol of their deprivation and death, reversing their age old, deep rooted

connections with the earth, seed and soil. By converting them into seed, Datua ensures that they are kept alive in the only way possible, doing what the peasant does best, by growing a good crop. When the people ask him if he used any fertilizer for such a good crop, he replies, "Yes I did, very precious fertilizer." (56) In this story, Mahasweta articulates the issues if caste along with class, and although Dulan Gangu is not a tribal, he represents the condition of all the lower castes and tribals who form the labouring classes of rural India. The story of this village, Lachman Singh and Dulan again figure in the story "Rudali" where Dulan instigates Sanichari to take up mourning as a profession to survive. Through Dulan's portrayal, Mahasweta highlights the need for the subaltern to survive using native cunning and every resource in the offering. The narrative foregrounds the complexities of the situation in India where the constitution guarantees equal rights to all citizens, but oppression and violence in the name of caste/ class/ tribe and gender goes on unabated, sanctioned by age-old social structures and attitudes.

Devi's short story "The Witch", (*Bitter Soil*, 57-123) embodies all the socio-cultural paradigms that make the common tribal beliefs and practice of witchcraft and witch hunting one of the worst kinds of atrocities perpetrated on tribal women. The narrative centres on the happenings in a poverty –ridden village in Kuruda province, where the Oraon tribals and other poor villagers are frantically searching for a reason for the famine that is staring them in the face, with vultures and kites circling the sky in warning. The village atmosphere abounds in superstition, rapidly degenerating into a vicious situation engendering mistrust among the villagers. When the famine starts taking effect- children die from illness and contaminated relief food, cattle die, crops and trees wither - the rumour of the "daini" or "the witch" spreads like wild fire. The story is taken forward through the means of gossip and hearsay, which is a literary technique often used by Devi, "It seems that in Murhai, when an old Ganju woman struck a flint to light a *beedi,* the stones yielded blood instead of sparks. It seems that somewhere a newborn infant walks down the road kicking a fire-bearing pot before him…" *(Bitter Soil*58-59)

Reason and sense are sacrificed as all their present misfortunes are attributed to the daini and women of all communities and ages start falling victims to the nameless terror. They are kept under strict surveillance and many are chased away or killed at the slightest suspicion. "All husbands-fathers –brothers –sons were compelled to keep watch upon the women." (60). As more players like the Brahman priest and the Krishna Consciousness group join the fray, the narrative becomes charged with heavy irony and black humour, two of Mahasweta's most effective narrative weapons. The relief officers, the policemen, mission workers, the local *sadhus* and the official of the Adivasi Welfare Ministry- they all have their own interests and try to exploit the situation without doing anything substantial to change it for the better. The light-hearted banter of the various non-tribal groups is set in a dialogic engagement with the tribals' very real fear of their desperate situation. In a sudden and powerful change of tone that is another of her characteristic fictional technique, Mahasweta inserts the story of the "Kuruda belt daini" into the sophisticated national and international arena of discourse, by referring to the "racy belles-lettrist essay published in an American magazine, complete with coloured pictures." (83) In a sharply ironic passage, she lampoons both the "Indianized" westerner and the modern "westernized" Indian for whom the poor Indian villager and tribal are just "exotic" objects, to be "studied" and discoursed upon. In the last stage, Sharan Mathur, the well-meaning school master, amateur journalist and researcher, joins in, having struck a deal with the white gentleman to "sell" his "story" to him, yet another ironic look at "mainstream" interests in tribal affairs.

The Oraon and Munda tribals of the neighboring villages unite in the witch hunt, the tempo of the narrative gradually building up through the increasing fear and frenzy of the tribals as they near their target. They sight a naked woman with a distended belly, and chase her into a cave, and as they prepare to set fire to the mouth of the cave and smoke her out, a strange, thin cry is heard from inside the cave. In a finale replete with tragic irony, the daini turns out to be Somri, the deaf-and-dumb daughter of the tribal priest who was raped by the son of the landlord Hanuman Mishra. Fearing ostracisation from her community for bearing an outsider's child, she had wandered alone, surviving on raw flesh of birds and dogs. In a rare show of solidarity, the tribals save her and the child, and bear her back to the village. They realize that they have been tricked and abused, their own beliefs being used against them. When the cloud of superstition is removed from their eyes, they realize that nothing has changed in the age-old cycle of exploitation. The outsider and observer Sharan Mathur also realises realizes the damage that the

interference of the so-called civilized society can do in the name of academic interest to the tribal community.

Most tribal communities in India hold age-old traditions in the belief and practice of witchcraft and witch hunting, whose origins are supposed to lie in the animistic tribal religious beliefs and practices that believe in the pervading presence of spirits, both good and evil. The Santhals have a myth regarding the origin of witchcraft that throws light on the social constructions behind this practice. The myth tells of how the Santhal women tricked their god Maran Buru and secretly learned witchcraft from him. In revenge, Maran Buru gives the men the power to witch hunt instead. The myth works as a gendered discourse, creating a cultural tradition that legitimizes the authority of men over women by designating women as witches and men as witch hunters. Witch craft is also seen as a means by which women appropriated sacred spaces for themselves, as they were also excluded from ritual worship at the sacred groves of the community. Seemingly inexplicable happenings in the tribals' lives such as illnesses, misfortunes, untimely deaths, crop failure, and vagaries of the weather and so on are attributed to vengeful and evil spirits (*Bongas*, in tribal parlance) who then have to be placated through rituals. These spirits are supposed to operate through a medium, usually identified as women, most often 'expendable' women like widows, old and other destitute women. These women are then "identified" as witches and are hunted down, killed or driven away, one of the functions of witchery and witch hunting being getting rid of unwanted women. "The unwanted females are chiefly widows, but may also include women who have become pregnant, but whom the men concerned do not want to marry." (Nongbri *Tribal Women* 167). Cultural traditions work in tandem with socio-economic factors of tribal life, especially in the present context of rapid change. As Bhowmick observes, "…the accusation of witchcraft is …used as a means to cope with societal disharmony and crisis by designating a culprit … restoring the social order. " (Bhowmik 390; Roy 57-60; Bose 1-27). Mahasweta's narrative thus embodies the multi-layered socio-economic-cultural tangle in which the doubly marginalized tribal woman is caught.

In the long story "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha", (*Imaginary Maps*95-198) which Mahasweta Devi describes as "an abstract" of her "entire tribal experience" (Author in Conversation *Imaginary Maps* xiv), the unbridgable gap between the intentions and claims of the state and the actual situation of the tribals is articulated in all its complexities. Although the story is ostensibly set in the tribal district of Pirtha in Madhya Pradesh, Devi says that "Madhya Pradesh is here India, Nagesia village the entire tribal society." (198)It is a rare and complex narrative that brings into its ambit the entire social/ historical/economic/political structures that have a bearing on the tribal situation in contemporary India, incorporating government records and bulletins, journalistic reports, academic writings of sociologists and anthropologists like S. C. Dubey and Verrier Elwin, and a variety of social registers that serve to recreate the conditions that have led to the present poverty of the Nagesia tribals, who represent all the marginalized tribals of post-independence India. The Nagesia tribals of the narrative are the embodiment of passivity and despair, leading an existence that cannot be described as properly human by any parameters. The entire government machinery of SDOs, BDOs and Adivasi Welfare Departments has not been able to ensure that the "target beneficiaries", i.e., the tribals, get their rights or the benefits of the welfare schemes and rehabilitation programs. The tribal boy Sankar's song, or rather his lament, outlines in poignant clarity the magnitude of their loss- the loss of their traditional lands and forests, their livelihoods, their independence and their ethnic and cultural identity:

> We were kings. Became subjects. Were subjects, became slaves. Owed nothing, they made us debtors. Alas they enslaved and bound us… Our land vanished like dust before a 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… Oh, we had our ancestor's graves! They were ground underfoot to build roads, houses, schools, hospitals. ("Pterodactyl" *Imaginary Maps*119)

Puran Sahay, the conscientious journalist, realizes that the world of the Indian tribal and that of non-tribal seem to run parallel, with "a tremendous communication gap" existing between them, as no amount of "knowledge" and preparation helps him to deal with the actuality of the tribal's experience. (102) He realizes that the development programmes targeting tribal areas have only helped the mainstream to exploit them further. He is also skeptical of the power of his pen to truly represent the

experience of the tribals in modern India and that he has to break out of "the glass wall of book-learnt theory" (118).

In their deep incomprehensible grief, the tribals interpret the appearance of the strange visitor from a pre-historic era, the"pterodactyl as the visitation of the unquiet soul of their ancestors that has come to remind them of their loss. Bikhia, the tribal boy who is witness to the appearance of the pterodactyl becomes speechless and silent, and can only draw a carving on the wall of a cave to interpret the significance of the pterodactyl. Puran is drawn into this experience when the pterodactyl enters his hut and he and Bikhia care for it. Despite being accepted as part of this unique and secret tribal experience, Puran realizes that he cannot truly understand or interpret the message of the pterodactyl, hinting that the gap between the tribal and non-tribal experience can never be truly bridged. The tribals bury the pterodactyl and continue living their old life and Puran returns to his life in the city and his newspaper in which he reports the socio-economic conditions of Pirtha, but remains silent about the pterodactyl. At the end of the narrative, the tribals' material conditions and class position remains unchanged and their resistant efforts to uphold their unique tribal identity also remains muted and unarticulated. Mahasweta Devi represents Bikhia's silence as a symbol of the silencing of the resistance of the tribals and the muting of their oral traditions. If Birsa Munda led an armed revolt, his descendent Chotti Munda shot his arrow and Bashai Tudu murdered his oppressors, Bikhia and Sankar are unable to do anything but retreat into the deepest recesses of their collective tribal memory and identify with the silence of their ancestral spirits.

The texts discussed above (with the exception of "Seeds" which articulates "caste") articulate the complexities of the tribal's negotiations with the hegemonic systems of the nation that have forced them to occupy the lowest rung of its hierarchical class structure, as the focus of this thesis is on the works depicting tribes. In these narratives Mahasweta Devi uses all the discourses that are relevant to the situation, from government bulletins and constitutional tracts to journalists' reports and sociological documents to lay bare the socio-political and historical structures that have legitimized, enforced and sustained the Indian tribals' marginalization and oppression. "Devi's diatribe on the government and administration is central to her questioning of what the nation in the post-independence era has done for its people," according to Sen and Yadav. (15)Working along with these are the social and religious discourses that create and sustain racist and casteist ideas in society. Tribal people and the lower castes are seen as "naturally" inferior people, suitable for the kind of sub-human life that is forced on them.

These dominant discourses engage dialogically with the suppressed but insistent voice of the tribals as they subvert the dominant discourse, thereby resisting this imposition. As the tribals are pushed into increasingly marginalized spaces by the powerful forces of society and the state, their resistance takes on different forms. Birsa Munda's Ulgulan in *Aranyer Adhikar*, Chotti Munda's arrow play, Dulan Gangu's conversion of the dead peasants into paddy seeds, Dopdi's challenge to Senanayak in "Draupadi", the Agaria's rude dance, - they are all expressions of Devi's belief that India's poor and marginalized lower classes need to resist oppression using whatever resources are indigenous to them. It is through the innovative use of the oral tribal traditions of song, tale and myth in the thematic and aesthetic elements of her fictional narratives that Devi achieves this foregrounding of tribal identity and resistance. The tribal characters inscribe themselves into the social and discursive structures of the nation through the subversive use of their oral traditions as much as through collective and individual action. Thus her narratives not only re-write the tribals' past and contemporary history, but also uphold the relevance of the subaltern's resistance against the dominant authoritative and discursive structures of the nation that seek to erase their distinct tribal identity through the powerful shackles of class oppression. Mahasweta Devi's fiction can thus be seen an expression of her concern for the tribals of India to be "… recognized as citizens of a postcolonial state, even 'special' citizens, without losing a sense of their own history and cultural identity…" (Sen and Yadav 26)

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