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Witnessing Tribal Life and the Environment: An Ecological Re-reading of the Select Narratives of Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract

The current ecological crisis in India must be traced back to its origins because, similar to Western beliefs and practices, colonization of the natural world is fostered and justified. Materialistic creed, techno-culture, enlightenment principles of human progress, and industrial developments successfully exploit the resources of nature and threaten the existence of rivers, lands, and their flora and fauna. As a result, the lower sections of society, including the deprived and marginalized tribes, bear the inevitable outcome of this exploitation of nature, and the tribal are pushed into socio-cultural and economic decline. The condition of the tribal people and their environment find best expression in the works of Mahasweta Devi, one of the most famous journalists, social activists, and creative writers of West Bengal. After witnessing the pitiful condition of the tribes of Western, Central, and North-East India, she decides to delineate their livelihood, and naturally their relationship with nature comes into discussion. Her writings trace the ecological history of India, and for this she cites incidents from the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and thus her narratives encompass the journey of the tribes from forest life to industrial life. The lost ecological histories of the tribals are again shown in *The Book of the Hunter*. The close bond between nature and men is given the fullest expression here, and their ecological wisdom should be followed and embodied to avert the current ecological crisis. The recreation of the tribal history of the Mundas, historical events of the Ulgulan, and ecological movements are portrayed in *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*. In the same way, in her short stories like *Seeds*, *The Hunt*, *Little Ones* and *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay and Pirtha*, she not only depicts the ecological equilibrium of tribal culture, but also the subjugated condition of the tribal and their lands, forests, and surroundings, so this paper delineates the ecological history of the tribes in the selected works of Mahasweta Devi.

Keywords: Ecology, Environment, History, Nature, River, Tribal.

Introduction

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. (Devi, 2001, p. ii)

The above quoted lines on the tribals by Mahasweta Devi seem to be the ultimate statement to depict the relationship of the tribals of India with their environment. The tribal population of India can be placed with indigenous communities like New Zealand, Native Americans, and the Aborigines of Australia. These tribal communities are excluded and marginalized, and they, as "Fourth World Citizens", are given a space under the broad genre of 'Fourth World Literature', a term coined by the First Secretary of the Tanzanian High Commission, Mbuto Milando. He stated that "when native peoples come into their own, on the basis of their own cultures and traditions, that will be the Fourth World" (Sukumar & Shinde, 2016, p. 298). This term "fourth world" can be equated with the status of people who are poor, marginalized, deprived, subjugated, helpless, displaced, oppressed, tortured, and domesticated. Their history is the history of resistance and revolution and their subsequent consequences. Mahasweta Devi, who writes extensively on this tribe along with their struggles, protests, injustices, violence, and activism, can be classified as a writer of the Fourth World Literature. How the tribals are deprived of their land and culture finds the best expression in her writings, and naturally, their relationship with nature comes to the fore. So, it is a true fact that "the sole purpose of my (her) writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies: the feudal-minded landowner, his henchmen, and the so-called religious head of the administrative system, all of whom, as a combined force, are out for lower-caste blood" (Sukumar & Shinde, 2016, p. 298).

Devi's narratives show the dichotomy of nature and culture, along with the threats welcomed by the patrons of modernization. Ecological and economic concerns are penetrated with insights in her works, and naturally, the anthropocentric attitudes of humans and their lopsided forestation policies come under severe attack. The life and culture of the tribals are given prime focus here because she observes that the ruthless attitudes of a particular section of society drastically affect those tribals who depend on forests for their basic needs and livelihood. She becomes sad when she finds that the Scheduled Tribes, which make up 8.2% of the total population of India, are neglected and relegated to the lowest rung in the social ladder. These tribes maintain a deep affinity with nature because for them nature is a guardian, mother, protector, life saver, and healer. The tribals are the self-reliant local economies, and they don't depend on any external sources because they rely only on their immediate surroundings. In her short stories, fictions, and plays, Devi throws light on the vital link between the cultural and material well-being of the tribal and their ecocentric attitudes towards nature. Tribes like Shabar, Munda, Santhal, Bim, and many others find voice in her works, for it becomes the demand of the day, and thus, Mahasweta Devi utters:

while nobody cares to pay heed to their claims to their right to survive, the hired writer, pandering to the middle and upper classes, content themselves with weaving narcissistic fantasies in the name of literature [...]. What can be more surprising than that writers living in a country bedevilled with so many problems- social injustice, communal discord and evil customs- should fail to find material for their work in their own country and people? Such indifference to people is possible only in a semi-

colonial, semi-feudal country like India, still suffering from the hangover of foreign rule. (1990, p. xviii)

Devi speaks on behalf of these tribes and their dependence on nature. In her introduction to *Agnigarbha*, she explains her mission thus:

After thirty-years of Independence, I find my people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labour. An anger, luminous, burning and passionate, directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints is the only source of inspiration in all my writing. All the parties to the left as well as to the Right have failed to keep their commitment to the common people. I do not hope to see in my lifetime any reason to change this conviction of mine. Hence I go on writing to the best of my abilities about the people, so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt and shame. For a writer faces judgement in her lifetime and remains answerable. (1979, p. 11)

Negotiating with the forces: Depiction of the Environment and the Tribals in Mahasweta Devi's *Seeds*

In her short stories, Devi vividly points out the causes and effects of the bondage labor system in India, and she chooses Palamu, the poorest district in the state of Bihar, as the setting for many of her stories. In her *Imaginary Maps* and *Bitter Soil*, she tries to expose the mediums of the exploiting agencies, and *Seeds* from her *Bitter Soil* attempts to give voice to those voiceless tribals and their environment. In this story, she shows the exploitation of Dulan Ganju by the feudal landlord Lachman Singh. Lachman gifts a piece of barren land as an act of benevolence to Dulan. This land is barren and unproductive, and so Dulan finds it hard to run his family. However, he manages to collect a bag of seeds from the government welfare scheme, and these seeds are cooked, and herein lies the act of tragedy and revenge. Dulan's son and seven other tribal members raised their voices for this kind of benevolence from Lachman Singh, and as a result, Lachman's henchmen killed them, and their bodies were buried on Dulan's land only. The bodies' ashes and nature's blessings in disguise intermingle and communicate with the soil, and Dulan's land is nourished into a ripe green field and consequently begins to yield a rich harvest.

It can be clearly seen that the distribution of land is the prime reason behind the economic gap between the rich and the poor, and the writer also supports this when she says: "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 [...] there is the added satisfaction of knowing one is compassionate" (Devi, 2009, p. 27). Dulan at first refuses to take the land, as it is unexpected for him to get a gift of land. But when Lachman Singh insists that Dulan take this land by showing his anger, Dulan has no other option but to do so. Lachman here tells Dulan: "Typical of you low castes! Today I'm feeling generous, so I'm giving you this. Fool, do you think I'll feel this way tomorrow?" (p. 27). Dulan thinks that Lachman will forget all about this when his intoxication wears off. But later, Dulan realizes that the land is barren. Lachman uses this land to bury the people who raise their voices against his torture, and these voices are mainly those of lower caste people. So, the land that should be used to cultivate crops is used to bury people. The essence of the land is degraded, and people find places in it only after their deaths. The nature that sustains life is used to suppress crimes. People like Asrafi, Pras, Mahuban, Bulaku, Mohar, and Karan are

buried there. So, the tribes are getting buried in the land upon which they used to earn their livelihood. Dulan's words show the tyranny of Lachman on a grand scale, and he says:

How easy! Two corpses on horseback! And those corpses must have been carried off arrogantly, from right under Tamadih Dushad's noses. Lachman knows there's no need to hide them. Those who see won't say anything. They have read the warning in Lachman's sharp, silent gaze. He who opens his mouth will die. This has happened before. Will happen again. Once in a while, it is necessary to send the sky with the leaping flames and the screams of the dying, just to remind the harijans and untouchables that government laws, the appointment of officers and constitutional decrees are nothing. (p. 36-37).

The corrupt police officials are with the upper classes, and people like Dulan gain nothing from this barren land. Devi shows how a land can be turned into a curse and how men used to do it so easily. Dhatua, Dulan's son, becomes rebellious to give his family the protection they have needed for a long time. But Dhatua's untimely death by Malik's henchmen not only gives Dulan a heavy heart, but also provides them with revengeful outlooks. Before Dhatua's death, Dulan used to cheat the government to get seeds, fertilizer, and money annually for his barren land. But after Dhatua's death, he decides to sow those seeds in this land, and this sowing is his protest against his Malik. Devi shows how cultivation can be the way to release oneself from the clutches of oppression. Through Dulan, Devi wants to show that the bones and blood of the lower caste don't reap thorny bushes alone, but they can also give life to new crops like paddy. Paddy for the tribals is something like a lifesaver, as the tribals need only a meager meal of rice to live on. This is proved through statements like this: "It took Dhatua's mother just one meal of rice made from the seeds to realize that she had never eaten anything so sweet in her life" (p. 32). Dulan's attack on Lachman seems to be the demand of the day, and it should be because of Dulan's demands:

What was our agreement? That I shouldn't farm. Why not? You will sow corpses, and I'll guard them. Why? Otherwise, you will burn down the village, kill my family. Very good. But, Malik, seven boys seven. Is it right for only wild, thorny underbrush to grace their graves? So, I sowed paddy, you see. Everyone says I've gone mad. I have, you know. I won't let you go today, Malik, I won't let you harvest your crop. Won't let you shoot, burn houses, kill people. You've harvested enough. (p. 55)

But, of course, this victory only lasted for a while because the taking over of the reins and ruling over the Kuranda village by Lachman's son proved this. But among all these, the message is that cultivation can be the way to stop domination, and land can be used to protest, protest, and preserve both the human and the natural world. So what Dulan does should be remembered by all:

[...] 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. (p. 56)

Of Equality and Harmonious creativity: A Deep Ecological Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Little Ones*

Deep ecology demands equality for all forms of life related to the biotic and abiotic environment. It is the anthropocentric attitude of humans that alienates them from the blissful touch of nature. This term encompasses all the natural elements of our surroundings, and, at the same time, it also wants to establish a biocentric relation. Mahasweta Devi's *Little Ones* clearly points out the basic characteristics of deep ecology. In this story, she wants to subvert the prevalent notions regarding the tribe. In this context, it can also be said that the story sarcastically presents the tribe of Agariya in the deepest tribal pockets of Lohri in Bihar. On the surface level, the story is about the little thieves who, under the guise of children, steal the relief. But later, Mr. Singh, the relief officer discovers that these little thieves are infarct men and women. Lack of food and malnutrition stunt their natural growth, and all these things happen because these people are wiped off their land and there is industrial development and mining. Seeing these pygmy figures, the relief officer has gone insane, and he is left weeping at their condition. What he utters at the moment is worth mentioning:

Fear, terrible fear. Terrible, terrible fear. He feels a terrible fear. Why are they advancing in silence? Why don't they speak? Their bodies are now clearly visible. What's this? Why are they naked? Why is their hair so long? If they are young boys, adolescents, then why is their hair white? Why do the little girls, the little girls, have empty, sagging breasts? Why is he coming forward? The one with the grey hair? Don't come near me- his terrified scream is silenced, what he gasps is- Don't come closer! (Sukumar & Shinde, 2016, p. 298)

The tribes should be given their due lands and opportunities. The BDO here illustrates the issue by proving the information related to the Agaria rebellion and the Agaria myth to the Relief Officer. Mr. Singh has the impression that "the Adivasi men played flute and that the Adivasi women danced with flowers in their hair, singing, as they pranced from hillock to hillock" (Devi, 2009, p. 2), but the anthropocentric motives of the government make this tribe helpless, desperate, and aggressive. Land is going to be replaced with industries, and again, the peace and harmony of the tribes with their land are at stake. The state goes ahead with its plan, and hills are blasted. The Agarias of Kuba become infuriated and kill those who are associated with that blast. The Agarias run away to the forests to save themselves from being caught. For them, the forest is the only safe place, and the land they are on symbolizes mother, but the government becomes more ruthless, and the police set fire to Kuba. There they sow salt, and, as a result, the tribal people gain nothing from that place. How the mother earth is tortured is shown by Devi in a vivid way. The Agaria village thus experiences oppression, exploitation, discrimination, and brutal taxation. The tribe and their land have never given equality and status. Mr. Singh actively engages himself in the relief work for the region, which is affected by famine and drought, and this is welcomed by the ruthless activities of some greedy officials. The BDO tells Mr. Singh numerous stories about the tribal, and Mr. Singh is further informed that the tribal members attribute each other and invite some supernatural forces, which they later sing to drive away. It is not the tribe but some external forces that do the damage to the environment of this area, and some false notions work among these officials, like "Lohri is a terrible place. Even if you give those damned people land, they sell it off to the Mahajan. They stare at you wide-eyed and ask, where's the water? Where are the seeds? Plough? Bullocks? How can we farm? Even if you give them all this, they'll still sell to the Mahajan" (p. 3).

The thick forest of leafless trees, the cruel hills, and the parched earth lose their beauty because of humans' inhuman activities. When the thieves are caught, they reveal the

truth by telling the misfortunes they have. The tribal people are envious of Mr. Singh's five feet and nine inches of height because they don't have that. The writer shows the human tragedy in this way. The loss of land can be a very affective one, as the body structure of the tribe proves. Food is needed for the development of the body, and loss of land means scarcity of food for the tribe. The tribes should be given equal opportunity to raise themselves, and Mahasweta Devi stands right when she condemns those money minded upper classes, and she says in this context:

What I wrote in 'Little Ones' is correct. Starvation over generations can reduce ordinary-sized human beings to the pygmies. Of course, the starving Agariyas are savagely angry at a system under which some people eat three meals a day while they are forced to starve! For I believe in anger in justified violence, and so peel the mask off the face of the India which is projected by the Government, to expose its naked brutality, savagery, and caste and class exploitation; and place this India, a hydra-headed monster, before a people's court, the people being the oppressed millions. (p. x)

So, it can be said that this story not only realistically portrays the two classes, but also speaks of biocentric egalitarianism, which means all living and non-living things are of equal moral worth or intrinsic value.

Stuck in between need and greed: Depiction of the hunting of the wild in Mahasweta Devi's *The Hunt*

Mahasweta Devi's 'Imaginary Maps' begin with *The Hunt*, and the story is about the village of Kuruda, which is known mostly for its giant Sal trees. The story further exhibits the ramifications of leveling the Sal trees and the ultimate destruction of both epistemologies and resources embedded in these forests. Structurally, the story falls into three sections. In Section 1, the exploitation of people like Mary Oraon of Kurda is shown. Mary is reduced to the life of a bonded slave, and her work at Prasadji's estate is captured like this: "Mary pastures the (as in the original) Prasads' cattle. She is the most capable cowherd...with Mary the agreement is for board and lodging, clothing and sundries. The Dixon bungalow was built as a residence for whites. Bhikni says the whites kept twelve ayahs-servants-sweepers. Under Prasadji, Mary alone keeps the huge bungalow clean" (Devi, 2001, p. 2). Section 2 shows the activities of the contractor, Tehsildar Singh. Banwari, the newly fledged post-independence landowner, joins with Tehsildar to continue the ruthless act of cutting trees, and, at the same time, women are oppressed. So, the patriarchal system works on both Mother Nature and women in general, but it is also true that this story successfully presents an alternative form of competence resistance from the forest and its inhabitants. The deforestation and the exploitation of Mary emerge together to project the metamorphic rape of both tribal people and their lands by the hands of neo-liberal global capitalism, and the village along with the lands are found to be under the colonial hangover. Section 3 projects the resistance of the tribe as they become violent to protect their forest. When the system fails to provide equality, only resistance can bring justice.

In *The Hunt*, the writer again shows the peaceful coexistence of human and non-human agency. The tribes live in harmony with nature and see their own lives in many aspects as the other version of the lives of other species in nature. When the situation arises, the hunting tribes cut down trees and, at the same time, beg forgiveness from nature and

those trees. They used to tell them, "You are our friend. I do this because my wife doesn't have any food, my son doesn't have any food, my daughter starves. Before they killed an animal, they used to pray for the animal, the bird, the fish, the deer" (p. ii). These tribes understand the ecology and the importance of land and forests. This story centers on the animal hunting festival, as its original title in Bengali is 'shikar' which denotes the hunting. The writer writes in the story that "once there were (wild) animals in the forest, life was wild, the hunt game had meaning" (p. 12), but the hunters are fiercer than wild beasts and they hunt them all. In the beginning, the writer describes the hunting of wild animals like leopards and hedge dogs by the tribes, which is done every year. The tribals in this story are seen hunting people like Tehsildar Singh, Pradadji, Banwari, and many others who are involved in the illegal action of cutting the trees. In her conversation with Spivak, Mahasweta Devi explains this merciless cutting of trees. She says that "Big money is involved. [...] The local political worthies, local police, local administrations are bribed. The railways cooperate by carrying this illegal felled timber. Illegal saw mills come up everywhere" (p. xii). So, all the incidents of Kuruda represent these kinds of incidents in India. The tribal members cut trees for their dire needs, as one tribal member says: "I need five rupees a day to buy rice. Ask me to fell a tree, I'll do it unwillingly, but I'll do it" (p. xii). But, at the same time, they will not buy the woods at throw away prices and Mary's words prove this fact when she says: "Not twelve annas and eight annas, "we will bargain for three or two rupees" (p. 9). So, Mahasweta Devi tries to tell us through this story that "the hands that fell the trees are not the hands responsible for the deforestation all over India" (p. xii). While cutting the trees, one should be logical, rational, and knowledgeable. The government should stop deforestation and provide the basic things required for living to all so that none can cut down trees only to survive.

Of Myth and Nature: The reworking of the epic narrative from the tribal perspective in *Kunti and the Nishadin*

Mahasweta Devi makes every possible attempt to recover the tribal history from the discourses of literature, myth, and history, for she wants to explore the subtext of the colonization of the lower classes and then rewrite those narratives, keeping in mind her tribal people. In *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, Gadgil and Guha place emphasis on these workings. They tell that the stories in the Indian epics, the Ramayana, 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 tribal in the lac house in place of the Pandavas, and the numerous other references to the suppression of tribal people—are now seen as embodying these early struggles between the tribal and non-tribal populations of India in those early days for control over the land and its resources (Gadgil & Guha, 1992, pp. 78–80). In the Mahabharata, the Pandavas burn the Khandava forest along with its inhabitants to build their capital city, and this is mentioned by Mahasweta Devi in her writings. So, the crisis of land can be traced back to the primitive age, and this continues to this day.

In her *Kunti and the Nishadin*, she narrates the story where five Nishada tribal men and their mother in the lac house, Jatugriha (in the Mahabharata), are burnt. Here Kunti is seen feeling guilty severally for two reasons—one for her unacknowledged son Karna and the other for the killing of the Nishads in Jatugriha. There is a perception difference between the tribal and the non-tribal here. The Nishadin women remind Kunti that the world of 'rajavritta' or the royal people, looks out only for their own interests, and for that, they

destroy the natural world without any hesitation, while, at the same time, the lower classes of janavritta try hard to save that natural world that sustains, protects, and nourishes them. As a mother, Kunti fails to protect her sons and other life forms as well. The Nishadin women tell Kunti that their world is a small but well-structured, and they don't violate the laws of nature. They also utter, "Nature's law. Nature abhors waste. We honour life... But you won't understand" (Devi, 2005, p. 41). The tribals are closely connected with nature, and they can sense the approaching forest fire too. Thus, they can escape to protect themselves, but Kunti, Gandhari, and Dhritarastra, who once were ignorant of the natural world, now live there and ultimately welcome death by perishing in that forest fire. So, the poetic justice is done, and nature takes her revenge in this way. The Nishadin women, in a very rational way, describe the forest fire and nature's responsibility to make the forest green again. The message of the story can be seen in these lines: "The fire will do its work, then rain will quench the flames. The scorched earth will turn green again" (p. 44).

Of Modernization and Ecological Equilibrium: A Reading of Mahasweta Devi's *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay* and *Pirtha*

In *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay* and *Pirtha*, Mahasweta Devi uses the myth of Pterodactyl, an extinct reptile bird of the Pterosauria class from the Mesozoic era, to portray the inhuman condition of the Nagesia tribal of the Pirtha block of Madhya Pradesh. This story is an abstract of the writer's experience of tribal culture and their relation to nature. She writes:

Pterodactyl is an abstract of my entire tribal experience. Through the Nagesia experience I have explained other tribal experiences as well. I have not kept to the customs of one tribe alone. In the matter of the respect for the dead, for example, I have mixed together the habits of many tribes. If read carefully, Pterodactyl will communicate the agony of the tribal, of marginalized people all over the world. (Devi, 2001, p. XIV)

Pirtha block, like the animal Pterodactyl, is now extinct. Puran Sahay, a journalist from Bihar, reaches there to place this block on the map of Madhya Pradesh. The area is affected by famine, and the tribal people are dying of starvation. They need a dam, but the government declared the area a drought hit one. The writers show here that "Pirtha Block is like some extinct animal of Gondwana land and the tribals are in the animal's jaws" (p. 99), but this is not the supposed scenario to be shown here. Once upon a time, the tribals used to live peacefully and in complete harmony with nature in this place. The tribals worshipped nature and got her blessings, and Sankar, the only literary person in this community, narrated all these in this way:

Once there was forest, hill, river and us. We had villages, homes, land, ourselves. In our fields we grew rice, Kodo, Kutki, Soma [...] we lived. Then there was game to hunt. It rained, peacock danced, we lived [...]. We asked the earth's permission, we are setting down takes to build a roof, settling land to grow crops. We worshipped the tree that was the spirit of our village. (p. 119)

After the entry of modernization, it begins to make tribal slaves. Their lands are vanished like dust, and industrial development takes away their homes, names, foods, and identities. The tribals were labeled "Criminal Tribes" in 1871 because of their resistance and revolution. They are marked as anti-national, anti-social, and later "de-notified" in 1952. Their forests

are devastated, and trees are cut down to produce raw materials, but these rapid, irrational movements invite flood, earthquake, famine, soil erosion, and global warming, and an environmental imbalance emerges due to some callous activities. In Pirtha, the barren lands are sprayed with various pesticides, and with the unexpected rain, all the pesticides are gathered in the roots of Khajra and in the water reservoirs used by the tribals. As a result, the tribal members are found dead after eating poisonous Khajra and drinking poisonous water. When the ecological equilibrium is destroyed, consequences like this are bound to happen, but on the other hand, the condition is not the same because,

Food will rot because of insufficient storage facilities at Food Corporation, but it will still never reach, never does reach Pirtha, Kalahandi or Koraput. Food goes to Africa, to Sri Lanka, promise of building collective crop farms are given at SAARC conferences, let them be given, give everyone everything since you over produce, greatly in food crop production, but why not, at the same time, give to the districts of Kalahandi and to the micro-regions of Pirtha. (p. 165)

Puran watches all this and makes a report on Pirtha to show the world the other side of the green revolution. He doesn't mention anything about pterodactyl, for he doesn't want to disturb the pristine beauty and culture of this nearly extinct tribe. He realizes that only love for their culture, land, and flora and fauna can save them. They require nothing but equality, respect, honesty, dignity, and carefully planned policies for their culture and nature.

Making light in the process: Tracing the Environmental movements from Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* to *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*

If the focal point of *Aranyer Adhikar* deals with the Ulgulan movements and the rights of the inhabitants of the forest to their lands, led by Birsa Munda in the period 1895–1901 against the British colonial regime, *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* narrates the movements centered around the river Chotti, led by the hero, the master archer Chotti Munda. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, the writer shows the exploitation of India's forest by the British. In order to build the ship industries and the railways, they use the sal and teak forests of India. Bamboo forests are used to make paper, and tea along with other crops are taken away to make the food industry. The Indian Forest Act of 1865 and 1878 raised the question of the rights of the tribals over their lands and forests. Here, the rise of the Mundas, led by Birsa Munda, gives hope to the tribal community. Birsa utters loudly, "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" (Devi, 1992, pp. 81–82). Like the Shabars, the forest for the Mundas is labelled "Munda Mother". Birsa's parents, Suhana and Karmi, remember the days when they used to live like kings and queens in this forest. They used to follow the laws of nature, and their natural cycles of life depended on the forest. Even when they are reduced to the level of bondage labor, the forests continue to give them money, security, and safety. It is Dhani Munda who inspired Birsa to fight to get hold of the lost lands in Chotanagpur. Like Tejota in *The Book of the Hunter*, the protagonist here elevates himself as a spiritual leader and healer, and his deep knowledge of the forest and non-human entities helps him gain powers like these. The forest here symbolizes the feminine principle (prakriti), and Birsa is Purush, who fights to defend her honor. The Mundas fight for the forest, and the forest in return gives them shelter to hide themselves, food to survive, and fruits to make poison for their arrows. The Munda women also play their part in this movement, and the song sung by them denotes their relationship with their lands. A few lines of their songs are worth mentioning:

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. (p. 205)

The rise of Chotti Munda denotes the failure of Birsa's rebellion. Here, the river Chotti is the source of life for the Mundas. Mundas build their homes, cultures, ethos, and identities, and the river is the medium of all those. The river provides fish and minerals, and Chotti Munda's father, Purti Munda, narrates all these, including his fear of losing this river:

They made a home by the 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 and was 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 the 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. (Devi, 2002, p. 2)

When the river dried up, draught forced the Mundas to work as bonded labor. The draught symbolizes humans' unwanted meddling with nature, and the lower classes become the first victims. Chotti stands up for the occasion, and his magic arrows try to restore the lost identities, cultures, and lands of the Mundas.

Conclusion

The time has long since come to break the anthropocentric attitudes of humans towards nature, and ecocentric ideals must be welcomed to bring out ecological equilibrium. The oppressions faced by the tribes and their natural surroundings are still going on, but these should be stopped, and all of these, like Mahasweta Devi, should come forward to bring out the suffocation and struggles of nature that lie hidden at the heart of the people who depend solely on them. The evils that lead to the destruction of the ecosystem must be wiped out lawfully and rationally to build a better future for all. Rather than eulogizing the efforts taken by the tribals, people should come forward with the intention of breaking the hierarchal orders and scattering the seeds of ecocentric thoughts in the minds of all. Unless one follows the laws of nature and lives in accordance with natural cycles, all these thoughts and movements will remain lifeless ideas. All sections of society should be educated, and the minimum standard of living should be guaranteed to stop the degeneration of society. Self-awareness and self-introspection are needed, and the discussion can be summed up by what Fritjof 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 inter dependent. 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. (1977, pp. 3-4)

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Notes on contributor

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