As Human As You Are: When Marangdei’s Brothers and Sisters Speak

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The paper aims at identifying a humanistic approach introduced to tribal studies by Mahasweta Devi in the book *Dust on the Roads*, edited translated and introduced by Maitreyi Ghatak. The review, thus specifically focuses on the tone and nature of articulation rather than the knowledge imparted through the articulation. The argument is construed through vindicating that there is a distinctive difference in which her writings articulate the tribal identity and in the works of other anthropologists, cultural feminists, subaltern scholars etc. Therefore, the review looks into the means used by the author in depicting the agency of the tribal people, however subjugated in the act of identity formation.

Keywords: tribal identity, narrative representations, agency and identity formation, the individual and the universal

The book *Dust on the Roads*, a non fictional work of the critically acclaimed Bengali author, Mahasweta Devi. The book is actually a compilation of most of her activist writings in English published in journals and newspapers including Economic and Political Weekly, Business Standards, Sunday and Frontier. The editor, Maitrayee Ghatak also includes within this volume a few of her significant articles from the large body of her Bengali works translated to English. The content page itself will reveal to those familiar with the activist writings of Devi, which though bereft of the popularity of her fictional pieces still command the socially sentient intellectuals respect. The selection meticulously includes all the important essays and reports which have preoccupied her over the decade of 1980s. What makes the anthology a success is that the articles cover a huge range of issues relating to the deprivation, degradation of life and environment, exploitation and struggles of the labouring poor and underprivileged, the landless and small peasants, sharecroppers, bonded labour and contract labourer and miners in West
Bengal and Bihar. The specific focus, however, is on the tribal life not merely in peripheral existence but also essential to the equilibrium of the Indian society.

The article does not seek to analyze the literary merits of the book as a whole as much as to vindicate a specific contribution Mahasweta Devi has made in her act of creating tribal epistemologies through the ontological considerations of a peripheral existence. There is a distinctive difference in which her writings articulate the tribal identity and in the works of other anthropologists, cultural feminists, subaltern scholars etc. This is not to deny credits to all the valuable documents and discourses available on the tribal issues. But Mahasweta Devi has dedicated a major part of her life to working with and for the tribals. She not only shuns the very prevalent empirical, factual approach to tribes that most academicians tend to follow but also avoids a mere sympathetic attitude appropriate to a victimized entity. What she provides is a humane treatment where she is a human talking about/with/for another human or other humans and not merely a researcher on her rather fascinating subject unlike most researchers and academicians involved in tribal issues.

So that the above mentioned idea does not become a hasty generalization of facts, it becomes imperative to look into the means of writing about tribal life that Devi chooses not to employ. Evidently, in present times tribals are a viable academic option and as V.K. Srivastava (in S.K. Choudhury’s Tribal Identity) says tribals “are at centre of our intellectual discourse” (vii). However in most books, articles and other documents that have been published about tribals even in the recent past, the authors have rather empirically and factually examined the tribes – their population, their habitat, their administrative structure, their customs and habits. Such an objective even clinical examination of the nature of the things in the tribal life has left us with a lot of information analyzed and organized for cognitive understanding about the first inhabitants of the land.

Yet such information has hardly done credit to the tribal identity and alienated the tribals as entities to be observed from the point of view of those in the mainstream. For instance, K.S.Singh in his paper Tribal Perspectives states that “most important development in the field of tribal research over the last 25 years has been the generation of an enormous amount
of data on the tribes which has not only often bewildered but have also provided a deeper insight into tribal formation” (6), we know that this data will not be used for a greater integrity between tribal and nontribal humans. And so as K.S. Singh continues “today we are sharply aware of the complexities, diversities, and variations in the study of the tribal people and are dealing with tribal matters. We have also been able to locate, identify and study specific tribal groups and generate probably the first standardized definitive list of tribes. We have today accounted for 426 tribal groups and including 165 sub-tribes. Our studies of tribal movement based on all India survey have highlighted movements of all types … many tribal economies which are getting integrated with the national market. There are works dealing with environmental issues and the tribals unrivalled knowledge of their environment which environmentalists find fascinating” (6).

A certain kind of academic attitude is reflected in both the inanimateness of hard data and the almost parsimonious acquiring of knowledge evident in the words and phrases like “bewildered”, ”find fascinating” or “locate, identify, study specific tribal groups” ; even the sense as reflected in “we” or “us” being the nontribals, the privileged of the binary, and thus, becoming “aware of the complexities, diversities and variations in the study of the tribal people” or his declaration that environmentalists are fascinated by the tribal’s knowledge about their own forests also vindicate the same: the tribal studies that referred to is all about tribal people being constructed and deconstructed from a nontribal gaze. It will be of as much use to the tribal people as a study on say, the lions of Gir will be of use to the lions at Gir or anywhere else in the world, hence attributing to them a kind of exotic-bestial nature. Hence it will merely aid our nontribal smugness to be augmented after having deciphered some more fascinating tribal mysteries. It will add to the large number of publications that come out yearly about these ethnically diverse beings with an appropriately decorated picture of a tribal woman on the cover page. The breach between the subject position of the tribal people and the knowledge-making processes enabled by the scholars will thus be attenuated and thus contribute to the other hegemonic constructions of the society that renders certain sections of itself to the peripheral and the invisible. In fact, the similar attitude can be traced to the colonial constructions of tribal identities: In her book State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Postcolonial India, Virginius Xaxa states:
Colonial administrators used the term tribe to describe people who were heterogeneous in physical and linguistic traits, demographic size, ecological conditions of living, regions inhabited, stages of social formation, and levels of acculturation and development. The need for such a category was necessitated by a concern to subsume the enormous diversity into neat and meaningful categories for both classificatory purposes and administrative convenience. (2)

Evidently the process and its purposes though related to human demography bear a great deal of resemblance to classifications of species of animals or plant life for facilitating the study of the natural sciences. So this process of dehumanization had apparently been started by the British Imperialists. However, ironically, even Indian mythology bears evidences of such an attitude towards the tribals. To quote again from Xaxa’s work:

Sanskrit and Hindu religious texts and traditions describe tribes in a similar fashion. Bara takes the point even further when he states that the pre-colonial depiction of the tribal people of India as dasyus, daityas, rakshasas, and nishadas, when juxtaposed with mid nineenteenth century Western racial concepts, advanced the aspect of bestiality associated with the tribes.(2)

Unfortunately the attitude, whether a part of colonial legacy or not, continues till the present date. The reason behind such an attitude is well explained by GN Devy in A Nomad called Thief. The fact is that the tribal people with their strong sense of self identity never gave in to their colonial masters: hence as Devy explains “…while the Adivasis kept fighting in the hills and forests, the rest of India was being educated and ‘civilized’ and its self-cognition was mesmerized so totally that when independence came, India started thinking of adivasi people as the primitives who had forever out of step with history.”(Devy, 11) An author who has published on tribal studies even in this twentieth century can afford to write like this “This state of India portrays rich tribal heritage and is the homeland of 62 tribes….The major tribal concentrations is found mainly in western and southern Orissa. Some of the tribes are ….at different levels of integration or culture contact with the dominant Oriya culture which constitutes the mainstream of Orissa. Thus with such richness of tribal cultures … much
anthropological research is awaited in Orissa”. The point of view of the author bears extreme similarity to what has been often termed as the colonial attitude. Acquiring of knowledge and its consequent articulation may often contribute to the hegemonic act of extraction: and undoubtedly this mode of knowledge-production is still favoured in studies about marginal existences.

It is in this context, that Mahasweta Devi’s book may be regarded as an alternative mode of writing, that by default also becomes the critique of the afore-mentioned hegemonic knowledge producing practice: as Shachi Arya in his book *Tribal Activism: Voices of Protest* states “writing is a pious and noble vocation. She lives what she writes and writes what she lives- a rare synthesis of word and action: documentation of life leading to life and action and vice versa.” (Arya, 66)The three distinctive qualities as identified by Shachi Arya ‘Partisanship’, ‘frankness and outspokenness’, ‘authenticity of description’ of her writing aid her a lot in her goal of representing nothing more or less than the truth in her writings about tribal people.

Moreover she also points the reasons behind such outright marginalization of the tribal people even in the so called academic world. In the chapter (or article) “The Jharkhand Movement”, she clearly states that:

Behind this …lurks the age old belief that *India means India of the caste Hindus*. We do not know the tribals nor do we care to know them. In the past, possibly even today, a large majority of the educated have a stereotyped image of tribals, promoted largely by films and plays. Tribals on the screen or on the stage inevitably wear feathered head-dresses if they are males and flowers if they are women, wear scanty clothing – near nakedness is compulsory- just to emphasize their innocence. And lastly the typical dance and music. Not that these are not part of tribal life but certainly not in the way they are shown. This synthetic image ….exists even in the minds of the educated people. (Devi 105)

In fact the apathy against accepting tribals into the main fold of the society emanates as much from laymen, as from the “scholars” involved in “tribal studies”. And the intellectuals or the scholars naturally bear more responsibility in such cases of ignorance and misrepresentation of facts or they are supposed to be very enlightened individuals with the job of enlightening others.
But their lack of social, moral, and humane responsibility is quite apparent. In the book, Mahasweta Devi narrates an anecdote in this regard that completely clarifies the attitudinal defects of the academicians involved in tribal studies and what led to this steady process of dehumanization of the tribals in the nontribal gaze. She writes:

I remember sometime ago, there was to be a conference of tribals somewhere in Medinipur district. When a suggestion was made to someone quite learned and otherwise enthusiastic to attend the conference he replied “I am not interested in meeting synthetic tribals who wear sophisticated clothes and attend conferences”. Another young person cultured, very widely read and working in a position of high responsibility, himself a writer told me about tribals. They are urban and sophisticated to the point of being unreal”. She further disclaims these fellow authors and scholars in blandly stating that their concept of “….tribals …wait[ing] for ages forgoing education, wearing loin clothes, bows and arrows in hand, in their “unadulterated” and “unsophisticated” form, completely alienated from the mainstream of life, in the hope that someday people like them would have the time and inclination to go and meet them? (Devi 105)

So in all her articles about tribals Mahasweta Devi attempts to disrupt the process of dehumanization of the tribals, to make people discard their fascinating and bewildering notion about them and more importantly to bring together the two objectives of preserving tribal identity and of normalizing it or humanizing – a task that most scholars and researchers have avoided for a long time. This does not however, entail that she idealizes the tribal life, presenting a romanticized naivety and valorized glory to create fictionalized narratives. The aim is to articulate reality in each of these pieces. Mahasweta Devi is completely realistic in her portrayal of the tribal people. For her, they are human beings, with various socioeconomic and political problems, chiefly caused by a globalized urban solipsism, but surviving nonetheless. She defends them as one among them not as their benevolent protector. In that sense, her vision of tribal life may be said to be in conformity with the deceased human right activist and writer Dr. Balagopal whose incessant struggle for preservation of tribals’ right to life, including basic human rights, have been of remarkable merit, ceasing at his early demise.
So in this book, the foremost concern of Mahasweta Devi is to destroy the “synthetic image” of the tribals; and she appears to be quite successful in this regard not just for the tribals in eastern India, at least for time being. As she unearthed from the clays on the roads of Palamau, Singbhum, and Medinipur tales of human lives, tribes cease to be fascinating specimens of ethnical diversities. She shows that their epistemic and ontological situation in the scheme of things is hardly any different from the nontribals. It becomes imperative for her to use her words to rightfully establish tribal identity as a part of humanity and to wreck the illusion of superiority among the nontribals of the human race- an illusion that is age old and too deep rooted. So when Mahasweta Devi begins to deconstruct stringent traditions and constricted ideologies, she begins when it all began, that is, from the past. Many authors are only interested in the origin of the tribals and their history only to understand their customs and practices; others do not go beyond lamenting the fact that how tribals have since the ancient times been portrayed as evil and frightening or been completely ignored. But Mahasweta Devi takes her own stance, not only demanding reorganization of tribal history but also suggesting ways of restructuring historical materials so that adequate justice is done to their past. In her book *The Tribal Language and Literature: The Need For Recognition*, she states, “My contention is that history should be re-written acknowledging the debt of mainstream India to the struggles of the tribals in the British and even pre-British days. The history of their struggles is not to be found only in written scripts but in their songs and dances, folktales, passed from generation to another. So much of it has perished with the people who have died …. But so much still exists.” In fact it should be mentioned here that she not only advises but also does her own bit. Her novel, *Aranyer Adhikar*, recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award provided a moving but factually correct account of the Munda rebellion against the British in the 19th century along with the life and struggles of the rebel leader, Birsa Munda. Though some have criticized her work to be fictional it is this novel that made widely well known the contributions of Birsa Munda as a freedom fighter, hitherto merely a name in a small paragraph titled the Santhal rebellion in most history books.

Here, too, when she records the contemporary times, she makes sure that the names of the new tribal heroes and martyrs are recorded for the posterity. She tells us stories of Chuni Kotal, the first woman graduate among the Lodha Savaras and Kheria Savaras of West Bengal who unable to bear the pressures of the insensitive civilized world eventually committed
suicide, or Saradaprasad Kiusku, a poet who lived and died without ever being officially honored either for his literary activities or for his social activism to empower his fellow tribal people. Equally important in her articles are the stories of Boodhan, a young Sabar with wife and family who was beaten to death by the police as a part of the political conspiracy but whose death almost led to a tribal movement for redressal and justice or that of Mangru, who became facially paralyzed under torture because he dared to protest against hereditary bondage labour but who still continues his activism undeterred. These names become the metonyms of the act of struggle in the greater praxis of tribal identity formation. That she is diametrically different in her approach to tribal studies is very well depicted by this. Researches pertain mostly to objectifying tribal practices and glorifying their survival techniques. But Mahasweta Devi’s aim is to demystify tribal life and lay bare their humane credentials. Her goal to bring them at par with their mainstream counterparts, but not subsume them with more authoritative identities is evident.

Therefore, Mahasweta Devi is not being merely affective and omitting the factual portions that are must for anthropological works. Nor can we call her works merely activist writings because they do replenish our knowledge about tribals. And she does meticulously go through a lot of research work like her academically qualified counterparts. The thing is she presents them in a very different manner- so that it seems that she is talking about her fellow creatures, as human as her and not some fascinating specimens of biodiversity. She enumerates the variegated amount of problems the tribals face- financial strains, political disruptions, socio-cultural marginalization and even ecological exploitation but not in a cold objective manner required in a scientific analysis of say, the reasons for extinction of a certain rare species of birds. So an academically sound anthropologist with highly informative publications would merely identify the problems, its causes and consequences. Mahasweta Devi would do the same, but only humanize the issue further so that we can appreciate the problem as of our own concern and not something the remote. For example, an article on tribal rights to land and forest and their encroachment by various illegal but powerful elements will only identify the technical drawbacks: the restrictions on selling tribal land that cause hindrances for the tribal in entering the free land market, the poor agricultural development and poor economic status of the majority of tribals leading to the demand for land amongst tribals, and the subsequent causes undervaluation of tribal land. It may also identify the ill effects of all-consuming urbanization:
due to ever increasing industrial, mining and development activities, the tribal lands are in great
demand among the non – tribals. This makes them easy victims of corruption by government
officials, police personnel etc. who frequently engage in a conspiratorial nexus to isolate tribal
lands by manipulating the law and their custodians. However, such words hardly depict the cruel
reality in tribal life or the insensitiveness of the administration who are simply not interested in
resolving such issues. For Mahasweta Devi, it is more than merely a subject for a paper. She
decides to bring in a human face to make the situation more fathomable for those unaware of
such kind of lives. In her article Land Alienation among Tribals the rampant social evil of
breaching tribal rights is very well portrayed in the story of Angu and his family who for two
generations have trying their utmost to get back 32.99 acres of their ancestral land that had been
tricked out of their possession by forged papers. Even the High Court ruling in their favour
which was declared after a long delay during which Angu’s family ran pillar to post (Angu even
lost his BSF job in the process) did not help. Forcibly evicted from the land, even after numerous
police complaints and applications of redressal to seats of authority, they stare at nothingness. So
again Mahasweta Devi manages to get across to us the blatant violati
ons of law faced by the
tribals without delving into statistics and surveys unlike other researchers.

Another such example can be from the subject of ecological interdependence of the
tribals on the forest. The problem of deforestation especially in tribal areas is identified by most
ecologists and environmentalists and more or less all of them have the same take: they identify
ecological problems, suggest conservation techniques to preserve forests and protect tribals in
the most scientific, rational manner possible that hardly sensitzes the non sufferers of the
problem to this issue. But Mahasweta Devi sees the depletion of natural resources as the cause of
trauma for men and women who are forced to leave their loved ones and their homes to look for
livelihood in the hostile urban forest of concrete. In her article, Contract Labour and Bonded
Labour, the seriousness of the situation comes out in an authentic manner in the folk song that of
a distressed mother forced to part with her teenage daughter:

    My Bali could live on forest fruits
    My Bali could live on jungle roots ;
    But trees, alas, do not saris grow
    So to the Bhatta* my Bali had to go
    My Bali had to go (Devi 34)
*(A bhatta is a brick kiln where young girls are made to work in terrible conditions under ruthless employers who go to the extent of exploiting them sexually.)*

Evidently, the urban-scientific nature of understanding global-warming vis-à-vis capitalism is simplified into the quotidian and the more understandable by tribal knowledge. Devi does not report it as fascinating but as knowledge gained through day-to-day living. In the article, “Back to Bondage”, the forest and its resources being of tremendous interest as sources of sustenance to the tribals which becomes completely evident in the line: “One old man quietly said “Jab jangal giya, hum log bhi mara” (which means – when the jungle goes, it’s the end of us.”(Devi 9)

Besides through these articles, it becomes evident that Mahasweta Devi does not make the tribal identity symptomatic of victimization, unable to take assert self-protection. Most authors have a vaguely sympathetic turn of mind and is apparently desirous of helping them. Take for instance her expounding on the tribal economy: while several governmental documents and empirical sources claim that the traditional system of tribals is now a thing of the past and one has to find out alternative models of tribal development that would help them to strengthen their socio-economic, cultural and political base and also protect their right of self determination” in research papers appear reflecting a hegemonic attitude. Hardly a few people can bother about speaking of tribal self sufficiency; many cannot even acknowledge the idea that tribal people themselves have the potential to empower themselves if not deliberately harmed by the mainstream elements. But Mahasweta Devi trusts that“…..development can only be ensured if people are involved at every stage, from planning to implementation.” And as Shachi Arya states

Mahasweta is associated with about two dozens voluntary tribal welfare organizations. She is convinced that it is through these and such other organizations that the tribal can be really awakened into standing up on their own seeing things with their eyes and taking charge of measures that can provide redressal to their grievances. She laments the lopsidedness, unimaginativeness and also insensitivity of governmental policies and priorities, and feels that much could have been achieved within the limited available resources, only if the central government was a .little less interested in squandering money on seminars and workshops that signified nothing, and a little more interested in easing that money out to the needy who could work wonders with that since locally and
sporadically they have been able to achieve that with meagre aid coming from the voluntary organizations. (71)

The paper does not argue that the work is of highest academic competence but chooses to identify and validate an approach taken by the author. Compared to the works of academically qualified anthropologists and scholars of social sciences, Mahasweta Devi’s take on tribal studies has its own faults. For some, her reach may seem limited concentrating only on the tribal people of Eastern India i.e. West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa. Her work may be criticized on the grounds of lacking formal terminology required in the field of anthropology and branches of social sciences dealing with tribal studies. In fact her fictional works have been criticized the other way round- for being merely chroniclers of social reality. Yet she has been involved with tribal life in a way very few mainstream people had the sense to. All her writings reflect her determined support for the marginalized sections of the society like the tribal people, as Maitreyee Ghatak the editor of the book writes, “especially the little known, little lauded struggles which are part of everyday life and don’t necessarily find a place in history books or the mainstream media.” And in a society that only pretends to be liberal and democratic, that is a tough if not a brave act, having introduced along with a few others a new more humanistic way of looking at the tribal life. A few more contemporary authors are following her school of thought. GN Devy is one of them, so inspired by Mahasweta Devi’s way of thinking, in fact dedicates her acclaimed work A Nomad Called Thief (2006) to the older author as the one who brought her to the tribes. As for the tribal people, to whom she is Marang dei or elder sister, her works are a mode of tribal identity formation which respects their human agency.
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