CHAPTER III

The Tribal and the Environment: The Ecological Paradigm

Human beings’ relationships with external nature have always been structured through physical and cultural means, and different cultures and civilizations have embodied these beliefs in their political, economic, social and cultural practices. The close and complex links between human life and the natural environment have often been overlooked in the discourses of human history, which have focused more on the political and social dimensions of human life. In their path-breaking book on India’s ecological history, This Fissured Land, Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, observe that “the most major lacuna in existing scholarship is an inadequate apprehension of the ecological infrastructure of human society” and proceed to fill this gap by charting the course of India’s ecological history from pre-historic times to the present day. (12-13) Environmental concerns are now
entering the political, socio-cultural and academic domain on the level of both theory and activism in a major way. Environmental activists all over the world, like Fritjof Capra, Claude Alvares, Arne Naess, Anil Agarwal, Vandana Shiva, Maria Meis, Charlene Spretnak, Bill Duval, Sunderlal Bahuguna, Madhav Gadgil, Ramachandra Guha, Medha Patkar, etc. have underlined the need for a radical shift in human perceptions, perspectives and values in relation to the life of the planet earth.

Historians of literary ecology like Lynn White Jr. trace the roots of the present ecological crisis to the beliefs and practices of western civilization, particularly the Enlightenment philosophy of human development and progress that justified and promoted the colonization of nature and non-white civilizations alike. The mechanistic principles of modern science and technology, when applied to Europe’s military and industrial development, paved the way for the colonization and exploitation of nature’s resources—both human and non-human-like never before in human history. (ER 8-11) In his influential book *The Web of Life*, Fritjof Capra identifies some of features of the Western paradigm that did not just remain in the west, but spread to other parts of the world as well through the colonial endeavor:

… the view of the universe as a mechanical system composed of elementary building blocks, the view of the human body as
a machine, the view of life in society as a competitive struggle for existence, the belief in unlimited material progress to be achieved through economic and technological growth, and... the belief that a society in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male is one that follows a basic law of nature. (6)

The environmental movement or the “green movement” has helped raise awareness of how human attitudes to nature have moulded the cultural and ecological traditions that have led the world to its present ecological crisis. The environmental movement recognizes the urgent need to replace this existing paradigm of the world with an “ecological paradigm”, one that will ensure the sustainability of life on the planet. Capra defines the term “paradigm” as “a constellation of concepts, values, perceptions and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality that is the basis of the way the community organizes itself” (5-6). Carolyn Merchant describes the ecological paradigm as one that promotes new ideas about nature that differ sharply from those of the mechanistic paradigm and which would necessarily uphold a more bio-centric world view that includes a broader conception of the global community as one that includes non-human life and the physical environment. It sees life on the planet as an integrated web, where everything is connected to everything else. In this
view, non-human life is not just an inanimate, passive background against which the drama of human life is played out, but is seen as a dynamic, active entity that is organically and inextricably linked to human life. While the mechanistic paradigm recognizes the “natural rights” of humans to use non-human nature for their own self interest, the eco-centric ethic is based on a network of mutual respect and obligation that ensures the health and sustainability of the biodiversity of the planet. (Key Concepts 126-128)

The work of environmental theorists and activists like Cheryl Glotfelty, Fredrick O.Waage, Bill Duval, Carolyn Merchant etc. have allowed a close interaction between critical studies of literature and environmental issues. The “Ecocritical” school of literary criticism professes to read that literature which embodies a concern for the natural world of which human beings are also a part. Although “nature” has been a powerful presence in literature since time immemorial, it is only since the late 1970s that literary theory has woken up to the political, cultural and aesthetic dimensions of environmental issues represented in literature. The term “ecocriticism” was first used by William Rueckert in 1978 in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, where he defines ecocriticism as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.” (ER xx) As environmental issues rapidly took centre stage across the globe,
“ecocriticism” or “literary ecology” has gained ground among both laymen and academics alike. Cheryl Glotfelty differentiates ecocriticism from other literary theories like this:

Literary theory, in general, examines the relation between writers, texts, and in most literary theory, “the world” is synonymous with society- the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of ‘the world’ to include the entire ecosphere...literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact. (ER xix)

Ecocritical theory engages with literature that represents nature and the organic connections between its human and the non-human dimensions. It is concerned with writers whose texts explore, express or resist the ideologies that govern human societies and their relationships with the environment. Texts that embody an awareness of the state of environmental crisis and offer a new ethic-the ecological paradigm- to help create an ecologically sustainable world come within its parameters. The branches of “Social Ecology” and “Ecofeminism” raise the questions of the inter-relatedness of social and environmental dominance and justice. Social ecologists like Ramachandra Guha point out that the contemporary ecological problems cannot be properly
understood without relating it to the problems within society as “the biophysical and sociocultural domains” are “interdependent”. (Social Ecology 3) The most well known social ecologist, Murray Bookchin, in his essay “What is Social Ecology?” says:

…economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others, lie at the core of the most serious ecological dislocations we face today…[and] …the hierarchical mentality and class relationships that so thoroughly permeate society give rise to the very idea of dominating the natural world.

The domination of humans over other humans preceded and sanctioned the domination of the natural world, in this view. Many environmentalist, sociologists and writers, especially from the postcolonial world, often explore the historical links between the issue of environmental degradation and the hegemonic structures of race, class and gender. Ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva and Maria Meis draw attention to the close relations in history between the domination of nature, women and indigenous non-white populations by the colonizing white male. In India, the marginalization of the indigenous tribes is historically linked to the colonization of their traditional forest lands by successive non-tribal populations. Their present impoverished condition is directly related to the history of the destruction and
degradation of India’s environmental resources, as the tribals were heavily dependent on their immediate environment for their survival.

From being a country that boasted of an “aranya samskriti” and venerated the elements of nature as gods, India has “progressed” to a state of serious environmental crisis that threatens the very existence of its land, rivers and seas, its flora and fauna, and its people. And the people who bear the brunt of the damaging effects of the environmental crisis are the poor and marginalized tribals, who, once upon a time, were the proud custodians of this ancient land, living in absolute harmony with its natural elements. Based on the modes of resource use, Gadgil and Guha classify human societies in India into four: hunting and gathering (including shifting cultivation), nomadic pastoralism, settled cultivation and industry. (14) As the earlier tribal societies (hunting-gathering and nomadic) encountered more sophisticated agricultural societies with superior technologies, they found themselves losing their land and traditional habitats to them. As kingdoms were developed, the forests were increasingly seen as “resources” which were gradually brought under state control. Till the pre-colonial period however, large pockets of tribal populations still remained as part of village communes, or as independent communities living in harmony with these groups, and still retaining a certain measure of control over their environment. It was in the British period that India’s forest cover was subjected to large-
scale erosion and her forest people were evicted for ever from their traditional homes. (14-40) These practices continued after independence too, resulting in the loss of the material base of the tribal’s lives, pushing them into economic and socio-cultural decline. As the famous environmentalist Anil Agarwal observed, the twin factors of increased population and the policies of modernization and industrialization have caused “… both increased social conflict and increased destruction of the ecological resource itself,” the poor and marginal groups bearing the brunt of its inevitable fall out. (358)

This ecological history of India in relation to tribal life and history can be recovered from Mahasweta’s works. Her representations of tribal life are based on a deep understanding of the vital links between the material and cultural well-being of the tribal people and their environment. She recognizes that it is the severing of these links, brought about through their historical encounters with other cultures, that lies at the root of their contemporary marginalized status. She observes:

They had no sense of property. There was communal landholding, because, just like Native Americans, they also believed that land and forest and river belonged to everyone. Their society was of course broken under mainstream onslaught… They understood ecology and the environment in
a way we cannot yet imagine. (“Author in Conversation”

IM ii)

Her fiction maps the journey of the tribals from their forest homes to the agricultural fields and industrial belts of modern India. She identifies the starting point of the marginalization of the tribals of India with their encounters with other cultures that were built upon ideologies or paradigms that justified the exploitation of nature for the sole benefit of man, a point that is supported by many of the contemporary environment activists and historians. In her efforts to recover the history of tribal India from its silenced spaces, Mahasweta often engages with the discourses of history, myth and literature to unearth from them the subtext of the colonization of the aboriginal people by the later populations, and to rewrite them from the perspective of the tribal. The stories in the Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the Puranas – the battles between the devas and asuras, between the kshatriya princes and the rakshasas, the burning of the Khandava forest, the episode of Ekalavya, the incident of the burning of the tribals in the lac house in place of the Pandavas, and the numerous other references to the suppression of tribal peoples- are now seen as embodying these early struggles between the tribal and non-tribal populations of India in those early days, for the control over the land and its resources. (Gadgil and Guha 78-80) The episode of the burning of the Khandava forest and
its human and animal inhabitants by the Pandavas to build their capital city is referred to in the short story “Seeds”, where the protagonist, Dulan Gangu, is reminded of the episodes when the upper caste landlord, in collusion with the police, burn the houses of the dissenting lower caste and tribal peasants. As Jennifer Wenzel observes, Mahasweta’s engagements with these conflicts in epic and myth suggest “…how ancient contests over the cultural significance of forests may inform India’s contemporary forest crisis” (128).

In “Kunti and the Nishadin”, (After Kurukshetra 27-44) Mahasweta recalls the incident of the burning of the five Nishada tribal men and their mother in the lac house in the Mahabharata and takes the opportunity to insert a dialogue that exemplifies the contrast between the tribal and non-tribal attitudes to nature and its place in human life. The Nishadin women remind Kunti that the world of the “rajavritta” (or royalty) always believed in furthering its interests at the expense of the natural world and its less privileged inhabitants of the “janavritta” (the common people). They remind her that her duty as a mother ought to be towards the protection of all life forms, and not just the life of her own children. The women tell her that their world is structured according to the laws of nature where everything, however small, has its own significance, and nothing is wasted. “Nature’s law. Nature abhors waste. We honour life… But you won’t understand.” (41) The tribals’ close
bonds with nature warn them of the approaching forest fire and they escape before it begins, while Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra perish in it. As they leave, they explain the ecological rationale of the forest fire to Kunti, “The fire will do its work, then rains will quench the flames. The scorched earth will turn green again.” (44) They point out to the lac and resin oozing from the trees that will feed the flames, and leave Kunti to die, the narrative thus effecting an ironic, yet poetic justice to their dead ancestors. The five peasant women of the short story “Five Women”, in the same collection (1-26), also uphold the ideology of the creation and celebration of life in their conversations with the royal women of the Kuru household. Mahasweta’s use of the oral discourse of the tribals effectively portrays this ideology. The songs that the women sing do not dwell on their personal grief at their widowed status, but tell of the unharvested fields in the ruined villages, the loss of the lives of the young men (the foot soldiers in the war) and the sheer waste of life that a war engenders:

The fields of golden wheat lie unploughed,
   hai hai!
Who will go there with ox and plough,
   hai, hai!
Seeds of wheat and sesame lie waiting in store,
   hai, hai!
They want to be sown
They want to sprout green leaves
Bear rich harvest, hai, hai!

……………………………

This war’s turned villages into cremation
grounds, hai, hai! (11)

When it rains and the scorched battle grounds of Kurukshetra cool
down, the women prepare to leave and they tell the royal women that
they will perhaps marry again, have children and work with their men in
the fields, as their lives follow the laws of nature, and not artificially
imposed laws that deny women a natural life.

Apart from the re-workings of these episodes from epic and
myth, Mahasweta chooses to begin telling the story of the tribals in
India in the novel *The Book of the Hunter* (2002). In this novel she takes
upon herself the responsibility of resurrecting the lost history of the
Shabar tribals, one of the oldest nomadic forest tribes of India, who
practiced the hunting–gathering mode of resource use. Unlike the larger
tribes like the Santhals or Mundas, they never took to agriculture and
were solely dependent on the forests and therefore suffered the most
when the forests were taken away from them. They would leave the
forest produce that they gathered at the outskirts of the village and take
whatever they needed–rice, oil, cloth– which would be left there for them
by the villagers. The Shabars were one of the tribes that the British
declared as “criminal tribes”, as they failed to understand this practice
and, considering them thieves, and marked them for life with the stigma of criminality. Although the Indian government de-notified them in the 1970s, the descendants of the hunting tribes - the Lodhas, Kherias and Ssabars - continue to be the target of social stigma and lead extremely impoverished lives.

*The Book of the Hunter* is not her first novel about tribal history, although it is the earliest in terms of the historical time depicted in the novel where she seeks the Shabars’ “rehabilitation in history”. (Preface *The Book of the Hunter* viii) The novel is a masterful recreation of the events that led to the creation of the *mangalakvyā* (epic poem), *Abhayamangal* or *Chandimangal* by the Bengali poet Mukundaram Chakravarthy in the sixteenth century in which the Shabars have been represented. They live in the forests at the edge of the village in uneasy, yet peaceful co-existence with the agricultural village community of Arhara in sixteenth century Bengal. Mahasweta depicts the living patterns of the Shabars and the other groups of the village with historical accuracy and aesthetic brilliance, bringing alive the milieu of the hierarchical village society, where nature plays an important role in the lives of the people, both tribal and non-tribal. The historical veracity of Mahasweta’s depiction finds ratification in many historical and sociological accounts, some of which are referred to in the introductory chapter. (Gadgil and Guha 14-40)
The contrast between the two cultures – the settled agricultural group and the nomadic hunting-gathering group- is reflected in their attitudes to nature and is developed in the novel in the exchanges between the Brahmin poet-farmer-scholar Mukundaram and the Shabar hunter Kalya. The Shabars in Mahasweta’s novel see themselves as part of the large community of living beings of their forest, “Chandir bon”, the forest of the goddess Chandi or Abhaya, the fearless one. They believe that the forest was given to them for their livelihood just as Mukunda was given the right to worship (puja) and to practice agriculture to live by. Kalya tells Mukunda:

Did you or I make up the way things are? The goddess Abhayachandi has given you puja for work, books, a granary and a cowshed, while she gave us the jungle. We’re Shabars, you hear, children of the jungle. (The Book of the Hunter 44)

They live by hunting small and big game, and by collecting and selling forest produce like wood, fruits, tubers, medicinal plants, honey, resin, animal skins and feathers to the villagers in exchange for essentials like rice, salt, oil and cloth. Mukunda, on the other hand is a poet and scholar who is forced to take up farming to feed his family. This practical experience gives him an insight into the close bonds between nature and man and opens his mind to the significance and value of other forms of life, especially “other” groups of people, like the
tribals. When he encounters the hunter Kalya, Mukunda’s brahmin ideology makes him think it is morally wrong to kill living beings, but Kalya’s wife Phuli replies, “And why not? I’ll sell the feathers and meat, and get rice and oil in the market. We have to eat, don’t we?” (44) For the tribal, hunting is only part of their survival and is regulated by the beliefs and practices in tune with the rules of nature, ensuring that the existence of no species is threatened. The forest is their mother, the source of all living beings, and is personified by the goddess Abhayachandi. Tejota, the wise matriarch of the tribe, says, “…The forest itself is our mother,… She gives us everything, keeps us alive—doesn’t that make her our mother?” (62)

Among all Mahasweta’s novels, it is in this novel that the full picture of the tribal’s intimate connection with nature is represented. The narrative is replete with innumerable references to the names of specific plants, trees and agricultural practices of that particular milieu. The translators note that the different registers she uses serves to bring alive not only the linguistic variety of the different communities, but also the sheer diversity of the socio-ecological milieu that is being represented. Both tribal and non-tribal people live in a non-confrontational relationship, in close proximity to their environment, whether they are farmers like Mukunda and Ganesh or the Shabars who live in the forests. There is a fair measure of give and take and mutual
respect between the different communities, and the tribals are respected and valued for their intimate knowledge of the forest and their historical status as its former custodians. When Mukunda arrives there for the first time, he is surprised when the villagers tell him that the tribals are an independent community and they don’t recognize the king of the land as their sovereign. Tejota, the matriarch of the tribe, is highly respected both within and outside her tribe for her vast knowledge of herbs and her status as the custodian of the secret tribal wisdom. From the king down to the meanest villager, everyone turns to her for her herbal remedies and her unique wisdom about the workings of nature.

The Shabars consider the grove in the deepest part of the jungle to be sacred, as it is inhabited by the goddess Abhaya and their entry there is regulated through the rituals associated with the grand hunt of their legends and mythology. Tejota narrates to Mukunda the myth that sanctifies their status as the rulers of the jungle, the way they lost their kingdom by trusting an outsider and their subsequent lives as proud but poor, nomadic hunters. Kalya and Phuli are named after their mythical ancestors, Kalketu and Phullora, who had ruled the jungle as per the wishes of the goddess Abhaya. Wherever Kalketu went, blue gandharaj flowers would bloom, and the day he could hunt the golden monitor lizard, the Shabars would regain their proud status as rulers once again. *(The Book of the Hunter 56-62)* This myth, preserved in tribal memory
through oral narrations, evokes mixed feelings in Kalya, the tribal hero of the novel. As the growing towns, villages and cities eat up their forest lands, the inevitable changes begin to overtake the Shabars, forcing them to confront the loss of their unique life pattern and identity. It angers and pains Kalya that the Shabars are now the marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society, and makes him impatient to claim his true inheritance as the rightful inhabitant of the forest.

The performance of the hunt at the end of the novel represents for Kalya the recovery of his glorious past and the reiteration of his identity. During the grand hunt, Kalya strays into the forbidden grove of the goddess, where he meets the lone wild tusker, looking for a place to die. The rules of the hunt forbid them to enter or to hunt in Abhaya’s sacred grove, an ecologically wise practice which probably makes the grove a safe haven for many species of plants and wildlife. Breaking the rules of the hunt, Kalya tries to hunt down the great beast who has taken refuge in the grove, trying to re-live the grand mythical hunt. But this is not the mythical golden monitor lizard, but a very different animal, and the elephant kills Kalya and goes away to fulfill his own destiny. Mahasweta’s ending highlights the tragic but realistic consequences that have come about due to the erosion of the tribal way of life that was once in total harmony with the environment.
The encroachment of other cultures have upset the equilibrium of their relations with the ecosystem, and pushed them into a mode of conflict with the elements of nature. Kalya, who should have realized that it was not wise to force a conflict upon a lone, dying tusker, forgets his natural wisdom and upsets the balance of nature. He tries to prove himself a worthy descendent of his ancestors, as his unique tribal identity and way of life now no longer give him a special status in society. The deaths of Kalya and that of the elephant are linked significantly, especially in the context of Mahasweta’s observation that the elephant appars in her fiction as a symbol of “things ancient-valued, but moving towards extinction.” (Interview The Wordsmiths 174) It is significant that Tejota imparts the oral wisdom of the tribes to Mukunda, and not her son Kalya, who is not mature enough to receive this knowledge. Mukunda in his turn incorporates it into his epic, thus preserving it in another non-tribal oral tradition. This can be seen as a position that hints at the author’s awareness of the changes that have come over tribal life, leading to the slow but sure death of their unique life patterns and culture and the ecological wisdom it embodies.

The tribal life represented in this novel seems to embody many of the ideas or paradigms now considered to be indispensable for the health of the planet. Their mode of life is replete with ecological wisdom, as it functions in tune with the cycles of nature. It ensures that over use of
environmental resources is avoided, the balance of human and non-human nature is maintained and biodiversity is preserved. Tejota tells Mukunda that her husband was denied the position of head of the tribe because, while hunting, he had accidentally killed a pregnant doe. The killing of female animals was forbidden by the rules of the tribe as it threatened the survival of the species. Such practices were related to an ideology that viewed man and nature as inextricably linked, and humans were regarded as “merely part of a community of beings that includes other living creatures, as well as elements of the landscape such as streams and rocks.” (Gadgil and Guha 18) Their religious and cultural beliefs grew out of this organic relationship with their environment-sacred qualities were attributed to specific groves, trees, ponds, rivers, groves and animals, ensuring their long-term protection and preservation. These practices “regulate their behaviour towards other members of their community of beings, and … seemingly contribute towards ensuring the long-term sustainability of resource use.” (20)

The branch of Deep Ecology, perpetrated by environmentalist like Arne Naess and Bill Duval upholds the view that man is only one part of nature and does not privilege man over other natural forms. The basic principle of deep ecology is that “man flows with the system of nature rather than attempting to control all the rest of nature” (Merchant 130-135). When Kalya dies, Tejota is wise enough to see it as an
inevitable fall out of his deliberate and willful disobedience of the rules of the hunt which are in perfect accordance with the rules of nature. She does not value the life of her son above any other life form, be it a tree in the sacred grove or a dying elephant. She realizes that it is Kalyas’ inability to cope with the change in their life patterns that cause his death. And she does not blame anyone, not even when Kalya’s wife Phuli kills herself in grief later. When they realize that their existence is threatened, the Shabars just pack up and leave to another place like all nomadic tribes did at that time, hoping for a better life somewhere else.

Mahasweta’s novel thus not only presents an accurate and living picture of an early tribal society, but also uncovers the organic interrelationships between the material and cultural aspects of their lives. Her unique narrative style and her commitment to the cause of tribal welfare do not permit her to paint a romantic picture of innocent tribals living in pure, pristine forest locations. She places them in the actual historical context where they had to interact with other groups and struggle to maintain their ties with their traditional lands and life patterns. Mahasweta’s innovative use of oral tribal traditions dramatizes the organic relationship between the ecological and the socio-cultural patterns of their lives and once again galvanizes the novel’s plot. The legend of the hunt and its contemporary enactment also serves to underline the fine web of relations that bind tribal life and culture to
their natural environment. The tragic and ironic overtones of the ending of the novel foreground the severing of these relations and the role it plays in the historical marginalization of India’s tribes. The slow and steady eviction of the tribals from their traditional lands and their increasing alienation from the living roots of their bio-centric culture is dramatized in Mahasweta’s fictional works. In the story “Arjun”, (The Wordsmiths 178-187) the contemporary situation of the Shabars is brought alive, where they are forced to fell the very forest that used to be their home. The Shabars realize that “… their lives and fate were inextricably linked with that of the arjun”. In a rare articulation of tribal resistance, the Shabars led by Ketu mobilize the villagers and members of other tribes in a successful effort to protect the “arjun” tree, which is sacred to them and is now a symbol of their past. (184) If The Book of the Hunter dealt with the pre-colonial history of the Shabar tribes, the novels Aranyer Adhikar and Chotti Munda and his Arrow recreate the tribal history of the Mundas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the British had consolidated their economic and political hegemony over India at the cost of her natural wealth and the freedom of her people.

It is in Aranyer Adhikar that the issue of the “rights” of the inhabitants of the forest to their lands is represented through the historical events of the Ulgulan, the Munda rebellion led by Birsa
Munda against the British colonial regime in the period 1895-1901. The British embarked on a rapacious mission of random and large-scale destruction of India’s forests in order to meet the demands of the rapidly developing industrial society in Europe. The railways and the ship building industries of Britain were the largest consumers of India’s teak and sal forests, bamboo forest fed the paper industry and tea and other plantations of “cash crops” eventually led to the rampant destruction of the biodiversity of India’s ecology. The “royal” sport of hunting hastened the wiping out of many wildlife species and pushed the remaining wildlife population into conflicts with humans as their habitats were steadily destroyed. As the British consolidated their rule, they realized the need of a more prudent use of resources, which led to the formation of the Imperial Forest Department in 1864. The Indians Forest Act of 1865 and that of 1878, only served to bring the forest cover under the control of the state more effectively, and raised the question of the “rights” of the tribal and village communities over their traditional lands which formed the basis of their lives. (Gadgil and Guha 113-145; K.S. Singh Tribes, Forest and Social Formation 39-50; Brara 141-183)

Although certain rights of foraging and cultivation were recognized in law, the powerless and uneducated tribal people fell prey to land-grabbing non-tribals and the government who colluded in
robbing them of their lands. If for the British, the forest was a source of timber and other raw materials for their industrial and military growth, for the tribal, the forest is the source, the means and the way of life itself. In addition to foraging for forest produce, many of the larger tribes like the Mudas and Santals also practiced shifting cultivation where selected areas of the forest were periodically cleared and used for farming for a few seasons and later abandoned, allowing the forest to re-grow. It is for these rights that the Mudas, led by Birsa Munda fought the British. As Birsa remarks, “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). The novel depicts just how close and compact are the links that bind the tribals with their environment. As with the Shabars, for the Mudas too, their forest is their mother, which, like a “Munda mother”, gives life and nourishment to her children. (88) Birsa’a parents Sugana and Karmi speak of their old order when the forest and the surrounding agricultural lands would give them enough to “live like kings” and there was peace, value and significance to their lives. (63) Karmi reminiscences about their customs, rituals and festivals that touched upon all the natural cycles of life around them. She wonders if it is because many of these practices were stopped and their gods are angry with them that they have to suffer poverty now. (174-176) It is their age-
old rights to this kind of life that is rapidly slipping away from them, appropriated by the British and non-tribal Indians alike. Even when they begin to lose their grip on their agricultural lands and they find themselves gradually reduced to the status of field labourers, the forest continues to be a safe haven and a refuge, providing them with subsistence and a feeling of safety and security.

The character Dhani Munda, who has taken refuge from the police in the forest, relates the history of their eviction from their traditional lands and their consequent marginalization to Birsa, inspiring him fight for their lost homeland in Chotanagpur. (27-34) When Birsa awakens to his destiny as the leader of the Mundas, the scene is symbolically set in the forest, at night. The narrative builds up Birsa’s character through many devices, the most important of which is his absolute identification with the earth and the forest. He is said to spend a lot of time in the forest, playing his flute and imbibing the spirit of the forest and its non-human inhabitants. He was also known as a healer, like Tejota of *The Book of the Hunter*, and the novel depicts how his deep knowledge of the plant life of the forest helps him in his later role as healer and spiritual leader. If the earth is the “mother” for the Mundas, then Birsa is “dharthi aba” or the “father earth” (87-88). In the absolute, primeval silence of the forest, Birsa hears the silent cry of his “mother earth” who recalls him to a sense of his unique tribal identity as
the original inheritor of this earth. The earth mother’s “honour” is under attack and her children are exhorted to defend it and redeem her from her ravaged state. (87-88) In another instance in the book, the forest appears as a young, naked Munda woman who has been stripped of her natural covering and Birsa is again inspired to defend her honour. This image seems to mimic the non-tribal discourse that identifies the earth as the feminine principle (prakriti) and man as the male principle (purusha). It becomes a convenient and appealing image when Birsa grows in stature as a leader of the tribals and the Mundas are united under his leadership to fight for their land rights.

The forest again becomes a mother to the tribals when they start the rebellion on a full scale. They take refuge in her dark depths, and unleash a guerilla war against the British who are not acquainted with the forest as they are. The forest also provides them with the necessary food for survival, as also the fruit from which they prepare the poison needed to tip their deadly arrows. For the tribals, this intimate knowledge of the land and the forest is just a part of their life, but Mahasweta’s narrative foregrounds the significance of this special knowledge, however worthless it is in the eyes of the mainstream. It is this knowledge resource that stems out of their close relationships with their particular ecosystems that aids the tribal people in their struggles for their right to live their life on their own terms. The women of the
tribe are also an integral part of the rebellion and their knowledge of the forest gives them the power to play a decisive role in Birsa’s “Ulgulan”. Although Birsa is the hero and the “father earth”, both the men and the women of the tribe play important roles. The women forage and find food to ward off hunger and they serve as messengers, moving silently from one place to another. They also sing songs, keeping the spirit of the rebellion alive among themselves. The songs that are used in the narrative reveal just how vital to the survival of their tribe is their land and forest:

The lords give new laws,
The land trembles with human sorrow.
Come, quick, take your bow, arrow, spear,
Death is better than this life.
Birsa Bhagwan, our leader,
Birsa was born for us
Quick, take your bow, arrow, sword
Let us climb Dombari together
The protector of the earth will reach there
Fear not this monkey-business
Dikus have grabbed our land
We will chase them away.
We have won their land
This beautiful land is ours
We have to get it back from them. (205)

The failure of Birsa’s rebellion marks the starting point of the downward slope in the graph of tribal autonomy and well being and effectively put rest the spate of tribal and peasant resistance movements that marked the period. The development agenda set in place by the British however set the tone for the future of India and the environmental degradation and tribal exploitation that was initiated during that period has only been continued into the post-colonial period. As Gadgil and Guha observe that by exposing Indians to the attractions “…of the industrial economy and consumer society, the British ensured that the process of ecological change they initiated would continue, and indeed intensify, after they left India’s shores.” (118)

With prime tribal land being earmarked for mines and industries and the forests ravaged for raw material to feed them, tribal people all over India faced the consequences of the dissociation of their lives from its vital roots in the natural world. Mahasweta continues to trace the history of the forcible separation of the tribal from his source of life in Chotti Munda and his Arrow, which traces tribal history from the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1970s.

In Chotti Munda, Mahasweta constructs the narrative around the river Chotti, that flows through the village of Chotti, and lends its name
to its hero, the master archer Chotti Munda. The various events of the novel connected to its eponymous hero are linked to the river Chotti. Like the forest in the earlier novels, the river is here their source of life, and is also intimately linked to their sense of place, their history and their unique cultural identity. The river yields its secret wealth of fish as well as metals and minerals to Chotti’s father Purti Munda, who foresees the takeover of their land by the outsiders:

They made a home by Chotti River. The river bank is like a high hill, and the hut is on this slope. He fishes in the bosom of the river in the evening. One day at glimmering twilight he saw amazed that there was gold dust in the sand that had come up in his net.

He sat down on the sand. He remembers how White men and Biharis jumped at the sight of coal and mica, how instantly they disfigured adivasi areas with slums of tile-roofed dwellings. Who knows what such people will do if they see gold? These hills, these forests, this river will once again be spoiled. (Chotti Munda 2)

The novel spans the period from 1900 to the 1970s and traces the changing fortunes of the Mundas of Chotti village, which is mirrored in the changing face of the river Chotti. The movement of the narrative runs parallel to the ebb and flow of the river, and its history becomes
inextricably linked to the history of Chotti and his fellow Mundas: Chotti is born in the year that the river had flooded; the year that the river dried up and the village faces a drought again marks a momentous event in Chotti’s life. The drying up of the river and the drought that follows affect the life of the tribals, forcing them to borrow money for food and become bonded labourers in the process. They are also forced to dig the river bed for small waterholes to stave off thirst and starvation, which pushes them into a situation of conflict with the landlords and the authorities. The tribals now bear the brunt of the fallout of the environmental degradation that is forced upon them, apart from the battles for social and political justice. The river thus becomes a symbol of their precarious existence and increasing marginalization within the larger framework of Indian society.

The village life depicted in the novel shows the slow breaking of the links between the tribal people and their environment as their traditional occupations of shifting cultivation and hunting-gathering have to be given up. The agricultural fields which were the basis of the life of the village community are no longer in their hands. They are now field labourers in the landlord Lala’s fields with no right to the grain they harvest, rather than the proud children of mother earth who shared with her the fruits of their toil. They live increasingly deprived lives in their villages where they grow small patches of vegetables, but are
forced to eat china grass as the rice that they harvest goes into the Lala’s granaries. The conflicts between the tribals and the more powerful groups like the Lala’s spell the end of many Munda villages. When he hears of the burning of Kurmi village and its desertion by its people, Chotti reflects on the work and the pain involved in clearing a forest and building a village. He wonders if the Mission, where the displaced tribe is heading for, has “such hills, and such forests all around, like t’ edge of mother’s cloth?” (217)

But unlike the Shabars and the Mundas of Birsa’s time, for the Mundas in this novel, the presence of the forest as a nurturing mother in their lives is reducing significantly. It gradually becomes a symbol of their cultural and ethnic identity rather than a living presence in their lives. The surrounding forests keep them alive with leaves, fruits, tubers and small game, but this is also rapidly diminishing. When Chotti’s status as the master archer grows and he decides to teach his fellow tribes men to shoot the bow and arrow, he does so in the forest, as it is a symbol for their glorious and autonomous past. The realization that their old life patterns are changing forever, lends a poignancy and an immediacy to these archery sessions in the forest, as Chotti’s prowess in archery and his legendary “magic arrow” becomes a symbol for the tribe’s unique identity with which he resists the status of “wage labourer” imposed on him by the mainstream. But the breaking of the
bonds between the tribal and his immediate ecosystem has been effected and Mahasweta depicts the horrifying picture of its after-effects in her works that dramatize the more contemporary situation from the 1970s onwards.

In the stories “Operation?- Bashai Tudu” and “Draupadi”, she takes up the tale of tribal participation in the Naxal movement in West Bengal in the 1960s and ‘70s, which was a fallout of the unjust feudal system that exploited low caste and tribal agricultural labour. The eviction of tribal people from their traditional lands is more or less complete by this time and the stories highlight the agony and frustration that force them to take up arms in defence of their right to just wages and decent living conditions. The tribal’s love of the land and their deep involvement in every aspect of farming the earth is the very basis of their life. Bashai recalls the songs that they sang as they sowed and harvested the paddy in the fields. (“Operation?- Bashai Tudu” Bashai Tudu 54) As he launches his guerilla warfare against the exploitative landlords, Bashai disappears into the forest, which once again serves as a refuge and safe haven for the tribal warrior. Dopdi Mehjen too goes into hiding into the forest when her fellow revolutionaries are apprehended and shot by the police. Mahasweta repeatedly evokes these age-old links that bind the tribal to the forests which were their original habitats. Their instinctive urge is to go into the bosom of their forest
mother who unfailingly inspires them with the confidence and power to put up a resistance in defence of their tribal identity.

In the short story “Little Ones”, (Bitter Soil 1-20) this relationship takes on a new and complex meaning when the Relief Officer finds out that the iron-smelting Agariya tribals had disappeared into the forest after killing the government officials who had razed their sacred hillock to the ground in search of iron ore. When he encounters the “little” men and women who come to steal his relief supplies, he realizes that they are those tribals who have been sheltering in the forest for many years. But generations of starvation has stunted and crippled them. Mahasweta refers to scientific reports that justify her argument that the very nature of the human body can change if life patterns change. (Preface Bitter Soil ix) The tribal people had devised means to live off the bounty of the earth while still maintaining the its ecological balance. When they are wrenched out of their natural environment and the environment itself is subjected to changes, it affects all forms of life, including humans, who are still heavily dependent on nature for food. The forest is no longer able to support the tribals in the manner that it was used to, as the forest itself has been subjected to the ravages of rapacious, timber hungry people. The story makes a strong indictment of India’s treatment of its tribal people who have been deprived of their lands and forests. The weak and inadequate efforts made for their
rehabilitation has brought them little relief and the iron-rich land and plentiful forests have been reduced to a vast waste land, prone to droughts and famines:

Officially it’s in Ranchi. But the entire area is a burnt-out desert. As if the earth here bears a fire of unbearable heat in her womb. So the trees are stunted, the breast of the river a dried –out cremation ground, the villages dim behind a film of dust. (“Little Ones” Bitter Soil 1)

All the stories in the collection Bitter Soil are centred in the area of Palamau which she describes as “a vast cremation ground”. (Preface Bitter Soil vi) The stories, written between 1976 and 1990, narrativize the horrifying picture of ecological devastation that has been visited upon this predominantly tribal area. In her journalistic articles now collected in The Dust on the Road gives the bare details of the environmental damage that is caused by the industrial “development” brought to the area. The cement, bauxite, brick/tile and wood industries in the area have caused serious damage to the environment. The tribal people of the area have not only been reduced to poverty, but also face serious health problems due to the heavy pollution of the air, water and the land. The destruction of the natural forests, which were the cradles of biodiversity, was replaced by monoculture plantations of eucalyptus and other “cash crops”. The tribal people had supplemented their income
and diet from the forests of sal and teak for generations. The new systems not only deprived the tribals of their livelihood, but also led to the loss of fertility of the soil, while causing major changes to the patterns of the climate. *(The Dust on the Road 58-68)* The stories in *Bitter Soil* depict this scenario where the tribal people find themselves pushed into conflicts with not just other human groups but with the elements of nature itself.

If the Agarias of “Little Ones” find the natural growth of their bodies itself affected by the change in their life pattern, the Munda tribals in “Salt” *(Bitter Soil 21-56)* find themselves pushed into an unequal struggle for survival with the animal inhabitants of the surrounding forests and also with the first officials. Three of them are killed by an elephant as they are forced to steal salt from the salt licks meant for the elephant population of the forest. Like Kalya of *The Book of the Hunter*, these tribals too are forced into a hasty and ill-judged encounter with the animals who share their environment. This is a conflict which would have been avoided by a tribal in an earlier period in their history when they had learnt to live in harmony, and not on a collision course, with the different elements of their ecosystem. The conflicts with their human neighbors also take sinister turns as the tribals find themselves becoming increasingly marginalized and deprived in their relations with mainstream human society, the erosion
of the natural base of their lives being the main reason for their social and cultural marginalization.

Mahasweta’s fiction dealing with the contemporary period show how the tribal people have become helpless victims of the most horrifying class-exploitation in modern India. From being free-living, autonomous communities they have been reduced to being the members of the lowest groups of India’s labouring classes. Their lives lose meaning and significance as the links with their old life are completely severed and they face extreme forms of oppression and exploitation. The short stories “The Fairytale of Rajabasha”, “Douloti the Bountiful”, “Sanichari”, “The Witch”, “The Hunt”, “Seeds”, “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha”, etc., deal with the devastating reality of the contemporary tribal exploitation in India, which was the fall out of the forcible eviction of the tribal from his homelands. They portray the exploitation that the tribal people and other oppressed classes and castes are forced to face in the name of class, tribe and gender. Nature is not a source of life any more for the modern day tribal, nor is it a comforting environment as they eke out miserable existences in the agricultural fields and industrial settlements of modern India. The women-centered stories tell a tale of sexual exploitation within the general blanket of class oppression. Mahasweta quotes a song sung by the tribal women to
show how they are forced into such situations to fulfill their basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing:

    My Bali could live on forest fruits,
    My Bali could live on jungle roots,
    But tress, alas, do not saris grow,
    So to the bhatta my Bali had to go.
    My Bali had to go. (Dust on the Road 34)

In “The Fairytale of Rajabasha” Josmina, a woman of the Ho tribe, is repeatedly raped as she labours along with her husband in the fields of Punjab, while Douloti Nagesia of “Douloti the Bountiful” and Sanichari becomes professional prostitutes in the township adjacent to the brick kilns where they work as contract labourers. Mary Oraon of “The Hunt” is pursued by the timber contractor Tehsildar. Mary however is a rare figure of female subaltern resistance as she evokes the age-old ritual of Jani Parab or the womens’ hunt and kills her oppressor by re-enacting the ritual in a contemporary scene. The resistance of Dulan Ganju in “Seeds” (Bitter Soil 21-56) also takes on a macabre and tragic hue. In this powerfully ironic narrative, Mahasweta shows how the ancient ties of the sons of the soil with mother earth are re-worked in a contemporary situation. Dulan Ganju’s son Dhatua and a few other young men of the village are killed by the landlord Lachchman Singh and he forces Dulan to bury them on the barren piece of land that Dulan
was granted. Dulan’s transformation of the corpses of the young men into paddy not only brings comfort to his grief-stricken soul, but is also his way of keeping them alive and thereby effecting a resistance to an inhuman system that gives no value to human life. The peasant’s unique bond with the soil allows him no other means to keep alive the spirit of life that is so easily crushed by the more powerful structures of society. The poor labourers like Dulan are often denied their share of the paddy they harvest, but here Dulan achieves the impossible, and raises a crop as a symbol of the continuity of life:

...Dulan returns to his land. His heart is strangely, wonderfully light today! He stands on the embankment and looks at the paddy.

Karan, Asrafi, Mohar, Bulaki, Mahuban, Paras and Dhatua- what an amazing joy there is in the ripe green paddy nourished on your flesh and bones! Because you will be seed. To be a seed is to stay alive...Dhatua, I’ve turned you all into seed. (56)

Such resistant figures are, however, rare as the tribal people, both men and women become helpless victims of socio-economic and political marginalization as their traditional lands are lost forever. Mahasweta’s portrayal of the ecological devastation and the socio-economic marginalization of the tribals in modern day India reaches a
culmination in her rather long short story “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha” from the collection *Imaginary Maps* (95-198). Pirtha is a predominantly tribal district in Madhya Pradesh and when Puran Sahay the journalist arrives there, he finds the Nagesia tribals of the area living a hand-to-mouth existence. Although there is periodical rainfall, the area is as dry as a dust bowl, the land and its people are deprived of their source of water, and are at the receiving end of a man-made drought. No amount of administrative measures and the well-meaning efforts of activists have prevented the tribal people from sinking into poverty and starvation, as they eke out a living by weaving ropes out of dried aloe plants and Khajra leaves. In his lament to Puran, the tribal boy Shankar speaks of their past history, when they led simple yet self-sufficient lives based on the sacred bonds between the earth and its inhabitants, both human and non-human:

- Once there was forest, hill, river, and us. We had villages, homes, land, ourselves. In our fields we grew rice, kodo, kutki, soma, we lived. Then there was game to hunt. It rained, peacocks danced, we lived. People grew, the community grew, some of us moved to a distance. We asked the earth’s permission, we are setting down stakes to build a roof, settling land to grow crops… We worshipped the tree that was the spirit of our village. Then we lived, only us. (119)
He wonders if they had committed any mistakes in their socio-cultural rituals and angered their ancient gods and ancestors to forfeit their homelands to “foreigners” and thereby to lose their independence and suffer such poverty today:

Ah misfortune! As ants come before a flood, as white ants fly in teeming swarms before the rains, so did our news reach strangers. Did we make a mistake in our worshipping? Did someone tear a leaf from a tree before it was consecrated, before the new fruit, new leaf, new flower came in the spring time, in the month of Phalgun? Did one of us kill a pregnant doe in the hunt? Did someone insult the elders? (119)

They are convinced that it is the non-observance of these sacred rituals that has brought on this immense material poverty and suffering upon them and they slowly slip into deep apathy and existential angst.

So when the pterodactyl arrives from pre-history to take refuge in Bikhia’s hut, the tribals interpret it as the arrival of the unquiet soul of their ancestors, to remind them of their glorious past and their unique ethnic identity as the original inhabitants of the land of Pirtha. Mahasweta’s use of the pterodactyl, an extinct reptile of the Mesozoic era, as a symbol of the soul of the tribal ancestor, calls attention to two factors: the historic span of the tribal past as well as the uncertain future of their ethnic identity. Like the pterodactyl, the tribals too have a long
past that dates into pre-history, and are today facing possible extinction as their traditional habitats and ways of life are being taken away from them. Thus the figure of the pterodactyl and its significance for the modern day Nagesia tribals recalls the scientific history of the evolution of life on earth and the specific ecological conditions that are necessary for the survival of a particular species on earth. The mainstream journalist Puran cannot adequately understand or interpret the message of the pterodactyl, pointing to the impossibility of true communication between the tribal and the non-tribal worlds in modern India.

Thus, from the near-idyllic, independent forest life of the sixteenth century Shabar tribals, Mahasweta brings us to the stark reality of the famine and drought faced by the landless Nagesia tribals in contemporary India. It has been a journey that saw the tribal losing the very ground from under their feet, a journey that brought to dust a five thousand year old history that was also the history of this land, water and its life forms. In *The Book of the Hunter*, Danko Shabar, Tejota’s father, dreams a fast-fading dream as they prepare to leave for another place after the death of his grandson, “There must be a place where there existed no city, no market, no king or any other caste or tribe, where there were only the forest, water and hills” (128). If in the sixteenth century, Danko Shabar can still dream of an unspoiled forest home waiting for them, protected by their goddess Abhaya, the dispirited,
defeated Bikhia of modern-day Pirtha, can only envision their future like this:

Their existence is freshly endangered. To survive they must mingle in the mainstream, where their social position will be on the ground floor and their sense of ethnic being will no longer be distinct. Yet there is no liberation for them if they hang on with their teeth to the hillside of Pirtha, their land and their soil have turned to dust and blown away in the wind. Who can catch dust-motes from the wind and compose village, forest, field? (“Pterodactyl” IM 181)

Mahasweta’s awareness of the links between the political, economic, socio-cultural and ecological dimensions of tribal life lends a deep complexity and historical validity to her fiction that is rarely found in fiction dealing with the tribal subject. The ecological paradigm that is highlighted in her works is significant to her thematic purpose in two ways. Her narratives are grounded in the spatio-temporal framework of history that dramatize the inter-relationships and conflicts between the tribal people, their environment, the larger society and the state, which have resulted in the social, political, economic and cultural marginalization of the tribal. Mahasweta locates the root of these contentious relations squarely in the tug-of-war for a greater share of the natural resources of the environment like land (both for crops and
grazing), forests and water. This is a historical reality that all social ecologists and environmentalists recognize as the basis of the human and natural crisis in today’s world. As Fijor Capra observes:

The more we study the major problems of our time, the more we come to realize that they cannot be understood in isolation. They are systemic problems, which means they are interconnected and interdependent…. Scarcities of resources and environmental degradation combine with rapidly expanding populations to lead to the breakdown of local communities, and to the ethnic and tribal violence that has become the main characteristic of the post-Cold-War era. (3-4)

Mahasweta’s works show a dialogic engagement with the various discourses of myth, history, culture and the living structures of the nation state to unearth those moments when the tribals lost their traditional habitats to the more powerful forces of the society and the state. Whether it is through the re-workings of the stories from the epics, or the recovery of the tribal narrative from the literary traditions like the mangalakavyas, or through the starkly realistic tales of contemporary tribal life, Mahasweta focuses on the fact of the forceful severing of the tribal’s links with his environment, brought about through the tribal-non-tribal interface, as the crucial reason for their historical
marginalization. If nature is the very basis of their lives, it ultimately becomes the very reason for their possible destruction. The interplay of the different discourses, and social registers and dialects of the different groups of characters only serve to highlight the differences in the ideologies that ruled their attitudes and practices, as can be seen in the dialogues between Mukunda and the Shabars in *The Book of the Hunter* or the conversations between Kunti and the Nishadins, or the impassioned defence of the forest mother by Birsa Munda.

Her works span historical time from the mythical past through medieval, colonial and the post-colonial periods to recover and thereby re-inscribe the history of tribal India, which is also the history of the destruction of India’s natural resources and environmental degradation. Thus she locates the ecological paradigm as the main factor that led to the historical marginalization of India’s tribals. As Sen and Yadav observe, Mahasweta’s foregrounding of the aspects of independence and insurgency in tribal history is correctly located in the struggle over land and its resources:

> The struggle, then as now, is about forests not only because the tribals have sustained themselves on forest as a resource of their livelihood but also that their relationship with forests was a central aspect of their traditional system of farming. This was a contract with one’s environments, imbued with
religious sentiment and expressed in mythical terms; it was the basis of their exclusivity against the outside world of the land pilfering dikus. (27)

Secondly, the ecological wisdom that recognizes the interrelated web of life as primary to the balance of an ecosystem is reflected in no small measure in Mahasweta’s representations of tribal life. Nature is not just a decorative panorama in Mahasweta’s fiction, but a living entity which is the basis of tribal life and is an indispensable part of its dynamics, whether economic, social or cultural. There are no long, sustained descriptions of nature in her works, which is a hallmark of the “descriptive” type of tribal novel mentioned in the second chapter. Nature is described in short, almost lyrical passages, like this one from \textit{Chotti Munda}:

Paddy is ripening in Aghran, the harvest month. Droves of birds keep arriving, deer have to be chased from the field. The time is coming for migratory birds to come to the Chotti sandbanks, for finding ducks flying in the moonlight. (68)

Nature is not just a beautiful backdrop against which the human drama unfolds, but is as much a character as the tribal people in the narrative, the living, breathing matrix that creates, sustains and ultimately destroys their very lives. Mahasweta’s narratives portray the role and function of nature in tribal life, and its embeddedness in their
socio-cultural systems. This is achieved in the narratives through the workings of the plot and a deft and focused style that inter-weaves detailing of scenes from contemporary reality, history and myth. Her portrayals highlight the ecological paradigm embodied in the life patterns of indigenous cultures all over the world that viewed all the elements of the universe as being inter-connected and saw human beings as only one strand of the enormous web of life on this planet. The prudence and ecological wisdom upheld in this paradigm of life is now highlighted by environmental activists and ecologically-conscious writers as the need of the hour to help combat the global environmental crisis. They point out that this wisdom has been marginalized and erased from history and practice, along with the societies that practiced it, under the onslaught of Western models of scientific, technological and industrial development.

Mahasweta’s works on tribal life foreground the value of this wisdom and hold out the possibilities of seeing it as an alternative model for the future health and sustainability of the planet and its beings. In The Book of the Hunter, when Mukunda hears of Tejota’s ecological wisdom, he scoffs at the idea that “a forest-dwelling Shabar could know much about anything. In his arrogance, … he believed that knowledge came from the formal cultivation of learning” (47). Through his close and loving association with the tribals, however, Mukunda comes to
acknowledge the value of this “knowledge” and incorporates it into his epic Abhayamangal. Thus Mahasweta’s narratives serve to bring to light the marginalized and forgotten wisdom of whom Gayatri Spivak calls “the original practical ecological philosophers of the world”, and thereby to highlight the need to review both the existing knowledge systems and the societal structures based on these ideologies. (Appendix IM 204) Her works stress the urgent need to understand and re-structure the mainstream attitudes to both the tribal community and the environment on the basis of the ecological paradigm. Such a view would necessarily evolve out of the vision of a planet earth where the living and the non-living, the human and the non-human, the tribal and the non-tribal could live in mutual respect, equity and harmony, thus ensuring that the spirit of life running equally through everything in the universe would prevail.