CHAPTER II

VICTIMS OF BONDED LABOUR

Bonded labour is an area of exploitation and a major social evil, which prevails in most parts of Independent India. Lakhs of bonded labourers continue to be exploited. They carry the yoke of neglect, suffering and frustration in abject silence. The system of bonded labour is a relic of feudal society. Though, it is abolished, the suffering and endurance of the oppressed and the undaunted domination of the oppressor remain as they are and continue unabated. Dr. Aziz observes:

Under the bonded labour system which appears to be unique to our country, the rural labourer having taken a loan from the landlord to meet economic and social needs or in accordance with a customary or social obligation pledges himself or his dependants to the later. The loan is taken in consideration of bond service and bond service will not terminate as long as the interest remains uncleared. In most cases, the service rendered is said to be counted towards interest. As a result, the principal amount remains intact causing sometimes even the descendants of the debtors to serve the descendants of the creditors.1
Bonded labour is the result of people's ignorance and poverty. It is their economic deprivation that drives them to bonded labour. In his book on bonded labour in India, N.D. Kamble states:

In practice, bonded labour in India is the culmination of the debtor – creditor relation into slave – master relation. But, the bonded labour is an outcome of socio-economic system prevailing in India. Some people who were deprived of the socio-economic and political power, had to depend on those who enjoyed these powers. Criminal poverty of vulnerable sections exposed them to exploitation in the built in mechanism of socio-economic system. Economic dependence and poverty of the under privileged sections of the society forced them to be slaves.²

Not only the socio – economic and political deprivation of the people, even the varna system in Indian society has the explanation to afflict the people to bonded labour. Indian Society has been stratified into four varnas (castes) – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. People who belong to Shudra varna are denied of right to property, education and choice of occupation. They are made to depend on others for survival. Their total dependence on other varnas reduces their status to that of slaves. Most of the bonded labourers today belong to this section of people.

Mahaswetha Devi, with her heartfelt concern for the bonded labourers, writes about their plight. Her works are the true experiences of people. She brings the realities in the form of stories and novels to create a good vision and
interest in the people. Being an active social worker, a journalist and a writer, she moves to various places of West Bengal, Orissa and Bihar, witnesses the pathetic conditions of the poor and brings them to the notice of all, through her works. She considers bonded labour to be the major problem in India where many people are treated less than animals. Her works *Aajir, Douloti The Bountiful* and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* deal with the problem of bonded labour.

*Aajir* portrays the plight of Paatan, a young slave who suffers slavery, as his ancestor Golak Kura sells himself, his wife and all his descendants for a paltry sum of three rupees during a famine. Paatan now undergoes an unendurable suffering under the clutches of his master. He tries to escape from slavery, but, the bond ties him back to slavery. At last, he gets relieved when he knows that the bond does not exist any more and has been turned to dust long back.

*Douloti The Bountiful* is about Douloti who takes her father Ganori’s bonded slavery on her shoulders. The bonded slavery she takes up is 'Bonded prostitution'. Douloti's suffering and endurance has no bounds. Through her, light is thrown on the plight of bonded prostitutes in a whorehouse. Douloti is relieved at last from the pains, only when she collapses with venereal diseases and dies vomiting blood.

*Chotti Munda and his Arrow* is a legend of Chotti Munda, but it speaks of bonded labour. It focuses on mostly, the conflict between the bonded labourers and the masters, which turns into external war. To keep the system of bonded labour continue, Tirathnath Lala, the money lender seeks the help of hooligans to
force the bonded labourers work for him. This novel shows how the politicians and police officials work for the vested interests of the privileged and try to suppress the poor people. This leads to a revolt against the oppressor where the unity of the oppressed class proves to be powerful. Chotti, the protagonist leads the revolt and gains victory through his spirit and intellect.

All the three works show that bonded labour is an exploitation operated beyond law. They give an artistic expression to the suffering of the ignorant poor people in the hands of exploitative mechanism. According to Samik Bandyopadhyay:

Exploitation in India operates beyond the law and with the tacit acquiescence of an exploited class held thrall by a load of conventional role obligations. Legal reforms or legal defenses for the exploited have rarely affected the exploitative mechanism sustained by the illiteracy/ignorance of the exploited.  

Though, India has got its freedom long ago, the people do not experience it. The social evils like poverty, bonded labour and discrimination are not eradicated as the Government is in the hands of selfish politicians. Exploitation of the poor people is found everywhere. The innocent still experience the trauma of inhuman subjugation by the landlords who reign supreme in the villages. Though, bonded labour is abolished, it continues unabated in rural India as a major exploitation.

All the three works, *Aajir*, *Douloti The Bountiful* and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* have their setting in the villages of West Bengal. They focus on
bonded labour existing in rural areas and being operated by the feudal mechanism. This exploitation is totally based on money lender and debtor relationship. The moneylenders represent the section of feudal mechanism. In villages, feudal mechanism plays a major role in subjugating and victimizing the poor by their invincible power and assertion. These three works exhibit the high handedness of the feudal society and the affliction of the poor in their hands. Maatang Sunri in *Aajir*, Munabar Chandela, Paramananda and Baijnath in *Douloti The Bountiful* and Baijnath Lala and Tirathnath Lala in *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* represent the feudal society and exploitative mechanism. In all these works light is thrown on the psyche of the exploiters who victimize the poor.

In *Douloti The Bountiful* the first part of the novel zooms on the atrocious mind of the malik mahajan, Munabar Chandela. He is the monarch of the place Seora. He lends money to the destitute and makes them his life long slaves. By this, most of the villagers are his slaves. The whole village is in his control. “There is no end to the people he has lent money to and made into Kamiyas (bonded slaves).” He keeps all Dusad, Ghasi, Nagesia, Munda, Lohar, Oraon, Bhuyians, Chamar and Parhaia caste people as his slaves. There is no end to his exploitation. About his tyranny and authority, the Kamiya women sing:

By the strength of Loans, by the strength of loans
Two rupees ten rupees hundred rupees.
Ten seers of wheat, five of rice
Munabar lends us.
We don’t know what to do.
The novel reveals his exploitative mind and exhibits his monstrous nature. He is a jealous man. He never tolerates any poor man's prosperity. He wants them always to be under his feet. He crushes down those who prosper. The people who have metal utensils are even envied by him. He snatches everything from them, makes them penniless, lends them and makes them his slaves. It is evident when the author states:

A Nagesia shouldn't have money. If he does, he shouldn't raise a roof. If you raise a roof, or buy a water buffalo, the master will notice. If you buy land, the master will grab it. If you buy cattle, the master will snatch them. If you buy umbrella for your head, or shoes for your feet, he'll have you tied to the post in the yard and beaten.

He is envious and can never tolerate the poor progress. The poor undergo lot of humiliation and desperation, and there is no way out for them, as they have to depend on him and his mercy to live in the village. Munabar's wife openly says, "I saw more new rooms, new cows, I can't see other people's good fortune, dear, I'm filled with envy." Both wife and husband consider others' property a dreadful impertinence. So, everyone is afraid of their envy.

Here, we come into acquaintance of Munabar's envy and monstrous nature when we see the predicament of Bono Nagesia. Bono Nagesia earns some money by working hard, comes back from Dhanbad to his native village Seora, wants to build a house and settle down at Seora. Knowing the situation at Seora, he takes the permission of Munabar to build his house. After he builds his house,
Munabar grows envy and furious. In rage, he comes with his muscle men, sets fire to the house and breaks it. He asks his muscle men to bring Bono to his office. They truss him like a pig and carry him. Munabar forcibly takes his thumb print on a white paper, gives him twenty five rupees and turns him as his bonded slave. He says, “You are borrowing this because your house is burnt down. From now on you are my bond slave.”8 This incident reminds of Mahaswetha Devi’s confrontation with Mangru, a man from Semra village, Bihar State, who is tortured by Ayodhya Pande and is forced to bonded labour. She reveals:

Mangru had bravely tried to do without ex-masters. Then Ayodhya Pande(Master) had him brought to him, and asked him to work in bondage. When Mangru refused, he was tied up and cruelly beaten. Ayodhya crushed his face repeatedly with his shoes. Mangru vomited blood and prayed for water. Ayodhya’s son Ramballa urinated on his face.9

The maliks feel that their domination is their birthright. Their unquestioned domination and subjugation, makes them crude and cruel in their behaviour. They treat the poor fellow beings as beasts and torture them mercilessly.

Like Bono Nagesia, many people undergo torture in Munabar’s hands. Having taken a loan of three hundred rupees for this daughters’ marriages, Ganori Nagesia becomes a slave to Munabar. In Munabar’s household every work is Ganori’s. “Everything is his job. Crook can’t reckon what is and is not
his work.”10 He feels that it is all a “fate’s decree”11 that makes him a Kamiya, but not the brute power. The legend says that:

When a Nagesia is six days old, that day our fate will come down to earth on the string. He will look like a head shaved brahman . . . He stands outside the shanty and writes with a thick pen in high-Hindi in the cloth ledger.

Your will spend your life as you are born. You will never build a home better than a shanty.12

So, Ganori and other Nagesias always feel that these words are written on their heads and will come true in their lives.

One day having drunk *'moua’, Ganori forgets to fetch Munabar's steer which becomes a prey to tigers in the forest. Munabar becomes very furious by the loss of his ox. He calls Ganori, puts the yoke of a loaded cart on his shoulders and whips him to pull it. As Ganori having no way out, pulls it, falls on his face and is crippled for ever. He becomes crooked and is called ‘crooked Nagesia’. This reveals the cruel nature of Munabar. Here, we get reminded of Mahaswetha Devi’s confrontation with a landlord of Palamau. When a man like Ganori in the same way is punished to pull a loaded cart, he is crushed and is made crooked. When Mahaswetha Devi asks the landlord about this incident, he says:

The bullocks are costly. If I send a bullock, it will suffer in heat and it might collapse. But these bonded labourers

\[ *moua \text{ is a spirit brewed from mohua tree. } \]
don’t count for much. A man can be wasted, a bullock cannot.\textsuperscript{13}

The Masters treat their slaves as mere animals and even less than animals.

Baijnath Lala in \textit{Chotti Munda and his Arrow}, like Munabar grows envy, when he sees Bisra Munda and his family prospering. So, he calls Bisra Munda and says:

You don’t want to borrow, don’t borrow. But you’ll come to work the land? It’s hard to set eyes on you. I hear you’re the Mundas’ moneylender?\textsuperscript{14}

Unable to tolerate Bisra’s prosperity, he again goes to police station, plots with the inspector, gets him arrested and beaten. Unable to bear the insult, Bisra Munda hangs himself before Baijnath’s house and dies. Thus, Bisra becomes a victim, for not accepting bonded labour.

In the same way, to continue his father’s profession, Tirathnath Lala, son of Baijnath Lala, forces the poor people to bonded labour, but, the bonded labourers revolt against him. This revolt does not stop his ambition. He takes the help of the hooligans and youth league to suppress them and force them to his work.

Maatang Sunri in \textit{Aajir} also victimizes his servant, Paatan to a maximum extent. Paatan is denied of love and marriage. Whenever Paatan speaks of marriage, he is whipped and brutally tortured. Maatang once tells his wife:
He’s a horrible sinner . . . Why does he forget he’s an *Aajir? His forefathers sold him away. He won’t keep that in mind, he dreams marrying, having a family of his own . . . *(He spits on the ground)* Is there anyone who’d give away a daughter in marriage to an Aajir? ¹⁵

He is even tortured very cruelly by his mistress and her people, when he tries to elope with a gipsy girl. Maatang’s men hit him, bring him to Maatang’s house, tie him to the pole in the courtyard and torture him. The mistress then says to Paatan, “There’s funeral pyre burning within me bastard! Do I run away? . . . I’d love to see your blood flow. I’ll make my hands red with your blood and then go to sleep to night.” ¹⁶

All these instances disclose the psyche of the masters and the torment, the bonded slaves submit to. The slaves are destined to lead a tormented life as their ancestors bind them to such evil bondage. It is the role of the ancestors and their ignorance that cause an affliction to these slaves.

In *Aajir*, Golak Kura, Paatan’s grandfather and his family suffer without food, shelter and clothing during a terrible famine. So, he sells himself, his wife and all his descendants for a paltry sum of three rupees. In his ignorance, he says:

Did you hear that, you bunch of worms? The famine blows the horn of doom, and brings death to all around *(laughs loudly)*. You can all go to your death. I’ll have my three rupees, for generations. My people will have oil for their

¹⁵*Aajir:* One who sold himself into slavery for a paltry sum.
hair, clothes for their bodies, and rice for their stomachs.

We'll be begging no more in lioncloths for the water drained from cooked rice. Bring your aajir's bond, master! 17

He signs the bond, and makes all his descendants also 'aajirs'. The dialogue above gives us a clear picture of the poverty and conditions of the people who suffered during the terrible famine in West Bengal. These conditions make a man weak and reduce him to sub-human level. So, he submits himself to anything for his survival. Golak Kura prepares to do anything for the survival and signs the bond.

Golak Kura, after signing the bond, feels very happy and relieved, as he feels that he has overcome all the difficulties by becoming an aajir and making all his descendants aajirs. He says to the audience:

There'll be drought every year,
there'll be famine every year,
I've bound my descendants' fate for them! 18

There is a similar instance in Chotti Munda and his Arrow which aches the young generations. Parmi's mother-in-law says to Dhani Munda:

For some famine on some far away 'yer' brother took ten seers of rice at country measure – which comes to less-
gave free labour for that bond, his son 'me' granpa-in-law gave it, 'me' father-in-law gave, we are giving. 19

* 'yer' – is meant 'your'
* 'me' – is meant 'my'
By this we can understand how inveterate is the bonded labour system. It is more painful for the descendants to bear this injustice. That's why Paatan in *Aajir* suffers a lot. His life is fully restricted. He is denied of the right even to love and marry. He is not allowed to live the life of an ordinary human being. He hates his restricted life, but, he is destined to live the same life. He curses his forefather, Golak Kura for having made his life like this. He calls his fore father:

Your bastard, Golak Kura: for a paltry three rupees you signed an aajir's bond and left generations enslaved for life.  

In *Douloti The Bountiful*, Douloti like Paatan, shoulders the yoke of her father's slavery. But, she never curses her father. She feels happy to relieve her father from slavery by taking herself all the pains.

In both *Aajir* and *Douloti The Bountiful*, Paatan and Douloti yearn for freedom. But, they are restricted. They can be compared to a caged bird. They are in the condition of a bird caught and caged for the pleasure of its master. In Harindranath Chattopadhyay's play *Parrot*, a woman having lost the freedom addresses the parrot:

Poor caged bird! And he bought you at the market for a rupee- one rupee and for that one stupid little round coin of silver you have lost your freedom . . . You have lost the sky and the meaning of your wings . . . you have lost the language of your soul and with it your mate . . . You yearn for freedom? But, it is no use.
Both are restricted. When they cross their limits, they are punished horribly. They feel despaired of their life. Once Douloti goes to the fair in the town with Rampiyari, the caretaker of whorehouse and other whores. When Latia, the client of Douloti, knows this, he beats and tortures her. Whomever “Latia chooses for his very own must remain at home. No one must see her.”

So, she leads an imprisoned dreadful life.

Unlike his predecessors who had spent their lives in servitude, Paatan yearns for free life. He always thinks of escaping into a world where there is no ‘master’ and where he can have family of his own. Here, we can find some similarity between Paatan and Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable. Bakha is also denied to live the life like other human beings. His life is suppressed. He also hates the work that is handed down to him from his ancestors. Both Paatan and Bakha lack freedom to live like others.

Throughout the play, we find how an aajir is restricted. When Paatan is attracted by a gipsy woman, he follows her. Then she says to him:

Have you forgotten you’re an aajir? a slave from birth? Yet, he asks her to take him away with her. Then she tells him:

Where can I go with an aajir? Wherever you go, they’ll drag back and flog you to death.

He convinces her and asks her to wait at Duboi Baba’s field on the new moon night. So that they can run away while the whole village will be in ‘puja’.

'puja' means prayer.
When Paatan is on run, the villagers know of this and run to catch him. The mob says:

An aajir you! An aajir you!
There’s no release for you! No release for you!

Paatan : An aajir I! An aajir I! There’s no release for me! No release for me!

The Mob : No life for you! No wife for you!

Paatan : No son for me. No joy for me.

The Mob : A slave from birth! A slave from birth!

Paatan (agreeing) : A slave from birth! A slave from birth!

The Mob : For ever! For ever!

Paatan : For ever! For ever!

The Mob : As long as you breathe.²⁵

These dialogues reveal that a bonded slave is bound life long to his master. The Chief Justice of Supreme Court, India, P.N. Bhagwati describes bonded labourers as “non beings, exile of civilization, living a life worse than that of animals, for the animals are at least free to roam about as they like and they can plunder or grab food whenever they are hungry, but these out castes of society are held in bondage and robbed of their freedom even.”²⁶ It presents an
awful and degrading picture of slavery that has been prevalent in the most parts of India. *Aajir* provides us an opportunity to see how the rural folk being illiterate and ignorant become victims of exploitation and are driven to eternal servitude and are treated as beasts.

Paatan silently suffers slavery under suppression. He is a silent protester. We don’t find any sign of revolt in Paatan till the end of the play. There is a conflict within him, that is, between a world, which despises and degrades him and a will that wages a relentless war against it to keep his identity.

Though, Paatan has a strong body and animal strength and is whipped by his master every alternate day, he never retaliates, because he is afraid of the insecurity and the loneliness of his life. As fear tends to be the order of the day, he submits himself to his master.

Sexual exploitation is another area of subjugating the bonded labourers. In *Aajir*, the mistress, wife of Maatang, is a lusty woman. She craves for Paatan’s flesh. She finds in Paatan the potency which Maatang lacks. She falls behind Paatan. To quench her thirst, she tempts him, but, he never yields to her. He considers her to be his mother. When Paatan is beaten by Maatang, the mistress goes to Paatan, taking concern of him and asks him:

> Where did he hurt you, my child?

*(She strokes Paatan all over. She is a lustful woman, all the flesh and craving. But, Paatan remains unconcerned).*

Paatan: I spoke of marrying and he beat me
The Mistress: Who'd give you away in marriage child, unless it's me? Come, sit here by me. Come closer.

Paatan: No, no. I look upon you as a mother.27

This incident reminds us the plight of Munoo in Mulk Raj Anand's Coolie. Mrs. Mainwaring, the mistress of Munoo, is a lusty woman with abnormal sexual urge. She looks upon Munoo as a potential lover for her. She almost resembles Paatan's mistress in her attitude. Both Munoo's mistress and Paatan's mistress crave for male flesh. Munoo becomes a victim of Mrs. Mainwaring's desires, whereas Paatan never yields for his mistress.

Paatan's mistress is a jealous woman. She does not tolerate Paatan loving someone or marrying someone. When Paatan tries run away with gipsy woman, she sends her servants to catch him and asks them to tie him to the post in her courtyard and whip him. She says to Paatan, "There's a funeral pyre burning within me, bastard! Do I run away?"28 After tying him, she says to Paatan, "I'd love to see your blood flow . . . and then go to sleep to night."29 This reveals her sadistic nature. She wants Paatan to be her only personal lover and that he should never entertain anybody. Paatan agrees to her proposal of elopement, only, when she promises him to give the bond and set him free. Of course, it is what saves him from bonded slavery. He strangles her in despair when she tells
him that the bond has long back turned to dust in the 'gaamcha. After her death, Maatang also reveals him the same. His happiness has no bounds when he knows that the bond has turned to dust and he is set free. This incident gives us a clear picture of how masters deceive their servants by making them ignorant of the facts. This exploitation is thus operated beyond law and beyond the knowledge of the victim.

In *Douloti The Bountiful*, sexual exploitation is the major aspect of discussion. It totally deals with bonded prostitution. Paramananda, a brahmin and urban exploiter goes to Seora village, sympathises with Ganori Nagesia and relieves him from bonded slavery by paying Munabar three hundred rupees, in exchange of marriage with Douloti. Thus, Douloti shoulders the yoke of her father. Paramananda takes her and puts her into bonded prostitution in his whorehouse. This is the greatest sexual exploitation. Douloti’s agony here is limitless. An innocent girl of thirteen years carries a heavy load on her head and heart.

Douloti first becomes a victim to Latia, a contractor, with an animal instinct who craves for the young harijan flesh. He is a monstrous fellow. He behaves like a beast. Douloti at the first instance itself falls in his hands and undergoes a lot of torture. Like a vulture he falls on her and tears her innocent body “bleeding and bleeding.” The author describes the nature of a rapist through Latia:

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* gaamcha - is a cloth used as a towel*
Latia pulled off her sari, he has torn off her blouse. He has taken off his own top, is he going to be naked? Lips trembling, tears in her eyes, what is Douloti saying?  
– No no lord, no no no lord, let me go lord . . .
– a desperate girl’s voice cracked out in terrible pain.  

Douloti suffers in Latia’s hands. When Latia takes up a girl, he continues his vulture actions till his attraction for her is lost. When he takes up a girl, she must remain for him only and she must not take any other client. So, every day and night, Douloti suffers in Latia’s hands. His attraction for her lasts for three years. All the three years are like a hell for her. She describes Latia as “lust-struck animal that digs and tears every day.”  

Like Douloti, many other women in whorehouse have experienced similar torture in Latia’s hands. Rampiyari, the caretaker of the whore house gives a few instances. Latia makes Kalabathi pregnant. When she is ill and passing blood, being dead drunk, Latia pounces upon her and kills her aborting. Somni under his animal desire gives birth to his three sons. The three sons become beggars as they have no place any where, even in the whorehouse. Reoti and Gohumani like Somni become victims to Latia’s actions. It is common for him to take new girls and throw them whenever his attraction for them is lost. These girls, after his refusal undergo more torture by taking many clients. There is no way out for them as they are ‘bonded prostitutes’. Through *Douloti The Bountiful*, Mahaswetha Devi throws light into these areas of suffering prostitutes. It is poverty that drives them to such suffering. All the women in Paramananda’s whorehouse are either tribals or Adivasi women. About the conditions of these
women, Gabrielle Collu says that: "They (tribals) own nothing: not the means of their livelihood, nor their own bodies." Thus, it is poverty that drives them to sexual exploitation. Mahaswetha Devi herself says:

In Hyderabad, there is a special area where buyers from Middle East, buy women in the name of marriage. Parents flock there because they are so poor, they cannot give their daughters food and clothing. The basic reason is poverty . . . As long as eighty percent of the Indian population lives below poverty line . . . Women are just merchandise commodities.

Douloti and others become commodities in the market as they have sold themselves to the bonded slavery. Paramananda, as he has pulled Douloti, by relieving her father from bonded slavery, pulls many girls in the name of marriage and throws them into his whore house as bonded prostitutes. He goes round the villages, pays the debts of the bonded labourers, and establishes a lucrative trade of bonded prostitution.

In the whorehouse, the prostitutes' lives become a hell. They have to load themselves with many clients and earn much for their master otherwise, they will be tortured. By over loading, they become old and worn out and die. Jaidev points out that:

The great Indians are starkly imaged in Munabar, as he yokes Ganori to cart, flourishing the whip. Like Munabar, the Misra brothel owners keep indiscriminately loading upon the bodies of their prostitutes, customer after
customer, until the girls are mere wrecks or die. The image they use for these girls is lorries or trucks. They must be loaded to the full, must keep plying non-stop, must ply as fast as they can.34

Douloti also becomes a victim to such overloading. After Paramananda’s death, his son Baijnath takes up the management. He changes management policies. Unlike his father, he believes in making a fast buck. He compels each girl to take dozen customers every night irrespective of what such an overloading would do to them. He is a better economist. He feels that it is more profitable to reduce their rates and take more customers paying more money. This makes the girls torn off more and turn into old rickety ones very fast. But, Baijnath never cares all these things and never spares any one. If they turn rickety, he replaces them soon by new girls. As it is drought they are easily replaced.

Seeing all this Rampiyari, the caretaker, ridicules the ignorance and naivete of the fathers who have sent their daughters with unknown men to the bonded prostitution. When Douloti joins, she says to her, “now they’ll eat the fruit of your womb.”35 Rampiyari sings a song which exhibits how a prostitute is exploited by the masters and she compares a prostitute to land and the master to a farmer. This song reinforces the association between the adivasi women and land, possession to be taken away and used at will for profit. She sings:

These are all Paramananda’s Kamiyas.

Douloti, Reoti and Somni

Field work, digging soil, cutting wells to work.

This one doesn’t do it, that one doesn’t do it,
the other one doesn’t do it –
the boss has turned them into land.
The boss plows and plows their land and raises the crop
They are all Paramananda’s kamiya.
They are all some people’s maat –
Near the foot of the Himalayas in . . .
The boss has made them land
He plows and plows their bodies’ land and raises crop
They are all some people’s maat.36

This song depicts Paramananda’s sexual exploitation. Here “plows plows” indicates the rape of women and possession of their bodies.

Baijnath, by his new policies makes them mere commodities which can be used and thrown away at his will. Douloti becomes a victim to his new policies. Her rate goes down to one rupee for a client. As she is over loaded by many customers, she undergoes a lot of tormentation and is affected by venereal diseases. All her body develops red swellings. She develops a high fever and does not take any food. She takes Baijnath’s permission to go to the hospital. As she goes to Tohri Hospital, being very weak, she falls unconscious, and gets robbed. When she is admitted in the hospital, seeing her typical condition, she is rejected by the doctors. Unable to do anything and in her condition, she decides to go to her birth place, Seora, to leave her last breathe in her parents’ embrace. Even before, reaching Seora, unable to walk any longer, she vomits blood and falls 'spread eagled' across the map of India drawn outside the primary school of Birsa village. That happens rightly on Independence Day. This incident gives a
complete identification of India with the exploited and subjugated women. Women like Douloti are all over India. It means that majority of people in India are being exploited. Independence to India is a lie and is meaningless to them.

Regarding this incident Gabrielle Collu says that:

Devi uses the image of the bonded sex worker lying dead on a map of India to denounce exploitation and destroy the myth of free India for all. She suggests that real Independence is impossible as long as there is gender, social and material inequality enabling one group to abuse another. 37

The author's revelation of Douloti's condition gives us the vision of all bonded prostitutes in India.

Filling the entire Indian Peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labor spread-eagled, Kamiya – whore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs . . . Douloti is all over India. 38

So, Douloti represents every suffering bonded whore in India. Unless, the system of exploitation vanishes, there will never be an end to the subjugation of such women.

Unlike Aajir and Douloti The Bountiful, Chotti Munda and his Arrow deals with a revolt against bonded labour. Though, it is a legend of Chotti Munda, it totally deals with a revolt against the bonded labour. Chotti does not take up bonded labour throughout his life and fights for his people against it.
Tirathnath Lala, the moneylender always wants to keep the bonded labour intact, but, the people want to get relieved from it. When the people know that bonded labour is abolished, they revolt against it. But, Tirathnath does not let his bonded labourers free. When they revolt against it and boycott his work, he takes the help of the youth league to suppress them and force them to his work. The youth league fellows create a lot of turmoil, - burn the houses of the people and shoot them. The people retaliate them by shooting arrows, where Romeo, Pahlwan and Udham, the members of the youth league lose their arms. Romeo, Pahlwan and others, after getting recovered, take up the forest contracts of Chotti village to keep all the tribals under their clutches. Knowing the plot of these people, the tribals kill them in the forest.

After the death of Romeo and Pahlwan, the SDO and police officials strive to catch the good archer in the tribals as Romeo and Pahlwan died by poisoned arrows. So, they plan to catch and arrest any Munda who is a good archer. They surround the Mundas who have gathered for their annual archery competition. Knowing all this, Chotti throws entire blame on himself and challenges the SDO and police to arrest him. When the police proceed further, they are shocked to see all the tribals revolting against them.

SDO seems to break some spell and stands up, goes forward. But instantly a thousand adivasis raise their bows in space and cry, No! The non-adivasis raise restraining hands. Chotti on one side SDO on the other, and in between

* SDO:- Sub Divisional Officer.
a thousand bows upraised in space. A warning announced in many upraised hands.\textsuperscript{39}

The bonded labour ends up when they revolt and kill Romeo and Pahlwan. Their unity further makes their point of revolt strong. Even the people in power and the people in Government service are scared to touch them, as their spirit would end up their lives.

In \textit{Chotti Munda and his Arrow} we come across a few other instances of revolt against the bonded labour and its masters. Dukhai, a bonded labourer of Kurmi village, beheads his manager as the latter tortures him by abusing and kicking him with the shoe. For that offence, Dukhai is imprisoned and hanged.

Puran Munda, an old man is a bonded labourer under Narsingarh’s manager, Tasildar Singh. Tasildar Singh breaks Puran’s house by letting his elephant on it. Puran escapes death and avenges by killing him, while the latter is returning from the forest. The vengeance of Dukhai and Puran is the outcome of the humiliation they have undergone in bonded slavery.

In \textit{Douloti The Bountiful} and \textit{Chotti Munda and his Arrow}, the appearance of Father Bomfuller and Amlesh on the scene is fraught with irony. They come to survey the existence of bonded labour. Instead of taking up any practical scheme for helping the poor people, the Government of India sends Bomfuller in \textit{Douloti The Bountiful} and Amlesh in \textit{Chotti Munda and his Arrow}, no good theorists, without any practical sense or practical knowledge to ascertain what projects are needed for the development of these bonded labourers. The bitterness of tone springs from the author’s personal involvement with the people, whose conditions remain unspeakable, while enormous sums go down the
drain in half-hearted endeavours for their uplift. In *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*, she writes:

> The government of India has always shown a fondness for these projects totally based on paper surveys and abstract theories, that are without any realistic basis, and by means of which crores of rupees can easily be given to some unworthy recipient. The government is interested only in the projects that never materialize, and never serve any useful purpose if they do.\(^{40}\)

This provides a vision into the projects that Government sanctions. The people who survey are practically unaware of the realities. Amlesh and Bomfuller take the paper surveys, but, in practicality they can never aim to end up the problem of bonded labour through their survey. Mahaswetha Devi is probably sarcastic of the survey system, by presenting us, Amlesh and Father Bomfuller as her characters. Of course, their survey gives a vision of the realities of Bonded Labour. For example, Bomfuller calculates the amounts while dealing with bonded prostitutes. When he calculates Douloti’s earnings, the calculations reveal that Douloti’s debt of three hundred rupees has earned the master forty thousand rupees by her body’s labour. He says, “Having bonded herself with three hundred rupees in 1962 – how much has she raised by 1970? Over forty thousand.”\(^{41}\) The bonded labourers are thus, squeezed and exploited.

Mahaswetha Devi, through her works focuses on the plight of many bonded labourers in India, even today. She creates an awareness in the people to react to the agony of the slaves and strive to end up this social evil as soon as
possible. She is herself a model in her venture to end the practice. She goes to the remote villages, identifies the slaves, creates an awareness in them, encourages them to fight for their rights and leads them. She approaches the landlords and the officials to free the bonded slaves from their bondage and thus has succeeded in freeing many slaves. Her work *Dust on the Road*, is a collection of articles she has written when she has confronted with them, known their problems and has relieved them from their bondage.

Mahaswetha Devi throws light on another kind of labour system called “contract labour system.” Its origin is said to have come from bonded labour system. She gives a note:

The bonded labour system was formally abolished in November 1975. Following that, a new system of recruiting bonded labourers was very quickly introduced in the bonded labour areas. Since their ex-masters would not give them work and since little was done by the State governments towards their rehabilitation, the landless ex-bonded labourers were in acute distress. Now came the agents of various masters to lure them away to far away places with promises of good jobs. Once they reached these places, they found themselves in a worse form of bondage.42

Contract labour is more complicated evil than bonded labour. The people under this system undergo more torture than the bonded labourers. Poverty and hunger drives them to contract labour. As mere abolition of bonded labour does
not help a bonded labourer, he chooses any form of subjugation to survive and stay alive. In order to stay alive, he enters – debt-bondage and he does not have any other alternative. Many people, under these circumstances, are enticed to take up contract labour in some far off places, where, they do not know what their fate would be. In *Douloti The Bountiful* and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* also we see how these contract labourers are exploited. Bono Nagesia works in a coal mine. He gives a clear picture of the plight of the contract labourers. He says that every one, the contractor or the union leader is a cheat. The contractor's hoods take a cut from every labourer's wages. Not only, the contractor and contractor's hoods, “Everyone sucks the coolie's blood." He says:

Government - union (union) contractor - slum landlord - market-trader - shopkeeper - post office, each is the other's friend. Down in the mine! How dark down, there! And at week's end, double darkness above the mine as well. The contractor's hoods stood with guns. They snatched the money. We got it only after they took their cut.

He tells further that, the shop keeper and the traders falsify their accounts, the postman does not give a note without his cut and everything is exploitation. Because these contract labourers are poor and weak, they are bullied at every step.

In *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*, Romeo and Pahlwan go to Chada Harbans' brick factory and demand cuts from the wages of labourers. As the labourers do not agree, they create a violence in the factory. All these instances of exploitation remind us of Gangu's plight in Mulk Raj Anand's *Two leaves and a
Bud. Gangu undergoes the same type of torture like Bono Nagesia. All the money he earns in the Tea Estate is snatched away by the managers and directors. He says:

The black coolies clear the forests, plant the fields, toil and garner the harvest, while money-grubbing, slave-driving, soulless managers and directors draw their salaries and dividends and build up monopolies.  

Mahaswetha Devi’s Outcast also deals with contract labour. It shows the lives of many contract labourers, especially, the lives of girl contract labourers in far-off places like Calcutta and Punjab.

During the times of famine or drought, the exploiters find an opportunity to grab the poor as they would be benefited with cheap labour and free sex. Most of these exploiters are brick kiln owners and landlords. They have the practice of recruiting adivasi labour. The adivasi women, who have been ex-concubines of the kiln owners, go to the remote villages, lure the young girls with the tales of good jobs in the cities and take them there. These Sardars, who lure the people, prefer young unmarried girls as they are better workers and are good for sale. In Outcast, two stories Sanichari and The Fairytale of Rajabasha deal with such exploitation. Many young girls are lured and taken to far-off places. They are seduced and victimized. Shanichari in Shanichari and Josmina in The Fairytale of Rajabasha are subjected to such anguish. In the first phase, we are given an opportunity to know how these Sardars act. Gohuman Bibi in Shanichari and Nandalal Sahu in The Fairytale of Rajabasha take up the profession of Sardars to mint money by benefiting their masters. Gohuman Bibi lands in a village; gathers
all young girls, treats them with puris and laddoos and lures them by telling interesting tales of the city, Kolkatta. She entices them that they will earn a lot of money, get “Chamak Chamak Saris,” jewellery and happy life. They get attracted by her sweet words, believe her and get beguiled.

Hiralal describes Gohuman Bibi’s nature and compares her to a venomous toad. When he confronts with her, he says:

You’re Gohuman all right! A cobra spits venom, like you.
You sell off the girls. Twenty rupees per girl. Supply a thousand girls and make twenty thousand.47

This comparison rightly fits her. And the number ‘thousand’ indicates the number of girls becoming victims to contract labour. The Sardars' thirst for money, makes these young girls victims. The Sardars play a major role in subjugating and victimizing these young girls. Mahaswetha Devi gives a description of these Sardars:

They (Sardars) force these girls to sleep with the owners, the supervising staff, the truck drivers, Khalasis, and local mastans. Any one who refuses to co-operate is first locked up in a room, beaten and then seared with a hot iron. It is usual to make a girl drink heavily and then send her for the master’s pleasure.48

The girls once captured by Sardars undergo a lot of humiliation and they cannot escape from their clutches. Shanichari becomes one such victim by falling into Gohuman’s fangs. With other girls, she is taken to the brick kiln at Calcutta. She falls into the eyes of Rahmat, the kiln owner. He catches her and says, “come,
share some meat curry and rice with me. You’re just my type. Spunky girls like you are more fun.” He seduces and tears her. One day when she rejects him, he throws her back into *reja work. She becomes pregnant and carries Rahmat’s child in her womb. For tribals, it is a sin to carry a *diku’s child. One day, when the brick kiln is shut down, Shanichari and all others are sent back to their homes. For being pregnant, she undergoes another torture of being abandoned from their society. Through Shanichari, Mahaswetha Devi gives the picture of women who suffer in their masters’ hands, by going to far-off places to work as contract labourers.

Like Gohuman Bibi, Nandalal Sahu deludes Josmina and her husband, Sarjom by luring them:

An excellent job. Big farmers. Plenty to eat. Work for a short period. The two of you will get, say, about four hundred a month. Enough clothes. Work for a year and at the end of it – baap re baap! You’ll come back with almost five thousand bucks! Sit at home and enjoy! 50

They easily get convinced and lured. They prepare to go to Punjab and land in Ferozepur. Niranjan Singh takes them to his house and entrusts field work to them. He gets attracted to Josmina’s body. One day he takes her to a hut, makes her naked and seduces her. This goes on everyday. She tells her husband and they plan to leave. They escape from there and fall into another vulture’s clutches. From Niranjan to Karnal Singh. From Karnal Singh to Gyan Singh. Like

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* reja means a coolie in a brick kiln.
* diku – a man outside the tribal community
that, unable to bear their torture, they escape from place to place. Every time; she gets pregnant and gets aborted. They lose their money also. For the last time, they join work in Sarban’s fields. His son Dileep Singh like others, tortures Josmia. One day they reveal all this to Sarban and pray to relieve them. When they are relieved, she carries a diku’s child. Unable to bear all this, she kills herself by drowning. Behind her death lies a lot of agony and humiliation she has carried within her for being abused many times and for being made an outcast. Mahaswetha Devi through these two stories, Shanichari and The Fairytale of Rajabasha, throws light on the affliction and tormentation, the young girls undergo as contract labourers.

The contract labourers are lured and taken, but, they get nothing. They are cheated by everyone. The masters suck the blood from these labourers and pay a very little amount and even some people are denied of their wages. Thus, it becomes the major exploitation. Mahaswetha Devi has been sincerely trying to solve and eradicate this problem. She writes about the predicament of the contract labourers to make the people know it and react to it. She has moved from place to place to create an awareness in the people and to eradicate it.

Aajir speaks of Paatan’s torment in the hands of his master, Maatang. He is not given any freedom. He lacks freedom even to love and marry. He suffers humiliation both in his master’s and mistress’s hands. He is relieved from slavery only when he knows that the bond no longer exists. Douloti The Bountiful exposes the plight of bonded prostitutes through Douloti. Douloti suffers all her life in a whorehouse. She is overloaded with many clients everyday. By overloading she is affected by venereal diseases and dies vomiting blood. Chotti
Munda and his Arrow depicts the war between bonded labourers and the money lender. The moneylender tries to keep all slaves under his feet and continue the slavery but, the slaves repulse to that age-old practice. In this war many people lose their lives. At last the slaves achieve their ends.

In Shanichari and The Fairytale of Rajabasha, the protagonists, Shanichari and Josmina are taken to distant places as contract labourers and are afflicted. They are ill-treated and sexually abused by their masters. They are made pregnant. For their pregnancy, they are made outcasts in their villages. They undergo humiliation both in the masters' hands and their villagers. Contract labour afflicts them in all the ways.

All these works on bonded and contract labour portray the predicament of the labourers who continuously rot in the hands of the rich and the feudal mechanism. The victimization still continues unabated. There is a need and urgency to end up such victimization. To bring awareness and to relieve the poor from such exploitation and torture, Mahaswetha Devi writes and fights against such odd practices of the society.
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