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Beyond Control! Beyond Knowledge! Vain Attempts at Taming the Untamable in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*

Soumen Chatterjee

Abstract

From time immemorial forests have been used as one of the dominant tropes in Indian literature. But the attitude of the Indian writers towards forests is marked by ambiguity as forests have been presented in its benign as well as wild aspects. But in most of the Indian narratives forest along with the forest dwellers known as tribal and *jungli* are seen to be in conflict with the civilized people who ultimately dominate them and bring them into the fold of the so-called civilization. The mainstream Indian narratives basically depict the indigenous communities living in the hills and jungles as wild, savage and uncultured. But Mahasweta Devi, providing voice and space to her subaltern characters, has debunked this type of stereotypical representation of the tribals in her narratives.

This paper will cite her acclaimed short story, *Draupadi* as my case study and will investigate how she has de-familiarized the usual forest setting here. How the so-called civilized discourse often exploits and humiliates the tribals along with their environment and how this exploitation incites unconventional modes of resistance from the margins are the areas of investigation of this paper also. The contribution of this paper to scholasticism lies in pointing out how tribal culture and the so-called civilized culture are two different cultural spaces running parallel.

Keywords: resistance, tribal, exploitation, hegemonic discourse, civilization.

From time immemorial, one of the dominant motifs that appear frequently in the Indian narratives in order to give expression to the social, moral and cultural codes of the mainstream society is the forest. Down the ages the consolatory and healing effects of the forests have been foregrounded in numerous Indian narratives. Apart from this the forest trope serves multiple purposes in Indian narratives. In the Indian story telling tradition, forests are adjunct to the civilization, providing resources of living to the civilized society. In the great Indian epics, "particularly as described in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* epic the long standing distinction between forestland and human settlement serves to express both the potentiality and limitations of civilization" (Johnson 510). It is in the forests that the epic heroes experience the moments of greatest crisis that usually provided them with the profound sparks of insight. Actually Indian forests are used as apt backgrounds where the epic heroes experience crises as well as epiphanic moments. Again forests have been used as an apt sacred space for spiritual communion with nature; it also serves as a political refuge in several Indian narratives. Being the "threshold between civility and wilderness" (Johnson 513), forest also serves as a site of conflict between civilized people and forest dwellers in the Indian epics: when the great epic heroes enter in the forests crossing the imaginary border line between civility and wilderness, they encounter wild, uncivilized and chaotic forest dwellers with whom they come in conflict in the dark recesses of the forest and ultimately vanquish them. In fact, from time immemorial forests have evoked ambivalent responses from the Indian writers: it is at once benign as well as wild. But in most cases, forests along with the inhabitants have been conceived in the mainstream Indian literature as wild and dark areas replete with untamable and uncivilized/ *jungli* human beings who perform witchcraft, magic and other enchanting rituals. Actually, an aura of enchantment has been inscribed on the forest and its inhabitants by the Indian writers.

But a sea change in human attitude towards forest has been noticed from the dawn of capitalism. The modern world ruled by logic and reason attempts to disenchant the proverbial power of nature and different traditional and ethnic practices associated with the proverbial enchantment of nature have been rationally analyzed. Forests are being regarded as the container of harvestable grounds, and they are the sites of different developmental projects. Attempts have been made by the hegemonic discourse to assimilate the forest dwellers, also known as tribals into the ambit of the civilized cultural discourse. The hegemonic discourse, in their attempts to bring the tribals into the orbit of the so called modern logical discourse, overlooks and disregards the inseparable bond between tribal self and natural world. The border line between civility and wilderness that should be honoured for the sake of conservation and preservation of environment and forest culture of the ethnic people, is violated by the hegemonic discourse in the name of development and policies of inclusion. In most of the cases, the real inhabitants of the forests, tribals are also deemed wild and savage by the dominant discourse of the modern world not only for their refusal to fully assimilate into the world view of the dominant discourse but also of their deep faith in an altogether different type of eco-theology and eco-ethics. The disenchanted language of the dominant discourse also cannot express the naturalized worldview of the tribals. It only reflects "a desacralised and therefore denaturalized, worldview" (Johnson 513). Therefore, my aim in this paper is to show how Mahasweta Devi in her short story, *Draupadi* has presented the inadequacy and inability of the dominant discourse to fully comprehend the tribal worldview. This paper also attempts to investigate how the tribal culture and hegemonic culture run parallel and cannot be brought into a single channel. Here I would also try to explore how Mahasweta Devi purposefully revises and defamiliarises the conventional uses of forest setting in this short story in order to acquaint her readers with tribal history, society and movements.

Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi* was published in *Agnigarbha* in the year 1977 and it is set in the postcolonial India against the background of Naxalbari movement in which poor people, bonded labourers, the exploited tribals and some educated intellectuals fired by Marxist ideologies went against the local Zaminders, zothdars and other aristocrats who after the independence stepped into the shoes of the former colonizers and kept the wretched of the earth disempowered. Actually, in the postcolonial India an unholy nexus developed between the State and the feudal lords who reaped the harvest of Independence in their own favour while the ethnic communities and poor people remained in their erstwhile state of deprivation. And the Naxalite movement was against such type of unholy nexus developed between State and feudal lords. Under the tempo of this Naxalite movement the protagonists of this story, a Santal couple named Dopdi and her husband Dulna killed a landlord, Surja Sahu and his son who even in the time of drought have not provided water to the common tribals as they belong to the lower strata of the society and then throwing dust on the eyes of the police, they took shelter in the impenetrable Jharkhani forest and carried out insurgent operations there. State sponsored police tried hard to capture them but failed in their mission. Then an uptight Operation Jharkhani was charted under the leadership of Senanayak who is a native intellectual. As a native intellectual and as a representative of the State, his main objective is to safeguard the feudal lords from these Naxalites. And in order to be successful in his mission, he wants to become one with the enemy so that he can grasp the strategic moves of these Naxalites perfectly.

In order to capture the insurgents, at the behest of Senanayak the police first attempted to disenchant the Jharkhani forest converting the wild forest into their habitual land. They were provided with the amenities of modern life so that they can feel comfort of civilized life even in the midst of wilderness:

> The battalion is provided with supervised nutrition, arrangements to worship according to religion, opportunity to listen to "Bibhidho Bharati" and to see Sanjeev Kumar and the Lord Krishna face-to-face in the movie *This Is Life*. No. The area is not wild. (392)

At the time of penetrating into the Jharkhani forest the policemen whimsically killed some Santals, the tribals who are the original inhabitants of the forests and who uphold forest culture. This can be viewed as modernity's violence on the wilderness, as the elitist State's whimsical exercise of power on the destitute people of the country. In fact, spatial overlapping on the part of the policemen resulted in the shameless killing of those innocent people who are the upholders of the forest culture of the same state. In order to capture the insurgents the policemen frantically attempted at adapting themselves thoroughly with the forest life: they in "their green camouflage" (395) led their days and nights on "the leafy boughs" (395) of the trees and kept strong vigilance on the springs of the forests as they are the only source of drinking water to these fugitives. Actually they just like the mythical sylvan gods, Pans took absolute control over the forest but unlike Pans, they had not aimed at guarding the inmates of the forest and preserving the forest culture. On the contrary, the army not only exterminated the inhabitants of the forest but also attempted at the forcible alternation of the cultural space of the forest in their own favour. In this context the observation of Jenifer Wenzel is worth-quoting, "The army's mapped extermination of forest inhabitants and control of their resources are accompanied by an attenuated form of cultural invasion as well." (142). Eventually, their attempts bore fruits as they killed Dulna one night when he went there to drink water. But before death Dulna uttered two words "Ma-ho" which were quite incomprehensible to the police as they were totally unfamiliar with the tribal ethnography. Even to the Senanayak who was quite familiar with the tribal space these words remain incomprehensible. He brought experts from Kolkata to make sense of these words, but they also failed. This shows that the

celebration of the civilized people of their epistemological success is nothing but a falsification of the 'Truth' as there are still codes that are unintelligible and incomprehensible to them.

As the narrative paces forward, the policemen bait the dead body of Dulna to entrap the fugitive insurgents. But surprisingly none of them came there to proclaim that dead body. One night the policemen from the top of the trees fired on a bush when they found it moving and descending they found that they had killed a copulating animal couple guessing them as insurgents. This action on the part of the soldiers who are the agencies of state clearly demonstrates that they are Greek to the forest life. Their whimsical killing of the animals can be regarded as the State's reckless invasion of the biological diversity. In fact, under the garb of emissaries of light, they spoil the environment and biological diversity. To quote Alan Johnson, "The soldiers' violent behavior undercuts the state's ostensibly civilizing goals." (516) In the meantime, the jungle scout Dukhiram gets a knife at his back and losing Dukhiram the policemen cannot find any direction in their way. Their chief, Senanayak is also at a loss and in irritation he slaps his anti-facist paperback on *The Deputy*. But this man prides in identifying himself with the rebels and can think from the point of view of the rebels. So he spreads his people all through the forests and its nearby towns. And his attempts bear results as he by his newly set up trap ensnares Dopdi alias Draupadi. In fact, when Dopdi was returning from the nearby town, she realizes that someone is following her. Then in order to befool them she turns away from the forest hideouts and tries to lead the cops to the rocky terrain of the forest area that is compared by her to the burning ghats of Patitpaban. But this time the soldiers have been successful in mapping her mind from her point of view. So to her utter surprise, her attempt of leading the cops to the sacrificial area leads to her own ambush and capture. Thus the untamable Dopdi is ultimately ensnared in the net of Senanayak. But before being taken away as a prisoner, she signals a warning alarm to her forest comrades in her own unique way:

> Now Dopdi spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns towards the forest, and ululates with the force of her entire being. Once, twice, three times. At the third burst the birds in the trees at the outskirts of the forest awake and flap their wings. The echo of the call travels far. (401)

Even Senanayak who is excessively proud of his ability of deciphering the worldviews of the tribals cannot decode this signal. This action of Dopdi is akin to Satyananda's song in Bankim Chandra Chattopadyay's *Anandamath*. While in the forest Satyananda was being taken away as a prisoner by the royal soldiers, he loudly sang his song that was intended to be a kind of instruction and warning to his followers. But the royal soldiers who surrounded him were unable to decode this song. This reflects that the worldview of the people living in the forests, outside the border of civilization is beyond the grasp of the so called civilized people.

Ultimately Dopdi is apprehended and for interrogation brought into the police camp where Senanayak instructs his fellows to make her up and do the needful. And in the police camp in the name of interrogation, she is gang raped by the police at night. She faces hellish torture in the police camp:

> Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says "water" she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her?
>
> Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she's been made up right. Her breasts are beaten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven—then Draupadi had passed out.
>
> She turns her eyes and sees something white. Her own cloth. Nothing else. Suddenly she hopes against hope. Perhaps they have abandoned her. For the

> foxes to devour. But she hears the scrape of feet. She turns her head, the guard leans on his bayonet, and leers at her. Draupadi closes her eyes. She doesn't have to wait long. Again the process of making her begins. (401)

In this way, the basic human rights are thrown into the winds in the police station in the name of "make her up" (401). Thus the process of making her 'anew' and doing the "needful" (401) is nothing but the civilized state's own modern way of exercising control over the targets in an inhuman manner and the way in which the Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi is tortured by the so-called civilized policemen is more brutal than the way her mythical counterpart was tortured by the Kauravs. On this inhuman atrocious treatment meted out towards Dopdi, E. Satyanarayana observes, "The barbarous attack on her chastity is not only a sign of insult to the dignity of an individual but also a threat to the human values. Ironically Senanayak and his men appear to have surpassed their counterparts in the epic." (182). Actually, the police station that should be used as a protector of the mass is used by the state as a repressive state apparatus. The way in which Dopdi was gang-raped in the police station is reminiscent of the tragic fate of Budhan who was mercilessly beaten in the police custody and ultimately was hung to death. The extreme sexual abuse meted out towards Dopdi is emblematic of the inhuman treatment meted out towards the Naxalite Guerillas in the police station. Her miserable plight in the police station is reminiscent of the tragic fate meted out towards Nandini in Mahasweta Devi's famous novel, *Mother of 1084*.

Critically speaking the "European Enlightenment's predatory hubris" (Ghosh 75) that once goaded the colonial rulers to exploit the environment and its resources still motivates the so called civilized people to exploit the tribal underdogs along with their environment. What Mahasweata implies here is that police station is the alternative of hell in the modern age.. In fact, rape either marital or civilian, has been used as a weapon across cultures with the aim of domesticating the untamable females and exercising dominion over them. To quote, Saheli

Biswas "An important aspect of both civilian and marital rape is that it is an instrument of domestication, showing the audacious female political prisoner or unarmed civilian the true place where she belongs." (5) The purpose behind this gang rape was also to demoralize Dopdi, to tear her psyche into pieces and to produce a docile Dopdi out of an untamable Dopdi. But instead of being demoralized and torn asunder, on the very next morning she faces Senanayak in her naked state. Tearing "her piece of cloth with her teeth" (402) she challenges his authority as she openly declares that he may be able to disrobe her, but the right to put on clothes is particularly hers: "You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again?" (402)

Thus in her naked state she openly challenges the authority of Senanayak and compels him to face the Real that is his victim's bleeding naked body. So, Dopdi uses her unarmed, unclothed body as "the most powerful form of defense against her oppressors" (Chandramani 128). She also uses the word 'counter' which is the abbreviation of the word encounter frequently used in the criminal register as the code description for the people killed in police custody. Thus Dopdi challenges Prospero-like Senanayak in Caliban's language and consequently strips Sennayak of his language and makes him a mute spectator. In this context, the observation of Alan Johnson is worth-quoting, "When, therefore, Dopdi challenges a Prospero-like Senanayak to counter me at the conclusion of the story, he is as terrified by her uncompromising challenge as by her savvy use of the English word he had believed to be his own special knowledge" (518). Actually, Senanayak and his men who expected that Draupadi would be helpless and at their mercy become baffled when they are openly challenged by her:

> Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me-come on, counter me? (402).

Ironically Senanayak and other policemen are encountered by a woman who has been gang-raped throughout the last night and does not have even a short dagger with her. So the meaning of the word counter is even reshaped by her action. Thus Dopdi is re/made in the police station by the agents of the state who all belong to the civilized world. In this context, the observation of Neluka Silva is worth-quoting, "In spite of her relentless rape and torture, Dopdi is made in the sense that, albeit appallingly, it releases her, makes her powerful, heroic, even legendary" (61). Actually, the actions of tribals and their cultural space cannot be fully codified by the language of modernity as they constantly invent and reinvent their own codes to express their actions. Dopdi by openly challenging and unsettling Senanayak also introduces an element of carnival here as her open challenge temporarily suspends all hierarchical procedures and permits topsy-turvydom. In this context Neluka Silva's argument is pertinent, "Dopdi's "making/unmaking" ultimately provokes Senanayak's unmaking. Therefore, the confrontation between Dopdi/Draupadi and her captor disrupts the dominant image of nationalism played out through its principal representative-the state…" (61)

In fact, the representatives of the so called civilized world, policemen who are also the agents of the state are countered, emasculated and castrated by Dopdi. In this context the observation of Aparazita Hazra is worth quoting, "Draupadi—the all-too-familiar Dopdi Mejhen leaves them feeling emasculated and fuming in the throes of castration anxiety." (47) Actually she posits herself back into the centre stage of action and hers is indeed the voice of a subaltern subject. As a subaltern subject she is also highly critical of civilized people and celebrates her unique ethnic identity. As a Santal she is highly proud of her unmixed Santal identity. She feels pride in the heroism of her forefathers who stood against the outsiders/ dikus and protected the honour of their women. Unlike the civilized people, the Santals never betrayed their community and they prized the honour and respect of the women at the high pedestal. Mahasweta Devi herself makes this point clear in an interview with Gayatri

Chakraborty Spivak as she tells, “Among the tribals insulting or raping a woman is the greatest crime. Rape is unknown to them. Women have a place of honour in the tribal society” (xi). On the other hand the civilized people do not care about their own community and they do not care a fig for the honour of their women as they take voyeuristic pleasure in ravishing the chastity of women. Actually she delves deep into her roots to celebrate her unique tribal identity and to her the Santal forefathers who protected the women are real men, whereas men like Senanayak are men only in name having nothing masculine in them. In this way she openly challenges the civilized people’s cultural pride in manhood and presents a paean of the laudable qualities of her own people and culture. In fact, Mahasweta Devi allows her “to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography” (Gandhi 2) and in doing so she gave voice to the muted voices of the truly oppressed tribals. Through her, Mahasweta Devi “depicts the spirit of tribal resistance against any intruding socio-cultural influence which may distort the value system of the tribal cultural space and distort its equilibrium” (De 142).

Moreover, her reaction to the gang rape is totally unconventional and beyond anyone’s prediction. Conventionally raped women either kill the men who dishonor them or commit suicide or silently bear their own pangs throughout their whole life. Sometimes they lacerate their family members to take revenge on the culprits. But the way in which Dopdi approached Senanayak and countered him is unique and unfamiliar not only to Senanayak and his men but also to readers. By providing Draupadi a unique voice of protest, Mahasweta Devi has made her an exceptional character. She has really come out of the womb of fire, that elemental component of the universe which is beyond control. In this context Rose observes,

> Senanayak’s fear and perplexity at the end of the story is a classic example of the most powerful form of resistance which causes a rupture in the hegemonic discourse. Her final resistance brings about an entire paradigm shift. Unlike the

> classical Draupadi, Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi emerges from Agnigarbha—the womb of fire. (101)

In fact, Senanayak, like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhay's Captain Thomas, dreams of triumphing over the insurgent tribals who took shelter into the forest but he is dumbfounded and frightened at the end as he finds that they are beyond his reach and control and their world view is even beyond his speculation. Actually, civilized culture and ethnic forest culture run in parallel channels and they can never merge in a single channel. To quote Mahasweta Devi's words from her interview with Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak: "The tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel. There has never been a meeting point…"(x). Indeed the tribals like Dopdi are nature's natural and their movements like nature's own movements cannot be always predicted accurately by the seismograph of the so called civilized state power. In fact, life is not a mathematical calculation; rather it has its own uniquely diverse set of emotions, feelings and movements and the attempt at reducing "the unintelligible diversity and material alterity of the world to the familiar contents" (36) of the official power is always risky and often provokes resistance. So, the real drama of Dopdi's life enacted against the background of the Jharkhani forest is a pointer of the vulnerability and porosity of the civilized world's epistemological pride in deciphering the worldviews of the Others. In this way the wild forest background here serves as a face to face interacting point of "two cultures—one tribal and the other non-tribal, one marginal and the other powerful with the ecotone[1]—the contact/friction zone omnipresent between the two" (De 141). But unlike the epic narratives this encounter that took place in the midst of the "greenish gloom" (Conrad 18) does not present the supremacy of the culture of so called civilized Prospero; rather it subverts this tradition as it brings the worldview of the lesser known world of Sycorax to the foreground and herein lies Mahasweta Devi's uniqueness.

Note

1. Ecotone has become a buzzword in the twenty first century which is immensely inspired by the ecological consciousness that views the earth as a unique set of climatic regions having their own biotic and abiotic elements. And ecotone refers to that space that exists at the border-edge of two or more ecosystems. Actually, ecotone refers to the transitional area between two ecological spheres where the elements of both meet and integrate.

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About the Author

Mr. Soumen Chatterjee is an assistant teacher in Barabeli Junior High School (Govt-aided) situated in West Bengal. He has completed his Post Graduation in English Literature and also completed Post Graduate Diploma in English Language Teaching. He has qualified UGC-NET in English literature. He has worked in Mahishadal Raj College under Faculty Development Programme for three sessions. He has contributed to some national and international journals and presented papers in West Bengal and other states. He may be contacted at soumenchatterjee94@gmail.com.