

# Dismantling Stereotypes: Mahasweta Devi's Tribal Representation in '*Chotti Munda and his Arrow*'

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## Abstract

Tribal representation in varied forms of literature is either extremely utopian or dehumanizing. In every expression, it seems to move away from the real state of tribal existence. Even, seemingly radical representations loom up towards victimhood and consequent tribal resentment, which quite often, is an outcome of external intellect or (non-tribal) forces. Further, it is characterized and differentiated based on social positioning i.e. whether the person who represents or speaks for them is either insider or outsider. In either case, it is characterized by prevalent stereotypes. Authentic representation of a subaltern group would refer to organic portrayals projected through the employment of organic mechanisms by an organic intellectual. The present research paper exploring nuanced tribal representation in '*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*' sets out to show how Devi dismantles prevalent stereotypes hitherto involved in tribal representation. Particular focus is on how Mahasweta Devi blurs the distinction involved in social positioning.

**Keywords:** Tribal Representation, Dismantling Stereotypes, Organic Intellectual, Organic Mechanism

## Introduction

Fine arts such as drawing, painting, sculpture, graphic arts and photography are depictive. They directly denote the object being depicted. A picture depicts what it is a picture of. Representation, on the contrary, connotes a range of possible symbolic significances. Robert Hopkins in his article Explaining Depiction differentiates between these two processes. He states that:

'A painting may depict a woman who in turn represents the sufferings of Russia, but it does not depict it. Similarly, a painting may depict a lamb, and the lamb in turn represents the man Christ, but it does not depict the man Christ but rather represents it' (Hopkins, 1995, p. 426).

Though literature is a representational art, it does not necessarily replicate real-life phenomena. Rather it identifies reality through manifest meaning that enables readers to make sense of something that is not printed on the pages of a book. The manifest meaning under question can be accessed through a deep probe into the literary work's intricate narrative style, themes employed, character construction and the language used. Manifest meaning extracted by an individual reader, however, cannot be universalized as normative for it varies with readers' understanding, interpretive abilities and formal training. Hence, representation has always been subjected to its fidelity to the object being represented.

This issue of fidelity appears more prominently in the representation of a subaltern group like *adivasis*. It is primarily because there has been a multiplicity of paradoxical tribal images. Civilizations have so far perceived tribals paradoxically as either the happiest people enjoying the purity of life in the company of nature or brute killers and cannibals occupying inaccessible forests and hills. Parallely, they are viewed as humble creatures to be used and exploited by being least privileged in the existing social ladder. Reference to these diverse tribal images is necessary to bring about a realistic picture, but all of them could not be simultaneously accommodated in a single piece of writing. As a result, available tribal representations appear fragmented. Hence, civilians, hardly familiar with the comprehensive tribal history and experiences of exploitation and suffering, perceive tribals as people at odds with the government's development projects and social welfare schemes designed for their betterment.

In the absence of comprehensive tribal representation

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capable of providing collective tribal experience, the role of the intellectual who takes it upon himself to provide collective tribal experience to the public is of utmost importance. The persistent belief is that outsider (diku/non-tribal) writers having limited access to tribal life and culture would not come up with authentic portrayals. Insider or tribal writers, on the contrary, would fabricate true images based on lived experiences. But due to a lack of formal education and the absence of script to tribal languages hardly a tribal becomes capable enough to represent himself or his clan in forms of expression designed by the civilized outsiders. Even if a tribal attains mastery over the civilized forms of expression, one stands the risk of favouring his or her superiority by being educated, civilized and more knowledgeable than other members of the clan. It is argued that the moment a subaltern is capable of speaking for oneself, he or she is no longer a subaltern. Representational capability is attained only when one surpasses and survives the historical experience of suffering. The tribal reality for such a person is the past, not the present. Both tribal and non-tribal at this moment of expression are equally ignorant and unaware of the real tribal experience.

It is the prerogative of an intellectual who sets out to represent a subaltern group to appear normative. This involves the risk of favouring one's Eurocentric attitude, patronizing gaze and understanding which quite often is very close to imposition. Such an attitude aligning with the prevalent subject of privilege ends up preserving the privileged thought as normative. Even, champions of the downtrodden like Foucault and Deleuze happen to do so in an interview published as 'Intellectuals and Power' (1977). Both of them after coming out of prison proclaimed that representation is no longer needed because people can speak for themselves. Their declaration goes:

'Representation no longer exists; there is only action-theoretical action and practical action which serves as relays and form network' (Deleuze & Foucault, 1977, p. 207).

It implies that subalterns are no longer ignorant and know exactly what they want. Perhaps, they are more eligible to speak and express their demands in a more natural way than an outsider intellectual would do. Responding to this pseudo normative thought Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' comments that both Deleuze and Foucault are preserving the subject of the West. Because their understanding of both Maoism and the Workers' movement seems incomplete. The Maoism they talk about is not original but a French version of it and while referring to the workers' struggle, they seem to neglect the global division of labour, its governing ideology and consequent class construction. The formation of a class is never natural. It

is based on subtly operating ideology and shared socio-economic conditions of the people's existence (Spivak, 1988, p.70). The better the economic base more the class mounts higher in the existing social hierarchy.

Representation of the subordinate class in this context is near the everyday dealings with its counterparts. These dealings are subjected to temporal moment. If not documented, they vanish. Particularly, the tribal experiences recorded in their oral traditions change as they get transmitted to generations down the line. The tribal social world is being polluted in every sphere. The root cause of this is the revamping of tribal economic stability through an influx of development projects and industrialization in the name of tribal welfare. Consequent displacement and land alienation further disturb them. It in its turn leads to cultural pollution. Ramsharan Joshi in his book 'Tribals: Islands of Deprivation' (1984) laments the loss of cultural purity. He states that:

'Invasion of tribal areas by the representatives of the machine age has shattered the sound, the music, the rhythm of nature which have been synonymous with life for them' (Joshi, 1984, p. 2).

Tribals unable to recognize subtle forms of cultural invasion had no resistance to it. This encounter between fully clad and half-naked people is similar to a conflict between colonists and primitive man. British colony in India for example, was hardly a military activity. Rather it involved the process of cultural colonization. They set out to colonize the minds of Indians. Similarly, tribals despite continuous rebellion for their rights to land and labour have been continuously evicted from their homeland. The overt experience of displacement can be stated by some people being evicted and several acres of land acquired. But it seems difficult to document the psychological turmoil and the inner forces that led to rebellion. This appears to be the real challenge in the representation of subaltern groups.

In this context the questions like: can the real tribal experience be documented/ represented in a literary work? Who (insider or outsider) should represent it? How could the problem of representation be resolved? form the core of the discussion below.

### Problems of Representation

The answers to the questions raised can be found in the writings of Mahasweta Devi and Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak. Devi seems to fabricate the fictional tribal world through journalistic interrogations and studied political championships. The uniqueness of her writing lies in its exploration of collective tribal experience. It encompasses discussion of issues as varied as exploitative bonded

labour, atrocities tribals meet in economic and social spheres, deprived state of women, class combat and tribal solidarity with Naxalites. Her fictional characters like Doulati, Droupadi, Mary Oraon, Chotti and many others are as dynamic and culturally grounded as the real tribals. Their dynamism is asserted by the fact that they are linguistic constructions of real people. In 'Chotti Munda and His Arrow' (1980) Devi records the struggle of tribal and lower castes with upper caste *dikus*. However, it is not a mere fight between classes but rather involves a deep probe into the subaltern consciousness of deprived masses. She uses a direct narrative style supplemented with collective tribal experience gained through journalistic expeditions and conscious political activism to dismantle prevalent stereotypes.

The lower caste solidarity is yet another form of resistance that Devi explores in her fictional writing. Union of Munda *Adivasis* and outcaste people exemplify the rise of subaltern consciousness. Despite attempts on the part of landlords to 'divide and rule' both tribal and outcastes- *Dusads, Ganjus, Chamars'* etc. accept Chotti Munda's leadership irrespective of racial and cultural differences. This lower caste solidarity stimulates the formation of the class of '*lumpen proletariat*'. Such a union transcends narrow divisions of caste, race and religion to make this combat universal. The combat between *Adivasis* and *Dikus*, therefore, does not remain a mere fight for the land holding, daily wages or bonded labour specific to the region being represented but forms a part of the sequential development of multiple streams of resistance viz. freedom struggle, class struggle, worker's struggle, identity politics, struggle against capitalism and so on. Not only the streams of resistance are multiple but also the ways of resistance. This multiplicity can be identified in the character construction of Chotti Munda. He appears as a figure of historical continuity from *Ulgulan* to the emergency and post-emergency. Chotti occupies the tribal world as heir of Brisa and Dhani Munda. His heroism and visionary leadership characterized by the greatest archery skills, possession of a spellbound arrow, acquisition of land, refusal to bonded labour and solidarity with Naxal boys' project his stature so dynamically that goes way beyond the stereotyping of the tribal figures. Chotti thus becomes a symbol of tribal aspirations.

In '*Can the Subaltern Speak?*' Spivak illustrates the two senses of representation.

'One is "representation" as "speaking for", as in politics and representation as "re-presentation" as in art or philosophy' (Spivak, 1988, p.70)

In its first sense, representation is more a part of political activism while the second refers to its symbolic and aesthetic aspects. Representation in both of its paradigms,

however, is never flawless. According to Spivak, the experience of the subaltern cannot be authentically represented with the tools and vocabulary used within the Western context. It would naturally end up silencing the voice of subalterns. As an example, we can cite the propagation of a narrative about the codification of the Hindu Law of *sati* that 'White men are saving brown women from the brown men' (Spivak, 1988, p.92). White men here not only attempt to save brown women from brown men but also promote the creation of colonized others against which whites can present themselves elaborately as more civilized and culturally superior.

Within the postcolonial nation state representation (in the both sense 'of representation and re-presentation) of subaltern groups is equally problematic. In most cases, non-tribal/ Elite Indians taking a political stand for the protection of the rights of 'tribal other' implicitly asserts the other's incapability to speak for self. The tools and vocabulary he or she happen to use for the act are alien to those for whom the battle is being raised. *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (1985) (Save Narmada Movement) started and led by Medha Patkar to oppose the construction of *Sardar Sarovar* Dam on the Narmada River and instigate the rehabilitation of over 2.5 lakh population, who were to be evicted from their native land made her the national champion of downtrodden. The particular agitation in its varied forms however was not a direct outcome of tribal thought. On the other hand, tribal movements led by tribal leaders usually for the rights of forest, land, labour and water had the greater impact. Some notable attempts *MalPaharia* Uprising (1772), *Koli* Uprising (1873) *Santhal* Rebellion (1885) led by Sidho-Kanho Murmu and *Munda* Rebellion (*Ulgulan*) (1899) led by Birsa Munda have gone down in legends. Being led by tribal heroes these uprisings had successfully mobilized tribal unity. Even though these uprisings were ruled out by powerful and cunning state imaginaries, they challenged the state policies designed to protect the interests of capitalist industrialists.

Devi by lining up Chotti in the tradition of resistance opened by Birsa and Dhani Munda maintains historical continuity of resistance. Continuity here implies possessing capabilities to initiate active resistance against contemporary challenges viz. internal colonization, problems aligned with globalization, fluctuating political horizon and maintaining distinct tribal identity in the post-colonial era of cultural homogenization. Devi asserts Chotti Munda's capability to handle newer challenges by making him get acquainted as spokesperson of the tribal with an economist appointed by the Central Government to ensure tribal welfare. Thus, she dismantles the stereotypical image of a tribal hero as either a mute sufferer or a violent killer by combining both Moderate



and Radical figures of social reformers like Gandhi and Bhagat Singh in his multifaceted persona.

Even she exposes the 'double bind'<sup>1</sup> with which the tribal subjects are treated in the postcolonial nation-state. Scholars and activists view them either as victims of modern state imaginaries in need of protection or as primitive savages to be civilized through civilizing missions viz. education, development projects and welfare schemes. In this context, *Adivasi* politics is interpreted as Uday Chandra states 'dramaturgy of postcolonial tragedy or triumphalism' (Chandra, 2014, p.15). Playing the victim creates room for sympathetic scholars and activists to speak for them while fitting the savage slot offers the possibility to remake and assert their tribal identities and use their ethnic values as weapons for resistance. Latter also indicates the possibility of two distinctive thought processes at work within the *Adivasi* social organization. The older generations prefer ancestral wisdom and deity worship whereas the younger ones, at odds with ancestral ways, are attracted toward Maoist activities flourishing in the tribal belt. It offers instant solutions to their problems as well as provides opportunities for both young girls and boys to get into alternative careers and interclan marriages. They prefer modern comradeship informed by modern education that facilitates a modern lifestyle.

Artistic representation of *adivasis* by elite or non-tribal artists often promotes idealism characterized by liberal social structure and eco-friendly living in village dormitories. It is a common belief that tribals prefer to live life rather than planning it. A tribal would never be conscious enough to subscribe to a couple of life insurance policies or to collect an emergency fund so that his or her life in the future will be secured. Their life as Arun Joshi puts it in the novel 'The Strange Case of Billy Biswas' (1971) is characterized by "a lot of drinking, singing, dancing, and love-making" (Joshi, 1971, 45). The idealist projection of the tribal world in the novel goes to the extent that Billy Biswas, a highly successful person living in the capital of India, disappears mysteriously to embrace tribal life. During his encounter with a narrator, Billy justifies his departure again with idealism. He states that:

"Nobody here is interested in the prices of food grains, or new seeds, or roads, or elections and stuff like that. We talk of the supernatural, violent animals, dance, and singing. And we talk, I am afraid, a lot about women and sex" (Joshi, 1971, p. 83).

Such romantic and utopian projections of the tribal world in canonical fictional works fabricate public perception through incomplete tribal experience.

The representation of the tribal world by insiders also has certain restrictions. Artistic representation as in

painting or literature does not imply mere reference to cultural ethos and traditions. Specifically, within the post-colonial nation-state, re-presentation should be able to authoritatively convey the pros and cons of interactions of half-clad tribals with fully clad civilized counterparts. To verify the authenticity of tribal portrayals by insiders it is necessary to refer to the writings of Narayana, the author of '*Kocharathi*' (2019) and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, the author of '*Adivasi Will not Dance*' (2017). *Kocharathi* is considered to be the first tribal novel of India. It depicts the life of *Malayarayar*- a tribal community inhabiting the pre-colonial Travancore State, in the Western ghats near Pathanamthitta, Kottayam and Idukki districts of Kerala. At large it is a simple story of love, despair, destitution and reversal of fortune entangled within the tribal customs and rituals. Beyond this, it also narrates the instances of atrocities, extortion and looting of tribal folk by upper caste money lenders, merchants, forest officers and priests of temples. The modules of civilizing mission viz. education and conversion to Christianity are at play. The novel by and large is an engaging account of tribal customs, rituals, and customary obligations along with conflict between older and newer generations. In short, it is an engaging account of tribal aspirations, opportunities, and challenges leading to victimization.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar on the contrary, in the short story collection '*Adivasi Will Not Dance*' consciously tracks subaltern consciousness and makes his character Mangal Murmu speak against land alienation and tribal displacement in the name of development. Mangal Murmu is a performer in the troupe appointed to perform *Adivasi* dance in an inaugural function of the Thermal Power Plant which has displaced *adivasis* from their land. He refuses to perform in front of the President of India:

"We Adivasi will not Dance anymore"- what is wrong with that? We are like toys- someone presses our on button or turns a key in our backsides and we *Santhals* start beating rhythms on our *tamak* and *tumdak*, or start blowing tunes on our *tiriyo* while someone snatches away our very dancing grounds. Tell me, am I wrong? (Shekhar, 2017, p. 170).

Such individual attempts, however, prove to be mere verbal cliché, because it is the outcome of individual anguish rather than concrete political activism strongly supported by an ideology. Similarly in his novel 'The Mysterious Ailment of Rupy Baskey' (2014), Shekhar depicts the psychological turmoil of the central character. Rupy Baskey an uneducated tribal girl after marriage moves into a town. Exposure to a relatively modern stage of living makes her mysteriously ill. She considers herself unworthy of an educated husband who symbolizes superiority and power. The mysterious ailment suggests

the internalization of inferiority in the 'collective unconscious'<sup>2</sup> from which tribals have not yet recovered.

This comparable discussion entangles us in the web of positioning. We are confronted again with the similar question of whether insider or outsider is fit to authentically represent/ re-present the subaltern either politically or artistically.

### Organic Intellectual

The question raised above could be answered by going beyond positioning. It is stated that an organic intellectual (whether insider or outsider) equipped with organic mechanisms will come up with authentic representation. Organic mechanisms under question generally originate through the 'ethical singularity' defined by Spivak as 'neither mass contact nor engagement with the common sense of the people' (Spivak, 1993, p. xxv). Rather it involves a reciprocal relationship between the intellectual/ speaker and oppressed/ respondent in terms of responsibility and accountability. Expected reciprocity can be formed based on a commitment to the authenticity of both parties irrespective of differences. It is a 'secret encounter' where everything is transparently revealed. This can be achieved with conscious political activism enumerated through factual journalistic interrogations and informed literary representations. Mahasweta Devi's tribal portrayals in this way are supported by both political activism and her engagement with specific individuals.

Devi's writings open up the structure of impossible social justice. She does so by creating premise for collective political struggle that emanates from her encounters with specific singular figures termed as organic intellectuals. Even, she promotes her literary characters as 'organic intellectuals'. According to Spivak,

'When the subaltern speaks in order to be heard and get into the structure of responsible resistance, he or she is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual' (Spivak, 1995, p. xxvi).

Authentic subaltern portrayals thus involve reciprocity. It also requires union of postcolonial and Organic intellectual. The representation that culminates out of this bond brings forth authentic portrayals informed by factual records and supplementing political struggle. Organic intellectuals involved in this process become omniscient and omnipresent agents of postcolonial intellectuals. Hence, his or her writing either journalistic or literary goes a way beyond typical stereotyping. Mahasweta Devi happens to be one such intellectual.

By way of example, I would like to refer to two of her character constructions i.e. Mary Oraon and Chotti

Munda from her story 'Hunt' and the novel 'Chotti Munda and His Arrow' respectively. They are embodiments of individual courage and collective tribal consciousness. Resistance of these two characters originates through tribal ethnography. Mary Oraon, the central character in the story shoots a *Tehsildar* to death on *Jani Parab* Day (a Women's hunting festival celebrated every twelve years) and gets into the structure of responsible resistance. He was shot dead because he was toying with the idea of having intercourse with her. Devi's literary writings accommodate the real stories of real people. In a conversation with Gayatri, Spivak Devi states 'I know that area like the palm of my hand. I have seen the person I have called Mary Oraon. Every event narrated within that story is true (Devi, 1995, p. xxvii). Yet, it is not a mere history but an account of tribal ethnography, their cultural identity and traditions particularly the oral traditions through which Devi reveals something that is not written. It is an attempt at rewriting the tribal history of resistance and social justice.

Chotti Munda being a legendary hero possesses an ancestral spellbound arrow received from Birsa and Dhani Munda. Dhani Munda an accomplice of Birsa during *Ulgulan* (Munda Revolt) is hopeful that a Munda tribal having the spirit of Birsa will lead tribal folks towards prosperity and peace. He states 'body will die but his Kernal will not perish' (Devi, 1980, p.18). He sees that spirit in Chotti and puts him in the structure of responsible resistance by making him his disciple. The uniqueness of Chotti's character lies in the fact that his voice like that of Birsa and Dhani is not silenced by the intrusion of powerful state mechanisms. He not only abided by the tradition of resistance but also altered the entire tradition by 'individual talent'<sup>3</sup>. It is exemplified through the mobilization and employment of 'cultural soft power. In most cases, Chotti need not get into a direct fight. The aroma built through legendary stories attached to his multifaceted persona is sufficient to get the work done. Chotti Munda counters the power of exploiters through an assertion of tribes' traditional set of skills manifested in spelt arrow, honesty, ancestral wisdom and above all dynamic persona by which he tackles the modern age problems posed by globalization at work. He is feared at the same time respected by money lenders, landowners and government officials alike.

Upper caste landowners and government officials execute their superiority through ideology that ensures that no tribal would ever become rich, save money and acquire land. Chotti opposes this scheme with a counter ideology informed by tribal culture and traditions. Unlike other tribal uprisings, Chotti's resistance seems to be grounded in ideological contentions. He understands that a direct fight against powerful agents of the state would

be futile and therefore, resorts to legal fights backed by ideology. Most importantly Chotti understands the way upper caste landlords, officers and moneylenders think. It is reflected in his attempts to become self-reliant. He never borrows and offers bonded labour. Chotti even suggests tribals become self-reliant by saving money and acquiring necessary skills in handicrafts. As a part of the attempt, he purchases land that dissatisfies the upper classes. For they believe that 'tribals should be kept like specters without any recourse, without any materiality, forever dependent' (Devi, 1980, p.148). Before the battle begins, he makes them mentally prepared to fight. Towards the end of the novel Chotti Munda takes the responsibility of killing Romeo and Phalwan and resolves to offer himself to the police. Despite warnings by SDO, he shoots the target at an archery competition with the arrow given by Dhani Munda and that is how he becomes eternal. Chotti Says 'I had but that one arrow'. (Devi, 1980, p.289). The spellbound mystical arrow symbolizes tribal resistance. Chotti finally forwards the spirit of resistance to generations that follow. Thereby he 'brings all Adivasi struggle into the present, today into the united struggle of *adivasis* and the outcastes' (Devi, 1980, p. 287).

### Organic Mechanisms

The employment of organic mechanisms is yet another facet by which Devi attempts to dismantle stereotypes. Organic here refers to 'not using artificial'<sup>5</sup>. Something that emanates from within, as in organic farming food is produced with the use of fertilizers of plant or animal origin. Similarly, tribals or subalterns should search for stimulants of resistance within themselves. The grounds for this search would be their culture, traditions and social structure. Bow and Arrow, for instance, is one such stimulant used throughout the novel. It is a cultural artefact, a weapon, a magic in one. The spellbound arrow handed down from a generation of Birsa and Dhani to Chotti Munda is a means of resistance. The inheritance of resistance, however, does not get transferred automatically rather has to be acquired by sheer practice. The magic of Dhani Munda's arrow is nothing but practice-*adhyan* and focus on a target. Government officials are well aware of the fact that tribals equipped with bows and arrows is an instance of revolt. Therefore, they have banned Dhani Munda from teaching archery skills to children. Yet, he transfers archery skills to Chotti and Chotti in his turn to other Munda boys. Finally, Chotti transfers the mystic spellbound arrow to the entire clan and makes tribal resistance eternal by bringing it to the present.

Besides projecting her characters as organic intellectuals, Devi exposes patterns of tribal exploitation. Indebtedness and consequent bonded labour were the

prime means of exploitation. "If they once put their thumbprints on paper, they give bonded labour for generations (Devi, 1980, p. 25). It is clear that tribals not having enough storage either of money or food grains usually fall prey to the whims of landlords during draught and instances of natural calamities. They could never repay their debts even after serving as bondslaves for generations. Bondslaves are not treated as humans. And, if a tribal on the pretext of extreme exploitation, resorts to a violent reaction, one was sure to be dead. Nataka King's Manager, for example, refuses food to his bond slave Dukhia by saying 'ye're used to fastin' (Devi, 1980, p.52). When his very existence is threatened, Dukhia in a violent retaliation kills the manager and offers himself to the police, where he is tortured. Many tribals being aware of the fact that police and government officers will work in the interests of the landlords only had changed their faith. They believed that Christian missionaries were a better alternative to the corrupt and disinterested police officers. The manager of the king had treacherously bound the entire *Kurmi* village into bond slavery. On refusal to serve as bond slaves the King orders to set the entire village on fire. Having no one to go for justice, villagers decide to change their faith. It symbolizes the cultural destruction. They are robbed of their homes, forests as well as their cultural identity. A narrative has always been set that tribals are easily excitable. They are known for aggressive retaliation. But nobody understands the circumstances that lead them to aggression. In reality, tribals are peace-loving people. As a result, they resort to the ways of resistance initiated by Chotti Munda. Chotti for them is like a river. As no tribal ritual is complete without a river, nothing happens in tribal and outcaste life without Chotti.

The dream of social justice remains unabated even after Indian independence. Despite the declaration of bond slavery as illegal by the government of India in the ordinance of 24<sup>th</sup> October 1975, it is never implemented. Life for tribals remains unchanged. The democratic government of India formed with the support of rich moneylenders, landlords and contractors would never want to implement laws that are against them. Therefore, Indian democracy for tribals is nothing but another form of colonization, an internal colonization in which British officers and their local agents are replaced by capitalist industrialists, feudal lords and politically protected goons. In this new system, tribals and lower castes no longer inhabit hardly accessible land. They do not practice distinctive ethnic traditions but form a class of unorganized manual labourers who are appointed by contractors and industrialists for menial jobs as varied as cutting trees, making bricks, or working as servants in houses and factories on a very



low wage. They are exploited economically and at times physically. Particularly, women are raped or forced to enter into prostitution. This has to be opposed by organized workers' struggle. Devi promotes it by the formation of a class of 'Lumpen Proletariat'<sup>6</sup> under the leadership of Chotti. It is a class of underpaid workers, notified criminals, and women either raped or kept by landlords. The very formation of this class by its virtue creates a premise for organized resistance. Rather than being merely a mute sufferer, Chotti plans and executes an armed struggle with the oppressors, particularly, the Youth League leaders Phalwan, Romeo and Dildar who had killed four members of tribal and lower caste families and set their houses on fire. Their armed struggle bears a cultural stamp. It displays tribals' knowledge of the forest and skills in operating bows and arrows. Chotti also resolves to save the honour of women. He captures and kills Youth League Leaders in the forest who had gone to abduct a tribal woman named Basmati. Devi justifies this violence because "when the system fails in justice, violence is justified. The system resorts to violence when people rise to redress some grievance, to protest." (Devi, 1980, p. xviii). Similarly, the violence for self-existence on the part of tribals has to be justified. Even, Chotti's solidarity with Naxal Boys suggests his inclination towards violence as a means to live and exist. Yet, he is critical of the kind of fight Naxal boys have started with. He suggests they become competent and equal counterparts of oppressive state apparatuses.

Mahasweta Devi critiques assistance- financial or otherwise- provided either by the government or NGOs for tribal upliftment. She thinks that the government schemes designed for the social and economic development of tribals are based on some academic theories proposed by researchers who are immune to the ground realities. Nothing percolates down to the tribal subjects in a system operating on cut fashion. Everyone including politicians, contractors, and government officers takes their cut of the money sanctioned by the government. And, the development projects established in the tribal land are least beneficial to them. Perhaps, these development projects are the means to vacate the minerally rich tribal lands. The visit of Dr Amlesh Khurana to the Chotti area is one such example by which Devi exposes the hollowness of government schemes. Amlesh Khurana an NRI known worldwide as an Indianist expert in social economics is appointed by the Indian government to design a welfare scheme for the social and economic upliftment of tribals and lower caste populace. As per his study, these people are no longer enthusiastic about their traditional occupations. But surprisingly, they do not know or possess the skills required for any

other job. This plan will turn skilled tribal farmers into unskilled industrial labourers, who would be vulnerable to the whims of capitalists. Karl Marks has always been critical of such alienation by which skilled farmers in their traditional jobs are turned into unskilled industrial workers. This has been one of the ways of exploiting people. In this sense, government schemes favour the interests of capitalists. Just giving money to agents or NGOs would never deliver the desired results. We must involve the tribal themselves in the process and let them take their development into their own hands.

## Conclusions

Thus, Chotti Munda and His Arrow appear as a most powerful narrative that dismantles deep-rooted stereotypes hitherto involved in tribal representation. Through the portrayal of Chotti Munda as a legendary hero, Devi highlights the complexity, resilience and humanity of the tribal experience. Devi's ethical association with singular tribal figures, who in turn operate as organic intellectuals enables her to go beyond a superficial depiction of poverty, exploitation and marginalization. She uses Chotti Munda's journey to reflect broader themes of resistance, self-determination and the enduring legacy of colonialism and post-colonial state oppression. Devi's organic tribal representation supplemented by organic mechanisms not only confronts prevalent stereotypes but also reclaims indigenous identities grounded in their cultural and historical traditions.

## Notes and References

- Double Bind: Double bind refers to how tribals are perceived. They are considered to be either the victims or savages.
- Collective Unconscious: A term proposed by psychologist Carl J. Jung refers to the shared memory of experiences and archetypes common to all members of a particular group. It may contain universal symbols and themes that govern specific behavioural and thought patterns of a clan or group.
- Individual Talent: T.S. Eliot in his essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent' proposed this concept. It emphasizes that true artistic innovations emerge from an artist's engagement with literary tradition. However, such innovation should not be created in isolation. A poet must balance originality with the influence of past works, contributing his share to reshape collective heritage.
- Cultural Soft Power: It refers to a nation's ability to influence others through its cultural assets, values and ideals rather than force. It can be applied to specific tribal heroes or communities within the nation as well.
- Not Using Artificial: It means the use of natural processes or substances. In the case of tribal representation rather

- than using civilized modes of collecting information, the use of ethical journalistic interrogations and organic representation needs to be preferred.
- Lumpenproletariat: refers to a marginalized class in Marxist Theory, consisting of the unemployed, criminals and other socially excluded groups.
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