

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 6, Issue 12, December 2018

www.ijellh.com

Bosudha Bandyopadhyay
Department of English,
University of Mumbai,
Mumbai, Maharashtra, India,
Bosudha.banerjee@gmail.com

Chotti Munda and His Arrow— A Struggle for Identity and Protection of Environmental
Habitat

Abstract

Among the many fictional works of Mahasweta Devi *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* has been translated by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak into English and thus it has received a global readership and critical attention. Though the story revolves around the main protagonist, Chotti Munda, but as we read the novel it unfolds not *a story* about *a Chotti Munda* but a tale about the tribals of India. It is a story which maps the growth of India from British imperialism to independence and beyond with its foreground as the tribal sector which has been unduly exploited over the years by people having vested interests. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* portrays the pathetic predicament of an entire world of tribals who are sometimes referred to as the citizen of a 'Fourth World'. Through the portrayal of the tribal struggle one may witness how the novel has unfolded many ecocritical perspectives which have been interwoven in the entire fabric of the story. Many of the ecocritical concerns like bioregionalism, environmental justice, oikopoetics and ecocide are to be discovered in this novel. There is no doubt that while writing the novel Mahasweta Devi was overtly concerned about the tribal struggle and the exploitation that they have faced, but as Timothy Clark has pointed out, 'ecological problems are seen to result from structures of hierarchy and elitism in human society, geared to exploit both the people and the natural world as a source of profit'. (*Literature and Nature*, 2) Thus while she was writing about the Mundas or Kherias or Gonds or Nagesias she was equally ecologically concerned. Her concern for the environment and the man-nature relationship maintained by the tribals become clear when in an interview with Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak she informs her that just like the Native American 'the Sobors (the hunting tribes) will beg forgiveness if they are forced to fell a tree: You are our friend. I do this because my wife doesn't have any food, my son doesn't have any food, my daughter starves. Before they killed an animal, they used to pray to the animal: the bird, the fish, the

deer.’ (*Imaginary Maps*, ii) Thus Mahasweta Devi understood that the relationship that the tribals share with nature and animal is not based on the greed that is the dominant driving force in this world of globalization.

Key Words- Destruction, Development, Ecology, Environment, Exploitation, Forest, Modernization, Mundas,

Introduction

A prolific writer and social activist, Mahasweta Devi is the author of a large number of novels, short stories and essays which speak volumes for her creative and conscientious writing. She has received her early education in Tagore’s ashramic school in Shantiniketan where she had the opportunity to meet the poet himself at the tender age of four. Winner of Sahitya Academy honour and recipient of Magsaysay award, in addition to many other honours, she has given enduring evidence of her literary talent by enlarging the areas of her creative faculty and actively participated in other spheres of social uplift and reforms as a fearless fighter for the freedom and dignity of the tribal people from the tutelage of the high and mighty of the contemporary society.

Mahasweta Devi has clearly confessed her indebtedness to Tagore and his writings for her creative inspirations. Her profound love of nature and the animals living in the forest was generated and nurtured from her association with Tagore and his school at Shantiniketan. She confesses that the courage to conquer all obstacles for championing a good cause was injected in her through the training she received from the hermitage school of Tagore. She, therefore, feels no hesitation to admit that her attraction for, an interest in, the forest and the foresters was mainly due to an all-inclusive attitude of Tagore which sought to inculcate in the minds of the students this love of nature and man. She says that had she not been in Shantiniketan she could hardly understand and empathize with the untold sufferings of the muted minds of the distressed and the deprived.

‘I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty towards society’ (*Imaginary Maps*, xiii). This is what she says in one of the conversations with Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak. She was according to Spivak instrumental in wiping out the lines of divisions among the tribes as she wants to see them as ‘a united community in India’. She formed the Adim Jati Aikya Parishad (Tribal Unity Forum) in order to achieve her mission. In deed Mahasweta was possessed with an extremely sensitive ‘social conscience’ which urged and inspired her to probe deep into the malady of the tribals in many parts of the

country, though her role as an activist was largely restricted to West Bengal. Mahasweta saw for herself the abysmal poverty and pain, torture and persecution of the tribal men and women. So, the artist in her not only felt and realized their gravity and intensity but also effectively expressed the extent of their inconsolable agony and anguish in the forms of amazing artistic etchings. No wonder all her stories and novels are realistic reflections of the unrelieved and total tragedy to which these unfortunate men and women of the so called low class were victims.

She gradually matured into a master craftsman who could delve deep into human situation and psychology and powerfully portray the most painful condition of a section of society which suffered in silence as it did not have the power to vent its feelings to the rest of the world. But fortunately for them, and for the Indian society that Mahasweta not only stood by them but brought out the enormity of their tragedy through her writings which actually acted as an eye opener to most people of India who were either unaware of this crime against humanity or simple indifferent to their sad situation, ensconced as they were in the privilege of social security and economic stability.

In a sense, therefore, Mahasweta could be regarded as a valiant rebel who has fearlessly exposed the immensity of hate and inhumanity of one section of men against the helpless suffering of another section of men and women who were made to undergo unrelieved misery and suffering inflicted by a richer and more socially and politically powerful class of people. She feels the tragedy of these men with the sense and sensibility of both an artist and activist. Thus she makes her readers realize the utter barbarity of their behavior towards their fellow beings. It is because of this wholesale humiliation and deprivation of a weaker section of the society, Mahasweta felt, that the country's progress as a civilized society has been retarded beyond measure. No wonder Mahasweta has been astounded by the appalling apathy of the successive governments in the State and at the Centre which have callously allowed a system of social and economic injustice to be perpetrated and perpetuated by some perverted people who are fiscally and politically powerful to practice the principle that might— physical or political or financial is the only right which they are pleased to exercise on the lower classes of society at their sweet will. Mahasweta is rightly outraged at the utter absurdity of this attitude of the affluent who have the audacity to take the governmental authority for a ride in order to indulge in acts of anarchy at their pleasure.

Mahasweta, therefore, felt obliged to adopt two roles to combat these long-standing curse of the society, that too in a country which boasts of a human heritage which has always upheld the dignity of men for the real uplift of the nation. In such a situation she thinks that she should and could do something substantial for the society if only she was able to play the roles of both an artist and a social activist. She is confident that both the roles are necessary in order to bring out some measure of fundamental reform in the existing order of the society which is steeped in a malady that needs serious care and concern from both the socially active artists and other intellectual and enlightened people of the country. Being herself a very conscientious and conscious artist, she has fully fathomed the power to portray and expose this deep-seated malaise of the modern society which, in some form or other, may be found in various parts of the country. She has the conviction that with her capacity as a creative artist, she would be able to awaken the minds of men not only in this country but throughout the world to the stark reality of the utter exploitation, persecution and humiliation of the weaker sections of men so that people throughout the globe are not only made aware of these awesome maladies but are encouraged to launch a mighty movement against this menace to the society.

Thus, it is evident that Mahasweta Devi pioneered a new path for herself by her acute observation of, and penetrating insight into, the exploitation of the primitive people in general and in particular of the women, especially of the neglected and distressed class of the tribal society. She has actually enlarged the theme and thought and the scene and setting of her novels dealing with the pestering problems of the weaker section of the society. So her novels are specifically meant to portray the manifold facets of the face of the contemporary society, and in particular of the tribals who are plagued by various problems to which these poverty stricken and oppressed people have become virtual victims. Backed by the vast and varied experiences of her long and eventful career as a creative writer and critique of the injustice inflicted on these hapless people by the higher sections of the society, she has powerfully depicted the deprivation and distress of those in the society who are not only muted but also murdered by the high and mighty who have been constantly reaping the benefits of the ceaseless labour of these lowly exploited people who can hardly give voice to their tales of tragedy. It is for this reason that Mahasweta has deliberately deviated from the beaten track of Bengali novel in her bid to tread new grounds which urgently needed the sympathetic attention of a sensitive creative artist. Fortunately, she has succeeded in getting free from the trammels of the prevalent tradition and innovated a new path to depict a large

domain of the Indian society and their ways of life to which most readers were so long totally indifferent. Consequently, in the choice of subject matter and creation of unusual characters and unfolding of startling often painful situations, she gave convincing and powerful proof of her artistic ability to realize her intended purpose as a novelist which was primarily the exposure of the abysmal poverty, agonizing persecution and exploitation of the dispossessed and the deprived of the Indian society.

The creative springs of Mahasweta Devi have found plentiful expression in a copious corpus of literature which deals with the diverse aspects of life and the varied sections of the society, though his predominant passion as a creative artist was reflected in the portrayal of the tribal society and their peculiar predicament. The insurmountable problems of their lives stemmed not only from their extreme poverty but also from the unabashed exploitation unleashed by some inhuman members of the affluent society. Needless to mention their exploitation was not restricted to mere physical and financial spheres but it inflicted a mortal blow on their mental and moral condition. But Mahasweta from her very personal experience was extremely conscious of, and concerned with these problems and predicaments to which they were perpetually subjected. Needless to emphasize that the exploitation and persecution of these people were perpetrated almost from times immemorial. So Mahasweta felt the need of an organized movement to make them aware of their untold sufferings which could lead them to think of a state of freedom or emancipation in which they could meaningfully manifest their potentiality and power to achieve their objective of tribal emancipation which Mahasweta believed could alone ensure their right to self-determination. As a consequence of this movement, however feeble, the tribals have become gradually aware of their potentialities and possibilities and a state has reached when they are prepared to raise their voice against the perpetrators. It is these tales of suffering and the muted protest of the oppressed which have been dealt by Mahasweta Devi, for she strongly felt, again from her firsthand experience that these exploited members of the society are actually bursting with the desire for the expression of their self-identity.

The Malady of Modernization

Among the many fictional works of Mahasweta Devi *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* has been translated by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak into English and thus it has received a global readership and critical attention. Though the story evolves around the main protagonist, Chotti Munda, but as we read the novel it unfolds not *a story* about *a Chotti*

Munda but a tale about the tribals of India. It is a story which maps the growth of India from British imperialism to independence and beyond with its foreground as the tribal sector which has been unduly exploited over the years by people having vested interests. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* portrays the pathetic predicament of an entire world of tribals who are sometimes referred to as the citizen of a 'Fourth World'. Through the portrayal of the tribal struggle one may witness how the novel has unfolded many ecocritical perspectives which have been interwoven in the entire fabric of the story. Many of the ecocritical concerns like bioregionalism, environmental justice, oikopoetics and ecocide have found more patent and latent expression in this novel. There is no doubt that while writing the novel Mahasweta Devi was overtly concerned about the tribal struggle and the exploitation that they have faced, but as Timothy Clark has pointed out, 'ecological problems are seen to result from structures of hierarchy and elitism in human society, geared to exploit both the people and the natural world as a source of profit (*The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 2). Thus while she was writing about the Mundas or Kherias or Gonds or Nagesias she was equally ecologically concerned. Her concern for the environment and the man-nature relationship maintained by the tribals become clear when in an interview with Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak she informs her that just like the Native American 'the Sobors (the hunting tribes) will beg forgiveness if they are forced to fell a tree: You are our friend. I do this because my wife doesn't have any food, my son doesn't have any food, my daughter starves. Before they killed an animal, they used to pray to the animal: the bird, the fish, the deer' (*Imaginary Maps*, ii). Thus Mahasweta Devi understood that the relationship that the tribals share with nature and animal is not based on the greed that is the dominant driving force in this world of globalization.

Chotti Munda and His Arrow is written in somewhat bildungsroman manner where it explores the growing up of Chotti from a mere boy to a legend. Chotti Munda is the descendant of Purti Munda who came from Chaibasa to Palamau with his wife and children in order to find a place where they could build a small village. But wherever he tried to settle down something remarkable used to take place and thus every time he had to abandon the place and look for a new place. In one instance stone age weapons were unearthed and immediately the land was claimed as the property of the Government. As a result, various kinds of *dikus* (foreigners in tribal language) — 'White-Bengali-Bihari' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 1) started to pour down and therefore the Mundari world started to shrink. Thus, in the very beginning of the story we get to see how the land acquisition by the government

for different purposes not only forced the tribals out of their home but completely exterminated the environment sometimes to extract mica or coal or sometimes to carry out an archeological excavation. Mahasweta has pointed out that the tribals 'help nature to survive' and 'lives in harmony with nature around him' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, xxii). Thus when Purti Munda came from Chaibasha to Palamau to settle down he cleared only the portion of the jungle to make it worth living but unlike his urban counterparts he did not have any intention of financial gain. Belonging to that particular bioregion, the tribals had a sounder knowledge of the ecology of the region and they were cautious of not disrupting the balance of nature. They regarded the forest as their home and kept it like their home.

But Purti Munda was exceptionally unlucky because Chhottonagpur plateau being a mineral rich area wherever he tried to settle he was evicted from that land and soon an industrial area would crop up which disrupted not only their habitat but also the character of nature at large. The consequence of such rampant industrialization is discussed in detail in Mahasweta Devi's journalistic works. Once while visiting the Singbhum area in Bihar she came to know how a factory was polluting the area beyond any measure:

'A visit to Singhbhum was long under contemplation, so the invitation to attend a meeting, or sammelan, of the tribals of Rajenka and other villages were most welcome. The ACC factory of Jhikpani is causing much distress in the locality because cement dust carried by the wind is ruining crops and vegetation.... The approach to Chaibasa was marked by a changing landscape. The field lay barren and grey under layers of accumulated cement dust. The tree looked ghostly, the leaves hanging listless, heavy with cement.' And these 'cement dusts accumulated and hardened by night moisture, kill vegetation slowly. Trees wither, paddy, lentil and jowar plants give up and die, unable to survive in soil hardened by cement dust' (*Dust on the Road*, 58). The plight and disappointment of Purti Munda was thus not only out of the hassle of resettlement, but from the fact that their 'Mundari world' was shrinking with the destruction of the forest which was regularly and compulsively carried on by the 'Whites-Biharis-Bengalis'-people who did not belong to that region and harboured only the motive of gain. The Mundas only wished for a place to settle in, they did not understand the financial gain that can be incurred from the land. The right sense of the term 'home land' was probably understood by the Mundas properly who respected and protected their land as their home.

Chotti Munda was named after a river-the river around which Purti Munda ultimately brought up his little village. Objects of nature are most respected by the tribals and

just as a Hindu boy would be named after a god, Chotti was named after the river which was an important source of their sustenance. Extreme poverty led Chotti's parents to send Chotti to his sister Parmi's in-law's house where he spent most of his childhood under the guidance of the legendary Dhani Munda, the valiant comrade of Birsa Munda. Dhani Munda was a deft archer of his time and this is the specific quality that drew little Chotti towards him. Chotti had an ambition of winning the archery competition at the Chotti Fair and thus he was drawn to Dhani who, he knew, could teach him the skills that are required of a winner. Dhani Munda while tutoring his student sometimes spoke of the great Birsa Munda and his *ulgulan*. Long hours of practice at archery and these little stories and anecdotes on Birsa Munda moulded not only Chotti's skill as an archer but also his mind. Eventually we will see him not only winning mere prizes at the Chotti Fair, but he will be instrumental in winning back the respect from the Munda community on the same ground where the fair is held every year.

The story of *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* is spread over a vast period of Indian history. The story opens when India was not even independent and ends much after the Naxalite movement. And throughout this entire time frame the one element that remains common is the exploitation of the tribals and exploitation and ruining of the ecological balance. This dual exploitation of man and nature is evident in almost all the works of Mahasweta Devi. Devi believes that a creative writer should have a 'social conscience' and a 'duty towards society' (*Imaginary Maps*, ix) and thus she portrays, writes her stories, colours the setting, builds the character in the most realistic fashion possible. The land that once belonged to the tribals is no more their as landowners have come from distant cities and have claimed authority over the land and have changed their Munda identity to bond labourers. When Dhani Munda advises Parmi's father in law to sow pepper in order to make more money, Parmi's father in law replies with indignation:

'T' land belongs to t' Lalas-traders. Given us to farm cos there is no good crop. Soon's they know pepper, they'll take away. We too know pepper grows there. Knowin' we can do nothin'. It's enough that t' rice grows'.

Dhani's proud reply: All t' arable land belongs to t' Mundas and t' Oraons' is strongly opposed and discarded as his nephew points out that everything has changed and now 'All t' land is Diku land- Hindu land'.

(*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 13)

Dhani will obviously fail to understand this because 'he went to all the revolts in the hope that Mundas would establish villages in forest and arable land and farm rightfully and in peace, and that other adivasi groups would do the same' (14) Dhani's participation in most of the tribal revolts suggests that the struggles of the tribals for their land and peaceful farming rights have been going on since time immemorial, but the government has failed them time and again. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* clearly portrays that this exploitation has not ended with the end of British imperialism but rather has taken an ugly turn in the initial years of our independence. The son of the soil thus, is uprooted from their rightful place and has been turned into a mere cog in the giant wheel for profit making. Dikus—the outsiders are now the land owners and it is according to their wish that they have to till the land and it is their wish that will drive their life. The Munda tribal community, on the other hand understands the importance of the jungle, respects it because they know that the jungle can offer them everything that is required to survive. But the dikus fail to understand this because their relationship with nature is not based on mutual love but on the assumption that he is the master. G.H. Toulmin beautifully expresses this sentiment in his book *The Antiquity and Duration of the World*:

'Ask anyone of the undistinguished mass of people, for what purpose everything exists? The general answer is, that everything was created for our practical use and accommodation!...In short, the whole magnificent scene of things is daily and confidently asserted to be ultimately intended for the peculiar convenience of mankind. Thus, do the bulk of the human species vauntingly elevate themselves above the innumerable existence that surround them' (qtd... by Keith Thomas, 1).

For the tribals jungle is 'Our Mother' and learning the jungle well Dhani believes 'ye won' die starvin'. What isn't there in t' jungle?' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 14) Jungle is not even their dwelling place but it is like a mother to them who sustains and nourishes them. The bounty that it offers is not to be exploited but to be preserved. For Dhani, Birsa Munda is the Father Earth or Dharitri Aba who is destined to protect their mother-the jungle. This understanding of the forest and the role of man is in confirmation of oikopoetics, which is a nexus of the sacred, the human, natural and cultural phenomena woven in an integrated relationship. In another instance while tutoring Chotti, Dhani Munda instructs him:

'T' most important thing in archery is concentration... when ye kill, finish with one arrer. Don' make t' prey suffer for nothing' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 14-15).

As Mahasweta Devi has also pointed out that tribals are not anthropocentric in nature rather their understanding of the ecology is remarkable and ‘so when he kills, it is a necessary killing’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, xxii) Again, when Harmu, Chotti’s son, makes a kill, Chotti is amused but he rebukes him for killing a female hare. Chotti considers it as a serious offence and scolds Harmu and makes him understand ‘t’ family of life grows larger wit’ girl animals, girl birds’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,97). Therefore, both Dhani’s instruction and Chotti’s disapproval makes it clear that their empathy towards the animals is manifold, greater than the dikus attitude towards them. They understand the cycle of life where one has to kill an animal for food, but neither are they disrespectful towards the animals nor will they indulge in mindless killings to adorn the walls and floor of their drawing room. The upper class or the ‘kings’ belonging to the Sun-dynasty, on the other hand, are neither responsible towards their tenant nor they are concerned about keeping the ecological balance of nature. The king of Narsingarh has become the ‘forest king’ and is actively associated with ‘the export of leopard –skins, tiger skins etcetra’. Forest laws do not apply to him’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,139). In fact, he goes to the extent of polluting the water of the spring with poison in order to kill more tigers as the ‘price of seven tiger skins has come to twenty-one thousand rupees’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,146).

The tribal community though stamped as unruly and most uncivilized has only taken up their bows and arrows to kill a prey or in extreme situation when they were repeatedly violated and their land was grabbed and they were impoverished without any limit. In a conversation with Spivak, Devi has pointed out that ‘they use weapons but they are not bloodthirsty. They are basically gentle, polite, highly civilized, and this innate blood civilization runs back thousands of years’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, xxii). When Dhani built a straw effigy and asked Chotti to aim at it, Chotti was most surprised:

‘Why s’d I kill humans?’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 18) is his innocent query to Dhani. Dhani who has been a comrade to Birsa Munda knows that at times a *ulgulan* is required to assert one’s rights of which they are regularly deprived. Though a victim of extreme poverty, Chotti has accepted it as a way of life but Dhani reminds him that they only raise their weapon against another human they ‘won’ eat mealie, won’ obey t’ terrorizin’ moneylender, Diku, polis, will occupy arable and settled rural land, will take back t’ right to t’ forest’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 19). Fifteen-year-old Chotti is not aware of the great rebellion spearheaded by Birsa Munda to claim the right of the forest. The very thought of killing another human being is almost alien to him. As Devi has pointed out the tribal lives in

harmony- not only with nature but also 'with human beings, even intruders' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, xxii). They understand the interconnectedness of all living beings, they understand the subtle tie that binds everything together and they never try to disrupt that bond for personal gain. In fact, the concept of personal property is absent in them. They believe that nature has endowed them with all the bounty and it is the duty of human beings to preserve it. Mahasweta in fact has given Chotti's character a civilizing touch as she says:

'...throughout the book you'll see, Chotti is never raising his arrow to kill anyone, he is basically a civilized polite person. If we think of what Gandhi means, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, tribals have it. The way they suffer is because they have a very ancient civilization. They can do it, we cannot. When they do it, one must understand their extreme desperation' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, xxii). In contrast to Chotti's character the character of Lala Baijnath, a caste Hindu seems most uncivilized in his manners and action. Driven by the only motive of exploitation he has almost forgone his essence of being a human being. When Chotti with his skill at the archery started to make his living a bit comfortable the Lala was almost green with jealousy. He was displeased that he could not entangle Chotti's family in the vicious web of bonded labour. He knows that 'adivasis work for incredibly low wages... **They work as they give word.** (Bold is my own) It is very easy to bind the adivasis in debt. If they once put their thumbprint on paper, they give bonded labour for generations' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,32). I have written the words in a bold font in order to point out how deftly Mahasweta Devi has portrayed the characters of both the Lala and the adivasi's in one line. This is the thought of a land grabbing moneylender about the adivasis. Through the sub conscious of Lala Baijnath we witness the innate civilized nature of the adivasis and his capitalistic mentality. In an article, Indian journalist Anil Agarwal writes: 'The first lesson is that the main source of environmental destruction in the world is the demand for natural resources generated by the consumption of the rich (whether they are rich nations or rich individuals and groups within nations) ... The second lesson is that it is the poor who are affected the most by environmental destruction' (Guha & Martinez Alier,3). *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* is a classic example of how not only the natural habitat of the poor is utilized for the benefit of the rich but also how savagely they are exploited to meet this end. The tribals are a part of nature in the truest sense. They help nature to survive and they themselves are as resilient as nature. Unless provoked to a limit they never retaliate. In a discussion with the Pahan (or priest), Chotti says: 'If I teach 'em Daroga will know. An' then he'll say, Chotti Munda trained everyone in archery, they'll start fightin'. They see us fighting whate'er we do. If every Munda did start fightin' wuld they

have lasted?’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 77). The tribals by constitution are more physically strong people but they do not use their might to exploit other people. This also underscores the pattern of nature. As long as the ecological balance is maintained, never does the Earth fail to fulfill human beings with its bounties but only under extreme provocation does it retaliate in the form of natural calamities rendering the man-made world most puny and insignificant.

In *Ecology and Equity*, Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil speaks about the post-independence Indian landscape to this effect:

‘It is a landscape in which the natural world is continually being replaced by a world of artifacts: where trees, shrubs and grasses are giving way to plantations and crop fields, roads and buildings; where rivers are being increasingly impounded with waters diverted through underground tunnels to turn giant turbines or merely being disciplines to flow along paths straight and narrow; where old wetlands are being drained and new ones created in the form of waterlogged fields’. (1)

In this changing landscape of India the tribals are losing their ground, their home. Chottonagpur being a mineral rich area has seen development in the form of Industrialization and railways also run there. Chagan, an outcaste Hindu puts it: ‘Railway trains running on the other side, the soil rich in uranium and monazite’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 297). Development is coming but not for these poor but only for the benefit of businessmen who are privileged to take its share from nature in the form of minerals. It seems that the Government is oblivious to them as it is oblivious to the harm it has been causing to the natural world in the name of development. In one incident Chotti says to Pahan: ‘No, no we’re people of t’ forest land, yes. Daroga’s Gormen f’r us’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 76). The tribals distinguish themselves from the mainstream people in a stark manner. They are the people of the forest, whereas the Daroga or the police inspector is the outsider. Throughout the novel it is reiterated that the tribals belong to the forest and any other people who have come to their land are nothing but the agents of exploitation.

In *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* we see that environmentalism for the Mundas does not verge on mere preservation of the wilderness. When the tribals of Kurmi village decided to leave the village and go to the mission they were aware of the pain associated with felling of an ‘impenetrable forest’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 88). The Pahan of Kurmi asks his people ‘Where is yer Mission? Does it have such hills, and such forests all around, like t’ edge of mother’s cloth?’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 88). For the tribals the concept of

western environmentalism based on the all-or- nothing dualism does not hold here. The tribals belong to the forest. They are a part of the natural surroundings, but they at the same time know to create a community which is both socially and ecologically sustainable. Their intention is to make a dwelling place. Much like a child who tugs on to the edge of the mother's cloth the Munda's existence also depends on the preservation of the forest. Mahasweta Devi in one of her visits to the Palamau districts met an old man who looked at the ominous future and said: 'Jab jangal giya, hum log bhi mara-When the jungle goes, it's the end of us' (*Dust on the Road*, 9). Like the mother who cradles the child in her bosom and looks after it with utmost care, nature too sustains us but it is our capitalistic attitude that has irreversibly harmed the ecosystem.

From a conversation of Chotti Munda with the Pahan of the Kurmi village it became clear that the only way in which they could survive the irrational tax levied on them by the manager of the King of Nakata was by leaving their dwelling place and joining the Mission. When the Pahan asks the people of the village about the life in a Mission they reply: 'But t' Mission life is different' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,88). They will not only be forgoing their own land but also their culture and their faith. According to Clark 'culture itself has a context- the biosphere, air, water plant and animal life' (*Literature and Nature*,2). Thus when they are made to compromise with their culture they are driven out of the particular bioregion in which they exist. They are no more a part of the biosphere, air, water and animal life. Pahan, though disappointed at the others who want to leave the village and Haramdeo's faith (faith of the Mundas), completely understands the reason behind that renunciation. The tribal renunciation of faith and rituals are indicative of what Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil writes in *The Fissured Land*:

'With the pattern of resource use becoming grounded in a continual march of agriculture and pastoralism over territory held by food gatherers, the belief system of the colonizers would naturally take a form very different from that appropriate to food-gatherers, who had a great stake in the conservation of the resource base of their territories. Since the forest, with its wild animal populations, served as a resource base for the enemy, its destruction, rather than its conservation, would now have assumed priority' (Guha& Gadgil,78). Thus, the forest ceases to be the land of the tribals but everything associated with it becomes a mode of resource for the capitalistic people and the government. Tribal people are a resource base to cheap labour, their home- the forest is a resource to woods, their land which yields mica or coal is again a resource base. Hence the extraction of the land, exploitation of the tribals and

extermination of the forest continues unabated, bringing untold sufferings for these helpless victims of a calculated conspiracy.

After the people of the Kurmi village had left, the Pahan set fire to the village and himself descended to the forest— ‘On the hill top with his spear held aloft, Pahan walks, behind him a few dogs. Pahan is descending the hillside. Toward the forest. Today is the festival day of the hunt. The pahan descends, the dogs, the forest swallows them up. Chotti shakes his head. There isn’t even a walking track on that forest floor. No one enters it for the fear of bears’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 96). Pahan’s resignation to leave the forest and ultimately to be engulfed by the forest is a silent protest against the system. His worshipped god is Haramdeo, his land is the forest. Thus, he remains a true Munda and descends to his death. His act of burning the village is not like the burning of the Khandava forest in the *Mahabharata*. The Pandavas’ act of burning the forest was to establish their kingdom, but the Pahan’s act of setting fire was symbolic of the destruction of a tribal clan. Though a fire burns the entire tribal zone of Chotti’s village but one cannot see that fire—it is the fire of extreme poverty and hunger that has ensnared its flames and is slowly shrinking the Munda community. Mahasweta Devi has meticulously and masterfully portrayed this peculiar predicament of the persecuted tribals in the novel.

It may be observed, therefore, that in the entire body of the novel there are repeated mentions of the lost habitat where there used to be an ecological balance between men-animals-forest. In this context one is reminded of that fact that once when Chotti brings some rice sowed in Harmu’s land the Pahan said-

‘Ye don’ bring birds an’ rabbits no more?

Wher do I get it? They’ve killed all (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 207).

Chotti’s reply is suggestive of the fact that with the jungle, and their own community the animal kingdom is also shrinking. Somewhere else in the novel Chotti gives consolation to his wife when he goes out at night by saying- ‘...those happy days are gone that t’ tiger’ll leap’. (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 161) The lamentation continues when he tells Harmu- ‘Now deer don’t come drawn by the smell of ripe paddy. They are not there. Everyone, hunting in any fashion, has killed them off. If there are any animals left, they’ve gone off in to deep forest for fear of the human’ (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 161).

Though the tribal communities were also hunter- gatherers, but the difference comes in the changed mentality. While the modern man is anthropocentric, the ancient tribes were

generally bio- centric and considered themselves as a part of nature, and not the master of it. Their awareness to keep the balance is illustrated when Jita driven by hunger pleads with Chotti to kill a spotted deer that has come to the paddy fields, Chotti stoically denies and says: 'Nah! that's a doe. I too feel like shootin', but they are bein' killed off like we are. Way in t' forest mebbe there are some. Now comin' out. There 'll be increase if we let t' doe live' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 190). Chotti by identifying their state with the state of the animal not only underscores the symbiotic relation of the animal kingdom but is also empathetic of the ecological imbalance that has been wrecked by the greed of the modern man. In another incident, when Harmu and Chotti were travelling through the forest, Chotti was surprised to see so many animals. He tells Harmu that: 'Yeah elephants! In t' old days, ye get into t' forest, there's tigers, there's deer, so many animals. Now not a one can be seen' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 325). He even promises to keep this a secret lest it should be revealed thus bringing danger to their lives.

Mahasweta Devi's writing, needless to emphasize, springs from reality. She herself was an active journalist seeking to bring to light the total tragedy of the exploited tribals. Thus, many of the incidents that are depicted in the novel are incidents that she had seen happening. The vicious circle of bond labour that is one of the themes of the story is also a fatal fact in the life of the tribals. Naturally Mahasweta Devi is made to write: 'There in the wilderness we saw the hut of Bikhani Mochi, a bonded labourer of Muneshwar Saha of Loharsimi, owner of 50 acres of land. He had borrowed Rs.55 about 10 or 12 years ago and still owes the 'malik' Rs 18 or 19. Bikhani was very uncomplaining about the affair... Bikhani also said that his 'malik' was a good man.' (*Dust on the Road*, 6). This despair of the extreme distress of the Mundas is reflected when Bharat Munda in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* laments in sorrow '...who knows mor'n ye do, that Munda's debt is n't repaid? It's not paddy-wheat-corn that we take for two bits, three bits, and four, it's as if we took gold. Lest why's our debt not repaid?' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 116). Bharat Munda's plight is not an individual phenomenon it is the sentiment reflected throughout the Mundari world as most of them were subdued and submerged in the bonded labour system. Once the tribal puts his thumbprint on a piece of paper in exchange of some money for food, they are doomed for generations. Just as Lala Baijnath's little empire was inherited by Lala Tirathnath in the same way bond slavery was also inherited from the father to the son and goes on for generations. In this sad and serious situation, only the forest and its produce sustain these unfortunates. Thus if the forest gets destroyed, they too will have little hope of survival. The tribals being well

acquainted with the forest can survive out of it. Even though they are given the most arid land, they will always find some way to 'nourish even such land with their heart's blood, thinking of it as golden. They raise crops on land that has never yielded anything but thorny rush and coarse grass' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,156). In another occasion, when there was a drought in the land and Lala Tirathnath was reluctant to help them, Chotti and his 'men dug up the sand, and put in planks with no gap in-between on the walls of the pit. The women threw the sand at a distance, on the bank. Gradually they dug ten pits. The water came up' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,128). Chotti's knowledge of his habitat has saved the Chotti village in a number of occasions. This knowledge is passed on to the tribes from generation to generation. Further, Chotti instructs the villagers on the ways and means of water conservation when he rightly directed them: 'Don' dirty this water with dirty clothes or baths...Precious water' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,128). But unfortunately, 'the villagers who get the jobs of illegally killing trees, deforesting the hills, and breaking stones to make moraine' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,149) mostly yield to the greed for gathering money without any thought for their future condition. They forget the fact that the forest which is central to their culture was being hacked down by the contractors for the woods which are required to build houses in the industrial areas. The hunger- driven tribals most reluctantly had to be a part of this vandalism. They had to let go of their sacred grove or the belief of spirit which resides in the forest in order to sustain oneself. This fact become evident from *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* when Bharat Munda sadly says: 'p 'raps our Haramdeo's also old, seein' all this railway, motorcar, and pichers we hear of in town-that move, that talk- all this. That's why he's letting his chillum go here and there. Thinkin' go kids go, go to tea garden, go to Mission, plough another's field, go where ye'll live. Otherwise these things cannot happens' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,110). Through the lamentation of Bharat Munda we get a clear picture that in order to merely survive, the Mundas will have to leave their rightful place and become slaves to other's wishes and fancy.

The land- grabbing mentality of the owners is illustrated through the character of Lala Tirathnath who could not stand the fact that Chotti's family would not only not come under his bond labour system but had also acquired a land of their own. Chotti while talking to the Daroga describes the arduous endeavor that he and his sons had undertaken to cultivate a barren land:

'Barren land. No one ever put a plough there. Us two brothers and two sons moved all t' stones. No water buffaloes. Borrowed Paha's buffaloes an' got the job done. Some years a

hunnert an' twenty-pound paddy. Forty-pound arhar lentils, ne'er got more. Land didn' smile. Then t' sons bore rotten leaves from forest, water from the spring, on their shoulders. Working' like that t' land smiled. For t' last five years it's givin' two hunnert pounds paddy. Now that Lala wants this Lord, will he put in so much work? This time the land will become barren agin' (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*,163). The tribals are aware of the simple ecological principle that permeates nature that one can help bear fruit to the hardest soils with one's perseverance. Chotti with his brother and sons were able to render an arid land into arable and nature too has rewarded them by yielding to them. But negligence and capitalistic mentality will never bring any result. Thus Chotti is absolute that once the land falls into the hands to the Lala he will ruin it in no time. He will only extract the profit but will not nourish the land enough to make it worthy of cultivation. In this context, one is readily reminded of what Mahasweta Devi writes to reveal the reality of their sad situation: 'As agricultural workers, the peasants are denied their wages. They have to struggle to procure the water, the seeds and the fertilizers they need for their field. They live in poverty and hunger' (qtd in Bandyopadhyay,viii).

It is most painful to note that the independence of India has not been able to bring about any change in the lives of these unfortunate tribals. In fact, in some respects the situation has become more horrible. The tyrannous attitude of the landowners is now coupled with the monstrous atrocities of the members of the political parties who while acting as their savior become the virtual agents of their increasing distress and deprivation. In this novel, the Youth League is a major influence not only on the Lala but also on the brick- contractor, Harbans Chadha. They force Lala and Harbans Singh to exact a 'cut' from the tribals in the name of Youth League. When the tribals opposed this unjust measure, they vandalized their village and even killed the Pahan.

Conclusion

It is evident, therefore, that in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* the role of the people in power and authority is basically aimed at appropriating profit by any means of extortion and even indulging in acts of vandalism. These two are their main motives and these two motives are enough to abolish by swift or slow degrees and deceptive manipulations not only the tribals but also the most productive and caring nature at large. In this context Dipesh Chakrabarty points out 'The history of colonial modernity in India created a domain of the political that was heteroglossic in its idiom, irreducibly plural in its structure, interlocking

within itself strands of different types of relations that did not make up a logical whole. One such strand critical to the functioning of authority in Indian institutions was that of direct domination and subordination of the subaltern by the elite' (*Habitations of Modernity*, 13). While reading the novel a careful reader will understand that it is not alone the subordination of people but *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* substantiates the fact that even nature at large is also subaltern and is at the mercy of the men in power. Men have become more than Faustian in his relationship and treatment of nature. Faust's damnation is of his own weaving, the deliberate sacrifice of himself for transient enjoyment. In a similar vein, modern man by exploiting and subjugating nature is actually unaware of the rueful repercussions which are inevitable to occur in near future. The difference lies here, while Faust was aware of his end but modern men seem to be oblivious of the self- inflicted nemesis of such exploitation which is sure to boomerang on humanity itself.

Works Cited

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Habitations Of Modernity*. Orient Blackswan, 2004. Print.
- Clark, Timothy. *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.
- Devi, Mahasweta. *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. Trans. Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak. Oxford and New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. Print.
- . *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*. Ed. Maitreya Ghatak. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 1997. Print.
- . *Five Plays*. Trans. Samik Bandyopadhyay. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 1997. Print.
- . *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories*. Trans. Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak. New York and London: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Gadgil, Madhav, and Ramachandra Guha. *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India*. Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Guha, Ramachandra, and Joan Martínez Alier. *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*. Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Thomas, Keith. *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800*. Penguin UK, 1991. Print.