

**Writing for/with Subaltern: A Study of  
Contemporary Indian Fiction with Focus on  
Mahasweta Devi's Works**

*Dissertation submitted to the University of Calicut  
for the award of the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in English*

By

FIROZ.N

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT**

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## DECLARATION

I, Firoz. N, hereby declare that the following dissertation entitled "Writing for / with Subaltern: A Study of Contemporary Indian Fiction with Focus on Mahasweta Devi's Works" submitted to the University of Calicut, is an original record of studies and bona fide research carried out by me during 1999-2006 under the guidance and supervision of Dr. M. Dasan, Head of the Department of English, Thalasseri Campus, Kannur University, and that it has not previously formed the basis, either in full or in part, for the award of any degree or diploma.

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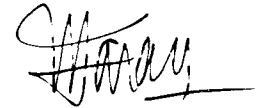
Dr. M. DASAN  
Prof. and Head,  
Department of Studies in English,  
Thalasseri Campus, Kannur University,  
Kerala, India.

### CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "**Writing for / with Subaltern: A Study of Contemporary Indian Fiction with Focus on Mahasweta Devi's Works**" submitted to the University of Calicut, is an original record of studies and bona fide research carried out by Firoz. N during 1999-2006 under my guidance and that it has not previously formed the basis, either in full or in part, for the award of any degree or diploma.

Place: PALAYAD

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Dr. M. DASAN

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## CONTENTS

Chapter I	Introduction	1
Chapter II	Subalternity as Ethnicity: A Study of <i>Aranyer Adhikar</i>	61
Chapter III	The Pedagogy of the Marginalized: A Study of <i>Chotti Munda and His Arrow</i>	130
Chapter IV	<i>The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh: Recuperating the Silenced</i>	179
Chapter V	<i>Rudali</i> : Subversion through Resistance	217
Chapter VI	Enabling Articulation: Dialectics of Subaltern Representation	259
Chapter VII	Conclusion	289
	Bibliography	300

## Chapter I

### Introduction

The incontrovertible connection between society and literature has always been an assiduous field of hot discussion in the modern world. It is generally postulated that the literature of a society should reflect its problems. Literary writing, in a wider perspective, is a social activity. Social aspect is a crucial dimension of all human activities including writing. Art and literature are neither innocent entertainment nor independent of social forces. They are inextricably associated with ideologies and politics. Literature, says Terry Eagleton, "is 'non-pragmatic' discourse: unlike biology textbooks and notes to the milkman it serves no immediate practical purpose, but is to be taken as referring to general state of affairs."(7) All writings carry certain ideological implication and maintain a stance, overtly or covertly, on issues of domination and subordination. They play a crucial role in the transmission and legitimization of ideologies in a given society. The vision of literature as an autonomous domain totally independent of historic contexts has been rigorously challenged in recent decades.

Arguably, the study of a literary work, whether fiction or poetry, involves an analysis in terms of its ideological stance. The naivety of the traditional criticism that views art and literature as politically and ideologically innocent enterprises obviously serves the interest of the dominant class. By reiterating the point that no discourse could be politically innocent Emma LaRocque, the Canadian First Nation writer, demystifies the

very concept of art and literature of their presumed aura of autonomy. She observes that “[L]iterature is political in that its linguistic and ideological transmission is defined and determined by those in power. This is why Shakespeare rather than Wisakehcha is classified as “classical” in our school curriculums.” (xvi) On the other hand, literature can prompt political and cultural alternatives by suggesting the subversive possibilities and lending them socially critical undertones. So, I think, in a society like India, where many people are perpetually persecuted and subordinated by the dominant castes/classes, any cultural act or artistic gesture has significance in the empowerment of the exploited.

The origin and development of fiction in India are intimately associated with the documentation and criticism of the social experience. In India, the genre fiction, in the first phase of its history, documented and reflected the social realities of the period, and carried an unmistakable sociological preoccupation with it. During the decades that immediately preceded and followed the Independence, there arose a galaxy of writers like Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, Babani Battacharya, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Sivaram Karant, Kamala Markandaya so on who pioneered the cause of the underprivileged people in the country. Their writings collectively envisaged a new era where there would be no social stratification and injustice. The entire corpus of novels produced during this period documented the heaving social realities of the time with an emancipatory fervor. Their writings were enthused by the time they were produced. Most of

the literature produced during this period not only mirrored the social and political realities of the time, but also recalibrated the momentum of the counter-hegemonic movements, thereby engaging the mission of social rectification. But, the following decades witnessed a drop in the vigilant attention given to the teeming issues of the society. The thematic preferences that were characteristic of the literary writing of the previous decades have been swapped by aesthetic modernism and its attendant accent on artistic excellence. Consequently, literature gradually lost its corrective and intervening potential. The social substance of literature came to be sidelined for the sake of literary artifice and aesthetic fineness. The social realism and commitment apparent in the early period later gave way to an aesthetic detachment, which gradually became the dominant presence in Indian literary scenario, especially after the advent of aesthetic modernism in the closing years of 1970's.

"What is Canadian about Canadian literature...?" the pressing question that the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood asks at the outset of her pivotal work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1996), is crucial enough to be extended to the context of any noticeable estrangement between a particular society and its literature (11). Lurking beneath the question is the neutrality and disaffiliation of the writers over the stark realities of the society in which they live. A close analysis of the contemporary Indian literature, particularly fiction, reveals that Indian writers are no longer concerned about the heaving issues of the society, which were so vehemently discussed a few

decades back. The estrangement of the writers from the socio-political realities of their milieu has prompted serious altercations about the role of literature in recent decades. The disengagement of the mainstream writers over the issues of the oppression and marginalization of the subaltern groups is often viewed as the elite tactic of excluding them in the literary discourse. This negligence, analogous to their omission in history, has to be viewed as the part of a broader process, sidelining the subaltern from the center of social discourses.

Why have most of the contemporary writers stopped bothering about the austere issues of the society in which they live? Why do they keep an ominous silence about the mechanism of power and its attendant effects upon the downtrodden people? Why do the silenced people fail to find space in the field of literature? These are certain fundamental questions which, I think, merit answer before undertaking the examination of the literary practice prevailing in the country. Any attempt to find answer to these crucial questions inevitably leads to the role of literature in a society. From a sociological point of view, it can be argued that, literature should demonstrate the alternative possibilities hidden behind the oppressive system. Literature ought to reflect the society from which it takes its birth and should not be divorced from the social realities. Art and literature have a subversive potential that can destabilize the mechanics of power in a society. This subversion involves, among other things, a deconstruction, and sometimes even a deep-seated refutation, of the received standards and a

building up of alternative paradigms. Commenting on the revolutionary potential of literature T.W. Adorno says "[A] work of art that is committed strips the magic from a work of art that is content to be fetish, an idle pastime for those who would like to sleep through the deluge that threatens them, in an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political." (188) Literature that disaffiliates itself from the physical environment cannot escape what Adorno calls "the shadow of irrationality." (201) The continuing contestation between the proponents of "Art for Art's Sake" and social realists still remains to be unresolved. One school of thought views literature to be a product of society hence they argue that it should reflect social reality, whereas the other holds literary practice to be an autonomous activity governed by its own rules and aiming at aesthetic excellence. These two dominant trends not only exist side by side but also take cognizance of and occasionally react against each other. Any study of literature as a discourse, first of all, demands a debunking of this aura or charisma woven around it by its liberal defenders. While challenging the naivety of the concept of aestheticism and the privileged position ascribed to literature Raymond Williams finds certain disconcerting tendencies of "incurable abstraction and generality" of its defenders which, he says, need to be "contemptuously rejected." (261) The concept of literature as an ideological construct has gained much momentum in recent decades. With the emergence of copious strands of counter discourses and critical endeavours the die hard notions about the autonomy of art and literature came to be challenged. Eagleton Observes:

Literary theories are not to be upbraided for being political, but for being on the whole covertly or unconsciously so -- for the blindness with which they offer as a supposedly 'technical', 'self-evident', 'scientific' or 'universal' truth doctrines which with a little reflection can be seen to relate to and reinforce the particular interests of particular groups of people at particular times (170).

Eagleton persuasively exposed the politics of aesthetic estrangement by interrogating the very notion of literary purity and universality. He went on to say, "[T]he idea that there are 'non-political' forms of criticism is simply a myth which furthers certain political uses of literature all the more effectively." (182) He states that literary theory has a particular "relevance to the political system" since it serves to "sustain and reinforce its assumptions" (171) which, he claims, could be effectively dismantled with, what he calls, "the theoretically limitless extendibility of critical discourse." (177) Recently, with the emergence of these fresh enquiries, the debate centering on the question of art and society has been incessantly brought to the forefront again, though no operative alternative has yet emerged to bridge the ideological gap between them.

In India, over the last few decades, the impact of alternative aesthetics on the literary studies has been strong and widespread, particularly in criticism where the conceptual borrowings from the West have been frequent. One of the prominent features of the critical scenario of recent decades is the

growing concern for the literature of the marginalized coupled with a de-canonization of mainstream ethos and values. The sociological aspect of literature has once again become the site of active contestation with the surfacing of various critical and cultural movements seeking to de-hegemonize the venues of different discourses including history, literature, cultural studies and social anthropology etc. Furthermore, the streamlining of a variety of marginal aesthetics in the recent decades has also created a compelling urgency to redefine the paradigms of art and literature in the light of new critical endeavours, which are predominantly counter hegemonic and subversive in nature.

Admittedly, in India, most of the contemporary writings are marked by an eschewal of the social content for artistic fineness. The question is significant why the contemporary Indian writers are so unconcerned about the stark issues of the society, such as the continuing exploitation and marginalization of the tribals and Dalits by the dominant classes. This shift from the earlier tradition of social documentation to the aesthetic obsession forms the point of departure of this thesis. It aims to examine, among other things, the problematic of subaltern representation in the works of selected Indian writers, with special reference to the works of Mahasweta Devi, which provide a perfect dialogic plane upon which the politics of representation can be examined. It also attempts to examine the discursive nature of the functioning of literature -- most extensively theorized by Michael Foucault -- and how it indirectly serves either to sustain or to debunk the silenced

position of the subaltern. In history as well as in literature the suppression of marginal voices goes along with the privileging of the elite. It is important to scrutinize how and why the subalterns are bypassed in the contemporary literature. These contentions are nevertheless allied with certain significant concepts like ideology and discourse. Hence, any examination of these contesting issues without reference to the formation of ideology and discourse would be incomplete and inadequate.

### **Ideology and Discourse**

An understanding of the concept of ideology is crucial to the study of art and literature. The questions of representation, domination and subordination are inseparably intertwined with the concepts of ideology and discourse. The conceptualization of ideology and discourse is crucial to the understanding of how the power relations are formed and values are constructed in a given society. An analysis of the theoretical premise of different anti-elitist and counter hegemonic endeavors in the critical and cultural fields like Postcolonialism, Multiculturalism and Subaltern Studies would certainly inform on this connectivity. The broad array of issues raised in these fields involves, among other things, the questions pertaining to the representation of subalterns, their resistance and its subversive potential. So, it is important to start my thesis by explaining the theoretical framework, which is chiefly constituted by Postcolonialism, Subaltern studies and Dalit discourse, which I think, are pertinent to the exegesis of the texts selected in the present study. In addition to them, I propose to use various critical tools

and analytical procedures provided by Post-structuralism, Marxism and Feminism in the arguments raised in the thesis. Before entering the focal area of investigation, the present study will attempt to engage with the questions regarding the formation of power and subjectivity. I think, the inclusion of these critical fields is theoretically justified since they provide the critical vantage points to commence my arguments related to the nature of subaltern representation in Indian literature.

Recently, many thinkers like Michael Foucault, under the influence of Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, have sought to incorporate the concepts of discourse analysis into the conceptualization of ideology. The widely influential theory of ideology propounded by French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser has a special affiliation with the critical inquiries taking place in the contemporary socio-cultural scenario. His theorization of ideology is very supportive in understanding the intricate ways through which the hegemony functions in the society. Ideology, for Althusser, represents a "system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or social group" thereby transforming human beings as social subjects (32). He observes that ideologies "constitute an illusion" or "allusion to reality" and therefore must be "'interpreted' to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of the world." (36) Althusser has identified that the "world outlooks" are largely imaginary and are mostly not reliable since they "do not correspond to reality." (36) Tracing the nexus between power and knowledge Althusser observes that the dominant classes

who “base their domination and exploitation of the ‘people’ on a falsified representation of the world” which is largely their own construct and with which they attempt to “enslave other minds by dominating their imaginations.” (37) Althusser brings home the inherent propositions in such falsified representations in the formation as well as sustenance of social relation. However, Althusser sees the possibilities of debunking the myths of power by changing the relations determined by these ideologies. He also brings attentions to the way ideology acts upon the individuals. Ideology transforms the individuals into subjects by means of what he calls “interpellation”, a process by which individuals acquire their self-awareness as subjects, and the attributes necessary for their social placement. (48) Althusser observes that institutions such as education, family, media, church, the law, though they formally remain outside the state control, serve to transmit the values of the state. He calls them collectively the “ideological state apparatus”, which the state effectively uses to interpellate the individuals. (58) It was Terry Eagleton who attempted to give an elaboration to the theorization of Althusser by realigning some of its basic tenets. Eagleton argued that relations alluded by ideology may not be always unconscious or affective as observed by Althusser. Ideology, according to Eagleton, makes reference “not only to belief system, but to questions of power.” (5) Ideology always involves the questions of power of a dominant social group, which uses it in different ways as strategies to sustain itself.

A dominant power may legitimate itself by *promoting* beliefs and

values congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself. (Eagleton 5)

Antonio Gramsci and Michael Foucault are two indispensable figures in the contemporary critical field who significantly theorized the complex and numerous ways through which power is internalized by people whom it seeks to disempower through ideology and discourse. They persuasively engaged with the questions of the operation of power and its concomitant effects upon the life of the powerless groups. Rather than being a sharp but passive analysis of the functioning of hegemony, their writings draw attention to the alternative possibilities behind it in a given order. It is based on the basic assumption that the formation of power itself is a product of discourse and certainly it carries an alternative possibility with it. Thereby, they argue, it is essential to discover means of counter hegemonic discourses to confront and alter the establishment.

It was in the context of explaining the characteristics of hegemony that the term "subaltern" came to be conceptualized in the social discourses with its subordinate relation to power. As a specifically sociological designation, the term "subaltern" is originated in the work of Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. His current exalted reputation in the contemporary critical scenario nevertheless rests on his ground-breaking work *Prison Notebooks*

(1929-35), which addresses a wide range of topics such as subaltern, intellectuals, hegemony, education, history, fascism and political parties etc. He traces the symptoms of civil society and liberal ideology, both of which he says, attempt a "crystallization of the leading personnel" by means of their "coercive power." (246) The deep insight with which he comments on these topics made him a pivotal figure in the debates and developments within postcolonial and Marxist fields. He examines how the state manufactures the consent of the subjects by disseminating its ideologies with the help of its institutions and culture industry.

If political science means science of the State, and the State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules, then it is obvious that all the essential questions of sociology are nothing other than the questions of political science (Gramsci 244).

Gramsci's most sustained efforts to explain the nature of the link between the power and knowledge have exerted tremendous influence in the critical practice and cultural inquiries of the recent decades. He holds that there is a counter possibility behind every oppressed phenomenon. He also exhibits how hegemony sustains itself by manufacturing the consent of the subjects. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, designates the ideological domination of the ruling class. Hegemony has been explicated by Gramsci as

a strategy of incorporation, co-optation, or inclusion whereby the subaltern has been persuaded to lend his/her support to a social order that maintains and legitimizes his/her subordinated position. It is a form of articulation which perpetually produces new subalterns who are always subsumed within the relations it establishes. Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* explains the overt and covert ways through which hegemony protracts itself. The interest of the dominant class is sustained through different strategies such as differentiation, legitimization and rationalization. His insightful analysis of the subject position of subaltern groups has later taken up by some radical historians of South Asia in the formation of a new historical and critical enterprise called Subaltern Studies in which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has been a crucial contributor. It demonstrates how the anti-imperialist and anti-enlightenment sites have prompted related line of inquiries around the globe. Subaltern discourse endeavors to expound a site of inquiry, hithertofore unexplored, and to embody in literary form, an insider perspective of the subaltern life. Spivak, by locating subalternity and connecting it with multifarious forms of subject positions, in the same analytic field as the study of colonialism, re-defined the framework of history and literature in a wider context. Since the field of subaltern discourse forms a crucial location of the present study, I have devoted a separate section for its elaboration.

In the 60's and 70's of the last century Post-structuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault inaugurated what is called the "anti-foundationalism" by undermining the traditional claims of

the existence of a center that guarantees a universal meaning in the text. The reversal of the privilege accorded to the denotative dimension of language over the connotative dimension propounded by Ferdinand de Saussure is a distinguishing feature of Post-structuralism. It was this realignment that was subsequently stretched outside the field of linguistics and led Foucault's elucidation of discourse through which he sought to investigate the complex functioning of the microphysics of power in the contemporary society. In his methodological text *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969) Foucault reconstructed the additional sets of underlying relations that constitute the actual meaning of language in a particular context and put it along with Althussean concept of ideology. Foucault replaced ideology with "discourse", which he used to designate a system of statements within which the world can be known. He argued that the additional structures are constituted by historically produced and loosely structured concepts and concerns, which he calls "discursive formations". A discourse, Foucault claims, is a collective of statements constituted by discursive formation which is the "object of appropriation." (What is an Author 179) He went on to say that "[D]iscourse are composed of signs, but what they do is more than use of signs to designate things. It is this more that renders them irreducible to the language (langue) and to speech. It is this "more" that we must reveal and describe." (*The Archeology of Knowledge* 428) It is noteworthy that Foucault's conception of discourse, like the concept of ideology propounded by Althusser, is bound up in social reality and is historically informed. Foucault examines the irrevocable relationship between

power and knowledge and identifies that the discourse of a specific society is mostly constituted by the power relation of a particular period. Every mode of discourse constructs the "facts" that it requires for its persistence. His theory of discourse has exercised a powerful influence in postcolonial studies. His writings go beyond the post-structuralist premise to broader theoretical speculations about the organization of knowledge and power in the modern world. Foucault claimed that discourses are ways of constituting knowledge together with social practices and forms subjectivity and power relations. He also identified the discursive nature of the functioning of intellectual power and how it indirectly serves to maintain the subject position of the dispossessed people. Foucault, however, leaves considerable space in his conceptualization for the formation of what he called "the alternative discourse" which could effectively destabilize the schemes of dominance. Admittedly, the possibility of forging counter discourses to contest the dominant discourses has engaged the attention of the intellectuals in a considerable way in the recent decades. Perhaps, one of the chief characterizing tendencies of recent critical inquiries -- whether it be postcolonial studies, Subaltern Studies or minority discourse -- may be the accentuation given to the alternative discourse and its potential to subvert the dominance together with a recuperation of the submerged entities.

It can be seen that, the current forms of Marxist and Feminist thinking demonstrate a similar tendency to debunk the foundational assumptions and procedures that dominated in the Western civilization. These contestations

are further stretched by Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak when they speak about the representation of the colonized and subaltern. In the analysis of power, they are deeply indebted to Althusser and Foucault in varied ways. For instance, Edward Said, the most influential figure in the postcolonial field, in his *Orientalism* (1978) examines how the Western image of the Orient has been constructed and legitimized by its cultural instruments like literature, history, art, cinema etc. He has been influenced by Gramsci and Foucault in his analysis of the construct of the Orient. The postcolonial thinkers, among other things, owe their basic theoretical ground works to the insightful analysis of culture and ideology by Antonio Gramsci and Michael Foucault. There is a sense of urgency in their conceptualizations about the need of forging counter discourses to disrupt the myths of dominance and power. Admittedly, behind all these anti-establishment approaches there is the influence of Marxist ideology. The fissures left by classical Marxism were compensated by the neo-Leftist ideologues like Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton. The collective of Frankfurt school has abundantly calibrated the venues of literature and culture studies. The interventions of these new Left writers have extensively invigorated the arena of literary studies. For any study that seeks to de-elitize the sites of knowledge, neo-Marxism is an ideal point of departure.

### **Postcolonialism**

Postcolonialism is an interdisciplinary field that examines the consequence of European colonialism upon the life and culture of the people

in the former colonies. It scrutinizes the different ways through which the debris of colonial power persists in the former colonies. The postcolonial inquiries have taken up all the issues related to the representation of and the problematic relationship between the colonized and the colonizer along with its attendant upshots in the socio-economic and cultural life of the former. As an overriding movement, it instantly found its resonance in various discourses including history, literature, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. In a short span of time, its premises of argument witnessed a tremendous boom, by integrating wide locales of critical and cultural interests into its field. Terry Eagleton observes:

Like Feminism and postmodernism, and unlike phenomenology or reception theory, post-colonial theory is directly rooted in historical development. The collapse of the great European empires; their replacement by the world economic hegemony of the United States; the steady erosion of the nation state and of traditional geopolitical frontiers, along with mass global migrations and the creation of so-called multicultural societies; the intensified exploitation of ethnic groups within the West and 'peripheral' societies elsewhere; the formidable power of the new transnational corporations; all of this has developed apace since the 1960's, and with veritable revolution in our notions of space, power, language, identity ( *Literary Theory: An Introduction* 204).

In recent decades, a lot of investigations have been done in the former European colonies like Africa, Canada, Australia and the Caribbean islands to analyze the abstruse operation of power in the postcolonial societies. Currently, the investigations done in the field of post colonialism has gone beyond its ethnographic and colonial concerns and is being applied to other cultural and political fields in the non-European countries. The basic point of argument is that colonial mechanism preserves itself in the former colonies through different representations, canons and values encompassing all domains of life. Robert Young observes: “[P]ostcolonial theory involves a political analysis of the cultural history of colonialism, and investigates its contemporary effects in western and tricontinental cultures, making connections between the past and the politics of the present.” (6) The basic premise of postcolonial inquiries is, of course, related to the growing awareness about the operation of colonial legacies within the societies of the former colonies of Europe. The imperial interest continues to get contented through the institutions it has established, the values it has disseminated, the education it has promoted during its occupancy period in the colonies. Nowhere this idea is so powerfully articulated than in Emma LaRoque’s words: “[T]o a Native woman, English is like an ideological onion whose stinging layers of racism and sexism must be peeled away before it can be fully enjoyed.” (xx) LaRoque was obviously implying the multiple subjectivities – both racial and gender – that the colonialism sought to construct in Canada. This realization about the continuation of the remnants

of colonialism has prompted some native thinkers to call for the undermining of Western institutions, values and education in the former colonies. Examining the impact of colonialism upon the life and culture of the colonized people Robert Young observes that “[C]olonialism may have brought some benefits of modernity, as its apologists continue to argue, but it also caused extraordinary suffering in human terms, and was singularly destructive with regard to the indigenous cultures with which it came into contact.” (6) Besides material domination, colonialism denigrated the indigenous cultures of the people in different ways. This impact of deracination and cultural uprooting is well illustrated in Mahasweta Devi’s *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*.

Post colonialism, as a culturally intervening and socially therapeutic enterprise, have been abundantly propelled by the writings of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Bill Aschroft etc. Their writings, besides sparking many debates on the issues of dominance and hegemony, have assisted the postcolonialism to access the critical field. Recent investigations made in the domain of decolonizing discourses about the politics of representation and its ideological implications have received copious amount of critical attention. The contestations triggered by postcolonial studies have now gone beyond its primary premise of the representation of colonized and has encompassed a large number of related issues thereby propelling its momentum in the contemporary critical scenario. The origin of these concerns, to some extent, is traceable to some other

contemporary critical sites, most importantly to Marxism, Post-structuralism and Deconstructive theories. Post colonialism, however, went beyond the theoretical venues of these schools, by focusing entirely on the silenced and dispossessed communities living in the periphery. One of the most immediate concerns of postcolonial studies is the analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge, particularly the degree to which the cultural representations are determined by material domination.

An unprecedented celebration of polyvocality and heterogeneity has been a dominant feature of the recent critical endeavours. The homogenizing propensities of Eurocentric thoughts came to be interrogated by the postcolonial thinkers. In the recent decades, the studies conducted in postcolonialism and ethnic cultures have enabled fresh investigations into a variety of marginal positions that are hitherto silenced by the elite discourses. Native literature is a seminal area in postcolonial field. Native writing, observes Emma LaRocque "is protest literature in that it speaks to the processes of our colonization: dispossession, objectification, marginalization, and that constant struggle for cultural survival expressed in the movement for structural and psychological self-determination."(xviii) Postcolonialism has triggered innovative interest in the literature of the ethnic minorities and aboriginal people. It highlighted the implication of grounding out the folklores and other forms of subaltern articulations excluded from written records. This accentuation on cultural heterogeneity and orality has been a defining characteristic of postcolonial literature.

The postcolonial theoretical exercises are characterized by the constant crossing of the disciplinary boundaries to engage the crucial question of subordination consequent upon the imperial dominance. These different strands actually denote the richness as well as the complexity of the site of post colonial field whose expansive universe engages venues not only about literature and language but also about ethnicity, gender, race, class, culture, ideology so on. In addition, today, it has generated a wide array of terms and concepts in connection with power and subjectivity. One of the most important contribution of postcolonialism, I think, is the way it insistently dwelled upon the alternative possibilities to understand and change the hegemonic structures. In literature, it marks a fundamental shift from the prevailing literary tradition, largely set by the standards of Europe. Consequently, the very canons of literature have been subjected to radical re-alignment. Explicating the tenets of postcolonial literature Michael Parker and Roger Starkey observe:

...postcolonial literatures are interpretive discourses, reshaping the languages whence they arise, disclosing to former colonizing cultures redefinitions of centralizing literary, cultural and political histories. The 'outsider' inside the text; the 'dispossessed' in possession of language; the 'alienated decentering discourses of power; the 'disempowered' recentered in their own empowering texts (23).

The debates about the persistence of the colonial residues had been

triggered by the writings of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha etc. who were the most well known representatives of the postcolonial theory. Said's *Orientalism* is a step towards capsizing the postulations of cultural and racial inferiority imposed by the West. In *Orientalism*, Said draws on a wide range of material from history, sociology, literature, cinema to diagnose ideological base of the cultural domination of the West that constructed its "Other" out of the East. Said probed into the different ways orient has been constructed by the Western social and cultural institutions. Orientalism according to Said is not a "political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions" but signifies a "whole series of interests", which, by means of different sociological and cultural discourses maintain "a certain *will* or *intension* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different world." (Said, 12) Orientalism is created by the West to manage and produce what is not West politically, sociologically and ideologically. He observes: "[T]he Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other." (1) His insightful observations about the Orient is crucial to the understanding of "Other", a construct used by the colonizer. Said focuses how the West constructs its "Other" to claim its superiority and to legitimize its imperial schemes. *Orientalism* raises a multitude of questions in connection with the different ways through which

the less privileged are represented within the elite discourses. Elaborating the observations of Gramsci and Foucault, Said argues that every discourse, including language and literature, are subject to power structure and inevitably aid in the perseverance of status quo. However, he claims, the resisting initiatives of the subordinated have nevertheless the potential of destabilizing the designs of the dominant class. Said observes:

...discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistic or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what "we" do and what "they" cannot do or understand as "we do") (*Orientalism* 12).

Said is deeply vigilant about the ideological implications inherent in different discourses including art and history and their roles in disseminating, what he calls, the "flexible positional superiority" of West (7). Similarly, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) offer an influential account of the psychopathologic consequences of colonialism upon the colonial subjects. Fanon himself has been influenced by the writings of the "Negritude Movement" that swept across African and

American continent during the 30's and 40's of the last century. They include the writings of Aime Cesaire of Martinique, Leopald Senghor of Senegal who highlighted black culture and used literature as a medium for articulating their protestation and anger. Fanon's writings not merely mark a continuance but an amplification of this tradition by granting seditious insights into the cultural and psychological aspects of post-colonial conditions. Arguably, it is possible to find an unbroken tradition of resistance, which goes back to the history of colonialism itself. Fanon brings attention to the different ways colonialism denigrates the culture of the colonized people: "[C]olonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (94). The intension behind such cultural uprooting, he elucidates, is "to drive into the natives' heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation and bestiality." (94) His writings are politically engaged and probably propose a course of action. He stresses on the role of violence in the process of decolonization.

One of the focal points of postcolonial studies is the complex interaction between the indigenous cultures and imperial cultures and the consequent process of hybridation. Among the postcolonial thinkers it was Homi Bhabha who attempted to theorize the colonial and postcolonial identities in term of the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Bhabha adapted the psychoanalytical term "ambivalence" to

designate the fluctuating relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. According to him, the contact with the colonial culture, though having a disconcerting impact upon the colonized, does not disempower the subjects, as observed by Fanon.

It was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who introduced the deconstructive critical tools into the postcolonial studies by translating Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976). Marginality is the location from which Spivak examines and deconstructs the structures of dominance. Her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has prompted tremendous amount of critical responses in the recent decades. It constitutes one of the vantage points of the present study and will be dealt in detail in the coming chapters. Spivak adopted a deconstructive and microscopic method of analysis, by opting to focus on local issues, often jettisoning the totalizing theorization characterizing the writings of her colleagues in the field, especially Said and Bhabha. She preferred to focus on a chosen text as exemplified in *Breastgiver - Stanadayini*, a study made on the story of Mahasweta Devi, in which she attempts to identify the traces of gender subalternity in the female protagonist Jashoda.

Thus, it can be seen that, there have been a large variety of theoretical positions constantly intersecting each other within the postcolonial field. Their focal points and favoured concerns vary from writer to writer. If Said stressed on the politics of representation, Fanon was engaged with the psychological impact of the process of colonialism upon the subjects. Whereas, Bhabha chose to dwell upon the complexities emerging out of the

hybrid formations in the colonies. Their theoretical position and engagements are not always analogous, though integrated in a wider location. Taken together, they offer a consistent critique of the Eurocentric, logocentric and patriarchal premises, thereby facilitating the alternative discourses. Today, "postcolonial" is used as an inclusive term, which encompasses all the communities who, directly or indirectly, are affected by the negative impact of imperial process. In addition to the theoretical writings of Said, Bhabha, Spivak and Aschcroft, there have been influential writings from the former colonies, like the writings of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Africa, Jeannette Armstrong and Janice Acoose in Canada and so on. The confrontation between center and periphery has been a crucial metaphor of all their writings. All these writings take in hand the urgent domains of language, history and identity etc. and introduce a variety of pressing questions related to these fields.

Furthermore, the postcolonial studies stirred up a large number of enquiries in different discourses including literature, history, sociology and cultural studies. In the scenario of literature, the postcolonial intercession virtually invigorated the field, particularly literary interpretation, not only by re-examining the canonical works but also by recasting the received interpretation of old texts by illuminating fresh precincts of meanings and possibilities. This subversive reading is best exemplified in Chinua Achebe's reading of Joseph Conrad's much celebrated work *The Heart of Darkness*. Achebe called Joseph Conrad "a thoroughgoing racist" for his "preposterous

and perverse arrogance” with which he reduced Africa as a foil to Europe in his work (119). He went on to ask persuasively “whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art”, and of course his emphatic answer was “No” (120). Admittedly, by granting attention to the literary products of the colonized, the postcolonial writers brought in a radical shift in the paradigms of literature in the recent decades. As Linda Hutcheon observes “...postcolonial criticism has positioned itself as a broad anti-imperialist emancipatory project and has thereby added a more overtly politicized dimension to related work in the field of Commonwealth studies...as well as in various national-language literary disciplines.” (qtd. in Sharma 68) However, it can be seen that, the postcolonial writers were addressing different area of concerns and were deeply rooted in their respective national identities and culture. Yet, the questions that are raised by them certainly go beyond their locales and contribute to the counter hegemonic discourses around the world.

However, postcolonialism has been criticized, in addition to the reductive tendency inherent in its periodizing labels, for the disproportionate accentuation given to the area of culture, sidelining other major concerns like class and politics. Among the Leftist thinkers, Eagleton and Aijaz Ahmed have consistently intervened the postcolonial field as its worthy critics. By giving disproportionate emphasize on culture, as Eagleton and Ahmed argue, the postcolonial thinkers overlooked other realities including class and

gender. Among other things, Ahmed alleges postcolonial theorists for privileging cultural nationalism as the “determinate political energy” under, what he called, the “theoretical signature of post-structuralism” (250). He accused them of downplaying the most pressing political questions encountered by the underprivileged people in the contemporary world.

Postcolonial engagements, notwithstanding these disparagements, carry with it a large scale historical phenomenon and are unignorable because of the crucial questions they raise in the context of increasing violence against the subalterns around the world. The advent of postcolonial theories in 1970's attuned similar stream of thoughts in many part of the world. As a cultural venture these writings forced many writers around the world to redefine their aesthetics. Postcolonial criticism also scrutinizes the literary output of the marginalized people in the contexts of their encounter with hegemonic forces, especially in Africa, Asia and Caribbean islands. Postcolonial writers, as Michael Parker and Roger Starkey observe, “have been acutely conscious of the formative, political and elusive power of language, and how, as a consequence, their work has engaged their readers in complex cultural narratives, sharpening awareness of the inextricable relationship between language and politics.” (1) This deconstructive and subversive use of language involves an attempt to “fix and enclose the history of empire” as well as to “unfold and address the experience of the colonized.” (1) This point is continually reiterated by the Native writers. The Canadian First Nation writer Janice Acoose, for example, observes that “...we must exercise our

sovereign rights to self-define critical methods and language, take control of our own stories, and resurrect our respective cultural epistemologies and pedagogies.”(39)Admittedly, postcolonial studies have set the vocabularies and outlines for many altercations in cultural studies as well as literary criticism. It is the most influential critical venture in recent decades, which has propelled different movements of the silenced communities around the world including Subaltern Studies, Minority Discourse, Multiculturalism etc. Though different in shape and concerns, all these fields are integrated in a wider context and imply certain transformative politics. Among them, Subaltern Studies merits a serious consideration since it forms one of the critical vantage points of the present study.

Postcolonialism prompted related, if not identical, line of inquiries in sites involving gender, diasporas and migrants, to which it is connected in an intricate and hazy way. The constituencies that were formerly overlooked such as gender, diasporas and migrants have been subsequently accommodated into the field. The experience of women in the former colonies came to be articulated in the writings of Spivak and Vrinda Nabar in India, Dorothy Driver in South Africa, and Jane Miller in United Kingdom etc. They placed gender along with ethnicity and class. Spivak included women in the theorization of colonial discourse, filling the hiatus left by her colleagues. While speaking about the possibility of the subaltern being heard she includes gender to the fabric of subalternity, thereby expanding the space of subaltern discourse. Postcolonial theory with its accentuation on the submerged

cultures led to an unparalleled focus on the marginalized and dispossessed experiences of the Aboriginals and Negroes in the former colonies of Britain and France. The outcries of the aboriginals and natives in the former colonies for right and recognition have complimented similar initiatives around the world by many other oppressed and exploited groups, who do not necessarily share the postcolonial experiences. So, it is obvious that the postcolonial enquiries stirred a lot of fresh areas of engagements in the arena of literature - - by redefining its canons, by highlighting the culture of the margins, by critiquing the biased representations of subalternity and by recuperating the submerged identities.

#### **Subaltern Discourse: Recuperating the Silenced**

Subaltern Discourse in India, developed in the seventies of the last century, was inspired, in part, by the postcolonial theories and burgeoned more in history than in literature. Although it manifests itself in a variety of forms and endeavours in historical and cultural contexts, the foremost characteristic of subaltern writing is arguably its focus on the historical representation of subaltern. As a cultural and historical intervening theory, it demonstrates a renewed interest in the placement of subaltern subjects in history and literature. The term "subaltern", as it is applied in the field of literature, is designed to expound a site of inquiry, hitherto unexplored, and to embody in literary form, an insider perspective of the subaltern life. The primary premise of argument of this field is that various discourses in the country including literature and history are pervasively elite, that is, the

realities they claim to represent are distorted and configured in such a way as to peripherize and exclude the subaltern. History and literature are largely elite-centered and manipulated in a manner to subordinate the downtrodden in all spheres of life -- social, political, economic, legal, educational and cultural so on. Besides repudiating the elite representations, the project aims to recuperate the submerged identities and events in history and literature. Its project involves, as Guha states, a "rejection of academic elitism" and an acknowledgement of the subaltern as "the maker of his own history and the architect of his own destiny." (Preface *Subaltern Studies II* vii) Subaltern discourse as an intervening enterprise has triggered an innovative interest in the literature, both oral and written, of the marginalized. "Subaltern" has been the center of most significant cultural and critical debates since 1970's, especially after the instigation of Subaltern Studies group, a collective of radical historians in South East Asia. In a broader sense, Subaltern discourse is an interdisciplinary field that aims to recuperate the silenced and marginalized subaltern voices and identities by debunking the myths of dominance in different discourses. It significantly, concerns itself with the upliftment of the underprivileged communities who lie at the bottom strata of social hierarchy.

### **Definition of Subalternity**

The discussion in the field has also prompted immense disagreement about how the term "subaltern" has to be defined. There have been diverse viewpoints regarding what constitutes subalternity. Should the term

designate only the tribals and lower castes or should it encapsulate all those people suffering from similar experiences of social ostracism? Does the analogous mold of experience make all the exploited people, women for instance, “subaltern”? These are vexing questions that have prompted immense discussion in the disciplinary fields in recent decades. I think, it is important to elucidate this before embarking on the crucial arguments of this study. Let me commence by explaining “subaltern”, the punch term to be dealt in the present study. Since a single adequate definition is absent for “subaltern”, it is useful to examine various designations accorded to it by different thinkers. Admittedly, each designation carries its own nuances, all corresponding subjectivity and subordination.

A subaltern, according to the dictionary, is a person holding a subordinate position, originally a junior officer in army. However, the term “subaltern” is seen to have undergone semantic metamorphosis since its origin. Earlier, in the middle English period, it simply denoted the peasants, subordinated or otherwise. But by 1700, “subaltern” shifted its meaning and came to designate the military officer of inferior rank. It was Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci who first used the term subaltern in connection with social marginalization, thereby suggesting its implications of class struggle. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci used the term to designate the unorganized masses that must be politicized. Expounding the nature of subalternity he observes: “[T]he subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a “State”: their history, therefore, is

intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States." (53) The dialectical relation which a subaltern maintains with power has been effectively conceptualized by Gramsci. Subalterns, according to him, are subordinated to power but never fully consent to its rules. Subaltern historians are intellectually indebted to Gramsci for the conceptualization of subalternity.

Later, the term "subaltern" accessed the critical mainstream with the publishing of Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak actually made the word high-flying in the current critical field, by explicating the different dimensions of the term "subaltern", by relating it with a variety of subject positions – social, gender, political and economical – thereby theorizing the locales of domination and subordination in a wider context. In the 1980's, the Subaltern Studies group appropriated the term, for debunking elite versions of mainstream historiography and for highlighting the "history from below". With the Subaltern Studies group, the term "subaltern" achieved fresh nuances and significance.

In India, the term "subaltern", which initially designated tribals and Dalits, was expanded in later decades to encompass women and other weaker section in the society. Today, it is used collectively to denote people who are marginalized and exploited by the dominant castes/classes. Ashok Sen defines subaltern to be "the entire people that is subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office, or in any other way." (203) According to him, "subaltern" in an umbrella term which envelops all types of

subjectivities – class, caste, race and gender. Arguably, the people who are designated as subaltern have certain shared experience in connection with the conditions of their subjectivities. Today, the term “subaltern” has become an all encompassing classification which, besides building a linkage among the different subjugated communities, homogenizes the otherwise heterogeneous groups of oppressed people.

Viewed from this perspective, it can be seen that, subalternity is a social residuum, necessarily misrepresented in that the subaltern does not access the social structures of representation. Subaltern is either non-existent or forcibly accommodated in the peripheries by the dominant classes/castes. It is a condition of relative inferiority within a social order, structured according to the rules of hegemony which perpetually reinforces the condition of marginality. All those groups that, for whatever reason, remain outside representation are, then, subaltern. Women, for instance, are subalterns according to this conceptualization in so far as they comply with the ideology of femininity which implants them in a position of relative social subordination. Subalternity is the central locale around which the literary representations in the selected texts are perused in the present thesis.

### **Subaltern Studies as History from Below**

Subaltern Studies, as an outburst of marginal academics, was initiated by a small group of historians in South East Asia. It started as a historic project propounded by some academicians and historians including Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakrovorthy Spivak, Gyan Prakash and Partha Chatterjee so

on in the end of 1970's. As an academic venture, Subaltern Studies propelled a revolutionary re-alignment across disciplines including history, sociology, literary criticism, cultural studies and social anthropology. Many of its precepts are summarized in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* edited by Ranajit Guha. Explicating the tenets of the project Guha states that "[W]e are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography... for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny. This critique lies at the very heart of our project." (qtd. in Chakrabarty 15) He argued that the subalterns were never the docile victims of the hegemonic forces, but had always resisted the dominant system that sought to victimize them. There are numerous examples in history to illustrate the counteractive potentials of subaltern people. Guha draws on many exemplary materials – from colonial archives to the oral materials – to illustrate the signs of self-assertion and resistance from the part of subaltern people throughout history. Subaltern Studies, he claims, would offer "a new orientation within which many different styles, interests and discursive modes may find it possible to unite in their rejection of academic elitism." (qtd. in Chakrabarty 141) The wide range of writings inside as well as outside the project has led to a new field of enquiry whose proponents came to be designated as "Subalternists". Taken together, the essays published in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* provide diverse interpretations of subalternity made in different contexts. Subaltern Studies Collective attempted to build up a critique of, and an alternative to, the

standard nationalist history of modern India. They made daring inquiries into the possibilities of writing history from “periphery”, thereby demonstrating the ideological black holes of nationalistic history. One of the crucial contentions of Subaltern Studies is that all the earlier forms of historiography have excluded the initiatives at the grassroots level. The reluctance of the grand narrative framework of the nationalist history became the chief target of subaltern historians. Ashok Sen observes:

The innate ambiguity of the transition process prevented the resistance of the common people from acquiring the scale of articulation and coherence that could bring them to the fore of an evolving identity on national scale. Among the causes responsible for fragmenting subaltern insurgency must be included the failure of elite leadership to identify itself with the mind and energy of the grassroots revolts. It is in this context that we must understand the meaning of the autonomous domain of subaltern movements and their consciousness. Their radicalism, both in form and content goes to the root of things, which remained beyond the comprehension of elite politics (207).

The Nationalist Movement in the country, which itself had been dominated by elitism, did not exhibit the political will required to bring transformation at the ground level. Besides this, a deep probe into the recent history unmistakably reveals that some elite segments in the Nationalist

Movement even attempted to undercut the counterthrusts of the downtrodden under the fear of subaltern radicalism. The mainstream historiography, which is largely elite, expediently concealed the local uprisings and struggles of the subalterns. Though there were many accountable initiatives by the tribals and lower castes in the Independence struggle of the country, they were not chartered in the national history. For example, the histories of the subaltern resistance like the rebellions of Kol in 1789, 1811, 1820, 1832, Birsa Munda rebellion in 1899, the Santal *Hul* of 1885, the Sardar movement in 1895 and Eka movement, to name a few, were either concealed or marginalized by the standard historic narrative of the country. These uprisings, though dynamic in volume and range, remain largely unacknowledged and unregistered in Indian history. Or as Spivak aptly observes "...if the story of the rise of nationalist resistance to imperialism is to be disclosed coherently, it is the role of the indigenous subaltern that must be strategically excluded." (A Literary Representation... 97) This non-recognition of the subalterns in the history is highly unjustifiable since they were the most relentless victims of colonialism in India. British colonialism, besides having impoverished them economically, had uprooted them from their cultures, resulting the denigration of their geo-cultural spheres. It is only a few decades back the historians of India recovered a substantial range of local resistance made by the subaltern peoples to the hegemonic forces that sought to oppress them. Consequently, a large number of subaltern counteractions, though fragmented and local in range, came to be excavated by the champions of

"history from below" recently. An enquiry of this sort also brings forth the fissures in Indian historiography, which account for the continuing subject position of the subalterns in the country. The act of championing the "history from below" has resulted in many cases the discoveries of subaltern pasts and constructions of historicity, which dismantle the inadequacy of the grand narratives embodied in the practice of the discipline of history. The subaltern historians challenged the exclusions and omissions in the mainstream narratives of the nation. They strongly argued that a nation cannot have just one big narrative of history. Colonialism and nationalism had become a crucial subject of contestation in the field. A close perusal of the texts, which I have selected in the present study, reveals the ineffectuality of Indian Nationalism in representing the interests of the subalterns.

The responses to the Subaltern Studies in the 1980's and 90's were astonishing. The project triggered a wide range of fresh enquiries across disciplines and, as Ludden aptly puts it, became "a weapon, magnet, target, lightning rod, hitching post, icon, gold mine, and fortress for scholars ranging across disciplines from history to political science, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, and cultural studies." (2) Subalternity became a pivotal subject of argument and has sparked many debates related to the "history from below". The project, besides recovering the crushed cultural identity of the marginalized groups, aims to highlight the structures mediating their resistance. The materials of myth, folklore, ritual, oral tradition have come to the center in the evaluation of history and culture. Among other things, the

subaltern historians sought to debunk the knowledge and representations constructed by colonialism. Its project also involves the conceptualization of the field of resistance and its possibilities in a confrontational social milieu. Not surprisingly, the movement gained momentum in the recent decades and generated tremendous amount of cultural enquirers and critical debates.

Like Postcolonialism, Subaltern discourse is a vast terrain on which different theoretical approaches meet and share ideas. This theoretical rendezvous has resulted in fresh vantage points to engage critical examination of the functioning of hegemony in different societies. By deploying postcolonial tools in analyzing Indian history, the subaltern historians superceded all previous modes of history. It laid, as Dipesh Chakraborty claimed, "the beginnings of a new way of theorizing the intellectual agenda for postcolonial histories." (15) In addition to history, it touched a variety of disciplines including cultural studies, anthropology, literature, legal studies, political science, economics so on. Theorists of diverse disciplinary background have taken interest in the project. These enquiries for alternative politics were made, arguably, under the theoretical signature of postcolonialism. Apart from being a mere area of academic specialization, Subaltern Studies designates certain radical social and political movement.

Subaltern discourse in India is characterized by, like many other cultural movements, diverse critical vantage points and procedures. Among the contributors, the influence of deconstruction and postmodernism in Subaltern Studies may be traced in Gyanendra Pandey, Partha Chatterjee, and

Shahid Amin. Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986) effectively applied Saidian and postcolonial perspectives to the study of non-Western nationalisms, using India as an example. Pandey's *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (1991) and Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1994) and Amin's *Events, Memory, Metaphor* (1995) dispute even the very possibility of constructing a totalizing national history in narrating the politics of subaltern people. They scrutinized Indian sociology, history and politics in connection with their stance on the issues of domination and subordination. By doing this, in effect, they brought, as Spivak claimed, "the hegemonic historiography to crisis." (Subaltern Studies...332)

In postcolonial theoretical premise literature, history and culture are brought together in a single contextual framework. This disciplinary merging, consequent upon the postcolonial studies, is illustrated more fervidly by the Subaltern Studies in its estimation of the South East Asian colonial history. Though the vantage points from which the subalternists analyzed the traits of marginality vary, they are united with the single mission of recovering the distinctive experiences, cultures, identities and traditions of subalterns which have been concealed by the dominant discourse. Responding to the theoretical diversity of the Subaltern Studies, Dipesh Chakrabarty points out that its members "are perhaps far more unified in their rejection of certain academic positions and tendencies than in their acceptance of alternatives." (qtd. in Ludden 18) Historians and academicians involved in the

Subaltern Studies project have drawn many materials from different discourses including social anthropology, sociology, cultural studies etc. Like post-colonialism, different conceptual strands collide and intersect in the field of Subaltern studies. This disciplinary amalgamation, characteristic of contemporary critical practices, aims to connect the assorted strands of enquiries in the de-hegemonization of social discourses. The non-restrictive approach of subaltern aesthetics encompasses a variety of venues which simultaneously refer to literature, history, culture, language, politics, where similar subversive logic is at work. These different strands actually imply the incredible range and complexity of the site of subaltern discourse whose expansive space engages issues not only about history and sociology but also about literature, ethnicity, gender, race, class, culture etc. The subalternists virtually validated the minor and marginal, often emphasizing their revolutionary potentials, their will to resist oppression and the desire to recoup their culture and language dispossessed of them. The subalterns' long and historical struggles for recognition apart from the mainstream Nationalist movement strike a linkage with struggles in the former colonies of Britain and France. Broadly speaking, Subaltern Studies prescribed the social historiography of the colonial south Asia in general. It is developed as a project of reinstating suppressed histories -- of the tribal, untouchable, women and all such subordinated groups. As Ludden observes: "[S]ubalternity thus became a novelty, invented *de novo* by Subaltern Studies, which gave old terms new meanings and marked a new beginning for historical studies.

Dominations, subordination, hegemony, resistance, revolt, and other old concepts could now be subalternised." (16) Subaltern discourse has indeed brought in a heightened interest in the problems of the underdogs in the country.

Spivak pointed out the absence of gender issues and the lack of engagement with feminist scholarship in Subaltern Studies. Articulating her discontent over the exclusion of the issues of gender within the locale of subaltern discourse Spivak alleges that "the group is scrupulous in its consideration towards women", who she argues, has to be viewed as a (sexed) subject. (Subaltern Studies...356) She expanded the field by drawing on the nuances of subaltern and conceptualizing the subject positions in terms of gender and ethnicity. Her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1994), forcefully addresses these issues, by rising deconstructive oppositions to any one-dimensional programme of enabling the subaltern speak. Later, the issues of gender and ethnicity that were overlooked in the initial phase of the project have been integrated into it. Spivak instigated the literary representation of subaltern, while the social history was incorporated by Sumit Sarkar. The later editions of *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South East Asian History and Society* included many articles of Indian feminists like Susie Tharu, Kamala Visweswaran and Tejaswini Niranjana on the topic of gender subalternity. Arguably, the integration of these venues, besides broadening the field, undercut its own binary division of elite and subaltern.

The increasing importance accorded to the silenced cultures and identities of the peripheries by the historians in the global context has attuned similar enquiries in the scenario of literature also. The impact of Subaltern discourse in literature implies the debunking of its prevailing canons, which, they argue, are constructs prescribed by the elitism. The subalternists are anxious to reclaim the subaltern from their subject position, and insist on rescheduling their life as a location of enormous counteracting potentials. The act of writing itself, according to them, is an important location for raising questions of representations and power. They brought in radical re-alignment in the standards of literature not only by introducing new tools for the interpretation of literary works but also by recasting the received interpretation of old texts by revealing new shades of meaning. Thus they problematized the field of literature. In the project, as Ludden claims, "historians and post-colonial critics stand together against colonial modernity to secure a better future for subaltern peoples, learning to hear them, allowing them to speak, talking back to power that marginalize them, documenting their past." (20) Naturally, the subalternists' active engagement with the life of the voiceless people lured the attention of many writers and scholars, who are unrelentingly concerned with the silenced elements of the society. Furthermore, the subalternists advocate the analysis of the historicity of the texts, already written, in order to locate the subversive forces of the age in which they are produced. Its project involves, besides a deep-seated refusal of the received paradigms of aesthetic that are mostly set by the elite standards,

and a repossession of the marginalized and inundated identities in literature.

1970's witnessed a tremendous booming of a cult of pluralism in matters pertaining to history and culture. These inquiries have resurrected many submerged cultures and led to the formation of numerous movements of resistance globally. Postmodernism, for instance, by erasing the assumed boundary between high and low culture and absorbing into its corpus the elements of popular culture, contributed to the movements of the marginalized. Postmodernists like Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Boudrillard cautioned against the guzzling nature of the grand narratives which, they argue, restrict the voices of the margins. The postmodern refutation of grand narratives has some connectivity with the Subaltern Studies as it aims to recuperate the distinct subcultures engulfed in the mainstream narratives of history and literature.

In India, the term "subaltern" designates a wide range of nuances such as the victims of social marginalization and economic exploitation, political manipulation and cultural subjugation etc. In the country, subalterns are not constituted by any single community alone, but a multitude of social groups with varying positions and socio-economic fibers in the social hierarchy. Like class and caste, subaltern is a relational category defined in terms of positional inferiority. The basis of this subordination, a characteristic feature of subalternity, is found in its socio-economic and cultural relation with the elite. The proponents of subaltern enterprise in India bump into a unique challenge – an issue which is totally unique and unfamiliar to post-colonial studies –

related to caste and its presupposition of hierarchies in every aspect of life. Once again we are encountered with the fundamental question of caste. The lower caste people are perpetually exposed to diverse forms of oppressions and exploitations, which are, age old and which derive their justification from the *varnashrama dharma* and its by-product caste system. They are socially marginalized and oppressed, economically browbeaten and politically manipulated. Their marginality is consequent upon their inferior condition that they inherit due to their lower position in the caste ladder.

In the Indian context, the condition of subalternity is chiefly constituted by class and caste. It specifically refers to the tribal people and lower castes who belong to the bottom of Indian social hierarchy. Throughout the history they are perpetually subjected to the encroachments at the hands of the dominant classes in various ways. Because, their condition of marginality within Indian society is structured according to the principle of the elite, upper caste ideology which defines and reinforces that relation of inferiority. Caste has to be seen as a basic form of class determinant in India. Explicating how the condition of subalternity in Indian context is primarily constituted by caste Partha Chatterjee observes that "...subaltern consciousness in the specific cultural context of India cannot but contain caste as a central element in its constitution." (Caste and... 169) Hence, I think, it is imperative to examine the problematic of marginality against the background of caste discourse to debunk the myths of power in the Indian society.

Indian social history is characterized by a matrix of subject positions,

rising out of the structures of class, caste, gender and religion so on, thereby intersecting with multiple discourses. Subaltern Studies, nonetheless, mediates the anti-upper caste movements in India and the postcolonial resistance to hegemony. It can even be viewed as a thematic carry over of postcolonialism and Dalit discourse. In the present thesis, I will use the term "subaltern" as a frame of reference to denote primarily the tribals and lower castes in India, though some special references have been made to the gender discrimination which occurs parallel to the class and caste marginalization. However, I believe, the designation "subaltern" is more articulating and strikes a connectivity with other people who experience similar victimizations, both inside and outside the country.

Notwithstanding the ideological affiliation postcolonialism carries with the subaltern discourse, its parameters are inadequate to understand and analyze the microphysics of power and dominance in Indian society. Since "post-colonial" primarily designates the persistence of colonial agencies and residues in post-independence cultures, we need to go beyond its premise to understand or analyze the issues related to the subalterns in India. Because, the social ostracism and exploitation of the subaltern people in the country pre-date the inception of colonial rule in Indian subcontinent. The marginalization of the subalterns in India dates back to the history of caste. Marginality and subalternity generated by caste system is the primary field upon which the questions of dominance and subordination are examined in the present study. Whatever critical usage "hegemony" and "subalternity"

may have for today's critics, their ideological implications in the Indian context cannot be fully comprehended without taking into account the hierarchies of caste and its religious mediation, especially the sanctions accorded to it by the scriptures. Since caste is the chief determinant of subalternity in India, it is necessary to examine its ideological premise and application against the background of the recent critical endeavors, especially the postcolonial studies and Subaltern discourse. I hope, it will help to understand caste in a wider context and also would help its re-articulation. In view of the tangled relationship between contemporary cultural studies and power, a reassessment of the relationship between caste and hegemony is necessary.

### **Dalit Discourse**

Dalit literature is a part of a broader social and political movement that seeks to rectify the caste-based discriminations and inequalities. As a literary movement, it is closely interrelated with social and political movements for the freedom and equality of the lower castes and untouchables. It has stemmed from the philosophies of Jyotiba Phule and B.R Ambedkar. Hailing from different regions of India, Dalit writers share distinctive social, cultural and economic realities, which determine the thematic pre-occupation of their works. In many ways Dalit literature is drastically different from the mainstream literary tradition. Dalit writers forged a new literary sensibility of their own by creating a unique mode of narrative, by opting to speak out their own wretched experience and by refuting the debilitating cultural roles

assigned to them by the dominant castes. Its project involves, besides the social upliftment of the Dalits, the development of a distinct mode of narrative to articulate the unique Dalit experiences and a re-discovery of the lost and neglected literary works written by Dalit writers. The new mindset spearheaded by Dalit movement bore substantial result in the literary scenario of the country, especially in regional literature. Dalit writers emphasize the interconnectedness of literary and political activity. Dalit literature, as Arjun Dangle points out in his introduction to *A Corpse in the Well* (1992), "is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality." (vii) It has its central project a rigorous questioning of the notion of social hierarchy supported by caste. As a cultural movement its presence is felt more in the northern part of the country where it has fused with many political interventions. Its impact is more palpable in Marathi, Tamil, Gujarathi and Kannada literature.

It was the philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar that laid the groundwork for Dalit movement in India. Ambedkar's theory of caste, one of the most influential paradigms in Indian sociology, provides a useful point of entry into the debate surrounding caste and modernity in India. He is considered to be the indomitable ideologue of the Dalit movement in the country. His *Bahishkrit Bharat* (The Excommunicated India), which became instrumental in fighting the social bigotry and maltreatment to which the Dalits are subjected, was a mouthpiece of Dalit movement in India. Defining dalitness in *Bahishkrit*

*Bharat* Ambedkar says: "Dalitness is a kind of life condition which characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of the lower castes by the social, economic and political domination of the upper caste Brahminical order." (qtd. in Basu xxvi) In *Gulmagiri-Brahmani* (1873), Jyotiba Phule traces the origin and development of Brahmin domination in India. His dedication of the book to the Negroes in the United States was a token of his admiration for their resistance against racial arrogance. He wrote numerous essays on the social, political, economical and cultural subordination of the Dalits within a system dominated by upper castes. He was a unique social revolutionary who revolted against the caste system, advocated the rights of women, the downtrodden peasants and the untouchables.

The chief advocates of the movement like Saran Kumar Limbale and Arjun Dangle were deeply concerned with the issues of cultural subjugation and acculturation, a theme which is emphatically articulated in the stories of Mahasweta Devi. Limbale cross-examines the derogatory stereotypes of subaltern representation in mainstream literature in his significant work *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* (2004). He observes that "Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief." (30) He contests the Dalit stereotypes and offers alternative and subversive points of view with respect to the subaltern representation in Indian literature. Autobiography has been a favourite genre among the Dalit writers.

Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003), Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (1978), Laxman Mane's *Upara* (1980) and Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya* (1987), to name a few, provide a transparent account of their experience of victimization and wretchedness. Limbale's *The Outcaste*, for example, candidly articulates his experience of untouchability and wretchedness being a lower caste. Limbale expresses the Dalit self with all its thrusts and throbs without fear or shame. In this sense, Dalit discourse offers a cultural intervention in opposition to the values of mainstream elite culture and conditions as they are conceived within the Vedic context and legitimized the interests of the privileged upper castes.

#### **Relevance of Theoretical framework**

Postcolonial theory and Subaltern discourse, with their stress on the suppressed and submerged cultures, led to an unprecedented focus on the experiences of the marginalized and dispossessed. Both oppose all reductive totalizations that seek to homogenize all local and distinct cultures into a monolithic entity. The social and cultural inquiries related to the issues of representation and articulation of the cultures of margins have evoked enormous amount of critical responses during the last few decades. One of the principal aims of the present study is to probe into the possibility of bringing these marginalized voices into a common forum which would enable them collectively to evolve fresh subterfuges towards their empowerment.

Recently, there have been increasing concerns over the issues of marginalized communities in the country. The people at the peripheries have begun to storm into the center and obtain their space, with or without the

consent of the privileged. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* brings home the far-reaching implications behind the paradigm shift effected in the recent decades. Though Fanon's concerns, here, are with the Negroes in France, it is equally true of the tribals and untouchables in India. It can be seen that, subalterns in India share a common heritage of colonialism and enslavement with the aboriginals in Africa and Canada. Hence, postcolonial writings certainly enjoy an intervening significance in understanding and changing the conditions of the subalterns in the country. What the postmodernists and subalternists say defining the meaning of the "subaltern", "colonized", "Orient" and "Other" is crucial to the understanding of the marginalities and subjectivities in Indian context. Critical theories emerged in these sites have generated a heightened interest in the affairs of hitherto voiceless and dispossessed sections of Indian society. They not only imply a universal pattern of oppression but also suggest a subversive logic which is at work in all these contexts. Furthermore, they evoke a multitude of questions in connection with the different ways through which the subalterns are represented within the elite discourses. It is such attempts to highlight the potentials of the counter initiatives of the less privileged segments of humanity which characterize the texts I propose to study in the present thesis.

Post colonialism definitely enters the site of this study for another reason too. Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, which are selected in the present study, offer a powerful critique of the colonial rule in India. These stories examine how the British imperialism in

India attempted a radical erasure of the cultural identity of the tribal communities. The themes of social marginalization and cultural subjugation fostered by the process of colonialism have been brought together with greatest political and ideological effect in Mahasweta Devi's stories. So, I think, these fields -- Postcolonialism, Subaltern discourse and Dalit discourse -- constitute an ideal point of departure for the de-hegemonizing task involved in the present study. The works selected in the study are explicatory of the nature of the subversive potentials inherent in the subaltern's counter initiatives.

### **Methodology of the Dissertation**

The present study proceeds from the hypothesis that the representation of subalterns in Indian literature is inadequate and corresponds to their exclusion in other social discourses including history, sociology and cultural studies. In this thesis, I have tried to examine the fictional writings of Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi as a compelling site of subaltern empowerment in the contemporary social premise. The tribulations of the subordinated people, who are unjustifiably excluded from history and literature, have been the focal point of her writings -- both fictional and non-fictional. The primary objective of the present study involves the projection and exposition of the liberating potentials innate in these works which, I hope, would calibrate the empowerment of the subaltern people in the country.

Mahasweta is a literary interventionist who daringly treads off from the beaten track of mainstream literary tradition. She has to her credit a

literary corpus which offers many formerly unarticulated grounds of social experiences, particularly that of the socially disadvantaged and oppressed. A significant portion of her oeuvre deals with the lives of subaltern communities, their abiding experience of exploitation and continuing struggles. Mahasweta has been the most articulate among the contemporary Indian writers who boldly takes up the issues of the subaltern communities with all their socio-economic and cultural implications. She is deeply concerned with the excluded constituencies of Indian society that have been subordinated by the dominant forces. One of the foremost objectives of this thesis is to expose the falsities of elite narratives in literature on matters of the process of domination and subordination in Indian society. This is done with the projection of an alternative subaltern narrative – most effectively exemplified in the writings of Mahasweta Devi. Her stories provide ample space for the discussion of subalternity and various structures mediating their resistance. The present study focuses on the representation of subalternity in her selected novels, though they demonstrate multidimensional features where the interplay of different varieties of subjectivities and otherness are many.

The thesis consists of seven chapters. Of the seven chapters, the first is the introduction and the last forms a brief summing up of the study. The first chapter “Introduction” explains the theoretical frame work of the study. The following four chapters offer a detailed analysis of the selected fictions of Mahasweta in terms of their subaltern representation and narrative strategies.

The sixth chapter makes a comparative analysis of Mahasweta's works with that of the Tamil Dalit writer Sivakami and the Kannada writer U.R. Ananthamurthy. The seventh chapter concludes the study.

The first chapter "Introduction" attempts to explicate the theoretical frame work of the study by illuminating the critical fields and vantage points used in it. This section tries to justify the theoretical framework -- constituted by Postcolonialism, Subaltern discourse and Dalit discourse - of the thesis. It also aims to expose the objectives as well as the methodology of the study. Whereas, the second chapter entitled "Subalternity as Ethnicity: A Study of *Aranyer Adhikar*" offers a detailed analysis of the impact of colonialism upon the lives of the tribal communities in India. It attempts to explain how the process of colonialism in India attempted a radical erasure of the indigenous cultures of the tribal communities in the country. The third chapter entitled "The Pedagogy of the Marginalized: A Study of *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*" elucidates that the exploitation and marginalization of the subaltern communities continues unabated even after the attainment of Independence. It exhibits the increasing process of exploitation and social ostracism to which the tribals and Dalits are subjected in postcolonial period. The fourth chapter entitled "The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh: Recuperating the Silenced" attempts to demonstrate how the Dalit people in the country, particularly in the rural areas, are perpetually exposed to different kinds of exploitations at the hands of the dominant classes/castes. It explicates the ways feudalism, in tandem with caste system, incapacitates the subaltern people in rural India. It also

illustrates that the subjective formation in Indian society is inextricably entangled with the ethos of caste. Chapter five, "*Rudali* : Subversion through Resistance", discusses how the counter spaces present in the unreceptive system help the subalterns in forging alternative politics to resist and disrupt the status quo. *Rudali*, acclaimed as one of the best eloquent works of Mahasweta, provides ample space for the examination of the operation of power in Indian society and the counter strategies with which the subalterns seek to disrupt it. Chapter six entitled "Enabling Articulation: Dialectics of Subaltern Representation" aims to explicate the problematics of subaltern representation in Indian literature with focus on the works of selected writers. It attempts a comparative analysis of the subaltern representation of Mahasweta with that of Sivakami and Ananthamurthy. This juxtaposition inevitably underscores the assorted nature of subaltern representation in Indian literature. Chapter seven "Conclusion" aims to establish how Mahasweta differs from other writers in the treatment of subaltern life in her stories. This section of the thesis draws pointed attention to several instances of the insider vision provided in her stories. These seven chapters including an introduction and conclusion constitute the text of the thesis. A glossary note has been added at the end of the second chapter to explain the regional terms used in it.

The present study focuses on the issues of social marginalization as they are handled in the selected novels of Mahasweta and attempts to place this focus within several intersecting critical spaces in which the ideologies of

domination are dismantled. The novels selected for close perusal -- *Aranyer Adhikar*, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, *Rudali* and *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* -- unmistakably testify how subalternity forms an operational element in all her writings. I hope, a critical estimate of these four novels will be supportive to situate the essential Mahasweta in the field of subaltern discourse. They are characterized by a consistent demonstration of subalterns' resistance to the system which seeks to ostracize them. In the present study Mahasweta's selected works are analyzed with reference to the works of other writers with similar thematic engagement. To estimate the literary output of Mahasweta critically, she is placed along with her contemporaries. A comparative analysis will be more rewarding in this context. For this purpose, I have chosen the works Sivakami and U.R. Ananthamurthy. This study attempts to explore the ideological implications of their thematic choices and to foreground some of the limitation and contradiction of subaltern writing in the country. Such a comparative analysis permits a vast space where the issues of subaltern representation in contemporary literature can be probed. In short, the thesis will attempt to evaluate the authenticity of Mahasweta's social documentation by placing her in the context of the continuing tradition of Indian literature, particularly in the context of the surfacing of various counter discourses in the arena of Indian literature.

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## Chapter II

### **Subalternity as Ethnicity: A Study of *Aranyer Adhikar***

For many years, the tribals of Chottanagpur, as of the other parts of India, have been incessantly exploited and subjugated. Tribals are considered the primitive segment of Indian society. They live in forests and hills without having more than a casual contact with the so-called civilized world. The tribal unrest and uprisings in colonial and postcolonial India were the swelling consequence of many contributory factors. In the past, there were no attempt to penetrate their regions and to impose alien values and beliefs on them. But with the expansion of British colonialism in India, the pattern of tribal life underwent a drastic change. This expansion was compounded with a proliferating intrusion of the outsiders into the tribal belts. The colonial administration came in conflict with the tribal societies in India from the beginning of the nineteenth century itself when they annexed tribal land and introduced British administration in Tribal areas. They tried to consolidate their position in the country by bringing all the regions, including the tribal areas, into a single administrative unit. The disintegration of rural order due to the imposition of the zamindari system of land tenure on tribal areas has evoked strong response among the tribals of Chottanagpur. The Chottanagpur area is a hilly region known for its abundant forest and mineral wealth. A lion's part of India's coal, iron, steel, mica and copper is taken from this area. But the natural riches of their homelands have been ransacked without any benefits trickling down to its inhabitants. The natural wealth of

the area stridently contrasts with the extreme vulnerable condition of the tribal communities who inhabit Chottanagpur.

The continuing exploitation of the natural resources of the tribal homelands has resulted in the extensive disintegration of the indigenous economy of the tribals. In addition, the increasing process of modernization and industrialization intensified their pathetic condition further. The sudden bourgeoning of industries in the Chottanagpur region has transformed the tribal-peasant economy drastically, which had already started to crumble with the incursion of non-tribal traders and money lenders to the region. While the disadvantage of the tribals at the organizational and social level hindered them from moving forward, politically and socially, the influx of non-tribal people and the conditions of economic stagnation and semi-feudal exploitation constantly coerced them to attack the system which was responsible for these conditions. All these forms of incapacitating conditions have given rise to a series of organized struggles in last two centuries, especially in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Time and again the tribals of India have protested against the exploitative system. The rebellions of Santals, Kols and Mundas in the nineteenth century, the Tana Bhagat and the Jharkhand movements in the twentieth century, to name a few, were all attempts by the tribal people to free themselves from the shackles of exploitation and to regain their customary rights over their homelands. Birsa Munda's *Ulgulan*, which marks the culmination of the repeated rebellions took place in colonial period, has been considered the most important among

them -- for both its volume and degree. This revolt led by Birsa Munda forms the focal point of Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar*. The continuing influx of the outsiders to the geo-cultural spheres of the tribals has led to the destabilization of their indigenous social order, affecting their very survival -- both in physical and cultural terms. This process had far reaching impact on the tribal society and their discontent surfaced in the form of numerous uprisings and movements. All these issues figure in Mahasweta's *Aranyer Adhikar*. Tracing the multifarious reasons that led to the counter insurgencies from the part of the tribals during the colonial period Kaushik Ghosh observes:

There were repeated and numerous rebellion till the very end of the nineteenth century against the displacement and transformations of such large numbers of people. But the colonial army, despite the occasional defeat, crushed these revolts and killed, deported and imprisoned large numbers of the rebels. Thus, the Ho, Munda, Oraon, Bhumij, Santal and Paharia peoples -- the raiding hillmen who so terrified others and remained autonomous of the people of the plains -- increasingly lost the autonomy that they had maintained at the time of their initial colonization (13).

Birsa's *Ulgulan*, which actually charts the culmination of a series of tribal uprising that started from the latter half of the nineteenth century up to its closing years, was agrarian in its basis, violent in nature and political in

content. Significantly enough, as an immediate consequence of his rebellion, the Chottanagpur Tenancy Act was passed in 1908. The colonial regime was accustomed to revise some of its anti-tribal laws. Furthermore, it has inspired many other tribal movements of resistance like the Jharkhand Movement.

The rebellion of Birsa Munda in 1899 gained much prominence in the field of subaltern politics in colonial India. Until a few decades back, the social initiatives and resistance of the tribals and peasants in colonial India were either concealed or marginalized by the standardized historic narrative of the country. Only a couple of decades back the historians of India recouped a substantial range of local resistance of the subaltern peoples to the hegemonic forces that sought to silence them. Consequently, a large number of subaltern counteractions, though fragmented and local in range, came to be excavated by the champions of different schools of alternative historiographies like Subaltern Studies and History from Below so on. The histories of Birsa rebellion in 1899, the Santal *Hul* of 1885 and the Sardar *Mulkuyi* in 1895, to name a few, have unveiled fresh perspective into the alternative strand of Indian politics.

Mahasweta's *Aranyer Adhikar* provides an authentic document about the socio-cultural problems experienced by the Mundas of Chottanagpur during the colonial period. *Aranyer Adhikar*, her first novel to deal with the issue of the tribals, ostensibly deals with the experiences of manipulation to which the tribal community had fallen. Placing Birsa Munda, a historical figure, at the centre of the text, Mahasweta has traced his life history from the

early childhood to his death in Ranchi prison due to police atrocities, at the beginning of twentieth century. The text, besides recounting the Munda uprising of 1899, provides an insider vision about the life and culture of the Mundas with all its specifications. Besides the meticulous research which was conducted before writing the text, her long experience among the tribal people as an activist has helped her to give maximum authenticity to the narration of Birsa Munda's life and rebellion. At the same time, it can be seen that, she has taken some freedom with the historical facts, without fictionizing and reducing its authenticity, with the plot construction as well as the character formation. She has used folklores, oral history, colonial archives, official documents and records of legal proceeding so on to reconstruct the life of Birsa Munda. Mahasweta has done thorough investigation into the life and struggles of Birsa Munda before she wrote *Aranyer Adhikar*. In the text she provides, based on the historical documents, the surfacing of Birsa as an undisputed leader of the Mundas.

The rising of the Mundas in 1899 under the leadership of Birsa constituted an indictment only of the local colonial administration but of colonialism itself. The story begins with the imprisonment and death of Birsa Munda in Ranchi jail in 1900. Then it goes back to Birsa's past life and the making of him as a leader. At the Ranchi prison, Birsa is shown to be thinking about the dire destitution of his people. His mind, was preoccupied with the thoughts of the survival of his people: "[H]e sees everything in front of his eyes, as if in a picture. In the life of Mundas rice is only a dream. Their food is

another thing -- *ghato*, the gruel made of china grass. It has become a dream for them. Birsa has always fought for rice. His slogan too was not different: why should the Munda keep on living by drinking the gruel made of grass? Why can't they eat rice like others?" (5) Mahasweta addresses the issue of survival at the very outset of the text. It is the question of survival -- both at physical and cultural level -- which forced the Mundas to take the recourse of arms against their oppressors. Significantly enough, the issue of survival provides *Aranyer Adhikar* a thematic connectivity with her other subaltern works like *Rudali* and *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*. After recounting the "clinical murder" of Birsa in Ranchi jail by the colonial administration and the response it created among his people, the text attempts to trace back the experiences and events that ultimately led to Birsa's taking up of the leadership as well as the ground works of the Munda revolt. The death of Birsa, though it signifies the culmination of a series of events connected with *Ulgulan*, doesn't mark the termination of his revolution. Birsa's earlier life was narrated mainly through two agencies. Largely, it is reconstructed through the memories of the Mundas. In addition, it is unveiled through the direct authorial narration.

It is in the forms of the memories of Dhani Munda, the veteran rebel, most of the episodes of Birsa's life have been reconstructed. It is significant that Dhani's narration of Birsa's life starts with the description of their community history. He narrates when and how the influx of the non-tribals into their geo-cultural milieu started and how they responded by resisting

through different rebellions like *Hool* and *Mulkuyi*. He told them how the Mundas came to settle in Chottaganpur and the region was named after their forefathers Chuttiyaharam and Nagu. The tribal history narrated by Dhani reveals that the tribal people were an independent and progressive society before the intrusion and entrenchment of colonialism: “[T]hey were happier then. They used to go to the forest for hunting. They made fields for farming. They had their own god -- Singbhonga.”(26) The narration of oral history which is characteristic of Mahasweta’s subaltern novels is apparent in Dhani’s narration of the Munda history to his fellow prisoners in Ranchi jail. He told them about the independent and happy life in the past and how it came to be disturbed with the incursion of the dikhus, the intruders. Reiteration, a device essential to oral story telling, is deployed by Dhani. By deploying this narrative strategy, Mahasweta has placed the individual experience of Birsa at the intersection of tribal history, thereby seeking to narrate and contextualize the formation of his subjectivity along with the social forces shaping it. This oral narration of tribal history is relevant, because it traces the metamorphosis of the Mundas from an autonomous and independent community to an incarcerated one. Besides, it implicates the counter possibilities of altering the present condition by organized struggles.

Birsa’s earlier life was narrated against the background of the increasing marginalization and oppression to which the tribal people were subjected during the colonial regime. With the influx of money lenders, zamindars, missionaries, traders and government officers, the aged pattern of

tribal life underwent a radical change. The lion's part of the land in Chottanagpur went into the hands of the moneylenders and traders and the Mundas became more and more impoverished in the process. Examining how the expansion of British colonialism has intensified the alienation of the tribal people from their socio-economic and cultural moorings Ghosh observes:

With the introduction of alien land tenures, the colonial state dispossessed many hill villages, nobles, chiefs and headmen: it also encouraged rapid growth in the market for land and an extensive money lending business. Alien traders, landlords and administrators at the forefront of the frontier colonial capitalism increasingly controlled the resources, and managed to get the Chottanagpur peasants into enormous debts. The entire system was backed up by an equally alien legal system and a powerful colonial army (13).

All tribal societies were eagerly looking for a redemption from their degrading condition. Strangled by these antagonistic conditions the Mundas were expecting a "saviour", who would be born among them to liberate them from the fetters of bondage. This deep desire for a leader is illustrated in Dhani's premonition about a Munda bagvan. Dhani was expecting this miracle since long. As Dipesh Chakraborty aptly points out: "(T)he semiotics of domination and subordination were what the subaltern classes sought to destroy every time they rose up in rebellion. This semiotics could not be separated in the Indian case from what in English we inaccurately refer to

either as “the religious” or “the supernatural.” (18) It can be seen that religiosity is inextricably entangled with the rebellion of Birsa, particularly in its manifestation. Dhani and Bharmi, who were the main associates of Birsa in *Ulgulan*, saw his development as a competent and undisputable leader from a perturbed youngman. Dhani had a presentiment that, Birsa, then a little boy, would become the liberator of the Mundas, who were trampled down by many aggressive forces. He thought that Birsa could reclaim their homeland and culture dispossessed of them. It is evident that all the Mundas, though outwardly sneer at his presage, share this common dream.

Mahasweta historicizes Birsa’s rebellion by locating it within the field of subalterns’ struggles which have been continuing since long. Mundas’ battle against the invaders to their culture and property had already begun. When Birsa was born, the sardars had already commenced their movement against the landlordism and colonial laws which prevented them from entering the forest. Yet, the abject condition of the Mundas continued unabated. Their condition, as the tribals elsewhere, was getting more worse during the colonial system. Their utter destitution is exemplified in the incessant flights of Birsa’s father Sugana Munda from one place to another in search of a livelihood. The extreme poverty forced Sugana Munda to leave his ancestral village, where most of the cultivable land had been forcibly taken away by the moneylenders. Sugana roamed from place to place to eke out a living. Ultimately, he embraced Christianity owing to the pressure exerted by the hostile system. The condition of the other Mundas wasn’t better either.

They moved continuously from one place to other in search of any means of subsistence. Their deep sense of predicament and helplessness is well illustrated in the words of Sugana Munda: “[I]t is not only the Vaishnavas, saints, Christians who were *dikhus*. Today there are numerous obstacles like court, office, law, tax, rich, interests, lease, slavery, bonded labour.”(47) These words come out of his agonizing apprehension about the numerous forces working around them making their survival – both at social and cultural level – increasingly difficult. After many years of straying, Sugana finally settled in Chalker, his maternal ancestor’s village.

Birsa had begun his life like any other Munda child of his time, doing odd jobs like leaves collection, grazing the cattle etc. He used to roam through the jungle alone, often playing his flute. Birsa’s odd tastes and flairs were looked upon by Sugana and Karmi with a tint of fear and anxiety. Even as a young boy, Birsa understood how hard his family strived for its livelihood, and helped it as much as he could. He used to roam the mountainous forests. Roaming through the deep jungle Birsa often felt that the black, virgin, forest-goddess, stretching her both arms and bellowing “[A]ll this land is ours.” (36) Dhani, amazed by Birsa’s deep intimacy with the forest, often followed him. One day, annoyed by Dhani’s continuous pursuing, Birsa told him emphatically that “[T]his is my forest.” (36) Dhani was obviously impressed by this assertive statement. He replied in a sharp voice “[M]ind this. Mind it very well. Today you told that this was your forest.” (36) Since then Dhani kept on stirring Birsa into revolution. Dhani was on tenterhooks about Birsa’s

taking up of the leadership of the Mundas against the war with the government and the landlords. He kept on persuading him to lead the Mundas to revolt against their oppressors. However, Birsa was hesitant and was obviously indifferent to the war ideals of the veteran rebel.

As a child, Birsa longed to learn to read, write and to receive education. He joined the German Mission at Burju, where he had his lower primary education. In 1886, he left for the Mission at Chaibasa where he met Amulya. Experiences at Chaibasa Mission were a turning point in Birsa's life. While staying at the Chaibasa Mission he asked Amulya: "[W]ill you turn to be a *dikhu* when you become a great man after getting education? Will you become our enemy? Isn't so everywhere?"(67) Later, when Amulya became the Deputy Superintendent, he persuasively tried to bring justice for Birsa and his people. Birsa left the Chaibasa Mission and joined the catholic Mission at Tohra. While staying there, he happened to hear about the rebellion of the sardars, the Munda rebels. The rising was brutally suppressed by the British government. The Munda rebels were denied the fundamental human rights in the prison. Some sardars died in the prison even before the trial started. Barrister Jacob, the British lawyer, continued to appear in the court as the counsel of the Mundas, out of his egalitarian views. Birsa was very much disturbed by the ruthless manner the rebellion was crushed by the authorities. It is significant that it was the brutalities meted out to the sardars that triggered the anti-colonial spirit in Birsa.

Birsa was getting more and more disenchanted of the Mission and its

policies. During the Christmas holidays he happened to see Dhani who instigated him by asking to fight their oppressors: "...these *dikhus* have to be opposed. The white men and the landlords. We have to recover our villages. Mundas villages must go to the Mundas." (70) This time Birsa was willing to hear him. Dhani told him in a tone of urgency: "Birsa, you leave the Mission. Do you know what the white men say? They say Mundas are naked, barbarians, muggers. You leave their Mission, Birsa." (71) Back at the Mission after the Christmas holidays, Birsa had to face certain unexpected events which became crucial in his embracing the path of revolution. His mind was already destabilized after the meeting with Dhani. The other Mundas at the mission reinforced his doubts about Mission's nexus with the district administration. They told him that "[T]he Government and the Mission are same. Mundas are not going to be benefited by them anyway." (71) It was then Father Notrit of Catholic Mission began to show off his racial prejudice against the Mundas. One day, he talked about the Munda rebels in an insulting manner. His deep-rooted racial prejudice surfaced in his presumptuous words: "[T]hese sardars are robbers, plunders and frauds. One must not make company with them." (75) Birsa was deeply hurt by Fr. Notrit's impertinent comment on his people. He is convinced that the sardars "desire the betterment of all Mundas. Otherwise why did they become prisoners? Why did they choose the cruel life of the prison?" (75) Obviously, he could not stand Fr. Notrit's discourteous remarks about the Munda rebels. He asked him in rage: "[W]hat wrong did they do? In what way they cheated you? They are

fighting for and staying in prison for the rights of the Mundas. Are they thieves according to you? Never !”(76)

Since then, Birsa began to address the Mundas students in the Mission. One day, Father Notrit happened to hear Birsa criticizing the Mission and government. He came to understand that he could not restrain the leaving Mundas. He lost his temper and called them cheats: “[A]ll the Mundas are alike. They come to the Mission like beggars. They adore the ideas of sardars in their mind. All the Mundas are ungrateful.”(76) Birsa was obviously taken aback by Father Notrit’s presumptuous conduct towards the Mundas. He felt that the government and the missionaries were same. He got completely disenchanted by the church and its ideals. He furiously reminded Father Notrit that the sardars could not be cheats as they were fighting for justice. He started flouting the church. In a sense of total disenchantment he shouted at Fr.Notrit: “[A]ll of you are same -- the government or Mission.” (76) It was followed by a heated exchange of words between Birsa and Father Notrit. Amulya, who was listening to this, tried to prevent Birsa from leaving the Mission. He knew that once Birsa leaves the Mission his dreams of education would never get materialized. As expected, that day Birsa left the Mission for ever. With this, Birsa’s education came to a halt. Later, Kali Mukherjee, the magistrate, expresses similar concern, when he tells Amulya that “[H]ad Birsa learnt more they could’ve got a person to argue for them.”(190) This was a turning point in Birsa’s life. Actually, the upsurge of his fury towards Fr.Notrit and the Mission was just a manifestation of the deep sense of

resentment pent up in his mind. His growing regard for the cause of his community which the sardars have been fighting for, coupled with a deep sense of disillusionment about the Mission and colonial education, culminated in an act of retribution. Anyway, this event, though indirectly, resulted in the ascription of divinity upon him.

*Aranyer Adhikar* demonstrates how colonialism attempts to homogenize the polyvocal traditions in the colonies. It presents a comprehensive study of the deracination as well as the psychological impact of colonialism upon the tribal people in India. Colonialism, by means of a set of institutions, virtually bulldozed the cultural practices of the native people in many ways. Mahasweta has dealt with these issues in detail in her collection of activist writings named *Dust on the Road* (1997). The problem of the tribals in the country, according to her, "is not that of getting material support of survival. Mainstream society is carrying on a continuous, shrewd and systematic assault on his social system, his culture, his very tribal identity and existence." (*Dust on the Road* 109) In addition to the activities of the missionaries, education played a pivotal role in denigrating the culture of the colonized. In India, it was the tribal people who suffered the impact of colonialism in the worst form. It is well exemplified in the cultural castration experienced by the Mundas during the colonial regime. This condition is well illustrated in Emma LaRocque words: "...perhaps the height of cheekiness in a colonizer is to steal your language, withhold his from you as long as he can, then turn around and demand that you speak or write better than he does.

And when you do, he accuses you of “uppityness” or cultural inauthenticity.”

(xxi)

After leaving the Mission Birsa began to roam in the forest. His mind was so destabilized. The psychological insecurity experienced by Birsa during this period is well illustrated in his decision to become a seer after mastering the Hindu scriptures. He went to the ashram of Ananda Pande, a Hindu pandit, only to get disenchanted by the Hindu principles. With this, his enthrallment with the dikhu ideals came to an abrupt end. His search for panacea in the ideals of Christianity and Hinduism did not bear any fruits. In order to become a true revolutionary leader he had to undergo a series of ordeals and tribulation – both at physical and psychological levels. On the other level, it proliferated his belief in his own culture. Birsa’s failure to find a resolution for his psychological crisis strikes parallel with the manner Bakha, the untouchable protagonist of Mulkraj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935), attempted to resolve his identity crisis. But, unlike Bakha, Birsa was equally disenchanted by the western education as well as the Hindu scriptures. He came to understand that he cannot have a succor and solace apart from his culture and community. The text shows how Birsa went through a wide range of psychological experiences before he became the undisputed leader of the Munda people.

Under the British rule, the colonial law was imposed upon the indigenous tribal communities, generating inestimable impact upon their geo-cultural spheres. The colonial government’s new policies, especially the land

and forest laws, have deprived the tribal societies of their traditional means of subsistence. The condition of the Mundas in Chalkaadi was getting more and worse. Most of them were starving. The new laws introduced by the British government, in effect, dispossessed them of all their means of livelihood. The tribals were pushed into dire poverty and destitution by these intercessions. The veteran rebels visited Birsa and informed him about the continuing ejection of the Mundas from their homelands. The extreme abjection of his people began to fill Birsa's mind with darkness. In Palamau, Manbhum and Singbhum districts the Mundas were being forced out of their land. When Sunara informed him about the new law which prevented the tribals from entering the jungle he protested in rage: "[T]he right of the forest is the first right in Krishnabharat. Then the nation of these white men was lying under the deep ocean. Since then the black people in Krishnabharat call the forest their mother." (82) He declared that their customary rights over the forest could not be curtailed by any system, legal or otherwise, since they date back to thousands of years. He led his associates to Chaibasa to lodge complaints with the forest office. He emphatically told the officers to concede the Mundas the right over forest. But his request was outrightly rejected. They were insulted by the officers. Back home, he found his parents in acute distress. They were not allowed to enter the forest and gather the China-grass for their meal. However, due to the pressure of hunger many Mundas violated the rule by entering the forest and were consequently reprimanded. After having witnessed all these events Birsa felt a deep sense of resentment and anger

with the colonial establishment.

*Aranyer Adhikar* demonstrates, contrary to the common conviction that the uprisings of the tribals do not happen spontaneously. A deep investigation into the nature and causes of these uprising reveals that the tribal communities took arms only after seeking many other non-militant options before the rebellion. In all these cases – Birsa' *Ulgulan*, Santhal's *Hool*, Sardar *Mulkuyi* – armed struggle was their final preference. Before turning to the recourse of weapon they had sought all options. The text contains references to many legal cases in which the tribals lost. Referring to a law suit with a landlord the author says: "Mundas failed in the case. They have arranged the lawyers by selling off their cattle. Now everything is lost. They did not get their land back. In addition, they had to pay the fine for grazing the cows in the fields of Jagdish." (83) Later, the Mundas approached the Mission requesting them to use its coercive power upon the government to give them their customary right over the land. But Mission, which did not have the social amelioration of the tribals in its agenda, kept a strategic silence over their problems. Consequently, their faith in the Mission began to subside and they started leaving it. This feeling of disillusionment is well illustrated in the words of a veteran sardar: "[W]hat was wrong with our Singhbonga? Then we used to light the lamps. There were light. When these dikhus came, darkness enveloped us. What did we gain by joining the Mission? Didn't it only hike up the darkness? (74) Explicating how the churches and missionaries in the colonies carry out the cultural agendas of colonialism by

detrimentalizing the natives, Fanon observes in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “[T]he Church in the colonies is the white people’s Church, the foreigner’s Church. She does not call the native to God’s ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor.” (32) Thus, it can be seen that the Mundas in Chottanagpur, after having failed in their incessant endeavours to find a solution for their problems through institutional means, decided to take the recourse of arms to reclaim their fundamental rights. The text marks the metamorphosis of the Mundas from compliant victims to adamant rebels.

The story achieves an epic dimension with the invocation of the natural powers. The mythic fiber of the story is provided by Birsa’s dialogue with the aranyajanani (the Mother Forest). Birsa’s imaginary dialogue with the aranyajanani provides a clear picture about his confused state of mind. Exacerbated by the extremely pathetic condition of his people, Birsa used to roam through the forest. He felt as if the Mother Forest pleading him to save her from the exploiters. The author narrates: “[T]his forest is the mother of Mundas. It is the aranyajanani. Birsa could hear the lamentation of that forest. Birsa has come to understand the painful cry. It is the lamenting of an insulted mother. Laws have imprisoned her. It is lamenting “Birsa, you save me. I want to be pure. You must save me Birsa!” (87) The melancholic wailing of the forest implies an irresistible urge from his own collective unconsciousness. Birsa heard the Mother Forest wailing like a poor, skinny helpless mother.

Today, I have become impure my son.

I will make you pure and chaste, mother.

These landlords and foreigners made me polluted my  
son.

I will save you mother.

My sons are made homeless.

I will get back the homes for them.

The Mundas, Santals and other tribes are leaving me my  
son.

I won't let them leave you.

No one hears my lamenting.

Mother, where are you?

In your heart, in your blood (88).

This imaginary dialogue is important to the fabric of the text as it provides a convincing ground for Birsa to take up the leadership of his people in the war against their oppressors. The vision of the forest as a naked and offended Munda woman created new sense of responsibility in him. Birsa became increasingly receptive to these voices and, in the process, regained his lost identity. He got possessed by these voices -- a possession which pressed for the recuperation of his own history from the premise of his confused consciousness. The deep uncertainties and confusions that enveloped his psyche began to melt. Furthermore, it provided a psychological purgation to him. As Birsa internalizes the spirit and energy of his own ancestral past, shaking off the effects of colonial education, there is a discernible change in terms of his physical presence in the text. Consequently, he becomes the focal

point of the other Mundas who have begun to view him as a conduit of their ancestral past. After this process, he qualifies himself to represent his community. In a rare mood of insight he shouts: "I will become the bagvan! The saviour of this land! I am born in the blood of Chuttu and Naagu. I will save the Mundas." (89) Initially, he was experiencing a psychic dislocation due to his inability to connect his interior and exterior landscapes. After this, he is seen to undergo a dramatic transformation both in psychological and mythical terms. Birsa's prophetic vision involves the liberation of his community and its disguised meaning is extended across the text. The denuded Mother Forest becomes a potent symbol of colonial domination in the text.

The forest figures in Birsa's consciousness for another reason too. For the tribal communities, their socio-economic and cultural existence is inextricably connected with the forest. The relation between the tribals and the forest is very old. To them, forest is the means of their survival as well as the repository of culture. Their food supply comes mostly from the forest. But the forest policies introduced by the colonial government deprived them of their customary rights over the forest. Earlier, they had enjoyed considerable freedom to use forest and hunt the animals. Besides providing the means of livelihood, forests supply them fuel, medicines, fruits and materials to build their homes etc. Their gods abode in the forest. This explains the tribal people's deep attachment with the jungle. Due to all these factors they have reacted sharply to the restrictions imposed by the government on their

traditional rights.

The text, among other things, examines the impact of colonial forest laws upon the socio-cultural life of the tribals. Perhaps, one of the most organized intrusions into the geo-cultural spheres of the Mundas, as of the other tribal communities, is the functioning of the forest department. Many measures taken by the forest department had a disconcerting impact upon the life of the tribal people. The extensive planting of teaks in the forest, for example, put their indigenous means of livelihood at stake. Teak gradually replaced sal and mohua etc. The tribals in Chottanagpur region traditionally depended upon the sal trees to satisfy many of their daily needs. Sal meant a lot to them. Its wood, its fruits and its leaves were used by them to satisfy their various livelihood requirements. Sal was integral to their economy. Besides, it enjoyed a religious status among the tribals. In an interview with Spivak, Mahasweta invites attention to this ecological displacement: "[T]hey worship sal trees, and the government was introducing teak (saguna). The cry went up: *saguna hatao, sal bachao*. This became a war for the tribals. They destroyed teak nurseries, planted sal." (xvii) By introducing many such anti-tribal reformations the colonial government virtually bypassed the indigenous economy in a drastic manner. Criticizing the anti-tribal forest policy introduced by the government in post-independent period Mahasweta writes in *Dust on the Road*: "[O]ur villagers have been robbed of food, fuel and means of survival because of the state's social forestry policy. One cannot eat the leaf, bark or fruit of eucalyptus. Eucalyptus does not offer shelter from

sun and rain. But protest against eucalyptus, in West Bengal, is interpreted as the influence of Jharkhandi propaganda.” (66)

The dialogue between Birsa and the forest-goddess suggests, besides revealing his disturbed state of mind, the insertion of some primitive energy into his perturbed psyche. It was an assurance that he required badly during those days of spiritual crisis. He came back from the forest, as if divinely inspired, accompanied by a crowd of people and told his crying mother: “I have become a god. Your lap cannot hold me anymore. I am the god of the earth.” (89) Here the auteur renders an epic breadth to the text without marring its historical authenticity. One of the chief aims of Birsa’s revolt was to repossess their customary right over the forest: “[F]orest won’t be burnt if *Ulgulan* is fired. It is the blood and heart of human beings that are burnt in it. It won’t destroy the forest. Instead, it will only renovate it. Mother forest is sitting with the sons of the forest on her lap – like the mother of the Mundas or the mother of Birsa.” (6) The very title of the novel *Aranyer Adhikar* (Right to the Forest) suggests this inseparable connectivity between the tribals and the forest.

Birsa’s rebellion was directed against three power – the government, Mission and local landlordism. When the fire of *Ulgulan* burnt extensively in the tribal settlements of Chottanagpur, Mundas stopped paying the tax and interest. It is significant that the first stage of *Ulgulan* was marked by a kind of civil disobedience. This was followed by armed rebellion. The text demonstrates how these hegemonic forces join hands to subjugate the tribal

people. Furthermore, Birsa's movement was deeply rooted in the tradition of tribal struggle. It marks a continuation of the earlier struggles, not only of the Mundas but also of other tribals like Santals and Kols. Birsa used calculated tactics to bring the crushed Mundas to the path of resistance. Birsa made them feel ashamed of the wretched condition they were in. Shame, as Marx would have us believe, is a revolutionary sentiment. To the thousands of Mundas in Chottanagour Birsa was a leader "who could oppose both the landlords and government and help them in regaining their lost farming lands and forest."

(94) It is apparent that Mahasweta has presented Birsa as an undisputable revolutionary leader, not a God. He is a bagvan who could help them to fill their belly with gruel and get them salt. Their anticipation of a saviour is elaborately described in the text. Strikingly, all these attributes resonate the traits of a revolutionary. News of the emergence of a bagvan spread instantly. From Chottanagpur to Palamau the news of Birsa's ascription of divinity disseminated like a wildfire. Devotees started flowing to Chalkar from far and near to see their liberator. Birsa's initial response to his newly achieved status was steady and full-fledged. He understood the responsibility involved in his new status. Owing to their continuous exposure to social ostracism and cultural subjugation, the Mundas, first of all, expected their bagvan to save them from their oppressors. In the novel Mahasweta has presented Birsa as a bagvan who "should not try to tell the stories of Paradise to the starving people." (94) Birsa was nonetheless aware about the massive responsibility placed upon his shoulder. He knew that it was a strenuous task to muster

resources to thwart the well organized colonial regime. In no part of the text he is shown to exult for having the status of a god. Instead, it brought him a series of exigent tasks which made his life on edge.

People sought the counsel of Birsa bagvan when they were affected by problems of epidemics. When people of Kattuyi village were dying of cholera Birsa visited there and gave directions to the people about the need of taking precautions to prevent it from spreading. Birsa directed them to keep hygiene and use only the water of flowing stream. His directions, besides having saved the people from the epidemics, served to reinforce his image of bagvan among them. It is ironical that it was the "scientific" knowledge received from the Mission that helped him to resolve such problems. In a short span of time the story of bagvan spread in many villages. However, Birsa knew that such intellectual acrobatics were not sufficient to become the leader of a crushed community.

Birsa cult instilled a new spirit in the mind of the Mundas. He could make them anger at the encroachments to which they were being subjected. They were to acknowledge Birsa as their leader and God, and to abide by his rules to be his real devotees. The transformation which the Birsa movement brought upon the character of the Mundas was astonishing. They became very sturdy and hardnosed in their stance towards their antagonistic milieu. They openly flouted the landlords and moneylenders. With a sense of confidence and courage, imparted by *Ulgulan*, they interrogated the landlords and officers. Furthermore, the Mundas turned away from their superstitious

practices. Birsa gradually tried to liberate his people from the fetters of ignorance and superstition. Their self-respect and reliance on their culture aggravated dramatically. Fanon explicates the logics of decolonization by stressing the role of self-assertion and violence. Decolonization, observes Fanon, "never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them." (*The Wretched of the Earth* 28) In this way, *Ulgulan* charts a drastic digression in the routines of the tribal people. In a short span of time, Birsa's undisputable status as a leader came to be acknowledged by all categories of people -- his friends as well as foes. The Deputy Commissioner Streetfield himself admits:

What if the lad is only a poor Munda -- didn't he try to wobble the powerful government? Yes, I feel respect for him. He subsists on the gruel made of a handful of china grass and wears just a strip of rag around his waste. Their weapon is only the bows and arrows. They bear the weight of tax and interest upon their shoulder. Hasn't he empowered these Mundas to fight the British power? (216).

There were different responses to the divine aura ascribed upon Birsa. It can be seen that the dissemination of Birsa cult, besides forging a new spirit among the Mundas, caused much concern among the privileged people. The Mission was understandably upset by the new turn of things. There was a

drastic reduction in the tribal people's dependency upon the Mission. No one went there to seek shelter and help. Moreover, the converted Mundas began to leave the Mission to become the disciples of Birsa bagvan.

The text explicates how the functioning of the colonial regime, in tandem with the missionaries, gradually destroyed the traditional culture of the tribals in India by grinding down its indigenous value system, firstly through religious conversions to Christianity, and secondly by imposing an alien legal, administrative and political system in the place of the indigenous one, which was slowly being substituted. Mission, on the other hand, with its seductive egalitarian appeal, continued to find its subjects among the depraved natives. Missionary activities among the tribal communities in colonial India, as elsewhere, have virtually sapped the vitality and optimism of the primitive groups. Conversion in the colonies had been one of the primary means of acculturation and detribalization. Examining the cultural denigration consequent upon the process of colonialism, Jean Paul Sartre observes: "[V]iolence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm's length; it seeks to dehumanize them. Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours." (12) This cultural imperialism, besides uprooting the native people from the geo-cultural mooring, led to the conflict between the Christian tribals and non-Christian tribals. The converted tribals by virtue of their better education and awareness cornered the benefits of the welfare schemes given by the

government and other institutions.

Significantly enough, it is the consideration of the stomach which drove the tribal people to take shelter at the Mission. This is illustrated in the conversion of Birsa's family. As a child Birsa was christened along with his family. Sugana Munda, Birsa's father, had no means to ensure the subsistence of his family. One day, Sugana told him: "Birsa, why don't you try to be like everyone else! If you become an ordinary person like everyone, you will always be with us. We can go to become Christians when the draught comes. In good times we can come back to our own religion" (43). The irony of conversion in colonies is well exemplified in Sugana's words. It was the dire poverty, necessitated by the colonial intercession to their traditional economy, which forced the tribal people to seek shelter in the Mission. The operation of the church in the colonies was just another extension of the colonial administration. They effected cultural subjugation in the colonies. This is the reason why Birsa conceded a large space for the restoration of cultural identity in his rebellion. Birsa's *Ulgulan*, admittedly, reduced the dependency of the Mundas upon the Mission.

Mahasweta shows how the British colonialism and the evangelical Missions worked hand in hand in the subjugation the people of India, particularly the tribal communities. This alliance is palpable in the regular correspondence done between them for discussing and managing the case of the revolting tribals. Mission kept the district administration informed about the dissenting activities among the natives. They viewed the self-assertion

and expression of dignity on the part of the tribal people as a gesture of looming rebellion. This is well illustrated in the correspondence Reverend Hoffman kept with the Deputy Commissioner. When the Mundas began to leave the Mission the authorities thought it as the noticeable symptom of imminent revolution. The text, in a unique fashion, debunks the reciprocal nexus between the Mission and the colonial administration.

The landlords and traders were obviously exasperated at the new turn of things. They were disturbed about the immense support Birsa received among the Mundas, who had stopped borrowing money from them. Nor did they pay the tax and interests. They stopped going to work in the zamindar's land and tea gardens. The history of land alienation in the tribal areas began during the British colonialism. The zamindars enjoyed absolute freedom under the British administration. Due to their lack of access to the resources, the tribals were indebted to the local money lenders. Indebtedness was almost unavoidable due to the heavy, compound interest to be paid to the moneylenders. Consequently, many of the tribals land came under the detention of the moneylenders, zamindars and traders who appropriated it either by advancing them loans or by forcible eviction. Mahasweta exhibits that the resistance and counteraction from the part of the oppressed, though fragmented in scale and volume, could destabilize the oppressors.

In each stage of his development Birsa is shown to be forging fresh strategies for the conduction of his rebellion. He used traditional *sabha* (assemblage) to convey revolutionary ideals to his people. He stressed on

counteractions: “[L]isten carefully. Mundas are in very bad condition today. The landlords and the rich people are exploiting the Mundas everywhere. By any means we have to get freedom. We have to expel all the foreigners from our land. No one should pay the tax. We must regain this forest.” (106) Each of his words is uttered with a studied manner with an intention of exerting influence upon the people. The tribal uprisings always involved the deployment of certain indigenous codes of dress, speech and behavior which tended to invert the codes through which their social superiors dominated them in everyday life. During the campaigning of *Ulgulan*, the Mundas used their own indigenous system of communication to pass information between the rebels at different locations. For instance, they would send a leaf to denote peace. Sending of an arrow meant war. Birsa conducted constant “study classes” to enliven the trampled spirit of his people. When taken away by the police Birsa whispered to Dhani to collect the black abrus seeds. It was secret code for getting ready for the imminent war.

The mobilization of the Mundas was viewed with much doubt and apprehension by the district administration. The Mission and government kept a close surveillance of their movements. To them, Birsa has become, to quote the words of Miyars, “a potential danger” to be crushed immediately (191). Frightened by the mobilization of the tribal people under the leadership of Birsa, the Mission at Chaibhasa regularly informed the government about the activities of the Birsaites. They wrote to the office of the Deputy Commissioner: “[T]hough Birsa is talking of certain dharma, his followers

have started collecting weapons." (106) There were differences of opinion among the local administration as to the way the Munda issue was to be dealt with. The district administration thought that the officers at Ranchi were unnecessarily fearing Birsa. At first, the objectives of Birsa's movement were ambiguous to them.

The colonial strategy of suppressing the dissenting voices is apparent in the way Miyars attempted to label Birsa as a mad man, thereby justifying the severe action taken against him. But his plan did not work as Doctor Rojors refused to certify it. Doctor Rojors, like Barrister Jacob, was a man of principle. They were free from the colonial logic and prejudices. He outrightly rejected the proposal of Miyars to certify Birsa an insane. Furthermore, he argued strappingly with Miyars in favour of Mundas. He openly stated that the condition of Mundas has become worse under British rule since they didn't have access to justice. He even went to the extent of appreciating Birsa for having taught the Mundas to be proud of their own culture. Doctor Rojors tells Miyars: "Birsa has been able to evoke a self confidence among his followers. For the first time I have seen them feeling pride of being Mundas. So far they had only lamented their Munda identity." (114) The inaccessibility of the tribal people to the colonial justice has been reiterated in many occasions in the text. The Mundas knew no other language other than their own language Mundari. The British judges who did not know the Mundari language always failed to understand their grievances. The translators used to distort and dilute the facts while explaining their cases to the judges. Famous

historian K.N.Panikker observes:

While engaged in conquest and initial administrative organization, the company's officials had hardly any time or the opportunity to gain knowledge about the civilization they encountered. The customs, habits, traditions and social institution of the newly subjected people remained an enigma to them. Their bewilderment was not only because of the discernible cultural plurality, but also because of the lack of access to knowledge about the subjected (124).

Among other things, the text offers a sharp critique of Colonial justice and its bogus claims of liberalism. The colonial justice upholds its written codes and claims to guarantee justice for all. This is well illustrated in the words of Miyars. He presumptuously tells Birsa: "British law is very liberal. It is based on justice. Both the accused and plaintiff get lawyers." (116) Yet, however liberal and refreshing this position may at first appear, it has problems. Because, it not only presupposes a definition of justice but also promotes a certain way of implementing justice. The bogus pronouncements of colonial justice and its pretensions of liberalism are dismantled in the text. The trial of the Munda rebels is indefinitely delayed for months. By then, most of the prisoners died in the prison cells. To the Mundas, justice is both delayed and denied by the colonial government.

During his first imprisonment Birsa refused to answer most of the questions put to him and rejected the offer of a defense counsel. On the night

before the day of Birsa's trial, thousands of Mundas came swarming with flaming torches to see their bagvan. They surrounded the Khunti police station and demanded immediate trial. The frightened authorities shifted Birsa to Ranchi where he was tried and sentenced to two years of rigorous imprisonment. On release, Birsa came back to his village and found it a desiccated and inhospitable terrain owing to the draught. The Mundas were already deprived of all their means of subsistence. They were practically strangled by the hostilities of the authorities and the landlords. They started complaining about the atrocities meted out to them by the authorities. The draught in that year had intensified their hapless condition. Birsa, realizing the gravity of the situation, started organizing his people to fight their enemies to ensure their survival. Birsa's *Ulgulan*, by all means, was triggered by the question of survival.

Even as a boy, Birsa was very much concerned about the question of survival. This is well illustrated in his stealing the ring from the body of a dead woman from the cemetery. After having left the Mission and the ashram Birsa roamed in the forest. His mind was already haunted by many disturbing questions. At home, he found his parents in utter destitution without anything to eat. Out of utter destitution and hunger he went to the cemetery. He took the silver ring and coins buried with a Munda woman named Chalki. She was pregnant when she died. According to the Munda faith, pregnant women are to be buried with whatever jewels they wear. They believe that it would make their access to the heaven easier. So the silver ring on her thumb

was not removed when Chalki was buried. Birsa took the silver ring from the dead body from the cemetery ground and sold it in the market to buy rice for his mother and father who had been starving for many days. The news instantly spread in Chakladi. On being questioned by his raged mother Birsa answers: "[A]ren't they dead? The dead people feel no hunger. Hunger is felt by those who are live. Do the dead need money or rice?"(86) To him the consideration of the stomach is greater than anything else. Hunger comes to be a motivating factor. Ironically enough, the same motive of hunger became instrumental in his captivity. He was arrested when Parami boiled the rice against his direction. Parami's thoughtless act was also prompted by her irresistible hunger. Mahasweta shows, in a unique fashion, how the motive of hunger violates the traditions and taboos. Understandably, both these acts solicited sharp censure from the elder members of the community. This event, which otherwise should have diminished his popularity, was instrumental in his ascription of divinity. This episode is relevant to the fabric of the story as it shows Birsa in a better light. Later during the campaign of *Ulgulan*, Birsa consistently considered the impediments to the sustenance of his people, thereby placing the question of survival above everything. Survival becomes a central concern in the story.

Birsa's *Ulgulan* was not inspired by any immediate events or aims. It is the outcome of many years of silent planning and home works. In one of the meetings held in the forest he declared that the chief aim of *Ulgulan* was to fight the *dikhus*, the intruders. Ignoring the admonition given by the

Commissioner, Birsa began to address his people again. He talked them of war to be made against their oppressors. He told them: “[W]e must get rid of all our enemies. We must teach all the devils – the British, kings, landlords – a lesson.” (167) He organized all the scattered Mundas for a war against all their persecutors, including the government, missionaries, zamindars and all other dikhus. His image of bagvan helped him to organize the scattered Mundas for the rebellion.

Birsa started his campaigning in the remote villages deep in the mountainous jungle, where the police could not reach immediately. Birsa is seen to be making a lot of home works before his rebellion. He conducted continuous “study classes” to the rebels. He suggested that they should meet at least twice in a week, possibly on every Thursday and Sunday. It has been decided that the meeting will be conducted during night to shun the surveillance of the authorities. He categorized his supporters into different groups for strategic convenience and gave them different assignment. They veteran sardars were designated as *puranaks* and they were expected to teach the lessons of war to others. Those who have abodes deep in the forest were to host the meetings and they were called *pracharaks*. And the youngest members among the rebels were called *naanaks*. Birsa addressed the crowd with much conviction and courage. The text explicates how the subalterns resist at communal level and how these resistances are carried out through the medium of traditional and communal institutions.

Birsa asked his followers to abandon many of their ordinary

indulgences like dancing, boozing and festivities. He convinced the Mundas that for the realization of *Ulgulan* many of their personal and collective pleasures should be forfeited. They readily accepted his proposals without any demure. Consequently, the songs and dances at the occasion of Holi and other festivals have been restrained. There were no more hunting and festivals during that period. All their attention was focused on a single mission – *Ulgulan*. They did not let any other matters distract them. By incorporating such taboos into the framework of the rebellion, Birsa could concentrate their entire energy upon the cause of revolution. They even abandoned some of their usual rituals and festivals like *Baaparva*, *Paachika* and *Karamparva* (174). On being asked about the newly introduced taboos he told Karmi: “[T]he life of Mundas is beset with sorrows. Have they ever benefited by these *poojas* and dances? This is not what they should do mother. This is the manner of my new religion. I don’t want to chide them. Nor could I forget them. I must teach them how to live. I will teach them to die and kill.” (176) By deploying these well-planned strategies Birsa, in effect, politicized his people.

It can be seen that Birsa’s visions and objectives of *Ulgulan* were comprehensive and historically informed. The author narrates: “Birsa’s aim is to take the Mundas from the primitive deadliness and blind rituals to the contemporary age. But, there should not be any assembly, law and administration made by the British. Birsa desires to give the light of modernity to them who have seen only the darkness since thousands of years.

They should keep their simplicity and the sense of justice though they reach modernity." (199) Through constant counselings and meetings he prepared them mentally for the war. In a little while, the message of *Ulgulan* was disseminated among the tribals like a fire in the forest. More and more people joined it. The involvement of the tribal people in *Ulgulan* was complete. All the Mundas, irrespective of their sex and age participated in the revolution. Sunara, to cite an example, had come to join the *Ulgulan* by setting fire to the house of Sooraj Singh, the landlord, whom he is indebted through a bond. In a short span of time its fame extended beyond Chottanagpur. The Birsaites maintained absolute discipline during the preparation and execution of the revolution. A sense of pride coupled with a logic of resistance encompassed the mind of the Mundas.

The tradition of protest that Birsa inherited from his forefathers involves the resistance and rejection of the dikhus, both foreign and native. Birsa's *Ulgulan* had immediate as well as distant objectives. Its immediate objective was to force the government to rework the anti-tribal laws and to ensure the livelihood of the tribals. The distant aims involve the repossession of their crushed cultural identity, the reclaiming of their lost heritage and a call to change the mindset of the elite classes towards the tribals. As Mahasweta aptly points out: "[T]he real problem of the tribal is not just that of getting material support for survival. Mainstream society is carrying on a continuous, shrewd and systematic assault on his social system, his culture, his very tribal identity and existence." (*Dust on the Road* 109). Birsa declared

that the first agenda of *Ulgulan* was to recapture the old temples of Chutia and Jagannathpuri. Birsa asked his followers to repossess the temples which were once theirs. The recapturing of the Hindu temples was symbolic, not only because it implies the pre-colonial invasions to their indigenous culture, but also because of the deep cultural consciousness that the Birsa movement implicates.

By focusing on the multifarious impact of the process of colonialism upon the life of the tribal communities in India, *Aranyer Adhikar* provides a sharp critique of colonialism. Besides demonstrating how colonialism with its extractive mechanism impoverished the colonized people by obliterating their traditional economy, it exhibits how it denigrated the cultures of the natives. Birsa could create a strong sense of resentment against the colonial regime in the mind of the Mundas. He achieved this by questioning and rejecting the very legitimacy of colonial regime. *Ulgulan* aimed to replace the illegitimate colonial rule with an alternative authority within the tribal community. The anti-colonial spirit inherent in Birsa's rebellion has not been acknowledged by the official chroniclers of the country. By highlighting the anti-colonial character of Birsa's rebellion in 1899, Mahasweta shows that it was not merely against the colonial administration but against the colonialism itself. She provides an alternative history by recuperating the submerged identities in Indian history. Such a recounting of subaltern history constitutes subversive cultural politics because it, besides exposing the forms of power that oppress subaltern peoples, provides certain liberating alternatives.

When the first meeting of *Ulgulan* was conducted furtively in the house of Jagari Munda, Birsa addressed the Mundas gathered there and told them that there were two ways in front of them. One is the path of peace and the other is the path of war. They examined both alternatives in details. The sardars had gone through the path of peace for a long time. But it hadn't borne fruit so far. They had already resorted to the law, sent complaints and appeared in the court. They have found such means futile and inadequate. Whereas, the latter – the path of war – involves much risk and danger. He explained: "[T]here are many thorns in the path of war. There is much sorrow in it. Sometime we will have to abandon this life and this world. We may die of hunger. We may be put in the prison. But, we have no other options." (186) They examined all other options but found them unviable. They were formerly tried and found inadequate. They decided not to rely on the administrative organs of the colonial government that regularly violated its own stated rules and paced towards an open revolution against their oppressors.

Birsa was obviously not imposing a war upon his people who were already devastated. At each stage of the revolt, he called the meetings of the veteran members to get their counsel on the issues encountered by them. Before taking recourse to arms they examined all other alternative but had to reject them in the light of their own past experiences. The non-militant forms of mobilization were found inadequate to obtain justice. The excessive exposure to oppression has often triggered a deep discontent and resentment

in the tribals. They were accustomed to take arms against their persecutors when the law did not help them, the government remained unsympathetic and the police failed to protect them and also pestered them. They adopted two paths for achieving their objectives. First of all, they adopted the non-violent path of bargaining and negotiating with the government and using a variety of pressure tactics without resorting to violence. Secondly, they adopted the militant path of violence or mass struggles. Through both these means they sought to evoke a structural transformation and reform to empower their communities. Birsa's rebellion was conducted after many months of planning and preparations. Initially, its political practice began with giving petitions to the authorities about the urgent issues they encountered. Before taking up the role of a Munda leader Birsa himself had given complaints to the local official about the teeming issues experienced by his people. But the course of law was proven to be unviable. This feature of tribal uprisings stands in sharp contrast to the versions of mainstream historiography which always tend to view them as spontaneous and apolitical. Rebuffing the concept of tribal and peasant insurgencies being spontaneous Guha says: "[I]t would be difficult to cite an uprising on any significant scale that was not in fact preceded either by less militant types of mobilization when other means had been tried and found wanting or by parley among its principals seriously to weigh the pros and cons of any recourse to arms." (The Prose of ... 1) But with the propelling of *Ulgulan*, the Munda politics began to turn away from the practice of petitioning the

authority that always defied its own stated rules and headed towards an armed struggle as a practical, though desperate, means to achieve justice. The Mundas were socially marginalized, economically browbeaten and culturally subjugated and had no option but to take arms to ensure their survival.

Birsa's rebellion was actually political in content, though religious in form. Like many tribal rebellions during the colonial period Birsa's *Ulgulan* was religious in its manifestation. It is characterized by the deployment of a series of traditional and religious codes in all its stages -- in the mobilization of the people as well as in the preparation and conduction of the rebellion. The religiosity of the subaltern movements has been a pivotal area of contestation in subaltern discourse. It is well illustrated in the statements of Sidhu and Kanu, two Santal rebels, who were hung by the British government in India after the Santal *Hool*. On being interrogated, they explained the British officials that they conducted the rising owing to the instructions they had received from their Thakur (god) who had also assured them that British bullets would not harm the devotee-rebels. Elucidating the religiosity involved in the tribal uprising Guha observes:

Religiosity was, by all accounts, central to the *hool* (rebellion).

The notion of power which inspired it was explicitly religious in character. It was not that power was a content wrapped up in a form external to it called religion. Hence the attribution of the rising to a divine command rather than to any particular grievance; the enactment of rituals both before (eg: propitiatory

ceremonies to ward off the apocalypse of the Primeval Serpents) and during the uprising (worshipping the goddess Durga, bathing in the Ganges, etc); the generation and circulation of myth is its characteristic vehicle -- rumour (qtd. in Chakrabarty 6).

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The ascription of divinity upon Birsa itself denotes the religiosity of *Ulgulan*. Birsa could exploit this religious image for the mobilization of the people as well as the execution of his revolution. He often spoke to them, as if divinely inspired. It was with a ritualistic sanctity that the Mundas acted in each stage of the rebellion. To them, all their rebellious gestures -- whether the killing of the constable or attacking the Missions -- were meant to gratify their deity, Birsa bagvan. However, Mahasweta has taken special attention not to eclipse the political substance of Birsa's movement by overemphasizing its religious content. Birsa's *Ulgulan* commenced with the symbolic recapturing of the temples of Chuttiya and Jagannathpuri. This was decided in the first meeting itself. Birsa declared that the temples actually belonged to the Mundas. Declaring the aims of *Ulgulan* he tells his people: "[W]e need our sacred places and primitive venues. We must get the old temples. We must get back the temples of Chuttiya and Jagannathpuri. Once they were ours. Now we are denied entry there." (169) The retrieval of the lost heritage surfaces to be one of the primary agendas of *Ulgulan*. Birsa's call for the reclaiming the old temples of Chuttiya and Jagannathpuri implicates the cultural agenda of *Ulgulan*.

It is significant that Birsa started his revolution by making a call to recuperate the tradition and culture dispossessed of them. As far as the tribal communities in India are concerned they are dispossessed of many things, including their gods. Many of their temples where they had been worshipping their primitive gods were taken over by the upper caste Hindus. Furthermore, Birsa was deeply concerned about the humiliation and insults heaped upon his people by the upper caste Hindus, who viewed the tribal people as untouchables. Birsa identified the native kings and landlords as their enemies. He strongly protested against the racial prejudices meted out to them by the dominant castes. He declares: "[W]e don't have any right to wear dhoti or turban or even slippers in front of the *dikhu* kings and landlords. We aren't allowed to dine in tile plate. Nor can we sit on high place. And we are denied access in the temples of our forefathers." (159) His words reflect his deep consciousness about the discrimination experienced by the tribals in the mainstream society. He was deeply disenchanted with the ideals of Hinduism, especially after his tenure with the Hindu pandit Ananda. One of the proclaimed agendas of *Ulgulan* was to reject all the forces that crushed their integrity.

Birsa wanted *Ulgulan* to be a comprehensive revolution which would liberate the tribal people from all types of yokes and fetters. Just a few days before the Christmas, he declared the major strategies of *Ulgulan* to his fellow rebels. His plan was to attack the Christian centers, thereby scarring them. He declared: "*Ulgulan* has two chapters - one is to frighten the Christians by

setting fire and shooting arrows. The armed revolution will be started in the second phase." (213) On the Christmas Eve, when the European club at Ranchi was excited in festivities, the Mundas started their attack by shooting arrows at the German Mission and other Christian institutions. The Christmas celebration was meddled by the unexpected attack of Birsa's men. Pointing out this aspect of Birsa's rebellion Spivak aptly observes that "*ulgulan* of 1899-1901 de-hegemonized millenarian Christianity in the Indian context." (Subaltern Studies... 358) The attack was made in the form of guerilla warfare. Immediately after the attack they fled from the scene without leaving any evidence. It is significant that the initial project of *Ulgulan* involves an assertion and recuperation of cultural identity. This reclaiming extends from the symbolic recapturing of the temples in Chuttiya and Jagannathapuri to the attack of the Christian centers. The politics of subaltern inevitably involves a strapping negation of the models prescribed by the hegemonic ideologies. Birsa's movement is characterized by the deployment of such counter strategies and codes. Guha observes:

When a peasant rose in revolt at any time or place under the Raj, he did so necessarily and explicitly in violation of a series of codes which defined his very existence as a member of that colonial and still largely semi-feudal society. For his subalternity was materialized by the structure of property, institutionalized by law, sanctified by religion and made more tolerable -- and even desirable -- by tradition (The Prose of... 1).

The attack on the churches and Missions, for example, implicates a resistance at the cultural level. *Aranyer Adhikar* is replete with the descriptions of the anxieties raised out of this cultural dilemma.

The police became alert and spread their net to arrest the Munda rebels. The rebels started killing the landlords and moneylenders from their hide-outs. Their movements were mainly during night that the police could not catch him. The uprising was more intensive in Singbhum area where three persons including a constable, a watchman and a trader were killed. Police stations were attacked. Heavy fighting followed throughout Chottanagpur. Birsa warned his followers that "[T]he government has started considering us." (222) Since it is impossible for him to reach every spot and give instructions he asked the rebels to act as per the demand of the situation. He advised his fellow rebels to "act according to the situation using their own prudence." (224) Next day two more constables were killed while they were trying to make a tent in the forest. Gaya Munda led the attack. Gaya's daring act testifies the metamorphosis Birsa cult brought among the Mundas. In *Ulgulan*, each member acted heroically. The violence in the subaltern insurgencies is always necessitated by the oppressive conditions. In an interview given to Spivak, Mahasweta justifies the violence in Munda rising. According to her "[A] tribal lives in harmony with the nature around him, with human beings, even intruders. With everyone. So when he kills, it is a necessary killing." (xxii) Mahasweta, by stressing the relevance of collective and organized politics, sidetracks any prospect of individual exaltation. She

examines all the factors that went into the formation of Birsa's political personality and movement.

Birsa cult had transformed the rebels drastically. This transformation is well illustrated in Narasimha Munda's audacious questioning of the Deputy Commissioner who came to arrest him. On being asked to surrender, he came forward and shouted at the Deputy Commissioner: "[W]hose country is this? Does it belong to you whites? It is our nation. Are we demanding power in your country? Or you show power here? Then who should yield weapons, you or us? Let the whites give in their weapon." (139) To him, like the other rebels, it was a dangerous but rewarding act. The Deputy Commissioner was taken aback by the unanticipated gesture from an old Munda. As the movement gathered momentum, their fear and submissiveness faded away and they began to demonstrate an adamant mindset. Birsa had reinvigorated the abundant heroic energy latent in them. He was an effectual, if not indispensable, mediator in the empowerment of Munda people. The text marks the metamorphosis of the Mundas from submissive victims to unbending revolutionaries. The revolution had changed them radically. Birsa made them angry at the ruthless encroachments to which they were subjected. The poor folks, who were hitherto crushed under the hostile system, emerged from the abyss of neglect to take back at their oppressors. Their resentment and frustration were translated into revolutionary actions. But, their anger, justified as it is, is often exaggerated as violence by the guardians of the system. "Violence", observes Fanon, "is a cleansing force" since it "frees

the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction.”  
(*The Wretched of the Earth* 74) From the eighteen year old Sunara to old Donka this impact was discernible. Birsa himself was transformed from a skeptical youth to a resolute leader. *Ulgulan* has changed him also. *Aranyer Adhikar* charts this metamorphosis of the victims which characterizes the subaltern politics.

It was with the attack of Khunty station the uprising of the Mundas came under national attention. The Bengali and English newspapers reported the event. Rumours spread that Ranchi will be attacked by Birsa's men. Consequently, the alarmed authorities requested for more troops in the affected regions. Deputy Commissioner Streetfield was nonetheless aware about the circumstances that forced Munda people to rebel. In one occasion he tells Miyars in an angry tone, when the latter insisted on a ruthless suppression of the Munda rising: “[T]he severe draught for two years, the Chottanagpur land tenure law, the overexploitation of landlords – these have become the substance for their fire.”(215) In spite of his concern for the cause of fighting Mundas, he could not do anything substantial in the case of the Mundas since he is the part of the same corrupted colonial system, which he criticizes. It was only with the killing of the constables that the district administration identified it as a rebellion against the government. The attack on the European club and the Mission had already alerted the colonial administration. The Deputy Commissioner requested the Home Department to deploy army for suppressing the rebellion.

However, with "Operation Sailrakab" Birsa's *Ulgulan* enters a new phase. Birsaite took shelter in Sailrakab, a region surrounded by mountains. There were women and children among them. The army took position on the heights and started firing indiscriminately at the Munda people assembled there. The Munda rebels fought bravely with the mighty force of Britain. They shot arrow at the army. Women and children threw stones. So many Mundas were killed in the firing. "Operation Sailrakab", as it was officially called by the district administrators, exhibits the oppressive strategies of the colonial government. Later, captain Rosch, Streetfield and Hobbs faced a nominal trial in the British court. According to the newspapers like *The Statesman*, more than four hundred Mundas were killed in the army operation in Sailrakab. But the Munda rebels said that they had lost more than seven hundred people. The official version in this, as expected, was confined to just twenty people. The Mundas buried their dead comrades in the forest itself. The author narrates:

How many burials of the Mundas have been furtively done in the forest? No one knew. Nobody knows that the supporters of Birsa fought the British with the arrows coated with a brus venom in *Ulgulan*. Future generation may be astonished. One could see in the bosom of the deep forest that some trees are grown more than the rest. Some trees are taller. Should they realize that the blood and flesh of the Munda warriors who died in the *Ulgulan* had become compost to these trees (254).

The unique fashion that the Mundas kept throughout the rebellion was repeated in the burial of their comrades too. They made the government statistics irrelevant by burying the dead comrades deep in the forest.

Birsa knew that he was going to be caught and persecuted. He kept on telling his supporters that the spirit of his rebellion would never end. Birsa was accustomed to shift his hide-out from one place to another. He went on moving from Sailrakab to Bortodi, to Ayubhatu and to Morahangra. There are with him Donka, Matsiya and Sunara. Sunara was badly wounded in the police firing. Birsa had to carry him on his shoulder for many days in the forest. Sally and Parami occasionally came to their hide-outs and kept them informed of the developments in the villages. They managed to smuggle food to the hide-outs of Birsa without being noticed by the police. They narrated him the pathetic condition in the Munda villages. Police was torturing the Munda women under the pretext of interrogation. At this juncture, Donka and Matsiya decided to surrender, for they thought it would help to alleviate the persecution to which the police subject the Mundas at the villages, particularly their women. They told Birsa that *Ulgulan* would continue if he is safe outside. The text also exhibits the sense of solidarity and amity among the Birsaitees. It is best illustrated in the way Donka and Matsiya managed to get the reward price for Manipahani for their arrest. At the time of surrender Donka told the police that it was Manipahani who persuaded them to surrender. The Government had already declared attractive rewards for the informants. He did so to get the reward amount offered by the government to

her. Manipahani, in turn, bought rice with that money and smuggled it to Birsa's hide-out.

The conditions that led to Birsa's captivity are derivative of the socio-economic condition of the Munda people. It was the pressure of survival which coerced Parami to ignore his order and to cook the rice, thereby attracting the informants. Hunger was the prime motive behind her action. Birsa had given the direction to members of his group not to cook any thing as the rising smoke would lure the attention of the police. He was extremely tired after many days of straying through the deep forest from one place to other without rest. He looked Sally with his sleepy eyes and said: "[Y]ou go to sleep. Let me also sleep. It seems devil's sleep has caught me. Limbs are extremely tired. Parami, aren't you awake? Remember, don't put fire." (259) It is worth noting that Birsa was arrested when Parami tried to prepare rice. She felt a deep, irresistible desire to cook the rice brought by Manipahani. She cooked rice and the smoke rose, leading to the captivity of Birsa. He was captured by the police with the help of some hired informants. Furthermore, the informants themselves were poor Mundas who couldn't resist the temptation of subsistence. It was Sasibhusan and other six Mundas who helped the police to arrest Birsa. To them, five hundred rupees was a big amount.

Birsa's presentiment about the threat upon his life in the prison was proven to be true soon. He knew what the British government was going to do with him. He wanted to save the other Munda rebels who are put in the

prison. He asked them to tell the court that they were participating in the rebellion without properly understanding what it meant. He had a premonition that he would be killed in the prison itself. He kept on reminding them of the need of continuing the struggle. He told his people: "[D]on't let your courage go down. Don't think that Bagvan has left you in the jail. I have given you all the weapons. Gave you courage in mind. Showed you the enemy. Don't submit your weapons to anyone. One day victory will be yours. That's certain." (264) He was seriously concerned about the continuity of *Ulgulan* and its resisting spirit. He wanted their struggle to continue until they obtain their fundamental rights.

Birsa's "clinical murder" in the Ranchi jail reveals the oppressive tactics deployed by the colonial regime to suppress the dissenting voices in the colonies which question its legitimacy and power. Though Birsa was imprisoned in 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1900, his case was not prepared until May. He was kept in custody for many months without trial. He was given poison by the jail Superintendent Anderson. As a result, he had begun to show some bizarre symptoms in the prison. After examining him the Superintendent declared that he had contracted cholera. Amulya came to sense the conspiracy behind the Superintendent's version of cholera. He became suspicious about the foul play done upon Birsa: "[N]o vomiting, no dysentery, no symptoms of cholera. No reason to contract cholera. Birsa hasn't eaten any meals or drunk any water other than which given by the Superintendent." (265) He realized that it was the part of the plot of the authority to exterminate Birsa in the prison

itself. He managed to get a special permission to see Birsa in the cell. He was shocked to see the pathetic condition of Birsa. Amulya warned him: “[Y]ou must listen to my words carefully. Don’t eat any food other than which brought by warder Maguram. Don’t take even water from others, Birsa.” (265) Birsa himself was not unaware about this conspiracy. He has already sensed it. He told the disheartened Amulya in an unruffled tone: “[W]ho knows better than the Superintendent that I don’t have cholera! They won’t send me alive from here.” (260)

Anderson’s colonial pride was hurt seeing the respect and support Birsa received not only from the tribals but also from his own subordinates. He decided that no special treatment should be given to Birsa, when alive or dead. On being asked about Birsa’s funeral by Amulya he replied in a sarcastic tone: “[I]t has to be conducted exactly in the manner of a prisoner died in the prison cell contracting cholera. One thing is clear. No royal treatment should be there. It is not a special case.” (13) To avoid official complications, Birsa’s body was cremated. Anderson had an additional plan behind this decision. He decided to burn Birsa’s body, as against the Munda tradition, to disturb their faith in him. Later, he fabricated a false report to bury the truth about Birsa’s death. He wrote the death report that Birsa died of Asiatic cholera. No one believed his fictitious report on Birsa’s death – from the gravedigger Siva to the Deputy Superintendent Amulya. Anderson’s persistent effort to tear off the divine aura of Birsa was a failure. He let the Munda prisoners see Birsa’s dead body with the hope that watching the

lifeless body of their bagvan would convince them the mortality and commonality of their leader. Ironically enough, it generated a reverse impact upon the Mundas. They started singing in chorus about the glory of their bagvan and his immortality. When Sally furtively came to collect the ashes from the pyre of Birsa she told Siva, the jail sweeper who was assigned the duty of burning the body of Birsa: "*Ulgulan* has no end. Bagvan has no death." (21) This catchphrase is reiterated throughout the text. In a rare mood of excitement Siva, came running, crying out loudly that bagvan won't die and *Ulgulan* won't end. It had a strange impact upon the Munda prisoners.

Finally, as a result of a series of efforts made by Barrister Jacob the final verdict on the Munda rebellion came in November 1900. *The Statesman* and *The Bengali* had ardently highlighted the issues to a wider audience, thereby compelling the authorities to revise their obdurate stance over the Munda issue. The Munda riot case was wound up. Total 482 Mundas underwent the trial. Only 98 were sentenced. 68 were set free with warning, 296 were freed without any punishment. Those who died in the prison (including Birsa) were 20. Gaya Munda, his son Sanre Munda and Sukhram Munda were sentenced to death for killing the constables (296).

Mahasweta has attached a sequel to the story. Rather than an accessory, it constitutes a vital part of the text. Written in the form of an addressing made to Birsa, it encompasses the notes made by Amulya about the trial of the Mundas involved in Birsa's rebellion and its case proceedings. Amulya shows, through his notes, how the counter actions of the Mundas in

Chottanagpur under the leadership of Birsa have led to a crisis of colonial authority. The notes reveal that Birsa's movement had been a grave topic of hot altercation among the colonial administration. Amulya's notes reveal the trepidation that the Birsa movement has triggered among the colonial authority. Amulya's notes on the case proceedings of the Munda rising in 1900 shows that the whole British bureaucracy joined hand to see the fall of Birsa and his people. Besides revealing the colonial strategy of silencing the subjects, Amulya's notes dismantle the inadequacy of the colonial laws in bringing justice to the colonized people. The appendix provides a detailed description of the trial procedures in which Barrister Jacob is shown to be arguing ardently in favour of the Mundas. He even cross-examined the Magistrate and Deputy Commissioner for distorting the laws according to their convenience. As expected, the reports and findings were fabricated in such a way as to vindicate the officials involved in the operation and to ensure maximum punishment to the Munda rebels. Finally, exasperated and disenchanted Amulya resigned from the service of the British colonial government.

Even Barrister Jacob was completely disillusioned of the bogus claims of British justice. Earlier he had defended the British law and its munificence. But by the end of the Munda trial he got completely disenchanted by the British law. His deep faith in the British justice was completely shaken. It is best illustrated in the words: "[L]ook, British administration would give you everything like education, media, university, and railway. They achieve

certain selfish ends through them. But, they don't want to give you the fundamental human rights. If they try to give this, it will weaken the landlords and riches who are the pillars of their rule." (292) Jacob's words unmistakably reflect his deep disillusionment about the imperial programmes of colonialism. Many setbacks notwithstanding, he acted insistently for bringing justice to the tribals. In the court he zealously argued that the Munda prisoners were denied even the fundamental rights ensured by the British justice. It was his active involvement with the Munda cases which helped to bring their issues to national attention. However, the irony is that he was functioning within the parameters of colonial justice. Whereas Birsa, who was already convinced of the inadequacy of the colonial justice, was skeptical about the initiatives of Jacob and Amulya.

Birsa's *Ulgulan*, like many other tribal risings which took place during the colonial period, was religious in form. The religiosity of the subaltern insurgencies had been a source of great exasperation to the colonial government. They were deeply upset by the superhuman image Birsa enjoyed among the tribals in the whole Chottanagpur region. In the novel, they are shown to be attempting to discredit Birsa in front of his people. The religious content of Birsa's rebellion was, however, clearly informed by a politics of collective resistance. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, Birsa's movement is delineated in the manner of a revolution with well-defined social and economic objectives. Birsa, notwithstanding his divine aura, is shown to be rejecting many of the tribal traditions, which he thought would hinder the realization of his

revolution. By repudiating several intransigent elements in his own tradition Birsa, in effect, politicized his people. Nor he took recourse in Hindu ideal as Jithu Santhal, the tribal leader, did later. He was equally disenchanted by the Hindu ideal and could view the problems faced by his people as an autonomous one. He even went to the extent of declaring the upper caste people as the enemies of the tribals. This is well illustrated in his decision to recapture the old temples of Chuttiya and Jagannathapuri from the caste Hindus. It alludes to the cultural agenda of his rebellion.

Arguably, Birsa never let the political substance of his movement eclipsed by its religiosity. The Subaltern historians' privileging of religion and culture in popular movements has been criticized for the reactionary propensities latent in it. This accentuation of religiosity, coupled with a downplaying of the politics of people, has nevertheless helped in legitimizing the cultural nationalism, exemplified in the aggravation of militant Hinduism in India. Mahasweta, however, who has received her materials for reconstructing the history of Birsa and his movement from the tribal societies, hasn't let the political content of Birsa's rebellion eclipsed by any other factors – cultural or otherwise. By endowing Birsa's *Ulgulan* with such social overtones, she delineates it as an anti-hegemonic revolution. *Aranyer Adhikar* is not the story of an individual tragedy. It is significant that the character of Birsa is developed through his relation to his community. Mahasweta has taken special care not to individualize Birsa to the extent of de-linking him from his socio-economic contexts.

The tribal societies in India are thoroughly disempowered and perpetually maltreated. The extremely abject condition of the tribals in the colonial period is reiterated throughout the fabric of the text. The new laws introduced by the colonial government increasingly alienated them from their socio-economic moorings. They were denied access to the forest which had been the means of their subsistence. The new bills passed by the British government conceded more power and opportunities to the local kings and landlords. The constraints exerted by the system -- theorized most trenchantly by Foucault -- in effect, incapacitated the subalterns in many ways. In every sense their life is encompassed by utter penury. It is well reflected in Karmi's words: "[O]ur life has become a torn rag. When we mend it on one side, the other side begins to rip. How can we wear the clothe which is completely torn?" (34) Rice and salt always appear in their dreams. Rice is their staple food, but they cannot afford boiled rice everyday. Rice is a luxury they cannot afford. Salt is very popular with them and they take plenty of it with their food. Birsa's brother Komatha used to say: "[W]hen I grow up I will bring a big sack full of salt from the shop. Then everyone can use as much salt they desire." (35) The question of survival -- both in physical and cultural terms -- are woven into the texture of *Aranyer Adhikar*. One of the most striking characteristics of *Aranyer Adhikar* is its sustained and uninterrupted atmosphere of subaltern articulation.

Like many tribal risings during the colonial as well as postcolonial period, Birsa's rebellion in 1899 was also related to land and labour. The

continuing ejection of the tribal people from their homelands has led to many organized struggles in last two centuries, especially in the latter half of nineteenth century. The uprisings of the Kols in 1832, the Santal *Hool* in 1885, the Sardar movement in 1895 and Birsa movement in 1899, to name a few, had their primary motive the issues related to land. *Aranyer Adhikar* not only marks *Ulgulan's* connectivity with the previous movements, but also implicates its continuation in the future movements of resistance. Even today the tribal societies, throughout the country, are still being evicted from their land. The open end of the text suggests the necessity of engaging further movements of resistance.

Significantly enough, in one occasion or other, every Munda character is shown to be articulating his/her aspirations about reclaiming the customary rights dispossessed of them. At the time of his death Sunara tells Dhani: "Bagvan has told that we will get back the forests and hills of Singhbhum." (25) He seemed to be cherishing on the dream of recovering their traditional rights over the forest. He went on to say that "[W]e will get every forest. We will also get the land fertile like girls. All the land will be ours. No white men or landlords will be there to usurp the land. We will get everything Dhani." (25) It is significant that Sunara had come to join the Birsa's movement after setting fire to the house of Suraj Singh to whom he is indebted through a bond. He, like many other members of his community, was virtually dispossessed of the means of sustenance by the colonial-feudal axis. With nothing but the labour to sell and survive on, the tribals are

frequently forced to the fetters of bonds. As per the contract, he had to serve Suraj Singh in all his life. In return, he would receive a bowl of gruel every day. The text contains descriptions of bonded labour, an issue which is candidly articulated in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* and *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*.

In *Aranyer Adhikar*, Mahasweta has presented Birsa's mother Karmi with an epic dimension. Being the mother of a revolutionary leader, she had to undergo a series of psychological traumas and tribulations. Her response to the ascription of divinity upon Birsa was an ambivalent one. Like the other members of her community she also had cherished a dream about a bagvan who would be born among the Mundas to liberate them from the shackles of servility and to regain their lost culture. But the sudden ascription of divinity upon Birsa led to a deep psychological predicament in Karmi. Earlier, she was obviously disturbed at Dhani's constant pursuing of Birsa. Her own attitude towards the veteran rebel was a mixed one. She had a respect for him but she was equally disturbed by the way he allured Birsa to the trouble of revolution. She had a premonition that she would miss Birsa forever, once he becomes the bagvan. However, her fears were later justified. Mahasweta has endowed the character of Karmi with an archetypal quality. At the end of the story, Karmi is shown to be waiting for her son Birsa who, she knew, would never come back.

When Birsa was a child, Karmi used to recount the story of Kallamma (The Stone Mother) to him. It is the story of a mother who turned a stone after

waiting many years for her son, whom certain robbers had kidnapped and killed. Without knowing the death of her son, the mother kept on waiting. The story actually is a parable of eternal motherhood. It is relevant to the thread of the text as it resonates the deep nervous tension experienced by Karmi after Birsa's death. At the end of the novel, Amulya sees her sitting like a stone statue, waiting for Birsa. It is with a touch of poignancy Mahasweta presents the picture of a devastated mother waiting for her son in vain. The eternal motherhood and its predicament is a theme well explored in many of her stories. Karmi's extreme dilemma brings to mind the picture of Jashoda, the protagonist of "Breast Giver", who is compelled to become a hired *stanadayini*, or breast giver, owing to her socio-economic vulnerability and consequently dies of breast cancer. "Breast Giver"— so excellently deconstructed and theorized by Spivak in the postcolonial field — stands apart from Mahasweta's other stories for its apparent emphasis of the gender subalternity. "Motherhood", according to Mahasweta, "is a great addiction." She went on to say that "the addiction doesn't break even when the milk is dry." (*Breast Giver* 267) Like Jashoda, Karmi is motherhood personified. The predicament of maternity continues to be a pre-occupying theme in many of the stories of Mahasweta. *Mother of 1084*, to cite another example, presents Sujatha, the mother of a boy killed in an "encounter", and her futile attempts to trace the reasons of his enforced death.

One of the most powerful characters in the story is Dhani Munda, the veteran rebel. He has been instrumental in turning Birsa into an adamant

revolutionary. It was Dhani who made all arrangements of *Ulgulan* when Birsa was in prison. In the text, he is depicted as a man with unremitting revolutionary potential. Dhani's active involvement in the tribal revolution dates back to the Santal *Hool* and Sardar's *Mulkuyi*. Throughout the story he is shown to be triggering the primal pride of the Mundas in many occasions, thereby instigating them to fight back their oppressors. Mahasweta has drawn him as an archetypal figure endowed with a rich repository of community wisdom. He is one of the chief narrative agents in the story. Dhani, like many other Mundas, was expecting a "Munda saviour" who could liberate them from the manacles of exploitation and reclaim their crushed dignity. Dhani's life, in fact, was a search for a revolutionary leader. His search for bagvan was an incessant one extended over many years. Driven by a strange hope, he even went to the Santals and Kols in Baganadihi with the expectation of getting a bagvan among them. Yet, he could not find one. But his dreams about the Munda bagvan did not materialize until he accidentally saw the perturbed Birsa roaming inside the forest. His oral narration of the community history traces the transformation which happened in their socio-cultural milieu during the last two centuries. Mundas are basically a farming community from the earlier period. In the past they were happier. They survived by hunting and farming. There was no incursion of outside people into their geo-cultural spheres. But their life underwent a drastic change after the influx of outsiders, foreign as well as native. Those who came from different corners became dikhus. They gradually ejected the Mundas from

their lands by violating their ancient tradition. Gradually the dikhus came to possess all the land. Tribals were accustomed to work as slaves for these cruel landlords. The predicament experienced by the Mundas was similar to the experiences of other tribal communities like Santals and Kols. Often they joined hand together to fight their oppressors. Dhani's search of the saviour among other tribes implies this connectivity. Sardar *Mulkuyi* and *Santal Hool* were primarily against the landlordism. Significantly enough, Dhani's recounting of the tribal history traces the history of colonialism and its impact upon the life of the tribal societies in India. It is through the characterization of Dhani Mahasweta strikes the continuity of tribal struggle in her *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*.

*Aranyer Adhikar* is also about the deep impact of the process of modernization upon the life of the tribal people in the country. Mundas in Chottanagpur, as the tribals elsewhere, have been undergoing the process of detribalization since last couple of centuries. Their culture and indigenous structures of social relations underwent drastic change with the intrusion of various non-aboriginal people into their geo-cultural spheres. Bringing attention to the multifarious ways through which colonialism denigrates the culture of the colonized people Fanon says: "[C]olonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it." (94) The intension behind such cultural uprooting, he alleges, is "to drive into the natives heads

the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation and bestiality." (On National ... 94) The text shows how colonialism, in connivance with the semi-feudal system in India, proliferated the process of detribalization and acculturation in various ways. The third person narrative throughout the text illuminates the social pressures and cultural crisis experienced by the tribals in Chottanagpur. "[M]any people came to their life. Many things came to their life. Landlords, traders, moneylenders, Missionaries, railway, train, roads, guns, bayonets, draught, poverty, statistics, contract, unpaid labour..."(28) Even today, the life of the tribals is enveloped by many hostile forces.

One of the prominent features of *Aranyer Adhikar* is the presence of folk songs across the thread of the text. Mahasweta has woven songs into the fabric of the story. In the novel, songs played a crucial role in instigating the revolutionary spirit among the Munda people. The tribal songs are equipped with a primal rhythm which intensifies the emotional appeal of the religion. In the text, by inserting the folk song Mahasweta seeks to capture the primordial rhythm of tribal life in an effective way. Besides evoking the racial memories, they aid in strengthening the bond among the members of the tribe. They consist of what Carl Jung called the "primordial images" and address the racial memory of the tribals. Birsa's song *bolope*, for example, had a strange effect upon the Mundas. It stresses the brotherhood and fraternity. Among the songs, Birsa liked *bolope* in particular and used to sing it on the occasion of the gathering of the rebels. The Mundas are also shown to be

fabricating many songs about their Birsa bagvan. It was also sung on the occasion of meetings. Sometimes they turned their deep sorrows and hardships into beautiful songs. It is illustrated in the way Munda prisoners sang in group when Birsa died in the Ranchi prison. In short, the folk songs were instrumental in strengthening the attachment among the Mundas during the period of *Ulgulan*. Admittedly, for them, these songs opened up numerous venues of socio-political actions.

*Aranyer Adhikar* offers a powerful critique of nationalism. It is also interesting to note that the waves of Nationalism and its ideals have not reached the tribal settlements. Though Birsa's *Ulgulan* took place in a period when nationalist movement was gaining momentum across the nation, the tribal communities remained uninformed and unaffected by the mainstream movements. Or the nationalist movement in India did not care to acknowledge these initiatives from the margins. To use the words of Mahasweta, "[N]on-tribal India has not acknowledged these glorious struggles as part of the freedom movement." (*Dust on the Road*, 108) That is why Nationalism or Gandhism never figured in the revolutionary space of the tribals. The deep anti-colonial character of this rebellion has been overlooked by the official chroniclers of the history of Indian independence. It has to be seen as the deciding feature of elite historiography in India. Spivak observes that "[I]n the case of nationalist movement for Independence it is clearly pointed out that the bourgeoisie's 'interested' refusal to recognize the importance of, and to ally themselves with, a politicized peasantry accounted

for the failure of the discursive displacement that operated the peasant's politicization." (Subaltern Studies... 333) Colonialism and nationalism were the two focal areas of scrutiny during 1960's and 70's. Most of the peasant movements in colonial India were dismissed as apolitical or as "pre-political". It is in this context that Guha scrutinizes the problematic of subaltern politics. Guha strikes a clear difference between the politics of the people and the politics of the elites. Elite politics, according to him, marks a "vertical mobilization" and rely on the adaptation of colonial parliamentary institutions. Subaltern politics, on the other hand, consists of a self-directed domain in which the political mobilization takes place in a horizontal manner. Subaltern politics, as Guha claims, is characterized by traditional organization of kinship and territoriality. Consequently, it tends to be more violent than the elite politics. Guha observes that "[T]he experience of exploitation and labour endowed this politics with many idioms, norms and values which put it in a category apart from elite politics." (qtd. in Chakrabarty 16) Peasant movements and tribal uprisings in colonial India are endowed with an autonomous grammar, entirely different from the nationalism. The mainstream historiographies, by refuting the autonomous domains of subaltern politics, overlooked the discourses of kinship, caste, religion and ethnicity through which the tribals and peasants expressed themselves in protest. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, Mahasweta, while retaining some of the concepts upheld by the subaltern historian like Ranajith Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, goes beyond them by rebuffing their stress on autonomy and

religiosity. She presents Birsa's *Ulgulan* not as a self-contained and autonomous rebellion but as a socially motivated revolution. The factor of culture is not allowed to downplay the politics of class.

With the arrest and death of Birsa, the *Ulgulan* initiated by him enters a new stage. Though Birsa died, the revolutionary ideals that he instigated in his people remained alive. By reiterating the persistence of his revolutionary ideals even after his death, Mahasweta suggests the continuity of the struggle by the oppressed people. As Barrister Jacob admits: "[H]is body is perished. But his ideals are very much alive in the minds of the Mundas." (291) Birsa movement was not a failure, though it was brutally crushed by the colonial government. Like any other movements of the exploited, it has retained certain significance. As an immediate consequence of Birsa's *Ulgulan*, British government was forced to revise some of its anti-tribal policies. The Chottanagpur Tenancy Act was passed in 1908. Furthermore, it has prompted many similar movements of resistance in colonial as well as postcolonial India. Jharkhand Movement, for example, was inspired by Birsa's *Ulgulan* of 1899. One of the recent developments of the continuous tribal struggles is exemplified in the formation of Jharkhand state. The text constantly strikes connectivity with other movements of resistance initiated by the tribal communities. There are constant references to Santhal *Hool*, the Kol rebellion, the sardar *Mulkuyi* so on in the text. The Munda rebels received energy from these resisting movements made by their forefathers. The author often intervenes to illumine the undying significance of these counteractions

initiated by subalterns:

No, it was not the whites who won. They did not win all the wars. The wars were won by Santhal, Kol, Sardar. It is because each defeat proclaims a truth. The names of the winners are only in records. Whereas the name of the losers sprouts in man's blood, treachery, hunger, poverty like in a small plant. Their names spread over the songs, memories and tasteless gruel of these black men (236).

Though the text marks no discernible change in the socio-economic condition of the Mundas after the rebellion of 1899, it implicates the continuity of subaltern counter struggles in the future. Significantly enough, Barrister Jacob reiterates this idea during one of his conversations with Amulya. He told Amulya, who has been totally distraught at the Government's brutal suppression of the Munda uprising: "[W]e cannot judge whether a war is failure or success on the basis of official records." (257) After appearing for the hapless Mundas for many years Barrister Jacob is convinced of the inadequacy of British law. Finally, after resigning from the service of the colonial government, Amulya went to Chalakad the native village of Birsa. He reflects "[N]o struggle ends in defeat. It must continue. Because, man remains." (300) Though Birsa failed in achieving the goals of *Ulgulan*, this setback itself would serve like a spring board for further revolution with stronger impact. The text has an open end. It stresses the continuity of subaltern struggles.

## Notes

Aranyajanani	The Mother Forest or Goddess of forest
Bagvan	God
Birsaite	The follower of Birsa Munda
Dikhu	Word used by the tribal people to denote an intruder or non-tribal.
Sabha	Traditional assemblage
Sardars	Munda rebels
Ulgulan	Armed uprising led by Birsa Munda from December 1899 to January 1900 in the Ranchi and northern Singhbhum districts of Bihar
Zamindar	Landlord

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### Chapter III

#### The Pedagogy of the Marginalized: A Study of

#### *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*

In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Mahasweta Devi documents the colonial and postcolonial history of the tribal communities in India. If the focal point of *Aranyer Adhikar* is the denigration of the tribal life during the period of colonialism, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* depicts how the exploitation and marginalization of the tribals and lower castes continued unabated even after the attainment of Independence. One of the prominent features of the novel is its consistent demonstration of the joint struggle of the tribals and outcaste Hindus against the upper classes/castes who seek to encroach them. Mahasweta demonstrates, in a unique fashion, how the solidarity of the victims opens up numerous spaces and counter possibilities for subaltern politics in the contemporary Indian social scenario. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* documents the continuing struggle of the subalterns against the manipulative system and also marks an extension of the struggles depicted in *Aranyer Adhikar*. Significantly enough, in the text, the colonial and postcolonial history of the tribals intersects with the history of India in general.

When the story starts, the impact of Birsa's rebellion had already faded out. But the memories of Birsa and his *Ulgulan* were still alive in the minds of the Mundas. The escalating process of non-tribal influx into their geo-cultural milieu had already impoverished the tribals. They were incessantly being

alienated from their land. One of the focal points of the text is constituted by the increasing exploitation and ostracism to which the subaltern communities in the country are subjected in post-Independence period. In her introduction to *Agnigarbha* (1978) Mahasweta observes that “[A]ll the factors that led to the eruption of the movement remain unchanged...the exploitation of the starving peasants continues unabated.... Rural India has the appearance of an enormous graveyard....” (qtd. in Bandyopadhyay viii) The text, in this sense, provides a sharp critique of independence and its failed projects. It realistically documents the socio-economic and political scenario of post-independent India.

The abiding exploitation of the natural resources of the tribal homelands has resulted in the wide-ranging breakdown of the indigenous economy of the tribals. By recounting the story of Chotti’s forefather, the text addresses, at its very outset, the issue of non-tribal infringement into the tribal homelands and its concomitant impact upon their life. The author narrates: “[S]uddenly one day many kinds of people – White-Bengali-Bihari – appeared and evicted him from his home.” (1) Purti Munda, Chotti’s forefather, had a premonition that the “outsiders in search of gold would make the place all mixed up.” (3) It was the fear of cultural erasure which forced him to flee to Mauritius. The deep disgruntlement over the process of intrusion is unequivocally articulated by Chotti: “how White men and Biharis jumped at the sight of coal and mica, how instantly they disfigured adivasi areas with slums of tile-roofed dwellings. Who knows what such people will

do if they see gold? These hills, these forests, this river will once again be spoiled." (2)

The prerogative enjoyed by the elite classes during the colonial tenure was the result of the superimposition of modern capitalist relations on the old feudal land relations. The British had placed over their own administrative patterns in the tribal areas leading to the disintegration of their indigenous economy. Most primarily, colonialism deprived them of their traditional means of subsistence. What was more devastating was the system of landownership and revenue introduced by the colonial government. The aboriginal people felt loss of power and resources in the colonial regime. The annual tax trebled was beyond the paying capacity of the tribals peasants. As Ashok Sen rightly points out: "[T]he inception of capitalism which came about through the onslaught of imperialism lacked integration with the local economy. The origin of an indigenous capitalist nucleus, and even its expansion and diversity, fell far short of releasing any production dynamic which could encompass the entire people." (206-7) Many non-tribal intruders - - mostly the money lenders, contractors, traders – started settling in the tribal regions. With their money, they offered credit facilities to the tribals. This loaning, which initially provided relief, soon turned to be highly exploitative and usurping. The British laws helped the exploiters. It was not in the interests of the colonial rule to bring any positive change in the old semi-feudal structure of Indian society.

Furthermore, the arrival of industries and construction of huge dams in

the regions led to the destruction of their geo-cultural milieu. They were displaced from their original habitat by these huge projects. The colonial rulers started using the tribal land for mining and plantation. As Partha Chatterjee aptly points out: "[T]he usual features here are the intrusion of new extractive mechanisms into the agrarian societies, often with the active legal and armed support of the colonial political authority, leading to a systematic commercialization of agriculture and the incorporation in varying degrees of the agrarian economy into a larger capitalist world-market." (337) The economic exploitation coupled with social oppression and cultural subjugation instigated the tribals to many movements of resistance. They revolted against the government to protect their land and culture. Their struggles were initially against the landlords and moneylenders but ultimately they turned against the colonial government itself. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* provides an authentic documentation of all these issues.

Mahasweta has maintained a thematic connectivity between *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* through different narrative strategies. First of all, the chief instrument of the linkage between these two texts is provided by Dhani Munda, the veteran rebel and Birsa's close associate in *Ulgulan*. Dhani is Chotti's sister Parmi's grandfather-in-law. He was close to ninety when Chotti met him. Chotti was only fourteen then. He told Chotti "I have a spellbound arrer. If ten birds fly in t' sky, an' ye tell t' arrer get me t' third one, it'll do it." (5) Chotti learnt the art of archery from Dhani. The very opening of the text presents Dhani as a great rebel who still preserves an

indomitable spirit. His association with the rebellions has nevertheless given him a special image among the Mundas. It can be seen that, if in *Aranyer Adhikar* Dhani is somewhat eclipsed by the image of Birsa, in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* he emerges as a prime presence, an embodiment of revolutionary spirit. There was a terrific haste inside his mind about engaging struggles against the oppressors. The author narrates: "Dhani was always crazy, at the time of the Santal Hul Dhani was a lad of twenty. The Kherwar revolt, the Mulkoï revolt of the Sardars, and then Birsa's revolt. Armed struggle is also an addiction. He went to all the revolts in the hopes that Mundas would establish villages in forest and arable land and farm rightfully and in peace...." (14) Dhani managed to subsist on by hunting. His strong rapport with the jungle is well illustrated in his advice to Chotti: "[L]et me learn ye t' jungle. With jungle learnin' ye won' die starvin'. What isn't there in t' jungle?"(14) Mahasweta has endowed an archetypal quality in his portrayal. Though it was his deep desire to win the archery feat which drove Chotti to Dhani, he learnt more things from him. Besides the art of archery Dhani taught Chotti the revolutionary lessons and how to be proud of one's own culture. After having taught him the lessons of archery, Dhani bequeathed his magic arrow to Chotti saying "[M]ost feisty arrer! This is an arrer to keep close Chotti, don't shoot unless there's great need. No one can ever beat ya if ye keep this by."(2) This is of course a symbolic act implicating the devolving of a tradition from one generation to other. Everyone believed that Dhani's arrow had some spell on it. The magic arrow symbolizes the continuing

tradition of their resistance and struggle.

Dhani was deeply disturbed at the increasing vulnerability of his people to the antagonistic forces in their physical environment. He felt that the Mundas had become more pliant and were living like slaves, pledging their dignity and pride to the moneylenders and landlords. He tells "[N]o Hul, no Mulkoï struggle, no Ulgulan. Me lord said I'll be born again in t' belly of a Munda mother, Dhani! No trace of that either. T' Mundas now work bonded labour with down-low heads, they die at t' hands of t' moneylender. All's become t' train line, t' polis watch, t' muscle force King-Emperor and Daroga -- no end in this -- me mind's not in such a world Chotti." (16) His deep faith in the armed revolution made him participate in many insurgencies against the enemies of the tribals. Chotti's conversation with Dhani unveils the revolutionary spirit inherent in the latter's mind. Dhani explains the rationale of revolution to Chotti:

Why must one kill people from time to time?

We killed.

Why.

We won' eat mealie. Won' obey t' terrorizin' moneylender, Diku, polis, will occupy arable and settled rural land, will take back t' right to t' forest.

Did ye?

No. we got nothin'. Someone showed us t' way. We fought. Someone might show ye folks t' way. All t'

reasons remain, Chotti. If such a day comes ye too will  
kill. (19)

Owing to the extreme economic pressure the Mundas were getting more and more vulnerable to the antagonistic forces in their physical environment. They became more susceptible to the landlords and moneylenders. The throttlehold of the landlords and moneylenders had become stronger. Dhani felt that his people have become easy victims of the moneylenders and the government. He tells Chotti: "In yer time there is no Lord, no *Ulgulan*, no fire in anyone's soul to change t' Munda's life, no piercin' of moneylender, polis, an' soldier wit' arrers in t' heat of that fire...."

(13) He was deeply disappointed over the proliferating impact of the hostile system upon his people, despite Birsa's *Ulgulan*. After the Birsa *Ulgulan*, Dhani was expelled from Chiabasa. Since then, he was living in Marudi under the close surveillance of the district authorities. He had a deep desire to go back to Chaibasa to see the people who were with him in Birsa's *Ulgulan*, particularly Sally and Pariba, Birsa's adoptive son. One day, without telling anybody, he went to Chiabasa and didn't come back. His disappearance from Marudi caused much fuss among the officials. After the release from the Munda rebellion case, he was sent to Marudi in Palamau with the order of staying out of Chaibasa. Not surprisingly, his reappearance at Chaibasa alerted the authorities. They were conscious of his power to instigate the people into revolution. Police saw the symptom of an imminent unrest in Dhani's presence at Chaibasa. Consequently, he was shot by the police.

Dhani's legend merged with the legend of Birsa. Chotti Munda was obviously inspired by Dhani's revolutionary rhetoric. Not surprisingly, after a few days experience with Dhani, Chotti became more concerned about the issues encountered by his community and simultaneously his interest in the archery feat began to subside.

Chotti's skill of archery came to be acknowledged widely. Even as a child he had kept an obsession for archery. He won the archery contests fair after fair. Archery fair is an integral part of tribal festivals. The archery festivals of Mundas and Oraons are detailed elaborately in the first part of the text. Every year there is a fierce competition in archery during the fair on Bijoya: "[H]itting the final bull's eyes is exceedingly difficult. Two iron rings are tied onto two successive bamboo poles. There are three such rings. The bull's eye must be hit through all these rings." (3) After the feat the contestants would share the pig and liquor among them. Besides the fair of Chotti, there were also Narasingah fair, Jujubhatu fair etc. in which he participated and won. Once the Secretary of the State came to Chotti village, out of his curiosity to watch the archery fair and was impressed by Chotti's sharp aim. But, at the time of leaving he didn't forget to warn Chotti: "[P]lay your arrows, shoot birds, but don't let your men make trouble." (61) However, after some years he stopped contesting and became the undisputable judge of the competition.

The alienation of land has been a major issue with the tribal communities in India. The lion's part of tribal land has been usurped by the

intruders, either by coercion or force. The land they rarely possessed was small and uneconomical. Their crop yielding was very minimal. The dearth of banking facilities in the tribal areas forced them to the moneylenders owing to their extreme economic vulnerability. Consequently, they remain chronically indebted. The colonial policies have resulted in the ruthless exploitation of the tribals in different ways as they favoured the zamindars, landlords, moneylenders and the forest contractors. Capitalism and colonialism strategically preserved many pre-capitalist and pre-colonial social relations. As Ania Loomba aptly points out: "[I]t is in the interest of capitalism that certain older social structures not be totally transformed, and certain older forms of exploitation based on racial and ethnic hierarchies continue to make available cheap labour." (131) The text shows how the tribals and untouchables, driven by poverty and hunger, are accustomed to the fetters of bondage, having left with no choice.

After recounting the story of Dhani the text attempts to document the socio-economic scenario prevailing in the village of Chotti. When Birsa, Chotti's father, refused to borrow money on bond, the upper classes became suspicious and they conspired to bring him under the yoke of bondage. The plot of the landowners to bring Birsa under bondage exhibits that the privileged class wouldn't allow any deviation from the prevailing exploitative order – an order that maintains the master-slave relationship between the elites and the subalterns. In order to perpetuate their hegemony over the resources this pattern had to be preserved. Any digression from this pattern is

viewed with much doubt and remonstrance. Lala Baijnath, the money lender, was enraged at Birsa's decision not to borrow money from him and get bonded. When Lala Baijnath provokingly called him a "moneylender", Birsa felt insulted and said: "[C]alled s moneylender, Lord? Munda borrows but doesn't lend. Doesn't suck his brother's blood by moneylending. You've abused me." (32) Among the upper castes, money lending is a word of respect whereas the tribals viewed it in as a derogatory business. Infuriated by Birsa's impertinent and self-assertive disposition, Lala Baijnath got him arrested by the police. He was brutally beaten in the police station. After a few days, unable to bear the insult, Birsa committed suicide. Chotti questions Mahabir Sahay, the police officer, when he came to make the report of the suicide "[W]hy'd me Aba die? Me Aba never looked even when a pig was cut. Yet hit him for no fault and fro' that his mind was turned" (47). Mahasweta demonstrates how the dominant classes, in connivance with the government machineries, encroach the tribals and untouchables in various ways. Birsa had to pay the price for his gesture of dignity. The gesture of self-assertion from the part of the subaltern is viewed with derision by the elite class.

Among other things, the text offers a powerful critique of the system of bonded labour, which is still prevalent in many part of India, especially in Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. The system of bonded labour, as prevalent in Indian society, is a relic of feudal system. It is a system whereby a person on receiving some loan from his creditor remains as a labourer under his authority until the loan and the interest is repaid. It refers to the

relationship between a creditor and debtor who obtains loan due to his/her economic compulsions and agrees to abide by the terms dictated by the creditor. The relationship built on this agreement is on unequal terms. Under this system, the service is rendered for the debt or in lieu of the interest accruing to the debt. The debtor either works without getting any payment or with an extremely meager wage far below the minimum. It chains the subalterns in perpetual bondage. Examining the features of this pernicious system Mahasweta observes:

Under the bandhua system, all over India, a man borrows some money – it might be for food, a death in the family, hunger, sickness, a daughter's marriage, anything. The borrower then puts his thumb-impression on a piece of paper and thus becomes debt-bonded. From then on he will work for the moneylender for an extremely low wage till the debt is repaid with interest. In reality, however, the debt is never repaid, for the interest goes on mounting. The process of debt-repayment continues for generations. (*Dust on the Road* 12)

According to this practice, the debtor enters into an agreement with the moneylenders that he would render service to the master either by himself or through any member of his family, for a specified or unspecified period. This system, besides forfeiting the debtor of his/her freedom of employment and movement, deny his/her right to sell any of his property or product of his labour at the market value. During the period of bondage, the debtor cannot

seek employment from any other person nor could he sell his labour. Indebtedness and forced labour are two basic features of this system. The forced labour hereditarily passes from one generation to another.

In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* Mahasweta has sought to deal with the impact of the reprehensible system of bonded labour in an extensive manner. Earlier, Dhani is shown to be expressing his deep discontent over the abject condition of his people which forced them to be bonded labourers, even after Birsa's *Ulgulan*. When Parmi's father-in-law went to give bonded labour to the moneylender Dhani prevented him saying "[T]a gie bond labour? Doncha know? That bond labour is one among all t' ills he fought against?" (8). He was referring the Birsa and his rebellion. The text is replete with the description of bonded labour and its concomitant problems. The Mundas and untouchables, with whom the dominant castes/classes maintained a creditor-debtor relationship, were always accustomed to seek their help, owing to their economic vulnerability. The system of bonded labour provided an effective weapon for the upper class/caste people to enslave the subaltern. As Lala Baijnath, the landowner says: "[I]t's very easy to bind the adivasis in debt. If they once put their thumbprint on paper, they give bonded labour for generations." (32) Every season the landowners need hundreds of labourers. It is the system of bonded labour which provides them with the labourers for cheaper rates. That is the reason why Tirathnath insisted on getting bonded labour. He knew that once the practice of bonded labour ended the landlords wouldn't get the field hands for low remuneration. The text demonstrates

how the landowners conspire to bring the tribals and outcaste Hindus to the shackles of bond and dependency. Like Dhani, Chotti kept a strong derision towards the system of bonded labour. When the draught descended on the village, the Mundas decided to borrow money from Tirathnath. Then, Chotti is shown to be preventing them: "[Y]e'll gie bonded labour for a thumbprint, f'r a bit of rice-wheat to eat, I'll not say 'yeah' to that. This bonded labour won' be quit in ten generations. Everyone falls into its trap. See all t' Ganjus, Dusads, Chamars, Dhopas – all the oppressed, tribals and outcastes – tied up in bonded labour. I won't say 'yeah' to no one. But thing is, can't say 'no' neither. Why not? Then ye'd say, if we put thumbprint on paper at least we'd eat." (49) Chotti's words illustrate the utter destitution that the Mundas were experiencing. Their life is enveloped by sheer poverty and uncertainty. The text shows how this reprehensible system enables a few socially and economically powerful groups to manipulate the underdogs, holding them in bondage.

Despite the enactment of Bonded Labour Abolition Act in 1976, this pernicious practice continues in many part of the country. Social workers have shown considerable attention to the practice of bonded labour since it is considered incompatible with the fundamental human rights. Mahasweta herself actively participated in the releasing and rehabilitation of the bonded labourers in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orrisa and West Bengal. Its impact is felt more severely in these states where the vestiges of feudalism still remain. These issues form the focal point of her collection of activist writings *Dust on*

*the Road*, in which she gives a comprehensive picture of this deadly practice and how it throttles the subalterns in the country. Her first hand experience among the tribals and untouchables in rural India has given the book a quality of social documentation. The tribals and Dalits are consigned to an existence where they have to live in utter destitution and be satisfied with whatever meager food they get. Her activism among the tribals for many years has convinced Mahasweta of the inadequacy of the government projects in ameliorating their condition. She claims that "I treat Palamau as a mirror for India. I have lived among the tribals, loved them, and worked with them. I have been saying to the Government, to the people all over India that you must give the tribals the respect they deserve. Just allotting some funds is not enough – the money does not reach them." (*The Wordsmiths* 173) Though it is often the economic pressure which drives the subalterns to the stranglehold of bonded labour, the social and religious factors also support the practice. Extreme poverty, inadequacy of income, destruction of the crops, natural calamities like drought and flood, diseases and lack of alternative loan system, to name a few, have been the chief conditions which forced the tribals and Dalits to the bondage. Significantly enough, all the works selected in the present study contain detailed description of the pernicious practice of bonded labour during colonial as well as postcolonial India. The impact of the system of bonded labour upon the subaltern people is most candidly dealt with in her *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*.

The text, among other things, shows how the missionary activities led

to the cultural uprooting of the tribal communities in India. While the missionaries have been the pioneers in education and health service in the tribal areas, they have also been responsible for alienating the tribals from their culture. Having left with no option, the tribals were forced to seek shelter in the Missions, albeit their deep fears of acculturation. Bharat Munda says "[W]e'll go and become Mission Mundas. No zamindar's brother-in-law can chase off a Mission Munda." (110) But Chotti couldn't stand the Mundas joining Mission. He tells Bharat "It hurts in me chest Bharat. T' more Mundas go, an arrer goes through me heart." (111) The Mission, with its seductive power, continued to ensnare the tribals. However, the prerogative that the Mission enjoyed during the colonial period subsided after Independence. Chotti tells Pahan that "[M]ission! With Sukha's group t' joy of t' Mission is over. T' Mission no longer gives land to Munda and Oraon, and makes him a farmer no more. Go to t' market town, and ye'll see Mission Mundas wanderin' around like us lookin' fer work, driven by hunger." (151) Pointing out the increasing estrangement of the tribal people with their own religion and culture Chotti says that "[T]hey forget all in their belly's worry." (151) Here, the author seems to be stressing on the question of survival. The consideration of stomach remained to be the most important motivating factor. Chotti was deeply disturbed by the way his people were perpetually pushed into the abyss of uncertainties. Dukhia's surrender to the police and Pahan's fleeing had already destabilized his mind very much. He thinks "[W]hy did Pahan go into the forest surrounded by high hills, a forest from

which there is no exit? To remain true to his self Dhani goes to Jejur, Dukhia goes to police station with the manager's head, and Pahan has to go into the forest? " (105)

### **Critique on Independence**

The text also offers a powerful critique of the Independence. The period of the story is extended over the decades that immediately preceded and followed Indian Independence. Independence hasn't brought any noticeable change in the condition of the subaltern people in the country. It did not entail the emergence of a social and political order which is attuned to the interests of the underdogs. The elite leadership did not exhibit the will required to bring transformation in the social structure even after the attainment of Independence. The pathetic condition of the tribals and Dalits continued unabated after independence. As B.T Ranadive points out: "[I]n consonance with its outlook of compromise with feudal land relations the bourgeois leadership adopted a policy, which though differing in words from the earlier policy, in content remained the same." (143) The privileges enjoyed by the dominant classes during the colonial regime continued unabated during the postcolonial period too. The author narrates: "[T]he August movement did not even touch the life of Chotti's community. It was as if that was the Diku's struggle for liberation. Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indian. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle." (121) The vestiges of feudal structure were allowed to stay in postcolonial India. With some realignment in the modes of exploitation the dominant classes went on

manipulating the poor, with or without the knowledge of the government.

The author narrates,

There's no king at Narasingarh now. He's scratched the title 'King' and become a forest king. He's got connected to the export of leopard-skins, tiger skins etcetera. Forest laws do not apply to him. He doesn't fall in the purview of any law....The king is occupied with such tasks. On his private land there are Munda-Oraon-Kurmi and Dusad tenants. The King has no time. His Agent Tasildar Singh keeps the tenants under control in the usual ways therefore. The weapon is the same. Bonded labour on the basis of compound interest loan. These days, if he is displeased with a tenant, breaks his home by putting an elephant on it. (140)

It denotes the absolute power enjoyed by the zamindars and contactors in post-independent India. The socio-economic premise of Chotti village are immersed in many unresolved social and economic disparities. Though Indian constitution identifies the amelioration of the downtrodden people, particularly the tribals and lower castes, to be an important objective of the government, their condition remain unchanged even many decades after the attainment of Independence. The Constitution prescribes many measures for the upliftment of the subordinated classes such as the protection from social injustice and exploitation, removal of restriction on access to means of productions and social intercourses, right to acquire property etc. Five Year

Plans, for example, gave priority to the welfare of the subaltern communities in the country. Mahasweta writes in her introduction to *Agnigarbha* (1978):

As agricultural workers, the peasants are denied their legitimate wages. They have to struggle to procure the water, the seeds and the fertilizers they need for their fields. They live in poverty and hunger. The economic gains that the country has achieved since Independence have not benefited the middle classes, the workers and the agricultural labourers. The rich have become richer, a brutally complacent and ignorant richer class has come into being. The middle class has become poorer, the lower middle class is almost extinct. The rich peasants are now richer; those who possessed small plots of land have been compelled to give up their last scraps to the *jotedars* and the moneylenders, and now add to the number of the landless agricultural labour.

(qtd. in Bandyopadhyay viii)

In the text, Mahasweta also digs at the reciprocal nexus between the landlords and government machineries. Pointing out the support enjoyed by Tirathnath in government offices, the author opines that “[N]ow India is independent. Absurd botherations like the kings and zamindars have vanished. He’s no more than a middle farmer. But farmers like him and farmers-landowners-moneylenders like him and bigger than him and smaller than him are a great source of strength for the Gormen.”(157) Earlier, British colonialism was supported by the Indian feudal remnants and other

reactionary forces. They exhibited a compromising propensity during the colonial tenure. The zamindars, mostly the Brahmins and Rajputs, are the descendents of the loyalists of yesterday. Gradually they usurped all the land of the tribals leaving them totally dispossessed. The same people continued to be the dominant group after the Independence. As Dipesh Chakraborty points out:

The history of colonial modernity in India created a domain of the political that was heteroglossic in its idioms, irreducibly plural in its structure, interlocking within itself strands of different types of relations that did not make up a logical whole. One such strand critical to the functioning of authority in Indian institutions was that of direct domination and subordination of the subaltern by the elite. (20)

The Indian bourgeoisie, as Chakraborty observed, is interlocked with reactionary landlords and money lending classes in the country. Occasionally, Mahasweta articulates her deep denunciation against the oppressive system through the direct authorial statements. She criticizes, for example, the inaccessibility of the subalterns to the economic pattern of Independent India. "[T]he state has left no spot for them in this pattern. The majority of the population in Independent India is low caste, and a significant percentage is adivasi. Therefore they are excluded from the national economic pattern. But even the excluded must live." (177) At times, Chotti becomes an effective instrument of authorial statements. After having been forcibly evicted from

the land, Chotti dismisses Harmu's proposal of legal suit saying: "[L]aws! Law courts! Never felt trust. Where'll we get lawyers? Lawyers will tek money, but what he says Munda doesn't understand'. And he don' understand' what Munda says, for lawyer understand's B when Munda says A an' explains t' contrary ta t' judge. T' judge judges contrawise." (159) His words reflect the deep disillusionment of the underdogs with the legal system prevalent in the country. It also denotes the inaccessibility of the subalterns to the legal establishment of the country. In one occasion Chotti asks his son: "If Gormen looked after Munda rights wud Munda be beggar like this?" (160)

One thing that differs the subaltern struggle in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* from that of *Aranyer Adhikar* is its highlighting of the fragmented subaltern initiatives. Mahasweta shows, in a unique fashion, that even the small gestures of resistance, though fragmented in range and volume, could disturb the apple cart of the dominating group. In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, the tribals are less convinced about the viability of a big organized militant struggle. But the oppression did not go unresisted. They retaliate, at times, at their persecutors. The text consists of many events to illustrate the counter actions of the oppressed. These gestures of resistance from the part of the subalterns to the oppressive system render the text a subversive quality.

One of the most striking features of *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* is its consistent demonstration of the solidarity among the victims of the system. This solidarity is constituted by the union of the tribals and the outcastes in the village. All the subaltern communities in the village -- the Mundas,

Oraons, Dusads, Kurmis, Ganjus, and washer-caste -- united with a purpose of combating with their persecutors. Mahasweta highlights the subversive potential of the kinship formation among the subalterns. Chotti tells Motiya, the lower caste washer woman: "[Y]e have caste stuff. To t' Lala, to t' Brahman, ye're low caste. To ye' Motia is low caste. We have no caste difference. And I bring it up, cos t' village is now all mixed. Ye and us dies together in famine, drought, and bonded work." (127) He was obviously pointing out the similarity of their abject condition. The association which Chotti and Chhagan initiated was based on the question of survival. They jointly evolved the strategies to resist and fight their oppressors. It is through these concerted efforts they effected some desirable change in their condition of existence in an unreceptive environment.

The condition of the lower castes in the Chotti village wasn't better either. The dehumanizing nature of caste system has deprived them of their basic standard of life. The text shows how they join hand together to eke out a living amidst the hostile milieu. When the village was affected by extreme drought, the Mundas and untouchables worked together to dig ponds and pits in the villages. They managed to overcome the utter water scarcity by digging these pits. The author narrates: "[T]he hole digging is like a joint festival for the Mundas and for Chhagan's crowd. The men dug up the sand and put in planks with no gap in-between on the walls of the pit. The woman threw the sand at a distance, on the bank. Gradually they dug ten pits. The water came up. They got the water right there." (128) Though, it was during

the time of drought Chotti's people and Chhagan's people joined together, their kinship went beyond it to the organized resistance and struggle. This camaraderie among the tribals and lower castes marks the beginning of subaltern empowerment and a liberatory politics. It highlights the potentials of subaltern solidarity. As Karlene Faith points out: "[W]henver power is infused across the range of disciplinary sites, there it simultaneously intersects with the force of resistance, even at the most microscopic, cellular and capillary levels of existence." (38) The text shows the Mundas, the Oraon and the untouchables work hand in hand to eke out their living and to resist their oppressors. The solidarity of the tribals and untouchables renders the text with a full-fledged subaltern aura.

The landlords and moneylenders, on the other hand, viewed this affiliation with much derision and qualm. Tirathnath was deeply disturbed at the unprecedented union between the Mundas and untouchables. He decided to tighten the stranglehold upon them. He says: "[I]t is certainly a problem if Chotti's group and Chhagan's people work together", and he suggests that "[I]t's necessary to keep them apart." (129) Chotti was conscious of the plot of the masters. He tells Tirathnath that "I knew all along that ye'd separate us from Chhagan and his people. Now I see that ye separate Munda from Munda." (131) However, the tactic of divide and rule had been destabilized by the vigilant and watchful mindset of the subaltern leaders.

Though submitted to economic exploitation, the tribals could never bear the insult upon their integrity. Even a slight gesture of offense could

provoke them. This intransigence on matters concerning their honour is well exemplified in the way they made Tirathnath seek pardon for having insulted them verbally. One day, Tirathnath insulted the Mundas by calling them 'sonsabitches'. It hurt them very much. Chotti headed straight to the office of Tirathnath and demanded: "[Y]e s'd take back that 'sonuvabitch' word. We've done nothing sonuvabitch. We won't take loan with this bad name." (132) When Tirathnath threatened to call the police he said: "[C]all police. I'll show ya sonsabitches. We'll burn all with fire-tipped arrers before t' polis come." (132) The untouchables were also present there. They single-mindedly demanded that Tirathnath should take back the offensive word used against the Mundas. Finally, they made the landlord seek forgiveness for his discourteous expression.

The increasing process of industrialization and modernization further alienated the tribals from their traditional moorings. The rich and abundant natural assets of the tribal region allured the contractors and industrialists to their land. Big industrial projects changed not only the geology of the place but also the mindscape of its inhabitants. Its jungle scape gradually gave way to factory scape. The bauxite mine and aluminum factory started operating from the region. Ironically enough, the fruits of the increasing process of development never trickled down to the subalterns. The number of contractors and recruiters began to increase. Contractors of timber, stone and minerals started appearing in Chotti village, as in the other part of Palamau and Chottanagpur. As a result, the Mundas were increasingly alienated from

their indigenous lifestyle. They underwent the process of thorough deracination by this influx. Their concern over the changing culture is well articulated by Pahan: "...t' Munda would never get anythin' his own way no more. To survive he mus' work at odd jobs bein' one wit' Chhagan's people. T' archery game's also over. Ye caint beat t' bushes durin' t' hunt game and get a hedgehog. Now Munda'll be Munda at festivals, and for community things like weddings. Bow 'n'arrer are now toys to win at games at t'fair. What used to be a weapon's now a toy." (151) A deep fear about cultural erasure and alienation is reflected in his words. Earlier, they had enjoyed considerable freedom to use forest and hunt the animals. Besides providing the means of livelihood, forests supplied them the fuel, medicines, fruits and materials to build their homes etc. Their gods abode in the forest. Due to all these factors they have reacted sharply to the restrictions imposed by the government on their traditional rights over the forest. Mahasweta demonstrates the deep uncertainty that envelopes the life of the tribal communities in postcolonial India.

The text also marks the gradual smudging of the boundaries of the village economy. Villages were integrated into larger economic and political units. The emergence of the new industries in Chotti marks this change. The arrival of new industries virtually led to the restructuring of the economic activities. Simultaneously, the manner and strategy of dominance also changed. The inaccessibility of the poor into the resources continued. The penetration of the market into the villages has affected the agrarian

relationships in a drastic way. It, besides having created extreme economic insecurity, further alienated the tribals and Dalits from the resources. The new economic activities embedded them in more or less similar subjective condition. With the penetration of market economy, accompanied by agrarian reforms, the traditional rural authority has changed its operational strategies by resituating its dominance in the new domains of economic transaction. The text, among other things, highlights how the social and economic advantages accrued to the dominant classes/castes while the subalterns remained totally deprived. Commenting on the prerogatives enjoyed by the elites Ashok Sen observes:

Being dominant and commanding wealth and resources, they could operate from the core of society and economy, keeping themselves in strategic control and maneuvering their way through the corridors of colonial politics by claiming to be the protagonists of nationalism and independence. Their career in the history of Indian nationalism was characterized by an amalgam of loyalty and opposition to foreign rule, a combination in which their scramble for power and privilege prevailed over national consideration. (207)

The text sheds light on some of the highly exploitative semi-feudal practices prevalent in Indian villages. Many exploitative practices, mostly the vestiges of feudalism, persist in the Indian villages. Besides bonded labour, the text explicates about the reprehensible systems like “market cut” and

"half harvest half right" etc. These unlawful systems continue to be practiced throughout the rural India. According to the "half harvest half right" the tribal field hands are given a piece of land, stony or barren, by the land owners, mostly by the borders of the forest. In return, they should give half of the crops to the landlord. In a few years, they raise crops on this land with their hard labour. This is profitable for the landlords. Often, the norms are changed according to their whims. This is exemplified in Tirathnath's unjustifiable demand to Chotti. But, Tirathnath went a step ahead of this established practice by evacuating Chotti from his land. Tirathnath had given a portion of land to Chotti for farming on the condition that he should get half the crops. The land was uncultivable and arable. After one year, when the land began to yield crops after the hard labouring of Chotti and his sons, he demanded that the land should be given back to him. Chotti was taken aback by the unjustifiable demand of Tirathnath, who insisted on getting the land back. When Tirathnath pointed out about the documents, the infuriated Chotti tells: "[M]a-ny things are done wit' words mouth. Ye say I've borrad so much, words mouth. Ye say I've harvested so much, worda mouth. Make me understan', Munda doesn' read, so how does he know words mouth won' stand true?"(155) In the absence of a writable script, the Mundas, like the other tribals, use only oral words for their social and economic transactions. The tribals have no written laws. But the sanction of the community has a force which none dares to violate. A tribal village is an independent unit which retains the shape and strength of social institutions and structures.

They are not familiar with the mazes of written documents. Often, it is this ignorance of the written document which becomes instrumental in their exploitation at the hands of the dominant classes. Undermining the superiority ascribed to the written script over orality Derrida observes: "The modern capital is always a monopoly of writing. It commands by written laws, decrees, and literature...." (qtd. in Parker 9) However, Harmu, Chotti's son, was not willing to yield the land to Tirathnath. When the landlord's cohorts came to seize the land he, along with his friends, defended strongly. Consequently, it ensued a fight between them. A constable who intervened the scene was shot by Tirathnath's cohorts. The tribal welfare officer was a witness to the event. The gun was confiscated. Harmu got two years of imprisonment.

The issue of land triggered a lot of events in the village. The politician asked Tirathnath to make negotiation with the Mundas since the election was very near. The text dismantles the unholy nexus between the oppressive landlords and the politician. When the election comes, the task of canvassing votes is left to the landowners in the village. They either offer a scanty amount or use their coercive power to allure the votes of the poor folk. In return, they get a huge amount as well as patronage from the politicians. Mahasweta debunks the corruption of the political establishment of the country. This is well illustrated in the conversation between Tirathnath and the political leader: "[W]e don't understand this land stuff. Settle your dispute. Otherwise the people of other party'll win by harking to this case."(170) Mahasweta

shows how the vote bank politics hinders the progress of the downtrodden people.

Since Chotti didn't want to do bonded labour he, along with Chhagan, joined Harbans Chadha's brick kiln, where they received a reasonable remuneration to meet their minimal subsistence. He began to arrange more labourers for the kiln. He wanted to free his people from the throttlehold of bonded labour. Some of the Mundas also began to work with the timber contractors. Later, Chotti bought three bighas of land from a trader on installment basis. Not surprisingly, Chotti's purchasing of the land infuriated the landlords. They couldn't stand the subalterns possessing land. The conservative propensity of the feudal landlords is apparent in Tirathnath's words. He tells Chotti that "[T]he land belongs to bosses and moneylenders. The Lord above doesn't wish that Munda-Dusad should own land. If He had, they'da got land." (199) They maintained an undisputable authority upon the subaltern with the ownership of land. Naturally, the landowners and moneylenders were displeased over Chotti's purchasing of land. According to them, the tribals and lower castes "should be kept like specters without any recourse, without any materiality, forever dependent." (187) Land becomes a crucial thing for both the oppressor and the oppressed. It was through the land the upper class perpetuated their dominance over the subaltern people. In the story, Mahasweta has presented the village of Chotti as a microcosm of the Indian tribal regions with the presence numerous non-tribal intruders who seek to exploit them. The changing pattern of economic practice

continued to deny the subalterns access to its resources. People who came from outside became their masters. They plundered the natural wealth in their regions. Chotti is conscious about the numerous ways through which his people are exploited by the upper class/ caste people. This is well illustrated in his words: "Chadha's made so much money sellin' these hollow bricks, that he now says he'll buy two or three coal quarries. Here t' coal is above ground. Givin' us twelve annas. Lala's made so much money farmin', wit' loan interest, that there was t' robbery, and he gave Congress fifty thousand rupees, and he didn't feel a scratch. He's givin' yer t' dust from his shoes. T' tishan master is takin' ten thousand rupees to dig this pond. And he'll giv' us twelve annas." (192) *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* explicates how the moneylenders as well as the newly emerged contractors worked in nexus to obstruct the upward economic mobility of the tribals and the untouchables.

The exposure to the economic and social exploitation drew the tribals and landless peasants to the Naxalite movement. Special police force arrived in Chotti in search of the Naxalites, the political activists of the extreme left, who were accused to have killed some landlords and contractors. The police sought the help of Chotti and Chhagan for catching them. They told Chotti: "[C]atch or kill, what's it to ye? Ye too are t' head of yer community, so I tole ye." (221). Though Chotti was not completely convinced about the operative strategies of the Naxalites, he was sympathetic towards them. He strongly believed that they were fighting for the cause of the poor and hapless people like him. It was due to this commiseration that he sheltered the Naxal boy

who came fleeing from the police. When Chotti asked him why did they kill the landlords the Naxal boy replied: “[W]e’ll finish off the contractors and moneylenders. The land will be in your hands. Everything will be new. No one will oppress anyone.” (225) But Chotti was somewhat unconvinced about the rationale of armed revolution. He tells the boy: “[I]f Lala dies, ‘nother Lala will come. Knowin’ that I didn’t raise me bow.” (225) He believed that such militant struggles might not bring any sustainable mobility in the life of the oppressed people. At the same time, he was very disturbed at the way the police hunted the Naxalites. His conversation with the Naxal boy divulges his deep sense of predicament: “[W]hy does polis chase t’ man who grasps our sorrow?” (226) He kept a clear vision about revolution. He tells the Naxal boy: “[T]he fight ya talked about, is good, but it’s not to be. Be equal to polis and then fight, no? Else in t’ end it’s t’ polis wins. Thas what I allus see.” (228) After a few days, the Naxal boy was caught. As usual, police fabricated an “encounter” story to justify the killing of the Naxal boy. During the seventies, the Naxalites were hounded out of their hide-outs and killed in broad daylight. Mahasweta is deeply concerned about the brutal way the police dealt with the Naxalites. Many of her works attempt to recreate the brutal killings of the Naxalites by the State. Her *Mother of 1084*, written against the backdrop of Naxal movement, unequivocally deals with these issues.

Swarup Prasad of Adivasi Welfare Service came to see Chotti and asked Chotti to take a pro-active stance towards their oppressors. Chotti was unconvinced about the *raison d'être* of armed revolution. According to him it

cannot bring sustainable results. Once he asks Swarup: “[S]uppose everyone raised arms at yer word. Then? T’ party bosses’ll kill, t’ polis will make t’ girls nekked, put us in je-hell chop chop, then? Then who’ll guard, give lawyers, save t’ homes from t’ bosses’ hard hand?”(307) Later, more Naxalites took shelter in Chotti village. The presence of the Naxalites in the village intimidated the moneylenders and contractors. Tirathnath says: “[Y]es boys give ‘im up if you see ‘im. They don’t give time to say ‘boo’. They cut down moneylenders on sight.” (230) Not surprisingly, police came out with more stories of “encounter”. The government violated its own stated rules in controlling the Naxalites. Mahasweta sharply criticizes the inhuman manner the government dealt with the Naxalites: “[W]ith the Naxals the Government blew off the Law and blew off the Courts. Why? Finish off the Naxals, whoever can. Government wants it.” (262) State itself became a criminal in its hunting of the Naxalites. Later, the Mundas harboured the Naxalites as a part of the defensive strategy.

The text offers a sharp indictment of the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975. Indira Gandhi sought to empower herself by imposing numerous restriction on the life of the public. In India, the Emergency of 1975 manifested itself through the authoritarianism of the state, the curtailing of civil liberty, criminalized politics, state terrorism, suppression of the press etc. By centralizing the power, Indira Gandhi sought to curb all dissenting voices. In an interview given to Gayatri Spivak, the translator of the novel, Mahasweta opines: “[D]uring Emergency, nothing happened that did not

happen before, although the lumpenization in the lower echelons of politics was perhaps made more systematic. But during emergency everything came out." (xiii) According to her, all sorts of reactionary forces began to upsurge during the period. The text provides a sharp critique of the Emergency:

In villages and towns the Emergency comes in two ways. The jail gates open and swallow prisoners. The voice of the newspapers is strangled. But since city folk are good boys and pleased with a little, they're quite pleased. For load-shedding power cuts decrease; train run on time, all vehicles run efficiently at the behest of the slogan 'work-talk-more-less', in fact one can even get to see clerks at government offices. (283)

Mahasweta also examines the impact of Emergency upon the village life. According to her, "it is the villages that know the real appearance of the Emergency." (283) In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Mahasweta has elaborately dealt with the impact of Emergency upon the life of the subaltern people. One of the most immediate upshots of Emergency was the criminalization of politics. The text sheds light on the proliferating rate of local tyrannies during the period of Emergency. It shows how the politicians unleashed their racketeers for threatening the poor people. The worst manifestation of the criminalization of politics is illustrated in the activities of the gangsters of Youth League party in the Chotti village. Politically sponsored criminals like Romeo were let loose in the villages, resulting the perpetuation of the maltreatment of the subalterns. They flouted law and order and unleashed all

sorts of violence in the villages. Those who protested were shot down. Huts were burnt. Romeo, the Youth League felon, became a nightmare not only to the tribals and untouchables but also to the liberal contractors like Harbans. Romeo demanded a "cut" in the wages of the labourers. By exposing the nefarious activities of the Youth League in the rural areas, Mahasweta digs at the functioning of youth wing of the Congress party, which came to be associated with many hostilities around the country during the Emergency period.

Consequently, the manipulative facet of the power politics got disseminated across the country. Elections were won through muscle power and manipulation. The harijan candidate had been killed by the opponents. The malefactors of Youth League Party captured the booth in Chotti village and cast all the votes themselves. When Chotti and his people went to vote they found that their votes had already been cast. The scheming politics in India has its roots in the conspiracies of the landlords to keep the tribals and poor away from the fruits of democracy. In this part of the text Mahasweta articulates her sharp criticism against the socio-political establishment of the country. The direct authorial statements serve to debunk the myths of power in contemporary Indian society. If the chief target of criticism in *Rudali* was the nexus between the social and religious institutions, in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* it is the political establishment which comes under the sharp censure.

The policy that the ruling party follows after winning the 1972

elections with a huge majority is most fascinating. Within the five years of the plan, all the shoutings, proclamations, legislations et cetera launched by the Central Government help India 'take a high seat in the World Assembly' and the image of the liberating Sun is as delightful as the Egyptian god Amon Ra. But like the god he needs fresh blood. As a result, the hollers like 'eliminate poverty' , 'bond labour's illegal', 'now moneylenders' 'loan for agriculture is illegal' become posters and get stuck on trees and stations and bus-bodies in the remotest part of the country. But in reality people like Chotti and Chhagan continues to get ground down (241).

The politicians, in tandem with the privileged classes, are shown to be using many strategies to ensure the votes of the tribals and untouchables in Chotti village. They join hand to eliminate those who stand against their interests. This unholy alliance is evident in the murder of the harijan candidate. The elite classes are shown to be using a variety of tactics such as appeasing, threatening, tempting etc. for bagging the votes of the poor folk. This is well exemplified in the words of the party secretary. He tells Tirathnath and Harbans: "[D]on't make a row about adivasi feast days and fair days. One thing is very necessary. Adivasis and untouchables pull together in Chotti. It'll be good if you can strategically divide them." (243) However, their tactic of divide and rule didn't succeed in Chotti village. It was during this period the brigands of Youth League came to be in conflict

with the Mundas and untouchables in Chotti village. Under the strong insinuation of Romeo, Harbans asked a "cut" in the wage from Chotti and his people. But Chotti outrightly rebuffed this unjustifiable demand saying: "[I]f you take bullyin' once, t' bullyin' gets bigger. Do whatever you think is t' right way for you. We won't give cuts. If you wish, let us go. We'll know our starvin' days're comin' again. But we'll die fightin'! They want truly to kill us." (264) He went on to say that: "[H]ey my lord! Your affair is a million rupees. Our affair is two rupees, and we aint scared to die either. Good if they kill me. T' Munda people will light a fire. They'll kill fo' sure, and then they'll die." (264) When Tirathnath started demanding the "cut" for Romeo, Chhagan and his people came to Chotti for advice. Chotti suggested that they should demand maize instead of money as their wage. There couldn't be any "cuts" from the maize. Romeo got infuriated by this and went to the village with his gangsters. They shot four people including Pahan, Parmi and Motia. Many huts were burnt. It shows how the zamindars and moneylenders, in connivance with the criminals, sought to silence the dissenting subalterns, using force.

By incorporating the episode of Amlesh Khurana into the thread of the text, the auteur digs at the unrealistic policy formulation of the government. Amlesh Khurana is a thirty six year old social economist. As the author says "[I]t is India he hasn't seen" and he is a person who "believes in theory and statistics" and not in "the reality of the situation." (284) He is an "intellectually arrogant project theorist who will cast aside reality and solve

national problems on the basis of theory.” (289) The grass root realities are not taken into account when policies and projects are introduced. It explains the reasons why the poverty alleviation programmes of the government continue to fail in the country. Amlesh’s area of specialization is the economic reconstruction of the villages in India. But he does his research without ever visiting the villages. His total lack of social sense is well illustrated in his talk with the S.D.O: “I want a few Munda villages, a few Oraon villages, some villages with mixed Munda-Oraon population, some Dusad villages, some Dhobi and Ganju villages, some Rajput villages, some villages with mixed Rajput and Brahmin population, and some leper-majority villages.”(287) To the theoreticians like him, the social issues could be comprehended and resolved through studies and surveys. Here, Mahasweta employs a highly ironical language to expose the absurdities involved in the unrealistic projects implemented by the government. She says: “[H]ere it is necessary to say that there is no evil intent behind the theory construction of an academician such as Amlesh and the support given by the Government of India to such theory. Behind both is present a desire to transform India into something as beautiful as the gardens of the Lytyens model Teen Murti House in New Delhi.” (285) This part of the text offers a powerful critique of the unrealistic nature of the government policies for rural upliftment. Academicians like Amlesh do the roles assigned to them in their own idiosyncratic way, often overlooking or even suppressing the facts. Amlesh has come to Chotti village to study the facets of rural economy. He is assigned to “survey the projected economic

necessity." (288) He was given special treatment by the authorities. Mahasweta brings out the irony of leaving the development of millions of rural folk to the whims and fancies of such academicians. Government makes rural development programmes on the basis of the report given by academicians like Amlesh. However, after a few days stay at the village he was accustomed to change many of his pre-conceived notions about the tribal life. He was very much impressed by the disposition of Chotti. Later, he attempted to help the tribals, with these unrealistic ideas. He is shown to be arguing vehemently in favour of the tribals in a conference called by the minister. But his academic idealism was defeated by the political pragmatism. He faced strong criticism for his project report. The government didn't want to infuriate the landlords and moneylenders who, according to them, are "the pillars of the government." (310) Mahasweta examines the different reasons why the rural reconstruction programmes continue to fail in the country. The lack of a strong political will coupled with a political pragmatism has been one of the chief factors that hinders the amelioration of the poor.

The enactment of Bonded Labour Abolition Act in 1976 evoked mixed responses among the tribals and untouchables. They were somewhat skeptical about the implementation of the law. They ask: "[I]f Government wanted harijan people to get official support, would they have made the law themselves, and then watched as their laws became a farce and a circus?" (262) Even though the Bonded Labour Act was passed the money lenders continued to demand it. The text exhibits that the law hasn't helped to slacken

the grip of the moneylenders on the tribals. In *Dust on the Road* she writes: "[A]nyone who thinks that the zamindari system has been abolished should visit Palamau. There is no such word as land-ceiling. The poor say they live on the zamindar's land. Yet Bihar passed the land reform bill in the 50's. An 8 year-old child became a bonded labourer in Kachan. The administration is not interested, neither are the political parties." (14) This part of the text gives a detailed picture of the corrupted and dehumanizing nature of the functioning of the political establishment of country during the seventies. Though Chotti felt much respite at the new law, he was skeptical about its enactment. Experiences have taught him that the privileged people take more pleasure in violating the rules rather than observing them. The lassitude and unresponsiveness from the part of the administration in dealing with their grievance have made the subalterns distrust the legal establishment. This deep disenchantment is palpable in Chotti's words: "T' law's already here, lord! And yet Motia and Pahan died! Did anyone go to je-hell, was anyone punished? Harmu did nothin' and went to je-hell. No lord! As long as Diku has t' power to make t' law work, so long will Diku watch Diku's rights." (304) Chotti knows that laws do not guarantee their implementation. New policies introduced by the government opened up numerous opportunities for the rich and privileged classes. There were enormous occasions for contractors like Harbans to get quick cash and flourish. They took advantage of the situation. Despite being comparatively generous, Harbans didn't offer the Mundas anything beyond their minimal means of subsistence. All of them

flourished by feeding on the vulnerability of the underdogs. Mahasweta writes in her *Dust on the Road*:

Periodic eviction from their own land and villages, atrocious exploitation by moneylenders, landlords, contractors, traders and officials, perpetuation of slavery under the bonded labour system, luring of tribals women who are coerced into the flesh trade, constant assault on their traditional culture and social structure-all these age-old practices have in the past led to both localized and widespread agrarian uprisings by the tribals in many parts of the country. (109)

Even after the passing of the Bonded Labour Abolition Act, the landlords insisted on the bonded labour. They also engaged the felons to threaten and coerce the field hands. It unleashed a storm of protest among the tribals and outcastes. They came to seek the counsel of Chotti who, after examining all the alternatives in front of them, declared that no one should accept bonded labour any more. The entire people – the Mundas, Oraon and the untouchables – agreed with his proposal. As expected, Tirathnath deployed the Youth League brigands to intimidate the dissenting field hands. Chotti worked out a plan to meet the threat posed by the Youth League gangsters. He consulted Swarup who gave him certain strategies of operation. Tirathnath, as per the advice of Romeo, agreed to give the wage on weekend. Chotti anticipated the danger hidden in Tirathnath's proposal. He sent instant message to Swarup's hide-out. As expected, on the day of the disbursal of the

wage, Romeo appeared with his gang and started shooting at the workers. The trained Mundas and Oroans sent by Swarup were hiding in every hut. They started shooting arrows while the untouchables threw stone at the Youth league fraudsters. In one of the most telling scenes of the story, the tribals and untouchables united to fight their persecutors.

The appearance of Sankar, an IAD officer, in the Chotti village gives a new twist to the story. He is assigned with the elimination of the Naxalites and the tribal rebels. He has come to Chotti village to wipe out all the revolutionaries. But his real identity remained undisclosed to the common folk, particularly to Chotti and his people. Though he was sympathetic towards the tribals who were incessantly exploited by the local landlords, he couldn't do anything for them as he was obsessed with the annihilation of the revolutionaries. Furthermore, some of the strategies, which he deployed to capture Swarup's men, were proven to be expensive for the Mundas and the untouchables in the village. After a few days, Swarup was caught and killed by the police. Sankar was the master brain behind the operation. He attempted to trap Swarup's gang by intentionally triggering a clash between the tribals and the Youth League brigands. He was sure that once the tribals were attacked, the activists would turn up on the scene to defend them. But this time his strategy cost three lives in the tribal side. It's a great irony that the attention on the government agencies is completely focused on capturing the Naxalites and tribal activists while the criminals protected by the landlords and politicians continued to unleash violence throughout the rural

areas. Ironically enough, Sankar himself came under the surveillance of IAD. It was apparently displeased with the tactics of Sankar and sent an additional officer to take stock of the situation in the tribal belt near Chotti village. By presenting the highly surreptitious and sneaky operations of IAD, the secret service of Indian government, Mahasweta implicates the state sponsored terrorism during the period of Emergency.

The murder of the Youth League party workers alerted the police authorities. Romeo and his gangsters were found killed in the forest. They were shot with the arrows. Later, Somchar came to Chotti and confessed that the murder of Romeo and Pahlwan was done by him and his friends Disha, Upa and Lal. They were taking avenged for the death of their people. Furthermore, they argued, if Romeo and his gangsters were let alive, it would mean more killing of the tribals and burning of their huts. They were a perpetual threat to the life of the underdogs. Because of their political patronage police never dared to touch them. Land owners like Tirathnath constantly deployed them to intimidate, and at times to kill, the tribal and the untouchable farmhands. They were never adequately punished by the law. All these facts nonetheless justified the action of Somchar and his friends. Their skepticism about legal establishment is palpable in Chotti's words: "[I]f Romeo and Pahlwan had killed every adivasi in the area, no one would have found it 'unexpected'. There are adivasis, there are sub castes, the Romeos kill them, it happens like this. But if one or a few adivasis kill the Romeos it is an unexpected event. The Romeos kill, they're not killed. This is the rule. Under

all regimes." (358) He interrogates the authority's double standard. Here, as elsewhere, Chotti becomes an effective spokesman of the author, who deploys him as a narrative tool throughout the story.

Due to the pressure from the top authorities, the SDO made elaborate arrangements to trap the killers of the gangsters. Since Romeo and his companion were killed with arrows, suspicion fell upon the tribals. He made a plan to arrest them at the fair. He asked every tribal archers to attend the Chotti fair. He wanted to arrest the tribals who killed Romeo and Pahlwan at the occasion of the archery fair. People from many villages came to the Chotti fair. The SDO has deployed armed police in the place. Immediately after the end of the archery competition he made an announcement through the megaphone, ordering the killers of the Youth League gangsters to surrender. When no one retorted, he threatened to arrest all the Mundas assembled there. At this point, Chotti gets the megaphone from the S.D.O and articulates the protest pent up in his mind:

*Standin' here today, evr'thin' comes to mind. Me father died by reason of that Lala's dad. I ne'er did a betrayal, and still he sent me son to j-hell, and I saved him from t' wheels of a movin' train! Mundas-Oraon-Dusad-Dhobi have never broken trust! And what did we get for that Lord? What did you give to us? You'll raise terror over us ta try their murder, but did they not raise terror? They went to take t' honour of our own daughters, all t' daughters of t' families of t' pahan, his wife, of Motia, of t'*

railway porter, of Dukha, Jugal, Chhagan – they died, and then there were no polis lord? Did you not work this way? (362)

Chotti questions the very legitimacy of the government and the legal establishment at the face of the constant exposure of the poor people to the oppression by the dominant classes. This irresolute speech is one of Chotti's weapons to question the authority. The subversive potential of his words have often destabilized the schemes of the dominant class. Through him Mahasweta shows another dimension of subaltern resistance. Ironically enough, his consistent and persuasive speech, pointed against the hegemonic system, suspends Spivak's assumptions about the articulating potential of subaltern. The text demonstrates that the subaltern can speak without the help of an external agency. As the translator of the text, Spivak is conscious about the contradiction inherent in her own stance. The new understanding about the speech potential of subaltern is apparent in her acknowledgement of the text. In the Translator's Foreword she admits that "[O]ne of the most striking characteristics of the novel is the sustained aura of subaltern speech." (viii) Here, the text marks a textual displacement of the voice of the elite class with the voice of the subaltern. Chotti speaks, out of an historical necessity. Commenting on the disparity inherent in the rhetoric of the elite and subaltern Dipesh Chakrabarty observes:

In India of today one can discern two kinds of political 'languages'. One is the language characteristic of nation-building and involves the rituals of the state, political

representation, citizenship, citizen's rights, etc. This is part of our colonial heritage and it is what Indian nationalism owes to the colonial experience. The other language derives its grammar from relationships of power, authority and hierarchy which pre-date the coming of colonialism, but which have been significantly modified by having been made to interact with ideas and institutions imported by British rule. It is true that members of the Indian elite classes equivocate and use both the languages, and it is also true that our history has moved in a direction of greater interlacing of the two languages in Indian institutions and practices. But it would be fair to say that historically the first language has been by and large a privilege of the Indian elite classes, while the lives and aspirations of the subaltern classes have been enmeshed on the whole in relationships articulated in the second. (373-4)

In an atypical heroic gesture Chotti took the responsibility of the murder of the Youth League felons. When he surrendered before the SDO, all the tribals and untouchables gathered there raised their arms in protest. The author narrates: "[T]hen he waits, unarmed. As he waits he mingles with all time and becomes river, folklore, eternal. What only the human can be. Brings all adivasi struggle into the present, today into the united struggle of the adivasi and the outcaste." (363) It unmistakably suggests further struggles. The magic arrow that Dhani bequeathed to Chotti represents the continuity of

this tradition. The tribal struggles in the past as well as in the present have been engaging the question of survival, both in physical and cultural terms. The strong feeling of discontent and fury pent up in their mind surfaced suddenly. The author narrates: "Chotti on one side, S.D.O on the other, and in-between a thousand bows upraised in space. And a warning announced in many upraised hands." (364) The end of the text is significant that it implicates the continuity of the subalterns' counteraction. If *Aranyer Adhikar* documented their resisting movements during the colonial period, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* deals with the history of their continuing struggles in the post-independent social scenario. There is no fissure in the continuing history of the struggles of the tribals. Thousand hands were raised, suggesting the inevitability of further struggle. Significantly enough, Birsa's final promise to his people "I'll come back again" symbolically suggests this continuity. The text, as Spivak aptly observes in the Afterward "marks the remote possibility of a resistant subalternity." (367) In the text, the voice of the subalterns, which was held in check so far, is articulated emphatically, upsetting the dark schemes of the dominant classes.

Chotti is certainly one of the powerful subaltern characters of Mahasweta. He is an acknowledged member of his community. The strategies he deploys to empower his community differs him from Birsa Munda and other rebels. He is very strong-minded and speaks with irrefutable authority on matters of livelihood and resistance. Personally he is not convinced about the rationale of armed revolution. He, like the other members of his

community, is economically browbeaten but remained unbeaten in spirit. Though Chotti wasn't involved in any revolutionary actions in the village, he is shown to be instigating his people to resistant action. His association with Swarup's organization marks his inclination towards revolution. He is equipped with a powerful rhetoric with which he frequently disarmed the privileged classes. Chotti's words are replete with practical wisdom. They are coming from a highly sharp and vigilant mind. He could reinvigorate the dreary spirit of his people and directed them to the path of resistance and survival through these stirring words. Basically, he adopted the means of non-violence. Throughout the story he is shown to be articulating strong denunciation against the socio-political and legal systems prevailing in the country. Once he tells Anand Mahato: "[I]f ye kill Dusad-Ganju-untouchable not a single Gormen man blinks an eye. If Gormen want untouchable-tribals to die, kill'em. Let's die fightin'. If we die fighti', we'll know we did something." (272-273) He was totally disenchanted by the government machineries and law. At the same time, he didn't want to thrust his people into an armed rebellion as he thought it would not bear any sustainable result. As the story progresses, he becomes more resistant to the encroachments of the dominant classes. By teaching the art of shooting arrows to the younger generation he, in effect, empowered his community. Admittedly, all the Mundas who were involved in the killing of the tyrannous landowners at various times were his disciples. Chotti, in effect, politicized his people by rendering them the lessons of archery.

The text progresses from the individual experiences of Chotti's family to the collective struggle of the entire subaltern communities in the village. The small embers and sparks of discontent and resistance gradually led to a mass movement of a big proportion. This transition from the experiences of the individual to the experiences of the community is characteristic of Mahasweta's subaltern stories. If *Aranyer Adhikar* depicts the organized struggle of the tribals against the mighty imperial power, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* presents resistance in fragments. It shows how the small embers of the subaltern resistance gradually become a great fire, manifested in the form of organized mass struggle. At the end of the text thousands arms raised and action never suspended. Like her other subaltern stories, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* is characterized by a subversive politics since it debunks the forces that oppress the subalterns and offers liberating alternatives.

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## Chapter IV

### *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh: Recuperating the Silenced*

In India, the deprivation and increasing marginalization of the subaltern communities are consequent upon a social system which is beset with dehumanizing forces like feudalism and contaminated by the divisive caste system. In *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*, Mahasweta Devi examines the deadly symptoms of Indian social system by depicting the struggles of the subaltern people, who remain in its bottom, against the ruthless exploitation and discrimination by the upper castes/classes. Like her other subaltern works like *Rudali*, *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, it demonstrates, besides portraying the persecuting effect of the system upon the subalterns, the resistance and counter strategies adopted by them to ensure their survival. By making the seemingly unequal conflicts of the feudal landlords and the untouchable people a winning fight for the latter, Mahasweta highlights the alternative possibilities of subaltern resistance in the contemporary social scenario. The text also demonstrates how the gestures of resentment among the underdogs have been translated into collective action, in a more explicit form, through violence and physical protestation.

*The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* provides a poignant picture of the escalating encroachment on the untouchable communities at the hands of the upper caste landlords. It offers a bold indictment of the hegemonic presence of feudalism and its worst impact upon the subalterns in Indian society. The story depicts the tremendous amount of consternation generated by

feudalism and caste system in Indian villages. It, besides revealing the degree to which the feudal power is based on forced labour and coercion, demonstrates the jarring but subversive voices of the dispossessed people. The story is set in a North Indian village Barha, which is characteristic of any Indian village, where various forces are at work to subject the underprivileged people to exploitation and oppression. The novel provides realistic portraits of the indigence and sufferings of the lower castes and their constant efforts to resist the process of dehumanization to which the system subjects them. Lachima, the Dalit woman who is mortgaged to a tyrannous upper caste landlord due to her economic vulnerability, is the representative of thousands of subaltern women who meet with similar, and often worst, oppressive experiences.

Lachima, the untouchable girl, became a wet nurse of the motherless child of Medini Singh, the Rajput landowner. When Medini's wife died, immediately after giving birth to Ganesh, he beckoned Gulal and asked her to bring her granddaughter Lachima to look after the motherless baby. He told Gulal: "I'll give you ten bighas of land. And ten rupees a month. When you leave, you'll get a cow." (3) As per the contract, Lachima had to stay and work in his house until Ganesh grew up and get married. It was due to her utter destitution that Gulal agreed to send Lachima as a domestic slave. In a deep sense of predicament she tells Lachima that "[L]et's make hay as long as we're here. As soon as the boy grows up, he'll kick us out." (15) Very soon Lachima succumbed to Medini Narayanan's sexual exploitation and was perpetually

entrapped in his house. At Medini's house she had to stay as Ganesh's wet nurse as well as Medini's keep concubine. Furthermore, she had to do all the household duties. In every sense, she became a domestic slave, a mortgaged property of her grandmother Gulal. Lachima, like any other member of her community, is forced to take up the role of a serf by circumstances beyond her control. Her extreme vulnerability to violence and exploitations is rooted in the structural precariousness of her community's socio-economic position. She is contextualized at the very outset of the story. By locating Lachima in a precise socio-economic context, Mahasweta connects her abject condition with the tragic predicament of her community.

Lachima was a child widow when her grandma sent her to the house of Medini Singh. It was her extreme indigence that made her vulnerable to the exploitation of Medini Singh. She was planning to marry Mohor Karan, a widower. Mohor was willing to marry Lachima. However, their dreams were destabilized by Medini's blatant violation of the contract. He refused to release Lachima even when Ganesh grew up and got married. He went on detaining her as his mistress, against her will, infringing the agreement he made with Gulal. Lachima came to understand that her dreams about the marriage with Mohor Karan would never be materialized. She pleaded with Medini Singh for her release: "[I]t you're getting rid of me anyway, let me go now, Maik. Let me have someone to lean on. Or else where will I go? When I am forty? I've served you all these years, shall I serve Chotta Maik for eight years more? You could keep a maid, no?"(24) But her words didn't melt the

cruel mind of Medini Singh. He said “[I]f he won’t wait, let him go. I’ve given you three bighas of land, if it comes to that I’ll give you another two bighas. Ganesh will be the next malik. If you cling to his feet, you’ll get two square meals a day.”(26) Moreover, he got infuriated and kicked out at Lachima and shouted “[T]ake the lower castes to bed, and they forget their place.”(25) Lachima came to realize that there was no escape from the stranglehold of Medini. The prolonged and enforced servility drained Lachima of her vitality and youth. One day, she sneers at Gulal for having mortgaged her: “I am mortgaged. When I’m sucked dry, useless as an old cow, then he’ll let me go.”(32) The text explicates how the extractive mechanism of feudalism, in connivance with the caste system, debilitates the poor folks in the rural areas.

Among other things, the text shows how the symptoms of patriarchy are woven into the grain of feudalism. The subaltern women are the most extreme victims of feudalism. As the author narrates “[F]or the likes of Ganesh, women were only commodities for their use.”(89) The feudal practice in India is characterized by dominance on land as well as violence against women. The condition of subaltern women in the feudal system is unequivocally articulated by the author: “...the lower castes had different roles to play at different times; sometimes these men and women were bonded labourers, sometimes debtors, sometimes they were landless farmers evicted from their land, sometimes kept women – these role were decided by higher castes. Who usually spoke while the lower castes listened.”(28) The caste and feudalism reinforced each other in the subjugation of the subaltern

communities, particularly their womenfolk. Harveen Sachdeva Mann observes:

Whereas caste system dictates women's subordination in terms of domestic seclusion, severe restrictions on education and employment, economic dependence, and rigid controls over female sexuality, the class system contains its own set of gender inequalities. Under the latter, women have only limited control over the type, quality, and propose of their education and the kind and level of employment they can find; they are sexually harassed in the workplace; and they have to perform all the domestic along with paid work. (158)

In the feudal order, the condition of the upper caste womenfolk isn't better either. The sexual arrogance of the feudal males is reflected in Medini's words. He tells Lachima: "[O]h! I'm still as strong as a horse! Good thing that Mohor Karan's left you. Can the barber's son match up to me?"(37). This aggressiveness is also evident in Ramrup Singh's hankering after Lachima after she left Medini Singh's house. Later, she married Haroa since she needed security from the sexual harassments of the upper caste men folk.

One day, Lachima managed to slip out of Medini Singh's house and met Mohor Karan. The meeting was arranged with the help of Gulal. She tells Mohor Karan about her helplessness: "[T]he Malik has bought me in exchange for three bighas of land. Just like he keeps bullocks and buffaloes. Even when the boy is married I won't be let off. I'll have to stay another eight

years. Then I'll be let off." (29)

Will you run away with me, Lachima?

Where'll we go? He'll finish us

If we get married anyway?

He'll burn down our huts, kill you. (29-30)

Lachima convinced Mohor that there could be no freedom for her from the bondage. She asked him to marry another girl. The text shows the gratuitous ways through which the upper classes/castes crush the life of the subalterns. Barha, the locale *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*, is a typical Indian village where the majority of the land is in the hands of the upper castes. Social stratification and oppression are pervading through its social scape. The story illuminates how the caste Hindus attempt to buckle the people at the bottom of caste hierarchy. However, it depicts not only the humiliation heaped on the untouchable communities through centuries but also their steady endeavors of resistance. The lower castes live in the periphery of the villages. They cultivate the land and are paid in grain. Their desperate struggles to eke out a living in an unreceptive system are delineated in the text: "[I]n years of drought-poor harvest-flood. The rule for debt repayment was a thumb impression in the mailk's ledger. They had to give him the lion's share of the crop plus, if necessary, free labour. In this manner, they were mortgaged, caught in the snare of all powerful ledger in the malik's *katcheri*. They were *kharidi banda*, 'bought subjects'." (40) The sharecroppers are left with nothing to eat when the dues are paid to the landlords. Consequently,

they are accustomed to take loans and get bonded. The text traces the symptoms of bonded labour, a byproduct of feudalism, and its dehumanizing effects on the underdogs. They have to do all kinds of labour which the landlord can demand from those indebted to him. One day, suspecting Haroa's absolute servility to Medini Singh as the result of a bond, Lachima asks him:

Has he made you press your thumb on some paper?

What kind of paper?

What a fool you are! You don't even know that a person sells himself by signing a bond? All those who work as the Malik's servants today are descendants of those who took a loan from him. They can't repay it. So they keep on working. For a share of the crop. That's the system. (34)

Mahasweta elucidates the numerous ways through which feudalism, in nexus with caste system, attempts to subjugate the spirit of the subaltern communities, reducing them to slaves. The despicable and impious way through which the dominant classes attempt to crush the life of the less privileged constituencies of the society is well illustrated in Medini Singh's undermining of Mohor Karan's marriage. Due to the compulsion of Lachima, Mohor had agreed to marry Danpatiya, the daughter of Bigulal, the field hand of Barkandaj Singh. But in a cheap sense of retribution, Medini Singh impeded in the marriage, first by coercing Barkandaj Singh not to give land to Mohor for sharecropping and later by getting him arrested by lodging a fake

case against him. This event shows Medini Singh in a better light. Barkandaj had agreed to give some land to Mohor Karan for sharecropping on the request of Bigulal. But Medini Singh, who came to know about the proposed marriage between Mohor Karan and Danpatiya, meddled in it. He went to Barkandaj and demanded that no land should be given to Mohor Karan for sharecropping. Barkandaj was the grandfather of Putli, Ganesh's wife. Though unwillingly, Barkandaj had to concede to his unjustifiable demand. Otherwise, he feared, it would affect his grand daughter's future. Not satisfied with this, Medini Singh got Mohor arrested on the day of the marriage by lodging a fake case against him. At the police station, Mohor was mercilessly beaten. Unable to bear the insult and grief, he left the village. The lower castes in the village were obviously exasperated by this event. The enraged Bigulal opines: "[I]f the maliks start poking their noses into our marriage, then how will we survive?" (53) Mahasweta shows, in a unique fashion, how feudalism, in connivance with casteism, encumbers the life of the people lying in the bottom stair of social hierarchy.

By recounting the history of the growth of Medini Singh as a powerful feudal lord, the auteur traces the very history of the feudalism and the iniquitous ways through which it expanded its mazes of oppression in the country. In India, as elsewhere, feudalism disseminated its dominance primarily by violent means. During the colonial time the Rajas needed the service of Rajput cohorts like Medini Singh: "[S]o much terror still to be struck, so many subjects' huts to be trampled on by elephants. So many

adivasis still left to be chased out of their forest settlements when the hakim came hunting. The entire pasture and forest land to be cleared of the ahirs.”(13) The history of Medini Singh, as the history of the other landlords, is characterized by many marauding and preying upon land and lower classes. Medini Singh was a bodyguard to the zamindar of Nawargarh because “[H]e was extremely efficient in dispatching others with bullets from his gun in order to keep the zamindars safe.”(6) He was rewarded by the zamindars for this and gradually he extended the web of his money lending business in the Barha village.

By detaining Lachima as a domestic slave under him, Medini Singh virtually ruined her life. The text explicates how the stranglehold of caste and feudalism encumbers the life of the subaltern people. When Medini Singh was bed-ridden, Lachima had to nurse him. She was past forty when Medini Singh relieved her. At the time of her leaving Medini Singh asked her if she needed more money. Lachima retorted in an unforgiving tone: “[M]oney! *Hansli!* You’ve ruined me, how can you undo that? How much money, how much gold, will it take? No, I shan’t take anything. I bore as much as I could. May you live long. Malik! For all the years you indulged yourself, may you sicken as long!”(69) The malevolent manner through which Medini Singh destroyed the life of Lachima and Mohor Karan caused much concern among the lower castes. During the Holi procession the bhangis featured songs about the whole episode. They caricatured Medini Singh and sang about the nasty way through which he crushed the life of Lachima and Mohor Karan.

The bhangis, who are the most marginalized community in Barha, constitute the prime subaltern presence in the novel. In the story, they are depicted with all their spirit, wretchedness and frenzy. They live in the margin of the village, yet integral to it. They would carry away the decaying and maggot-ridden animal carcasses to the distant pits to be skinned. Their service is indispensable for the upper caste Hindus. However, there are many unwritten edicts, which forbid them from coming to the center of the social interaction. Their work is deemed "dirty" by the upper castes, even if they who do the cleaning work in their houses. Furthermore, they are debarred from sharing public facilities such as wells and roads. Alok Mukherjee observes:

Dalit settlements are not only apart from the upper caste Hindu settlements, they are actually outside the boundary of village. This physical segregation signifies other separations. Dalits do the work, live the life, eat the food and wear the garment that the upper caste Hindu will not. They draw water from a separate well, and cremate their dead in a separate space. Dalits are the upper caste Hindu's other. But this other is not only separate and different, like the member of another ethno-cultural, religious or linguistic group. This Other is a part of Hindu society, and yet apart from it. Inscribed in that apartness and difference is inferiority. Dalits occupy the lowest place in the Hindu hierarchical order. (2)

Among the lower castes, the bhangis are more subjected to severe constraints. When latrines were introduced in the village, the duty of emptying them fell to the bhangis. The upper classes had to consent to their demand of wage because, "if they didn't clean the latrines, the houses became unbearable." (45) Later, their refusal to perform the designated duties such as sweeping and scavenging and their demand for self-dignity evoked an ill-feeling among the privileged classes.

In the story, the bhangis are portrayed as people full of energy and passion. They lead an impetuous life celebrating every occasion in their life. Even amidst the penury and destitution they demonstrate an adamant will: "[T]he bhangis drank, turned into mud and colour-smearred demons, made themselves up like freaks, took out processions, composed songs. They composed songs about new laws, about murders and fights, about the oppression of the police and the scandals of the maliks." (57) By composing songs about the rotten and pretentious life, they sought to undermine the culture of the elite classes. They fabricated mocking songs, digging at the stinking private life of the masters. The hypocritical life of the masters featured in their songs. Occasionally, the tales of the exploitation and suffering also surfaced in their songs. No one questioned their right to compose songs. Their songs can be viewed as a protestation at the cultural level. Commenting on the counter strategies and defensive mechanisms deployed by the subaltern in a hegemonic system Antonio Gramsci observes that:

It signifies that the social group in question (a subaltern group

of great mass) may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes -- when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality. But this same group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it, because this is the conception which it follows in 'normal times' -- that is when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate. (qtd. in Chatterjee 170)

On the day of Holi, the scavengers fervently sang about the scandal involving Medini, Lachima and Mohor in a juicy language, erupting laughter among the crowd. The enraged Medini Singh started beating them ruthlessly. But undaunted and resolute, they continued their song by moving away to a safe distance. The disgrace was too much for Medini Singh. It triggered a hypertension in him and consequently he was paralyzed. Though indirectly, it led to fall of the local tyrant. By mimicking the masters through momentarily composed songs, the scavengers prove that they are indomitable in spirit: "[T]heir right to compose songs on village scandals was recognized. They would make up a song on any stirring event, paint their faces and sing the song in the bazaar, to collect money."(42) Their crushed spirit get invigorated by these songs and dances. To them, it is a protestation on a

cultural level. Their caricaturing song is akin to the mimicry of the colonized - - so trenchantly theorized by Bhabha in the postcolonial field -- and carries a subversive potential with it. The subversive potential of mimicry, according to Bhabha, lies in its "*double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority." (qtd. in Sharma 77) However, as the story progresses, this cultural protestation gradually takes the form of physical violence.

The tyrannical policies deployed by Ganesh to intimidate the outcaste Hindus in the village are evident in the way he trapped the scavengers with a police case. After the death of Medini Singh, Ganesh is shown to be organizing the landlords and moneylenders in Barha to tackle with the issue of lower castes' self-assertion. He couldn't stand the scavengers enjoying the freedom to caricature the masters. He told Gajamoti Singh: "I'll teach the bhangis a lesson. They can make up their songs, paint their faces and clown around, but they shouldn't bring the maliks into it. A malik is a malik." (76) Infuriated by the impertinent disposition of the scavengers, Ganesh made a plot to entrap them in a police case. He let one of his old cows loose near the bhangi settlement. He knew that once it dies it would be carried off and skinned by them. After a few days of straying without food or water, as expected, the cow died of thirst. Mangalal, who came to see the carcass of the cow lying on the road, dragged it to the pit and skinned it. Soon, Ganesh complained the police that Mangalal killed the cow and eventually got him arrested. The auteur shows how the privileged classes, in nexus with the

police, debilitate the subaltern people in various ways. Later, when the scavengers approached Ganesh with the request of exonerating them of the police case, he tells them arrogantly: "I've shown you what I can do if I wish. If ever I hear a good or bad song about any malik – I'll burn down the bhangli *toli*. No government, no Gandhi Mission, no contractor for animal hides will be able to save you." (83) This event increased his image among the landowners. The unscrupulous and dictatorial propensity of the landlords is portrayed in the text.

By introducing the character of Pallavi Shaw, the daughter of an influential Businessman in Delhi, Mahasweta unmistakably digs at the urban version of social service, which is devoid of any knowledge of the grass root realities. Pallavi had come to the Braha village from the city out of sheer curiosity than a sense of commitment and was ultimately hunted by the very force that oppressed the subaltern people. Earlier, after a failed suicide attempt, Pallavi approached Edwin Krishnatma, who advised her to join the Gandhi Mission and to "[G]o amongst those who are the most deprived, the lowest of the low." (86) Pallavi's presence at the village of Barha should have meant advantageous since she was influential enough to address the problems of the lower castes in a wider stage. Ironically enough, the scavengers had to pay the price for her misadventures. She was too urbanized that she could not even understand the problems of the villagers. She was a city-bred girl who had come to Barha with a declared mission: "I am dedicating one year to the poor and the oppressed." (86) Pallavi kept an

The author deploys a highly ironic language in this part of the text.

Enraged by the escaping of Pallavi Shaw, Ganesh set the entire settlement of the bhangis fire. Ejected out of their quarters, the bhangis fled to the forest and built grass huts on its edge. Very soon, dispossessed of land and property by the landlords, the dusads, another untouchable community, joined them. The condition of the other lower castes in Barha weren't better either. They had joined the bhangis owing to their extreme poverty, abandoning their traditional caste-based jobs. As DR Nagaraj aptly pointed out: "[W]hen a given religious tradition is insulting to their self-respect, the Dalits assert their dignity by rejecting to perform their traditional roles." (14) The dusads and ganjus, in effect, cast off their traditional caste-based roles, when their survival was threatened. They are shown to be desperately trying to eke out a living in the middle of numerous hostile forces. On being asked about their joining of the bhangis, Mohan Dusad tells Metri: "[T]he Maliks forced us to. Land they had always seized, but our huts? Yes, they too. Took it all. What could we do? We're living on *fores* land." (58) Mahasweta demonstrates that, in the present system, the life of the subaltern communities is encompassed by many uncertainties and anxieties.

The whole text is beset with instances of predation. The socio-economic scenario is infected with the presence of feudal predators, who feed on the vulnerability of the disadvantaged lower caste people. Abhay Mahato of Gandhi Mission has a similar story to tell. He is also an outcaste. Looking at the burnt bhangi settlement he says: "[M]y house was in Purnea district. From

unrealistic idea about the rural reality. It was with this unrealistic idea that she told Ganesh Singh when he came to bully her: “[Y]ou’re trying to scare them because they don’t know any better. I’ve told them, there are no maliks anymore. This is independent India.”(90) Pallavi had a narrow escape from the harrying of Ganesh. She became a victim of the feudal violence. Though she had some strong desire to help the exploited people of Barha village, she couldn’t do anything substantial for them due to her sheer idealism. Her presence in the village, on the other hand, pushed them into further troubles. Ganesh Singh burnt the entire bhangi settlement for having sheltered her. The experiences at Barha were too much for her to bear that she fell into a severe nervous breakdown.

By inserting the episode of Pallavi Shaw into the fabric of the story, Mahasweta seems to suggest that the activism based on pure idealism would not help the empowerment of the underdogs. This episode, besides revealing the inadequacy of the unrealistic service programmes, shows Ganesh Singh in a better light. It testifies the highly cantankerous disposition of the feudal landlords towards women. Interestingly enough, Pallavi Shaw reminds of Almesh Khurana, the academic idealist in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. Both Almesh and Pallavi are devoid of any knowledge of grass root realities of Indian social life. They want to help the poor people with their unrealistic ideas. In one way or other, both of them are forced to pay the expense of their misadventures. In the process, they get disenchanted too. Mahasweta digs at the inadequacy of such idealistic approaches in empowering the subalterns.

the time I was four to when I was nine, our *toili* was burnt three times. The malik-mahjans were kayasth zamindars. The second time, my father and others went to the government officers with a petition. The third time the zamindar's men killed three of them and threw them into fire. Then my mother fled with me.... (133) His own personal experience has convinced him about the ferociousness of landlordism.

The escalating victimization of the subaltern womenfolk in the present system is palpable in the experience of Rukmani. She was the daughter of Ganga, the untouchable maid servant in the house of Nathu Singh. Ganesh asked Nathu Singh to send Rukmani to his house as a helping hand to his wife. Nathu Singh agreed to send Rukmani to Ganesh's house in order to ensure his own daughter's safety. He tells: "I'll send Rukmani. If I keep her here, the other servants will go astray. You run your house with an iron hand. Let her stay there. Shameless hussy, she was all set to run off with Kamu Ahir." (100) In a feudal order, working class women are exposed to constant sexual exploitation by the upper class/caste masters. As on the land, the upper caste men maintained domination over the body on lower caste women. It is evident in both Lachima's and Rukmani's cases. They were forced to become the domestic slaves, against their own will. The oppressive system concedes them no alternatives.

The wanton ways with which the upper class/caste people play with the life of the underdogs are exemplified in the way Rukmani was forced to become the maidservant of Ganesh. Actually her marriage was fixed with

Kamu Ahir. She pleaded to Nathu's wife not to send her to Ganesh: "Malikn. Don't do this, I beg you. Didi's Malik scares me, and if there's a scandal, Kamu won't marry me. What'll become of me then? I implore you."(101) Here, Lachima's experience is seen to be replicating through Rukmani. Ganesh forcibly used her to satisfy his lust. When Putli, his wife, protested Ganesh's attempt to harass Rukmani he asks: "Why? Is this new to you? Aren't you Nathus' daughter?"(108) Herself a brutalized victim, Putli didn't want Rukmani to go through the same experience. Rukmani didn't want to rear up an illegitimate child. She tells Ganga: "I don't want to be the mother of the Malik's *kaanin* son." (113) After a few days, Rukmani committed suicide after failing in an attempted abortion.

Rukmani's death triggered much protest among the lower castes. This event virtually opened up a Pandora's Box as a consequence of which the marginalized clusters in Barha village were mobilized. In one of the most telling episodes of the story, all the lower caste people organized to protest the death of Rukmani. They interrogated the upper class masters for crushing the life of a poor girl. They carried Rukmani's corpse to the house of Nathu Singh and demanded an explanation. Bigulal shouted at Nathu Singh:

Malik, you sent her to Ganesh Singh's house. There she lived like a caged bird. She came back three days ago, three months pregnant. She knew she could no longer marry Kamu, lost all interest in life, hanged herself. What to do now? Take her to Tohri? Let the police cut her up? Or should we cremate her? I

say burn her. If the police cut her up, they'll find out that Rukmani was three months pregnant. (118)

Nathu Singh felt deeply humiliated by this unexpected gesture of self-assertion from the part of his subjects. But, he had no option but to pay the expense of the rituals demanded by them to avoid a possible scandal. In effect, they made him take the responsibility of Rukmani's death. As for Rukmani, the suicide itself was an act of protestation: "[N]ot in life, but in death, Rukmani proved her strength." (119) Her suicide and funeral gained much significance in Barha village. It united all the victims of Barha. The deep sense of resentment and discontent pent up in their mind began to surface. It is apparent in Bigulal's questioning of Ganesh: "[P]regnant, Malik. With child. Don't you understand? A maidservant in your inner quarters, where no other man but you can enter and she was pregnant. She couldn't take it. So in the early hours of the morning, she put a noose around her neck." (120) Gradually, the anger and protest hitherto buried in the mind of the downtrodden started manifesting in a variety of forms. As a gesture of protestation, Ganga and Mori, the maidservants in Nathu Singh's house, refused to enter work. The text shows how the subalterns resist at communal level and this resistance is carried out through the medium of traditional communal institutions. As Partha Chatterjee aptly points out:

In the constant battle between feudal forces striving for greater dominance and the resistance of a subordinate peasantry waged through a wide variety of means ranging from deception to

open rebellion, the balance of forces can be seen to oscillate in terms of the relative recognition of 'feudal' and 'communal' rights in the established structure of law, whether customary or codified. (337)

The open protestation of the scavengers, though indirectly, had already resulted in a sense of solidarity among the entire untouchables in the village. This caste association enabled them to get involved in a subversive politics by mobilizing the members, functioning as pressure groups for protecting and asserting their rights. This mobilization shows a growing sense of shared feeling on issues involving their social survival as well as cultural identity. Shortly, the dusads joined the bhangis and stayed in the edge of the forest, abandoning their traditional jobs. Later, the ganjus also joined them when Ganesh unjustifiably demanded the repayment of the debt. All the untouchable members came forward to combat with the persecuting environment to free themselves from the fetters and shackles of servitude. As Ghanshyam Singh observes: "[T]he caste consciousness of Brahmins strengthens ritual aspects of caste and helps the status quo; it aims at perpetuating the power of the few. Caste consciousness among the Dalits challenges the Brahminical ideology and seeks social transformation towards an egalitarian social order. The latter is a product, and part of the process of, democratization." (28) This sense of solidarity enabled the Dalits to embark on a course of action and trim down their dependency on the land lords of the village. They decided to settle scores with the tyrannical landlords and take

revenge on the death of Rukmani. The mobilization of the subalterns upset the designs of the landlords. When Ganga and Mori left the work, Nathu sensed some imminent danger. He told Ramrup "More troubles ahead of us. We must unite."(125) The feudal mobilization can be seen as an immediate strategy to tackle the caste turmoil resulting from a feared lower caste challenge to their dominance. Frightened by the assertion of the scavengers Ganesh conspires with the other landlords, who set aside the feuds among them for the time being, to fight their common enemy. Here, Mahasweta demonstrates how the oppressive mentality of the landlords comes to its ugly manifestation when they are confronted with the threat of subaltern uprising. They viewed the assertive behaviour of the untouchables as a serious threat to their prerogatives. The level of caution on the part of the upper class vividly suggests their fear of a possible change in the status quo maintained by them. As Nagaraj aptly opines: "[C]ertain powerful sections of society are still clinging to an old scheme of things. Since their interests are well-served in the old structure they are not prepared to accept any proposal to change it."(35) This growing anxiety over the need of protecting their privileges from the disruptive presence is articulated by Ganesh: "[W]e need to be united. That's all. Nothing else. The land is ours, we have the money, we have servants who will wield lathis on our behalf."(76) Here, the author unambiguously indicates the potentiality of subaltern politics and the seeds of fear it throws into the mind of the oppressors. The text shows the dominant classes' sense of timidity as it is registered through their concerted responses, thus

undermining the domination from within its own premises, thereby signaling, what Carl Marx called "a crisis of authority", which remain unresolved throughout the text.

The upper caste hegemony in Indian socio-economic spheres derives its grammar from relationships of power, authority and hierarchy which pre-date the coming of colonialism. But these hierarchies were re-structured to interact with ideas and institutions introduced the colonial regime. Even Ganesh's strong belief in his power and the continuous persecution to which he subjects the untouchable are based on a set of assumption about the binary relationship between a landlord and a tenant. These assumptions nonetheless reflect the traditionally maintained hiatus between the upper caste and the lower caste in Indian social order. Ganesh's chatting with the landowners at the end of chapter four reveals exactly how fervent they are in matters related to the preservation of their prerogatives. Incensed by the scavengers' insulting songs he tells Gajamoti Singh: "I'll get the bhangis evicted from the village." (75) They are ready to go to any extent, which they do later, to preserve the dominant status traditionally accorded to them by the system. Medini Singh and Ganesh are just the part of the system, which is maintained at the expense of the downtrodden people. By enforcing its own codes of power, the feudal system in India sought to establish its moral legitimacy at a time when its action of appropriating power is likely to be perceived as illegitimate.

In the story, Ganesh Singh appears to be sharpening the oppressive

tactics which he inherited from his father. He is more obdurate in his approach to the subalterns. Ganesh, partially through the oppressive legacy he inherited from Medini Singh and partially through his own bestial temperament, ignored all human feelings in his persecution of the lower castes. His feudal propensity is revealed in his conspiracy to eject the ganjus and dusads out of the forest: "[T]rees will be felled, fire will break out. They'll break the *fores* laws. Lose the *fores* work. Then they'll fall at our feet. We'll kick them in the face then. Make ten people do the work of twenty. Or my name is not Ganesh Singh." (137) Even as a boy, he used to indulge in cruelties and intimidate the servants. By ascribing divinity to a cruel landlord who persecutes the poor people, the author sarcastically digs at the contradictions inherent in Indian social system.

The upper caste people deploy all sorts of tactics to enslave the working class. They perpetuate their dominance upon the subalterns by various means --through the bonds, coercion or intimidation and even by blackmailing. It is apparent in the crooked way Medini Singh got Haroa enslaved by blackmailing. Haroa had actually come to Medini Singh after killing his landowner Suraj Singh. He told Lachima how he was forced to kill his former master, unable to bear the persecution to which he was subjected. Though it happened in pre-independent time, Medini Singh continued to blackmail him with this, thereby ensuring his free labour. Ever since, he had been working like a slave labourer under Medini Singh. The bond has been a convenient tool for ensuring cheap labour.

The bonded labour through which the landlords keep the lower castes under servility and force them to do unpaid labour come under the focal point of the text. To the landowners, the system of bonded labour is an effectual weapon to enslave the working hands. Incensed by the exodus of his field hands to the forest, Ganesh attempts to intimidate them with the bonds, which were actually signed at the time of Medini Singh. He threatened them asking: “[N]ow here are your father’s or grandfather’s thumb impressions. They had mortgaged the land – you know that, don’t you?”(132) The field hands, with whom the landlords maintain a creditor-debtor relationship, are always accustomed to seek their help owing to their socio-economic susceptibility. The debt may be taken by their parents or even grandparents. But still it remained unpaid, though they have been paying it back with unpaid labour and crops. But even the interest had not been repaid. Furthermore, the interest has increased manifold. Commenting on the dehumanizing system of bonded labour, Mairteya Gattak observes:

Under the bonded labour system a person loses his status as a free labour and virtually becomes a serf labour under a person from whom he has taken a loan, the amount of which may appear to be ridiculously small. He forfeits the right to sell his labour or the products of his labour in the open market value. He or a member of his family has to work under the creditor till the loan is repaid. But the wages are absurdly low and the rate of interest astronomically high. (10)

However, it was not within the capacity of the ganjus and dusads to repay the amount unjustifiably demanded by Ganesh Singh. Deprived of all means, they decided to go to the forest. With the effort of Abhay Mahato of Gandhi Mission they got a temporary permit to collect wood from the forest. The permit was given on the condition that there should not be any tree felling or fire inside the forest. Ganesh Singh was obviously upset at the leaving of his field hands. He decided to destabilize their plans of collecting wood from the forest. He even tried to misconvince the SDO when the latter refused to yield to his pressure.

Mahasweta documents how the economic uncertainties of the poor people thrust them to the mercy of the cruel landlords. Economic exploitation is very much at the core of the things. The constraints imposed by the system drive them to many inescapable uncertainties -- social, economic and cultural. The issue of economic exploitation cannot be divorced from the analysis of the social marginalization and subjugation. The present system ensures the siphoning off the wealth by the dominant classes, who preserve their hegemony over the weaker sections by maintaining control over the means of production and wealth. Despite the land reforms implemented in many states, the hegemony of the upper castes in social relation and means of production remain intact even today. Whereas, the lower caste communities, unable to manipulate the improvement of material conditions to their advantage, are still being subjected to exploitation at various levels. When his attempt to influence the SDO to get the permit cancelled, Ganesh began to

think of other alternatives. He was ready to go to any extent for incapacitating the untouchables. He conspired to put fire in the forest, thereby depriving the ganjus and dusads of their permit to collect wood from the forest:

I'll evict them. Bring in new subjects and settle them here. What will the SDO do? The court? Won't they need money for the elections? Sure, we'll give money -- but you help us. They'll help us. Tell me who's more important to them -- Ganesh Singh, who owns lakh, or that Harijan, Abhay Mahato? I'll see that he dies first. Who'll protest? The *achchuts*? I burnt the *bhangi toil*, ousted them, got Rukmani pregnant, she died, what could any of them do? Ramrup you don't just inherit land, you hang on it -- through power. (132)

Haroa came to overhear Ganesh's conspiracy to set fire in the forest and instantly informed Lachima. She, in turn, rushed to forest and informed Ranka Dusad about Ganesh's wicked plot. Soon the news reached the SDO through Abhay Mahato. SDO beckoned Ganesh and warned him strongly of the consequence if he tried to materialize his conspiracy: "[L]ook, if you set fire to the forest and start trouble in their name, the police will go there. And I'll go too. I've come to know that you are planning all the trouble, and I am not letting you go free. You aren't scared of me, right? All right, I'll also tie a rope round your waist, and drag you through Barha village to the police van." (145) Ganesh felt insulted. He came to sense that the news had leaked through Haroa. Offended and enraged, he headed straight to his house to

take revenge on Haroa for publicizing his plot. Running from Ganesh, Haroa reached the hut of Lachima. Realizing that Ganesh was going to kill him, Haroa brandished his sickle at him, in a defensive gesture, causing a severe wound on his shoulder. Ganesh shot Haroa in front of his wet nurse, Lachima.

Haroa's death proliferated the discontent among the underdogs in the village. They viewed Ganesh Singh as a threat to their very existence. Ranka kept watch with his people in the front of the forest, anticipating further plots from Ganesh. At night, they saw him approaching the forest with a tin of kerosene to fire the forest. Realizing that he had come to deprive them of their last means of livelihood, they decided to take back at him. Instantly, they alerted all people and began to chase him. Ganesh was shocked by the unexpected responses from the part of the subalterns. They shouted loudly and began to chase him. The anger and protest buried in their mind began to surface instantly. The author narrates: "[T]heir pent-up fury burst out in a scream and they surged forward." (163) Scared by the pursuing mob, Ganesh ran by the edge of the forest and finally reached Lachima's hut. She immediately came to sense his conspiracy: "[T]he smell of kerosene! You brought kerosene tin? You've started a fire? Set the jungle on fire?" (164) Lachima's long suffering at his house has given her a right to argue with Ganesh. When Ganesh pleaded her to harbour him from the mob, she tells him in an unwavering tone: "[O]nly I could have saved you then. Today, I shall save you again. But not, Ganesh Singh, in the way you want me to.

Today, I shall do it my way.”(164) Telling this, she brandished her sickle at him and loudly called out the people: “[W]herever you are, come quick! Ganesh Singh had come to set fire to the forest, he’s hiding in my hut. Wherever you are, hurry! Ganesh Singh is hiding here. Come quick!”(163) This is, of course a symbolic gesture, which serves an example for the people to follow. It marks the eruption of her suppressed pain and anger shared by all other members of her community. Ganesh was quite unprepared for what happened next. In a reversal of power, the subalterns, hitherto remained victims, started hounding their prey. Power, as Radtke Lorraine H and Henderikus J. Stam observe, “may be ceded from one person to another and may be acquired by virtue of one’s position within a social hierarchy or through sheer brute force.” (2) The silent resentment and anger heaving within her mind urged her in an act of retribution. In an attempt to level out the indignities to which she and her community were being subjected, Lachima retaliated her persecutor.

However, Lachima’s was not an individual act of revenge. Instead, the whole community joined hand to punish their common persecutor. Finally, in a telling scene, Lachima did what she could, knowing well that Ganesh would have her disposed of. She brandished her sickle at Ganesh, thereby instigating the other victimized people gathered there to tag along her model. Ultimately, Ganesh Singh became the victim of the same violence that he has fostered. The violence at the end of the story is made inevitable by the feudal brutalities meted out to the underdogs. As Fanon aptly points out: “between oppressors

and oppressed everything can be solved by force." (56) Now, mounted from the abyss of wretchedness, they retaliated their persecutor violently. They took their prompt from the very system which continually maltreated them: "[A] sea of armed people, voices raised, surged around the house in mighty waves. Lachima moved aside, leaving the door free, and became one with the crowd." (165) This gesture of resistance is integral to the plot of all the subaltern works of Mahasweta. The political compulsion of forging a resistant mood, already present in the earlier stories, is more strongly articulated in *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*.

All the subaltern stories of Mahasweta highlight the counter actions initiated by the subalterns against the hegemonic forces which seek to encroach them. And *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* is no exception. The works selected in the present study are characterized by a sharp critique of the socio-political and religious establishments of the country and a simultaneous highlighting of the counter initiatives of the marginalized people. It is evident that, through these works, Mahasweta's efforts are directed to create a space in which the voice of the oppressed subalterns may be heard. In one occasion, infuriated by Ganesh's arrogant disposition, the SDO tells: "[I]n modern India the peasants no longer suffer in silence when the mailks oppress them. Now there's unrest everywhere." (136) These words constitute the central statement of the text. None of her stories present the subalterns as docile victims of the system. Instead, they continuously resist the dominant classes who seek to maltreat them. The militancy of the underdogs can be seen as a consequence

of their advancing awareness of their prerogatives. Only by means of the organized struggles the subalterns could effect desirable change in the system. It is noteworthy that this accentuation on their organized struggle is highlighted against the backdrop of the failure of the socio-political establishments of the country. As a social activist, Mahasweta is personally convinced of the revolutionary potentials of the subalterns' counter actions. By highlighting this aspect of subalternity in her fictional as well as non-fictional writings she seeks to empower the subaltern politics.

In the story, Abhay is the chief instrument of authorial statements. He, for example, tells the SDO after Haroa's death at the hands of Gaensh: "[T]his is the problem in such areas. And Bihar is full of them. The malik-mahajans own the land. They burn down huts, murder their subjects, and get away with it. The law cannot touch them." (154) The text offers a powerful critique of Independence. It discredits the ineptness of the nationalistic aspirations in a social order where the issues of caste and feudalism remain unsettled. Abhay is totally disillusioned by the political establishment of the country. His deep derision for the elitism which controls the politics is palpable in his talk with the station master: "[M]astersaab, there's no party or union for people who are poor. If there was, would my Bihar have so many peasant deaths, so many evictions?" (157) By stating this, he indirectly hints at the need of organized movements from the part of the less privileged people. Furthermore, the direct authorial commentaries, characteristic of Mahasweta's subaltern stories, offer a powerful indictment against the socio-political establishment of the

country. Her deep disenchantment with the mainstream political establishment is illustrated in these words: “[P]olitical parties ought to take an interest in Ranka and his people, they needed to form a union. But even the parties with a declared policy of the liberation of the oppressed don’t particularly care about rural India’s dispossessed tyrannized, tortured peasants, brutally killed because of their caste.”(158) In the text, the author intervenes, at times, to make her sharp pronouncement against the oppressive system: “Ganga and her people didn’t know that once there had been no independence, and that now there was. The lives of their men were in the hands of the maliks, the women were for the use of the maliks. Same old story in every house. Working the mailk’s land, in debt year after year, stripped of their land, pauperized, yet they remained *kharidi* subjects.” (113) The uncanny sense of realism with which she delineates the oppression and exploitation of the subaltern at the hands of the landlords of the Barha village is totally free from sentimentalism. Text demonstrates how various forces including the landlords, money lenders and government machineries etc. subject the subalterns to appalling atrocities. Mahasweta observes:

Rural India looks increasingly like a cremation ghat. During the summer, and in times of drought, tribals and the so-called lower caste Hindus desperately dig up dry riverbeds in search of drinking water. The tribals of Palamau often do not get anything to eat other than the seeds of China grass. The exploitation of poor, hungry, destitute peasants continues unabated. Almost all

cultivable land in the country has been cornered by a few thousand rich zamindars. Also the landless peasants are being forced to pay exorbitant sums as compound interest on small amounts that may have been borrowed generations earlier. (*The Wordsmiths* 189)

This elite-politics alliance that dominated the rural India is potential enough to disrupt any government initiatives. The dominant castes wield preponderant economic and political power. Tyrannous landowners like Ganesh enjoy the support of the mainstream political parties. Most of his iniquitous deeds are consequent upon his firm conviction about the political benefaction he enjoyed. It gave him the courage not only to encroach the subalterns but also to defy the law. When the SDO came to confiscate his gun after the killing of Haroa, Ganesh tells him in an arrogant tone: "Hakim saab! I don't give *licen fee*, I give money for the elections. Fifty thousand. In three elections, I've given fifty thousand in all." (160) However, the SDO, who was quite uncompromising on matters of law and order, took a firm stand in Ganesh's case.

The predicament of Lachima, the Dalit protagonist of the story, is derivative of an exploitative system which is constituted by many discrepancies like casteism and feudalism. Her extreme susceptibility to the unreceptive forces in her environment is basically embedded in the precariousness of her community's socio-economic condition. Lachima is also the victim of the exploitative sexual relationships perpetuated by the feudal

order. Lachima, like Sanichari, the Dalit protagonist in *Rudali*, was initially neither retaliating nor psychologically empowered but subsequently becomes indomitable due to survival necessity. At first she, crippled by her own docile mindset, was highly vulnerable to feudal and caste-based exploitation. Her inability to transcend the constraints of her environment has to be read along with Sanichari's acquired ability to manipulate the milieu to her ends. However, at the end of the story, Lachima seems to have grasped the wisdom of resistance and manages to surface out of the abyss of diffidence to retaliate her oppressors, setting example for other victims around her. Her timely metamorphosis resulted in the fall of Ganesh. It has to be noted that even amidst the protracted sufferings she maintains a rare sense of dignity and power of endurance.

Caste does enter firmly into the fabric of the story. *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* is noted for its blatant denunciation of the caste system and its cancerous effect on Indian society. It shows how the ethos of caste, besides fostering segregation, legitimizes the suffering of the lower castes. Mahasweta has not individualized the characters in the story. Lachima suffers because she is born in a lower caste. So is the condition of the other members of her community. Their degradation, penury and victimization, are attributed to the factor of caste. Caste, according to Ambedkar, is "a harmful institution, inasmuch as it involves the subordination of man's natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules." (93) The victim position and abject condition of the bhangis and dusads are consequent upon their lower

status in the caste hierarchy. Mahasweta also shows how the system of caste legitimizes and privileges the dominant castes. There is a great irony in the divine status accorded to a tyrannous landowner. It was for appeasing his master Medini Singh that the Brahmin priest ascribed a godly status on the child Ganesh. When the child was born, the priest pronounced that there was something godly about the child and hence he should be called Ganesh. That's how Tritirthanarayan got the nick name Ganesh. The text explicates how the caste system, in tandem with feudalism, ostracizes the underdogs in various ways. By means of the prerogatives accorded by the system the dominant castes mobilize resources and conduct a number of economic and political activities. It is this disguised concentration of capital that sustains what Tapan Basu called "untouchability fetish promoted by the caste system." (xvii) The dominant castes have been cornering the benefits of the government policies. Though the democratic politics and capitalist economy expanded the basis of politics, the subaltern classes are still denied access into it. Basu went on to observe:

Despite modernization of an ancient economy, the economic condition of the poorer segments of society, which included most Dalits, did not improve. In fact, the upper caste stranglehold on economic resources and rewards was accentuated further with the increasing concentration of capital in the possession of the already powerful and already prosperous social segments. The Dalit poor, or more pertinently,

the poor Dalits, was rendered more penurious than ever before.

(187)

In the text, the upper castes, mainly constituted by the Rajputs, are shown to be perpetuating their domination over the economic production and the apparatus of culture. The lower castes who remain in the bottom of the Indian social hierarchy have been the victims of numerous exploitations. Caste-based oppression is evident in all spheres of their experiences. Today, however, the democratic values of equality and social justice have gained political legitimacy, revitalizing the consciousness of the traditionally dispossessed groups. It also marks a struggle for resources.

The spurious nature of caste system is once again exposed in the episodes where, upper caste men, despite making fake claims about "caste purity", are shown to be exploiting the lower caste women sexually, with or without their consent. The ethos of caste doesn't prevent them from exploiting the lower caste women sexually. Through the direct authorial statements Mahasweta exposes their immoral and malicious lifestyle: "[T]he high caste Rajput males were a hot-blooded lot. They solved this problem by keeping a low caste woman in addition to the wife at home." (27) Lachima is sexually exploited by Medini. But hers is not an individual case. The same predicament is confronted by other women of her community. Later Ganesh raped Rukmani and ruined her life. It brings to mind the way the sister of Bakha, the untouchable protagonist of Mulkraj Anand's *Untouchable*, was harassed by a Brahmin. One of the major events in *Untouchable* is the temple

priest's attempt to seduce Sohini. She had a narrow escape from this seductive attempt. When his attempt fails, the priest deceitfully cries of pollution. In *Rudali* also Mahasweta has eloquently dealt with the sexual exploitation of the working class women by the upper caste men. It is by means of the traditional power accorded by the caste position that they perpetuated their domination over the subalterns. The sexual harassment of lower caste women goes parallel with their economic browbeating and social oppression.

Like her other subaltern works, *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* offers a powerful critique of the system which incessantly victimizes the weaker sections of the society. Servility is passed from one generation to another. Medini Narayanan bequeathed his oppressive tradition to his son Ganesh. So is the case of the victims too. Lachima inherits the tradition of servitude from Gulal, who in turn had hers inherited from her parents. The author seems to suggest this disturbing aspect of power relation by demonstrating how the experience of oppression and discriminations resume unabated throughout the history of India. In the text, she exposes the sociological undercurrents of what is called the stream of power, which continuously victimizes the weaker sections of the society. Most of the contemporary practitioners of fiction in the country, who prefer to live and write from the lofty heights of aestheticism, have stopped bothering about the social issues. By making her stories the documentation of the life and struggling of the humiliated people, Mahasweta reminds her contemporaries the need of debunking the apple carts of elitism that dominate the literature and historiography of India.

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## Chapter V

### *Rudali: Subversion through Resistance*

One of the most acclaimed among the stories of Mahasweta Devi, *Rudali* offers a powerful indictment against the socio-economic and religious establishments in India. The text demonstrates how these three domains reinforce each other in the social oppression and economic exploitation of the subalterns in various ways. The subversive potential of *Rudali* as a politically intervening work lies in its consistent demonstration of the counter initiatives of the exploited people to resist the domination of the hegemonic classes. The authentic documentation of the incessant struggles of the subalterns to meet the both ends of their life, coupled with an unswerving effort to resist the domination, testifies the political agenda of the text – the agenda of empowering the subalterns by highlighting the alternative possibilities behind the oppressive system. Written in the middle phase of her literary career, *Rudali* testifies Mahasweta's thematic engagement with the less privileged constituencies of Indian society. The text traces the metamorphosis of Sanichari, the untouchable protagonist, by exhibiting how her initial vulnerability and defenselessness gradually gave way to an unremitting attitude and a successful manipulation of the system to her end.

The issue of survival is nowhere dealt with such deep insight from the perspective of subaltern as in *Rudali*. The text, in a sense, offers a survival manual for the subalterns to follow in an unreceptive world, where they experience continuous ostracization and subjugation at the hands of the

dominant classes. Questions of survival, implying as it does, an intersection of an adamant mindset and cognizing efforts, has become the focal point of the text. "A preoccupation with one's survival", observes Margaret Atwood, "is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival." (*Survival* 33) Concerns of survival and the ensuing hardships are littered across the fabric of the text. Sanichari is placed at the center of the text, and it is through her experiences the issues of the exploitation and marginalization of the subaltern communities are examined. The taking up of the profession of rudali (funeral wailing) charts the subsiding of Sanichari's submissiveness to the victimizing forces in her milieu and marks a guarded step towards her empowerment.

*Rudali* narrates the story of a Dalit woman who boldly builds up her means of subsistence in an antagonistic system. Sanichari encounters a series of predicaments after the death of her close relatives, including her husband. But, by refusing to view her abject condition as the outcome of destiny, she treads bold steps and makes many efforts, amidst many odds, to ensure her survival. As the story progresses, she is seen to be forging fresh strategies for survival, both at individual and community level. The subalterns who are historically on the defensive, according to Antonio Gramsci, "can only achieve self-awareness via a series of negations, via their consciousness of the identity and class limits of their enemy." (*Prison Notebooks* 273) In the story, admittedly, Sanichari gets empowered by means of the negation of the resilient role ascribed to her as well as her community by the establishment.

In the process, she learns to manipulate the very system that seeks to ostracize her. By refusing to be subservient, she comes to enjoy a relative independence from the stranglehold of the system. *Rudali* offers a powerful critique of the contemporary Indian social reality by exhibiting the dire poverty of the subalterns, their persistent struggle to eke out a living in an oppressive milieu, their occasional gestures of self-assertion and their resistance to the encroachments by the dominant castes/classes.

The locale of the story, Thahad, is a typical Indian village where different forces are at work to browbeat the underprivileged communities in various ways. Like any other Indian village, Thahad is also characterized by the presence of caste system and feudalism. Caste becomes a determining factor of the life of the people of Thahad. Sanichari, the central character of the story, is an untouchable by caste. The very opening of the story introduces Sanichari along with her socio-economic environment: “[I]n Thahad village, ganjus and dushads were in the majority. Sanichari was ganju by caste. Like the other villagers, her life too was lived in desperate poverty.” (54) By locating Sanichari in a well-defined socio-economic context, Mahasweta brings home the idea that her abject condition is consequent upon her bottom status in the caste ladder. Sanichari’s subalternity is inextricably entangled with her caste identity. By contextualizing the locale and characters at the very outset of the story Mahasweta concedes no space for any other assumptions attributed to their desperate condition. The socio-economic context in which the characters are situated unmistakably reveals the

symptoms of India social system with all its discrepancies.

Every death in the village is mediated by certain rituals, which bring with them many financial burdens for the subalterns who are already impoverished. The ritual demands are often too much for them to afford. In one occasion Sanichari exclaims: “[W]as one to weep or worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbours cheaply at the shradh?”(55) It is in an ironic vein that the author pictures the pathetic predicament of the underdogs, who do not have the time to mourn the death of their family members owing to their busy efforts to meet the religious demands attendant upon each death. Throughout the story Sanichari is shown to have no time to grieve the death of her family members due to her extreme socio-economic constraints. The death of her husband exacerbated the dismal situation already present in her life. There is no indication in the text to suggest that her life was happier before. Like the other members of her community her life was also beset with scarcity and destitution: “[I]n this village everyone is unhappy. They understand suffering. So they are content with being fed just sour curd, sugar and coarse parched rice.” (55) Ironically enough, this stark picture strikes a sharp contrast to the idealized portrayals of Indian villages – so ardently delineated in the stories of the mainstream writers like Rabindranath Tagore and Premchand. Since Sanichari had to shoulder the responsibility of pooling up the expense of the funeral of her husband, she didn’t get any time for mourning. This has to be read along with the vocation of “funeral wailing” she took up later due to the compulsion of survival. This

is the sharp irony that underlies the life of the subaltern communities in the country. Mahasweta sarcastically points out how the underprivileged people are forced to put off not only their domestic pleasures but also their personal sorrows due to their socio-economic constraints.

The entrapping and petrifying of the untouchables by the police at the behest of Ramavatar reveals the nexus between the feudal landlords and local administration. When Sanichari's mother-in-law died there were no male members in the house to make the necessary arrangements for cremation. Ramavatar Sigh, the Rajput landlord in the village, who suspected the dushad and ganju males to have stolen some of his wheat, had got them arrested. With the money power, the upper caste landlords could bring the subalterns punishment for a mere whim of suspicion. Here, Mahasweta digs at the system of justice prevailing in the India villages by demonstrating how it gets contaminated by the influence of caste system. Examining how the casteism interferes in the practice of rural justice, making it discriminatory D.R.Nagaraj observes:

In the case of Dalits even petty thieving becomes a matter of grave offence. The caste Hindu society loses the sense of proportion and discrimination, and the judicial society of the village transforms itself into the state with all its judicial and policing powers. In the modern context the proper way is to initiate processes of law and order. The official legal machinery is there to take care of these violations. It assesses the magnitude

of crime through its own well established procedures and the rule of the law should take its course ( 32).

Even some slightest faults on the part of the untouchables, real or imaginary, enrage the landlords. Due to the detention of her husband in the police station Sanichari, together with her sister-in-law, had to do the all the crematory works herself. Otherwise, they feared, it would bring them the additional burden of paying the expense of the repentance rites, if the cremation was delayed.

What is more scandalous about the prevalent system is the way in which the religion, which is exceedingly institutionalized, in tandem with feudalism, incapacitates the weaker people through its various ritual and ceremonious demands. In India, the theological knowledge is, by and large, monopolized by the upper castes, particularly Brahmins. The dominant castes enjoy domination not only on the means of production but also on scriptural knowledge. Dispossessed of the knowledge entitled by the scriptures, the lower castes have become vulnerable to religious exploitations in many ways. Not surprisingly, the caste Hindus take advantage of the situation and utilize their command over scriptural knowledge to perpetuate their domination over the subalterns. The monopoly of the upper castes over knowledge is a major topic dealt in the subaltern stories of Mahasweta. *Rudali* shows how the institutionalized religion disempowers the subalterns by its coercive means.

Sanichari's husband died of cholera after consuming the milk offered

at the Baisakhi mela, a religious festival held to celebrate the New Year by the Hindus. The idol of Siva was bathed in milk offered by the rich. Lower castes, out of their desire to consume the milk approached the priest, who readily offered it by demanding money. It was this "sanctified" milk given by the local priest that caused the death of Sanichari's husband. The priest unjustifiably demanded money for the contaminated milk, knowing that consuming it may be detrimental to their health. He offered the unhygienic milk to the lower castes, little respecting their life. To the upper castes/classes, the life of subaltern is not worthy to be cared. Examining how the ethos of caste legitimizes the mechanics of power in Indian society, Tapan Basu observes in his introduction to *Translating Caste* (2002): "[W]ith its justification in Hindu religio-legal mandates, caste power is useful in concealing the concentration of class power in the possession of elite, and in the perpetuation of that possession through compulsion and coercion." (xxiii) The institutionalized religion, with its coercive power upon the subalterns, reinforces the exploitation taking place at social and economic levels.

Mahasweta shows, in a unique fashion, how the interests of institutionalized religion and feudalism reinforce each other in subjugating the subalterns in the contemporary India social scenario. The priest at Tohri is shown to be demanding ritual offering which, he insists, is inevitable since her husband died there. Sanichari had no other option but to concede to this ritual demand, violation of which, she was made to believe, would be highly ominous. Sanichari was accustomed to spend "a precious rupee and a quarter

on a Spartan offering of sand and sattu which Budhua offered as panda.”(57) She didn't know that the same ambush of religious exploitation was awaiting her at her own village too. She was made to do the ritual offerings two times which consequently pushed her to the shackle of bonded labour. In the story, religion is presented not as a source of solace and redemption but as a source of trauma and suffering. This monopoly on scriptural knowledge enjoyed by upper castes is presented analogous to the marginalization of the lower castes in matters of education and learning. The deprivation of knowledge, largely concerning rituals, inevitably leads the lower caste communities to the mercy of upper caste priests. Tapan Basu observes:

The coercive aspect of caste power is apparent also in the denial of knowledge to those considered outside the pale of caste power. The monopoly overlay as much as theological knowledge enjoyed by Brahmin men and then, with the passage of centuries, by the upper castes as a whole, has been matched by lower caste marginalization in matters of education and learning, inevitably giving the so-called caste Hindus an advantage insofar as they utilized this to capture and continue to hold on to the instruments of cultural as well as economic production and emerge as the so-called class Hindus (xxiii).

It is this coercive nature of caste system that is exemplified in the way the priests at Tohri and Thahad intimidated Sanichari by demanding money for ritual. Back at Thahad, Sanichari found another burden awaiting her.

Mohanlal, the local priest, insisted that she should do the ritual offerings once again, since what was done at Tohri was inadequate. He taunted her by shouting that she tried to belittle scriptural demands: "[W]hat! A mere offering of sand, that too in river water! Is Budhua Lord Ramachandra, repeating his act of offering a pinda of sand for His father, King Dasaratha!" (57) This time Sanichari had no money with her to do the money required for the ritual offerings. Consequently, she gets herself mortgaged to Ramavtar Singh, through a bond, after borrowing twenty rupees from him for doing her husband's funeral rites. As per the bond, she has to reimburse fifty rupees through a bonded labour extending over five years. This episode shows how the feudal system, in connivance with the religious establishment, weakens the downtrodden people in various ways. Religion, rather than a source of soothing presence, is shown to be debilitating the hardly earned income of the subalterns.

The bondage to which Sanichari has been forced is juxtaposed with the spendthrift way the upper castes spend money for the funeral ceremonies. It is significant that it is the ritual demands followed by the death of her husband that forced Sanichari to indebtedness to Ramavatar Singh. The irony apparent in the situation is that the subalterns are forced to the stranglehold of bonded labour for years for a flimsy amount of money, while the elite classes lavishly spend huge amounts on their funerals. In the story, the funeral extravaganzas are narrated along with the dire poverty of the subalterns for whom even the nominal indulgence like bangles and combs remain a distant dream. This

narrative strategy of juxtaposing the two ends of Indian social hierarchy endows the text a powerful subversive quality.

However, Sanichari managed to free herself from the bondage. After one year's of bonded labour, driven by a slight hope, Sanichari approached Ramavatar with the request of relieving her of the enforced contract. Ramavatar, who was in a happy mood then, readily agreed to her request. It was certainly an uncommon sign of bounteousness from the part of a landlord. But Ramavatar's act of generosity did not go uncriticized. The other landholders accused him of exhibiting unnecessary liberality towards the untouchable field hands, whom, they insist, must be always kept under yoke. Bonded labour, according to them "was of less value than the dust off their shoes", and what mattered was "the yoke, the burden of debt that kept them labouring like cattle." (58) The practice of the extremely exploitative and dehumanizing system of bonded labour in rural India and its throttlehold effect upon the subalterns are dealt with in detail in Mahasweta's collection of activist writings *Dust on the Road* (1997).

The text also explicates the community kinship and caste association among the subaltern people. In the story, the lower castes are shown to be very caring and co-operative, notwithstanding occasional wrangles and quarrels. When Budhua died, leaving his baby child with Sanichari, the lower castes in the village came forward to look after their needs. Dhatua's wife came forward to breastfeed Haroa, Budhua's baby. The author narrates that "[W]hile Sanichari worked on the job, she didn't need to cook. Dulan's wife

would send her meal of roti and achar along with Dhatua's. Sanichari repaid the debt of wheat flower. But, there are some debts that can never be repaid." (62) Prabhu ganju offered Sanichari his yard for erecting her hut there. It is significant that all of them – Dhatua, Dualn and Prabhu – are ganjus, the untouchables. The caste members, particularly those who belong to the lower stair of the hierarchy, who are more exposed to exploitations, have certain shared experience of victimization. According to Sanichari, "[I]n order to survive, the poor and oppressed need the support of the other poor and oppressed." (63) In another occasion, Sanichari herself offered shelter to Bikhni, when she found her dispossessed in the market. When the landlord had laid claim over her house for her failure of the repayment of a loan and her son left for his in-law's house, Bikhni was left with no option but to leave her village. Sanichari readily invited her to her hut: "[M]y two-roomed hut is empty. Each room has a platform to sleep on." (66) The corresponding pattern of subjugation that they experience, being lower castes, has developed a strong sense of kinship among them. In the story, the sense of solidarity and amity among the underdogs is often juxtaposed with the internal feuds and treacheries among the elite classes.

Sanichari was obviously affected by the running away of Haroa, who was doing the menial works in Lachman Singh's shop at the market. She went in search of him from one market place to another. Haroa's running away becomes relevant to the fabric of the story in another way too. It is during her incessant search for him that she happened to meet Bikhni, her childhood

mate. The condition of Bikhni was equally pathetic. She was also accustomed to roam around in search of job, due to her extreme economic insecurity. She was forced to leave her house when the landlord of her village laid claim over her house as a repayment of the loan. Dispossessed and distressed, she had been wandering from place to place when Sanichari met her accidentally in the market.

The resistant spirit and watchful mind of the subaltern is well exemplified in the character of Dulan. It was Dulan who became instrumental of Sanichari's empowerment by guiding her out of the mazes of enforced deprivation and penury and reconnecting her with the community. He is an accredited member of his community. Nothing in the village escapes from his watchful mind and observant eyes. When encountered with the issue of livelihood Sanichari urges Bikhni: "[C]ome, let's go see Dulan. He's a crafty old rogue, but he has a sharp mind. He is sure to show us way." (68) An indomitable will coupled with a vigilant spirit differ Dulan from the rest of the members of his community. He prompted them to action: "[A]s long as there's a way of earning, why should anyone die of starvation?" (68) He was implying the elaborate ceremonies to be conducted in connection with Bhairab Singh's funeral. They had news that it was going to be performed with pomp and splendour. Sanichari and Bikhni actively listened to everything Dulan told them. They looked attentive and motivated. Dulan not only made a sound diagnosis of the problems at hand but also offered a course of action. And nearly everything he said and did was calculated for

effect. He could enliven the dull spirit of Sanichari and directed her to the path of resistance and survival through these stirring words. He prompted Sanichari: "Budhua's mother! Do readymade ways of earning exist? They may exist for malik-mahajans, but do they exist for dushads and ganjus? We have to make our own opportunities." (68) He keeps himself informed of what is happening in the village. To him, information means power since it opens up fresh opportunities. In one occasion, Sanichari compliments him: "[N]o one keeps close track of everyone's affairs the way you do." (76) The enthusiasm and spirit that he demonstrates, even at worse times, denote his adamant consciousness, which is unmistakably subaltern. The regenerative potentials of his words effected desired change in the mind of Sanichari and Bikhni. He whole-heartedly endorsed their joint efforts to find fresh opportunities of subsistence. He often spells out spiky criticism against the upper caste masters. In one occasion, while talking about the need of arranging more rudalis by including the sex workers at Tohri he remarks: "[It]'s these Rajput malik-mahajans who have created so many randis." (72) At the same time, the author seems to have taken special care not to attach a redeemer image to Dulan. Such an aura of redeemer, once bestowed upon the character of Dulan, would certainly hinder the subversive quality of the text. He is only an instrument in their empowerment, and not a precondition.

It is not difficult to see that Dulan's craftiness is not alienated from the community wisdom. He is a true repository of community wisdom. It is this community wisdom that enabled Dulan to perk up the spirit of Sanichari and

Bikhni, and later through them the other members of the community. He prompts Sanichari saying “[L]ook here Buddha’s ma, there is no bigger god than one’s belly. For the belly’s sake everything is permissible.” (69) He is of the opinion that one needs certain tricks and strategies to live in an unfriendly system. There are no readymade solutions available for subalterns. It is his firm conviction that what one does to feed one’s belly is justifiable. It is by re-establishing the connectivity with the community that Dulan facilitated the empowerment of Sanichari and Bikhni. They, in turn, invigorated the other members of their community, thereby expanding the network of empowerment among the downtrodden people in the village. This new spirit enabled them to transcend the strictures of their environment and to exploit the circumstances to their benefit.

The practice of funeral wailing is an enumerative act which accumulates momentum as the text progresses. The practice of mourning the death was a staple activity among the upper classes and is considered as religious obligatory. The landlords normally allot a huge sum for arranging the rudalis, because they think the size of the amount being spent would enhance their prestige. The landlords, Dulan tells Sanichari, “need rudalis to prop up their honour. Now I have shown you the way, fight on.” (74) Here, Mahasweta is obviously digging at the spurious pride of the upper caste people. The first occasion that Sanichari and Bikhni went to do the job of rudalis was for the funeral of Bhairab Singh. Dulan was the first to know the death of Bhairab Singh in the village. He passed the information to Sanichari

and Bikhni. It was when Sanichari and Bikhni were left with no money and job that he triggered them off to the opening made available by the death of Bhairab Singh: "[T]hey need rudalis to wail over the corpse. They have got hold of two whores. In the household of the masters, whores weep for the dead." (70) This project betokened new aspirations as well as anxieties in Sanichari and Bikhni. Obviously, there were promises of improvements encoded in the new vocation.

The narration of the oral history by Dulan to the other members of his community has to be seen as a part of the narrative strategy deployed by the author. It, besides historicizing of the text in a wider context, testifies subalterns' resistance to the encroachments of the dominant castes/classes in the past. The story of the incursion of the Rajaputs into the tribal areas is relevant in many ways. First of all, the story, with its emphasis on the bold resistance of the tribals against the onslaught of the outsiders, gives the text a thematic connectivity with her other stories like *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, where the issues of domination and subaltern resistance are dealt with in a wider canvas. Secondly, it shows the direct authorial intervention in the text at its best. The author narrates that "[T]he tale Dulan told them was very significant. It explains clearly how the ruthless Rajaputs infiltrated this remote area of tribals, and gradually built themselves up to the status of moneylenders and established themselves as the masters of the area." (73) History is constantly reactivated not only as the thread of the narrative texture but as its source too. Mahasweta, by means of such direct

statements, spells out her sturdy dissent, which could not be expressed otherwise, with the discrepancies of the system. This authorial intervention effectively reveals the political agenda of her writing.

The narration of oral history by one subaltern to the other subalterns is, however, pertinent since it traces the reprehensible channels through which feudalism in India expanded its exploitative network throughout the country. It narrates how the Rajaputs fell into the favour of the king after helping him to suppress the tribal uprisings. The king, in turn, gave them the land, which they expanded by means of oppression and marauding during the course of time: "...now they take possession of land, not by throwing swords in the air but by shooting bullets at people and flinging flaming torches at settlements." (73) Here, like elsewhere, Dulan becomes a powerful spokesman of the author, who uses him as an effective narrative tool throughout the story. The statements made by Dulan unmistakably betray the social critique inherent in the text:

There may be litigations and ill will between mailks, but they have certain things in common. Except for salt, kerosene and postcards, they don't need to buy anything. They have elephants, horses, livestock, and illegitimate children, kept women, venereal disease and a philosophy that he who owns the gun owns the land. They all worship household deities, who repay them amply- - after all, in the name of the deities they hold acres, which are exempt from taxes and reforms (74).

His words offer a powerful indictment against the horrendous manner with which feudalism functions in Indian society. The history of India is also the history of continuous exploitation and oppression of the lower castes and tribals at the hand of the upper castes. The real causes of the deprivation of the marginalized communities are to be attributed to the presence of feudalism and caste system. Independence has not helped to eradicate the dehumanizing practices of feudalism and caste system in the country. The subalterns, who belong to the bottom of the caste hierarchy, are the direct and immediate victims of the socio-political and religious exploitation.

The profession of funeral wailing had multiple effects upon the life of Sanichari and Bikhni. First of all, it generated the income for subsistence and alleviated their poverty thereby bringing a refreshed vibrancy in their life. They found the practice of funeral wailing not only adaptive but also potentially dissident for altering their subject position. This new vocation, they hope, would enable them to escape the domination of the privileged classes/castes who use the coercive means by which they could pull out labour as well as impose an inconsiderate working condition and low wages on their own exploitative terms. At the same time, Sanichari was aware of the irony involved in her taking up of the vocation of funeral wailing. The author narrates in an ironic vein: "Sanichari thought that perhaps her tears had been reserved for the time when she would have to feed herself by selling them." (72) Dulan asked Sanichari and Bikhni to arrange more rudalis by including the sex workers at the randi street into their group. This is a great stride

forward in their struggle to confront the challenges they encountered in their immediate environment. They have begun to see things in their own terms. They discarded their resilient mindset and decided to fight. They also understood the need for a concerted effort at community level. As Karlene Faith aptly points out: "[R]esistance may also be a choreographed demonstration of cooperation. The 'willing victim' may be operating from the vantage of strategic resistance, watching for openings and coalescing the fragmentary forms of resistance which, in combination, articulate a potential challenge to the status quo." (39) Here, the text marks the beginning of the subalterns' collective empowerment. This new perception, which enabled Sanichari to view the possibilities in her antagonistic physical environment, illustrates the distance she has trodden in the process of empowerment.

As the story progresses, Sanichari and Bikhni become more assertive and succeed in surmounting the hurdles in the path to empowerment. They took their cue from the very system which perpetually exploited them. Emerging from the confines of her persecuting milieu Sanichari exhibits remarkable power of adaptation. The initial performance of Sanichari and Bikhni as *rudalis* is significant since it was a litmus test for them. Their outstanding performance at the funeral of Bhairab Singh exhibits how diligent and determined they are when encountered with the question of survival. They wailed loudly and sang well-chosen phrases in praise of Bhairab Singh, thereby outshining the whores who had come from the randi street. So in the very first performance itself they got noticed as professional *rudalis*. Later,

everyone began to demand them for wailing the death. The politics of subaltern resistance always involves a deep-seated repudiation of the codes and norms prescribed by the dominant castes/classes. As Sartre aptly observes “[W]e will become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us.” (15) The text marks Sanichari as a clever manipulator of the discreditable system and therefore links her to other wider locales of subaltern resistance. Her psychological empowerment is well illustrated in her words: “Everything in this life is a battle.” (74)

The second half of the text presents Sanichari as an empowered subaltern who is determined to manipulate the unfriendly system to her end. Sanichari is seen to haggle with the account keepers for better payment for their job: “[T]he way we’ll weep and wail, huzoor, we’ll drown out even the chant of Ram’s name! For five rupees and rice. On the day of the *kriya* ceremony we’ll take cloth and food. Nothing more, nothing less. And if you need more *rudalis*, we’ll arrange it.” (74) The haggling shows that she is unwavering in matters concerning her subsistence. She began to demand different tariff for performing her labour such as “wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one *sikka*, wailing, rolling on the ground and beating one’s head, five rupees two *sikkas*.” (75) She knew that as long as the masters needed the *rudalis* to show off their pomp and snob, she, being a professional, was in demand.

*Rudali* presents an obnoxious picture of the domestic life of the elite classes. The greedy sons don’t hesitate to murder their fathers for property,

whereas some others are shown to be waiting impatiently for the death of their mothers. When Nathuni Singh's mother fell ill, he didn't bother to give her treatment. Instead, he made all arrangements for a pompous funeral and "stocking up on sandalwood and sal wood for a sensational funeral pyre. Bales of cloth are arriving, for distribution at the kriya ceremony. He is preparing to feed Brahmins and purchasing loads of ghee, sugar, dal, flour." (77) It, besides revealing the pettiness of the upper class life, exhibits the extravagant manner they waste money on funerals. It has to be read along with Sanichari's mortgaging to Ramavtar Singh for five years for having borrowed fifty rupees. The unrelenting endeavours of the subalterns for survival are documented along with the licentious and profligate ways of the elite life. By juxtaposing the two extremes of Indian social Mahasweta debunks the acute contradictions in Indian society.

The spurious pride and snob among the elite classes opened up more opportunities for the underdogs. The practice of wailing was viewed as a matter of prestige among the upper castes. The furore it generated among the privileged people is well exemplified in the words of Nathuni Singh's second wife. Out of a sense of pride she says in a snobbish manner: "[W]hat's thirty thousands rupees for a kriya ceremony-- less than nothing. May my father live long -- but when he dies, then I'll show everyone how a kriya should be held!" (78) The merchants and traders, who belong to the middle stair of caste hierarchy, also began to ask for rudalis to show off their prestige. Occasionally, Sanichari spells out her pointed denigration against the pseudo

manners of the rich class: "[T]hese people can't summon up tears even at the death of their own brothers and fathers, won't they count their kriya costs? Do you know that Gangadhar Singh, a rich man like him, was stingy enough to use dalda instead of pure ghee on the funeral pyre of his uncle?" (76). As the story progresses, the subalterns are shown to be translating this derision into actions by the timely manipulation of the situations where their oppressors are involved.

Bikhni's joining of Sanichari led to a viable union of two victims of the system, competently fitted to counter any amount of odds. Later, their activities are effectively synchronized by accommodating the sex workers in the village within their fold. It developed a sense of solidarity among the exploited women in Thahad village. Gradually, more of them began to think in similar terms and the subsequent campaigning and collective initiatives had finally borne crop. Dulan suggested that they should make a union of rudalis. He understands the importance of unity and organized work. When her profession came in full swing, Sanichari organized the whores in the randi street. It demonstrates a growing sense of shared feeling on issues involving their social survival. The issue of survival is constantly reiterated throughout the thread of the whole text. Here, the act of wailing becomes a labour for the working class women. Dulan tells Sanichari: "it's wrong to give up one' land, and your profession of funeral wailing is like your land, you mustn't give it up." (89) According to him, wailing has to be viewed like any other profession. By becoming labourers the rudalis could organize, conduct strike or even

bargain for better payment. In one occasion he tells Sanichari in a vein of humour: "[T]he coalminers have a union. Why don't you form a union of rudalis and randis? You can be the *pishien*." (80) He understands that the rudalis need to organize to get the best out of the masters.

The story charts the slow but discernible metamorphosis of Sanichari and Bikhni from the docile victims of the system to its manipulators. Later, Sanichari tries to boost up the other subaltern women in the village economically by organizing and absorbing them to the network of rudalis. Sanichari gathers all the sex workers from the randi street and ensures them reasonable payment. Most of them, including her own daughter-in-law, had been forced to become sex workers by their utterly impoverished condition. At another level, it reveals the disconcerting picture of the sexual exploitations to which the subaltern women are subjected. Their economic vulnerability and social depravity occasionally forced them to the feet of the tyrannous landlords and moneylenders. Mahasweta demonstrates how the economic vulnerability and insecurity force the subaltern women to the ensnarement of the feudal landlords, who exploit them sexually. The women who are sexually exploited and harassed gradually turn into sex workers. This is illustrated in the conversation between Budhua and his wife. When Budhua's wife insisted on going to work in the house of the landlord, he warns her: "... I won't let you work in the maliks' fields. Young women who work for him never return home"

Why, where do they go?

First to a nice house, then to the randipatti – the whores' quarters (60).

Budhua's words reflect the threat on the security of the subaltern women in the feudal order. The sex workers in the randi street were formerly the maidservant of the landlords. They are the victims of feudalism and caste system. The concept of purity and pollution doesn't prevent the upper caste men from sexually utilizing the subaltern women, with or without their consent. Ironically enough, they are not concerned about caste defilement in having sexual relation with the subaltern women. By weaving these episodes -- Dulan's narration of the oral history as to how the Rajputs usurped the land by dispossessing the tribals and how the subaltern women are forced to become the sex workers -- into the fabric of the text, Mahasweta demonstrates how unjustifiably the subaltern communities are victimized ad infinitum by the dominant castes/classes in one way or other. The relationship of the subalterns including Sanichari and Bikhni with their physical environment they inhabit is not characterized by profusion but by exploitation caused by various unreceptive forces like caste system and feudalism.

Sanichari felt alone when Bikhni died after contracting asthma at her village. However, her grief is soon replaced by a fear of survival. She tried to soothe herself: "[A]fter the worst disasters people gradually bathe, eat, chase away the goat nibbling the chillies in the yard." (88) She didn't let the sorrow subdue her mind for long. She feels that "people can do anything but if they can't eat, they die." (88) Dulan told her, as usual, in a comforting tone:

“Bhudua’s ma. It’s wrong to give up one’s land, and your profession of funeral wailing is like your land, you mustn’t give up.” (89) Dulan’s words have always stepped up her weak spirit.

The empowerment of Sanichari is illustrated in the manner she gathers the sex workers in randi street, without any sense of shame or embarrassment, to wail the death of Gambhir Singh, a self-made intimidator of the lower castes, particularly the lower caste women. At the end of the story, Sanichari, equipped with an invigorated concern of livelihood, leads the whores to wail Gambhir Singh’s death. Gambhir Singh’s corpse is surrounded by the wailing rudalis, most of them are sex workers in the randi street. It gives the story an ironical ending. There are among them who have been exploited and driven out by him when he was alive. It was he who ruined and consequently reduced them to prostitutes. Now, the sex workers have come to wail on his death on “contract basis”, to fill their stomach. To them, the consideration of stomach remains to be a primary motivating factor. The way the story ends is significant as it suggests the organized efforts of the subalterns to eke out their livelihood, despite numerous obstacles. They exhibit consistent spirit to hold on their life on slender terms, notwithstanding many restraints. This is best illustrated the manner they manipulate the occasion of the funeral of Gambhir Singh, their former persecutor.

Gambhir’s corpse stank of rooting flesh. The randi rudalis surrendered his swollen corpse and started wailing, hitting their head on the ground. The gomastha began to weep tears of

sorrow. Nothing will be left! Cunning Sanichari! Hitting their heads meant they had to be paid double! He and the nephew were reduced to helpless onlookers. While hitting her head on the ground and wailing loudly, Gulbadan turned her dry eyes in the direction of the nephew, cast him a leering wink and grinned. Then, listening to Sanichari's cry, she rejoined the chorus (91).

It reveals the subversion involved in the act of wailing. Moreover, this gesture of collective manipulation marks a transition from the survival at individual level to community level. The mobilization of the *rudalis* disconcerts the designs of the landlords. Mahasweta obviously wants to demonstrate how the resisting initiatives of the subalterns serve to upset the apple carts of the dominant groups. Furthermore, this episode also testifies the spontaneity and resourcefulness of village womenfolk. However, it is important to note that though these organized movements have helped them to achieve some increase in the payment, it seldom brought in any sustainable upward mobility in their life.

### **Critique on Socio-political Scenario**

*Rudali* demonstrates the survival strategies adapted by the subalterns both at individual and community level. At the end of the story Sanichari surfaces as one who is capable of maneuvering the situation. Throughout the story, she is presented as one who is equipped with some survival strategies. The text traces her transformation from a submissive and resilient victim of

the system into its indomitable manipulator. She is shown to be more empowered than she is at the beginning. However, it is not the story of individual success. Many factors go into the empowerment of Sanichari in the story. Her empowerment hasn't taken place apart from her community. It is inextricably entangled with the empowerment of the whole community. Most primarily, it is the subaltern consciousness accelerated by Dulan which ultimately led her to confront the challenges posed by the system. Dulan has been instrumental in her empowerment. She, in turn, empowered the hapless sex workers in the randi street, by opening up fresh means of survival for them. She achieves empowerment through a variety of community tactics.

*Rudali* exemplifies Mahasweta's purposeful deployment of certain textual tactics which characterize her subaltern stories. It is through a series of narrative strategies like non-individualization of the characters, contextualization, historicization, de-fictionalization, authorial interventions, to name a few, Mahasweta reinforces the social content of her stories. Admittedly, *Rudali* testifies the skillful deployment of the narrative strategy at its best. In the text, documenting the struggles of the subaltern, like her other stories, she has jettisoned the prevalent standards of fiction with a purpose to de-fictionalize the cruel social realities which she seeks to depict.

The individuals are unambiguously historicized throughout the story. None of the characters in the story are individualized to the exclusion of their social or communal identity. This narrative strategy of contextualizing the characters by placing them in their socio-economic and cultural milieu has

been a characterizing feature of Mahasweta's subaltern stories. In *Rudali*, the author never details her characters' personal traits to the extent of isolating them from their socio-economic moorings. This narrative tactic allows a variety of perspectives to be juxtaposed and explored. By refusing to individualize Sanichari or Bikhni, Mahasweta stresses on the similarity they bear with the condition of the other members of their community. All the untouchable people in Thahad village, whether the ganjus or dushads, share a common legacy of victimization for having born in a lower caste. The condition of Bikhni is not better than Sanichari. So is the condition of all other members of their community. They are the products of their socio-economic conditions. Their subalternity is woven into the fabric of their words and deeds. They act and behave according to the compulsion of their physical environment.

The non-individualization of the characters is a narrative strategy effectively employed by Mahasweta in *Rudali*. As in her other stories like *Aranyer Adhikar*, *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* and *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*, which are taken for analysis in the present study, the characters in *Rudali* never speak or act apart from their socio-economic contexts. The subaltern characters in the story, particularly Sanichari and Bikhni, stand in sharp contrast to the stereotype sketches of subaltern women in subsidiary social roles recurrently presented in the stories of the mainstream writers. Though a character like Sanichari concedes much space for psychological description, Mahasweta has intentionally dispensed with this aesthetic enticement, as it

would eclipse the social substance and political mission of the text. The dress she wears, the words she speaks, and the mannerism she wears is identical and is not separable from the other members of her community. When Sanichari happens to meet her companion in the market after a long time, their appearance is described: "[L]ike Sanichari, Bikhni's wrists, throat and forehead sport no jewelry other than blue tattoo marks, both wear pieces of cork in their ears instead of earrings, their hair is rough and ungroomed." (65) The physical descriptions of the Sanichari and Bikhni are given with the identical signs of their subalternity. The writer hasn't attempted to delineate them in psychological terms, to the extent of excluding them from their socio-economic and cultural contexts. But at the same time, it is worth mentioning that the characters in the story retain certain peculiarities that they are not reduced into mere clones of their community. The ambience of realism is kept till the end of the story. In other way, this narrative tactic of contextualization implies that the tragic condition of the subalterns can be altered since it is the result of an asymmetrical system. The text persuasively suggests the alternative possibilities inherent in the system with which the subalterns could alter their subjective condition. The whole story, in a sense, is an attempt to forge various strategies for changing this condition.

The textual strategy of historicization of the characters is apparent at the very outset of the text. The way the story starts is significant that it situates the protagonist in a well-defined socio-economic context. Sanichari's mother-in-law would often opine that "Sanichari was born on inauspicious

Saturday that her destiny was full of suffering." (54) But Sanichari was not ready to accept this view of fatalism. She understands that destiny has no role in the sufferings of her community. It is neither a question of auspiciousness or inauspiciousness of one's birth. She asks: "[H]uh! Because I was born on and named after a Saturday, that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law! You were born on a Monday -- was your life any happier? Somri, Budhua, Moongi, Bishri -- do any of them have happier lives?" (54) She means that her condition is socially constructed and therefore can be changed. This realization helps her to rise from the position of a docile victim of the system to its clever manipulator. She developed, though gradually, an indomitable will that enabled her to manipulate the antagonistic social environment to her end. It is worth mentioning that even at the outset of the story Sanichari exhibits a clear perception about her marginalized position in the society. Her statement denotes that she is not going to be an easy resilient victim. She observes that it is not a matter of being born in a particular day, but the socio-economic condition that is responsible for their utter penury. Nowhere in the story are the subalterns shown to be content with their material condition. Occasionally, they are seen to be spelling out their resentment and discontent against the inferior and wretched status ascribed to them by the system. The ideological implication inherent in the revealing remark of Sanichari at the outset of the story is another instance of the narrative strategy effectively deployed by the author. Interestingly, Sanichari's acute consciousness about her own subordinated position in the system resonates Margaret Atwood's

elucidation of the basic victim positions, which she makes in connection with the subjectivities in postcolonial Canada in her influential work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1996). The third victim position which Atwood describes is relevant in this context. The victims of this type refuse to accept their subjected position as an outcome of destiny. She observes that “[T]o acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable”, and the subaltern subjects of this category distinguish between the role of a victim and the objective experience that is making them victims (37). The victims of this position, according to Atwood, can change these objective conditions and seek alternatives. Though Atwood has made this analysis on the basis of Canada’s postcolonial experience, it is equally pertinent to the subject position of the marginalized people in India. Victim position, she argues, can be altered by the conscious efforts from the part of the victims (37). This hypothesis is well illustrated in the manner Sanichari achieves her empowerment through a series of premeditated efforts.

On the contrary, there are yet another category of victims, which Atwood puts in the second victim position, who are characterized by a pliant and submissive attitude. Here, the subject position, she observes, tends to “acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea.” (37) It implies a flexible attitude of

the subordinated – well exemplified in the subaltern characterization of writers like Kamala Markandaya, Premchand and Bhabani Battacharya – and doesn't designate any counter politics. In *Rudali*, the subaltern protagonist repudiates the victim position at the very outset of the story itself by refusing to accept her deprivileged condition as the outcome of destiny.

Mahasweta brings out the question of social discrepancies at the very outset of the story. *Rudali* offers a powerful critique on the caste. It debunks the idea of birth as being the sole determining factor of the suffering and depravity of the lower castes. The text shows, in an unequivocal manner, how the people who remain in the bottom stair of caste hierarchy are continuously being ostracized and subjected to various types of exploitation by the upper caste people. The struggles of the subaltern in *Rudali* are characterized by a deep-seated repudiation of the inferior role accorded to them by the caste system. Tracing the underlying principle of Hinduism which legitimizes and justifies the subjective positions of the Dalit communities in the country Alok Mukherjee observes:

However, the fact is that it is precisely the experiences that flow from the centuries-old hierarchical and hereditary system, unalterable because sanctioned by religion, with the concomitant notion of people as polluted and untouchable, which make the Dalit unique and distinct. All other experiences of exclusion, subjugation, dispossession and oppression, experiences that resemble those of other groups, result from this

fundamental reality. Dalits may attain educational, economic, social and political success, but their unique dalitness remains (11).

The idea of the role of destiny in the pathetic condition of the subalterns is outrightly scoffed at the very beginning of the story. The ideology that ascribes poverty and penury to an individual's bad luck, besides conveniently concealing the real causes of the inequalities in the system, reduces the possibility of counter initiatives from the part of the oppressed people to alter the system. As a socially committed writer, Mahasweta knows that describing the problems generated by the oppressive system in terms of destiny would help only to sustain, not to alter, the status quo. By rejecting the role of providence in the scheme of things the author stresses the importance of transformative politics.

Another major characterizing feature of the narrative tactic of the text is its discernible progress from a specific milieu, mostly an individual one, to a common one. As the story progresses, the narrative shifts from a contained and particular account to a sequence of sociological equivalents. This includes the expansion of the network of the rudalis by including the sex-workers and Sanichari's joint venture with Bikhni etc. It testifies how the text grows from the level individual experience to the community experience. The community thread of the story is strong enough to sidestep its individual sketchings, with whatever uniqueness they are drawn. The juxtaposition of the utter penury of the subalterns and the wasteful luxuries of the upper class/caste people is

another textual strategy that Mahasweta employs in *Rudali*. The pomp and splendour in the burial of the masters are delineated along with the hard struggles of the subalterns to meet their both ends. The text shows the continuous struggling of the underdogs to eke out a living, albeit numerous obstacles. The constraints imposed by the system make even the simplest pleasures like bangle or comb a distant dream for them. They play all possible roles, well exemplified on in Sanichari's taking up of the profession of rudali, to fill their empty stomach. On the other hand, the upper caste landowners and moneylenders are shown to be spending money lavishly for snobbish pageantry and hypocrisy. The inequity of the system is best explicated through this juxtaposition. Furthermore, it provides a powerful critique of the post-independent socio-economic scenario of the country. Mahasweta's own acute perception of the cruel social reality prevailing in the country figures out in the texture of the story.

In *Rudali*, the issue of economic exploitation and social marginalization is described thriftily, yet evocatively, suggesting the ideological implications in every act of domination and its resistance. These textual strategies, carefully deployed by the auteur, have given the work the authenticity of social documentation. Concerns of subsistence and struggles for survival are spread across the thread of the text. This manner of documentation, besides giving an unromanticized picture of a typical Indian village replete with caste system and feudalism, implicates the possibilities to alter the status quo. It can be seen that the social substance of the text is well synchronized with the

textual strategies. By embedding the characters in a wider context of dominance and subordination, Mahasweta strikes a functional linkage with the anti-hegemonic movements taking place in the country.

*Rudali* bears the best example for Mahasweta's powerful narrative, which reflects her deep insight into the grass root realities of contemporary India. Through this narrative form, strategically maintained in the later stories, the novel demonstrates the phenomena of oppression in a broader light. The narrative is littered with authorial statements, which suggests meanings which are not communicated otherwise. This authorial intervention, besides steering the unstable meanings to a thematic coherence, serves the debunking of the discrepancies of the system. In many occasion, the author is seen to interfere often by coming out with sharp pronouncements against the dominant class or by giving third person narratives of the hapless condition of the subalterns. At the outset of the text, for instance, we are given a clear picture of the locale of the story: "[I]n this village everyone is unhappy. They understand suffering. So they are content with being fed just sour curd, sugar and coarse parched rice." (55) Mahasweta effectively demonstrates the impact of the system upon the subalterns without burdening the scene with external conflicts or violence. The plot construction of *Rudali* is drawn with remarkable economy. The opening scene itself switches the action of the story on. Sanichari's remark at the beginning of story, repudiating her mother-in-law's view of pre-destination, becomes the opening statement of the story.

Occasionally, Mahasweta is shown to be using dark humour and irony to bring out the utterly pathetic condition of the subalterns. For instance, Sanichari, out of her utter sense of helplessness and penury, spontaneously lets out a sigh of relief a couple of days after the death of her brother-in-law and his wife: "[I]s it possible to feed so many mouths on the meager scrapings they bring home after labouring on the malik's field? Two dead, just as well. At least their own stomachs would be full." (55) By means of the deployment of such ruthless irony and dark humour, Mahasweta digs at the system which imposes numerous constraints upon the subaltern making their survival increasingly difficult. She shows a remarkable economy of words throughout the story. A condensed style coupled with a well-defined narrative strategy differs *Rudali* from her other works. In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* and *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*, these issues are dealt with in a wider canvas and in a stretched manner. The entire text is replete with highly pointed denunciations of the socio-political and religious establishments of post-independent India and the mutual nexus between them.

There are many premature deaths delineated in the story. Deprivation of the minimal levels of food and health service often exposes the subaltern people to various types of epidemic diseases. In the absence of sufficient resources to maintain the health, in the sense of survival, the life of the subalterns is easily susceptible to diseases and death. It is well exemplified by the subaltern deaths delineated in the story. Their socio-economic condition, though indirectly, is accountable for their tragic death. The author

unmistakably seems to suggest that it is the system, which is responsible for the sufferings as well as the premature death of the underdogs. In this sense, *Rudali* offers a picture of the multidimensional consequences of inequality and the poverty it fosters. A close analysis of the death of the subalterns in the story reveals the dire poverty behind them. For instance, Sanichari's husband died of cholera. He contracted the mortal disease by consuming the contaminated milk donated to the temple by the rich upper caste people. It was the dire poverty that made him, like other lower castes, to drink the petrified milk. Her son Budhua met with similar fate. He caught tuberculosis due to his over exposure to work at Lachman Singh's shop and consequently died. Later Bikhni dies of asthma after consuming *sarbath*, a cheap drink. To them, contracting diseases means death. Because, that they cannot afford medical care or better health service within their financial parameters. It can be seen that, every loss in the life of Sanichari, as of the other subaltern characters in the story, is mediated by utter poverty and indigence. The death of Bikhni nevertheless shattered her. But she was not ready to submit: "[I]f Sanichari has survived so much grief, she'll survive the loss of Bikhni. She's devastated, but she won't cry. Money, rice, new clothes -- without getting these in return tears are a useless luxury." (88-89) It is worth noting that the lower caste members meet with their premature death after contracting some diseases as a result of their socio-economic insecurities. Being lower castes, they have less command over the resources. The dominant class, on the other hand, is shown to be enjoying good material successes and steady income.

The inadequacy of income brings many discords to the life of subalterns. Often, amidst the penuries, they cannot materialize even the basic domestic requirements. The family chord is often affected by the social and economic insecurities. The reasons for the untimely death of Sanichari's dear ones, her own doomed predicament, and the running away of her daughter-in-law and Haroa can be traced to the social subordination and financial insecurities they are exposed to.

### **Subversion through Resistance**

The text traces the metamorphosis of Sanichari from a resilient victim of the establishment to its obdurate manipulator. The wisdom of resistance and survival are spread across the fabric of the text. The subversive potential of *Rudali* as a subaltern work lies in its consistent demonstration of the resisting initiatives of the victims of the system. Javeed Alam observes: "[I]t still needs to be demonstrated that any section of the exploited and toiling people had developed, at that time, the ability to consistently take the initiative to further their material and other interests, temporary defeats notwithstanding." (48) By documenting Sanichari's successful manipulation of the unreceptive milieu Mahasweta highlights the counter possibilities lying behind the oppressive system. However, it is also noteworthy that in *Rudali* the subalterns' resistance doesn't take place in a militant way, which characterizes the subaltern struggles in *Aranyer Adhikar*, *The Arrows of Chotti Munda* or *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*. Here, the resistance takes place in the form of a clever manipulation of the system. From a sociological perspective

Sanichari breaks her ground by opening up the potential of collective resistance of working class in the informal sector. The text explicates the potential of organized struggle. The discriminating and dehumanizing effect of the society impels Sanichari to invent alternatives so as to be able to escape the austerity of her socio-economic environment. Examining the dialectical relationship between power and resistance Karlene Faith observes:

Resistance cannot simply defeat, overturn or suddenly transform disciplinary power. Such powers circulate independently of particular authorities who institutionalize and claim them for themselves (and who, theoretically, as mere carriers, can themselves be turned around). Resistance can, however, resituate the problematic of power abuse. That is, resistance weakens processes of victimization, and generates personal and political empowerment through the acts of naming violations and refusing to collaborate with oppression (39).

The resistant will that Sanichari demonstrates after taking up the vocation of rudali at the behest of Dulan is apparent in the manner she organizes the sex workers of the randi street at the end of the story. In the socio-economic context of the story the very practice of rudali and the act of wailing become a gesture of symbolic resistance to the constraints imposed by the elite system. By capsizing the traditional role of mourning to an effective means of survival, Mahasweta demonstrates the possibilities inherent in an unreceptive environment. In this sense, *Rudali* implies an inversion of

traditionally held job ascribed to the subalterns with regard to their caste role. Like her other subaltern stories *Rudali* too has an open end, often implying the continuity of the struggles documented in the texts.

The text also offers a powerful critique of Independence. The period of the story span over the decades that immediately preceded and followed Indian Independence. India was still under the British rule when Sanichari's husband died of cholera after consuming the milk in a religious fair. By the time of the death of Haroa India had got freedom. However, the transition of power hasn't brought in any change neither in the life of the protagonist, nor the other members of her community. The pathetic condition of the subaltern communities continued unabated in Independent India also. The measure taken by the Indian government to uplift the underprivileged people in the country could not be materialized due to numerous reasons. The absence of a strong political will coupled with the failure in effectively implementing the rural development programmes explain the persistence of adverse forces like cast and feudalism in India. The ongoing exploitation and silencing of Dalits and tribals in different parts of the country betrays the inadequacy of the Independence. Vijay Prashad observes,

The political direction offered by the state is not in consonance with the visions of freedom enunciated by the people for whom the 'freedom movement' which led to political independence provides a charter far in excess of the type of bourgeois -- landlordism which characterizes the Indian state. The popular

critiques of the state do not challenge it as a form for the creation of people's power, but they challenge the monopolistic power exerted by the dominant classes upon the state-form (170).

Neither the colonial administration nor the native administrations that followed it cared to bring any radical change in the system. The old feudal structure was allowed to stay in postcolonial India. The socio-economic premises of *Rudali*, like elsewhere in India, are immersed in many unresolved disparities – social, economic and political. Thahad is a microcosm of all Indian villages, where the scenes of oppression and marginalization are common. By documenting their abject condition Mahasweta suggests that no improvement in the status quo is possible without freeing the subalterns from the stranglehold of caste and feudalism. It is obvious that Mahasweta was not creating a myth of subaltern resistance but was documenting the struggles which she has seen as an activist among them for more than three decades. There are numerous instances in the history of India where the subalterns are found resisting the encroachments and oppression of the dominant classes. *Rudali* textualizes not only the discrepancies of the system but also the counter actions and struggles of its victims.

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## Chapter VI

### **Enabling Articulation: Dialectics of Subaltern Representation**

In the context of the continuing inquiries being made about the authenticity of the representation of subalternity in different discourses including history and literature, contemporary literature requires a closer scrutiny. The acclamation accorded to the subaltern writers for the consistent zeal they exhibit in documenting the life of the underprivileged is not to be embellished. The contribution of their writings to the subaltern discourse in the country needs to be re-examined in the light of the new critical and cultural theories. In the present study, Mahasweta Devi's subaltern stories are analyzed with reference to the works of other writers with similar thematic engagement. For this purpose, I have chosen the selected novels of Sivakami and U.R. Ananthamurthy. A comparative analysis, I hope, would certainly yield a constructive location for the conceptualization of the subaltern representation in contemporary Indian literature.

#### ***Sivakami's The Grip of Change and Author's Note: Articulation of Dalitness***

Sivakami's *The Grip of Change and Author's Notes* provides a dialogic plane where the issue of caste, gender and the politics surrounding them are articulated forcefully. It is also noted for its outstanding blend of the Dalit and gender causes into a single platform. It tells the story of how Kathamuthu, the Dalit leader, attempts to protect a Dalit woman, who was brutally harassed by an upper caste landlord. Kathamuthu's attempt to protect Thangam led to many caste-based skirmishes in Puliur and its surrounding villages. *The Grip*

*of Change and Author's Note* explicates how resistance at community level helps the oppressed people to achieve their rights in an antagonistic milieu. In this novel, Sivakami attempts to shed light on the continuing symptoms of feudalism and caste system and also reveals how they reinforce the positional subjectivity of the Dalits in India.

At the very outset of the text Sivakami brings up the issue of the victimization of the Dalits at the hands of the dominant castes. The story starts with Thangam's arrival at the house of Kathamuthu, requesting his help from the encroachment of the Udayars. On being questioned, she told him how she was forced to yield to the sexual ensnarement of Paramjothi Udayar and was later brutally beaten by his wife and her brothers. It was her extreme deprivation that made her vulnerable to the exploitation of Paramjothi. Kathamuthu, realizing the gravity of the situation, started taking instant measures to get her grievance addressed in a wider platform. He sheltered Thangam and registered a case against Paramjothi Udayar and his relatives for having beaten her. Sivakami provides an authentic picture about the caste reality prevailing in Tamil Nadu. She seeks a re-articulation of the issues of caste and the consternation it generates upon the subaltern communities. She exhibits how caste system sustains economic exploitation and social victimization of the lower castes in various ways. Thangam was maltreated because of her positional subjectivity being a lower caste. Her extreme vulnerability to violence and exploitation is derivative of the structural precariousness and instability of her community's socio-economic position.

She was working in Paramjothi's farm since the death of her husband. Udayars are the dominant community in the village. Paramjothi forcibly used her to satisfy his carnal desire. Enraged by this, his wife, along with her brothers, mercilessly beat her. They pulled her by her hair and dragged through the street. It clearly demonstrates the ruthless atrocities meted out to the Dalits in India. In all spheres of life they are exposed to exploitation and marginalization by the dominant castes. Paramjothi was obviously perturbed by Kathamuthu's taking up of Thangam's case. He felt ashamed to have involved in a scandal with an untouchable woman:

He did not fear the police, the courts, the expenditure that he might incur, and the nuisance that would follow. Only the caste concerns made him anxious -- the exposure to an affair with a Parachi was humiliating. He would have braved it out even if it had been a murder case of criminal assault. But what a disgrace if he had to own up to a relationship with a Parachi! (32)

The text examines how much, and in what way, the power structure of Indian society is determined by caste system. Power is inscribed in the rituals and practices of caste. The untouchables encounter numerous experiences of social stratifications and oppression, many of which are traditionally and socially enforced by the higher castes. Caste system perpetually exposes the lower castes to humiliation and insult. The values and norms consequent upon casteism have historically constructed the subject-position of the untouchables. It is well exemplified in the deprived condition of the Parayars

and Chakkiliyars of Puliur village. Caste antagonism is seen to have retarded their material progress. They are dependent on the Udayars and Reddiyars, the dominant castes in the village, in their economic and other aspects of life. The upper castes, on the other hand, are entitled to economic and social privileges. Commenting on the continuing influence of the ethos of caste in the contemporary Indian social life Revathi Krishnaswami observes:

Caste disappeared from the realm of discourse even as it remained materialized in social practice. Armed not with ritual superiority but with English education, the upper castes retained control of most economic, political, and cultural resources in the modernizing secular nation-state. Thus by the time the Brahmin could be challenged, caste had already become invisible, transparent, trans-formed into something else.

(76)

Since caste is based on the dogma of predestination, the status of a person depends not on his individual faculty but on the importance of the caste in which he had the luck of being born. Between the members of different castes, there could be no social interaction on equal terms. As B.R.Ambedkar aptly observes: "[T]he Hindu social order does not recognize equal need, equal work or equal ability as the basis of reward for labour. Its motto is that in regard to the distribution of the good things of life those who are reckoned as the highest must get the most and the best and those who are classed as the lowest must accept the least and the worst." (85) The sociology

of the village of Puliur itself informs on this caste-based stratification. The upper castes live in the comfortable part of the village. The lower castes are normally denied access to this part. In the village, the Dalits live in cheri, a ghetto located at the periphery of the village. The Parayars and Chakkiliyars live in their separate ghettos. Their relationship with their physical environment they inhabit is not characterized by profusion but by exploitation caused by various hostile forces. The text presents their constant struggles for equality, rights and recognition. The Dalit communities in the village – mainly constituted by the Parayars and Chakkiliyars – are shown to be subjected to relentless marginalization by the dominant castes. Being the outcastes in the society, they have been denied social as well as economic opportunities. The identity accorded to them by the caste hierarchy has almost become a disgrace, which they find it hard to rub out. Sivakami explicates the formation of hierarchies within the lower castes themselves. There are many hierarchies among the lower castes too. The Parayars are drummers and menials, Chakkiliyars are cobblers and Pallars are agricultural labourers: “[T]he Pallars considered themselves higher than the Chakkiliyars, who in turn considered themselves superior to the Para-vannars, the washer community.” (63) She sounds critical about the internal sub-caste hierarchies within the Dalit community. This is well illustrated in the words of Rasendran. Responding to the internal caste feuds among the Dalits Rasendran says:

For us Parayan, Pallan, Chakkiliyan, Valluvan and Vannan may

be different. For them, we are all the same – the untouchables. Do you think they would make us stand outside their houses and take you inside and feed you milk and rice? As long as we continue to differentiate among ourselves and beg for their favour, they will continue to maneuver and hammer us into submission. (62)

As a caste leader, Kathamuthu was deeply conscious about the working of caste prejudice in all spheres of life. This is apparent in his talk with the Inspector at the police station: "...but tell me a place where caste doesn't exist. Just because you and I don't talk about it, doesn't mean it's not there." (22) Here, like elsewhere, Kathamuthu becomes a powerful spokesman of the author, who uses him as an effective narrative tool throughout the story. It is well exemplified in his sharp condemnation of the caste prejudice of the upper castes, which he often spells out. The statements made by Kathamuthu unmistakably betray the social critique inherent in the text. He could not stand the insult meted out to his community. When one the community members justified the violence which the Udayars subjected Thangam, he got angered. He tells: "[I]f the landowners and upper caste feudal lords take the law into their own hands, why do we need the police?" (38) He was not ready to accept the logic that Thangam was punished for her adultery with an upper caste man and so she deserved it: "[U]pper caste women commit adultery, is that addressed in the panchayat? Can we punish those women? They beat her up because we are lower caste, poor, and

have no protection.”(38) Each of his words is articulated in a studied manner and had an impact upon his people. He understands that their deprived condition is socially constructed and therefore can be changed. This realization helps him to rise from the position of a compliant victim of the system to its clever manipulator. In the story, Kathamuthu is presented as a crafty subaltern who is equipped with many manipulative strategies in a caste-bound and unreceptive society. He is endowed with an exceptional power of rhetoric with which he would disarm the dominant castes/classes. Through this consistent and persuasive speech, which constitutes the prime subaltern voice in the text, he interrogates the very legitimacy of the privileges enjoyed by the upper castes. Throughout the text, he is shown to be digging at the upper caste people’s claims of purity and superiority. In one occasion, sarcastically responding to the untouchability fetish of Naicker, an old Brahmin jeweler, he tells: “[O]ho, so there is another meaning to untouchability. I didn’t know that. Right, don’t you come near me with your foul breath and stained teeth. You talk about cleanliness. Just look at my teeth.”(19) The subversive potential of his rhetoric is unmistakable. As a crafty subaltern, he has come to understand the possibilities lying behind his unreceptive milieu. The Dalits in Athur and nearby villages are very much benefited by his practical knowledge and cunningness. However, the text shows that Kathamuthu keeps a manipulative propensity not only towards the dominant castes, but also towards his own community. Sivakami has drawn Kathamuthu with all his strength and weakness.

Sivakami shows how the upper castes, in connivance with the government machineries, attempt to encumber the Dalits in different ways. When a case was registered against Paramjothi Udayar for having harassed Thangam, the policemen are shown to be helping him to get out of it. They asked him to lodge a counter-complaint against the Parayars. They told him that such a counter-complaint would make the lower castes defensive. Eventually, they decided to place some articles in Thangam's house at night, thereby alleging her of theft. However, their plot was destabilized by Kathamuthus' timely intervention. Kathamuthu came to sense the conspiracy between the Udayars and the policemen and acted timely to safeguard Thangam from the burden of a counter case. When caught with the bribed money, the policeman betrayed Paramjothi's plot to Kathamuthu. Consequently, he arranged watch to Thangam's house. When Paramjothi's cohorts went to place the articles in Thangam's house at night, they were chased away by Pichapillai and others who were keeping watch. Shortly, the upper castes in the village are shown to be organizing at the outset of a feared subaltern unrest. When the plot to trap Thangam in a theft case failed, Paramjothi made another scheme to entrap the Parayars. He, in nexus with the other upper castes, fabricated a story that the Parayars attacked their Padayachi workers who had gone to the cheri to hire the labourers. Furthermore, they planned to instigate caste feuds among the Dalits by hiring the Chakkiliyars, substituting the Parayars. They determined to crush the dissenting voice of the Dalits at any cost. It is well illustrated in the words of

Ramalinga Raddiyar: "[I]f they don't give in before that, we will burn the cheri to the ground. If the Parayars cannot serve the upper castes they might as well die." (50) The tactic of divide and rule is apparent in the way Paramjothi instigated feud among the Parayars and Chakkiliyars in Puliur village. In effect, Udayars and his racketeers could stir caste chauvinism among the people of the village. After a few days, some houses in the cheri was burnt. As Nagaraj aptly observes: "[T]he major problem with Indian rural society is that it cannot handle deviation now without resorting to violence, and whatever little restraint it has collapses when it comes to the question of handling untouchables." (34) Immediately after the burning of the cheri, the Reddiars and the Udayars organize an emergency meeting to plan the strategies for countering a possible lower caste insurgency. The upper castes are shown to be creating rift between the lower caste communities to materialize their dark schemes. It is evident in the way the Udayars spread false story that their Padayachi workers were attacked in the Pulayar cheri. Paramjothi was diverting the attention from his scandal with Thangam. Ironically enough, the burning of the cheri united the Parayars and Chakkiliyars. They came to realize the conspiracy of the upper caste masters. The subalterns are shown to be articulating their strong discontent at the oppressive system. This is apparent in Rasendran's angry remark: "[F]irst they beat her and then they want to brand her a thief! Now they'll burn us alive? Didn't he enjoy sleeping with her in every nook and corner of his field? Didn't he enjoy the fruits of her labour? How can we put up with this any

longer?"(51) Besides depicting the continuing victimization of the Dalits, the text demonstrates the various strategies adopted by them to ensure their survival, both at individual and community level.

Kathamuthu preferred the path of bargaining and negotiating with the oppressors and used a variety of pressure tactics without resorting to violence. His personal strategy and logic of resistance are proven to be advantageous to his people in many occasions. He never believed in taking recourse to militancy or revolution. When the cheri was burnt some youths like Rasendran demanded that they should retaliate in the same way. But Kathamuthu prevented them by saying:

What is practical? We will bargain for better compensation for our losses. We'll demand to go to work from tomorrow. Let us make sure they pay us better wages. We should make it expensive for them to crush us another time. Remember, we have to live in this village. The village and cheri have to coexist. We can't live as enemies and in fear. (65)

As claimed, Kathamuthu made the upper castes pay the cost of their atrocities against the Dalits. He succeeded in forcing the upper castes to concede a fair compensation for the affected people. He could elicit massive rehabilitation programmes for the Pulayars and Chakkiliyars in the cheri. Whether in the case of Thangam or in the case of the burning of cheri he adopted a highly cunning strategy which could successfully disarm the dominant castes/classes. It explains the Paramjothi Udayar's extreme

nervousness when he came to know that Thangam's case had been taken up by Kathamuthu. Paramjothi pleads him: "Kathamuthu, can't we settle the matter in the panchayat? Why should we take a matter concerning a woman to the court?" (74) Thangam's case has also been settled in a panchayat (the traditional assemblage for settling the issues in the village). Kathamuthu made Paramjothi pay ten thousand rupees to Thangam. He helped her to get out of the mazes of the stigma caused by Paramjothi's sexual abusing. Ironically enough, later Thangam herself became his property. His sexual exploitation of Thangam brings out his frailty. Sivakami has adopted the textual strategy of critical realism to bring out the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the subaltern politics, as it is prevailing in India.

Kathamuthu's ideas like "[T]hose who bear their suffering in patience will ultimately rule the world" often provoked dissent among the educated youths in his community (73). They could not digest most of his philosophies regarding the negotiating strategies. Once, when the panchayat for settling the case of the burning of the cheri was held, Rasendran let slip his discontent over the moderate policy of Kathamuthu. Unimpressed by the extremely supple stance taken by Kathamuthu on the issue of the burning of the cheri, Rasendran says: "[I]t is because we having been begging from them always, they keep testing our weight...." (69). Infuriated by Rasendran's unexpected intervention Kathamuthu shouts at him: "[A]re you a fool? Because you have learned to read and write doesn't mean that you can speak up in this forum. What do you know? If your mother gives you a plateful, you will eat. If you

marry, you will have children. Shut your mouth. I'll knock your teeth, if you don't."(69-70) His disposition towards Chandran, the union leader, also explicates his impatience with other alternatives in dealing with the Dalit problems.

Sivakami highlights the potential of caste association and organized politics. Chandran seeks to mobilize all the oppressed castes against the dominance of the elite castes. Kathamuthu appeared to be taking special care to downplay the gestures of this alternative leadership, which he believed would disrupt his own authority. Sivakami explicates how caste and class intersect in the Indian context. She examines their commonalities against the emergence of Chandran as a leader of the labourers in the Rice Mill. The workers, belonging to different castes, organized under him. The union activities of Chandran, which gain momentum in the second part of the novel, nevertheless mark the emergence of a new Dalit politics, markedly different from Kathamuthu's leadership. Chandran knew that the political empowerment of the Dalits could pose a serious threat to the authority of the dominant castes. By evoking class consciousness among the Dalit communities in the surrounding villages he sought to resist the upper caste hegemony in a wider context. As a result, the Dalit communities in Puliur and Athur, hithertofore dispossessed of power, started to realize that they could fight with the traditionally dominant power and brandish power so as to level out their grievances and express their priorities and aspirations. Sivakami substantiates the inextricable bond between caste and class by

means of an analogy: “[I]ssues of class and caste were so deeply intermingled that they made him think of those blunt-headed snakes were like rubber tubes. One could never be sure which end was the head and which end the tail.”(112) Kathmuthu was obviously irritated by Chandran’s union activities. He felt that his image was being eclipsed by Chandran’s growing support among his people. Comparing Kathamuthu and Chandran the author comments that the former is like “a cactus that did not allow any other plant to grow in its vicinity”, whereas the latter is like a “banana tree that flourished along with its offspring.”(113) Though Kathamuthu is economically more empowered, he failed to empower his community in the same line. He was careful to retain their dependency upon him. He was skeptical about the revolutionary movements. His discontentment with the emergence of new voices representing the Dalits in the village is apparent in his raging at Rasendran in the Panchayat, when the latter articulated his view over the burning of cheri. Arguably, his one-man show could not bring any structural transformation in the life of the Dalits. However, notwithstanding all these personal weaknesses, he retained an undisputable image among the oppressed communities. Throughout the story, he surfaces as one who is capable of maneuvering the situation. Sivakami has adopted a textual strategy of critical realism to bring out the flaws of the present Dalit leadership, which she believes, is inadequate to empower the oppressed people. Kathamuthu remains to be the central subaltern presence in the novel.

The text also reveals the disturbing picture of the sexual exploitations

to which the subaltern women are subjected in Indian villages. The economic vulnerability, coupled with social depravity, often forces the Dalit women to various types of exploitations. The text elucidates how the caste and patriarchy reinforce each other in the oppression of subaltern women. The Dalit women in the country are stigmatized by the caste-based oppression. They are the subalterns among the subalterns. In addition to the abiding stigmatization at the hands of the upper caste men, they are also marginalized within their own community. In the story, for instance, Thangam was exposed to two kinds of exploitation -- firstly, the open assault on her body by Paramjothi Udayar, the upper caste landlord whose labourer she was, and then the sexual exploitation by the caste leader Kathamuthu, whom she considered as her guardian. To her it was as disgusting as "stepping on shit while walking on a riverbank." (87) Kathamuthu, after a series of concerted efforts to bring justice to her, who is continually maltreated by her landlord and his people, appropriates her and her property. Thangam's extreme vulnerability exposed her to many hostile forces in her surrounding. When her husband died, his brothers began to hanker after her. They even evicted her from the land. The multiple levels of marginalization are marked by the dominance of men folk upon her sexual and economic labour. Sivakami shows, in a unique manner, how the economic vulnerability and insecurity force the Dalit women to the ensnarement of feudal landlords, who exploit them sexually.

In the story, Gowri is presented as a critical insider who keeps a close

watch on the activities of her father Kathamuthu. Gowri has been skeptical about her father's policies. Kathamuthu's dealings of Thangam's case seemingly evoked mixed responses in Gowri. Initially, she acknowledged his sincere attempts to protect Thangam. But, his manipulation of Thangam created deep suspicion in her mind about his genuineness. She suspected his intension in managing the money of Thangam. She gets totally disenchanted by his character after his sexual exploitation of Thangam. Gradually, her initial indifference has been translated into a kind of repulsion. The very texture of the story is constructed from the viewpoint of Gowri.

By introducing Nallasivam Padayachi, another caste leader, at the end of the story, Sivakami signals the need of change in the Dalit politics. Nallasivam is presented as a die hard caste leader who is deeply prejudiced about the other lower caste communities. He is the leader of Padayachis, who prefer to be identified as Vanniyars. Though Padayachis are lower caste, they imitate the Brahmins by wearing the sacred thread. Besides, they often attempted to intimidate the other lower castes. Caste system, as Ambedkar aptly observes, "...form a graded system of sovereignties, high and low, which are jealous of their status and which know that if a general dissolution came, some of them stand to lose more of their prestige and power than others do." (104) The contemporary socio-political scenario of Tamil Nadu, where the untouchable communities are subjected to exploitation even by the backward classes, nevertheless justifies the depiction of Nallasivam and his conservative ideas. Sivakami digs at the conservatism of some of the caste

leaders, by exposing their prejudices, which impedes the organized caste politics. Both Kathamuthu and Nallasivam are skeptical about changes. They are intolerant towards those who stand for change. By exposing the prejudice and arrogance of Kathamuthu and Nallasivam, Sivakami is obviously suggesting the need of new leadership for the Dalits. In the text, she provides an authentic picture about the caste reality prevailing in Tamil Nadu.

Sivakami, like Mahasweta, doesn't try to romanticize the social realities prevailing in India. Puliur is a typical south Indian village where many forces are at work to subjugate the subaltern people. *The Grip of Change and Author's Notes* provides an insider vision about the abstruse functioning of caste in Indian life. Sivakami, herself a subaltern by birth, has captured all the intricacies of caste-based oppression. By implanting Thangam in a precise socio-economic context, Sivakami connects her dismal condition with the predicament of her community. Besides, she speaks like a critical insider in the text. *Author's Notes* is consequent upon her revisiting of the text after many years. This meta-narrative offers a deep insight into Sivakami's ideological stance over Dalit movement in politics as well as in literature.

#### **U.R.Ananthamurthy's *Bharateepura*: Misrepresentation of Subalternity:**

The subject of most of the works of U.R.Ananthamurthy is related to the problems of the subaltern communities in Karnataka. Admittedly, the discrepancy of Indian social system and its dehumanizing impacts have brought about the thematic provocations in Ananthamurthy. His major works like *Samskara*, *Bharateepura* and *Avastha* have their theme related, in one way

or other, to the problems of the downtrodden people and pose serious questions regarding the power mechanics of Indian society. He explores the socio-political reasons behind the impoverished condition of the marginalized people in India. But none of these works has a full-fledged representation of the subaltern experience. The subaltern portraits which he offers in his novels are obviously that of an outsider or of a detached viewer. In *Samskara*, Ananthamurthy deals with the identity crisis of a disillusioned Brahmin who, as a result of his exposure to genuine experiences, strives to redefine the morals of his life. *Samskara* exposes the cultural scantiness of upper class life, which is devoid of impulses. Parallel to the existential fervour of the story flows the acknowledgement of the impulsive life of the subaltern communities. *Bharateepura* has as its theme the unsuccessful attempts of a western educated Indian, Jagannathan, in provoking the traditionally oppressed people to revolutionary actions. The attempt of the protagonist to instigate the resisting spirit in the subalterns is to be seen as a part of a resolution, which he seeks to relieve his own sense of uncertainty. Jagannathan, the disenchanted protagonist, believes that a courageous step of the oppressed people is enough to shake the establishment. This step has been a predominant motif in the works of Ananthamurthy. Similarly, Krishnappa, the protagonist of *Avastha*, tells his beloved Gauri that once the victimized people get furious and tread a bold step, the present exploitative order would be destroyed completely. Ironically enough, all these three novels are about this bold step which is never trodden by the victims of the system. Though

the subversive potential of subaltern insurgency is reiterated in all these works, it never takes place owing to the psychological indeterminacy of the protagonists. The politics of change is bypassed for accommodating the individual dilemmas of the characters. This existential obsession downplays the very social content of these novels.

In *Bharateepuram*, Ananthamurthy documents the efforts of Jagannathan, a British educated youth, to bring revolution in Bharateepuram, where many forces are at work to exploit the subalterns. Bharateepuram is a microcosm of Indian society where the upper caste hegemony seeks to silence the subalterns with the sanctions of religion. Jagannathan is firmly convinced that the only reality prevailing in Bharateepuram is its exploitation. The untouchables are subjected to exploitation for centuries. Manjunathan, the upper caste deity, is at the core of the power structure of Bharateepuram. It is an effective agent of exploitation. Jagannathan has already repudiated the exploitative feudal structure of Bharateepuram at the level of his consciousness. The real revolution has already taken place in his consciousness. Now he wants to give it a concrete form. Here, unlike *Samskara*, Ananthamurthy attacks the very basis of Indian civilization through Jagannathan. This is well exemplified in Jagannathan's conversation with Adiga, a conservative Brahmin: "[E]verything, from your spiritual thoughts to Sankaracharya, are means of supporting the social system." (197) He believes that a renaissance in India could be possible only with the complete obliteration of the old decadent social structure. The story traces

Jagannathan's efforts to destroy the exploitative pattern prevailing in Bharateepuram. His project was to make the Pulayars, the untouchables, enter the temple of Manjunatha, and thereby to shatter their deep faith in it: "[T]he Pulayars should be made to enter the temple. The reality that has been existing throughout centuries should be altered with a single step. Manjunatha should be destroyed." (56) The untouchables are made to believe that they would die, vomiting blood, if they enter the temple. They also believe that Bootharaya, their own deity, would pull them back to prevent them from entering the temple. The upper castes have been perpetuating these assumptions by means of many fabricated tales. It reveals the strategies used by the dominant castes to maintain the subjectivity of the lower castes. The irony latent in this belief is that Bootharaya, the subaltern deity, is set against its own people. Commenting on the formation of power Edward Said observes in *Orientalism*:

There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain idea it dignifies as true, and from tradition, perception, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces. Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analyzed. (20).

Ananthamurthy examines how the elite ideology legitimizes the oppressions and exploitations it fosters. Like Mahasweta, Ananthamurthy

shows how the nexus between the socio-economic and religious establishments of the country incapacitate the subaltern people in many ways. The subalterns are dispossessed of their land, dignity and even gods. The Brahmanism has hijacked their tradition and gods. This is exemplified in the master-slave relationship strategically maintained between Manjunathan, the Brahmin God, and Bootharaya, the subaltern God. Bootharaya, according to Puranikar, is the God of passion and psychic energy. Whereas, Manjunathaa "represents the intellectual and religious aspect of Indian thinking which is hypocritical."(97) Furthermore, the Manjunatha temple is maintaining an economy around its premise which is unmistakably elite-centered.

Expectedly, there was much opposition against the temple entry programme declared by Jagannathan. But, notwithstanding all these oppositions, he could mobilize the progressive people in Bhartheepuram. He is shown to be pooling maximum support from the progressive forces nationwide. He wanted to show that nothing would happen if the untouchables entered the temple. He desired to give a blow to their belief that the untouchables would vomit blood if they enter the temple. He writes to Margaret: "...we all live in the womb of God and we will not begin to live unless we act and make our own existence in society meaningful."(29) During the campaigning, in a characteristically premeditated act, he rouses the fury of the elite classes, including his own people, by making the Pulayars touch the sanctified stone kept in his house. Naturally, a novel of this theme cannot escape the political and ideological implications. But Ananthamurthy reduces

the impact of a series of historical and political events, by filtering them through the consciousness of Jagannathan. By concentrating on the psychological dilemma of Jagannathan, he gives the impression that the central interest of the text is not on the politics of change but on the impact of these events on the consciousness of the protagonist.

Ananthamurthy digs at the Indian elite leadership who legitimizes the exploitative system by remaining its unquestioning believers: "Indian society will not be responsible for their life, unless the glory of this God, whom even the President believes, is shattered. We could become a creative society only from the sorrow derived from the destruction of the belief in God." (27) The existential idea that one is responsible for his/her own life is reiterated throughout the text. The untouchables' entry into the temple is a symbolic act through which Jagannathan sought to shatter the foundation of the hegemonic structure of Indian society. However, his efforts to bring existentialist socialism in Bharateepuram by shattering its exploitative feudal pattern remained unrealized.

There were other alternatives in front of Jagannathan, exemplified in the Victorian obsession of Puranikar, to escape the decayed premise of Bharateepuram. But unlike Puranikar, who sought shelter in the westernized life, he attempted to translate his mental energy into revolutionary actions. He went ahead with his project, many obstacles notwithstanding. But, his intellectual alienation has deprived him of his emotional coherence and rapport with his living environment. Through the revolution he attempts to

restore the emotional coherence with the help of the Pulayars. Ironically enough, the Pulayars had to pay the price of his misadventure. Disturbed by his revolutionary programmes, the upper caste people are shown to be attempting to undermine it. Prabhu, the upper caste businessman, for example, set fire to the Pulayar settlement to destabilize Jagannathan's programme. They feared that once the relevance of the temple and its god is gone, the economy of Bharateepuram would change and consequently they would lose their prerogatives. The text shows how the privileged castes feed on the exploitative spaces opened up by Manjunathan, the upper caste deity. Ananthamurthy kaleidoscopically depicts the positional subjectivity of the Dalits, the religious myths and social institutions, their crystallization into dogmatized and oppressive formulations and their reinforcement by the dominant ideologies over the centuries.

Ananthamurthy dramatizes the event of temple entry. The insanity of the Priest's son and the anonymous letter Jagannathan receives just before the execution of his revolutionary programme had a disconcerting impact upon the psyche of Jagannathan. In an interesting episode in the story, the idol of Manjunathan was destroyed by Ganeshan, the son of Seetharamayyar, the chief priest of the temple. Ganeshan was suffering from deep psychic disturbance during this period. His life was trodden under the domineering attitude of his conservative father. In an impulsive act, Ganeshan went to the temple of Manjunatha at night and destroyed the idol with an iron rod. To him, this was a revengeful act rather than a gesture of rebellion.

Certainly Jagannathan's views are historically informed and politically motivated. He firmly believes that unless the downtrodden people are liberated, the life of the entire society would remain non-creative and corrupted. According to him, the liberation of the subalterns is a precondition for the liberation of the entire society. It is palpable in his conversation with his step mother: "[O]ur life will be meaningful only when the subalterns in our country start to rebel. Look at the poor peasants in Vietnam. They are fighting with a powerful nation like America. That is a wonderful thing of this time. So is the case of the rebellions of the Negroes in America. When these people resurrect, their life develop. Ours too. Our own human existence will remain to be imperfect unless they become human beings." (114) The central concern of his revolutionary project is derived from his realization about the dehumanizing impact of the system. The oppressive system dehumanizes both the oppressed and the oppressor. There could be no productive change in the social life as long as a large segment of humanity is bonded in the fetters of servility and disgrace. Jagannathan used to tell that "[O]nly Pillan, Madan and Karian need to raise their head." (25) This idea is reiterated throughout the text many times. Before enacting the temple entry programme, he made the Pulayars touch the holly stone kept in his own house. He tried to revitalize their spirit and bring them into the path of revolution: "[Y]our abjection is your strength. Your wretchedness has made you indispensable for the community. Tell them that you should not clean the excretion! You have the power in you to destroy the smell of the sandal sticks

that envelopes Manjunathan everyday with the stink of shit.”(208) He was expecting a break through in the exploitative social order with the revitalization of the subalterns’ pride. However, his initiatives are characterized by a mood of indeterminacy together with a sense of alienation. Ironically, rather than the beneficiaries of his revolution, Pillan and his people became the victims of his experiment. *Bharateepura* starts with the sign of subaltern insurgency but ends with its failed attempt, leaving the issues of social disparities unresolved. The text doesn’t mark any subaltern politics.

Arguably, the representation of the subalterns in the story is unauthentic and diluted. The subaltern presence in the story is constituted by the Pulayars. They have internalized the codes of servility and view their subjectivity as natural, not as constructed. In the story, they are presented as extremely submissive and irreformable people. The central idea is that they cannot speak for themselves. Despite his strong sense of solidarity with them, Jagannathan could not understand their life. Ananthamurthy is a detached observer of subaltern life and thereby lacks the insider perspective which characterizes the stories of Mahasweta. A deep analysis of the text reveals that its social substance has been eclipsed by the existential broodings of the protagonist. The possibility of an alternative politics is suspended by his confused consciousness. This contradiction attests to the author’s complicated allegiances towards his own self. Hence, the text fails to achieve the subversive potential which it could have achieved otherwise. Though it asks many questions regarding the social injustice, it leaves them unanswered. The

absence of an insider vision prevents Ananthamurthy's works from being authentic subaltern narratives.

### **Writing for / with the Subaltern: Dialectics of Representation**

The pivotal area of the present study -- the authenticity of the representation of subalternity in contemporary Indian literature -- can be substantiated with a comparative analysis of the treatment of subalternity in the selected works of Mahasweta, Sivakami and Ananthamurthy. It can be seen that, there are many points of similarities between Mahasweta and Sivakami. Both of them present an unromanticized and authentic picture of the subaltern life in their stories. Their texts exhibit a tremendous capacity to accommodate a wide range of issues related to the subaltern communities such as the economic exploitation, social oppression, cultural subjugation, mal-distribution of wealth and human degradation fuelled by social stratification so on. Furthermore, they skillfully deploy a variety of narrative strategies to de-fictionalize the texts, thereby giving them the quality of community narrative or social documentation, with a stated agenda of helping the empowerment of the downtrodden. The transformative potential of their writings is associated with these calculatingly deployed narrative strategies. By repudiating the stereotypes created by the mainstream aesthetics, Mahasweta and Sivakami seek to dis-intellectualize the very process of writing. Their subaltern characters are not the docile and unresisting victims of their hostile environment. For instance, Sivakami's subaltern characters -- whether it is Kathamuthu, Chandran or Rasendran --

occasionally articulate their anger and discontent against the exploitative system. Kathamuthu's cunning and calculating propensity is reminiscent of the shrewdness of Dulan in Mahasweta's *Rudali*. The resolute spirit and watchful mind of subaltern is well exemplified in the characters of Kathamuthu and Dulan. The experience of the neglected and dispossessed finds a realistic expression in their stories, where they have located the individual experiences at the intersection of social history, thereby seeking to narrate and contextualize the formation of subjectivities along with the social forces shaping it.

Though Mahasweta is not a subaltern by birth, her first hand knowledge of and closeness with the life of the subaltern people have rendered an insider vision to her texts. Whereas, Ananthamurthy's works, arguably, lack this insider perspective and cease to be the realistic documentation of subaltern life. His novels are constrained by certain literary concerns, and thereby lack the transformative politics which characterize the works of Mahasweta and Sivakami. The individual concerns predominant in his texts, nevertheless, effect an erasure of their own social content. This explains the eclipsing of the questions raised by Pillan's entry into the temple by the subsequent sense of irresolution experienced by Jagannathan. The half-baked subaltern representations present in his novels do not challenge the system, despite their constant efforts to initiate a re-alignment in the social-relations. Such distorted portraits help only to elude the reality and are counter-productive in bringing any desirable change in the life of the

marginalized people in the country. One thing that differentiates Ananthamurthy from Mahasweta and Sivakami is his disinclination to demonstrate the resisting initiatives of the exploited people. He withdraws after depicting the victimization of the subalterns without documenting their counter thrusts and resistance. Neither does he succeed in understanding the cultural universe of the subaltern subjects. The absence of a clear political agenda prevents his works from being full-fledged subaltern works. The subalterns in his novels are sketched as unresisting and easily manipulable people. Sometimes, they are presented as irreformable and uncivilized people who merit appalling treatment. Furthermore, Ananthamurthy's characters are not activists who fight for the cause of the downtrodden. Despite their deep sympathy for the downtrodden, they fail to effect any change in their abject condition. In all these stories, subalterns are either speechless or accustomed to speak with the help of upper caste/class agents. To Jagannathan and Krishnappa, the revolution is what they resist at the level of consciousness. However, both in *Bharatapura* and *Avastha*, there are hopes about possible counteractions by the victims of the system, which, as the protagonists believe, could alter the very social order.

Mahasweta's writings have virtually broadened the horizon of Indian literary scenario by re-defining the very canon of literature, interrogating the elite representations and values and by compelling social reforms. Despite being an upper caste by birth, she exhibits a consistent involvement with the life and problems of the subaltern communities. Her long career as an activist

among the tribals and Dalits has given her deep insight into their problems. The thematic preoccupation throughout her literary career testifies this active engagement with the life of the downtrodden. This consistent and unremitting positioning on the side of the exploited stands contrary to the unsteady attitude of the other writers like Ananthamurthy, who occasionally take up the social issues only to go back to the sanctuary of aestheticism again. A critical estimate of the four texts selected in the present study is supportive to justify Mahasweta's status as a subaltern writer. All these stories are characterized by a subversive politics. They, besides debunking the forces of power that victimize the subalterns, offer liberating alternatives. In all these works, the subalterns are allowed to speak and talk back to the forces that ostracize them. The political agenda being articulated in these texts is unmistakably one that challenges all sorts of dominations, particularly the upper caste hegemony in Indian socio-economic fields. As a writer, she has been exhibiting a consistent interest in the life of the marginal constituencies of Indian society. Interestingly, her consistent engagement with the life of the underdogs resonates Said's observation of the role of intellectuals in the contemporary society: "...the challenge of intellectual life is to be found in dissent against the status quo at a time when the struggle on behalf of under-represented and disadvantaged group seems so unfairly weighted against them."(xv) The unrelenting engagement with the life of the downtrodden communities qualifies Mahasweta to the status of a subaltern writer. While the question if a non-subaltern writer can represent the subaltern life

authentically is still being contested, the extent to which Mahasweta's writing has calibrated the subaltern discourse, in variety of ways, must be admitted. By opting to speak from the counter-space of subaltern life, by offering the alternative voices, by refusing to be contained in the mainstream canons, her stories challenge and upset the complacent notions of prevalent literary tradition.

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## Chapter VII

### Conclusion

A diligent and tireless advocate of the cause of the subalterns, Mahasweta Devi has played a crucial role in setting up a new paradigm in Indian literature, by giving it connectivity with larger political and social concerns. The thematic preoccupations throughout her literary career authenticate her active engagement with the issues of the marginalized communities in the country. She wrote many stories and articles forcefully articulating her indictment against the hegemonic forces persecuting the underdogs. Almost all her writings, both creative and activist, barring a few exceptions, are centered on the lives of the underprivileged sections of Indian society, particularly the tribals and Dalits. The works selected in the present study are characterized by a sharp critique of the socio-political and religious establishments of the country. It is evident that, through these works, Mahasweta's efforts are directed to create a space in which the voice of the oppressed may be heard. Mahasweta's contribution to the anti-hegemonic discourse in the country is considerable, both in significance and quantity. Her works, besides providing the ground for resistance, debunk the mechanics of power in contemporary society which seeks to subordinate the subaltern in all spheres of life. She demonstrates that power and authority can be disrupted through resistance.

An analysis of the creative evolution of Mahasweta reveals that she has matured into a more strident position by abandoning her earlier romantic

concerns. Her earlier works like *Jhansi Rani* (1956), *Amrita Sanchay* (1964) and *Andharmanik* (1967) were not completely free from romantic conception. It was with the *Mother of 1084* (1973) she managed to shake off the Tagorean romantic influence predominant in her early writing. Among the early works, *Kavi Bandhyogoti Gayiner Jivan O Mrityu* (The Life and Death of Poet Bandhyoghoti Gayin) merits special mentioning since it is centered on the struggle of a lower caste boy to achieve dignity and right denied by the caste-ridden society. However, it was only with *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977) she began to focus on the lives and struggles of the exploited people. *Aranyer Adhikar* is an authentic account of the influx of the non-tribals into the tribal areas in Chottanagpur during the colonial period. The text delineates the ruthless exploitation of the Mundas, the disintegration of their indigenous social order, which was predominantly agrarian, and their militant struggle against the intruders, both foreign and native, under Birsa's leadership. Whereas, *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* (2003) is an eloquent indictment of the deep rooted prejudices based on caste. The most exiting and comprehensive picture of the subaltern struggle is embedded in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (1979). In her short stories like "Droupti", "Dhouli" and "Shanichari" she recounts the social victimization of Dalit women in relentless detail. Her collection of plays *Five Plays* (1997) dramatizes the encroachments to which the subalterns are subjected. Taken together, all these stories de-elitize the very field of literature, not only by making the Dalits and tribals as their focal points, but also by repudiating the stereotypes. The political substance apparent in these

works appears to be gaining more momentum during the last two decades.

The novels selected in the present study exemplify Mahasweta's active involvement with the life of the less privileged stratum of Indian society. *Aranyer Adhikar*, her first novel to deal with the issue of tribals, fervidly documents the experiences of exploitation to which the tribal communities had fallen. *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* delineates how the untouchables organize and resist the abominable subjection at the hands of the landlords and moneylenders. *Rudali*, on the other hand, explores how the subalterns manipulate the hostile system which seeks to persecute them. *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* and *Rudali* bear the author's strongest repudiation of caste and feudalism. All these stories highlight what Gramsci called "the counter possibilities" behind the oppressive system, by documenting the resistant initiatives of its victims. The locale of all these novels -- whether it be Thahad in *Rudali*, Chalkad in *Aranyer Adhikar* or Barha in *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* -- are typical Indian villages where the antagonistic forces like feudalism and caste system garrote the life of the poor people. Taken together, they seek to challenge the elite discourses and de-legitimize the presumptions about subalterns' marginal position.

#### **Writing with the Subaltern: Tales of Survival and Empowerment**

Mahasweta's writings are characterized by a thematic preference of the tales of survival and empowerment. Each of these stories encapsulates, in different ways, the signs of resistance made by the subalterns amidst their worst victimization at the hands of the hegemonic classes. Mahasweta's

works are more about the subaltern resistance than about their sufferings. She demonstrates great interest in subaltern's resistance to the domination, a thing that is downplayed by other writers who opt to portray subalterns as docile and unresisting victims of the unreceptive system. Her stories do not merely exhibit the forces acting upon the lives of the underdogs but demonstrate what can be done to alter the course of things. In *Rudali*, for example, she demonstrates how the vulnerability and defenselessness a Dalit woman gradually gave way to an unbending attitude and the successful manipulation of the system to her end. None of her stories presents the subalterns to be unresisting and submissive. Her subaltern characters -- whether it is Birsa or Sanichari or Lachima -- are not subservient victims. By violating the role ascribed to them by the system, they seek to disturb, not to maintain, the status quo. In this sense, Mahasweta's stories provide an emphatic answer to Gayatri Spivak's presupposition of the non-articulation of subalterns. They testify that subaltern can speak for themselves, without the assistance of external agencies. She shows that subalterns have to speak out of historical necessity, else they will be silenced for ever. Her characters rise above the wretchedness with a sense of resistance. They retaliate, through their own limited means. They get empowered in the process. The novels selected in the present study are characterized by a textual displacement of the voice of the elite and dominant class coupled with a celebration of the marginal voices. An aura of subaltern speech envelopes all these stories. This highlighting of the voice of the silenced subaltern has been a consistent interest of her writings.

As a writer with a social commitment, Mahasweta believes that every gesture of protest from the part of the downtrodden people, however microscopic it might appear in size, needs to be acknowledged and highlighted. The resisting initiatives of the subalterns have been a crucial concern of her stories. Such acts of resistance range from the collective uprising of the Mundas of Chottanagpur to safeguard their life and culture from the intruders in *Aranyer Adhikar* to the individual struggle to earn the daily means of subsistence by Sanichari and Bikhni in *Rudali*. This consistent emphasis on the counter initiatives of the victims of the system differs her from other writers with similar thematic engagement like U.R. Ananthamurthy and Sivaram Karant.

As a writer Mahasweta is conscious of the role of an artist. Literature, according to her, has to be a medium of social criticism. She views art and literature as a potent vehicle for social criticism and reforms. The consistency and deep concern with which she engages with the life of the downtrodden stands a sharp contrast to the unsteady stance of her literary colleagues on the issues of dominance and oppression. She boldly documented the cruel realities of the society in an uncompromising manner. Mahasweta is an activist-writer, living very close to the subaltern subjects of her stories. The insider vision of her stories is consequent upon her first hand knowledge of the life and problems of the tribals and Dalits. Actually, her writings, including fictions and articles, can be viewed as an extension of her activism among the underprivileged people. Her extensive activist writings, most of which appeared in *Bortika*, have helped to address the issues of the tribals and

Dalits in a wider audience. Her wide-ranging essays about the subaltern communities in India offer powerful critique on issues ranging from economic exploitation to cultural subjugation and social ostracism. These problems have figured very prominently in her *The Dust on the Road* which consists of essays about her experiences in the remote villages in Bihar, West Bengal, Orrisa and Madhya Pradesh. Besides documenting the unjustifiable exploitations meted out to the tribals and lower castes in the country, she has been responsible for pooling up different sources of supports to the cause of the subaltern. She has played a vital role in highlighting the neglected life of the tribals and Dalits in the country and engaging the attention of the humanists as well as the authorities to a variety of problems enveloping their life. To Mahasweta, artistic expression is a potentially transformative political act which can debunk the myths of power in the society. However, her activism has not affected the quality of her texts. Instead, it has bestowed her writings with an insider vision and authenticity.

Mahasweta strikes an operative connectivity with the subaltern historians by providing an alternate history of the tribals. The much acclaimed concept of "history from below" is materialized in the subaltern stories of Mahasweta. Her stories offer an authentic account of the tribal and Dalit communities in India. By documenting their strugglings and resistance she challenges the mainstream history which has either hidden or marginalized the subalterns from its narratives. She uses the history to amplify her narratives. The localized histories as well as folklores have been

the unprocessed substance of her writings. Unlike the grand narrative of mainstream literature, Mahasweta's writings emphasize on the assorted streams of localized histories, broadcast through folklores, dealing with the tales of survival and empowerment. Her deep concern for history is best exemplified in *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* where she narrates the history of the tribals in colonial and postcolonial time. By doing this, Mahasweta is not just questioning the biases underlying the elite historiography or re-writing their history, but re-configuring the fields of history and literature where the lives at the peripheries are excluded.

### **Narrative Strategies**

A close perusal of Mahasweta's subaltern works reveals certain recurring pattern of narrative which she has calculatingly deployed to materialize the political agenda of her writing. Admittedly, the transformative potential of her writings is interconnected with these textual strategies. She replaced the figurative style of the mainstream literature with narrative simplicity and telling statements. By means of a series of textual strategies such as the contextualization, historicization, authorial intervention, non-individualization of the characters and oral narration of local history so on Mahasweta, in effect, dis-intellectualized the very process of writing. This textual strategy, besides rejecting the stereotypes created by the mainstream aesthetics, helped her to project the importance of the counter initiatives and empowerment of the subaltern people. A critical estimation of the selected works reveals this consciously deployed narrative strategy. *Rudali*, despite its

small canvas, encapsulates in microcosm the unexplored realms of subaltern experiences. Through its well-defined narrative and locale, Mahasweta captures the distinct experiences of subaltern life effectively, almost with an insider perspective. The same narrative progress can be seen in *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh*, in which the focal point shifts from the Dalit protagonist Lachima to various signs of subaltern unrest and subsequent uprising. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* eschews this contained narrative for a more flexible one, mapping wider experiences across communities. The subversive potential of Mahasweta's works derives, in part, from her refusal to be contained within the aesthetic parameters of the mainstream. She constantly blurs the boundary between fiction, history and journalistic writing. Often these elements are synthesized into a new form of cultural critique. By deploying these textual strategies she seeks to expose the elite bias encoded in our literary tradition. Her insistence upon the social documentation nevertheless links her to the older strands of literary practice represented by Mulkraj Anand, Bhabani Battacharya and Sivaram Karant etc. While all these writers documented the victimization of the subalterns and paid little attention to the possibility or means through which this condition can be altered, Mahasweta consistently demonstrated the counter initiatives and resistance of the subordinated. Her novels have an open end, often implying the continuity of the struggles documented in the texts.

The erasure of the demarcation between the individual and community has been a deciding feature of Mahasweta's narrative tactic. In her stories, the

character interest never eclipses the community interest. She uses these narrative strategies to convey a sense of embeddedness of the individual in the community and to demonstrate that both are constitutive of each other. For instance, the encounter with the community figures like Dulan and Dhani allowed both Sanichari and Birsa to gather the details of the histories of their respective communities, which eventually helped them to explain various forces which had damaged their life. Her subaltern characters -- whether it is Sanichari, Bikhni, Birsa, Chotti or Lachima -- manage to forge connection with their community which consequently alters their subject position. Their empowerment inevitably involves an insertion of community consciousness into their mind. She never details the characters' personal traits to the extent of isolating them from their socio-economic moorings. They never speak or act apart from their socio-economic contexts. Through this, Mahasweta undermines the politics of characterization based on aesthetic principles that focuses on the interior mindscape of the characters. The texts grow from the chronicles of individual sufferings to community narratives. The narrative usually shifts from a contained and particular description to a series of sociological parallels. This textual strategy allows a variety of perspectives to be juxtaposed and explored. This narrative pattern is seen to be kept undisrupted in all these stories.

On the narrative level or with respect to the form of the stories, she disclaims the received mode of fictional pattern for the sake of documentation effect. The boundaries of fiction and pure documentation are continually

crossed and blurred, often destabilizing the very standards of fiction. The world that her stories present is the real social world that really exists for the reader and it is never let mixed up with fantasies. It, being her preferred mode of communication, provides the readers with convincing and realistic pictures of human struggles rather than inviting them to make sense of the text. By restricting the readers on their choices to engage in varied interpretation, she challenges the conventional literary encounter between the text and the reader. She forces the readers to a variety of discernible subject-positions, rather than to a gallery of individualized and multi-dimensional characters. The texts become a mirror held up to the reality by her reportorial manner of rendering all the events, in the same circumstantial, matter-of-fact way. This textual strategy has the advantage of suggesting the potentials of people's politics. Such a narrative is deeply rooted in the author's deep responsiveness to the contemporary socio-economic realities. It has sharpened the social edge of her writing. However, her social agenda has not diluted the literary quality of her works. In the case of Mahasweta, the social urge and creativity are superbly synchronized. This rare literary symbiosis between social commitment and artistic excellence is a thing which differs Mahasweta from other writers. Through these writings, which are read by the tribals and Dalits, the "subjects" of most of her stories, as well as the academicians, Mahasweta poses irresistible example for other literary practitioners in India. To her, creative activity, like social activism, is solely a product of purposeful planning, resolve and effort. She emphasizes the interconnectedness of

literary and political activity. To respond to her works is to acknowledge, among other things, the counterthrusts of the people who are crushed under the system. Her activism as well as writing has assisted the calibration of the subaltern politics in the country. Her writings have been a source of inspiration for all who stand for the cause of the oppressed.

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NB 4950