CHAPTER FIVE

SURVIVAL

Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.

(Judith Butler 29)

Lack of possibilities perpetuates precarity. Precarity has always challenged survival. When it is a situation plagued with contingencies of mammoth magnitude like natural calamities, war and civilian violence then struggling for the survival is less individualistic but when it comes to live on individually an unending life of precariousness then struggle becomes a meaningless utterance lost in the maze of turbulent noises of anarchy. For women living on the margins of society created out of caste and gender forces the life is a representation of perennially challenged survival and living on precarity. Sometimes the system of oppression and subjugation work in the hand of the oppressed to fightback and retort too. Such stolid and silent battles of fightback and survival have been documented in works like Rudali.

Indian society has a hierarchy based on caste. The system of domination is prevalent depending on the hierarchy of caste, class, gender, religion, etc. The marginalized are left with no voice. In the present caste system, Brahmins are dominant, and in the gender hierarchy men dominate the opposite sex. The higher caste landlords traditionally maintain the authority over the village and by virtue of being economically strong they have an upper hand politically as well. Besides they
demand respect from the lower class for their status in the society. But the women of the marginalized class are the worst sufferers of all:

A suffocating patriarchal shadow hangs over the lives of women throughout India. From all sections, castes and classes of society, women are victim of its repressive, controlling effects. Those subjected to the heaviest burden of discrimination are from the Dalit or “Scheduled Castes”, known in less liberal democratic times as the “Untouchables”. The name may have been banned but pervasive negative attitudes of mind remain, as do the extreme level of abuse and servitude experienced by Dalit women. They experience multiple levels of discrimination and exploitation, much of which is barbaric, degrading, appallingly violent and totally inhumane. (Peebles, “Gender and Caste Discrimination in India”)

During the time of Zamindari system in India the status of wealthy families were defined in terms of rudalis they could hire at the death ceremonies of their family members to cry and mourn publicly at their funeral ceremonies. Rudalis are the professional women mourners. They cry for money and weep upon invitation from a family which loses a member. Usually found in Rajasthan hired by the upper class people to cry at the death of any family member rudalis form a marginalized class of the power hierarchy in the society. The professional crying and weeping is accompanied by songs praising the dead, his personality and past deeds. It was regarded as unworthy for the upper class people of certain communities of Rajasthan to cry at the funerals, so rudalis were hired to cry for them. Rudali is one of the notorious orthodox practices where mourning was compulsory expression of
uncontrolled emotions by rolling on ground and beating head and breast accompanied by songs in praise of the dead. Chiefly the poverty-stricken women belonging to lower castes were forced to become rudalis. They were regarded as no less than prostitutes. They were treated as outcaste by the society.

Rudalis are still found in the northern parts of India where the culture of public mourning made by professional mourners were in practice earlier. But with the discontinuation of feudal landlordism and Zamindari system, the Rudali profession is dying out slowly. As discussed, especially the poor and distressed women were forced into the profession, it is clear to note that the status of women in Indian society has been marginalized. The roles that they play are chiefly confined within the four walls of the house. Women do not have any socio-economic rights in the patriarchal society. Rudali is a clear indicator of the marginalized status of women in connection with the socio-political scenario. In some instances, the funerals of aristocrats (such as Zamindaars and Landlords) involved hiring Rudalis sometimes before their death, to make sure that well-known Rudalis come to their funeral to cry out. The fates of the rudalis have been well depicted by Mahsweta Devi in her novella Rudali. It was adapted into a Hindi film by director Kalpana Lajmi. The extreme form of patriarchal hegemony and the caste stratification has created havoc in the lives of the Rajasthani women by exploiting them in many different ways. They have been highly discriminated, exploited and subjugated for their marginalized socio-economic status. And they were mostly exploited by Maliks, Mahajans and Maharajas of the hamlets who were from higher castes chiefly displaying Brahminical patriarchy. Rudalis were made to dress in black and with unkempt hair, are expected to beat their chests, crying and wailing over the dead and even dancing by scattering themselves with vehement
outcry in praise of the deceased. This signifies the barbarous practices of the death rituals. The women of lower class thus were forced to a culture of subjugation and tolerance. The texts of Mahasweta Devi in documenting Indian culture, tradition, beliefs and practices disclose extreme form of marginalisation of women—marginalisation that is caste specific, gender specific, culture specific and society specific.

*Rudali* is the story of survival in an oppressive society. It shows how the protagonist along with the others adapts with her circumstances to overcome the daily hardships to continue living. Anjum Katyal, the translator of the story writes:

In the novella, the text sees an evolution in the central character, Sanichari, who emerges at the end as better equipped to adapt, survive and manipulate the system – in other words, more empowered – than she is at the beginning. The implication is that familiarity with this one life will also familiarize us with the life of a community. The individual is historicized, not highlighted to the exclusion of context. Along with this agenda of historicization runs a harsh, powerful critique of an exploitative and repressive socio-economic and religious system. Confronting this, the author positions the issue of survival with an assertion of belief in the necessity for, and benefits of community.

(Katyal 42)

In the story Sanichari is the central character, but in the context of the story, her predicament is no different from the other members of the community in which she was living. The socio-economic condition was the same along all the people of the Tahad village. It was ruled by the Rajput jotedars who did not miss any
opportunity to make the villagers their bonded labour. The people were all poor and steeped in religious superstition, which is no exception in North Indian villages. The story is set in the mid 20th century India, when exploitation of the Zamindars and Jotedars were at its peak. The opening sentences of the story give the readers a very clear picture of the pathetic conditions of the people of the Tahad village in which the story is set:

In Tahad village, ganjus and dushads were in majority. Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like the other villagers her life too was lived in desperate poverty. Her mother-in-law used to say it was because Sanichari was born on inauspicious Saturday that her destiny was full of suffering. At that time, Sanichari was young daughter-in-law; she wasn’t free to speak up. Her mother-in-law died when Sanichari was still young. She was never able to answer back. Sometimes, the old woman’s words came back to Sanichari. To herself she would say, Huh! Because I was born on and named after a Saturday that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law! You were born on a Monday—was your life any happier? Somri—Budhua—Moongri—Bishri—do any of them have happier lives? (Rudali 71)

The socio cultural constructs of caste and gender is problematized from the very beginning of the novella. Sanichari, a ganju by caste, is represented as gendered subaltern. She is a subject who is both low caste and a woman. Thus she and her likes have to suffer more in the oppressive society. The torment and misery is unimaginable in Sanichari’s life. It is said that when her mother-in-law died in a rainy night, she was all alone and it was left on her to complete the last rituals of the dead mother-in-law.
The fate as the people of Tahad would say was against her. ‘At the time, her husband and his brother, both the old woman’s sons were in jail because of Malik-mahajan Ramavatar Singh. Enraged at the loss of some wheat, he had all the young dushad and ganju males of the village locked up’ (72). Sanichari had also in mind not to keep the corpse overnight, or else she had to bear the cost of repentance rites. ‘And there wasn’t even a cupful of grain in the house!’ (72) It was considered to be an ill omen to keep the corpse overnight. She was forced to run in the rain to drag out the neighbours and for the arrangements of the cremation. ‘She was so busy that there was no time to cry’. (72)

Within three years of Sanichari’s mother-in-law’s death, her brother-in-law and his wife were dead too. The misery and the historic experience of injustice dehumanize Sanichari to a state of insensitivity. That is why Sanichari, and the women like her are presented as un-emotional. She was bereft of her intimate emotions, and gradually she loses her tears. Sanichari was aware that it is the daily struggles under oppression and the everyday realities of injustice and double standards that degrade and dehumanize them. Her struggle to survive, her struggle to earn daily bread leaves her with no tears:

Was one to weep or to worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbours cheaply at the shraddha? In this village everyone is unhappy. They understand suffering.....Everyone understands the fact that Sanichari and her husband don’t shed tears. How is it possible to weep? When you’ve borne three deaths in as many years? Their grief must have hardened into stone within them! To herself, Sanichari had sighed with relief. Is it possible to feed
so many mouths on the meagre scrapings they bring home after labouring on
the malik’s field? Two dead, just as well. At least their own stomach would be
full. (72-73)

Sanichari never thought that she wouldn’t cry at her husband’s death but that was her
destiny. Her husband died, when her only son, Budhua, was six. Her husband died of
cholera by drinking the contaminated milk which was offered by the rich people to the
Shiva idol in the Baisakhi mela at Tohri. Budhua’s father died at the Government
hospital tents, which were laid to treat the cholera victims of the mela. ‘The
government officers didn’t give her any time to shed tears. They burned the corpses
quickly’. (74) The panda of the Shiva temple of Tohri insisted Sanichari to make
ritual offerings before returning to their village as her husband had died there. ‘She
spent a precious rupee and a quarter on a spartan offering of sand and sattu which
Budhua offered as pinda-daan’. (74) When she returned to her village the local priest
of Tahad, Mohanlal got angry, when he came to know about the ritual offering at
Tohri. He threatened her by saying that she has insulted the local priest by obeying the
panda of Tohri. So being helpless and,

In order to appease Mohanlal she was forced into debt to Ramavatar; she
received Rs 20 and put her thumbprint on a paper stating that she would repay
Rs 50 through bonded labour on his fields over the next five years. And, after
paying for Budhua’s father’s shraddha, she was so hardpressed to feed her
little son that she never had time to cry for her husband. (74-75)

It is not that Sanichari did not want to cry over the deaths, but as earlier stated she had
other grave concerns than to cry. She had to appease all with her meagre earnings.
She had to feed her son along with herself with almost no means at all. She will cry because she is now a bonded labour. She will cry because she did not have enough means to feed two mouths. ‘I’m slaving to repay debt. I’ll go home with a handful of sattu—that’s why I’ll cry. Haven’t I reason enough?’ (75)

With all the misery and hardships Sanichari was growing old, ‘and with ways of keeping the stomach fed, Sanichari forgot to cry’. (77) His son Budhua grew up and was married. They had a son. Budhua’s wife had a great appetite and was able to feed herself with all sort of stuffs through her contacts in the market place. Nonetheless their life was still poverty stricken. Budhua while working contracted with fever and tuberculosis. He started throwing blood while coughing:

She could see that he was going to die, and knew that her dreams of building a life around Budhua would never be fulfilled. Even her more modest dreams have never been realized. She had wanted to buy a wooden comb for her hair, to wear shellac bangles for a full year—neither of these dreams had materialized. With time, her dreams had changed shape. Her son and daughter-in-law would earn enough, they would support her, she imagined sitting in the winter sun sharing a bowl of gur and sattu with her grandson—had this last dream been over-ambitious? Had she sinned by wanting too much? Is that why Budhua was wasting away before her eyes? (77)

The basic needs were luxury for Sanichari, but she was denied of that too. Eventually Budhua died. Budhua’s wife ran away with a medicine man leaving her son, Haroa behind. With all this happening ‘she didn’t cry for her son either’. Now it was all up to her to bring up Haroa. She gave all the care to Haroa and brought him up.
well. When Haroa was fourteen, she took him to Lachman Singh for work. Haroa worked very hard for few months and would hand over his pay to Sanichari. But gradually, he got bored and restless. Eventually he ran away with the magic-show lot. Sanichari getting worried searched for him from one market place to another. Again, ‘it didn’t occur to her to cry for him. It felt as if this was bound to happen’. (84) At this point of time Sanichari met her childhood playmate Kalikambli Bikhni. ‘Everyone called her Kalikambli Bikhni because she always wore a ghagra made out of a black quilt.’ (84) They bumped into each other in the market place. They were about to start a fight when they recognised each other:

They settled down in the shade of a peepul tree. They eyed each other closely, before each relaxed in the realization that the other was no better off than herself. Like Sanichari, Bikhni’s wrists, throat and forehead sport no jewellery other than blue tattoo marks, both wear pieces of cork in their ears instead of earrings, their hair is rough and ungroomed. (85)

They both shared their plight with each other. Bikhni’s fate was also no better than Sanichari. Sanichari invited Bikhni to come and stay with her. Bikhni loved housework and within days, she made the house look fresh and beautiful. She also worked at the vegetable patch to raise vegetables. Bikhni also bought lice medicine for Sanichari. Sanichari after a long time slept well:

The lice medicine killed the creatures in Sanichari’s hair. After sleeping comfortably she realized that her sleepless nights had been caused by the lice, not mental anguish. No matter how griefstricken one is, work-worn body is bound to sleep well. (87)
They were having a good time together but soon realized that they ran out of money. At this time, Bhairab Singh, the local jotedar was found murdered. It is quite ironic that even the death of the jotedar becomes an occasion for establishing supremacy and caste honour. The upper caste people like Lachman Sing and his likes do not lament for the dead, but only feared of losing privileges and caste distinctions:

Hai, Chacha! As long as were alive, the lower castes never dared raised their heads. For fear of you, the sons of dushads and ganjus never dared attend government schools! Now, who will take care of all these things? (88)

Their main concern was to keep away the subalterns out of school, and Bhairab Singh was a feared man, so his death was being mourned by Lachman Singh. Even the burial becomes a case of ceremonial exhibition to show their wealth and power among their peers. It becomes a case of prestige to spend as much as they can in such cases: ‘We must perform the ceremonies and burial with pomp and splendour. Dress up the body, place him on a big bed. And inform our entire Rajput clan.’ (88)

Sanichari and Bikhti were worried about their survival. Sanichari then went to see Dulan. Dulan was an elder member of the community who helped others in their hard times. According to Sanichari, ‘he’s a crafty old rogue, but he has a sharp mind’ (89). Dulan somehow knew everything what was happening around. So he suggested Sanichari and Bikhti to work as rudalis:

Amongst us, when someone dies, we all mourn. Amongst the rich, family members are too busy trying to find the keys to the safe. They forget all about tears. Our malik has ordered a fancy funeral. The funeral procession will be
tomorrow afternoon. They need rudalis to wail over the corpse. They’ve got hold of two whores. In the households of the masters, whores weep for the dead. These two were probably Bhairab Singh’s whores at one time, now they are wizened crows. You’ll get money, rice. On the day of the kriya ceremony, you’ll get clothes and food. (91)

The members of the malik-mahajan family did not mourn over the dead body rather low caste women were made to weep over the dead body. The women who cry over the dead on hire are called rudalis. Sanichari was reluctant to take up the job of rudali: ‘Cry? Me? Don’t you know? I can’t shed tears? These eyes of mine are scorched?’ (91) But Dulan insisted: ‘I’m not asking you to shed tears you couldn’t shed for Budhua. These tears are your livelihood—you’ll see, just as you cut wheat and plough land, you’ll be able to shed those tears.’ (91) Eventually she agrees to become rudali because of material constraints.

The oppression of the people by the Rajput malik-mahajans is described throughout by the narrator. These have direct impact on the female members of the society. Sanichari and her likes are worst affected. There are number of instances when the ganju and dushads were punished by their maliks unnecessarily. At the very beginning of the novella Ramavatar, when loses some wheat, he had all the male members of the community locked up. ‘He (Gambhir Singh) burned down many dushad settlements with his own hands, that he ruined hundreds of young girls’ (111). The upper castes and the religious heads, i.e. the pandas and the priests of the temple, work in a general consensus in the suppression of the innocent lower caste people. The dushads and the ganjus had to carry out their instructions according to their
whims, or else they were to face with dire consequences. Sanichari was forced to take loan for her husband's kriya ceremony, as she was threatened by the local priest. It is also insisted that the Rajput Malik-mahajans were the ones who created whores and rudalis out of the lower caste women. Gulbadan was the daughter of Gambhir Singh's whore, but after her mother died, she was forced into prostitution:

Gulbadan looked upon her father's nephew as her brother, though both her father and the nephew considered her nothing but a whore. (116)

The subaltern women are powerless at the hands of these upper caste people. They have their sovereign power over the mind and bodies of the lower caste people. The Rajput Malik-mahajans literally forced the tag of 'whores' and 'randis' on to the lower caste women and created the wailers, who are called rudalis:

Bhairav—Daitari—Makhan—Lachman Singh's of this world treat their labourers and whores alike—they tread them into the mud......What vicious bastards that lot are! The worst is Gambhir Singh. He kept a whore, had a daughter by her. As long as the whore was alive, he kept the child in comfort. When the mother died, he told the girl, a whore's daughter is a whore—practise your profession and support yourself......That girl is now rotting in Tohri, in the randi bazaar. From a five-rupee whore she's down to a five-paise whore.' (91-92)

Though lower caste people were dying of hunger and poverty, the Malik-mahajans funeral procession were held with great pomp and show. The rudalis who can wail better were paid better and fed well. 'Lachman Singh has ordered that ten,
twenty, whatever it takes, he wants good rudalis. Two hundred rupees have been budgeted for this' (92):

Sanichari and Bikhni were hired for the funeral procession. They were served generously with chivda and gur.

As she filled her stomach with chivda and gur, Sanichari thought that perhaps her tears had been reserved for the time when she would have to feed herself by selling them.

At first the randis paid no attention to the two old village women. But Sanichari and Bikhni wailed so loudly and sang such well-chosen phrases in praise of Bhairav Singh that the marketplace randis had to admit defeat. Sanichari and Bikhni wailed all the way to the cremation ground and all the way back. Each of them earned five rupees and two and half sers of rice. (93)

Sanichari and Bikhni became famous as rudalis. In the quest of survival, Dulan has showed them the way to fight. 'So Sanichari and Bikhni fought on. Everything in this life is a battle.' (96) Initially she was worried about the criticism she had to face from the villagers for becoming a rudali, but now she is no longer ashamed of what she was doing. She has learnt the art of survival. Sanichari and Bikhni now can feed themselves well. Rudali is their profession now:

For them, nothing has ever come easy. Just the daily struggle for a little maize gruel and salt is exhausting. Through motherhood and widowhood they're tied to the moneylender. While those people spend huge sums of money on death ceremonies, just to gain prestige. Let some of that money come into

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Sanichari’s home! Everyone wanted them after seeing their performance at Bhairab Singh’s funeral. They were professional. The world belongs to professional now, not to the amateur. Professional mourning for the unmourned dead is a regular business. In the big cities, prosperous prostitutes competed for such jobs. In this region, it is Sanichari who has taken up this business. (96-97)

Sanichari started to learn tricks of her business. She has fixed different kinds of rates for different kind of mourning. For wailing and rolling on the ground, she will take five rupees and one sikka. Wailing, rolling on the ground and beating one’s head, she would charge five rupees two sikkas. Wailing and beating one’s breast, accompanying the corpse to the cremation ground, rolling around the ground there, the rate was six rupees. She could arrange more rudalis too from the randi bazaar of Tohri:

Business prospered. There was such a demand for the pair who wailed at Bhairab Sing’s funeral, that it was almost like a war of prestige. Soon, not just the landlords and moneylenders but the lalas and the sahus began to ask for Sanichari. In fact, when Gokul lala’s father died, he said, Come every day till the kriya ceremony, Sanichari.

Gokul gave them sattu and gur every day, saying, We acquire virtue by feeding you. (97-98)

Mahasweta Devi’s narration is quite ironic and full of disdain when she describes the death of the Rajput landlords and their ways to celebrate it. Nathuni
Singh did not bother to treat his mother with doctors and medicine. 'His mother's left to lie in her excrement' (99). But, 'he's stocking up on sandalwood and sal wood for sensational funeral pyre. Bales of cloth are arriving for distribution at the kriya ceremony.....and his mother's not even dead yet' (99). He actually wanted her to die quickly, so he had taken away the warm quilt in the cold weather. In the same way Nathuni Singh's middle wife too prepared for her father, Mohar Singh's funeral ceremony well beyond before his death. 'My father's cremation and kriya will be the stuff legends are made of. Everyone will talk about it. I want my husband and co-wives to burn with jealousy' (102). Gambhir Singh, another landlord, when realized that he is dying, he started arranging lavish funeral for himself. 'He gave instructions to arrange such a kriya for himself that it would leave everyone stunned. Everyone would realize that a great man had died' (108). Sanichari and Bikhni didn't complain though as these things were helping them to survive. But the war of prestige among the Rajput landlords were beyond the understanding limits of the lower caste people. It helps in drawing a comparison though, between the barbaric Rajputs and the lower caste people, who believed in helping each other among the community:

They (Rajput landlords) don't care about the living, but once they are dead they hold grand funerals and try to raise their prestige.

The whole situation was quite complex. When someone died in a malik-mahajan household, the amount of money spent on the death ceremonies immediately raised the prestige of the family. The status of the rudalis also rose. (100,103)
Sanichari and Bikhni were doing well as rudalis. Sanichari as person was evolving, but all the while her companion was Bikhni. Bikhni was her strength. Her association and sharing with Bikhni that emerge against the backdrop of her tough life offers a dimension of female camaraderie and the bonding that two survivors provide as a support in times of utter helplessness. Sanichari as character further evolves after she was left alone by Bikhni’s absence as well. Bikhni goes to Ranchi, in hope to see her son, but she never comes back. She dies on the way due to asthma. Sanichari was most affected by the death of Bikhni than the others related to her. She was in fear:

"No, not grief, fear. He husband had died, her son had died, her grandson had left, her daughter-in-law had run away—there had always been grief in her life. But she never felt this devouring fear before. Bikhni’s death affected her livelihood, her profession, that’s why she’s is experiencing this fear." (114)

But she was not willing to die rather she wanted to survive in this ruthless world where she had lost everything. She can’t shed her tears for free. Tears gave her food to survive, and she can’t waste it now:

Sanichari didn’t want to die like that. And why should she die? Her husband died, her son died, she didn’t die of grief. No one does. After worst disasters, people gradually bathe, eat, chase away the goat nibbling the chillies in the yard. People can do anything—but if they can’t eat, they die. If Sanichari has survived so much grief, she’ll survive the loss Bikhni. She’s devastated, but she won’t cry. Money, rice, new clothes—without getting these in return, tears are a useless luxury." (114)
Sanichari, feeling helpless at the death of Bikhni, goes to meet Dulan for advice. Dulan advises her not to give up the profession of funeral wailing. He further suggested her to go to Tohri to bring all the whores at the funeral of Gambhir Singh. She was at first hesitant to go to the red light area of Tohri, because her daughter-in-law was also there at the place, but after all it was the question of survival, she had to go:

Bikhni’s dead, Sanichari smiled. Seeing a familiar face in the crowd, she asked—Budhua’s wife? You come too, bahu. Gulbadan, you come along as well. Gambhir Singh has died; by wailing for him and taking their money, you’ll be rubbing salt in their wounds. Don’t hold back. Take whatever you can. Come, come. Five rupees a head, everyone will get rice, and cloth at the kriya ceremony. (117)

Sanichari gathered almost hundred whores from Tohri. Everyone was victim of the malik-mahajans. So it was chance for Sanichari and others to extract money from them. Gambhir Singh’s nephew and his gomastha were astonished at the sight of hundred rudalis:

Gambhir’s corpse stank of rotting flesh. The randi rudalis surrounded his swollen corpse and started wailing hitting their heads on the ground. The gomastha began to weep tears of sorrow. Nothing will be left! Cunning Sanichari! Hitting their heads meant they have to be paid double! He and the nephew were reduced to helpless onlookers. While hitting her head on the ground and wailing loudly, Gulbadan turned her dry eyes in the direction of
the nephew, cast him a leering wink and grinned. Then, listening to Sanichari’s cry, she rejoined the chorus. (117-118)

This is a very important juncture in the story. Sanichari and the others who were all victims of the malik-mahajans come out triumphant on this occasion. The narrative heightens the resistance and subversion of power. Gulbadan’s ‘leering wink’ to her nephew is an instance where Gulbadan for the first time felt powerful. She gets her revenge as her exploiters were mere spectators.

Though the protagonist of the story is Sanichari, the wailing and crying is a representation of the painful lives of all these women along with their toils to survive. The wailing and mourning in the scene is euphoria full of mockery of the mindless customs and regulations of the society. The euphoric celebration of their vindication is what this group of wailers perform at the death of the man who represented the institutionalised defiling of their lives all along. Through the plight and survival of Sanichari, Mahasweta Devi portrays the fate of others like her. Sanichari’s evolution is the evolution of the whole community who are represented as united from the very beginning as against the Rajputs who were vied for each other’s blood:

In Rudali, for example, the plot traces the evolution of the protagonist, Sanichari, from a suppressed ‘voiceless’ subaltern woman to an empowered and empowereing agent of resistance carrying the potential of deconstructing the exploitative forces. Recounting Sanichari’s saga of suffering, Mahasweta puts her in a specific socio-historical context . . . The central character is introduced next, not as an individual, but as a member of the caste she belongs to. Right from the beginning, Sanichari is firmly embedded in her context as
her ‘likeness’ to others in the similar situation is repeatedly stressed . . . She shares a common fate with the other low-caste villagers. (Gupta 64)

Sanichari is not individualized by the author while describing her. Her manners, her clothes, her appearance, and above all her fate are no different from the others. ‘Like other villagers, her life too was lived in desperate poverty’ (70). The narration is detached and de-sentimentalised while describing the characters. All through the story the author establishes that Sanichari’s fate is common and same as others. Through the plight of Sanichari, Mahasweta touches all the other lives of the society. The narration is journalistic which is usually Mahasweta Devi’s mode of writing. Devi historicizes Sanichari’s character. She gives a wide detail of the prevailing condition of the Tahad village.

Every incident which takes place in the text in Sanichari’s life has connection with the exploitative system around her. Religion plays further role in exploitation of the subalterns. Sanichari’s husband dies because of drinking contaminated milk offered by the rich to the Shiva idol. She is forced to take loan from Ramavat Singh for the ritual ceremony. Her son Budhua dies by contracting tuberculosis while hauling sacks of wheat. Her daughter-in-law leaves her because of poverty. In the same way, her grandson runs away as he could not withstand the daily struggle for survival. Like Sanichari everyone undergoes same fate. They have limited source of employment; either to work under the harsh conditions of Rajput jotedars or to become prostitute. Sanichari’s daughter-in-law, Parbatia runs away to become a prostitute in Tohri.
Dulan is a major character in the story who further historicizes the text, thereby offering a critique to the upper class Rajputs. He explains the hypocrisy of the Rajputs to other villagers. He also presents an important oral history which describes the present condition and its cause. The author too acknowledges it:

The tale Dulan told them was very significant; it explains clearly how the ruthless Rajputs infiltrated this remote area of tribals and, from zamindars, gradually built themselves up to the status of jotedars, establishing themselves as the masters of the area. The Rajputs were warriors in the army of the Raja of Chottanagpur. About two hundred years ago, in protest against the cruel oppression practised against them, the kols revolted. The Raja immediately sent his army to put down the uprising. Even after the rebellion was suppressed, the Rajput warriors' aggression was not sated. They went on a rampage, killing innocent tribals and burning down villages. So Harda and Donka Munda started sharpening their arrows and a fresh tribal uprising was imminent. Then the Raja sent his Rajput sardars to the sparsely populated Tahad region. He told them, Take as much land as is covered by throwing your swords in the air... That's how the Rajput's settled in Tahad, and how they came to be masters of the region. (94-95)

Dulan explained to Sanichari and Bikhni how the Rajputs exploit the poor with the help of the state. It was them who created whores out of the poor women, who were kept as mistress and later thrown to the market place. Dulan explained that the prostitutes too were victims of the rich Rajputs like them. They are not the outcastes. He advises them not to hold any prejudices against them. He further explains how the
Rajput landlords force the poor to give up their land and treat them as slaves. Now they grab the lands with the guns:

There may be litigations an ill will between the maliks, but they have certain things in common. Except for salt, kerosene and postcards, they don’t need to buy anything. They have elephants, horses, livestock, illegitimate children, kept women, venereal disease and a philosophy that he who owns the gun owns the land. They all worship household deities, who repay them amply—after all, in the name of the deities they hold acres which are exempt from taxes and reforms. (95-96)

The Rajput land lords are shown as controlling every aspects of life of the lower caste people of the village. The law and order was on their hand. They owned the deities and they can do whatever they felt like. And to further aggravate the situations of the poor, religion is not shown to give any solace or relief to villagers. On the contrary they further exploit the impoverished, with their demands of rituals and ceremonies. But though the villagers were oppressed, and submit to the power of the Rajputs, they were not colonized. The villagers criticize their hypocrisy and shallowness. Sometime they tried to manipulate their weaknesses for their own good. At one time, when Ashrafi’s mother left a calf in Sanichari’s care, the calf was borrowed by Ramavatar Singh. His uncle was on the death bed, the calf’s tail was placed on his uncle’s hand to help him cross the ‘Baitarani river—the mythical river that separates this life from the afterlife.’ (76) Sanichari’s debt was not paid off by that time. It was a great opportunity for her to clear her debt:
Sanichari saw that the room was full of people; all Ramavatar’s peers and kin were there. She suddenly thought of a scheme. From outside the door, she loudly pleaded, You, who are the benefactor of the poor! This poor woman begs you to reward the service she did you today! Please wipe out the debt due! Write it off as repaid! (76)

Thus her debt was wiped off. In the same way Sanichari, Bikhni, and all the whore of the Tohri market find way to survive by extracting money from their exploiters by acting as rudalis. Dulan ganju shows them the way.

Sanichari’s development from oppressed to empowered was not all by her own. The village community, Bikhni and and especially Dulan played a larger part in her evolution from a mere spectator to an agency.

Dulan is the first character highlighted in the text with voices of his own. He had knowledge of the world. He knew how the system works, and also knew how that system can be exploited to their benefits. He acted as the mouthpiece of the author. He was also the guide to Sanichari and her likes:

He embodies the resistance will, the sharp intelligence, the irreverence, the cynicism, and the cunning, that the subaltern uses to subvert the total control of the masters. He is also, as we have seen, the oral narrator of their history, the one who constantly questions the authority and teaches the others to be critical of it. It is Dulan who at every stage contributes to the growing empowerment of Sanichari, who shows her how to adapt and cope. (Katyal 48)
At every point of time Dulan intervenes in the life of Sanichari and teaches her to use the tools of survival. When Sanichari’s son dies and her daughter-in-law leaves her, Dulan manages a job for her in the construction site of the railway line. When Sanichari and Bikhni were left with no money, it was Dulan who advised them to take up the job of the rudalis. He teaches the nuances and tricks of becoming a successful rudali. He even accompanied them to meet Bachchanlal, Bhairav Singh’s account keeper to negotiate the deal so that they could get a good offer. He advised them to keep their ears open in the market place, so that they could get the news of deaths, which would help them to get the jobs of rudali. When Bikhni dies, Sanichari was in deep despair; Dulan helps her to recover from that state with his intelligent words of advice. With Dulan by her side Sanichari gets empowered. She starts to believe in herself:

Sanichari went to see Dulan.

He grasped the gravity of the situation at once, said, Look, Budhua’s ma. It’s wrong to give up one’s land, and your profession of funeral wailing is like your land, you mustn’t give it up. (114)

Sanichari was also reluctant to go to the Tohri market to meet the whores and bring them as rudalis at the funerals. Before it was the duty of Bikhni, but as she was dead, it was left on Sanichari to go to them. She was also worried about the fact that people would talk about it, as her daughter-in-law was also a whore at the Tohri market. But Dulan’s insistence brings back her confidence and clears her doubts. Dulan insists:
Don’t weigh right and wrong so much, leave that kind of thing to the rich. They understand it better. We understand hunger..............What one is forced to do to feed oneself is never considered wrong. (116)

Dulan further makes her understand to look at the rudali work as pure professionalism. Dulan also insists her to become the president of the rudalis and make a union, so that they can extract more benefits from the malik-mahajans. Mahasweta Devi uses Dulan as a tool to empower Sanichari. Though he is a male, he is not presented with patriarchal authority. Gendered hierarchy is sidelined while presenting the character of Dulan:

Mahasweta Devi refuses to foreground the gender issue vis-a-vis community relations; in the process she bypasses even a hint of patriarchy. That Dulan might be perceived as a male playing mentor and guide to helpless females is not a concern of the author; and as result Dulan and Sanichari interact as peers, unselfconsciously free from any hint of asymmetry in their relationship. (Katyal 48)

The solidarity of the poor villagers shown in the text is another important aspect which helps Sanichari to evolve, empower and survive. The fellow villagers too understand the sad plight of Sanichari and so do not condemn her for not weeping on the deaths of her family members. ‘Everyone understands the fact that Sanichari and her husband don’t shed any tears. How is it possible to weep when you’ve borne three deaths in as many years?’ (72)
It is not only Dulan but other villagers too help her out in the time of her despair. When Sanichari was left with her six month infant grandson, she was having a very hard time bringing him up. Dulan’s wife comes to her rescue. She takes the baby to her daughter-in-law who was also nursing to breast feed the baby. She also helps her in finding a job. In the same way, Parbhu ganju and Natua dushad help her out in other household works. The village people are also sensible enough not to talk about Sanichari’s daughter-in-law, who becomes a whore, lest Sanichari would get hurt:

But there are some debts that can never be repaid.

Dulan and his family looked out for her, and Parbhu ganju said, You’re completely alone now. You’re like an aunt to me, why don’t you shift your hut into my yard?

Natua dushad sold her vegetables for her in the market. If her fellow villagers had not rallied around in this manner, would Sanichari have survived? No one mentioned that Budhua’s wife had become a whore. (81)

Time and again Sanichari acknowledges the help she received from the fellow villagers. She understands that solidarity among the poor and oppressed is an essential tool for survival:

In order to survive, the poor and oppressed need the support of the other poor and oppressed. Without that support, it is impossible to live in the village even on milk and ghee provided by the malik. (82)
It is quite interesting to note that the whores who are considered as outcastes and looked down by the society are also accepted as the members of the society. Sanichari, at first resisted to go to the Tohri market whore house, accepts them as their community too. Mahasweta Devi through the voice of Dulan makes Sanichari understand that the whores too are not different or outcastes. Like Sanichari and others they are too victims of exploitation at the hands of the malik-mahajans. ‘It’s these Rajput malik-mahajans who have created so many randis’ (94). Like Sanichari, the randis too were professional and did their work to feed their bellies.

In the context of the story Bikhni is very important, who had a great influence in the development of the character of Sanichari. They were not related with each other. They accidentally stumble upon each other in the local mela. Sanichari meets Bikhni at a crucial juncture of the story. It was the time when Sanichari’s last hope, her grandson leaves her. They very quickly bond because they share lives of similar hardships. They both were abandoned by their families, their social and economic conditions were no better, and they both were old and searching for means for survival. Anjum Katyal writes:

Untethered thus from the ties of family and all that family imposes by way of roles, duties and self-imaging. Sanichari and Bikhni are in highly unusual situation for Indian women, one that allows them to bond a friendship and partnership which, free from preconceptions and societal norms, can, in a sense, invent itself. Socially and financially they are equals; both are equally without family, equally abandoned: on the basis of their common situation
they construct their companionship. Once again the author turns disability into an enabling force. (Katyal 57-58)

Bikhni was more rebellious and has a carefree attitude unlike Sanichari. Bikhni was a fighter and when she was abandoned by her family, she was ready to beg at the stations and survive, which shows her fighting attitude to survive. She was bold and not concerned with the religious and societal norms. Her carefree attitude influences Sanichari in the long run. She takes the idea of becoming rudali instantly without any hesitation unlike Sanichari. She also readily agrees to go to the Tohri market to bring the whores for work without hesitation, whereas Sanichari was concerned about what people may talk about them.

Bikhni stayed in Sanichari’s hut and became part of the village community. It was only after meeting with Bikhni, Sanichari starts understanding the world all the more. Bikhni helps her keeping the house clean and works on the vegetable patch to grow vegetables for her. Sanichari finds her peace for the first time at the company of Bikhni. Bikhni fuels her to become empowered in the course of the novella.

They understand each other and are sensitive towards their emotional state. After the visit of Tohri whose house, Bikhni returns with the news that she saw her daughter-in-law there. Sanichari becomes uncomfortable and refuses to talk about it. Bikhni understanding the situation, silently drops the discussion. Though Sanichari is disturbed by the news, she can’t stop to think of the fate of Parbati. She says to Bikhni:

I wouldn’t have turned her out after Budhua’s death.
No, no, of course you wouldn’t have.

Did she look very poor?

Very.

Sanichari fell silent.

Bikhni tries to understand the gravity of Sanichari’s mental condition and comforts her. Though her daughter-in-law left her abandoning the infant baby, she was still feeling for her sad plight. She was actually on the path of acceptance, shown to her by Dulan and Bikhni. Later in the story she accepts the prostitutes as one of their own.

The depth of their emotional attachment is better understood when Bikhni suddenly announces that she is going for a brief visit to Ranchi to attend a marriage of her nephew’s daughter, also in hope of meeting her son there:

Sanichari said, Well, since you put it like that I won’t say anything. You say you want to meet your son. But will you come back soon? Or will you stay on there?

How can I? That day I had walked out of my home, and I met you by chance. If you hadn’t been there that day, what would I have done?

..........It was a three-mile walk to the bus stop. Sanichari accompanied Bikhni, saw her onto the bus, advised her, It’s eight rupees for a seat. Squat in the aisle, you’ll only have to pay two. (109-110)
In the absence of Bikhni, Sanichari was worried and restless. Sanichari’s restlessness shows dependency and closeness towards her.

She was emotionally most attached to Bikhni. So when she gets the news of Bikhni’s death, she was most shaken. The gravity of loss was much more than the death of husband and son. She was lost and in fear but again it was only after the death of Bikhni, she comes to know herself. It was only after the death of Bikhni and with the advice of Dulan, Sanichari overcomes her fear. She takes the responsibilities of Bikhni on her own shoulders and accepts to lead the whores of Tohri market. Earlier Sanichari was lead by Bikhni, but now she becomes her own leader.

Sanichari’s with her all her personal losses and exploitation, she never gives up hope to survive. At the end of the story she stands triumphed overcoming all the obstacles in her life. She is confident and empowered. She overcomes her inhibitions while interacting with the whore at Tohri. She acknowledges Parbatia as bahu. She calls out all the whores to join her to extract money from their exploiters. ‘All of you come. When you grow old, you’ll have to do this anyway. So while I’m around let me initiate you’ (117):

Nor is it just Sanichari who grows in stature. This triumph is not hers alone. Gulbadan, whose self-worth was shattered when her natural father Gambhir Singh ordered her to submit to the lust of his nephew, calling her a whore like her dead mother, is here in a spirit of vengeance. She turns lament into mockery as she casts, a sneering wink at the nephew over her father’s corpse. Sanichari, fully alive to such ironic overtones of this ritualized, commercialized system of lamentation, foregrounds its subversive potential
when she urges the prostitutes to use it as means of revenge. By the end of this text, the custom of rudali has been politicized. Not just a means of survival, it is an instrument of empowerment, a subaltern tool of revenge. The text literally closes on the clamouring, jubilant cries of the disempowered and the outcast, banded together to invert a howl of grief into a howl of triumph. (Katyal 61)

Though Sanichari is the protagonist of the story, the story does not exclusively deals with the subaltern women. It is focused on the whole subaltern class. As we know Mahasweta Devi denies placing herself as a feminist, she is not only concerned for the cause of the women, but also for the cause of all the subaltern people who are subjected to exploitation. But again according to her, women are at the bottom of that class. ‘Mahasweta Devi’s feminism revolves around the assertion of the women as an individual in her own right. Among the poor and the marginalized communities, a woman is considered to be the property of the landowners and the money lenders.’ (Sen 14)

The text is not fictionalized by subverting the class or by punishing the Rajput malik-mahajans. Rather it traces the root of exploitation and provides means of survival tools to the subaltern class. It presents the existing reality to its readers who are not able to identify themselves with the subaltern class. Throughout the text Sanichari struggles hard to meet her very basic needs. Through this novella and through the character of Sanichari, she presents the case of all the subaltern women who finds it difficult to survive in this class prejudiced nation. Nandini Sen writes:
Several women characters portrayed by Mahasweta Devi belong to these oppressed sections of the society who are forced to fight for their basic sustenance. Caught in the grim battle of class, caste and poverty, her women protagonists chart out their own paths of self-realization. More often than not it is not limited to debunking patriarchy, but attempts a redefinition of the woman’s role in the severest of adverse situations. (ibid. 15)

The experiences of Sanichari and Bikhni in the story help their subjectivity to adapt with all odds and survive. The female subjectivity portrayed through these characters emphasises on the culmination of male hegemony in the traditional bound society. At the end Sanichari’s subjectivity emerges triumphant. She has learnt to survive, and leads the whole community towards survival.

It is obvious that after resistance, the female subjectivity emerges but it faces the constant attack from the patriarchal society and the survival of women amidst all sufferings becomes a big question. The answer of which can be traced in their incessant struggle with patriarchy. Like Social Darwinism where the ‘survival of the fittest’ is the trademark, the survival of women with new identity and subjectivity requires a constant counter-attack on the patriarchal structure which moulds and remoulds its system for perpetual oppression of women. In the survival of female subjectivity women start a new course of existence that befits with the shifting values of patriarchal society, and experiences continual force of oppression. The survival provides a new paradigm of female subjectivity to the Indian women.
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