



# Balance between Environment and Development in Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*

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**Abstract**— This paper aims to explore the issue of development at the cost of environment through Mahasweta Devi's novel *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. Development with sustainability and balance is the imperative of today's globalised world which faces various threats from nature such as global warming, flash flood and earthquake etc. This paper studies the novel from the environmental perspective by delving deep into the lives of tribals their marginalised status under colonialism, the implementation of development project in tribal areas and the tribals with consciousness of nature preservation. Sustainability and ecological habitat are considered as the much required vehicles to make our future free from natural precarity. This paper will demonstrate how tribal community which inhabits a terrain far removed from metropolis has richly inherited ecological wisdom to impart the world. Thus this paper will intend to infuse tribal insights which may enrich the environmental discourse.



**Keywords**— Colonialism, Globalisation, Ecological Habitat, Sustainability, Tribal Community.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Along with globalisation modern world has witnessed progress in science and technology. In new capitalist order, industrialisation has also fast taken place. But alongside it pollution, deforestation, waste dumping into rivers, loss of biodiversity have propped up as new challenges to the world. Environmental degradation has fast taken place in wake of use of pesticides and plastic containers. Modern man's materialism has led to the discard of spiritual wisdom acquired from our ancestors. Besides, the indigenous people whose life is more deeply grounded in nature and forest land, encounter survival crisis in face of globalisation, and thus their local practices of agriculture and nature preservation has been utterly ignored.

## II. ECOCRITICISM THE THEORY

Ecocriticism considers the interpretation of literature from the perspective of environment and explores the possibilities of the symbiosis between man and nature. Ramchandra Guha, the widely respected thinker and historian points out that notions of development in third world is based on western models of modernity and thereby it ignores the ancient cultural and social practices of the local areas, and thus the indigenous people are evicted from their land, which they have occupied for centuries for centuries under the progress of conserving the wild life.

Guha and Martiniz Alier have developed idea of 'Environmentalism of the poor'. They propose that environment in poorer nations cannot be declined from the issues of livelihood, distribution of resources and social justice, and any intervention in the forest grounded life of the poor is to meddle with the unequal structures of the society. India environmental movements like Chipko are

about the preservation of ecosystems that help the poorer sections of society. Adoption of either the first world environmental approach or agricultural practices is to ignore the very local inequalities, forms of knowledge and practices. Thus, this idea focuses on the two points –first the dependents of the poor on nature and second the intervention of the west into their ecofriendly culture. The other features of this concept is that it focuses on the larger parts played by women due to their connection to the everyday work and environment they are the most effected by the changes in the ecosystem (lack of fire wood and shortage of water). First world notions of development, trade agreements, free market economy, subsidy policies, patent rights adversely affect agricultural practices and social justice in the third world.

Vandana Shiva, in her cult text *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, points to the plights of women and peasantry and their greater dependence of nature. Her view is that liberation of women, nature and tribals is possible through the ecological path of harmony, sustainability and diversity.

In this frame work of thought, my paper seeks to explore the issues of environment and its degradation in wake of development projects in the third world nation through Mahasweta Devi's novel *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*. Mahasweta Devi is a tribal activist who combines activism with aesthetics. In her novels like *Aranyer Adhikar*, *Fire Within*, *Chotti Munda and his Arrow*, she interweaves the diverse threads of the issues that include the peasantry women and environment in the global and neo-colonial contexts.

### III. CHOTTI MUNDA AND HIS ARROW

Mahasweta Devi in her work represents the story of the legendary Munda Archer Chotti, recounting nearly the few decades of his life as a wise, farsighted leader whose activities and acts of resistance bring about consciousness to the community. The Munda resistance stressed from the colonial period in India up to the 1970s.

The novel in the beginning shows that Munda's are nomadic. Purti Munda, the grandfather of Chotti and Koel shifted to the Chotti region near the river Chotti from Palamau and Chaibasa. The reason behind this was that their inhabited land happened to produce mica, coal, gold and stone age weapons which were possessed by the kings, White Gorman or the Diku land owners of Bengal and Bihar. Purti Munda wanted that all local adivasi people worshipping Haramdeo under Pahan and priest to live together with their ageold pastoral practices. Quite nomadically, they used to clear forest and settled there and judge its qualities in terms of water and soil. This very

form of land settlement was advocated by the tribals during colonial period when a series of uprisings were under taken to resist the entry of non-adivasis and traders which included Ulgulan by Birsa Munda during 1899 to 1900. Dhani Munda while giving reference to the uprising, tells Chotti- "we won't eat meali, won't obey t' terrorizing money lender. Diku, police will occupy arable and settled rural land will take back t' right to t' forest" Likewise, he remembers the Hul revolt which was intended to empower the adivasis to 'establish the villages in the forest and arable land and farm rightfully and in peace'. This shows how the tribal practices would have restored the management of natural resources in a sustainable way.

Panjabi industrialist, Harbans Chada, employed the Munda's in the brick kiln. Those who were bonded to the feudal landlord Tirathnath, chose to work in coal fields. Tirathnath remembers how his father used to consult Chotti's father Birasa on the matter of agriculture, thereby showing the exploitation of landowning class.

Chotti leases a plot of land from Tirathnath for his son Harmu till the land and removes the Stones from it and carries arm loads of rotting leaves from the Jungal. When the land starts yielding, Tirathnath tax it back. The land on which Parmi works, yields rice but Dhani Munda thinks that pepper will be a more economical agricultural investment. But Parmi prefers to cultivate rice as the land owner will take back the land if he knows that rice grows on it. Quite harassed, they go out to join the Christian mission. Thus, they willingly leave their cultural practices and his spiritual believes. The loving care, the Mundas give to the land shows that land is not a mere economic resource for them.

The tribal's ecological knowledge is closely linked with their spiritual belief. Anwar wants to convert his long arrable land into flower garden. Chotti tells him "put the ash from their burnt huts on her land. Fallow land, land never rests without owners me lord. Land has soul too, who knows if t' soul's good or bad. If you put a bitta ash, whatever rage it has "Il go. Too, t' so you'll be happy (275)."

The tribals believed that just as man needs land so the land needs man to take care of it. In this we see that the tribals have a spiritual view of it.

The tribals are also shocked at the materialism of the dominant class. Chotti remembers how white men and Biharis jumped at the site of coal and mica. Chotti also remembers how the tribal area was disfigured with slums. Purti Munda sacrifices himself for the sake of his land and his tribe's wellbeing. Later we see how the tribal's are disposed of the land by the river Chotti. Birsa Munda could hear the forest crying. Dhani tells Chotti "t forest

cried told him Birsa, Diku, Master, White men, together they have made me unclean, naked, undressed, clean me up (12).”

The forest is significant for Munda's in various ways. It would offer grazing place for their cattle. Women would collect woods for fuel and fodder for the cattle. Rotten leaves were used to enhance the productivity of the land. Mahua and other berries were sold in market. Mundas hunt also. But while hunting, they strike balance between commercial and subsistence needs. The resources available in the forest are shared by the tribal community. During colonial rule, there was sufficient forest space available for the tribals. But during independence in India, wastage of forest resources was worse than it was by the British colonisers. The novelist presents the dominant class as unscrupulous with whom government colludes in its development project. As a consequence, the nature-friendly tribals are displaced both territorially and culturally. Dhani teaches Chotti how to lay trap for deer and where to collect peacock feathers in the forest. During the end of the novel, we come to learn Dikus have cleared much of the forest space. We also see how Sal, the tree having spiritual significance, has been cut down and the mono-cultural tree teak has been transplanted.

Dhani Munda refers to the forest as ‘our mother’ (14). She is a mother who provides and offers refuge to her children. Wild grass is used to weave mats. Mahua seed is used for bearing the lamps.

The Mundas do not believe in any hierarchy. The women are treated with dignity. In tribal fare, women are free to dance just like men. They have their divisions regarding their family. Likewise, Mundas live in harmony with other races. We also see how Mundas strike balance between their resources and their needs. Mundas very wisely use the resources of water by using the Sal leaves. Chotti exhorts the entire community to dig up holes for water but also reminds them of exceeding the limits.

Local knowledge and indigenous practices may not be perfect, they may not be valuable for all the time. As sometimes, they used to set fire to their huts while shifting for new place. The white men and Indian administrators may not welcome their such acts but still they are certainly better than the developmental projects of the government and mainstream society.

After independence, the process of deprivation continues. More than thirty million tribals have been displaced by developmental projects like mines, mega dams, industries, sanctuaries and national parks. Activists like Sundarlal Bhuguna and Medha Patkar have been spearheading movements against displacement of tribals, destruction or monopolisation of forest cover and

inadequate rehabilitation measures. In *Eucalyptus*: Why, Mahasweta Devi strongly decries the West Bengal governments’ policy of replacing bamboo, palas, kusum, siddha, sisam and sal forests with Eucalyptus groves which drain off moisture from the soil. In this essay Mahasweta Devi also questions the mono-cultural policy of government that unleashes havoc on biodiversity and sustainability of nature.

All the tribal wisdom seems to be embodied in Dhani. He becomes Chotti's mentor. He not only relates to Chotti the occasional uprisings for the cause of tribals but also feeds Chotti on tribal wisdom. Chotti learns how to hunt a deer. He is informed how to shoot but at the same time, he is made aware of the obligation to preserve forest and its inhabitants. Dhani's own daily practices are rounded in nature, he counts his own age by marking out the inner ring of Sal tree. Tribals faced the severe threat regarding their culture in post-independence India. Their displacement was for worse than it was during colonised India. It has been pointed out in the novel that during colonialism, a lot of forest space was there, tribal way of life was going on unhindered. They used to revise their cultural practices, hunt the animals and preserve the values of life but after independence, the tribal culture crumbled down as forest, the main stay of their culture was ruined in wake of so-called development projects. Cutting of forest for train routes, cutting of Sal trees for trading, making wild life preserves have been some kinds of deforestation that has damaged both environment and the tribal way of life. In this new colonial condition, the power blocks like administration and dominant class have really set their assault on nature and tribals.

The arrow in the novel is a symbol enriched with multiple meanings. In one sense we take it literally but arrow also stands for tribal culture that is under severe threats of unreasonable developmental projects in the nation. The arrow does not only signify the tribal solidarity but also the necessity to preserve nature. That is why in the end of the novel, we see how Chotti Munda hands over the magical arrow to future to keep alive the message implied through it.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In this way we see how environment and the tribes are interrelated both territorially and culturally. But the development projects undertaken by government and the dominant class in the western paradigm of modernity, only brings deforestation and destruction of tribals' life. As a consequence, we fail to make a sustainable all-inclusive system of development that may be informed and

enriched by the indigenous practices and cultural wisdom of the tribes.

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