Chapter 7

Tribal India in Indian Fiction in Translation-III

Mahasweta Devi

Tribal India Cries for Attention

After Gopinath Mohanty, Mahasweta Devi is probably the most famous writer who has dedicated her entire life to the tribal cause. She has been working among the tribals and writing about them for more than three decades. Mahasweta Devi was born in Dhaka in 1926. Her father Ritwik Ghatak was a renowned writer in Bengali. Her mother Daritri Devi was also a writer and social worker. About her family she says:

I was fortunate to be born in a family where both sides were liberal and women were held in great respect. The women were terrors, indomitable, fearless [...] And all received education. At home we were nine brothers and sisters [...] every day was a festival, so much sharing, I don’t see that now. This had a great influence on my work, on my life. (qtd. in Sharma 161)

Mahasweta Devi has witnessed important phases of history such as World War II, the Quit India Movement of 1942, the Bengal famine of 1943, the Partition, and the Tebhaga Peasant Movement. Her involvement with social and political happenings started early. She tried a number of odd jobs, from peddling dyes to
teaching. She married Bijan Bhattacharya at the age of 21. Her son Navarun Bhattacharya is also a well-known writer. However, the marriage did not last long. Her subsequent marriage to Asit Gupta also broke up.

Mahasweta Devi started writing seriously in 1952-53. She contributed to Suchitra Bharat under the pen name Suchitra Devi. From the very beginning, Mahasweta Devi showed an inclination to break away from the conventional pattern of Bengali writing, both at the formal and thematic levels. Her novels reveal a strong sense of commitment to the exploited classes of society—the tribal peasants, the city proletariat, and women. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in our times, Mahasweta Devi is the only Bengali novelist in whose works, one of the main battles of Indian society i.e, feudalism vs. the peasant class, is reflected in its right perspective. Her first novel Jhansir Rani (1956) based on the life of the Queen of Jhansi is a famous work and has been translated into English recently. Mahasweta Devi has won several awards for her literary and social works. The most famous among them are the Sahitya Akademi, Jnanpith, Padmashree and Magasaysay Awards.

Mahasweta Devi has been involved deeply with the tribals and their life in the Chotanagpur region, and she has written a number of novels, short stories and articles concerning tribal issues. This chapter looks at a few of these works. Her writings on the tribals can be divided under two major themes: tribal history and the tribals’ struggle for existence.
Let us first look at her works on tribal history. Mahasweta Devi’s efforts have been to help the indigenous people in reviving their past and to give them a pride of place. Her narratives highlight the rich history and culture of the tribals of the Chotanagpur region which has been lesser known to the mainstream society in spite of the commitment and sacrifice of the tribals. For instance, the tribals had a number of resistance movements and revolts against the colonial masters and they laid down their lives for the country. However, these movements and their leaders have not been given adequate attention and are largely ignored by the mainstream historians and writers. In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Mahasweta Devi explains why she thought of writing about tribal history: “Once a tribal girl asked me ‘When we go to school, we read about Mahatma Gandhi. Did we have no heroes? Did we always suffer like this?’ That is why I started writing about the tribal movements and the tribal heroes” (Devi, Imaginary iii). Of course, the tribals have leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, but they are unsung and their contributions are not highlighted. Today, how much do we hear about the Revolt of the Paharia Sardars of 1764, the Tamar Revolts of 1789, the Munda Revolts of 1820, the Kol Insurrection of 1831-33, the Santal Insurrection of 1855, the Birsa Munda Movement of 1874-1901, or Tana Bhagat’s Movement of 1914 and 1920? Or about tribal leaders such as Dulchand Tudu, Jayaram Murmu, Raghu Murmu, Ganpat Mahoto, Birsa Munda, Lakshman Naik?
Mahasweta Devi’s efforts have been to bring forth the oral history of the tribals to the attention of mainstream society. Through her writings, she urges them to recognize the significance and greatness of tribal life and tribal history. Her novels *Sal Girar Dake* (In the Name of Birthday), *Aranyer Adhikar* (Rights over the Forests), and *Chotti Munda ebang Tar Tir* (Chotti Munda and His Arrow) deal with tribal history. It is worth exploring how the writer combines oral tales, legends and myths with the documented facts in order to reconstruct the past. These three novels record the history of tribal life from the colonial period to contemporary times. The novel *Sal Girar Dake* or *In the Name of Birthday* was published in Bangla in 1984. The story is set in the Eighteenth century. Here, Mahasweta Devi depicts how the East India Company penetrates into the forest areas of Chotanagpur region in the 1750s. Sundra Murmu’s father (a Santal) is the headman of the village. The Santal and the Paharia tribes live a harmonious life, supporting each other in times of difficulties. After the death of Sundra’s father, Sundra takes over as the Majhi or head of the Santals. And after Sundra’s death Tilka becomes the head. Tilka, as a child has heard inspiring stories from his grandmother. She would tell him about the British Raj and in a way prepare him to be a leader. Tilka is inspired by these stories. The Company spreads its business in this region. In this process, the Company introduces a monetary economy as against the traditional barter system of the tribals. In addition to this, the Company starts buying rice from the tribals at a cheaper rate to keep it in stock and to sell it back to the tribals when they are in want. The tribals spend the money in buying ribbons, clothes, bangles, garlands etc. The major blow to the tribals is that the Company opens railways and the postal system in the tribal areas,
destroying the forest. The Paharias and the Santals are united in their struggle against the British. Tilka Majhi takes the lead in the struggle. They refuse to pay taxes. They win the battle against the Company by defeating Captain Brook's forces in 1772. This victory is very inspiring and they continue to fight. Realizing the strength and unity of the tribals, the Company adopts foul means. It tries to divide the two communities of tribals by patronizing one of them. Under the leadership of Cliveland, the Company attempts to deceive the Paharias by becoming their benefactors. The Paharias are recruited into the Company's workforce. However, the Paharias also realize their folly, and get united again to fight the British. The British have superior weapons. They win the battle, but with a lot of difficulty. Mr. Brooke, Philips and Cliveland are killed. Among the tribals, Tilka Majhi and Mansa are killed. However, these deaths bring unity and determination among the tribals.

The novel *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977) is based on Birsa Munda's Movement for tribal emancipation. There are different views about the Movement. According to K. S. Singh, contemporary records and the British newspapers considered this to be an agrarian movement. Indian newspapers also seemed to take the same view. Some of these considered it to be the continuation of the Sardars' Movement. According to these sources, Birsa was the tool of the Sardars. They also underlined the anti-Christian and anti-European character of Birsa's movement. The animosity towards the 'dikus,' or the aliens was represented as the motive force behind the movement. The indigenous accounts however, represent him as primarily a religious leader, an incarnation of God, a social reformer, counselling moderation and calling upon his
people to avoid extremist means of struggle. These interpretations view Birsa’s movement as an agrarian, political, continuation of the old Sardars’ Movement, and as being anti-Christian and anti-European. It is worth exploring Mahasweta Devi’s view on the movement by studying the representation of the movement in the novel. Singh further points out that until the post-Independence period, Birsa and his movement were a much-ignored chapter of Indian history. Though Birsa’s movement had a much greater significance, it received much less attention than the Santhal Insurrection of 1855-57. Birsa’s movement was a leap forward in the history of tribal movements in India. He directed his crusade simultaneously against two systems—feudal and colonial. Singh points out that until the movement of 1874-1901, the tribals considered the ‘dikus,’ (the native Zamindars, small kings and petty police officials) their enemies. It was Birsa who exposed the British government as the main enemy of the Munda people and emerged as the hero of his tribe. K.S. Singh rightly points out: “He spoke of a new millennium for his distressed people, of freedom and salvation, status and power, opportunity and fulfilment in the new world in place of the old one which lay shattered within a few decades of colonialism” (Birsa Munda 1). Mahasweta Devi’s choice of the particular historical event, which is a neglected phase of Indian history, gives evidence of her social commitment. Through this novel, Mahasweta Devi exposes the exploitation of the tribals and its effects on their lives—physical as well as emotional. She makes an attempt to give a realistic picture of the movement. She exposes the crookedness, exploitativeness, and callousness of the British government authorities, and the ruthless and wily nature of non-aboriginal landlords, moneylenders and petty officials. The writer picks up the
essential historical factors that were at work in this particular period in the history of
the Munda tribe. Unlike writers who were stimulated by tribal exotica and chose to
romanticize and idealize tribal societies, Mahasweta Devi does not present a
romanticized picture of the Munda tribe. Instead, she portrays the poverty-striken and
insecure lives of the tribal people for whom rice remained an eternal dream, where
life meant wandering from one village to another due to ceaseless eviction by the
‘dikus,’ for whom land reclaimed from the forest was the basis of tribal life. As we
can note in the novel, Birsa’s father Suguna’s idea of happiness lies in getting two
meals of boiled china-seeds, wearing an un-torn dhoti above the knees and sleeping
under the intact roof of a leafy hut. In this poverty-stricken world, even the attainment
of bare necessities fills life with a regal grandeur. Mahasweta Devi portrays Suguna’s
world as follows:

This world of his had rigid borders. In that world one could become a
king, if one got two meals of ghato a day, four handloom dhotis in a
year, the warmth of husk bags in the winter, escape from the clutches
of the money-lender, ‘mohua’ oil for lighting the lamp, black salt for
‘ghato,’ forest roots and honey and meat of wild rabbits and birds.

(Aranyer 51; translation mine)²

The novelist uses an ancient Munda as the narrator, and he tells the history of his tribe
to the younger generation. She describes the system of exploitation in the direct and
accurate language of one who has survived all this exploitation. In prison, Dhani tells
the young Mundas:
Look, the first forefathers of Birsa’s clan had founded Chotanagpur. But someone else became the king and since then outsiders came to our land and forests and snatched away everything […] Ha! Look! The diku wants a horse, the Munda will pay for it. The diku’s wants will be supplied by a Munda. (21)

Mahasweta Devi shows her grasp of history in the foregoing extract. Her ability to detect the numerous historical forces that ate into the life of the tribal peasants is evident in the novel. She also shows evidence of knowing the people and the times by her depiction of the way people like Dhani Munda lived—the manner in which their lives had been intruded upon by the money-lenders, the zamindars, the missionaries, the jails, the courts, the tarred roads, the trains, bayonets, guns, the droughts, the famines, the recruiting agents, and free labour. Along with this, the natural calamities—drought and famine—combined with the feudal trick of hoarding of food grains is well captured by Mahasweta Devi. During the famine, the recruiting agents lure the tribals to the distant tea gardens and take advantage of the famine. It is as if these agents look forward to drought and famine for doing business as suggested by P. Sainath in his book Every One is Happy with a Good Drought (1996).

Mahasweta Devi gives a picture of contemporary social life of the tribals and captures their condition, and prepares them for a rebellion. She brings out the contradiction between the religion of Singbonga (the Munda God) and the mission-sahibs, between the age-old Mundari prohibitions inscribed in Munda’s blood and the
education he received from the Christian missions and Anand Pande, the Vaishnava teacher. She indicates changes that have been taking place in Mundari society through an analysis of Birsa’s thoughts:

[...] something was pulling Birsa away from the Mundari world, out of his familiar life towards the lure of the world outside. It was a terrible attraction, strong and irrepresible.

[...] Mundari life meant a life full of thousands of edicts. Superstitions flowed through every blood vessel of a Munda’s body: today’s Mundari would be tomorrow’s Christian, again a Mundari and Christian again. But whatever your names were, whether you were Suguna, Komta, Donka, Bharami, or Dhani today, and Poulush, Daud, Mothy, Yohan, or Abraham tomorrow, in your blood the Lord Singbonga will always hold sway. Haram Asul’s frown will always be upon you … Birsa knew that it was a great sin even to think of a life different from the Mundari life lived by lakhs of Mundas. But Birsa had committed that great sin. Somewhere in his blood protest and indignation had gathered day by day […] . (40-41)

The following passage depicts Birsa who has lost faith in his old religion:

Birsa felt that strange, unseen powers were gradually overpowering him. He was not able to come back to his old faith. But why couldn’t Birsa become a Christian once and then go to Anand Pande? Why
would it seem to Birsa that his old religion could no more hold and
shelter him? (71).

The novel describes Birsa as being a descendent of the two brothers who
founded Chotanagpur, playing the flute, dancing in the tribal dormitory, and who felt
that the lives of Munda people were like torn wrappers. He felt very sad when at the
end of the day he did not get a bit of salt with his ‘ghato’ (a type of wild rice). His
only ambition was to make his mother a queen by bringing all the sacks of salt and all
the jars of ‘mohua’ oil from the weekly market and laying these at her feet. He is
nostalgic about the golden tribal past, bound to the forest with a strong emotional tie.
When he is inside the forest, he gazes at the blue mountains that merged with the
horizon and gets lost in reveries. At such moments, he saw those primordial men in
his dream. He would see those two brothers crossing the flooded river. He would hear
them proclaiming: All these are ours!” (29). As a child Birsa hears from Dhani about
their heroic struggles. Birsa listens to their stories and is determined to free his
motherland. Even as a child he is determined to learn so as to equip himself for future
struggles: he fights for his father’s lost rights in the Khuntkatti village and recovers
them.

Birsa studies in mission schools with the goal of winning back his father’s
Khuntkatti land. He is attracted towards the prayer meetings, and sings the beautiful
hymns, but a severe confrontation with Father Nottrott and the abuse the missionaries
shower on the Sardars creates disillusionment. He has great respect for the Sardars.
He realizes that “sahib sahib ek topi hai”—all whites, missionaries and the
government wear the same cap (63). He leaves the mission, renounces the Christian religion, stays with a Vaishnava teacher and studies the Indian epics and mythological texts in search of the origins of his tribe. But Birsa feels restless. He always feels that he has come into this world with a mission.

When Birsa lifts a corpse from the village burial ground and takes the coins and the silver ring that are buried along with the corpse in order to buy rice for his starving parents, his mother is horrified. At this stage of the novel, we see Birsa’s emergence as the “Dharti-aba,” the father of the Earth. He is no more his mother’s son whose ambitions and promise are limited to sacks of salt and jars of oil, but a symbol of a larger goal. He announces: “Don’t call me Birsa, mother. I am Bhagwan. I shall not let the Munda forget their deprivations; I shall not cradle them in my arms. I shall win back for all—all these forests, hills and land... Mother! These people wanted a Bhagwan. So I have come back as the Bhagwan” (72).

Through this spelling out of her hero’s goals—recovery of the forests, hills and land—Mahasweta Devi establishes the fact that the basic nature of Birsa’s movement was agrarian. Having given a picture of his formative years, she prepares him as a religious ‘guru.’ She describes how Birsa teaches his fellowmen how to prevent epidemics. He cures the Mundas of ignorance and superstitions, and restores the lost confidence of the Munda race. Then he realizes that it is not enough to teach people how to prevent epidemics, but that he has to restore the motherland which is weeping. Throughout the novel, Mahasweta Devi uses the mother-son metaphor.
Deep inside his heart he could hear Mother Forest weeping: “I want to be pure, I want to be clean” (72). Throughout the novel Mahasweta Devi uses the image of a weeping, ravaged, dry-breasted, stripped-off Munda mother and a Munda son, consoling and assuring his mother in order to stress the great emotional ties Birsa has with the forest. And through the reiteration of this metaphor she accentuates this gradual shaping of Birsa’s goal of establishing a pristine, sacred Munda raj unadulterated by ‘dikus.’

Contemporary records and newspapers as mentioned earlier, believe that Birsa’s revolution was a continuation of the Sardar movement. But Mahasweta Devi refutes this and does not allow Birsa to be a puppet of the Sardars, who had finally succumbed to the British. In the novel Birsa contemplates the Sardars’ role in his movement: “The Sardars’ movement meant a movement of petitions [. . .]. Though the Sardars continued their movement for the welfare of the Munda people, it seemed that their movement was only directed towards this end—to make the Chotanagpur Tenure Act effective” (Aranyer 86-87).

Birsa’s movement is different because unlike the Sardars, he is not ready to be a puppet. He wants to win the battle and establish the Munda raj by driving out the aliens. Thus Mahasweta Devi hints at the political goal and the agrarian nature of the Birsa movement. Birsa thinks independently and chalks out plans and strategies. He combines the agrarian, religious and political issues. Mahasweta Devi shows that Birsa’s movement was independent and that all these aspects are inseparable. She
also separates this Munda struggle from the national struggle. As pointed out by Shyamali Kurian, Mahasweta Devi makes it clear that “the Mundas were not fighting for the nation, but for the recovery of their land, their ‘disum’” (154). About Birsa’s vision Mahasweta Devi says that Birsa knew that he had taken a hard vow. He wanted to free the Mundas from their old inert life style. He wished to form a social structure where the society made by the British and their administration would get obliterated. He wants to eradicate all customs and rituals that were introduced into their lives by the aliens. He wants to reform society—he prohibits Koram Puja and the other customs, the witchcraft, and the blood-spilling rituals. He would work for the starved Mundas.

For *Aranyer Adhikar*, Mahasweta Devi travelled through the Mundari villages acquainting herself with the people whose history she undertook to depict in the novel. The speeches of the Munda people in her novel throb with life. The Bengali dialect which she uses to translate the rich and poignant experiences of the imaginative, simple minded, mystic and oppressed Munda tribe brims over with the sap and savour of real life. To echo Birsa, the Mundas are illiterate; they do not have a script; they do not record their experiences in written words. They ‘sing’ instead. All the deprivations and humiliations of their lives are recorded in their songs.

Mahasweta Devi has captured this lyrical element in her reproduction of the language of the tribe. In *Aranyer Adhikar* she excels in deploying idioms, styles, and modes from the Mundari language and captures the nuances and idiosyncrasies of the tribal’s world-view. But the task of using language in a novel like *Aranyer Adhikar*
was not limited only to understanding the language of the Munda tribe and rendering a Bengali translation of it. The novel, which is set against the backdrop of a complex social-political situation, portrays a society of heterogeneous people. We find here the non-aboriginal moneylender and zamindar, the petty Bihari police official, the educated elite Bengali, the hypocritical English missionary, the barrister, the journalist, the callous bureaucrat, the British army officer, and the ruthless British administrator.

So Mahasweta Devi had a harder task at hand. She had to take great care to include all the vivid patterns of this complex historical situation in her use of language, and she has done it very well. She does this by drawing on several sources—the 'impure' idiom of everyday speech to represent the non-aboriginal feudal lords and the petty police officials, the standard variety to represent the educated Bengali, and several registers of the Bengali language like the medical, the ecclesiastical, the bureaucratic, the journalese, the legalese and the telegraphic to delineate the colonial forces. She depicts these representatives of different social classes and various walks of life through the typical languages they speak and write. Her command of these various linguistic expressions gives the novel a rare social dimension of totality.

The novel as a form is unparalleled in documenting human lives. Tribal societies, however, as classified and documented by writers, can be represented more vividly in fiction and hence, they become more accessible through novels like
Aranyer Adhikar. In this regard Aranyer Adhikar and her other works have played a major role in documenting authentic aboriginal lives.

Mahasweta Devi’s Chotti Munda ebang Tar Tir (1980) or (Chotti Munda and His Arrow) follows events after Birsa’s revolution. It is about another tribal revolutionary called Chotti Munda who leads the revolution against the moneylenders and contractors who exploit the tribals even after Independence and in spite of the existence of laws meant to safeguard the interests of the tribals. Chotti Munda draws inspiration from Dhani Munda, an associate of Birsa Bhagwan who is also a skilled archer. The police are still in search of Dhani. Chotti Munda organizes the tribals to emancipate them from the clutches of the moneylenders, landlords and contractors who form a nexus with the police and politicians. Chotti Munda does not support violence, but he saves the Daroga (bodyguard) of his arch-rival Teerathnath. He also doesn’t approve of the Naxal ways. But when innocent tribals are killed, he has no other way except to use his mythical bow and arrow. Chotti passes the arrow to Haramu, his son, and the latter lifts it. Then, Chotti offers himself to the police to be arrested. The Sub-Divisional Officer gets up and moves. But at that moment, thousands of tribal hands with bows raised to the skies, shout “No.” The non-tribals also raise their hands in protest.

These three novels of Mahasweta Devi record the tribal past starting from the eighteenth century to the present times. In her novels she narrates how the colonizers come and intrude into the forest and introduce an alien economic and
political system there. Mahasweta Devi reminds the reader of important events of
Indian history such as the Battle of Plassey of 1757, which the tribals thought was
between two kings—the Sahibs and the nawabs. She also mentions the 1930s, the
heyday of the Indian Struggle of Freedom. Scholars like K. S. Singh and A. R. N
Srivatsava record the tribal movements such as the Paharia Sardar Movements, Birsa
Munda Movement, Tilka Majhi Movement, and Mahasweta Devi has used these
historical sources in writing these novels. For instance as mentioned earlier, she used
the noted anthropologist, K.S. Singh’s book Dust, Storm and Hanging Mist which is
about Birsa Munda’s struggle, as one of the sources for the novel Aranyer Adhikar.
K.S. Singh had used the writings of missionaries, government records, and newspaper
reports in writing this book. Interestingly, K. S. Singh was inspired by Mahasweta
Devi’s novel and revised his own book and renamed it with the concrete title Birsa
Munda and His Movement (1874-1901).

What makes these novels different from other fiction about peasants and
subalterns is the author’s treatment of tribal myth. We find in Aranyer Adhikar that
Birsa has become a mythical figure among the tribals. He is given a religious
dimension and his movement is also similarly extended to make it more powerful.
Chotti Munda’s arrow also has a mythical quality and it is very popular among the
tribals. One notes the use of myth in Bashai Tudu, another novel by Mahasweta Devi
on the theme of Tribal Movement. In this novel Bashai Tudu develops a new strategy
of warfare and resistance rooted in his own cultural ethos, which is not known to the
‘dikus.’ For others, Bashai dies and appears before them five times. Similarly, Chotti
Munda, Bashai Tudu, and Birsa become mythical figures. They adopt strategies rooted in their cultural ethos and myth, which have become a secret knowledge shared only by the tribals. This feature distinguishes the tribal movements from the peasant movements or the Naxal movements. In Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s novel *Matigari* (1987), a fictional character called Matigari becomes a mythical character and the Kenyan intelligence agents talk about him until they discover that Matigari is a fictional character. In the case of *Matigari* an oral myth is evolved from a written text, whereas in the case of *Bashai Tudu*, a written text is evolved from an oral myth.

Apart from these documented facts Mahasweta Devi uses local folk tales. For instance, Tilka’s grandmother is a great source of tribal history. She tells him how the Sahibs came to the forest. The stories about the missionaries who worked among the tribals are still alive among the tribals. Even now one can hear the tribals narrating stories about Fr. Levens, Chilmili Sahib and others who worked among the tribals. The oral stories also talk about the history of displacement which is part and parcel of tribal life. As we can see in *Chotti Munda ebang Tar Tir*, Choti’s father is displaced again and again as the places he wants to settle down in are occupied and factories and mines have come up on them.

The novels highlight tribal struggles. For example, in *Bashai Tudu* Bashai’s aim is to lead a struggle where the tribals can have a major say. They are leaders and not followers of the mainstream. This is evident from the conversation between Bashai and Kali Santara:
'Does it have to be one of those ways that you have known and followed? Either the CPM, or the CPI, or the Naxalite? Why not the Bashai Tudu way?'

'What’s that way?'

'The way that works. Where the law serves, we’d go for the law. Where the jotedar defies the law, we’d step beyond the law. If the Naxals stand by me, I’ll accept their support. If you come with me, I’d welcome you.' (Devi, Bashai 46)

Mahasweta Devi seems to imply here that by calling Bashai Tudu a Naxalite, history was being written again by the dominant groups—the communists, the administration and the urban groups. Here she tries to emphasize the self-determination and self-assertion of the tribals. Unlike historical novelists who fictionalise history by romantic descriptions of historical figures, Mahasweta Devi problematizes history in her writings for the reader so that the reader is deterred consciously from arriving at a stereotypical and definitive response. Her engagement with the tribals and her research on history and her documentary style give these novels a realistic touch.

Mahasweta Devi’s descriptions of places like Singhbum, Palamu, Chakradharpur, Chaibasa, the Koel river and a number of villages situate her fiction in a locale that is authentic in terms of history and geography. Her use of tribal terms such as ‘ulgulan,’ ‘diku,’ ‘ghato,’ ‘haramdeo’ and many others add to localization.
She also assimilates in her diction a number of English words. One noted example is that her tribal characters pronounce the word ‘jail’ as ‘jehel,’ and government as ‘gormen’. Her use of polyglot diction, ‘chalit’ Bengali, proverbs and idioms is also an additional effort to achieve an authentic specificity. The songs and dances of the tribals which form an integral part of their struggle find their due place in these novels. Thus, these narratives together record the tribal past and add to their documented history: they narrate their glory and also tell us what happened to them and what they had lost.

Another concern in Mahasweta Devi’s fiction is the theme of exploitation and the tribal struggle for existence. Her short stories deal with sexual exploitation, the problem of bonded labour, displacement, and other socio-economic problems faced by the tribals in the contemporary world. Her short stories “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha,” “Douloti, the Bountiful,” “The Hunt,” and “Draupadi” all deal with the stark reality of tribal life. The narrative “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha” is a story about the mainstream attitude to tribal society and the mainstream’s refusal to understand it. Puran Sahay is a journalist from Bihar who comes to Pirtha, a famine affected region in Madhya Pradesh. His one-time friend, Harisharan has been appointed a Block Development Officer (BDO) there. Puran has read a lot about the tribals from the writings of Verrier Elwin and S. C. Roy. He wants to write about the famine. He meets Harisharan and through him the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO). The SDO in typical official style, suggests that he should accompany him to visit the important tourist spots and tribal communities:
—You’ve come to Madhya Bharat [lit. Middle India], why don’t you see Gwalior, Indore, Jabalpur, Dhara-Mandu, Bhopal? Do you know that there’s still a festival at Shivapuri, a statue-festival? The descendants of the servants of the old kings serve and worship the kings’ statues! ‘The Middle Ages in Middle India’ will be a fine piece. Go to Bastar, see the tribals. (Devi, “Pterodactyl” 101)

For the BDO, tribals are showpieces to be gazed at. This reminds one of the tourist guides in India urging tourists to visit tribal habitats. For a journalist, tribals are topics for sensational coverage. The villagers from Madhopur have come to the SDO’s office. One of them called Shankar is a literate person. They sit in the SDO’s room and discuss different problems. Puran goes to a village in a truck. During his journey, the truck driver talks to him. According to the driver, the government is obsessed with tribal welfare, whereas the tribals misuse the facilities:

What’s the use giving rice to the tribals? When have they eaten rice? Such good quality molasses, popcorn! The government lives for the Adivasis.

[...]

—Be it jobs, or other kinds of aid, everywhere it’s tribals and untouchables! [...] No one can fulfil their needs, sir. They sell everything they get, they have standing clients in Rajaura you know. They won’t live in government housing, so why should the government build for them? (Devi, “Pterodactyl” 108).
This is the typical attitude of an outsider, who belongs to the so-called mainstream, towards the tribals and the welfare measures meant for them. The tribal habitats are so inaccessible that nobody visits them. As the writer comments, even Nehru and Indira Gandhi tried, but gave up reaching out to these areas. Mahasweta Devi gives a vivid picture of this region. Through the travels of the journalist and his assistants, she depicts the reality of this region:

They come to Rajaura.

A very small place. The Block Development Office. Police Station, school, Health centre (closed).

There are almost no brick buildings besides the Bank and the Post Office. There is a market and shops, and a sawmill. Two video halls, and a signboard declaring this is an ‘Animal Clinic’, but behind it a roofless room, whose doors and windows have either disappeared, or were never there. (110)

Shankar accompanies Puran. Later, they meet Bhan Singh Shah. He is a descendant of the Gond king. Shankar Singh Shah was killed by the British in the Mutiny. Though he is a tribal, he does not associate himself with the tribals as he is a leader from the feudal background. He is an example of tribals who are better off and who therefore stopped bothering about their community. Shankar narrates an account of the glorious days the tribals had before the intrusion of the outsiders and shows how misfortune struck the tribals. Shankar explains that the tribals had a self-
sustaining life in the past. Nature provided for their needs and the tribals lived in
harmony with nature. However, with the advent of the outsiders, misery and suffering
came to the tribal society. As Mahasweta Devi writes:

—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, peacock danced, we
lived. People grew, the community grew, some of us moved to a
distance. We asked the earth’s permission, we are setting down stakes
to build a roof, settling land to grow crops. The Chief of our society
told us where we should settle land fit for living. There we built
homes, made villages, settled land each for himself. We worshipped
the tree that was the spirit of our village. Then we lived, only us.
[...]

—Why did the foreigners [outsiders] come? We were kings.
Became subjects. Were subjects, became slaves. Owed nothing, they
made us debtors. Alas they enslaved and bound us. They named us,
as bondslaves, Haroahi, Mahidar, they named us Hali, named us
kamiya, in many tongues. Our land vanished like dust before a storm,
our fields, our homes, all disappeared. The ones who came were not
human beings. Oh, we climb hills and build homes, the road comes
chasing us. The forest disappears, they make the four corners unclean.
Oh, we had our ancestors’ graves! They were ground underfoot to
build roads, houses, schools, hospitals. We wanted none of this, and anyway they didn’t do it for us.

—Alas! In pain we are stone, mute. We failed to give peace to the ancestors. We are coming to an end, rubbed off the soil. (119-120)

Shankar’s statement sums up the plight of the tribals and presents a sharp contrast to their glorious past when they lived in harmony with nature keeping their culture intact. However, with the intrusion of outsiders, their life got disintegrated, and they faced adversity and misery. It also tells us that in the name of development, tribals are displaced, their land is looted, and their livelihood is disturbed. The roads, hospitals and other modern amenities are meant for the outsiders. The tribals either don’t make use of them, or are not allowed to make use of them. This is not to say that Mahasweta Devi is advocating a strategy of taking them back to their past or asking them to keep their separate identity alive. In an interview with Gayatri Spivak she denies this aggressively: “No, no, no. […] They are Indians who belong to the rest of India. Mainstream India had better recognize that. Pay them the honour that they deserve. Pay them the respect that they deserve” (Devi, Imaginary x). While Shankar is attributing the disaster of the intrusion by the outsiders, the imbalance in ecology and the destruction of nature to their failure in satisfying their ancestors, a group of people surround the strange creature called pterodactyl that Bikhia has painted on the base of a wall.

The Pterodactyl comes as a symbol of their ancestral soul grieving because their ancestors’ burial ground has been desecrated in the now extinct settlement.
About Pterodactyl Mahasweta Devi says: “Pterodactyl—a flying reptile of the pterosauria class from the mesozoic era, extinct species. Their limbs and organs were suitable for flying,—their bones hollow and air-filled [...] One group of these creatures, the pterosaurus, had batlike leathery wings” (154-55). Some tribal communities consider bats to be their ancestors. This reminds one of a story called “The Rightful Inheritors of the Earth” written by Vaikom Mohammed Basheer in Malayalam. Here the narrator’s wife and nephew want to kill the birds including the bats as they eat up the grains. When the tribals see them attempting to kill the bats, they attack the two people with their lethal weapons, because bats symbolize their ancestors’ soul. The two people run for their lives to escape from the tribals.

Mahasweta Devi wants to say that the mainstream has destroyed the whole civilization and hence it is not possible to comprehend it. She points out: “Too little can be known, we have destroyed a continent that we kept unknown and undiscovered. The tribal wants human recognition, respect, because he or she is the child of an ancient civilization” (177-178). She further says that there is no communication-point between us and the pterodactyls and that we belong to two different worlds:

—To build it [the communication point] you must love beyond reason for a long time. For a few thousand years we haven’t loved them, respected them. Where is the time now, at the last gasp of the century? Parallel ways, their world and our world are different, we
have never had a real exchange with them, it could have enriched us.

(“Pterodactyl” 197)

As a result of the destruction of nature and the ecological balance, and the intrusion of outsiders, the tribal areas face serious problems: famine, poverty, illiteracy and all other disasters—all can be attributed to the ill-treatment of the tribal civilization. Mahasweta Devi presents the stark reality of this region through Puran’s survey. This region is inaccessible. There are no facilities for health, or education. The officials are corrupt. Mahasweta Devi rightly points out: “The Central and State Governments have kept at least thirty-five projects and subprojects in the ITDP sector in various names, and for each there is an enormous amount of money. [...] There are projects, money is being spent, yet there is no reflection in actual fact” (“Pterodactyl” 188-89). She writes that according to the rule (Integrated Tribal Development Programme) tribal land can’t be bought by a non-tribal. But it is getting sold. They (the tribals) are forced to sell it. The awful truth is that the government officers, contractors, and businessmen are eating that money. Mahasweta Devi comments:

The ‘Act Prohibiting the Transfer of Tribal Land’ is a total failure. For shrewd exploiters have either bought land in the name of non-existent tribals or forced the landowner to sell. Or the landowner knew nothing at all. This is happening with the co-operation of the Revenue Department and the courts of law. (“Pterodactyl” 188)
There is persistent famine in the region because of the contractors and moneylenders. Education is a distant dream. People are affected by serious diseases. Many of them have contracted tuberculosis. In the story, the Sarpanch helps the old woman, and feeds her. As Mahasweta Devi records: “A strange mixed smell attacks him: of dying of starvation bit by bit, of an unwashed body, of a rotting mouth.”(131).

The people, Nagesia for instance, have no date-leaf mats, not even grass mats in the winter. They have been taken away by the employers. They have nothing to wear, except the loincloth. Thus, through this story, Mahasweta Devi invites our attention to the tribal land, which she regards as the first nation, the Adim Jati. If these stories are looked at in the context of the 21st century, there is a major aggressive attempt by the developed countries to exploit the ecology of the developing countries—the “grabbing and deforestation,” as Spivak calls it, practised by the dominant countries (Devi 200). According to Mahasweta Devi this story deals with “ecological loss, the loss of the forest as a foundation of life, but also the complicity, however apparently remote, of the power lines of local developers with the forces of global capital”(201).

Mahasweta Devi’s short stories—“Douloti, the Bountiful,” “The Hunt,” and “Draupadi”—centre around the theme of sexual exploitation, mostly of tribal women. The other stories, namely, “Arjun,” “Salt,” and “Shishu,” deal with economic exploitation of the tribals and their struggle. In “Douloti the Bountiful” Mahasweta Devi highlights the problems of women as bonded labourers. In this story, Crook Nagesia’s fourteen-year-old daughter Douloti is taken away to the city by Paramananda Mishra the middleman on the pretext of marriage. Douloti thinks that
he will marry her, but she realizes later that she has been sold as a bonded labourer. She is kept in a whorehouse managed by a woman called Rampiyari, and is raped by Latia, the contractor. She becomes his mistress. She has no freedom. She belongs to the contractor. Latia says, “Tell Rampiyari, this girl is mine, when I let her go, she can take clients” (“Douloti” 59). She is made pregnant again and again, and leads a miserable life. The last scene ends where Douloti collapses on 15th August at the flag post signifying her bondage even after several decades of Independence. It has to be noted that Douloti is not a tribal girl, but a Dalit’s daughter\(^3\). Unlike Mohanty, who privileges one community over another, Mahasweta Devi’s concern is for all communities that go through hardship. She wants change in the living conditions of all oppressed people.

In the short story “The Hunt” the main character is Mary Oraon. She is born to a tribal mother and an Australian white father, who had a tea estate. Later he leaves for Australia. Mary works at Prasadji’s bungalow. She has chosen to marry a Muslim man called Jalim. She invites the wrath of Tehsildar Singh, the contractor who comes to Prasadji’s bungalow to fell trees. Tehsildar Singh is already married, but his eyes fall on Mary, who is not inclined to accept him. One day when Mary is coming back on a water-buffalo’s back herding other cattle, Tehsildar Singh comes up to her and says:

How pretty [...]. You look like Hema Malini.

—What?

—You look like Hema Malini.

—You look like a monkey.
Tehsildar Singh felt much encouraged by such a remark and came up close. Mary didn’t stop her water-buffalo. As she moved on she took out a sharp machete and said in a lazy voice, Brokers like you, with tight pants and dark glasses, are ten a rupee on the streets of Tohri, and to them I show this machete. Go ask if you don’t believe me. (Devi, “The Hunt” 9)

But Tehsildar Singh does not give up. He is very confident of his manliness. He tries to appease her by bringing her a nylon sari. Mary, on the contrary, is insulted by this. She throws it back at him in the presence of many people. She says, “You think I’m a city whore? You want to grab me with a sari? If you bother me again I’ll cut off your nose. She goes off proudly swinging her arms” (10). Tehsildar Singh waits for an appropriate time. He is insulted, and wants to prove his masculinity. At the same time, he is careful because he is scared of the tribals. He wants to overpower Mary by showing signs of aggression. He wants to humiliate her for the injury she has caused to his male ego. One day

Tehsildar caught Mary’s hand one day.

[... ] He said, I won’t let you go today.

At first Mary was scared. Struggling she lost her machete. With great effort, after a good deal of struggling, Mary was able to spring out of his grasp. Both of them stood up. [...] Against the background of the spring songs Mary thought he was an animal. A-ni-mal. The syllables beat on her mind. (12)
Finding herself in a helpless situation, she quickly takes a tactful decision, and 
pretends to yield to Tehsildar’s wishes. She says that she would accept him on the day 
of Janiparab when all the women would be out hunting. When that day arrives, Mary 
finds Tehsildar, catches him and strikes him down with the machete. Mary performs 
this on the day of the Festival of Justice when the elders bring offenders to justice. 
People don’t go to the police for justice, for the hunting festival is meant to 
administer justice.

The story “Draupadi” is set in the background of the Naxalite activities of the 
period 1967-1972. The Naxalites of Bengal were disowned by the mainstream leftist 
parties, and were repressed by the forces of the State by 1972. The story “Draupadi” 
is set at a time when the process of Naxalite repression was at its peak and indicates 
the involvement of the tribals. The movement was hitherto run by the elite and the 
student radicals. The story is about Dopdi (tribal name for Draupadi), a tribal Naxal. 
Dopdi and her husband Dulna Majhi are underground. There have been search 
operations headed by Senanayak, who is well equipped with the knowledge of the 
activities of the naxals. This intensified effort results in Dulna Majhi getting killed in 
an ‘encounter.’ His body is kept as ‘bait’ in order to capture Dopdi, who however 
does not turn up. The search continues. In the process, innocent tribals are killed. 
Finally, the Senanayak is successful in capturing her for interrogation. After the 
interrogation, when the evening advances, Senanayak orders his men to “make her 
up” and “do the needful.” Dopdi is subjected to multiple rape and abandoned. She 
refuses to cover herself and confronts Senanayak with her bare body.
Here Dopdi is a symbol of social change that has been taking place among the tribals. She protests against subjugation and injustice. Unlike the Draupadi of *Mahabharata* who prays for clothes to cover herself, she fights with a bare body. Perhaps by using the myth, Mahasweta Devi is showing the continuity of exploitation from the days of the *Mahabharata* to the present times. Here, Draupadi is not supported by Krishna, yet she makes an attempt to assert herself: “Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don’t you want to see how they made me?” (104). Her insistence on remaining naked is an indication from her that male aggression stops before such gestures.

The story “Arjun” is an example of exploitation of the tribals by local moneylenders and their control of the tribal region. Bishal Mahato and Ram Haldar are influential people. They force the Sabars to fell trees, and the Sabars by doing this land in jail. Bishal Mahato summons Ketu Sabar and asks him to fell the Arjun tree. However, Ketu does not want to fell the tree. Mahato assures him that the latter will not be arrested. Still, Ketu is reluctant because he is aware that the Arjun tree is closely associated with his culture. This particular tree is the only surviving relic of the Bandhini jungles from the Zamindari era. It still evokes “memories of the past in the minds of Ketu and his friends” (181). The elders of the tribe still respect the Arjun tree. They believe that it is the manifestation of the divine. Ketu and his friends Banamali, Diga and Pitambar decide what to do. They are determined that they
should protect the tree. They decide to save the tree because it is revered by all—the Sabars, Kharias and Oraons. Diga suggests that they should gather around the Arjun tree and worship it. Mahato and Haldar are afraid. They know the tree and the people, but today they are unable to comprehend them. They seem like strangers. Here the tribals are able to overcome the landlords, but it is not always the case. It is so difficult to come out of the clutches of the moneylenders. The tribals are at the mercy of the dominant society.

The story “Salt” is a good example of the helpless condition of the tribals and the oppressive behaviour of the moneylenders. Uttamchand Bania is the moneylender and big businessman in the tribal region. His forefathers came to this village just a few decades ago. Uttamchand not only controls the economy now, but political affairs as well. The tribals used to cast their votes since the fourth election. Uttamchand in fact manipulates this. He says “Why walk all the way from the forests? Here is a rupee for each of you my brothers and sisters. I am here to cast the votes for you”. But in 1977 a change takes place in this pattern. With the initiative of the Primary School teacher Balkishen Singh the tribals go in person and cast their own votes. This invites the wrath of Uttamchand. He is annoyed with the election issue and decides to “finish them off by deprivation of salt.” He says, “Let them have a taste of saltless gruel. Such ingratitude after being fed by me for so long!” (102). He thinks that these people have eaten his salt, ‘namak,’ and in spite of that they have turned ‘namak haram’ (ungrateful). Salt is also associated with the freedom movement. The point here seems to be that wherever tribals make the slightest move
towards freedom, it is branded as betrayal. Perhaps it is to reverse this association between freedom and betrayal that Gandhi organized the salt satyagraha.

The story "Shishu" is also an example of the writer's aim to subvert the prevalent notions about the tribals. The tribals are called 'shishu' or children. This has something to do with the colonial perception of the natives. As Ashis Nandy points out:

Colonization dutifully picked up these ideas of growth and development and drew a new parallel between primitivism and childhood. What was childlikeness of the child and childishness of immature adults now also become the lovable and unlovable savagery of primitives and primitivism. (Nandy 15-16)

Following the colonial perception, the Indian dominant class also looks at the tribals as immature and child-like figures. This has been problematized in the story. The story is located in Lohri in Ranchi district. This region is affected by drought and famine. The Block Development Officer (BDO) and the Relief Officer come to distribute relief among the tribals. The relief officer Mr. Singh is on duty for a few days. He wants to distribute relief materials in the famine-affected area. He has a false notion about the tribals. He thinks that "the adivasi men played flute and that adivasi women danced with flowers bedecking their hair. And he had thought of them running from one hill to another singing..." (237). However, he finds them to be different. Through his conversation with the BDO he is informed that the tribals
attribute each calamity to the wrath of some supernatural force and that they sing to drive it away. The BDO says: “Lohri. That’s a bad place. A bad place. Give them land—they simply sell it to the moneylender. Then they place a countercharge on us. ‘Where’s water? And seeds, the plow, the bullocks? How are we to till the land?’ And if you supply them with those, they sell them too.” (Devi, Imaginary 237). The BDO warns the Relief Officer of theft by the tribals and tells him about the Agaria uprising and the Agaria myth. The government wanted to set up factories and mines in this region, disturbing the peace and tranquility of the indigenous people. The tribals resisted this move. The State went ahead with its plan, blasting the hills. Enraged by such intervention the Agarias of Kuva village had killed every man from the team who had assisted in the blast, and ran away into the forests. Extensive operations to catch the criminals were launched, but with no result. At last the Government resorted to a ruthless combing operation. The police set fire to Kuva and sowed the earth with salt so that nothing would grow there, and left. The Agaria village had thus suffered on account of ruthless taxation, oppression and terrible persecution. The honest Relief Officer starts his work, sets up the camp and starts relief operations. As Mahasweta Devi writes:

The camp began the very next day and was run in a most disciplined manner. Gruel was prepared and distributed. The medical volunteers gave injections for cholera and typhoid. The camp hummed with activity.
Now people started coming from distant villages. Even at night one could see processions of hungry people moving toward the camp with flaming torches. […] Singh became so deeply involved in the relief work that the scorched earth, the dense forest of dwarfed and leafless trees, and the copper-red and gray hungry hills lost their horror, and the starving hungry populace became top priority. (Devi, “Shishu” 245-46)

He is respected by the people. He is alert during the night. He awakes at the sound of footsteps to see whether somebody is stealing the sacks and milo. He gives them a chase as the sacks are carried away through the forest. But on the way he realizes that they are not ghosts but ‘children’ of men. He runs behind the thieves and reaches “the wilderness of stunted grass where, in the legendary past, Jwalamukhi had fought with the sun god” (Devi, “Shishu” 248). The children who are being chased by Singh stop, put down the sacks and approach him:

Suddenly they moved closer. Boys and girls in a group. And fear struck at him, a great fear, leaving him immobile. Moving forward together, they made a circle around him and stood still. But why?

They looked at him and he watched them warily. The circle moved in. Singh turned his head and found that the circle was complete. […] They were human beings born of human parents, not spectral beings. […]
We are not children. We are Agarias of the village of Kuva.

("Shishu" 248-249)

Singh realizes that they are not children but adults. They themselves tell them that they are the Agarias of Kuva who killed the outsiders to protect their hills. They seek revenge against Singh merely because of his height of five feet and nine inches, the normal growth of his body, which they were not able to achieve because of being deprived of food for so long. They also indicate—as he himself realizes, too—that people like him are responsible for the sad predicament of the tribal people.

Looking at these stories one can group Mahasweta Devi’s fiction into two categories—one, concerning tribal history and culture, and the other concerning tribal reality—their deprivation, degradation, exploitation and their struggle for survival. Her fiction suggests that the tribals had a rich and glorious past. Her efforts have been to unearth their cultural past and draw the attention of the dominant class to it and urge them to recognize it. At the same time she is aiming at creating awareness among the tribals. One may ask whether the tribals read the writings by her. The answer is yes. Maitreya Ghatak, who has edited the activist writing of Mahasweta Devi in a book titled *Dust on the Road* mentions this in his Introduction:

In 1992, I was doing fieldwork in a tribal village in the Medinipur district of West Bengal, for the National Institute of Adult Literacy. The village had just passed through an intensive literacy campaign and the purpose of the research was to see if any reading habit was retained
after the campaign was withdrawn. The general complaint was that there was no reading material. In a village, a young tribal boy brought out a book, an abridged version of Mahasweta’s *Birsa Munda*, written specifically for young readers. He said that this book was read by everyone of his community; it was through this book that they had learnt a lot about Birsa Bhagawan. The boy was a Munda. The book was also translated into the Ho language in Bihar. (Ghatak xi)

Unlike the writers discussed earlier, Mahasweta Devi does not privilege the tribal community over the other communities living with them. She writes about them with the same concerns, since they are also oppressed by the dominant class. For instance in “Douloti the Bountiful” she narrates the story of a Harijan girl. Mahasweta Devi’s attitude to the non-tribal backward sections of India’s population should be contrasted with that of Gopinath Mohanty who has negative things to say about the Harijans (Dombs) who live with the tribals. She also does not fail to recognize the voluntary work done by missionaries such as Fr. Blumful and non-tribals like Mr. Srivastava, the Primary School teacher who makes an attempt to rescue the bonded labourers in the story “Douloti the Bountiful.” Such good deeds are largely ignored by Mohanty and Karanth, who have derogatory things to say about them, particularly the missionaries working among the tribals. Moreover, Mohanty’s world of the tribal is a romanticized one. He finds them happy, dancing, singing, and celebrating, whereas Mahasweta Devi finds the tribals to be struggling for survival. They are always under subjugation in her fictional world. This is because of Mahasweta Devi’s
own ideological predilections which wants the tribal situation to be transformed and
for which she invites the attention of the mainstream through her writings. She pleads
for an egalitarian society. Mohanty, on the other hand, was more interested in the
cultural aspects of the tribal world. He was impressed by their close association with
nature and their philosophy, their life and social relations, and customs. Therefore his
novels highlight these aspects of tribal life. Mahasweta Devi, as an activist writer,
lays emphasis on the existential problem of the tribals instead of just confining herself
to the cultural eulogization of the tribals.

Further she does not eroticise tribal sexuality. As Hansdak points out:
“Mention of dances, courtship rituals and erotic nudity are conspicuously absent from
her writings”(82). She also does not celebrate the tribal woman’s sexuality, but uses it
as an instrument of change. In her fiction, women are not there to attract the outsiders,
but to teach them a lesson. The major characters of Mahasweta Devi’s stories such as
Dopdi or Mary Oraon, are agents of transformation. Although she does not eroticise
the tribal body, she does glorify it. Mahasweta Devi would just say: “This body is
dark, healthy, virile and beautiful”( Hansdak 83). One may argue that this is again
patronizing, and is just another way of glorifying the tribals. This might be so. Her
involvement and desire to do something for them might have prompted her to develop
this attitude which is reflected in her fiction.

Her involvement with the tribals has given her a better understanding of tribal
reality. She has picked up tribal dialects, idioms and proverbs and used them in her
writings. Even the distorted forms of English words such as ‘Gormen’ (in “Douloti”) and ‘commis’ (in “Pterodactyl”) which are in currency in tribal regions are exploited by Mahasweta Devi. She has familiarized herself with the laws, programmes and projects meant for tribals from the local level to the international level. All these minute details concerning tribal life in her fiction lend an authentic touch to her fiction.

Her contact with the tribal people has also given her adequate knowledge and materials for her stories. Most of the characters in her fiction are not merely imaginary but people she has personally met. About Nagesia, a character in “Douloti the Bountiful," she says:

I saw Crook Nagesia with my own eyes in the month of June, just before the rainy season. Palamu has very little rainfall. Under the burning sun the landlord loads the bullock cart with paddy and tells the man to pull the cart to the local market. He could not do it. He fell under it. He was crushed. He became twisted and crooked for the rest of his life. I asked the landlord why he did it. [...] ‘You are an upper-caste person,’ he said. ‘These bullocks are costly. If I send a bullock, it will suffer in the heat and it might collapse. But these bonded labourers don’t count for much. A man can be wasted, a bullock cannot.’ This was his argument, the perennial argument [...] I have named the village Seora. But there are such villages everywhere in
Palamu. [...] the sale of girls for rape still goes on. Douloti is still true, and true for the rest of India. (Devi, *Imaginary* xiii-xiv)

This passage not only speaks about the detailed documented reality of her works, but also "shows how she transcends the boundaries of material concerns, and highlights the need for a universal consciousness of exploitation. And the strength to protest against it" (Ghatak x). Nelson Mandela while handing her the Jnanpith award rightly pointed out: "She holds a mirror to the conditions of the world as we enter the new millennium" (qtd. in Ghatak x). However, in spite of all the wealth of her experience, even Mahasweta Devi remains an outsider. Her experience is acquired and not lived as is the case of the tribal. We shall foreground this difference in the next and concluding chapter by considering some narratives written by the tribals themselves, and focusing on a body of writing which is inward and subjective. This hopefully will give us a balanced view, and allow us to see this in relation to the 'outsider representations' we have explored so far.
Notes

1 Since the novel is yet to be translated into English I have used the Hindi translation of the novel known as Sal Girah Ki Pukar Par (1984).

2 This and the subsequent quotes from the novel Aranyer Adhikar are translated by me from the Oriya version of the novel as the English translation of the novel is not yet available.

3 Though my study concerns itself with representation of tribal people, here a Harijan or a Dalit character is discussed as Mahasweta Devi’s writings show concern for the problems of the Dalits as well. For Mahasweta Devi both these communities are subject to more or less the same kind of exploitation.