

Articulating Tribal History : The Fallouts of Caste in Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*

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Abstract:

In the foreword to Chotti Munda and His Arrow (2002, viii), Gayatri Spivak has enunciated the cardinal objective of Mahasweta Devi. Spivak asserts, "Mahasweta articulates tribal history with colonial and postcolonial history...one of the most striking characteristics of the novel is the sustained aura of the subaltern speech" (Chotti Munda, vii-viii). Mahasweta has actively committed herself to the salvation of the tribal masses from the stigma of caste intolerance. The scourge of racism that has assaulted the very existence of the tribals, is a system perpetrated by the high classes of India. This in turn was grievously secured by the elitist colonials during imperial dominion of India. Hence, Mahasweta has exposed the colonial as well postcolonial history of India to state how the tribal masses were dehumanized by the colonizers in the colonial India and are meted out with the same treatment by the Hindu elites of colonial and post-colonial India. In fact, it is Mahasweta's conviction to subvert the unbalanced equation of caste by challenging the orthodox traditions of the mainstream society. Hence the imperative question is: How India's caste culture stymies class solidarity that an effective resolution cannot be engendered against the continuing lapses of the high class elites and elitist colonials? (Reading, 9). The peasants, the adivasis, and other

low caste masses of India embody a travesty which Mahasweta Devi has vehemently exposed, and actively attempted to rectify. In her magnum opus Chotti Munda, Mahasweta hence has reclaimed a tribal history in the labyrinthine system of colonial and postcolonial history.

Key words: Subaltern, race, colonialism, feudalism, caste system

“I am talking about a place of great caste difference...
but with the tribals they were one in everything”
(Mahasweta Devi, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, xiv)

Caste has been an identifier of masses in Indian society. There is however a considerable difference between caste and race, the disparity of which Crispin Bates has discussed in her work, *Subalterns and Raj: South Asia Since 1600* (2007). She asserts,

The ordering of people according to caste is an important practice in Indian society, which, as has been observed, is linked to occupational specialization...colonialists (believed) that differences of caste were comparable to the differences of race...race and caste...became crucial elements in the ideology and epistemology of colonial rule (*Subalterns and Raj*, 1796-97).

Be that as it may, caste was a, “method of social control by elites...caste is quintessentially rooted in religious belief (*Subalterns and Raj*, 1797). In not delving into the intricacies of this difference, the attempt shall be to expose the fallouts of race or caste as highlighted by Mahasweta in *Chotti Munda*. The work is a resounding attack on the egregious system of caste that over the years has waxed itself as part of social mores. *Chotti Munda* is a work of social activism that is etched in the notion that if Nationalism united the masses irrespective of caste to defeat colonialism then how come the tribal masses and peasants are still disenfranchised? Why they are not included in the modern principles of egalitarianism, that proclaim to overthrow prejudices, slave labour, land-grabbing

and rituals that reek of human tyranny? Why everywhere the ancient lawlessness of feudalism is penalized, and in the lands of the tribal masses it is enforced with official authority?

The milieu of the novel sketched around the village of Chotti is a symbol of 'tribal aspiration' in the face of overwhelming odds of prejudice and disenfranchisement. In her fictional world, Mahasweta has exhorted the readers to recognize and protest the inhuman manners of oppression dealt to the tribal masses. She exclaims;

These people do not find anyone writing about them, and they do not have script...this is unwritten history. I had to learn it by being with the people. They compose the stream of events into song. ..their history is like a big flowing flower going somewhere, not without a destination. ..tribal world is like a continent handed over to us, and we never tried to explore it, know is mysteries, we only destroyed it.

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow, xi)

George J. Sefa Dai in his essay, "The Denial of Difference: The Anti-Racist Praxis" (2007) has delineated the root cause of class antagonism and bigotry. He weighs the importance of confronting race than allowing its myriad interpretations to polarize the society. According to him, these misguided interpretations have a proclivity to agitate the public sensibility when it comes to the sensitive topic of race. Dai observes:

A theoretical understanding and concrete acknowledgment of race and difference (is needed to provide) the contexts for power and domination in society...race is evoked when expedient by the dominant group (e.g. criminalization of black youth)...race is denied when the dominant group is challenged to acknowledge its privileges and power base. ..race is expressed in the problematic discourse of "competency," "ability", "merit", and "excellence" which are evoked to signify the one group (specially the dominant) has a monopoly over these domains.

(Race and Racialization, "The Denial", 188)

The question of race has been a pivotal focus of postcolonial studies. Joseph-Ernest Renan's *La reforme intellectuelle et morale* (1871), one of the earlier recorded works of racism writes, "The regeneration of the inferior or degenerate races, by the superior races is part of the providential order of the things for humanity...Nature has made a race of workers..." (Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 2000, 418–19). A belief is perpetrated as a gospel truth that by a divine order of things, races have a hierarchical set up which society must uphold and abide by. On this credo is based the cultural legacy of colonialism as well as caste system that dehumanizes the natives into objects of slave labour. Ranajit Guha has also highlighted the apparently social and moral justification of this exploitative system. He has traced the ethos right from the original tract that justified the subordination of low classes by the high classes. In his phenomenal book *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (1997), he writes;

Armed with this doctrine (caste-system), every landlord could indeed play "maharaj" to his tenants in extracting begar from them or setting his lathi-wielding myrmidons on them if they refused to oblige. Again, according to this principle, the use of violence by upper caste elites on the untouchables and adivasis or the instigation of the sectarian strife by a dominant local group against the subaltern adherents of a local faith other than its own, could pass as a meritorious act modeled on a sovereign's defense

(*Dominance*, 30)

Mahasweta Devi has astutely exposed this outlook in the character of the feudal lords of India. They staunchly believed in the divine right to rule the adivasis. It hence conveniently encouraged the landlords to exploit the tribal masses in the name of a moral code. The landlords are hence acquitted from the pangs of remorse, and any penalty that should convict them for their tyranny is condoned. Mahasweta observes:

That's not god's law (to give lands to low castes). The 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...(tribal masses) wear shoes, carry umbrellas...tell me if I lose face wit' this or not? ...This is not good

(*Chotti Munda*, 198-199)

Homi Bhabha has also exposed this germ of race in defining the subaltern racial minorities. He asserts that the presence of the subaltern minority group serves to define the majority and that the former have the command to undermine those in power (*Encyclopedia*, 823). Bhabha also affirms to the Gramscian notion that, "subaltern classes are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a State" (*Subalternity and Representation*, 1999,133). Mahasweta Devi has highlighted this aspect by exploring the ways in which the low caste masses as "Dusdad, Ganjus, Charams" abandon their caste differences and welcome the tribals and other Hindu outcastes into their social life. In the wake of the surmounting threat of the elites, these undermined castes unite forces to jointly confront the subjugation (*Chotti Munda*, xiv).

In the postcolonial India, it is a mortifying fact that the tribal masses are not considered citizens of the country and the reasons are not only racist but also politically motivated. They are stamped as denotified tribes or most outrageously as ex-criminal tribes of India. The rights and privileges of a citizen are not provided to them. They have been conveniently erased from the map of India owing to the deeply entrenched politics of caste. To effectively right this wrong, Mahasweta has methodically exposed this travesty of India. She observes;

Globalization is not only coming from America and first world, my own country has always wanted to rob the people...tribes of India, who, in 1871 were notified by the British as 'born criminals'...the Government of India declared them as 'denotified.' The stigma persisted..Underwent many atrocities (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, xv) and (www.harmonyindia.org)

Hence the imperative question is: How India's caste culture stymies class solidarity that an effective resolution cannot be engendered against the continuing lapses of the high class elites and elitist colonials? (*Reading*, 9). Ekta Singh in *Caste System in India* (2005) has chronologically traced the genesis of caste in India. In her exegesis, she has defined caste as a 'social instituting' than being a progeny of some religious edicts, "Caste is simply a crystallized social institution (not religious as popular claim goes) which after doing its service is now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench and it can only be removed by giving back to people their lost social individuality" (*Caste System*, 12). Mahasweta has exposed the plight of the untouchables, who are ostracized by the majority, and subjected to numerous acts of human rights violation. The caste system ensures the untouchables remain relegated to their menial jobs, and if they attempt to seek their rights, they are punished with most impunity. Cases are fraught with these obnoxious acts of rape, immolation, public beating and more when the dalits protest. Hillary Mayell, in her report, "India's "Untouchables" Face Violence, Discrimination" highlighted the ground reality behind this system:

"Untouchable"—people tainted by their birth into a caste system that deems them impure, less than human... the police, village councils, and government officials often support the caste system, which is based on the religious teachings of Hinduism, many crimes go unreported due to fear of reprisal, intimidation by police, inability to pay bribes demanded by police.

(National Geographic News, June 2, 2003)

Under these dire circumstances, Mahasweta has challenged the deliberate discrimination and exclusion of the tribal masses. Tribal masses were cut off from their freedom struggle, and in their coerced seclusion, significant events of their history was unknown to them. Hence it is obvious they did not get liberated

from feudalism when the country was liberated from the British. In fact it was a sinuous subterfuge of the Indian nationals to use and throw the tribal masses when they deemed fit. They mobilized the low castes to wage a united front against the colonials but deep down were so suspicious of the tribal masses to materialize this unity. Partha Chatterjee in her essay, "The Nation and its Peasants" (2000) has effectively traced this relationship:

...nationals leadership sought to mobilize the peasantry as an anticolonial force in its project of establishing a nation-state, it was ever distrustful of the consequences of agitational politics among the peasants, suspicious of their supposed ignorance and backward consciousness, careful to keep their participation limited to the forms of bourgeois representative politics in which peasants would be regarded as a part of the nation but distanced from the institutions of the state. ..the unity remained fragmented and fraught with tension (in the struggle against colonialism).

(Mapping Subaltern Studies, 10)

Mahasweta reaffirms this mainstream sentiment in the novel:

The August movement did not even touch the life of Chotti's community. It was as if that the Diku's (Hindu) struggle for liberation. Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indian. They didn't draw them into the liberation struggle. in war and Independence the life of Chotti and his cohorts remained unchanged

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow, 121)

Partha Chatterjee has carefully revisited these historic exigencies of Nationalist struggle against colonialism. In his study he has exposed the duplicity of the nationalist leaders in employing the services of the peasants, and then disallowing them to partake the fruits of freedom struggle. Chatterjee has not only attacked the deception of Indian nationals but also has stated that by the same card, the colonialists maneuvered to fleece the adivasis. Mahasweta Devi has personally interacted

with the tribals and has witnessed them to be peace-loving than barbaric or inferior as reported by the elitist epistemologies. The landlords and the colonials capitulated on this, and realized that their exploitation of the tribal masses will not be met by any protest. It further served as an incentive to continue the practice unbarred, 'Adivasis work for incredibly low wages. Don't like bickering. They work as they give word. It's very easy to bind the adivasis in debt. If they once put their thumbprint on paper, they give bonded labour for generations...Baijnath knows the rules of adivasi society, (hence he knows how to manipulate them (*Chotti Munda*, 32-34). Under such grave circumstances, Mahasweta wishes to expose this chronic abuse that has beset the toiling classes of the country without any effective resolution of this crisis. It is the mentality that the author is striking at, for it is the mentality that answers to the rationales behind the crisis. In the major shuffle of power, from colonialism to democracy, it is indeed a travesty that tribal masses were still incapacitated to realize any upliftment of their state and estate. They were stricken off the map of India and withheld from its developmental projects and other aspiring agendas. They were only recognized as labour which could be bought with low wages. The tribal masses who managed to survive the pandemic decimation of colonialism, were after independence still deprived of freedom to rise in their station. That is, the erstwhile system of colonialism continued its retrogressive measures through feudalism, and the tribal could not reown their lands. Hence gaining a seat of power was a far cry.

Mahasweta asserts how the tribal masses have retaliated against the insidious abuse of the ruling class. If one is to chart the history of tribals, one would embark on a track of rebellions which were suppressed so that the reign of terror could continue for the profit of colonial and nationalist expansion. The author has witnessed the brutality up-close, and her details expose the racial discrimination met by the

natives. She has narrated the prominent revolts as 'Mulku', 'Telengana-Girijan', 'Ulgulan', 'Tebhaga' etc and each are testimonies of the agrarian movements raged against the tyranny of landlords and native/foreign administration. Mahasweta hence has portrayed three timelines which visited the village of Chotti. She has exposed the hierarchies of race that originated in the feudal India, were consolidated during colonial Empire and which continue to resurrect itself in the capitalist India. The author has documented a tribal history which time and again protested these totalitarian forces. Some of the tribal protested with a revolt, while some used the peaceful means of petitions to voice their suppression. In her allegiance to the continuing struggle of the tribal masses, Mahasweta writes:

When, in the 60's, I would go to Munda villages, their marketplaces...I have seen with my own eyes what Emergency meant, what was done. The criminalization of politics, letting the lumpen loose in the lower caste and tribal belts. Inhuman torture and oppression. I have also seen resistance...Chotti Munda or my other stories and books depict is a continuing struggle...Tribal History is not seen as a continuity in Indian historiography...the tribal masses are still evicted from their land...the first Santal Rebellion was Baba Tirka Majhi's rebellion...(then) Birsa's uprising and of Dhani Munda...yet after each rebellion-always relate to land and labour-they were evicted from their home places.

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, ix)

Feudalism persevered in India, for it garnered profits for the landlords who sought an opportunity in this medieval arrangement. David Hardiman explores various texts to corroborate that this system originated in the pre-colonial past. Under the British rule, the system underwent changes which only modified it and did not alter it any major way (*Subaltern Studies V*, 2011, 29). The government after independence had no considerable intention to see adivasis as their own countrymen, and hence reforms to counteract the feudal

authority weren't constituted. More so, the landlords were recruited in the government as ministers with power and portfolios behind them. Under such a scenario it became even more complicated to abolish the practices of human slavery. Mahasweta has eloquently put this point forth:

...The tragedy of India at independence was not introducing thorough land reform. A basic feudal land system was allowed to stay... A feudal value system is anti-women, anti-poor people, against toiling people. It is the landowners who formed the ministry, and became the rulers of the country, why should they do anything else?

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow, xv)

Mahasweta has represented this ideology of feudal lords in the novel. She has exposed this long-standing tradition of feudalism through landlord Lala Baijnath. She has portrayed him as a paragon of feudal authority to expose the shameless fleecing of the adivasis by the landlords:

Baijnath has a creditor-debtor relationship. ..It is not the wish of either the foreign or the indigenous administration that real relationships grow up between the officers and subject groups. It is more auspicious for the administration to keep the relationship completely unreal. then in the officer's eyes, the humans can remain a mathematical calculation of supplied census statistics. And in the eyes of the people of the administration can remain the king's elephants. Elephants that are no use to them yet must be reared by them.

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow 32-35)

In the Indian context, a meticulous study was made by Ranajit Guha who highlighted this shift of power from colonial regime to the native bourgeoisie. He observes that the natives who happened to rise above their stations, instead of promoting the cause of their own people, engendered the interests of the colonial or feudal authority. Guha expostulates:

...colonial elitism, and bourgeoisie national elitism. Both originated as ideological product of British rule in India, but

have been assimilated to neo-colonist and neo-nationalist form of discourse... (the subaltern comprise the) subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the laboring population and intermediate strata in town and country-, that is the people. ...(subaltern means) the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those we defined as elite. (The elite comprise the) dominant groups, foreign as well indigenous (where in the latter constitutes) the biggest feudal magnates...mercantile bourgeoisie and the native recruits to the uppermost levels of bureaucracy...(who) still acted in the interests of the (feudal magnates) and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own being.

(Selected Subaltern Studies, 37-44)

In shocking revelations, Mahasweta details the intricate workings of feudalism, and how its unchecked working corrupts the landlords to dehumanize the farmers into exploitation. In the novel, there are political forces at play which deliberately subdue the farmers into a labour-force and it's not only by power of politics the system is enforced, but by the foul concoctions of divine law, distortions of religion etc. Tirathnath, who is Baijnath's successor, serves as a memento of the continuing prevalence of feudalism. It is through his new ideology Mahasweta highlights the belief system of the landlords who deem their job as sanctioned by some divine law, "I'll take bonded labour. to take bonded labour from adivasis and untouchables is my natural duty (*Chotti Munda*, 50).

Tirathnath is not blind to his oppressive system of beliefs, which he might justify with this and that dictum of divinity. He knows it's all a callous ruse to sabotage the farmers into servitude. The landlord realizes he is a mere middle farmer because in independent India, 'absurd botherations like Kings and zamindars have vanished':

Tirathnath was realizing he was not acting right...bosses...never gave these folks good land. By shares they are given stony land, barren land, dry land, distant meadowland, land by the borders of the forest. Given half-

harvest, half right....Everything is the landowner's whim.

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 155-56)

Mahasweta makes for a perceptive read, for she addresses the system in all its fallacy and exposes the human tyranny that fuels it's working. It is the ideology which she attacks throughout the novel, for it remains innocuously hidden, and hence works the most outrageously as it can. It is because of this, the system continues to fester, and people in the likes of Tirathnath work for it without any action against them. Mahasweta calls this method as 'indirect exploitation' something which is pervasively recurrent in the history of human dominion, "No action that would enrage the jungle folk must be undertaken. They do not recognize indirect exploitation...best to follow that doctrine (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,71). Hence hidden from the vigilance of the government, or should one say that the government does not bother to broil itself into its myriad complications, the tribal masses remain a cheap labour-force. It is to be noted that government appoints tribal officers for tribal welfare, but their authority or their designated duty is to keep up the appearance that some rehabilitation is being done for the natives. Mahasweta argues that in reality, these officers are mere marionettes which act on formality and are powerless in resolving the major issues of the tribals:

The official responsible for tribal welfare and development can give handicraft training to a displaced Munda, not support him in recovering lost land. ..It is quite beyond (their) powers...The government wishes the tribal well...but the landlords and moneylenders are mostly uneducated. They won't give up their old ways.

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*144-164)

The range of this marginalization can be realized when the mentality to outcaste the tribal masses is even projected by the schools. This is evidence that schools and other institutions

work in connivance with the government and its biased system of beliefs. Hence these schools are the 'Ideological State Apparatuses' as theorized by Althusser, (*Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, 2006, 98).

To exemplify this notion, one can take the instance of the ruling class, the British empire, and the 'religious ISA' that is the Missionaries. The latter in the guise of civilizing the natives, promoted the cause of colonialism. In the context of schools, Mahasweta underlines this mentality, and one can discern clearly the analysis of Althusser on this concept. She remarks, '...t' schoolmaster says, what'll ye do with school? Go herd cows...A Munda'll go to government school here! Diku boys won' study then, and t' master chases off even t' boys of Chhagan's caste. They say, Low caste, do low work, why d' ye need to study? (*Chotti Munda*, 150-206). This reference is ripe with the evidence of caste-system that prevails in India. Ekta Singh defines this system of caste as a dictator of people's roles in the society. She writes,

“...the caste system has come to dictate the lives and roles of much of India's population by ruling class and status. This system of defining caste from birth has created rigid barrier of mobility within the country. ..discrimination based on caste...it is difficult to persuade a society to relinquish traditional methods and thought...” (*Caste System*, 11).

Mahasweta has emphasized on the collusion between the government, police, and high classes that ensure the system is practiced even when it was abolished when Indian constitution was framed. Hence this deplorable crisis is bound to happen when the government itself has set a precedent not to fortify the tribal masses. Why then the school or other 'ISA's bother to power them with education and social standing. The institutions heed the diktats of the ruling class, and clearly when the latter is deliberately oblivious of the concerns of the tribal masses, the schools and other institutions will only follow its suit. :

Thus do the Mundas and low castes of Chotti village enter the national economic pattern of independent India. The 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.

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow,177)

It is the social ethos which encourages the segregation of the adivasis as untouchables, a point which Mahasweta wishes to expose. It is a sweeping generalization which is ingrained in the public's mentality that untouchables are to be disallowed from ascension to private or public sector. This thinking has rendered the natives illiterate and poor and recurrently oppressed. The harbinger of independence, Gandhi who was hailed as a protector of truth, when he openly interacted with the low castes to the point of abolishing the caste system, the reaction of the public is observed by Mahasweta as:

Our birthright is the caste-system.

...Mahatma didn't keep the caste-rules?

...He was a god. Do humans understand a god's affairs?

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow, 244)

This outright defiance of even Gandhi's belief suggest that any attempt to rehabilitate the tribals would have to start by changing the grassroots mentality, and then following the steps to ensure the effect materializes. Ramesh Chandra emphases this point in his work *Identity and Genesis of Caste System In India* (2004), when he asserts that the 'prejudice' can only be abolished if it is 'shed from the heart', and then only can the public attain 'swaraj'(Identity, 139). Ranajit Guha also affirms this belief that in abolishing the caste system, the orthodoxy behind it has to be corrected. Guha writes, "The use of caste sanction is basic to Hindu orthodoxy. It constitutes the most explicit and immediate application of what is regarded by some as governing principle of the caste system" (*Dominance Without*

Hegemony, 111).

It is interesting to note that the adivasis in India, despite surmounted by the class-loving officials, however are not themselves prejudiced by it. The tribal masses in India, portrayed in Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* have no class system in their social sphere, a point which the protagonist Chotti remarks to a village council chief, "There's one difference. yehae caste stuff. To t' lala, to t' Brahman, ye're low caste. to ye Motia is low caste. We have no caste diff'rence. And I bring it up, cos t' village is now all mixed. ye and us dies together in famine, drought...(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,127). Mahasweta's main emphasis is to stress the ethos which legitimizes the caste system. The laws are in place, like the legislation of 1989-The prevention of atrocities Act, but it is in their implementation that there is a gross discrepancy.

Mahasweta has throughout the novel attacked the practice of land annexing. The occupation of the lands of the tribal masses was the first breach of trust by the government. A border demarcates their territory, and a caveat prohibits their freedom of voice. The natives can't own their home or prosecute anyone trying to evict them from their own lands. In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, Mahasweta asserts on the expulsion of the Mundas (the tribal masses) from their lands, "The Mundas were the ones who first lived in the village. Other Bihar sects and castes now dominate the village...The Mundas labour ...(in the) barns of the Hindus(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* 6-13). Peter Hulme highlights this set up as, "...discursive practices which relate to occupied territory where the native population has been or is to be disposed of its land ...America and India...can exemplify very roughly his division" (Loomba, 2005, 94). The world's biggest democracy, India won its freedom after years of crisis and wars. It has been disclosed by the author, that the freedom struggle however didn't espouse the liberation of the natives, rather ignored them entirely. The extent of which is evident in the contemporary state of affairs.

The tribal class is still below poverty line, uneducated, deprived of basic amenities and suffering an exploitation which once their country bore under the yoke of colonialism. Birsa Munda is depicted by Mahasweta as a symbol of peasant rebellion against feudalism, and his compatriot Dhani Munda picks up his banner and rouses his people against their servitude to the zamindars. Dhani Munda is despaired to see that his fellow tribal masses are so pacified that they fail to recognize it, and protest it:

No new torture, just the old one(feudalism)...give bonded labour to the moneylender at harvest time. ..That bonded labour is one among the all t' ills he (Birsa Munda) fought against...Father Earth. Lord Birsa... In yer time there is no Lord, no Ulgulan, no fire in anyone's soul to change t'Munda's life, no pierchin' of moneylender, polis, and' soldier wit' arrers in t' heat of this fire... The kherwar revolt, the Mulkoji revolt of the Sardars, and then Birsa's revolt. armed struggle is also an addiction. He went to all revolts in the hope Mundas would establish villages in forest and arable land and farm...

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow,8-14)

The tribal masses are incapacitated to generate a mass movement as they are mostly illiterate of the laws. They waver with indecisiveness to beat the system and continue to remain in their oppressed comfort zones. Most revolt but some do not for fear of a backlash. They however attempt every peaceful medium to voice their oppression. Mahasweta notes this reaction, and also writes down the reasons for their silence on the matter:

(Munda) crowd starts a non-cooperation movement regarding the market cut. ...we sent many a petition, sores on our footsoles from walkin' and walkin' to t' office, but no one heard a word from us poor folks...our homes, our bit o' land, all tied up I bonded labour. In land held by ten generations of livin', no munda has anythin' to call his own.Is't jest landowner and moneylender that kills Munda? T' law kills...Law courtshavnev'r seen t' Munda, an' will nev'r...Ever'thin' is

Gormen's. If Gormen looked after Munda rights, would Munda be beggar like this?.. Leave land with Diku's kick.

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow, 115-160)

Mahasweta emphasizes that it is the system which needs to be amended, a system that is driven by officials-zamindars who believe in its social pyramid almost religiously. In their staunch adherence to its hierarchy, the inclusion of the natives into it, becomes difficult as this system of class was built to ensure the exclusion of tribal masses. Hence there is a cold impasse because to effect a change would imply that the untouchables can ascend the pyramid and stand in equal station as the zamindars. Guha encompasses each cause and fallout of this exploitation, and calls it an "idiom of Danda". He opines:

idiom of Danda which is central to all notions of indigenous notions of subordination...the private feudal armies and levies, caste and territorial panchayats governed by the local elite authority, caste sanction imposed by the elite and religious sanctions by the priesthood, bonded labor and begar, the partial entitlement of landlords to punitive measures taken against women for disobeying patriarchal moral codes, civilian and criminal jurisdiction over tenantry, elite violence organized on sectarian, ethnic, caste lines...framed in the idiom of Danda.

(Dominance, 29)

Tribal are hence denied access to the mainstream democratic arena, even when ruled by it, and when they object to it, their act is considered a treasonous reprisal which can only be contained by imposing martial law on them. To impose it, every limb of justice like the police, the court, the lumpen etc is given orders to suppress the tribal masses before they reown their lands back. Tribals hence have been an expendable labour-force and only few are able to rise above the social strata impressed upon them. These few are given jobs at politics, in the academics, etc. but they become so consumed with their new portfolios that looking back to their roots for some of them

gets to be a museum tour alone. In the refrain of Fanon, "The national bourgeoisie of under-developed countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labor...(*The Wretched of the Earth*, 148). It is an ideological framework which works to keep the tribal masses alienated, and bereft of any recourse to uplift their social life. In the wake of this, incentives are thrown to keep others content with their position, and force is used to threaten the discontented. These incentives are even publicized to perpetuate a charade that the system is a firm liberator of the tribal masses. While the ground-reality of the exploitation of the tribals is kept clandestine.

In the novel it is not only feudal lord but also the elite industrial magnates who are determined to exploit the tribals. Mahasweta highlights this practice through the character of Harbans, a scion of Industrialization in the Chotti village. The significant shift from feudalism to capitalism as is evident in the novel has been a debate among various critics. Morishima in his discussion paper, "A Historical Transformation from Feudalism to Capitalism" has analyzed these shifts in England and Japan (The Suntory Centre, 3 1986). Morishma notes that with the change in regime such as from feudal lords to Parliament, the prominence of feudalism started to lose sway, as merchants began to hold more power. The power of the merchants, and their advocacy for a 'parliamentary monarchism' led to the demise of feudalism and it was eventually decentralized. Mahasweta has carefully recorded the change of power from feudalism to capitalism in the novel. She has depicted the change through the paramount characters of Tirathnath and Harbans who serve as a history chapter in making.

The industrialist Harbans is a hypocritical man, who hides behind the veneer of his modernity-the motor cars and radio etc., and so deeply he believes he is modern, that he is oblivious to the fact his acts are still medieval and uncivilized

and downright exploitative just like Tirathnath's. The cover might have undergone a drastic makeover to look humanistic, yet the book is still about the gross continuation of corrupt suppression. This can be taken as a severe indictment of the notion of independence, for it might suggest India shining with escalating economy and unprecedented boom in social sector, but the agrarian foundation of the country that is the tribal masses are still exploited. Only a glimmer of modernity has hailed India after independence. Its roots are still buried in the colonizing abuses of feudalism. Reading into the hypocritical assertions of Harbans, one is provoked to see the truth.

(Harbans who is a symbol of capitalism) finds Tirathnath (a symbol of feudalism) and the matter of moneylending medieval...hey his wits are ancient... A man who doesn't buy a motor car, doesn't play the radio, doesn't run to the county seat to roam the movie houses and hotel-bars-who wears a knee-length dhoti, a coarse kurta and sturdy cobbler-shoes-whose idea of entertainment is to listen to the 'Feats of Rama' sung by the village bards-seems in Harbans's eyes a country hick, somewhat uncultivated. Only philistines gain from money lending according to Harbans. Bonded labour and making the poor work for ower wages also seem to him to be philistine behaviour. Harbans sees no fault in himself, although he doesn't not give Chotti and his people more than twelve annas, and in bad times makes famine-struck folks dig hard ground at no more than four.

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow,175)

Mahasweta has exposed the manner and extent of tyranny, Harbans is capable of in contrast to Tirathnath. One can universalize this conception to most of the industrialists who recruit laborers for low wages, and dehumanize them with mechanized servility:

Harbans is a bloodsucker but he's a small industrialist, and is way of thinking is more modern than Tirathnath's. In the coming five years plans he wants to be a middle industrialist from this area. Tirathnath's land-centered mentality is

altogether repugnant to him...You (Tirathnath) want bullock cart, I want airplane. We need a connecting road here. I want to have a bus running seven days a week. Industrial townships growing up all around, this is the moment.

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,181-182)

It is interesting to note that Harbans finds Tirathnath as a symbol of feudalism repulsive and outmoded. Harbans is ill at ease seeing the foul workings of Tirathnath, and asserts, 'Today's bosses and moneylenders carry in the imperial tradition of the Tughlak dynasty inherent in the pre-British king-landowners (*Chotti Munda* ,195). Harbans as a capitalist is wearisome of the archaic methods employed by Tirathnath, a feudal lord. He is derisive of him, and the system Tirathnath embodies. But that does not condone his exploitative abuse of the services of the tribal masses. He does not believe in the doctrine of caste system but replaces it with his ambition to expand and gain multi-dividends. His aim is to profit while the concern of the Tirathnath is profit and complete subservience of the tribals towards him. Harbans doesn't abide by the mores of caste system, and is not bothered about the high or low class of the workers. Chibber has reaffirmed this difference between a capitalist and a feudal lord. He writes:

...cultural differences... don't matter for the spread of capitalism, as long as agents obey the compulsions that capitalist structures place on them. I go to considerable lengths to explain this in the book....*capitalism's universalization doesn't require erasing all social diversity.*

(“How Does the Subaltern Speak’, Issue 10, Jacobin)

Mahasweta has conclusively dwelt into the psyche of two twin pillars of tyranny-feudalism and capitalism. She has exposed how it is embedded into their minds that they are masters, and the servants that are Mundas cannot and never shall rise above their stations. A rigid caste system, entails the fixed duties of each caste. Tirathnath is portrayed as an ‘ancient’ upholder of

it, while Harbans is depicted as an agnostic industrialist who doesn't care about the system. Yet both will not accept any breach to the measures of exploitation they execute for gains. Mahasweta explores how when Chotti acquires a stony land, Tirathnath is anxiously displeased:

...dissatisfied with Chotti's acquisition of land. It's not correct that Chotti and company should own even stony land. This might alter the balance of their mental make-up. They may get a sense of property rights in land...they should be kept like specters without any recourse, without any materiality, forever dependent.

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow,187)

Mahasweta has drawn a model character whose psyche serves an explanation on the ignoble workings of authority which detests change in hierarchy and is fondly possessive about its rigid tiers. Any change in the class system, and it is a threat to one's sovereignty, to one's position of prestige and absolute authority. In this analysis, the notion Mahasweta wishes to persuade is, authority is impregnable, and only by petitioning disobedience can the subalterns have themselves heard. Servitude would only worsen the case, as any provision of mercy or mutual profit is not the intention of high classes.

Tirathnath's system of beliefs, his faith, and his entire existence was build up by dehumanizing the adivasis, and seeing it 'out of joint', the landlord as an emblem of feudal authority is delirious to return to the old times. Birsa Munda understood it, and so did Dhandi Munda and others who took to retaliation. Chotti Munda however unlike them waits and tolerates and hopes if by peaceful entreaties his pleas are heard and answered. But at the core of his despair, there is a vengeful fire that burns the way Dhandi's did. Chotti confronts Tirathnath over his abusive control over the adivasis and how he is perniciously against the tribal masses owning even a stony land. Chotti is disturbed by his covetousness of land, and of his vapid reasons to justify the abuse. He lambasts at him:

What is this cravenness? if paddy grows on me land ye think let's grab t' land. If we take more land ye think let me buy up all t' baren land cos otherwise t' nekkid beggars'll know t' taste of land. then if ye put me boy in je-hell s'dn I think that when lala walks around alone at sundown, lemme hit 'im? I think, but I don' do it. me blood is not that way.

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,199)

James C. Scott in his book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* has outlined two moral codes of the peasants when it comes to the relationship between the landlord and the peasant. He phrases them as 'norm of reciprocity' and the 'right to subsistence'. As the terms lucidly explain, the first principle demarcates that the landlord must provide the 'agricultural produce' in turn of the 'services' rendered by the peasant. While the second states that every peasant has a right to his survival (*Subaltern Studies V*, 44). If there is a retraction of these codes by the landlord, then the peasant is morally right to condemn and protest against it. The recurring occurrence of the binary warfare between the landlord and the peasant indicates that the tribal masses have been endlessly cheated by the elites and continue to be marginalized on their own lands. This gnawing of their rights, does not register a response from the government. The tribal masses were alienated in the regime of the British and continue to remain alienated even after independence. The ring of candidates appointed by the government, speak of big promises for the tribal masses but with a different agenda. The post-independent elections continue to bypass the natives, even when they realize it's not the low castes who will disturb the peace but the "narrow-minded, superstitious and prejudiced high castes" who are "reactionary to the extreme and (are) real obstacles to India's development" (*Chotti Munda* , 201).

In the novel, the elections are held with the high promises of development and rehabilitation, but the ground-reality is a charade where in the candidate and the people pulling his strings are single-mindedly interested in their own

upliftment.

The surge of modernity which was expected after India's independence remains an illusion in the adivasi areas. If feudalism prevailed before, it still prevails, hence with this impasse, the tribal areas are not yet free of the bondage of imperialistic slavery. This point Fanon also asserts when he exposes the reality that "with the ground-nut harvest, with the cocoa crop and the olive yield... We go on sending out raw materials; we go on being Europe's small farmers who specialize in unfinished products (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 151). Mahasweta remarks that the pattern of modernity which reached Chotti village is just in words and not in the spirit:

The Chotti area graduates into modernity through the way in which former Member was removed, the elections were won through fraud an armed robbery, and the post-election contracts were divvied up...Under this regime, everyone's character is purged and made to adopt appropriate class-roles...Gormen work goes at slow speed. First they'll spend a year to see where there's coal. Then they'll spend a year makin' up their minds f this place should have a Coal Board office. Another year to build a house.

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,239-241)

There have been some steps taken to right the wrong, for instance Jawaharlal Nehru framed a *panchsheel* plan to assimilate the tribal masses with the mainstream. Rycroft and Dasgupta in their collaborative work on the peasant past of India, have traced how adivasis and non adivasis had a conflicting liaison. When the masses which were at the margins of the Hindu majority were identified, the Indian National Congress decided to 'disavow' their 'insurgent past' (*The Politics of Belonging in India*, 2011, 191). But the adivasis strove to reclaim their past, and even contradict the ethics of the majority. The government with the red-tape, court adjournments, parliament ruckus and incumbent candidate was inept to rehabilitate the tribal masses in the lap of

independence. What was achieved was only a 'semblance of egalitarian development' (*The Politics*, 192). Under such circumstances, the era of modernity that would have seen the abolishment of caste-system, hardly reached the tribal lives. The clamour for modernity which the government makes is for reasons other than implementation. Mahasweta emphasizes this note in clearly suggesting it is all done to show a good face to the world, and to keep a shining ledger with developmental projects here and there, whether they were launched or not, is inconsequential:

Within the five years of the plan, all the shoutings, proclamations, legislations etc 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...The current regime beats many a drumroll about harijans in the outside world, but everyone knows the real order-no one cares if all the harijans and untouchables die...But in reality people like Chotti and Chhagan continue to get ground down. These five reigning years are dedicated to the task of making the rich richer, keeping the lower castes and the adivasis crushed under-foot, and, above all, turning those designated hoodlums without portfolios into cannibal gods with police support...renovate India...rewrite the old proverbs. It is the naked who must most fear the thief and the armed robber.

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 241-271)

Mahasweta highlights that even amidst the secular leaders of independence; India still ails from class prejudices and stereotypes, an ailment which is widespread and irremediable. The government officials who are assigned to revitalize India on secular and egalitarian grounds are themselves tainted of class antagonism. The Secretary in the novel pitched as the harbinger of modernity is besmirched of class-difference, "Our

birthright is the caste-system” (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 244). The government appoints a doctor to the villages to peruse the economic development of the area. He is a well-known statistician, but a pedant for he might have learnt how to calculate the downtrodden in other countries, but the situation of the Chotti village is alien to him. He is depicted as one who is determined to do his job without prejudice but can't fulfill his obligation because of his ignorance of the social pyramid that taints the tribal masses areas. Interestingly, this serves as an attack on the government's lack of sensitizing doctors such as these, who are sent to do their job but without proper knowledge to go along with it. Mahasweta observers:

An Indian expert in social economics. He believes theory and statistics, no in the reality of the situation...It is India he hasn't seen...He says the root cause of the entire problem of poverty in India is dependence on agriculture and industry...The government of India always loves these statistics-based paper theories, on the basis of which it is possible to construct completely unrealistic projects-in the implementation of millions of rupees can be given to unsuitable persons...there is no evil intent behind the theory-constriction of an academician such as Amlsh...desire to transform India(without knowing its social pyramid)

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,284-285)

It is only when he is immersed in the social strata of the village, he begins to apprehend the situation. When he is sensitized enough, the man becomes determined to expose the landlords, the Youth league, and other malaises afflicting the adivasis. During his tenure at the Chotti village, the place is met with an unparalleled news which holds promise for their immediate upliftment, 'Gormen made kings out y'all... by the Ordinance of 24th October, 1975,the bonded labour system is at an end, illegal (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 299). In a meeting with the officials to ensure the Bonded labor act which is implemented without obstruction, Amlsh is shocked to hear that the state will ignore this act, "(we need) need realism, not

idealism” (*Chotti Munda*, 299).

It is indeed a shame. The law after much delay is finally constituted to free the tribals from the bonds of landlords. But then no one is willing to implement it owing to caste antagonism. Caste serves as a debilitating impediment. None of the officials feel it is right to execute it. Amlesh is taken aback and condemns, “This is atrocious talk.....they all need psychological treatment...medieval and feudal ideas feed their psychosis. They are like the White racist of the US...Why did the PM pass the act during Emergency knowing it will not be implemented? (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,312).

The plot moves ahead to witness a regime change. Indira Gandhi loses to the Janata Government, and socialism is pitted as its agenda. But Chotti remains a ‘battleground’ with rivaling lords, industrialists, youth leagues and etc who are unwilling to let go of the old system. In the notes to her work, it can be seen that Youth league in fact,

(is an) allusion...to the Youth Congress, a wing of the Congress party under Indira Gandhi. The youth congress, under effective control of Indira Gandhi’s younger son, Sanjay Gandhi, came to be associated with many acts of tyranny and violence during Emergency years (*Chotti Munda*, 378).

The Youth league also includes the lumpen proletariat, which is a term that recognizes the outcasts such as beggars, prostitutes, gangsters, racketeers, swindlers, petty criminals, tramps, chronic unemployed or unemployables, who are unable to better their social station, and continue to remain a degenerated class in the society. In time of crisis, such as one depicted by Mahasweta i.e. Emergency, the lumpen are ideologically channelized to support a cause, and are armed with power to stir chaos and riots. This anarchic unleash of lumpen under the backing of the government is portrayed by Mahasweta through the organization of Youth League. The lumpen form the Youth league as exemplified by Mahasweta in the barbaric personages of Romeo, Pahalwan, and Dildar. These

men are a shindy of henchmen that do the dirty work for the government officials. Through them Mahasweta wishes to explore how far the fruit has fallen from the tree. Gandhi clamoured for equality among the various classes of India, but these leagues in his name are perpetuating an altogether different story:

Tell every landlord-moneylender, we will teach these harijans-God's people-such a lesson in five years that it will take them five thousand years to raise their head again. Remove these harijans, these tribal masses. Let the poor high castes till the fields. If this programme is successful in Bihar, it will work everywhere in India.

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow,256)

Romeo who is a confirmed lecher, a rapist and a murderer has the backing of the state government, the party organization, police and even Delhi. He had lost his manhood, and believes it to be a reason for him to adopt violence for a much higher goal:

I've become Brihannala and I'm doing Arjun's brave work as well...gives a smile Socratic in its wisdom...With the Naxals the government blew off the Law and blew off the Courts. Why? Finish off the Naxals, whoever can. Government wants it. ...the harijan...teach them a lesson...If the government wanted harijan people to get official support, would they have made the law themselves, and then watched their laws become farce, and a circus?

(Chotti Munda and His Arrow,257-262)

In the character of Romeo, one is provoked to see that the tribal masses didn't cause him any harm, yet he is adamant to decimate them. He takes cue from government's own Machiavellian tactics. The way the government is wiping out the Naxals who stand for the cause of the tribal masses, the same way Romeo believes he has the right to ethnically cleanse the villages. To foment trouble, to build anarchy, to accomplish personal vengeance in the name of public welfare, that is the intrigue Romeo yearns for. Akeel Bilgrami arrests this

antagonism and finds that the Nationalism itself was contaminated of it.

In this byzantine network of feudalism, nationalism and capitalism, it is clear that tribal masses are yet to be recognized by the mainstream. Colonialism, a pan-endemic empire, was adopted by the landlords and the capitalist merchants for it augmented their power. They made an effective coalition, which according to Hardiman, “(was) a development and consolidation of system of exploitation by a colonial bureaucracy in alliance with various indigenous classes...these classes ...welcomed the advent of (colonialism) which in so many novel and ingenious ways enhanced their ability to exploit the poor”(*Subaltern Studies V*, 47). In this travail of domination and subordination, the nationalist leaders vouched to protect the cause of the Indians against the colonial enterprise and its marionettes. But once the freedom was established, the devious evasion of the leaders in uplifting the tribals has been most reprehensible.

The peasants, the adivasis, and other low caste masses of India embody a travesty which Mahasweta Devi has vehemently exposed, and actively attempted to rectify. In her magnum opus *Chotti Munda*, Mahasweta hence has reclaimed a tribal history in the labyrinthine system of colonial and postcolonial history. In a fervent allegiance to the cause of the tribal masses, Mahasweta has asserted:

...thus came *Chotti Munda*. In it, so many experiences, I had stored them so lovingly-Chotti is my best beloved book. I had such a great asthirata in me, such a restlessness; an udbeg: I have to write, somehow I have to document this period which I have experienced because it is going away, it is vanishing...it is cultural, it is economic, it is connected with the land, with everything, they want to rob the tribal of everything.

(*Chotti Munda*, xiii)

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