Chapter: 3

Forgrounding The Local: Ethical Consciousness at Work
In Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi, as a renowned figure in the post-colonial literature, is the writer who has devoted her entire life for the tribals and outcastes. She focuses on the neglected and marginalized people and locations. “She articulates the erased oral history of tribal leaders/heroes/revolutionaries and thus makes an attempt to return to the subalterns their role models.”¹ Her work has covered the tribal communities, their culture, their myths, tradition and history because she believes that “the tribal communities of India are the oldest and longest surviving cultural groups in the subcontinent.”²

“A tribe is viewed, historically or developmentally, as a social group existing before the development of states.”³ Tribe is a contested term due to its roots in colonialism. The word has no shared referent whether in political form, kinship relations or shared culture. Some argue that it conveys a negative connotation of a timeless unchanging past. To avoid these implications, some have chosen to use the terms “ethnic group” or “nation” instead.

“An ethnic group or ethnicity is a socially defined category of people who identity with each other based on common ancestral, social, cultural or national experience.”⁴ Membership of an ethnic
group tends to be defined by a shared cultural heritage, ancestry, myth of origins, history, language (dialect), or even ideology and manifests itself through symbolic systems, such as religion, mythology and ritual, cuisine, dressing style, physical appearance etc.

According to the data collected, there are 426 tribal groups including 165 sub-tribes. A considerable part of India lives in its tribes. They are living examples of how life was in earlier days. The tribes have almost the same culture, tradition and values whether they are Gond or Munda, Oraon or Gaddi, Khasis or Dimasa, Chenchu or Bhil. Tribal communities in India make an important dimension of the great Indian society. The term ‘tribe’ suggests the term ‘jana’ used to be referred to these primitive or techno-economically backward communities in ancient times. People like shabaras, Kolutas, the Kollas, the asoor and the khasis are countless. The British colonial government used the term to categorise these people. They live in forest, hilly tracts living a life of isolation and simplicity. They believe in collective effort. They believe in sharing. They treat the natural world just as man. This concept of man-nature relationship is made up of notions and practices centered around harmonious interactions and drawals upon, the surrounding world. Traditionally, tribals have kept a balance between human needs and ecological imperatives and preserved forests as a source of posterity.
Development has also learned to look beyond the earlier theories that emphasized that before traditional societies modernise and develop, the known contours of their anti-development, socio-cultural formations have to be demolished. “There is a mature recognition now that traditional societies could have both growth-positive and growth-negative facets of social values and individual psychologies which are rooted in culture and that an appropriate strategy of development has to identify them, and seek to encourage the growth-positive elements and marginalise or eliminate the growth-negative aspects.” Only then, a suitable balance can be struck between ‘economic’ well-being and socio-cultural satisfaction. On the other hand, far too many aspects of socio-political and religious externalities have also been covered under the general rubric of culture. It is necessary to peel off these accretions and marginalities so that the core aspects of culture become clear.

Human history throughout the centuries has established culture’s seminal role in man’s evolution. More particularly, the events of the last twenty years have brought home to us, in no uncertain terms, that we have to look beyond the nation-state, political ideologies, religious faiths and economic theories to cultural traits that bind men in communities. New ways of looking at the sources of man’s togetherness are essential. “The battle for men’s minds and their need to live in communities and groups has to find a cultural focus and cannot legitimately be maintained
outside cultural identities. Such identity need not be fully equated with ethnic identity as the latter signifies only particular manifestation of cultural identity.”

“Culture has an interface both with the economic goal of maximisation of development, general welfare and quality of life as much as maintaining the individual’s sense of belonging to the group.” The erosion of traditional cultural forms, however, has certain common characteristics irrespective of whether they happen in large multi-ethnic states or more homogeneous states. These spring from the interface of culture with rapid economic growth generally accompanied by technological change, new patterns of production, endless consumerism, increasing market forces and global tourism. Each of these has a possible unsettling impact on traditional cultural forms. And a sense of balance and a search of harmony between varying objectives have to be systematically looked for.

Forest is the source of their livelihood. Traditionally, they use the forests only for local consumption not for sale. But deforestation caused by industrial development and land alienation, dependence on money-lenders, bondage all force them to find the alternate ways of living. If we study their culture, we find that their structure is community based not individual based. These structures depend on the words. The undertaking is given orally, trust or not to cheat anyone is their tradition. It is found that their concept of property is
different from the so called civilized society. For tribals, the property is the communal resource. Their social and political structures have their communal character. In some tribes, like the Garo, Khasi, Lushai and Jaintia, the chief is the village council and every villager has a right to cultivate a plot but only as a member of the community. Almost 80% of tribes’ food comes from the forest. Other sources of their food are shifting cultivation, fruits and flowers from trees and plants, animals and other livestock. According to the data, at least 109 tribes practice shifting cultivation in India. All these sources of their livelihood are based on nature. It can be seen that the tribes lives in harmony with nature. They play both the roles equally as user and preserver.

Secondly, they love to share and all have the equal status. This is the biggest difference which one cannot find in modern, civilized society. They have maintained the balance between healthy human life and interaction with nature. They have preserved their core values for thousand of years, but are now facing the threat of losing their identity.

Thirdly, the status of women in tribes is higher than that of women in mainstream. Women have high status in the family as well as in the whole society. Some tribes are matrilineal. Men cannot lay claim over the women’s body. Women usually get the final say about whom they will marry and are allowed to divorce and remarry. Women dominate the economic life in the family. The
sexuality of tribal people is practiced in a health fashion that doesn’t objectify women or make them become submissive to their male partners. The tribal dance is a great occasion of fun and of learning of hunt and notions of sexuality and how to relate to each others bodies.

Fourth, they have a unique understanding with nature. They always keep a balance with nature, never exploit for men’s desires. Practices that cause destruction of forest or land are strictly prohibited. Most tribals feel guilty about cutting trees for human use. They tell the gods that “they deserve pardon for the sin of cutting trees because they have no other alternative and that as protectors of the people, the gods should give them a good harvest and regenerate the forest.” They have their own ways of protecting trees. Those trees which are old and do not yield fruits can be cut. The tribes regards certain trees as essential for its survival, can not be cut.

Fifth, they always remember and respect their dead ancestors. They believe that their ancestors’ spirit live on the land. Another aspect is this that there are many legends and myths surrounding the cult of the ancestors that highlight the magical powers of the ancestor’s spirit. They have oral tradition. Everything is found in their songs like myth, history, and legend story. They believe on the word of the mouth. So, the tribal communities and culture of India have certain common features that link them.
“Firstly, unlike in modern society, their worldview is not fractured.”

They still have an integrated and holistic approach to life and the world around. The individual, men in society, the natural world, the ancestors and the unseen gods somewhere beyond the cloud- all of them are parts of this integrated world. Each one is vitally, meaningfully and inextricably linked to the others. The second important feature is the intimate way they are passionately wedded to life. One may wonder how these communities, some still quite poor and deprived, with a long history of exploitation, have retained such love for life and passion for living. Rarely have they turned their back on life in despair. The third feature is the intimate sense of community. An entire village is like a family participating in each other’s joys and sorrows, from the birth of a child to death.

The village is the sacred soil of the ancestors. Its soil does not belong to one until the bones of one’s forefathers are underneath it. The entire village is a family unit that participates in all social and festival occasions and the celebration of rituals. This emphasis on community living is important as a lesson for modern society where the web of community is extremely loose and seems to be slowly disappearing. “Individuals living in glass-concrete jungles do not know even their nextdoor neighbours.”

There should be “emphasis on small community where individuals are intimately, linked to each other thus holds a value for us and the nature of such society can be best illustrated by the tribal world.”
The word ‘native’ means being attached to a particular place. “Basically, nativeness is entirely self-manifest as in plants and trees that patiently grow and live in their own soil.”

Culture is a network of interacting systems. “Every living and potent culture has the in-built capacity to convert and absorb suitable external influences into a native system.” The process of such assimilation may be termed nativization. The more efficient this process the more nourishing it proves to the local culture. The texture of a vibrant society is strengthened by such a nativization of abstract and concrete influences impinging from outside. It is through this process that a culture absorbs events and objects in the world external to man, from things animate and inanimate to animals and plants. And this process establishes man’s innate relationship with the local hills, rivers, animals, history and geography.

In literary tradition too this process of nativization takes place continuously. Every new writer automatically realizes that he is deeply rooted in his local traditions. “Those who have interacted with other cultures, whether knowingly or unknowingly, absorb not only values and beliefs but also larger cultural systems from them. Aryans, Huns, Scthians, and Mughals were nativized here in the same manner.”

According to the great anthropologist Ralph Linton, nativism is the result of cultural contact. He has proved on the basis of his
studies of native American tribes, that whenever a culture is under threat from another more aggressive culture, the weaker one’s awareness of its native values is expressed in many ways. In 19th century India, such was the condition. That is why there was many a nativist movement in that period. The revolt of 1857, frequent uprisings in various places, the farmers’ revolts, and also the various other nativist movements-ranging from political ones of those of language cleansing-initiated by leaders like Jotiba Phule and Jamshedji Tata, were all meant to express awareness of our nativist realities. The great example of this is Gandhiji’s freedom movement based on non-violence. In a sense, nativism of a group cannot be seen in an isolated context, because in order to be a cultural phenomenon the nativist spirit should be aware of other cultures existing elsewhere.

Nativistic movements are the manifestation of the community’s full inward reliance on native resources. Nativistic movements have references to external oppressing cultures, whereas nativeness is related to one’s own culture.” 15

Nativism evokes a whole constellation of feeling, perception, thought, enlightenment, and memory which has grown due to one’s attachment to a specific geographical period. There is more of poetry in the emotional bond between man and his territory in the nativist consciousness than rationalism. The viewpoint is more traditional than modernist. It prefers to look back into the past more than to looking ahead into the future. “Nativism is a response of the
entire people, young and old. It is a lifestyle of a whole group, past and present. Society’s collective power of reflection and emotion is expressed through nativism. Broadly speaking, nativism prefers maintaining the status quo to gaining momentum, as a strategy.”

“The important thing worth noting is that nativism has an inclination for shaking hands with the traditionists and the retrograde; fascist exploitation of such structure is well known; and an identity politics as well as in culture clashes, nativism often serves a favourable base for fundamentalists and fanatics.”

Compassion for one’s native soil does not preclude love for other lands. If nativist’s consciousness wants to survive, like an living organism, it develops its own internal strategies to combat its parasites. It is also equally true that nativism is the only weapon in the hands of the oppressed culture, the weapon which is capable of throwing out the dominant systems of foreign influence which erode capable native systems. In the Indian context it can be said that our long and rich history can be bestow upon us the necessary and effective means of coping with the new situations.

“Some of the creative uses of nativistic tools, such as the spirituality of Mahatma Gandhi or the revival of Buddhism by Ambedkar, have proved to be more beneficial to India and to humanity’s struggle for liberation than any other so called progressive international ideas.”
Anthropologists classify tribes into three major groups according to their racial features:

The proto-Australoids comprising tribal communities such as Mundas, Ho, Oraons, Khonds etc. who have the development of lower forehead and sunken nose. The Mongoloids with light skin, straight hair, flat nose and medium stature, are distributed over the sub-Himalayan region and the Eastern frontiers of India.

The Negro strain is found among the Andamanese and the Kadars of the South-West. These can be considered to be the oldest of all. These tribes can be classified into various categories according to their linguistic affinities.

Among these tribes, Santhals are the third largest tribe in India. They are mostly found in West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand and Assam. They belong to the pre-Aryan period. They were the great fighters during the British regime in India. “During the late 1850s Santhal hero Sidhu had accumulated around ten thousand santhals to run parallel government against the British Government.”¹⁹ They speak Santhali that belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family. Apart from Santhali, they also speak Bengali, Oriya and Hindi. They have long head and flat nose, curly hair. They have dark brown complexion. The source of their livelihood is forest. They are also engaged in hunting, fishing and cultivation. Santhals follow the Sarna religion. They pay respect to ghosts and spirits. They also perform animal sacrifices to the Gods.
They celebrate Karam festival and hunting festival on the eve of Baishakhi Purnima.

Munda tribe of Jharkhand also spreads over to West Bengal, Chattisgarh, Orissa and Bihar. They speak Mundari language, belongs to Austro-Asiatic family. They have black complexion, short curly hair. Their history shows some evidences of the Mundas kingdom in the pre-British times. Christianity is the main religion among the Mundas. They have their own religion known as Sarna which stress on the belief in one god. They are highly superstitious people. The Sarna people do not have any written code of moral laws. They are also hunters and now converted into the settled agriculturist. But they also become bonded labour for their earnings.

Gonds are the tribal community who belong to the Central India and are widely spread in Madhya Pradesh, Bastar of Chattisgarh and Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. They are one of the largest tribal groups in the world. Their history traces that they settled in Gondwana in the ninth and thirteenth century A.D. In the fourteenth century, they ruled several parts of Central India. The Gondwana kingdom survived till late sixteenth century. During the British regime in India, Gonds challenged the Britishers in several battles. They speak Gondi language related to Telugu and other Dravidian languages. Gonds fair and festivals are influenced by Hindu traditions. Gusadi dance is the most famous dance
performed by Gonds. Madai is the major festival in which they meet their relatives. They also celebrate Hindu festival Dusshera.

Oraon tribe is mainly found in Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa. They mainly depend on agriculture. Their breathing line is also forest from where they get forest products to sell. Not only for their livelihood, but for other needs, they depends on forest such as house, medicines etc. Their religious system has been largely influenced by the Munda religious tradition. They have given place to environmental features in their religion. Their major customs are linked with birth, marriage and death and all these customs are related to nature. The marriage ritual would be incomplete without these invocations of trees and plants. The Oraons practise burial and cremation and bodies are buried when crops stands in the field. The festivals like ‘Sarhul’, ‘Karam’ are celebrated among them. Sarhul is celebrated when Sal tree is in its full blossom. Karam is associated with the idea of productivity. So, the whole life moves around nature.

The Shabar tribe mostly lives in Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal. During the British Raj, they were classed as one of the ‘criminal tribes’ under Criminal Tribes Act 1871. So, they suffer from social stigma in modern age. Traditionally they are forest-dwelling tribe and rely on the forests for their living.

The discussion about tribal culture and identity in literature is always a matter of big interest and big controversies. Many literary
figures sometimes deny the destruction of tribal tradition and identity. But sometimes some literary figures come out and take stands with them to preserve them. Among them, Mahasweta Devi is the name top most in the list. She not only discusses them but takes action to save, preserve and protect them from the exploitation and threat of losing their identity and values.

Mahasweta Devi has a deep concern for tribals and outcastes. Whenever they are in trouble, she stands there with them to help or protect. She knows what the development means in the modern era. The development that swallow trees, forests, land and disturbs the ecological balance of nature. She is herself nature-loving person. So, she doesn’t want an imbalance between man and environment. She supports the indigenous people because they respect and care nature. They never exploit trees or land for their own desires. Every aspect of their life relates to nature. She reveals in her novels all the angles of tribal life with environment, morals and values.

Her work The Book of Hunter is set in the sixteen century medieval Bengal. In this novel, she depicts the culture, life-style, myths and customs of Shabar tribe. She has accepted that her knowledge about Shabars depends on Lodha Shabars of Medinapur of West Bengal and the Kheria Shabars of Purulia. Devi’s Bhadhkhanda, the Book of Hunter reconstructs “the shabar tribal history and identity and to inform and instruct mainstream Indian society.” Through this work, she tells that the land and forest is
the lifeline for them. “the soil held everything in itself.” They believe that forest is the mother who provides all the things. They never leave their mother or the land/forest in which they grow. “Araha gives me life-sustaining food and thus is another mother. Does a child ever abandon its mother?” They believe that they are the children of the jungle. They are forest dwelling tribe. So, “wherever there’s forest, there are Shabars” because “she gives us fruits, flowers, tubers, leaves, wood, honey, resin, medicine herbs, barks, leaves and roots even animals to hunt.” Forest gives them not only food to eat but is a big source of their earning. They sell the forest products and get the money for their livelihood. “All sell acacia berries, ritha fruits, amla and ripe hartuki that they gather in the forest and buy rice and oil with the money.” They not only use forest for their living but preserve and respect it. Any disobedience of the law of jungle is a great sin. They never go against any rule of jungle. Shabars never break any law and disobeying it a greatest sin for them. “She is the creator, nurturer and protector of all living beings on land and water. To disobey her law is the greatest of sins.” The forests are the great source of learning. They never go to schools, never learn from books because their school is nature, their teacher is forest, land which teaches them the knowledge of life, the skills of success. Shabars believe that the violence or needless killing is never good, which they have learnt from animals, “look at the kingdom of animals and birds! When a tiger is hungry, it kills a deer; an elephant eats leaves and twigs from the bamboo and the
banyan tree, but there is no needless killing, violence or destruction.” In the story, when Kalya beats his wife, his mother says, “why won’t you learn lessons from the forest even now? Do the tigers and deer thrash their females mercilessly like you do yours?”

They learn all the lessons of life from forest. They worship nature in the form of Sun and Wind for their protection as well as success. Abhyachandi is the goddess of forest “who gives birth to every tree, animal and the forest-dwelling Shabars too; you nurture them and give them assurance.” They love forest and the land because they give them protection from diseases. Ayurvedic doctors collect those same bonkere and bonkapash weeds and they make medicines from them, “the soil itself nurtures all these little plants, animals, birds and bugs. Each one of them has its own function.”

Shabars know about the functions of different types of soil, different trees and plants which the earth provides us. “The earth gives you all kinds of fruits and grain, but everything needs its own type of soil.” They know how to cure the diseases through plants as the soil has plant for every disease. They “knew cures for every ailment – fevers, cut from thorns, the body’s heaviness during rains and scorpion bites. She supplied medicinal plants to the king’s physician.” An absolute dependence on nature for livelihood is the hallmark for indigenous life.
Nature has a deep influence on their lives and they name the seasons accordingly—“seasons of shiuli and lotuses, of the poush festival for the winter harvest, of the new rice harvest, of Tilpanchami or Sesame festival, of palash and mahua blossoms.” Shabars’ life moves around the forest as they celebrate every festival with natural surrounding. “Abhyachandi, Banachandi....they go into the forest to celebrate Ashtami and Bijoydashami during Durga Puja as will.” Shabars’ birth, marriage, death every precious moments of life is related to forest/nature. Shabar reminds us of Wordsworth’s concept of nature. He also believed that if we enjoy the outer beauty of nature we can feel the inner joy of life. He also believed that nature is the best teacher. He also emphasized the moral influence of nature – a moral teacher who teaches us how to behave with the loved ones; how to preserve for upcoming generations as Shabars do. Wordsworth also tells that one can find the inner peace and joy only in the lap of nature far from the madding crowd and city life. Shabars also know “if they’d lived in the forest, they would have learned things, but the influence of city is a foul thing.” They love to live in the lap of nature. “When this town of Araha grows larger and the forest is cut down, you’ll see them abandon their settlements and go somewhere else.” They believe that Abhyachandi protects them from every danger, “Abhyachandi was their goddess. She gave them abhaya or reassurance against all fears; she kept all her wild creatures, trees and forest children – the Shabars- safe in her lap, covered by her
sari.”37 Shabar’s whole life revolves round the forests, even their tradition and customs are closely influenced by nature. It is their custom not to kill deer during the meeting time. “Any Shabar who kills a deer during this period would have Abhaya’s curse upon him.”38 The festivals or ceremonies are related to forest like Banadurga Puja, Abhaya Puja, they are connected to their merry-making customs. “To remain happy and make merry is an art in which tribals are masters. The Banadurga Puja on the night of the full moon in Shraban, the Pahad Puja, Abhaya Puja, or the Baha ceremony at the advent of spring until which you can’t pick the new crop of fruit, leaves or flowers from the Sal and Palash trees.”39 It is the time when Shabar people dance, sing and enjoy life with the forest. There is another custom of ‘tree wedding’ because “you could become givers of life, shelter and nourishment like the trees. So you could be victorious over death, like a tree. A tree creates new trees through its seeds and lives on through them.”40 In this wedding, all the girls walk around a ‘mahua’ tree “seven times and every boy married a mango tree.”41 They also believe that Abhaya means forest provide them freedom and right to protect their honour. They have their own customs. “When husband and wife leave each other, they can both remarry. A widow could marry her late husband’s younger brother, or any other man. That was what Abhaya has laid down. Give them full liberty and they will honor it absolutely.”42 Ma Abhaya gives them freedom to leave and freedom to be a husband or wife. The wife is equally free to choose the way
of her life. It is not a social bondage for a woman to suffer in her relationships.

“In the Shabar community, both men and women toiled for their daily rituals. They married whoever they wanted. They built separate huts after marriage. When the husband and wife quarreled, the husband thrashed the wife, she in turn, struck a blow or two. And it could even come to pass that they would leave each other. Then both the man and the woman could remarry. It wasn’t the sort of society in which the wife had to take it all lying down!”

During the festival of hunting, when Shabars kill an elephant “all young women should go forth and gather under the old ‘shiimul’ tree. The men will emerge with the tusks on their shoulders and you’ll come dancing alongside them.” And even at the time of death, they never leave forest. Their traditions and customs of birth, marriages, festivals, rituals, death all are closely connected with forest. It is because their tribal myths are also inter-linked with it. The story of blue Gandharaj flower refers to Ma Abhayachandi’s presence everywhere. They believe that Ma Abhayachandi said “you’ll find me wherever you see blue gandharaj blooming.”

Shabars wait for the day when they see golden monitor lizard and become a king according to a myth which tells about Kalketu and Phullora. “If some other Akhetiya ever catches the sight of the golden monitor lizard on Durgashtami, he will be the king.” It is said by Ma situated in jungles, “Ma has kept him safe somewhere! The Akhetiya who encounters the golden monitor lizard will
emerge from the forest as a king wearing a golden crown.”\textsuperscript{47} Kalya had a dream to be a king/Kalketu. He wanted to kill king elephant as great as the divine Airavat. He wonders about the life after killing a giant elephant. The myth had a deep impact on the Shabar. Like Kalya, everyone wanted to be a king after finding golden monitor lizard. “If Kalya could kill the elephant, then certainly he would find the golden monitor lizard as well. Kalya would become king, Kalketu.”\textsuperscript{48} Thus every action of their life depends on forests.

“It has become an urgent necessity to forge a Development Design for tribal areas which puts their culture as the centre piece. Perhaps that is the only way we can achieve the twin objectives of ensuring that the charming mosaic of our national culture of which they form such an important part is preserved to the extent possible, and simultaneously use those cultural profiles as aids for development.”\textsuperscript{49} Our project planning and implementation should not only be based upon a proper understanding of their cultural profiles but also go into the prevailing specificities of their time-honoured indigenous approach in the fields of agriculture, health, education and house building. In each of these areas, surely there are new developments which we have to adopt in our planning but we should not forget that there could be certain values as well as certain operational benefits, which their existing systems offer.
As the forests are being cut down due to industrialization and other developments, the shabar people are forced to do other works such as farming or bonded labour. But their basic needs of forest can never be fulfilled by other things. “When this town of Araha grows larger and the forest is cut down, you’ll see them abandon their settlements and go somewhere else.”

They have the same respect and love for nature, Mahasweta Devi shows it in her another work, Imaginary Maps. She tells us that the mainstream Indian society was struggling to pass a Widow Remarriage Act. On the contrary, “Oraons, Mundas, Santhals, Lodhas, Kherias, Mahalis, Gonds and more - widow remarriage has always been the custom. In tribal society, there is no dowry system, only bride.”

Devi also discusses that the tribal does not know the word ‘orphan’ because they have commune character. So they bring up a child together whose parents are dead. She talks about Shabar that they are hunting tribes. They love the forest as a living being. And when they are forced to cut, they will beg forgiveness: “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.” They repeat the same procedure with animals also. It can also be seen the same love and same guilt for cutting the trees in almost every tribe.

Tribals protect the entire ecosystem by dividing it into three systems “known in Chotanagpur as the ‘sarna’, the ‘akhara’ and the
‘sason’. These ecosystems, more than anything else, symbolised the symbiotic relationship between the tribals and forests.”

The ‘sarna’ was a plot with several hectares of thick forest growth in which the tribal teenagers were initiated into adulthood. In that sense it symbolised the very identity of the tribe. Besides being the initiation ground, it was considered the abode of the deity and the dwelling place of the spirit of the tribe. No tree from this area could be cut. The use of sickle and axe was forbidden. Only dry twigs could be broken with the hand for fuel. The young men who were initiated into adulthood had to live on the fruits and animals available there.

The ‘akhara’ is the dancing or assembly ground in the forest where young men and women meet. Some of the dances, like the annual ‘dhangara-dhangari’ among the Konds of Orissa to choose their life partners. While ‘akhara itself is a clearing in the forest, the ecosystem around it is considered sacred and is protected. As in the ‘sarna’ so also in the ‘akhara’ no sickle and axe could be used. Fruits available there could be eaten and dry branches and twigs that could be broken with the hand were used as fuelwood.

The ‘sasan’ or the burial ground was in the middle of the forest. In the absence of written documents of ownership of land and of the membership of a tribe, till the arrival of the British and the introduction of the zamindari and private property system, the tombstone of an ancestor was the only proof required for a family to
stake its claim for agricultural land in the village. The sasan is an open space in the forest. The thick growth of trees and shrubs around the sasan is considered sacred and no sickle or axe was traditionally used in it.

It is easy to notice a deep connection “between the community resource and conservation. The three ecosystems that are preserved by the tribals all over the country are those that are linked to the continuity of the tribe, viz, the teenagers i.e. the future warriors, the couple or the future parents and the ancestors. A balanced use and conservation of this resource for posterity were thus linked to the continuity as well as the identity of the tribe.”

Mahasweta’s work ‘The Hunt’ in her book entitled Imaginary Maps discusses a tribal festival ‘The Hunt’. She discusses the love of nature in this work also. She tells that the character, Prasadji has 75 acres of land with Sal trees. People gather timber from it for constructing their huts and leaves, seeds and fruits for oil and other works. Mary Oraon, the central character of the story picks the fruit of Mahua tree on the Prasadji’s property. When the forest proprietors come there to do a deal, Mary and other people are not happy. They try to make them happy by giving them daily wages. These two trees are very important for tribals. Sal is used for housing timber, for construction of windows and doors. Its leaves are used for medicine and paan. Its seeds are used as oil. “Mahua is a cash fruit. You get liquor from mahua, you cook with the oil of the
black seed of the mahua fruit, the skin goes to make washing soap.”\textsuperscript{55} The tribal cares for trees as they give them the way of earning.

Devi also tells about their customs of marriage and remarriage. Through ‘The Hunt’, we come to know that Mary is the illegitimate daughter of a white father and she wants to marry a Muslim boy but the story tells us that “if her father had been Somra or Budhua or Mangla Oraon- the Oraon would not have let this marriage happen.”\textsuperscript{56} But she is accepted by the society even then she does not want to live their life. As a custom, “she also sells custard apple and guava from the Prasad’s orchard, driving terrifically hard bargains with the Kunjaras, the wholesale fruit buyers.”\textsuperscript{57} Mahasweta Devi describes their huge festival of hunt celebrated at the spring season. It is the animal hunting festival called as festival of justice. After the hunt, the elders would bring offenders to justice. And every twelfth year it is Janiparab, the women’s hunting festival in Bihar. She describes the same event in the story. “For twelve years men run the hunt. Then comes women’s turn. It’s Janiparab. Like the men they too go out with bow and arrow. They run in forest and hill. They kill hedgehogs, rabbits, birds, whatever they can get. Then they picnic together, drink liquor, sing and return home at evening. The women do exactly what the men do. Once in twelve years. Then they light the fire of the spring festival and start talking.”\textsuperscript{58} It also depicts that “no hunt for the men this year. The men will drink and make up new
songs for the spring festival, dress up as clowns and go out to sing for money.” Mary participates in the festival. She hunts the biggest animal, the tehsildar who wanted Mary’s body. She kills him because “among the tribals, insulting or raping a woman is the greatest crime. Women have a place of honour in tribal society.” After killing him, she “drank the most wine, sang, danced, ate the meat and rice with the greatest relish,” because she has killed the biggest feast. This story visualizes not only love of nature, their customs, festivals but the powerful role of woman in tribal society.

Devi feels that the so called modern society is still struggling for women’s right in the 21st century whereas tribal society provides freedom, liberty, and justice to women in their lives.

“An instance has been reported from Baharagora, Singhbhum district, where a Santal widow was being pressurized by the male heirs of husband to give up the land itself, in return for a promise of ‘maintenance’.

In this case, the village intervened on behalf of the widow and prevented the male claimants from seizing the land.”

Three phases in the degradation of widows, land rights can be seen- in the first, the widown has rights equal to those of her late husband; in the second, the widow has rights over a plot of land sufficient for her own maintenance; in the third, any independent access to land is negated, and the widow merely lives on
maintenance provided by the male heirs of her husband. This last position is not much different from that of widows in Hindu society. Differences in the two situations comes from (1) the continued participation of such adivasi widows in labour both in the field and forest besides the home, as a result of which widows too can have their own income from the collection and sale of various kinds of forest produce; and (2) the right which widows still have, in the event of maltreatment by the relatives, to demand the allotment of a separate plot of land for their maintenance.

This third phase in the degradation of widow’s rights has not yet been fully reached, but the pressures in that direction are visible. More or less people, men in particular, have come to mean by the term ‘khorposh’ mere maintenance and not a right to possess land (i.e. a usufructuary right) for maintenance.

The situation in which a woman has the most comprehensive land rights, on par with men, is when she is married in ‘ghar jawai’ from, i.e. where the husband comes to reside in the woman’s home, i.e. matrilocality and not according to the normal patrilocal, rule.

The tribal provides many rights to women and they approve marriages in the form of ‘ghar jawai’. A daughter married in this form becomes like a son, and has the same rights to land as any other son. At times a smaller share may explicitly be decided upon at the time of marriage. This is often the case where the girl is in some way disabled or deformed. “A woman married in this form
retains her right to her father’s land even if she divorces the ‘ghar jawai’.”63 If a woman has some kind of disability or deformity, which may make it difficult for her to get married. “A woman in this condition may be a charge on one of her brothers, who would be given additional land to meet her needs. Or, she may herself be given a plot, smaller than what her brothers get, out of which she could maintain herself.”64 It is their culture to give woman rights to live her own life in her own way. The tribal traditions have all those values, morals which we modern Indian thinks that we should have in such a civilized and cultural society. But we ignore their culture and we forget them as they are never there. “We do not know the tribals nor do we care to know them.”65

Mahasweta Devi visualizes such situation in her writing that we never bother who the tribals actually are. We never have feel that they are also the part of society who are committed to their culture and values. ‘Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha’ that Government officials forget the tribals, their identity is somewhere lost. Through this work, she depicts the adivasis of Pirtha, Madhya Pradesh who are 22.97% of the entire population but they appear nowhere in the economy of the state. The common tribal man has entirely vanished from the government records. Not only common tribal man but the great tribal heroes are also forgotten. “It is a great injustice that the government of Independent India has not given him any recognition as the descendent of a tribal hero of the first Battle of India Independence.”66
Mahasweta tells in her every work that the adivasis are closely attached with nature. Their cultures, values, lifestyle all depend on nature. Every tribe community has a special tree which is connected to their life. As Walter Fernandes suggest that tribal communities have many beliefs and myths which are “closely related to the preservation of economically important species which are linked to the origin and continuity of the tribe.” Walter gives the example of the ‘totem’. It can be a bird or an animal or a tree. It may not be killed except during the annual celebration when hunting parties are organised, usually during ‘chaitra Parab’ which is the spring festival. The animal or bird thus captured by the whole village or tribe is eaten during “this annual celebration to signify the common shared life of the entire community.” The myth is actually centred round the creation of the world or the origin of the tribe. There are many such instances among the Orissa tribals. The Kond tribals of Kalahandi believe that when the world was submerged in water and all people died except two children who survived on a hill, the ‘salap’ gave them its juice and saved them from starvation. From these children the ‘adivasi’ race emerged and still survives. “The Gonds of Koraput believe that the first Gond male and female were born from a cow’s feet, and, therefore, they are called Gond.”

Most of the raw material from which trees and animals are created comes from parts of the creator’s own body while the first ancestors of the tribe originate from some tree, a creeper or Mother
Earth. “In all these myths ‘Kittung’ the creator is presented as a lover of trees and animals.” The sago palm is the commonest material mentioned. The sap of this tree is used in all their rituals and wine produced from it is an important source of protein. Also other trees such as the date and toddy palms have similar myths surrounding them. In other cases a family relationship is established between the tribes and the species concerned. An example is the Kalahandi district of Orissa where the tiger is treated as a brother. If a tiger dies the neighbouring village is expected to bury it with all the elaborate funeral rites which are observed at one’s brother’s funeral. Also the Konds of the Ganjam district of Orissa used to treat the tiger an uncle and in case of death give it a funeral befitting one of their own ancestors.

Ho tribe believes that sal tree is their life just as Sagawan tree signifies life to Korju tribe. But these trees are used as raw material in saw mills. So the modern developmentalist exploits the tribals. But as Devi says “the Ho language has no synonym for exploitation.” It is their tradition that they never capture their history in written form. “They have captured their history by observing the rules of birth-marriage-death-social injustice. There is no alphabet, they have caught the past in their songs.” Their oral tradition is the strength of their history. They remember their past through their songs. They always miss the natural beauty, their festival which are not performed due to their exploitation and suppression- “Once there was forest, hill, river and us. We had
villages, homes, land, ourselves. In our fields, we grew rice, kodo, kutki, soma, we lived. Then there was game to hunt. It rained, peacocks danced, we lived.... We asked the earth’s permission, we are setting down stakes to build a roof, setting land to grow crops.”

They recall the natural beauty which gave them life. “The water of Pirtha Pool was shadowed by its banks, by the acacia trees all around. The water was green in places, in places transparent with sun.”

Nature is their life so they plant the trees according to their needs, uses and preservation of their culture. “We must plant the Khajra that keeps us alive. If Baola keeps us alive, we must plant Baola. Otherwise, everything will be desert and we will have to leave.”

Just as “the Korjus worshipped the Saga trees as their deity. They married their bride and groom to Saga tree first so as to make their marriage lasting, strong and productive.”

Most myths are built around trees and animals that are considered sacred because of their economic value. For example, most tribals believe that the banyan tree is the abode of gods and ensures good health; the peepal tree is the abode of goddess; the mango tree protects the village community and ensures health and property; and the goddess dwells in the mahua tree. The bel tree is the abode of Shiva and the worship place of Brahma and other gods; the sal tree is the abode of the forest goddess; neem and salva provide good health, the sahada prevents misunderstanding between the bride and the bridegroom; the salap created the adivasis; the limba was created by god Jagannath and the bata by
Brahma. Sago palm is the abode of the soul of the ancestor. “Through such beliefs the tribals have traditionally ensured the protection of these trees, shrubs and wild life.”

Tribals also talks about the anger of the gods and goddesses when trees are cut. “if the bana devata (the forest diety) is angered, podu crop will be affected.” Devi says through ‘Pterodactyle, Puran Sahay and Pirtha’ that “we lowered the body at the crossroads. We scattered the seed of the Kodo and rice. Then at the time of burial we gave oil, cloth, rice, fruit. We laid the body down with the ancestors. After the funeral we laid a rock on the grave.”

Their customs, traditions are linked with environment. Various aspects of their life are connected with environment such as costumes. Like the “dress of a Pathan in the North-West is the cultural expression of that land, so is the loincloth, the native expression of the South Indian. Similarly, the flora and fauna, the thoughts and the behavior, each region is inseparable from its environment.” They cannot live without nature or forest. Their birth, marriage and death all are related to nature. Their beliefs and values are associated with forest, land and environment. They feel peace and safety in the lap of nature. Not only their ethics or traditions but myths are also connected with the natural surroundings.

They worship their ancestors before starting or after finishing their work because they believe that their forefathers’ soul protect
them from every bad omen. “We will make our offerings, ask for your ancestors’ blessings and then start work.” They give honour to their ancestors and connect it with the stories of their life. Not only this, different trees becomes part of their myths as “the acacia is the mythic tree of wish- fulfillment.” Not only in Madhya Pradesh but in Rajasthan also, the acacia is the wishing tree. Whenever, the tribal people demand or wish anything, they ask the tree to fulfill it. Devi says that the tribes of Pirtha had a myth about it “The old days the rocks moved about on the Pirtha Hill. Everything was alive. And the Lord Sun told them, you are alive, but I’m now sending humans to the world.” The Pirtha tribals have their myth connected with ancestors and acacia which both are associated with their life. They offer acacia flowers, leaves to their ancestors to give them honour. In the story ‘Pterodactyle, Puran Sahay and Pirtha’, Puran saw a lot of acacia flowers and leaves “in front of the engraved stone, the stone almost invisible with flower and fruit. There was also a handful of rice, some earth in a clay pot, a torn piece of cloth and the place for the offerings marked off with a line… Each left some acacia flowers, leaves, and a handful of soil. The soul of the ancestors came driven by distress,” Not only their action but their knowledge shows the influence of nature and its surroundings upon them. As Harisharan, the character in Pterodactyl, tells “split the leaf to weave mats and cuts the tuber, leave the very end. Another plant will come up. And if you don’t pick it, the bottom of the tuber will spread, many plants will come
‘India Together’ also tell us “The tribals’ traditional practice of organic farming has conserved rich diversity of seeds. The genre pool of seeds is safer in the hands of the tribal community than with multinational gene banks and corporate. They have a multi-cropping pattern which takes care of their cereals, pulses, vegetables etc. Organic farming is devoid of pesticide consumption.” Such knowledge helps in maintaining ecological balance.

“Most tribal societies have a built-in intimacy with and respect for nature.” For many of them, the river, the forest, the trees and the hill stream are gods and they are treated as an integral part of their lives. Respect for the environment thus comes naturally to them. It is true that some tribal societies used to have- and even today have- slash and burn cultivation, variously known in different parts of India. Some economists believe that this system of curing some forest area on the hill slopes for cultivation was agronomically optimal in earlier years. Population was small, soil nutrition on the hill slopes was inadequate, and cutting down and burning the trees made up the latter deficiency. The forest area cleared was allowed a number of years to heal after a year or two of cultivation- which was possible because of low density of population. Societies, which practised such pattern of cultivation, have largely been won over.
We should think about the ways adopted by tribes to protect trees. For example, a tribal would not put his axe to a fruit-bearing tree. Modern society which has created its own problem of environment degradation as the inevitable end-product of over-exploitation of nature has to learn to cultivate the tribal’s respect for and integration with the natural world. For the tribal, the concept of this earth not being a planet but a home comes naturally. On the other hand, modern society has assumed that the whole wealth of this planet is meant only for him. “There is very little care for intergenerational equality that treats it as meant for our children and our children’s children.”

They know about many medicinal plants which help in their health care. Their traditional system of treatment through nature basically depends on their deep observation and understanding of their natural surroundings. But the so called development through metal roads creates new culture of exploitation and bonded slavery. It makes them loose their identity. They want nothing but “human recognition, respect because he or she is the child of an ancient civilization” But the modern society has given development that leads to “the metal road has come to them to serve the interests of those very moneylenders from Bhalpura and Rajaura who will snatch their harvests to recover their loans, those patients customers who wait like vultures for the moment when starving parents will sell their children in the extremity of despair, and fall to feeding on carrion, the advance men of those labour-contractors who will make
the aboriginals their bond slaves with the seduction of ten rupees a
day and a full stomach.”89 The modern people turn them into
beggars and spectators who are silently watching the exploitation
for the sake of development of modern Indian society but the actual
ratio of development is beyond our imagination. “One person eats
well by keeping five hundred starving, one person graduates
college while six hundred remain illiterate and one person buys an
apartment keeping how many hundreds homeless, such
complicated ratios.”90

The desires and demands of modern Indian society have
created a huge gap between tribals and non-tribals. Because of this
reason, they start to hate the growth, development and the non-
tribal. “He is not a tribal. His naming ceremony is not called ‘napta’,
his marriage ceremony is not called ‘Kirincho bouhu bapla’, his
surname is not ‘chonre’, his clan- totem is not lizard, at his
cremation women will not play the main role, his ancestors’ soul
does not become unquiet, he is not the prey of man- made famines
every year.”91 Such big disturbances create cultural differences
among the whole Indian society. These differences create a new
culture of bonded- slavery, child labour, exploitation and “palamu-
Nagesias have still not been able to avoid becoming bond- slaves, or
kamiya, seokia, haroaha, charoaha, they have not been able to
escape, anywhere.”92 Mahasweta Devi narrates the story in this way
that she shows the picture of every aspect of real India.
She believes that we are the real exploiters of nature as well as the culture of poor adivasis. She discusses her values, culture, myth and how all these aspects of their life are connected with nature and how they are losing their culture, identity due to new developmental policies.

‘Water’, her wonderful piece of work in Five Plays, Devi raises these issues connecting with the social problems. In this story, Maghai Dome is traditional water diviner whose village is suffering from drought. Through this character, Devi shows all the cultural and ethical angles of poor low caste community. “Maghai Dome knows all about water. Every year he spots the place, and Santosh digs, and there’s a new well.”93 Santosh, the village head, a local big landowner and moneylender, has used relief fund of poor for his own desires. Devi presents two different characters in her story- one is Maghai who “is water diviner, he worships the water, draws out the hidden water.”94 The other is, Santosh who acts as spokesperson of the backward, dalit, rural farming community but in reality, he exploits the poor. Through Maghai, Devi shows love of nature. Maghai calls Ganga River a holy mother, mother of nether Ganga. “This is how I’ll go circling and praying for water. Give us water. Give us water. O holy mother, drown the earth under water, and release me from your charm.”95 Maghai believes that the river Ganga is “the preserver of life, you the nurse. You lord it over being and creation, life and death.”96 He tells us that nature is our mother who takes lots of pain for her children and it is our duty to preserve
her and ask her for forgiveness if we hurt her. “Offer your puja here, then blast the soil, but begs forgiveness of the Mother Earth before you do that. Tell her, we hurt you for water, mother Earth, and do not hold it against us.”

Maghai is so emotionally attached with the river Charsa that he says “she and I are old lovers, I hunt for water, a water diviner, I point out where water lies hidden, but the water’s not for us.”

His wife, Phulmani also believes that her husband and Charsa river have a deep relationship and calls her co-wife. “When the water rises in the Charsa, my man rushes to her, he talks to the river, flirts with her.”

Maghai’s love for water is so intense that when he is killed, he tells his wife at his last breath. “It’s the Bhagirath of the nether Ganga here, wife. I can’t let them carry me as a corpse into their bloody morgue. My last journey will be with the water.”

On the other hand, through the character of Santosh, she presents the hunter of poor, oppressed people. He has used the total relief fund to fulfil his own desire, everything going to his belly.

Mahasweta Devi believes that the problem of naxalism is the outcome of exploitation. “Stealing from the relief funds as a hereditary business.” This stealing prepares people as naxalite. “The naxal terror raises where the moneylender is evil and the landowner too.” With this issue, she also presents their ethical, cultural values before the readers. She expresses “Domes, the Chandals, the keots, the tiors, the lower castes never lie. They never speak a lie, they’d never bear a lie.”
Mahasweta says that these people not only love their ancestors but give honour to them even after their death. They inherit the knowledge, skill and culture from their forefathers just as Maghai. “He draws on the knowledge that he has inherited from his ancestors to divine water.” Maghai is not ready to quit from the job of water diviner even after so much exploitation because “it’s a job handed down to me by my ancestors. I’ll be doomed to hell if I betray that trust.” Maghai believes that his ancestors have given him this responsibility. He tells his son that the mother Ganga has chosen him or her ancestors as her priest. “You’re my chosen priest. I’m the goddess, the nether Ganga, whenever men dig for a well or a pond, you’ll gather the offerings, pray for water, and go around looking for where the water lies hidden till I tell you where to dig.” Maghai feels proud that he has inherited the power or knowledge from his great ancestors. He loves his job and never thinks of charging fees for divining water. He has deep respect for his ancestors. That reason stops him to quit the job. “How can I refuse to come for a job that’s been handed down to me by my ancestors, a job that I owe to my caste?” Maghai is hostage to the myths delivered to him by his ancestors and that are forever lodged in his memory validating the discrimination his community faces.” But even then he shows the determination and emotional attachment to his ancestors. Not with water, Maghai shows concern for the mother earth also. He tells about Santals who had Sing Bonga, a supreme God to create the earth. “The earth crawled with
sinners. He burnt it down to ashes. Then he drowned it in a deluge of water. Then, he gathered earth from the mouth and the arse of the earthworm and made a new earth all over again.” These myths are connected with his job and even after the cruel exploitation of his people; he believed in and had respect for his ancestors’ skill. But the other people like Dhura, Maghai’s son have belief in other Gods/Goddesses who provide them a happy life. He mentions the name of “Manasa, the snake goddess, or Bhanjo the goddess of rains, or mother Baram, the goddess of forests.” “Manasa is the protecting deity against snakes and snakebite and the ruler of the snake.” Their myths are connected with nature and customs. Holi is the festival of colours “connected to Krishna as the divine lover, and celebrated with people smearing and spraying one another with colored powder and colored water.” India have different customs and rituals in this festival. But as Phulmani says “My mother-in-law would buy a new pitcher on the day of the Holi festival. That was the custom in the family.” Their old and oral tradition has great influences of myths, natural surroundings and their history. They have a rich resource of oral narratives in the forms of songs, riddles etc. These songs have the stories of love, rituals, joy and sorrow, customs, festivals, history, legends. Like Phulmani sings during the festival of Holi:
“O my darling Krishna’

O my golden boy!

People run after gold,

But they don’t care to look at

My golden boy.”⁷¹⁴

Not only here, we find in Mizo tribal Christians that they are entirely devoted themselves into the celebration of Christmas and Easter. Their song reflects their zeal and enthusiasm for the Christmas:

“Christmas comes to mark the Lord’s birthday,

Tlazawng begins to sprout and to bloom;

Nursed by winter’s light and night’s clear dew

Every morn it blooms more prettily

Tlazawng flower, pretty as young maids face,

I’ll call your “fair bloom” as your nick name

I wish you could keep blooming for ages,

And be the famed non- fading flower.”⁷¹⁵

Their songs have affinity with nature and they have used symbols and metaphors from nature. These songs shows their love, rituals and joy which are connected to their God/Goddesses.
“The Shankhini forms the edge of the sari the mother wears,

The Kajaliya forms the collyrium to adorn the mother’s eyes,

The Chitibora forms the mother’s bodice,

The Chandrabora forms the jewellery at the parting of the mother’s hair,

O holy mother manasa!

Into the water now on your immersion.”\textsuperscript{116}

All these songs expresses that “singing is older than speech. In singing the human being has always expressed his relatedness with his forces, with the totality of life. In his speech, he expresses his relationship to things. Song is the primeval communion of all, the ancient amicable-inimical closeness of nature whose pulse educated its rhythms. Speech is acquired separation….song is magic.”\textsuperscript{117}

Mahasweta Devi supports the view of Partha Chatterjee about nationalism:

\textbf{Nationalism sought to demonstrate the falsity of the colonial claim that the backward peoples were culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the conditions of the modern world. Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonized people; it also asserted that a backward nation}
could ‘modernise’ itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of ‘modernity’ on which colonial domination was based.\textsuperscript{118}

Nationalism also denies the discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity. These terms have some similarities but they are not same. The terms “race and ethnicity have been used to set the ‘norms and limits’ of the nation’s imagined community.”\textsuperscript{119} The first thing to note is that these terms do not mean the same thing, although they have some similarities. Taking ‘race’ first, it is important to realise that all constructions of racial difference are based upon human invention and not biological fact. There exist no objective criteria by which human beings can be neatly grouped into separate ‘races’, each fundamentally different from the other. Racial differences are best thought of as political constructions which serve the interests of certain groups of people. Theories of racial difference are often highly selective in choosing certain biological ‘facts’ in making distinctions. Skin colour has often been the primary sign of racial difference and a frequent target of racialising discourses, often taken as evidence of some form of ‘natural’ difference between, say, white and black Africans. We tend not to think of people with different eye colours as fundamentally different, yet this is just as much a biological ‘fact’ as skin colour.
“In short, we are proposing that our perceptions of racial difference are constructed socially for particular political purposes, and are, of course, open to contestation and change.”\textsuperscript{120} ‘Race’ as a category is the result of this social and historical process which we can call racialisation. Racism is the ideology that upholds the discrimination against certain people on the grounds of perceived racial difference and claim these constructions of racial identity are true or natural.

Both ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ are concepts used to posit a common bond or identity between individuals. But whereas ‘race’ tends to prioritise physiological features as evidence of similarity between individuals, the parameters of ‘ethnicity’ tend to be more wide. As Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis helpfully explain:

“Ethnic groups involve the positing of boundaries in relation to who can and cannot belong according to certain parameters which are extremely heterogeneous, ranging from the credentials of birth to being born in the right place, conforming to cultural or other symbolic practices, language, and very centrally behaving in sexually appropriate ways.”\textsuperscript{121}

Ethnicity tends to involve a variety of social practices, rituals and traditions in identifying different groups. “Although ‘race’ and ethnicity are not synonymous, both can be used as the grounds for discrimination.”\textsuperscript{122} Members of particular ethnic groups or ‘races’ might find themselves disqualified from certain positions of power.
It is possible that ethnic and racial identities can be used as valuable resources for a particular group and also “to a tradition or inheritance of cultural and historical treasures.” Mahasweta also discuss such historical treasures of great heroes. Mahasweta’s novels depict the erased, forgotten history of tribal leaders, heroes and warriors and try to recreate them as the role models. Her fiction depicts the ground reality, the solidity of facts because “she believes fiction must stem from actual, historical facts.” She tells the great legendry stories of Chotti Munda, Birsa Munda, Bashai Tudu and Titu Mir. These stories of Chotti Munda, Birsa Munda and Titu Mir “re-examines the dominant nationalist history and exposes its elitist bias by focusing attention on the neglected and marginalized locations.” “Conventionally, history has been understood as the written record of the dominant power centres.” It has tended to deal with political landmarks and individual personalities to promote the idea of a national tradition. It is also a cultural statement of the dominant in the society at a particular time, reflecting its norms, practices and moral preferences while simultaneously getting conditioned by these.

“History, as projected by the mainstream discursivity, proposes to capture the past. It evaluates and confirms, within the ambit of its ‘past recordings,’ the civilizations of the past, their material achievements and their institutional arrangements, follows their trajectories and their survival/decline.” In all these aspects, history has become increasingly unstable and problematic. Both, its
ontological and epistemological status have been debated. And so, the mode of representing and understanding history has become problematic in recent times. Postmodernism contests the efficacy of history in its proposed function and locates gaps and spaces in its tasks of evaluation and recording. It also undermines and debates the claims of the historical discourse regarding the ‘objectivity’ and ‘authenticity’ of its accounts.

“The subaltern groups are always subject to the dominance of the other, even when they rebel and rise up.” According to the subaltern school of historians, Indian history has always been dominated by elitism. It has originated as an ideological product of the ruling elite. And so it attributes all the major achievements in the history of the Indian nation to the elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas.

Traditional historical discourse is fraught with gaps and absences. The gaps are a product of the process of marginalisation. Revision and rewriting aim at filling these gaps by making an attempt to bring the margins to the center. “Mahasweta makes an attempt at rewriting the historical “givens” by depicting in her writings the struggles of the marginals against oppression and discrimination by the mainstream elite.” By making the tribals the subject of most of her works, she challenges the absence of their stories in the recorded literary history. By centering the tribals’
struggle in her works, she reinscribes the marginalized history of the subaltern into the national/postcolonial historiography.

“Mahasweta participates in process of this historical ‘correction’ through her creative works which function as counter-literary and counter-cultural consciousness formation instruments whereby the non-heroes emerge as heroes and certain mythico-historical narratives get liberated from their conventional epistemological binds.”  

Through her work, she aims to record and recreate the tribal struggles and revolts which are easily vanished or forgotten in the official history of the country. She visualizes the gap between the movements of freedom by the tribals and by the mainstream. In **Chotti Munda and His Arrow**, she writes:

“The August movement did not even touch the life of Chotti’s community. It was as if that was the Diku’s struggle for liberation, Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indian. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle.”

Devi deals with the long history of oppression. Her **Bashai Tudu** and **Mother of 1084** traces the events of naxalite movements while her **Aranyer Adhikar** and **Titu Mir** deals with the history of the past.

In **Titu Mir**, Mahasweta Devi visualizes the socio-economic consequences of the permanent Settlement Act, especially its impact on ordinary farmers. Devi tells us about the life of Titu Mir as well
as his growth as a hero or warrior against the exploitation. She presents him “as a strong, powerful and assertive hero”\textsuperscript{132} who cannot bear the pain of ordinary man. “Titu is like some uncrowned emperor, born into our house by mistake. Ever since he was a boy, he has been unable to tolerate injustice. He’d give his shirt to the needy, he’d pour out grain for visiting fakirs.”\textsuperscript{133} Such love for poor and hatred for exploiters has made him a great warrior. With his heroic qualities, Titu emerged as a messiah for the common people—the ordinary farmers, peasants, weavers who had been exploited at the hands of rich owners, planters, government officials and their agents. He came as an avatar to release the ordinary people. In his part of the country, people were facing the crisis of food due to the indigo plantation and excessive tax/revenue had made their condition worse. Even at the time of natural calamities, no one had come to help them. Titu revolted against such ignorance and oppression. After his meeting with Syed Ahmed, he found his path with the sword to fight against exploitation and exploiters. “His circumstances and the times had been molding him for a long time. When people had tried to frighten him with ghost stories as a child, he would demand that a ghost be brought and shown to him. The boy Titu had wanted a leopard as a pet. And now, after so many years, he had found the charm, the incantation that banished fear.”\textsuperscript{134}

Devi also raises the issue of Hindu-Muslim conflict through her work. Titu had raised his head against the corrupt zamindars
but it became the matter of people of particular religion. Krishnadeb believes that “the whole affair was pure. Muslim religious fanaticism. Muslims, in his eyes, were both contemptible and hateful. He was zamindar, and a Hindu. His pride as lord of the land has been wounded by this humble farmer’s son’s insult to his men.” Each and every word of the book *Titu Mir* depicts the sufferings and deplorable situation of farmers. The British East India Company wanted to make more money by sucking the poor farmer’s fertile land. “This indigo farming is such a curse! The planters and the zamindars talk and plan among themselves, and the poor farmers know nothing of it.” Our own zamindars were not worried about our farmers and our land. “They’re happy just to get their rent in. They can see the most fertile land being staked out, how much of a crop do they expect from poor soil? Yet they go on raising the tax. The zamindars and the planters are turning this land to ashes: they’ll bury it yet.”

Through this piece of work, Mahasweta Devi has given the true historical events that occurred in colonial India. The Indigo Revolt was a peasant movement against the Indigo planters in Bengal in 1859. There, farmers refused to sow the seeds of indigo plant. It was spread in Murshidabad, Birbhum, Narali etc. The zamindars were also the targets of these peasants. It was also considered as non-violent revolt which was later adopted by Mahatma Gandhi. It affected the government and they appointed Indigo commission. The revolt was necessary because “from Nadia
to Barasat, had laid out indigo plantations and poured poison into good rice-bearing lands.”

So, the ordinary farmers knew that the Britisher never wanted any progressive step towards Indian people. “You think the company will do justice to poor peasants? It never has and it never will. Get ready for war.”

Mahasweta Devi has given the account of Sanyasi Revolt in Titu Mir which was started in the late 18th century in Bengal. “The Sanyasi Revolt had begun with the attack on the Company’s plantations in Dhaka. Though it was called the Sanyasi revolt, fakirs, sadhus, weavers, farmers, potters, labourers- everyone participated in it and it had gone on for 18 long years.” History tells that the revolt was the outburst for mainly three reasons: religious tax was increased by the local landlords and Britishers for Sanyasis who travelled from North India to the different places of Bengal; secondly, crop failures, famine killed 10 million people in Bengal but the government officials never came forward to help them; third, in 1771, 150 saints were put to death for no reason. This caused a great revolt which Devi highlights in Titu Mir. Titu Mir is also a historical legendary hero, a rebel who fought against zamindars and Britishers strongly and put up an impressive armed resistance. This hero never had gun but he made the powerful weapon as bricks and unripe fruit, spears and swords. But “the lathi had always been his first and favorite weapon.”

Devi writes “when Titu Mir raises his lathi even a fly is not suffered to come within its range.” Though he had power yet he also had great
love and concern for his own people. He had a power to draw the people’s attention through his words. His words lit a fire in the heart of his group: “Today we fight for the honor of the bamboo fort. We don’t have heavy ordnance as they have, yet we will still fight to keep our fort unbroached”¹⁴³; “if one mujahid dies a thousand will be born to take his place.”¹⁴⁴ Such words created a hope of freedom in the air. They believed that the “history will be rewritten” and Titu Mir will become a legend. “Some months later the English and Bengali newspapers will get wind of the story and vilify Titu Mir; they will bay for what little remains of the Wahabis’ blood. And hired historians will swear that Titu was a thorough communal fanatic.”¹⁴⁵ But he was forgotten by the modern civilized mainstream of Indian society.

“Interrrogations of anti-colonial nationalisms on the grounds of their alleged elitism make two important points.”¹⁴⁶ First, anti-colonial nationalism can result in the replacement of a Western, colonial ruling class with a Western-educated, ‘indigenous’ ruling class who seem to speak on behalf of the people but function to keep the people disempowered. Second, representations of nationalist struggle tend to celebrate the inspirational activities of individual members of the elite and do not recognise the role played by less privileged individuals or groups in resisting colonial rule.
Mahasweta Devi also believes what Antonio Gramsci and Michael Foucault “have explored the ways in which representations of Indian nationalism either ignore the contributions made to anti-colonial struggles by the masses, or explain their activities in such a way that the particular and local forms of ‘subaltern consciousness’ are not represented adequately.” The term ‘subaltern’ is explained by Ranajit Guha in his essay ‘On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India’.

“The term ‘subaltern’ is used to signify the many different peoples who did not comprise the colonial elite. These might include ‘the lesser rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle-class peasants’, although members of the subaltern classes could work either for or against the interests of the elite depending on the situation.”

Guha’s essays describes that contemporary representations of Indian anti-colonial nationalism tend to place the subaltern classes as subject to the whims of the elite. Hence, Indian nationalism often reads as ‘primarily an idealist venture in which indigenous elite led the people from subjugation to freedom... The history of Indian nationalism is thus written up as a kind of spiritual biography of the Indian elite. Guha renders these representations suspect on the grounds that they are locked inside a certain way of thinking about Indian nationalism that privileges elite consciousness over subaltern consciousness. The activities, efforts and decisions made by
members of the subalter classes are rarely regarded; and when they are, Guha argues that little attention is paid to the specific forms and functions of their insurgency. Nor is the conflictual relationship between elite and subaltern groups explored. “As Guha puts it elsewhere in ‘Selected Subaltern Studies’, the rebellious subaltern too often ‘is excluded as the conscious subject of his own history’.”

In the same way, Titu Mir’s name has vanished as it was never there. He fought and fought only against oppression and only for the poor people. He was the inspiration for those people who somehow belonged to him. His enemy was horrified even by his dead body because they believed that his dead body was able to inspire for another rebellion. “If we do not burn his body, Titu Mir will not be totally destroyed. If his followers get hold of his dead body they will start another rebellion. Even his corpse is dangerous.” He fought like a warrior and died on 19 November 1831. Such revolutions of Sanyassis or Titu Mir caught momentum when Gandhiji protested against the Britishers. But we should not forget that these are among the earlier rebellion to show us the path of freedom.

In **Chotti Munda and His Arrow**, Mahasweta narrates the condition of colonial and post-colonial India. She tells that the mainstream never think about their identity and culture. They never give them the place in our history which they deserved. Their
tribal heroes their struggle for preserving their culture and ethnic identity never shakes and inspires mind; never sympathizes mainstream’s heart for them. “It was as if that was Diku’s struggle for liberation. Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indian. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle. In war and independence the life of Chotti and his cohorts remained unchanged. They stand at a distance and watch it all.”¹⁵¹ But even then, their struggle never ends.

Mahasweta Devi says about Bashai Tudu in ‘Untapped Resources’, “Bashai is a real person, around whom a myth has grown. A formidable leader of the oppressed Santhals in the late 70s...he is killed by the police five times but before the file can be closed, Bashai starts fighting again.”¹⁵² He fought against poverty, minimum wages, for water, for the freedom of bonded labours, and for the rights of adivasis. Bashai and his people violated the law and order and disturbed the system of mainstream. He was dead, identified and resurrected again and again in between 1970 to 1976. He also had the same weapons that Titu Mir, Chotti Munda and Birsa Munda had “bows and arrows, sickles, hatchets, pole axes, short spears, throwing spears, multi-headed fish-killing spears, long spears.”¹⁵³ and these weapons took stand against machine guns which cannot “distinguish women and children from the men, mechanically loaded and fired delivering continuous fire.”¹⁵⁴ The story also shows that he had tried his hand in politics also as a member of Communist Party but there also he was treated and
considered as low caste or untouchable despite his education. It makes him a rebel who again and again stood against exploitation and slavery, injustice. He was not ready to accept his defeat. “Bashai’s wringing of the neck of the wind will continue as long as his mission of releasing the human soul from bondage will remain unfulfilled.”

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With the same spirit of freedom, we find another soul ready to fight, named Birsa Munda. He was an Indian tribal freedom fighter and folk hero who belonged to Munda tribe and he was behind the great Munda rebellion against the British rule in India. Mahasweta Devi introduces him with her another star work _Aranyer Adhikar_ in which she talks about the Munda rebellion under the leadership of Birsa Munda. The work was published in 1978 and received ‘Sahitya Akademi Award’.

The Britishers and jotedars, zamindars and missionaries all snatched land from their hands. The work tells that the Munda people suffered and suffered but Birsa Munda emerged as an avatar who came to establish Munda Raj. This work tells that Devi has used their myth to convey several meanings. The tribal myth in which Simboda, the god, in his fury sent a rain of fire down on earth. This stormy fire destroyed everything except one man and a woman who escaped by hiding in a hollow pool of water inhabited by crabs and lived to carry on the race. The second implication is made through a reference to the forest fires that suggest the turmoil
and destruction in the lives of the original owners of the jungles, the tribals. Fire is also seen in its traditional role as the cleansing force that will restore the purity of the tribal culture, its people and the forests after an initial upheaval. Yet another face of fire is witnessed as “‘Ulgulan’, the stormy fire of revolution kindled by Birsa and his followers.”

With the historical events, Devi narrates their culture and beliefs. She also includes many folksongs which narrate their rituals, myths of their origin, beliefs and habits of tribe. Their unwritten songs describe actual happenings of Birsa’s life such as, his childhood the tragedy at Dombari and Birsa’s arrest and his last days. This novel raises the issues of poverty, hunger, the right on forest and agriculture, “the need to come together and fight against oppression.” It also highlights the human weaknesses like betrayal or cheating for five hundred rupees because “Munda has never seen anything bigger than a ten rupee note.”

She also gives references of historical events, the movement of Sardars, the kol insurrection, and the remedial measures of civil and legal administration which became a failure. Devi gives the details of history by the character of Dhani. He is the old man in the story who has seen “five hundred moons” means several stages of Munda movement. He tells the pain of Beth Beggari system and forced labour with no hope. “It is Dhani who recollects the history of Mundas for Birsa’s and for the reader’s benefit.” He reveals the
facts to Birsa the agony and the irony of the time when the Mundas have become slaves in their own homeland. Devi has described the unseen moments of his life as a child; his joy as a young boy. She also depicts the days when superstitions worked more but Birsa was aware of basic facts of science. He was famous among the tribals as a god who prevented the village from cholera with his simple knowledge of medicine, hygiene and preventions.

Mahasweta Devi narrates his story to tell the reader about each and every aspect of Munda’s life and the history which belonged to them. She wants to tell the reader about the struggle they did to preserve their land, culture and their identity. This story of Birsa Munda has made Devi very near and dear to them as she herself tells in her interview with Gabrielle Collu:

They want a tribal identity. That’s why I am so dear to them, so near to them. They treat me as their own. All over India. Because for the first time when I wrote that book on Birsa Munda (Aranyer Adhikar)…they said that for the first time they got their place in history. Indian history did not recognize the tribal fights, tribal rebellions. Never recognized them. Never wrote about them. Never mentioned them.160

Like Mundas, we find the revolts which emerged among Ho tribe. This tribe belongs to Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. The Ho tribe constitutes 43% of total tribal population of the district. They
were traditionally known as fighting Kols. With the Mundas, they participated in the Great Kol rebellion of 1831-32. To protect their identity, their cultural and religious system, they had performed movements. Their movements were mainly religious but all were for preserving their cultural identity. We find ‘Dupub Dharam’ in which the tribal groups had united around the Sal Grove common to all. They believed that it is one of the best ways to protect their identity.

Bhils of Khandesh revolted against Britishers in 1818. They struggled for thirty years in a mass form which was suppressed on the large scale. The hill tribes, Koya and Khonda Dora of Rampa region of Chodavaram rebelled against zamindars and new rules of forest. Several means were applied to suppress them. “Tribal resentment against the imposition of forest laws and feudal system led to the rise of the revolt of the tribes of Jagdalpur region of Chattisgarh.”\textsuperscript{161} The rebels disrupted communication system, attacked symbols of colonial power and tried to seize the town. But it was suppressed in 1910 by the Britishers.

Bhagat movement started in the religious form but later changed into political under the influence of Indian National Congress. Oraon tribe of Jharkhand was in the centre of this movement. Just like Munda revolt, the Santhal rebellion started in 1855 in Jharkhand against the zamindari system and British colonial authority. It was also known as Santhal Hool. “It was led by the
four Murmu Brothers- Sindhu, Kanhu, Chand and Bahirav.”
Santhals, like other tribe live with Mother Nature and earn their livelihood from her products. But during the British raj, the new land revenue system and policies snatched their land from them. They became slaves for indefinite period. Not even this, “the Santhali women who worked under labour contractors were sexually disgraced and used as concubines and comfort women by the money-lenders, zamindars and agents of the Raj.”

The loss of their land, freedom, culture and respect turned them into rebels. They had killed many zamindars and money-lenders. This was the shock for the British Raj but as the weapons, technique didn’t match and the revolt was brutally crushed by the Britishers. Even though, we find that the Britishers praised it with their words. As Charles Dickens said:

There seems also to be a sentiment of honour among them (santhals); for it is said that they use poisoned arrows in hunting, But never against their foes. if this be the case- and we hear nothing of the poisoned arrows in the recent conflict, -they are infinitely more respectable than our civilized enemy. Russians, who would most likely consider such forbearance as foolish, and declare that is not war.

Thus, Mahasweta Devi describes the story of a tribe which has a culture, traditions, ethics, heroes, myths and love for nature. She re-writes the historical experiences of indigenous people. Her work
The Book of Hunter, Titu Mir, Chotti Munda And His Arrow, Imaginary Maps and the story of ‘Water’ shows all these aspects. She records their history and tries to construct a bridge between tribals or natives and the mainstream society. She depicts their culture and lifestyle because she wants that the new modern readers understand and contribute in their development.
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