CHAPTER II

The Tribal in the Saga of Class Exploitation

Raymond Williams observes that the modern use of the word “class”, referring to hierarchically differentiated social groups (such as upper class, middle class and lower class), can be traced to the period between 1700 and 1840 in Britain, when the Industrial Revolution was underway. During this period social groupings were redefined in economic terms, replacing the earlier hierarchies based on birth and rank, in view of the “increasing consciousness that social position is made rather than merely inherited” (61). Marxist theory identifies class as the primary basis of social organization, relating it to the means of production in a particular society. Thus there is one class of people, usually in a minority, that controls the means of production and, therefore, possesses wealth and power, and the other class of people,
usually in the majority, who do the productive labour, but has access to neither power nor wealth. Marx divided history into three epochs -that of slavery, feudalism and capitalism- based on the way class was structured in societies. Class-divided societies were characterized by relations of exploitation and of domination and subordination, operated through the hegemonic structures of society and the state. Social classes can thus be defined as:

… those distinct social formations made up of groups of people who have a similar relationship to the means of production in society and, as a result, a common social and cultural position within a unequal system of property ownership, power and material rewards. (Hartley 39)

Contemporary postcolonial theorists use the term “subaltern classes” to refer to those social groups who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling/elite classes in a society or nation. The term “subaltern”, first used by the Italian political thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), was a military metaphor which meant “of inferior rank”. (Ascroft et al Key Concepts 215-219) It has become popular in academic and non-academic discourse with the rewriting of both colonial and nationalist histories of postcolonial nations from the point of view of the subaltern classes by the “Subaltern Studies” group of historiographers from South Asia, particularly India. Mahasweta Devi’s works have been read by
such postcolonial critics as attempts to reinsert the suppressed histories of the subaltern classes of India into the grand narrative of Indian history. But as critics like Gayatri Spivak point out, the category of class is not a homogenous and autonomous entity in a country like India. The subaltern classes in India are constituted by numerous and varied groups of people marked by differences of race or tribe, caste, region and gender. Therefore any discussion of class-related issues involves the particular intersections of these categories within its framework. Mahasweta’s fiction that deals with the tribal subject articulates the particular intersections of the category of tribe with the larger picture of class-exploitation in colonial and postcolonial India.

Although it remains an undisputed fact that her works have received wide critical attention under the label of “subaltern” literature, Mahasweta herself does not attach much significance to the term itself. But she emphatically reiterates her commitment to “the other side of the people” by which she means the poor, exploited and marginalized classes of men, women and children of India primarily consisting of the “lower” castes and the so called “untouchables”, tribals, and the peasants and labourers who constitute the rural and urban poor. “I write about a country which is class-divided, class-exploited, class-oppressed…I believe in class … the country was not allowed to grow naturally, … and human beings were absolutely divided by (the) caste
and class system. Caste is always identified with class. That’s what I believe…” (“I am Interested in History” Kakatiya Journal 93-99).

The subaltern, for Mahasweta, is any human being who is oppressed, deprived and marginalized by virtue of his/her class, caste, tribe or gender and whose voice has been silenced in his/her own country. Her activist and journalistic work has focused on the material realities of class-exploitation among the lower cases and tribals in contemporary India, especially in the states of Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa, in meticulous detail. Her activism involves ground-level interaction with the tribal people, detailed documentation of their problems, negotiating with the authorities and helping them to fight legal battles for basic concerns like land, housing, employment, education, health care and so on. Most of her journalistic articles on these subjects have been translated and brought together in the collection Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi and provide the background for the situations dramatized in her fictional works. As Susie Tharu points out, they reflect her concern with “the real issues of poverty, hardship and exploitation” which are “primarily class questions” (2917). In her fictional works, however, she relates class issues like land, labour and wages to the socio-cultural aspects of tribal life, thereby providing a holistic picture of the different dimensions of the tribal experience.
Her fiction includes characters from different castes and tribes, who constitute the large and amorphous category of India’s depressed classes. However, she never loses sight of the specificities of the situation and characters being represented, whether of historic period, region, caste, tribe or gender. Mahasweta points out that her first published novel, *The Queen of Jhansi*, was about a royal queen and high caste Brahmin widow who joins the ranks of “the other side of the people” as she displayed the courage to take on the powerful British army in defence of her kingdom and people. Characters like Maghai Dom in “Water”, Patan in “Ajir” or Dulan Ganju in “Seeds” are all characters from the lower castes who suffer the double yoke of class and caste exploitation. Women, for her, are an exploited class in themselves and the boundaries of caste and tribe often appear irrelevant in the larger picture of class-exploitation portrayed in Mahasweta’s women-centric stories like “Rudali”, “Bayen”, “Jamunabati’s Mother”, “Dhouli”, “Sanichari”, “Statue”, “The Fairytale of Mohanpur” etc. In one of her most popular stories, “The Breast-Giver”, the protagonist Jasoda belongs to the Brahmin caste, but is exploited in the name of both class and gender. Her definition of the category of class therefore, brings into its ambit the concerns of all people oppressed on the basis of class, tribe, caste or gender. However, she seems to harbour a special interest in the plight of the most exploited class of people in India today, namely the
tribal people. In an interview with Pankaj Singh, she says that the tribals of India, especially the so-called “criminal” tribes have “suffered the most brutal oppression”(9).

Because of their unique location in the history of India’s society and polity, Mahasweta, however, considers the tribal people to be the most exploited among the subaltern classes of India. In the official discourse of the Indian nation, tribes are considered to be a distinct ethnic category of people, with specific constitutional rights and privileges conferred on them due to their marginalized and endangered status, meant to guarantee them their economic, social and cultural autonomy. But the long history of domination and oppression from pre-colonial times to the present day has reduced Indian tribes into one among the most exploited, deprived and dispossessed groups of people in India today. Forming almost 8.2 % of the population, tribals are a significant part of the undefined and largely unorganized category of poor, powerless people generally called the “depressed classes” in colonial discourse and the “lower classes” in modern Indian parlance, who have to fight daily battles with both society and the state for their basic rights to an independent and dignified existence. The overlapping of the category of tribe into that of class has its historical reasons, which has been explored by postcolonial scholars and critics.
History tells us that during pre-colonial times, tribes had enjoyed a fair degree of insularity and autonomy in their relations with more powerful mainstream societies. However, as civilizations grew and urban centres and villages developed rapidly, the tribal people began to feel the ill-effects of these encroachments by outsiders or “dikus” as they call them, both to their lands, their economies and their culture. It was during the period of British rule that the tribes faced large scale encroachments into their traditional habitats and consequently lost their independence and autonomy. The British introduced new land regulations and promoted the feudal system and private ownership, which replaced the system of communal land holdings by the tribals and made them strangers in their own lands. The erstwhile tribal areas were earmarked by the British for plantations, mines and industries. Deprived of their lands, traditional occupations and burdened by new taxes, the tribals fell prey to rapacious money lenders and exploitative landlords, many of them becoming victims of the evil of bond slavery. Along with the people of the lower castes, tribal people were thus gradually brought into the ambit of labour. “Labour… had to be placed at the lowest level to ensure its availability and continuity,” remarks Romila Thapar. (The Penguin History of Early India 65)

Postcolonial studies have focused on how colonial discourse served as a handmaiden to the economic and political goals of
imperialism. The “scientific” and anthropological theories of race facilitated this process and ensured that the labour of colonized people was appropriated, making available a labour force to further the capitalistic growth of the empire. In a country like India the already existing caste system that divided people based on an ideology of birth and occupation, proved even more helpful for the imposition of colonial ideologies. Ania Loomba observes that the “ideology of racial superiority translated easily into class terms… Certain sections of people were thus racially identified as the natural working classes” (126). Thus the people of the lower castes and the tribals were transformed into the category of the labouring classes, and were subjected to all the exploitative measures aligned with it.

Kaushik Ghosh’s article on the subject provides valuable insights into the incorporation of tribes like the Santhals, Mundas, Hos, Oraons and Paharias of the Chotanagpur area and other hill tribes of the North East into the indentured labour market as “dhangars” or “coolies”, both in India and overseas during colonial times. Ghosh observes that the introduction of alien land tenures in tribal areas by colonial administrators led to the tribals losing their traditional habitats and their revenue, pushing them into poverty and debt. Ruthless exploitation at the hands of the administrators, landlords and traders was aided by colonial laws and enforced by the army, forcing the tribals to leave their
traditional lands and migrate to other places as peasants and labourers. Though this resulted in many tribal revolts and peasant rebellions in the nineteenth century, they were mercilessly suppressed by the colonial army. The discursive constructions of race and caste helped further this process. The tribes were pictured as being naturally “suitable” to hard labour because of their wild and hardy nature, their “castelessness” and so on. The proud, independent indigenous people of India were thus reduced to near slavery as docile and hardworking coolies, mere fodder for the well oiled imperial machine, and in the process losing their lands and livelihoods, their unique cultural identities and their rights to a dignified human existence:

Thus the Ho, Munda, Oraon, Bhumji, Santal and Paharia peoples- the raiding hill-men who so terrified others and remained autonomous of the people of the plains- increasingly lost the autonomy they had maintained at the time of their initial colonization… This transformation was neither inevitable nor an evolutionary progression from tribe to peasant to wage- labourer. New imaginations and discourses of primitivism had to be created in place of the older discourse of savage hill-men as an inseparable part of the transformation of the Chotanagpur peoples into a stream of coolie labourers. (13-14)
It is this historic scenario and its continuation in post-independence India that is Mahasweta Devi’s primary concern in her understanding of the tribal situation in India and its representation in her fiction. All her major novels and short stories dealing with tribal life and culture dramatize a particular socio-historical scene, bringing alive the particular issues relevant to that scenario. The focus of her work is on the tribal belts in and around West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, though she is also involved in the issues in other areas like Gujarat and South India too. Even as she presents the realistic picture of the tribals’ economic and political marginalization within the larger discourse of class-exploitation, she shows the tribal negotiating with this marginalization and resisting it through the agency of their own unique ethnic cultural discourse. Mahasweta’s narratives define the various socio-historic-political hegemonic structures that led to the tribals’ status as a marginalized class in all its discursive plurality. She adopts the innovative narrative techniques to weave the tribal’s story in their own voice, taking recourse to the various narrative strategies of story, song and myth that are the unique features of the tribals’ oral discourse, setting it dialectically against the dominant discourses.

As observed above, it is the question of land- the tribals’ right to their land and its loss through forceful means- that is identified as the primary issue in the saga of their transformation from proud,
autonomous, ethnic communities into the ranks of the “depressed” classes of modern India. Mahasweta cites the reasons for the issue of land alienation among tribals reaching alarming proportions thus:

… there are several reasons for this, including the poor level of development among the tribals, lack of literacy and education among them, and their deeprooted mistrust and fear of the legal system. But the real cause is their class position. India, that is, Bharat, doesn’t consider them to be an integral part of society. How else can one explain the role played by the dominant section of society, the administration and the political parties, doing everything within their means to ensure that the tribals do not enjoy any right to which they are entitled? (Dust on the Road 70)

The eviction of the tribal from his traditional forest and agricultural lands thus marks the starting point of their marginalization. Though written later in her career, it is in the novel The Book of the Hunter (2002) that Mahasweta goes furthest back into history and brings alive the lives of the reclusive hunting tribes, the Shabars, who are one of the most marginalized tribal groups in India today. This novel is set in the sixteenth century and depicts a picture of a tribal world that was still more or less autonomous and isolated, where the tribal lived in their traditional forestlands, in harmony with his environment. But the first
effects of alien cultures were beginning to be felt and the tribe’s existence becomes increasingly threatened in the face of more powerful and dominant groups in the village societies. The forest has shrunken as the village has advanced and the children of the forest are forced to mingle with other people and are increasingly made aware of their “inferiority” both in cultural and material terms.

The tribal protagonist Kalya’s burning but impotent anger, and his reckless attempt at asserting his identity are tragic reminders of the slow but inevitable victory of the mainstream over the subaltern. Kalya’s participation in the traditional hunt is his attempt at resisting this imposition of a lower class status by the more powerful mainstream society, on his ancient heritage as a proud hunter and the sentinel of the forests and the forest goddess Abhaya. With Kalya’s death, the tribal begins his saga of loss, deprivation and death that will get worse as time goes on. The Shabars (along with the Lodhas and Kherias of West Bengal) are today one of the most deprived of all tribes, having been “notified” as “criminal tribes” by the British. Although “denotified” by the Indian government in 1976, they still continue to suffer from social stigma and are the targets of unmentionable cruelty and atrocities at the hands of society. (Dust on the Road 114-137, Preface The Book of the Hunter vi-ix) The short story “Arjun” represents the present condition of the Kheria Shabars as they live increasingly deprived lives, having lost
all touch with their traditional lands and ways of life. They are now just casual labourers who are exploited by the wily politicians of the village, who force them to cut down trees, pushing them into conflict with the authorities. Ketu, the hero, is in and out of jail all the time, for performing the “all important task of land encroachment, crop theft, disposal of corpses and clearing government owned forests”, the authorial voice tells us. (185) The story dramatizes the Shabar’s successful resistance to the efforts of the exploiters to get them to cut down their sacred “arjun” tree.

Her first novel on tribal history, the Sahitya Akademi Award - winning \textit{Aranyer Adhikar}, (1977) sees Mahasweta going right into the heart of the tribals’ forest lands and picking up the tale of the tribal uprising, the “Ulgulan” led by Birsa Munda against the British, to regain their rights to their lands in the forests of Chotanagpur, during the period between 1895 and 1901. The history of Birsa Munda’s movement has been documented comprehensively by Dr.K.S.Singh in his book \textit{Dust Storm and Hanging Mist: Story of Birsa Munda and his Movement} (1966) and its subsequent revised editions. Singh uses different sources like official records and documents as well as the oral lore prevalent in the area. Mahasweta has based her novel on Singh’s book, and her own researches, characteristically weaving her tale from the various discourses through which Birsa’s story evolves. The novel begins and
ends with the matter-of-fact stating of Birsa’s death in Ranchi jail. In between unfolds the different strands of the narrative that moves in a rambling fashion reminiscent of the oral story telling mode, through factual records, oral tales, songs, myths and the almost lyrical authorial voice, going straight into the heart and soul of the Mundas’ brave fight for their ancestral lands. The economic and political background for the revolt is outlined by K.S. Singh (1-27) and is brought alive in Mahasweta’s narrative.

She poignantly portrays the poverty, sorrow and angst that the tribals suffer when they see their lands, livelihoods and culture slowly disappear. The changing situation forces the Mundas and other castes and tribes associated with the village into a situation where they suddenly perceive themselves to be the lowest among all classes of people, exploited and hounded out of their homelands. The implications of this are not just economic but cultural and existential too, as their ancestral burial grounds are also lost with the land, hacking at the roots of their religious and cultural traditions, filling their lives with sorrow, fear, guilt and insecurity. The song sung by Sunara Munda and later taken by the whole tribe as a song of their brotherhood, epitomizing their pain:

O brothers, brothers,
Run children, run for your lives,
The storm has come
O brothers…
The storm is in the earth’s breast!
Here is the mist that hides the sky!
Our land has been robbed,
O brothers, we have nowhere to go!
Darkness, all is darkness!
O brothers, sisters,
You too run, run to save your lives…

(*Aranyathinte Adhikaram* 25, own translation)

Mahasweta builds up Birsa’s character by juxtaposing the two main aspects of his evolution as a revolutionary leader of the Mundas-his poverty-filled life and his legendary status as the divine saviour of the Mundas. Birsa’s childhood is filled with poverty and want, and he is shunted from place to place along with his parents in search of work and food. He gives up his ancestral religion, telling his parents that their gods have failed them, and joins the Christian mission hoping for a better life, but leaves when he realizes that the mission too is in collusion with the government. Even as he wages everyday battles to fill his stomach, Birsa slowly becomes conscious of the legends that are growing around him as the rightful heir of Chotu and Nagu, his
ancestors who built Chotanagpur, through the tales of Dhani Munda, a veteran of many battles with the British. He finds solace in the lap of the forest, “the mother of all Mudas”, where, in a moment of great spiritual clarity, Birsa awakens to his real destiny as “the father of the earth” and the saviour of the Mudas and their land. On a momentous night, he hears the cry of the forest mother and pledges to save her honour that has been defiled by a procession of conquerors. He launches his agitation, called the “ulgulan”, to reclaim the tribals’ right to their forests and farmlands. (87-88)

Mahasweta uses the metaphor of fire to express the raging anger that inspires the poor tribals and peasants of Chotanagpur join ranks with Birsa. The fire of hunger slowly transforms into the fire of the revolution. Although the non-tribal world considers them to be uncivilized savages, they are aware that they are an ancient race, their beings filled with the immeasurable power of the source of all life, symbolized by the deep, dark, life-giving forest. The Mudas of the “Austric” race are considered to be one of the first inhabitants of the land they occupy now. Birsa says, “One drop of Munda blood holds the whole of the dark past of Bharat” (75). It is this umbilical connection with their ancient history and the source of their life that is being severed with the loss of their land. So when their savior arrives with the call for the “ulgulan”, they embrace him with love and hope. His story is
wafted through the forest on the wings of legend, song and myth, inspiring the people of the whole Chotanagpur area to rise in revolt. They immortalize this momentous time in their history through songs and legends that recall them to a sense of their proud heritage:

Our hands do not hold bright weapons
Birsa’s coming! We go to war
In the left hand, bow
In the right hand, arrow
In our hands, weapons
In lines we come, Birsa. (229)

For the next five years, (from 1896-1901), Birsa and his fellowmen wage a valiant but loosing battle with the colonial forces, which ended with Birsa’s capture, arrest and subsequent death in prison. Mahasweta’s narrative treads the narrow, wavering path between the almost fairy-tale like legends of the mystical, god-like Bhagwan Birsa and the sad facts of a failed tribal revolt. For the people who fought with him, Birsa’s “ulgulan” represents the tribals’ resistance to the forceful imposition of a class status that they see as an affront to their proud and ancient civilization. As Kumkum Yadav observes, Mahasweta’s concern is not just with setting the political and historical record straight, but also with the human predicament involved.
Mahasweta Devi’s concern with the socio-religious and the anthropological dimensions of Birsa’s movement, like her concern with its political nature… reaches beyond the purely informative to suggest contemporary as well as symbolic meanings in a tribal practice or idea. As a movement rooted in basically tribal issues, Birsa’s ‘Ulgulan’ needs to be read for the Munda mythology, rituals and beliefs as they existed during a period of strong political as well as socio-cultural upheavals. (Narratives on Tribals in India 59)

Even as the colonial and Indian mainstream hegemonic structures and discourses seek to push them into the lowest strata of society, the tribals’ access their own unique resources to effect a political and cultural resistance. Birsa hears his ancestors’ voice throbbing in his veins, reminding him that “The right of the forest is the first right of this dark country. At that time, the country of these white men was sleeping under the depths of the ocean” (Aranyathinte Adhikaram 81-82). Mahasweta foregrounds the intrinsically indigenous nature of their resistance- with the “primitive” but deadly bows and poisoned arrows, using their knowledge of the forest to survive in hiding and to surprise the enemy. She also shows how the tribal people use their oral discourse of song, tale and myth to embody the spirit of the struggle and to script their resistance into history as well as into myth. Their songs not only
serve to unify them into a brotherhood, but also to immortalize Birsa as a historical as well as a mythical hero, the savior of the tribe. In the colonial records, which are inserted almost verbatim in Mahasweta’s narrative, Birsa is just an under trial prisoner held for arson and conspiracy, who died of cholera in jail, a fate that is shared by all his fellowmen and all “lower class” tribals and peasants who resisted the colonial administration. But in tribal lore, he is a legendary hero, a semi-divine being, born on earth as a Munda to save his brethren from bondage and exploitation. It is this foregrounding of tribal identity within an imposed class identity that Mahasweta’s narrative is able to effect.

The legend of Birsa Munda and his ulgulan continues to inspire future generations of Mundas for many years to come, although their resistance was effectively quelled. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the tribal system of communally held land holdings (called the Khuntkatti system) and their forests were either in the hands of private land owners or the government as large-scale agricultural lands, coal and mica mines, plantations and industries. The new evil of “bonded labour” reduces many of them to the status of slaves, as they are forced to borrow from rapacious landlords and money-lenders during times of famine or for social functions related to marriage, births or deaths. The tribals were gradually transformed from the free-living people who were
the original inhabitants of this land, into the exploited and marginalized class of ryots and wage labourers. Mahasweta continues the narration of this history from the beginning of the twentieth century right into post-independence India in her “best-beloved” novel, *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (2002) initially published in 1980.

Chotti is born in the year 1900, coinciding with Birsa’s death, and his history becomes the history of tribal India till the 1970s, running parallel to mainstream Indian history. The novel traces the momentous events of Indian history- British rule, independence struggle, the first Congress government, the emergency, the 1977 elections and the defeat of Indira Gandhi’s party. These events do not touch the Munda’s lives in any significant way as they remain on the periphery and watch one set of masters replacing another, making no difference in their poor, marginalized existence:

The August movement did not even touch the life of Chotti’s community… They did not draw them into the liberation struggle. In war and Independence the life of Chotti and his cohorts remained unchanged. They stand at a distance and watch it all. (*Chotti Munda* 121-22)

For them it only means that one set of masters has been replaced by another, as colonial practices and attitudes are replicated and often
improved upon in post-colonial India. As India moves into nationhood, the people of the lower castes and tribes find themselves at the bottom of the class hierarchy, deprived of their rights to basic amenities like food, shelter, water, education and minimum wages. The nation’s development projects turn their forest and agricultural lands into graveyards and turn them into commodities bought and sold in the labor markets. They are enslaved in debt and bonded labour, either in Lala’s fields or in industrial projects that destroy their environment. They are given inadequate wages and are not even entitled to eat the rice that they harvest, but have to be content with “ghato” or the seeds of china grass that they boil and eat with salt. Rice becomes an obsession and a dream for them, acquiring a poignancy which is narrativized in almost all of Mahasweta’s fiction. For instance, in *Aranyathinte Adhikaram*, it is the smoke from the fire that was used to cook rice that leads to the capture of Birsa, for which he doesn’t blame his fellows, realizing their obsession with it.

Chotti and his fellow tribals are not aware that bonded labour was abolished in 1976, their lack of education and exposure keeping them in conditions of ignorance and slavery. Chotti realizes that the Government “Won’ teach so we understand our rights. And what’s t’ use larnin? Mundas’ ve nothin’ to call their own no more.” (137) The struggles of the tribals led by Chotti and the untouchables led by Chhagan take
different forms, from digging wells during drought, fighting the combined forces of landlords, money-lenders, corrupt officials and political leaders and their goons. The novel brings alive the ground situation where the differences of caste and tribe are overridden by the constructions of class. The awareness that there is a need for solidarity among the different untouchable castes and tribals who form the labouring class if they are to put up any meaningful resistance to the exploitation of the state and society, is foregrounded. As Gayatri Spivak says, “Chotti Munda repeatedly dramatizes subaltern solidarity: Munda, Oraon, and the Hindu outcastes must work together” (Translator’s Afterword Chotti Munda 366). Mahasweta lampoons the academician whose is looking for “pure” adivasi villages to illustrate his “theories” on the problems of caste and tribe. Chotti reminds them, “But all adivasis don’ live in such villages lord. In our Chotti village untouchable-adiwasi live together. In work-sweat, in joy-pain, we’re one” (Chotti Munda 306). Chotti’s story represents the swift changes that overtake the lives of the Munda tribes, transforming them from a distinct ethnic group into a major part of India’s subaltern classes.

Their tribal identity is evoked through the legend of Birsa Munda, which is linked to the story of Chotti through the figure of Dhani Munda, the old man who had fought with Birsa in his “ulgulan”. When Chotti is fifteen, “On a frost-dripping night in the harvest month of
Aghran, at the unearthly moment when the starry heavens has come surreptitiously close to the earth…”, Dhani hands over to Chotti the “magic” arrow and the machete that once belonged to Birsa as a symbol of tribal identity, anointing him as the current leader of the Mudas. (12) The machete has Birsa’s name scratched on it, and Dhani tells him that even though they cannot read, “If ye feel it with yer fingers t’spell’ll enter yer fingers as well” (13). Both of them are aware that the possibility of a revolt on the scale of the “ulgulan” is not possible anymore since the adivasis have well and truly been subjugated by the colonial and elitist forces by this time. Chotti knows that his unique tribal identity, here represented by his prowess with the bow and arrow, is well on its way to being “museumized”, and will now be confined to archery contests in tribal fairs, as symbolic artifacts of tribal culture and identity:

The day is coming. Mundas will not be able to live with their identity. In all national development work they will have to be one with those who, like Chhagan, are the oppressed of the land, and work as field hands, as sweated workers for contractor or trader. Then there’ll be a shirt on his body, perhaps shoes on his feet. Then the ‘Munda’ identity will live only at festivals- in social exchange. (139)
Chotti starts practicing to shoot with Dhani and wins at every fair, inspiring the growing legends about his infallible arrow with the magic spell among both the tribal and non-tribal people of the village. When Dhani is killed in a police encounter, Chotti assumes the mantle of the tribe’s leader and his growing reputation instills fear and a grudging respect even from the all-powerful police and the landlord. His steady arm and continuous practice are the reasons behind his success with the bow and arrow, but for his people, it is a symbol of power and of hope. Fearing another tribal revolt, the officials ban Chotti from participating in archery contests and he is made a judge instead. Chotti’s saving the daroga’s life, winning for himself a small, barren piece of land, successfully bargaining for higher wages, re-entering the archery contests- the tribal people convert all these events into songs and stories, linking Chotti and his spell-bound arrow to tribal myth and history:

Everything is story in Chotti Munda’s life. Now these stories are reaching the supernatural. In every area Munda men and women say when they put their children to sleep, There’s a man called Chotti Munda. He’s taught his Lala a lesson with arrers. Gormen is scared of him and lets him have land with paperwork. (213)
Another song sung by the women at the fair goes like this in Spivak’s translation:

Ye raise t’ bow, ye hit t’ target
Makes Daroga mighty afraid, mate-
Ye go to Gormen and tell ‘em our plea
Makes Daroga mighty afraid, mate-
So they didn’ let ya play yer arrer…
Which Munda knows t’ bowspell?
Only ye, mate-
Which Munda is Gormen’s buddy?
Only ye, mate-
So they didn’ let ya play yer arrer. (84)

But as Chotti is well aware, his everyday reality is that of a poor, marginalized tribal eking out a hand-to-mouth existence as a wage labourer. He tells his baby daughter, “Yer ears will hear songs about yer pa. Yer eyes will see yer pa livin’ on three rupees daily wage and a snack, ploughin’ Lala’s field” (105). Mahasweta’s narrative thus suggests the complexity of the reality of the tribal in India today as they are caught between a harsh, deprived life and the memory of a proud, ancient past. The tableau-like ending where Chotti’s and Chhagan’s groups stand together, up in arms, facing the powerful state machinery, epitomizes this standpoint of the author. As Shirley Chew remarks,
Mahasweta seems to raise the question of “whether real change without the loss of integrity is possible for the tribal and outcaste communities,” and seems to suggest a possibility of “subaltern resistance and cultural identity” (59). The use of the tribal oral discourses of song, story and myth too is part of this resistance as Chotti’s unique tribal identity is foregrounded from the general discourse of class. Mahasweta’s herself provides the clue to the relevance of her narrative technique of using the oral tribal traditions of discourse:

…this is also resistance. Thus they are making the thing alive. Chotti here is a symbol or representation of tribal aspiration. This is why the beginning of the book opens into a mythic ancestor- continuity placed within an open frame at both ends. (“Telling History” Chotti Munda xi)

_Chotti Munda and his Arrow_ ends in the 1970s, when the peasant unrest that ended in the Naxalite movement had begun to gain ground. If the Naxalite movement is only mentioned in Chotti Munda, it is given a full and powerful representation in Mahasweta’s novelette “Operation?-Bashai Tudu” which is part of the collection _Bashai Tudu_ (1-148), where she focuses on the peasant insurgencies in the Naxalbari region in North Bengal from the mid 1960s. The area had seen many such peasant uprisings from the colonial period onwards, like the Sannyasi revolt, the
Wahabi Movement, the Indigo revolts and the more contemporary Tebhaga movement of the mid 1940s. Mahasweta outlines the socio-economic and political background of the unrests that culminated in the violence of the Naxalite movement in the Preface to *Bashai Tudu* (1990). (xv-xxi). By the 1970s the tribals are well and truly entrenched in the lowest rung of the class structure, forming the majority of the agricultural labourers of the area who are denied even the minimum wages fixed by the government in 1968. In a style that bristles with sustained irony and black humour, Mahasweta unleashes the full force of her angry, strident criticism of a system that allows these unfortunate people to be exploited by the nexus of landowner-state-legal system. With sharp irony and black humour, she parodies the discourse of the leftist government that is supposedly committed to the interests of the working classes, exposing its hollowness and the wide gap between its theoretical claims and actual practice:

Constituting the lowest rung of agricultural labour, the migrant labourers were not affected in the least by the orders on the MW or the *Minimum Wages for Agricultural Labourers*, as declared by the Labour Department to the reverberation of slogans like ‘Workers of the World, Unite!’, ‘It’s no Independence till the workers have their own State!’ and ‘The workers are the rightful owners of the world!’ With
the omniscience of the ancient sages, they knew that laws are made only because they have to be made, that they need never be enforced, and that those for whom the laws are made need never reap the benefits… They were aware of the glory that the MW law had brought to the Government, how it had redeemed the administration’s sense of guilt, how it had been a topic for discussion at several meetings held in air-conditions chambers over steaming cups of Nescafe, and how it had drawn a blank in implementation. As with the naked and hungry the world over, the lives of the Santals are determined and regulated by hunger, not by any government.  

(“Operation? – Bashai Tudu” Bashai Tudu 61)

According to Samik Bandhopadhyay, Mahasweta has fashioned her hero Bashai Tudu, a Santal tribal, out of the many tribal heroes of the actual movement, “who stands outside the Naxalite movement as well as the constitutional political parties, to fight exclusively and doggedly for the cause of the agricultural labourers” (Introduction Bashai Tudu xi). He is a fierce and cunning warrior who organizes and executes killings of the exploitative landlords when they deprive the tribals of their rights to a share of the crops that they harvest and also to minimum wages. Although he is not a declared “Naxal”, and has the whole official machinery and the police force trying to capture and kill
him through “Operation Bashai Tudu”. He is killed in an encounter, but very soon surfaces at another strife-torn scene, creating confusion and fear among the officials, landlords and police. Samik Bandhopadhyay feels that through this master narrative stroke of making Bashai rise up from his ashes “like a phoenix”, Mahasweta “lets him grow into a myth, who dies at every encounter and is reborn to lead the next one.” (xi). For the SI, he seems to be of the breed of the “Rakthabeeja demon”, who re-grew from every drop of his own blood, while for the tribals, he is their brave and clever leader. ( “Operation? – Bashai Tudu” Bashai Tudu 48) They are complicit in what Bashai terms his own “Operation”, willing to die in his place, so that he can continue their struggle for justice. They have to believe in his infallibility, as he is their only hope for some kind of resistance. As Betul, a young villager says, “He’s not a man. Can a man die four times, and come alive every time?” (19)

Kali Santra, a former friend and fellow-party colleague of Bashai’s is entrusted with the task of identifying his dead body each time he “dies”. Though still a Party member, he is an idealist and therefore an outsider in the party. Kali Santra and Bashai had been together in the days of the formation of the Kissan Sabha, the workers’ wing of the Communist Party, but Bashai quit when he realized that the Party also pandered to class distinctions. In one of their secret meetings,
Bashai tells Kali Santra why he quit the Party and why the violent ways of the Naxalites are justified:

They never had a thought to spare for the agricultural labourers. There was a big lie behind their slogans for peasant unity. ..The Kissan Sabha went on nurturing the unity of the rich and middle peasantry, while the marginal peasant lost their meager plots to the landowner-moneylenders and ended up as agricultural labourers. (45)

In the official records, Bashai is a wanted man, his physical appearance described in precise terms. His action of making wringing motions with his hands in the air before he is “killed” assumes symbolic overtones as it is later repeated by all the revolutionaries. (6) In a totally different register, in the sections 5 to 7, Mahasweta paints an unforgettable picture of Bashai in a few strokes, as a proud and free-living Santal, who would not hurt a bird if possible. In the conversations with Kali Santra, Bashai comes across as a simple but uncompromising person, who is forced into violence by the inhumanity of his own country men. (19-54) The tribal discourse in the form of song and tales is notably less in this story, as the tribals’ lives have changed irrevocably, their harsh reality as labourers working under conditions of starvation for subsistence ages leaving nothing of the unique culture that
they had. Their songs are now few and far between, reflecting only their present reality. Kali Santra sings their old harvest song when Bashai wants to hear it:

Protect your rice, ho
Protect your life, ho
Protect your rice, ho
Sharpen your sickle, ho
Stake your life and honour for it.
We shan’t part ever again
with the rice we planted with our blood,
the rice that’s our life, ho. (54)

Mahasweta’s narrative meanders through the whole gamut of discourses- official, academic and social- that deal with the class struggle involving the peasants and tribals. She uses everything from popular film songs, references from writers like Tarashankar, Tagore, Joseph Heller and Hemmingway, the official discourse on “tribal welfare” and “theoretical” academic papers in her efforts to bring into play the socio-cultural ideologies that create, uphold and perpetuate a lopsided class structure with the tribals at the bottom of it. The rough and ready language of the peasants and the local people replete with four-letter words, the “scholarly” language of the “babus”, and the authorial narration in sustained ironical prose- all go into the making of
a text that brings alive the time and the milieu being represented. English words like “police station”, “officer”, “report”, “meeting” or “encounter” appear in their local flavour, alongside their common Hindi or Bengali variants like “thana”, “daroga”, etc., which can be easily located in the text as they appear in italics in most translations. Samik Bandhopadhyay highlights this aspect of Mahasweta’s fiction:

The plurality of languages and cultural references serves to locate the marginalized agricultural labourers and their struggle for their rights in a setting that denies them, and exposes the setting itself to a critique that grows from a recognition of the historical truth as it comes splintered though the fragmented readings in the distinctly different languages that carry different social and cultural perspectives on the same experience, from the different languages that different sections and classes use in their negotiations with history. (Introduction Bashai Tudu xiv)

By dramaizing the different aspects of the socio-political scene, Mahasweta exposes the magnitude of the exploitation that goes on, reiterating her belief that the Naxal violence was justified when viewed from the point of view of the exploited peasants, in the face of the violence unleashed on them by the state machinery. The movement
later spread to different states in India like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and was eventually quelled, reducing the peasants to an even more powerless state than before. It is here that the myth of the phoenix-like Bashai assumes importance as it symbolizes the rising spirit of the people who have been trampled down for centuries by those who wield power and influence. As the exploitation is repeated time after time, in village after village, Bashai re-appears, and spearheads the revolt, fulfilling the aspirations of his people and winning a small victory. Kali realizes that this mythical, magical “rising” of Bashai is nothing but a clever strategy of resistance that Bashai has evolved by mobilizing his tribesmen in every village and using their native wisdom in fighting a guerilla war. As a sympathizer, Kali Santra too contributes to keeping the myth of Bashai alive, as it embodies message of resistance and hope for the marginalized and oppressed tribal caught in the inescapable tangles of class-exploitation sponsored by the Indian state.

Mahasweta once again creates a dialogic text where the realistic narrative of a historical event engages with the oral tribal traditions of tale and myth. The repetitive pattern of the exploitation is evoked through the narrative mode of the oral tale where the story pattern is repeated in every telling, with only the characters and events changing. Even then, they often reappear and are mingled together in each telling,
thus holding the contemporary, the historical and the mythical together on the thread of the tales. As Bashai dies and reappears in every episode of the tale of the Santhal tribals of Naxalbari, he “achieves a mythical dimension” in tribal history, according to Mahasweta. (“Untapped Resources” Seminar 18)

The class-exploitation figuring tribal communities from the period of the late 1970s to the 1990s finds expression in a series of short stories now brought together and published as the collection Bitter Soil (2002). They are centered in the region of Palamau, which Mahasweta believes is “a mirror of India” as it reflects the painful truth of the lives of rural India’s poor and marginalized people, a sizeable percentage of whom are tribals. She describes Palamau as “a vast crematorium” where the land and its people are so dry, arid and lifeless that it is difficult to conceive of how they survive. Mahasweta once again locates the root of the tribals’ marginalization in the unfair and unenforced land reform system and the caste and class hierarchies that pushed the lower classes into debt, bondage and poverty. She says, “For the last five decades, one India has remained basically feudal, while the other has remained a victim of class and caste oppression. ‘Land is not yours by right, land belongs to the privileged’” (Preface Bitter Soil vii). There are four stories in this collection, namely “Little Ones”, “Seeds”, “The Witch” and “Salt”. In each of the stories, Mahasweta dramatizes a particular
region, its tribal inhabitants and a specific issue that brings to the fore the magnitude of their suffering and the mobilization of their resistance. The contemporary feel of the stories reminds us that this is modern India of the 1980s where people still suffer unspeakable oppression in spite of the presence of a democratically elected government, its machinery and resources, and its legal apparatus.

The first story titled “Little Ones” (1-20) is located in a place called Lohri, near Ranchi. The area resembles a desert and the “deep brownish-red” colour of the earth is the colour of dry, congealed blood, evoking the images of violence and death in the reader’s mind. (“Little Ones” Bitter Soil 1) The government machinery is in full working order, with an efficient and sympathetic Relief Officer arriving with supplies to help the tribals survive the drought. He is shocked at the sight of the poverty and deprivation that confronts him, upsetting all his acquired “knowledge” on adivasis and their culture. Mahasweta once again focuses on the wide gap between popular perceptions and theoretical discourses about tribals and the stark reality of their contemporary situation:

Never in his life had he seen such an arid, uninhabitable place.

The sight of those who came for relief, the near-naked, shrivelled, worm-ridden, swollen-bellied adivasi men and
women, repels him. He had had the impression that adivasi men played the flute and adivasi women danced with flowers in their hair, singing, as they pranced from hillock to hillock. (2)

His ears, pricked up to hear the lilting songs of the adivasis, only hears a continuous keening sound, “like the lonely wailing of an old witch” (2) which seems to him something like a dirge. He realizes that their oral discourses have almost been wiped out, the empty wailing echoing the emptiness of their lives. From the BDO he learns the history of the local Agariya tribals and the significance of the said “hillock”, which sounds like an unbelievable fairy tale, a “jungle tale” (5) to his “civilized” mind. The Agarias, belonging to the Asur tribes who mined iron and coal in the old days, are now one of the poorest of all tribal communities. They explain away their present poverty through a myth involving a conflict between their legendary king Logundih and the sun god. The only survivor, a boy called Jwalamukhi, fights with the sun god again and the whole land is burnt in the combat and the sun god curses the Agarias to a life of poverty. The three gods who live on the hillock- that of iron, fire and coal-do not smile on them anymore. This tale that embodies their history gets involved in a more contemporary tale of the Indian government leveling the hill to establish coal mines in the 1960s. A whole village of Agarias rises up in defence of their hill,
and they kill all those who were involved. And then they mysteriously disappear into the surrounding forests, never to be seen again. All these stories seem to belong to the realm of fancy to the relief officer who cannot seem to square it with the actual sight of the poor, hungry, disease-ridden people whose lives depend on these relief supplies alone. He does all he can in his official capacity to ensure that the relief actually reaches the people and is not appropriated by middle-men and corrupt officials.

But there is another story doing its rounds now which holds everyone’s fearful attention. According to the BDO, as soon as the relief supplies are arranged in the tent, a few sacks are stolen by “small children” who appear out of the forest at night and disappear back into it. The Relief Officer stays awake and spots the “children” stealing the bags of food and, overcoming his fear, decides to follow them. What confronts him is a grotesque and almost unreal scene in which small, naked, shriveled, white-haired men and women advance upon him, screaming and dancing around him. “Fear, terrible fear. Terrible, terrible fear. He feels a terrible fear.” He realizes with a shock that “explodes like Hiroshima-Nagasaki in his mind” that they are “Not children, 

adults!” (18). They are the Agarias who had disappeared into the forest after the conflict with the government, the revolt at Kubha, and have been reduced to pygmies from years of starvation. They tell him that
there are now only fourteen of them left and there is no hope for the future as their sexual capacities have dried up. They rub their dry, shriveled bodies and genitals on the body of the relief officer, cackling and reveling in his fear.

Mahasweta’s articulation of the tribals’ resistance is all the more powerful for the irony implicit in the scene of the small, shriveled Agarias holding up the relief officer in paralytic fear:

Counter-violence, revenge…
Against what?
Spreading across their dancing silhouettes, his shadows shows against what.
Against his 5-foot 9-inch being.
Against the natural growth of his body…
He can’t say a word. Standing under the moon, looking at them, hearing their laughter, feeling their penises on his skin, the undernourished body and laughable height of the ordinary Indian male appear a heinous crime of civilization. (20)

Unable to speak, the relief officer realizes the terrible lie that is India’s claims of freedom, equality and development. “Because if this is true, then all else is false. The universe according to Copernicus, science, this century, this freedom, plan after plan.” (19) He realizes that it is the resistance of the Agarias against a system that forces them to
steal the very food that is earmarked for them as relief. The highly charged narrative is an indictment of the post-independence Indian nation that allows its tribal people to be “literally and figuratively crippled”, as Loomba observes. (10) In the Preface to the collection, Mahasweta justifies her use of the image of the stunted tribals with scientific evidence that long periods of starvation can actually cause it to happen. (ix)

If in “Little Ones” the Agaria tribals are forced to steal food to stay alive, the adivasis of Jhujhar village on the outskirts of Palamau Reserve Forest are forced to steal salt for their daily needs in the sort story “Salt”. (Bitter Soil 123-145) They are all extremely poor Mudas and Oraons who do ‘betbegari’ or wageless labour for Uttamchand, the sole owner of all the neighboring land. His forefathers had bought up all the tribals’ lands and they are now bonded to him for life, caught in the web of loans and the debt ledger. During the elections, they come to know through the youth activists of the party that the system of betbegari or bonded labour is illegal. They are made aware of some of their rights to amenities like water, education and minimum wages through the Inspector of the Adivasi Welfare Office. Under the hesitant leadership of Purti Munda, the people demand fair wages from Uttamchand who decides to teach them a lesson. “Not by hand, or by bread, nimak se marega- I’ll kill you by salt, Uttamchand Bania had
said.” (“Salt” Bitter Soil 124) Since he owns not only the land, but also all the trading outlets and shops, the tribals suddenly find themselves deprived of salt.

The lack of salt in an already inadequate diet slowly begins to affect their health, making hem breathless, weak and dizzy. Mahasweta’s effective use of irony can be seen in a passage in scientific discourse by a medical representative about the functions of salt in the human body, which, when juxtaposed with the harsh reality of the nearly starving tribals, sounds pompous and quite meaningless:

- What can go wrong if one doesn’t eat salt?
- What can go wrong? If you eat high calorie foods instead, you’ll be able to make do with a minimum salt intake.
- Arrey, there are people who have no connection with calories. (132)

The tribals inadvertently get to know that there are places in the Reserve Forest where salt is spread out in the soil for the elephants to eat. They decide that they will steal the salt from these salt licks. This pushes them into a situation of conflict involving not just the forest guards but the elephants themselves. Mahasweta’s narrative highlights the injustice of a system that forces the tribals into a confrontation with their immediate environment, the forest and its inhabitants, with which
they have always lived in harmony. They are now forced to play a dangerous game of hide- and-seek with the elephants, stealing the muddy salt from their salt licks. The game goes horribly wrong when they encounter a rogue elephant, a lone tusker, who kills them. The death of three poor tribals of the lower labouring classes does not cause much of a dent in the life of the area, they being the most expendable among the people of India. For Uttamchand, it as just a power-game and when he tires of it, he stops it, but by then the tribals have paid for his game with their lives. Stealing salt from the elephants seems to be an “irrational” thing to the daroga (the police officer) who records their deaths and it is explained away as just another example of the unfathomable ways of “uncivilized” adivasis. (14) But for the tribals, it is a reiteration of the awareness of their expendability, their distance from the life of mainstream India:

…They feel at ease only when they return to their own life, a life in which there is no disbelief, no easy explanation for the deaths of Purti and the others, no attempt to deny the reality of their existence with simple explanations. That life. (145)

Another story in the collection, titled “Seeds” (21-56) also depicts the class-exploitation faced by the lower castes and adivasis in the dry, desert-like Kuruda village as they engage in a common struggle
for survival. The narrative focuses on the life of the low caste protagonist Dulan Gangu who uses his wits to survive the daily struggle against hunger and deprivation. The question of land and bonded labour is again placed at the centre of the narrative. Dulan is given a piece of barren land by Lachman Singh the landlord, as part of the Sarvodaya movement. Mahasweta’s ironic style is at its peak here:

This gifting of land has many uses. Barren land can be got rid of. The recipients are bought over. One’s position with the sarkar becomes stronger. Above all, like rossogolla after a meal, there is the added satisfaction of knowing that one is compassionate. (“Seeds” Bitter Soil 26)

The irony takes on a deadly hue when Lachman Singh unleashes violence to quell the resistance of the labourers demanding higher wages. He forces Dulan to help him bury the corpses of his fellow workers who were killed in the violence on that “boat shaped” piece of land, with the help of goons and the concurrence of the police. The people do not understand where their fellows have been disappearing, and Dulan’s son Datua’s song expresses his incomprehension at the injustice in their lives in this song, not knowing that one day he too will be come part of his song:

Where is Karan gone?
And Bakuli?
Why is there no news of them?
They are lost in the police files…
Karan fought the twenty-five paise battle.
Asrafi fought the five rupees forty paise battle…
All lost in the police files, lost. (43)

When he is forced to bury his son too, Dulan works out his revenge in the deep grief of his soul. He sows paddy seeds on the land, converting all the dead men into a harvest of paddy, “Scattering seeds on the land, he chants, like a mantra- I won’t let you be just aloe and putush. I’ll turn you into paddy. Datua? I’ll turn you into paddy.” (51) The burden of his soul is lightened when he kills Lachman Singh and lets his fellow labourers harvest his bumper crop. The narrative reverberates with the agony of the lower class labourer for whom paddy has become a symbol of his deprivation and death. By converting them into seed, Datua ensures that they are kept alive in the only way possible. When the people ask him if he used any fertilizer for such a good crop, he replies, “Yes I did, very precious fertilizer.” (56) In this story, Mahasweta articulates the issues if caste along with class, and although Dulan Gangu is not a tribal, he represents the condition of all the lower castes and tribals who form the labouring classes of rural India. The story of this village, Lachman Singh and Dulan again figure
in the story “Rudali” where Dulan instigates Sanichari to take up mourning as a profession to survive. Through Dulan’s portrayal, Mahasweta highlights the need for the subaltern to survive using native cunning and every resource in the offing. The narrative foregrounds the complexities of the situation in India where the constitution guarantees equal rights to all citizens, but oppression and violence in the name of caste/class/tribe and gender goes on unabated, sanctioned by age-old social structures and attitudes.

The last story in the collection, “The Witch” (57-122) Mahasweta articulates the intersections of the issues of tribe and gender in the larger issue of class exploitation. The stories in the collection Outcast (2002) presents the horrifying picture of the tribal and lower caste people caught in the trap of contract labour in the brick kilns in small industrial towns and in the agricultural farms of Punjab, West Bengal and Bihar. They are women-centred narratives that depict the many-layered oppression faced by the women of these communities in the name of class, tribe/ caste and gender. In the collection Five Plays (1997) too we see Mahasweta foregrounding the issue of caste within the larger picture of class oppression, dealing with the problems related to the lives of lower caste peasants and labourers, both men and women, as they struggle for survival in post-colonial India. The stories in the collection Bait (2004) deal with the same issue with an urban and a more
contemporary setting. In these stories Mahasweta reveals the underbelly of the city of Calcutta where the people of the lower classes are victimized in the treacherous and inhuman network of criminal gangs, forced to become hired killers and prostitutes. Mahasweta inserts the voice of the oppressed subalterns in her narratives to articulate a resistance to the conditions imposed on them that is often ineffective, but is resistance nevertheless.

The texts discussed above (with the exception of “Seeds”) articulate the complexities of the tribal’s negotiations with the hegemonic systems of the nation that have forced them to occupy the lowest rung of its hierarchical class structure, as the focus of this thesis is on the works depicting tribes. In these narratives Mahasweta uses all the discourses that are relevant to the situation, from government bulletins and constitutional tracts to journalists’ reports and sociological documents to lay bare the socio-political and historical structures that have legitimized, enforced and sustained the Indian tribals’ marginalization and oppression. In the long story “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha”, (IM 95-198) which Mahasweta describes as “an abstract” of her “entire tribal experience” (Author in Conversation IM xiv), this unbridged gap between the intentions and claims of the state and the actual situation of the tribals is articulated in all its complexities. Although the story is ostensibly set in the tribal district of Pirtha in
Madhya Pradesh, Mahasweta says that “Madhya Pradesh is here India, Nagesia village the entire tribal society.” (198)

It is a narrative that brings into its ambit the entire social/historical/economic/political structures that have a bearing on the tribal situation in contemporary India. And it does this by incorporating government records and bulletins, journalistic reports, academic writings of sociologists and anthropologists like S. C. Dubey and Verrier Elwin, and a variety of social registers that serve to recreate the conditions that have led to the present poverty of the Nagesia tribals, who represent all the marginalized tribals of post independence India. The Nagesia tribals of the narrative are the embodiment of passivity and despair, leading an existence that cannot be described as properly human in contemporary India. The entire government machinery of SDOs, BDOs and Adivasi Welfare Departments has not been able to ensure that the “target beneficiaries”, i.e., the tribals, get their rights or the benefits of the welfare schemes and rehabilitation programs. The tribal boy Sankar’s song, or rather his lament outlines in poignant clarity the magnitude of their loss- the loss of their traditional lands and forests, their livelihoods, their independence and their ethnic and cultural identity:

We were kings. Became subjects. Were subjects, became slaves. Owed nothing, they made us debtors. Alas they
enslaved and bound us… 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… Oh, we had our ancestor’s graves! They were ground underfoot to build roads, houses, schools, hospitals. (“Pterodactyl” IM 119)

Puran Sahay, the conscientious journalist, realizes that the world of the Indian tribal and that of non-tribal seem to run parallel, with “a tremendous communication gap” existing between them, as no amount of “knowledge” and preparation helps him to deal with the actuality of the tribal’s experience. (102) He realizes that the development programmes targeting tribal areas have only helped the mainstream to exploit them further. He is also skeptical of the power of his pen to truly represent the experience of the tribals in modern India and that he has to break out of “the glass wall of book-learnt theory” (118).

In their deep incomprehensible grief, the tribals interpret the appearance of the pterodactyl as the visitation of the unquiet soul of their ancestors that has come to remind them of their loss. Bikhia, the tribal boy who sees the pterodactyl becomes silent and can only draw a carving on the wall of a cave to interpret the significance of the pterodactyl. Puran is drawn into this experience when the pterodactyl
enters his hut and he and Bikhia care for it. Despite being accepted as part of this unique and secret tribal experience, Puran realizes that he cannot truly understand or interpret the message of the pterodactyl, hinting that the gap between the tribal and non-tribal experience can never be truly bridged. The tribals bury the pterodactyl and continue living their old life and Puran returns to his life in the city and his newspaper in which he reports the socio-economic conditions of Pirtha, but remains silent about the pterodactyl. At the end of the narrative, the tribals’ material conditions and class position remains unchanged and their resistant efforts to uphold their unique tribal identity also remains muted and unarticulated. Mahasweta represents Bikhia’s silence as a symbol of the silencing of the resistance of the tribals and the muting of their oral traditions. If Birsa led an armed revolt, Chotti shot his arrow and Bashai murdered his oppressors, Bikhia and Sankar are unable to do anything but retreat into the deepest recesses of their collective tribal memory and identify with the silence of their ancestral spirits.

From The Book of the Hunter to “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha”, Mahasweta’s texts chart the history of the downward progression of the graph of the tribal’s dispossession and their struggle to uphold their identity from pre-colonial times to the present day. The social, political/historical and economic reasons behind their fall from being independent, autonomous ethnic communities to the ranks of
India’s lowest classes of people are embodied in her narratives. Her
texts are woven out of the different discourses, linguistic and socio-
cultural dialects and registers that embody these hegemonic structures,
constructing, imposing and maintaining the tribal in a subaltern
condition. The claims of official and academic discourses about the
‘special status’ accorded to tribes are nullified in their ironical
juxtaposition in her narratives with the stark picture of the class
oppression faced by the tribal protagonists. “Devi’s diatribe on the
government and administration is central to her questioning of what the
nation in the post-independence era has done for its people,” according
to Sen and Yadav. (15) Working along with these are the social and
religious discourses that create and sustain racist and casteist ideas in
society. Tribal people and the lower castes are seen as “naturally”
inferior people, suitable for the kind of sub-human life that is forced on
them.

These dominant discourses engage dialogically with the
suppressed but insistent voice of the tribals as they subvert the dominant
discourse, thereby resisting this imposition. As the tribals are pushed
into increasingly marginalized spaces by the powerful forces of society
and the state, their resistance takes on different forms. Birsa Munda’s
Ulgulan, Chotti Munda’s arrow play, Dulan Gangu’s conversion of the
dead peasants into paddy seeds, Draupadi’s challenge to Senanayak,
Rudali’s professional mourning, Mary Oraon’s killing of Tehsildar, Bashai’s resurrections, Kalya’s hunt, - they are all expressions of Mahasweta’s belief that India’s poor and marginalized lower classes need to resist oppression using whatever resources are indigenous to them. It is through the innovative use of the oral tribal traditions of song, tale and myth in the thematic and aesthetic elements of her fictional narratives that Mahasweta achieves this foregrounding of tribal identity and resistance. The tribal characters inscribe themselves into the social and discursive structures of the nation through the subversive use of their oral traditions as much as through collective and individual action. Thus her narratives not only re-write the tribals’ past and contemporary history, but also uphold the relevance of the subaltern’s resistance against the dominant authoritative and discursive structures of the nation that seek to erase their distinct tribal identity through the powerful shackles of class oppression. As Sen and Yadav point out, Mahasweta’s fiction is an expression of her concern for the tribals of India to be:

… recognized as citizens of a postcolonial state, even ‘special’ citizens, without losing a sense of their own history and cultural identity and in how they can benefit from the ameliorative institutional structures of the nation while
retaining a degree of control over self-definition without capitulating into bourgeois democracy. (26)