



SHIFTING PARADIGMS OF SOCIO-CULTURAL TERRAINS IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S  
*BASHAI TUDU* AND GOPINATH MOHANTY'S *PARAJA*

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**ABSTRACT**

Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty are two pioneer writers of Indian tribal literature. Both writers have designated a realistic picture of tribal's socio-economical conditions in their literary works. In *Paraja*, Mohanty presents tribal's pre-independent economic exploitation and social suppression at the hand of Ramachandra Bisoi, the sahuakar, as well as the colonial governing body. Sukru Jani, the protagonist, is completely excluded from the socio-economic structure. He is forced to become sahuakar's goti, a word replace to bonded slave, along with his two sons, Tikra and Mandia. Mahasweta Devi, in *Bashai Tudu*, exposes unchanged socio-economic condition of tribal in post-colonial India. The tribal along with other subaltern are still a subject to exploitation and marginalization at the hand of the jotedars, who transformed themselves to new colonial power. The jotedars, in company with governing body of post-colonial India, leave no place for tribal and other subalterns in independent India to enjoy their liberty. Like colonial period, they face economic exploitation, social injustice, physical torture and bonded slavery. They feel no distinction in the shifting paradigm of socio-culture terrains from colonial to post-colonial India, only the skin of colonizers has changed.

Key words: Goti, Jotedars, Subalterns, Bonded Slave etc.

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Decolonization is a process of interface, as the dominant class of colonial or post-colonial time in India always consider itself superior to those who have been remain marginalize (subalterns) during pre and post independent period, and have an ardent sense of belongingness to their inferior system. This concept of superior and inferior creates "a space, an inaccessible blankness of the society (*Post-Colonial Theory: Context, Practice, Politics* 102)". The dominant or elite class never shares economic, political and social justice with these spaces (subalterns). Even the post-colonial

Government also turns off its eyes on the subaltern or marginal people. It adopts the same peripheral attitude towards the marginal class as the British colonizers practiced with all the native Indians. In this new post-colonial nation the position of the "marginal" as bell hooks defines, remains "a part of the whole but outside the main body. (XVI)" bell hooks explicates that marginal people live in the same world that is completely under the dominance of the centre or the people of the elite class, they have never been a part of the same.

The aim of this research paper is to analysis the futility of decolonization in relation to Indian tribal people, who have been remained a subject to socio-political-economical exclusion and exploitation from colonial to post-colonial period. In particular, I would like to analyze the dismantling attitude of Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty in context of 'Shifting Paradigms of Socio-Cultural Terrains' of pre-post independent Indian situation. Both writers belong to two different Indian regions (West Bengal and Orissa) and both represent two different time period (as Mohanty represent tribal's situation in British colonial period and Mahasweta Devi post-colonial period). But both periods depict tribal's ceaseless exploitation and exclusion within centre-margin binarism practiced by the elite class people of the mainstream society. By drawing attention to the exploitative condition of tribal, both writers deliberately reflect their dismantling attitude towards the privilege centre-margin binarism in Indian mainstream life.

I would like to study how Mahasweta Devi in *Operation Bashai Tudu* and Gopinath Mohanty in *Paraja* use Indian tribal community to critique the processes that form a binarical mentality towards the fourth world inhabitant, the tribal people. Having started this concern, some of the related issues that I would like to raise are: (1) tribal as a subject to socio-economic exploitation in both colonial and post-colonial India. (2) Continuity of centre-margin binarism from colonial to post-colonial period. (3) Reversal of feudal system into post-colonial capitalistic class. Finally Decolonization as a transfer of power: white colonizers v/s local Indian neo-colonizers.

Spivak, in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1995) talks about the theoretical framework of the Subaltern Studies Group such as: "the work of the subaltern studies group offers a theory of change. The insertion of India into colonialism is generally defined as the change from semi feudalism into capitalism subjection." This transformation of colonial feudalism into post-colonial capitalism gets full exploration in Mahasweta's *Bashai Tudu*. Mahasweta choose to situate the story of tribal's exploitation and socio-

political exclusion to establish a homogeneous identity in decolonized India.

Bashai Tudu leads the landless agricultural laborers against their economical-political exploitation. He revolts against the local *jotedars*, a reversal form of colonial Feudalism, who exploit tribal by giving them low wages than the minimum wages decided by the Labour Department. Hundreds of Santal gather under his leadership "with their primitive weapons – bows and arrows, sickles, hatchets, pole axes, short spears, throwing spears, multi-headed fish killing spears, long spears" (92). Though there is an organization, *Kisan Sabha* that apparently works to protect peasants and agricultural laborers from exploitation. But it is too not remain untouched with the practice of centre-margin binarism. It is completely controlled by the middle class *jotedars* and landlords who themselves, a part of colonial agencies in post-colonial India. They involve in the physical, economical and political exploitation of the small peasants as well as agricultural labourers. This *Kisan Sabha* never supports to the government policies, like Minimum Wage, Land Act, because they affect to the *jotedar's* economic interest. Of leading the landless agricultural labourers, Bahsai died many times phoenix death. But every time he becomes alive and once again he leads another movement against the local colonial agencies.

In *Paraja*, Gopinath exposes the cruelty of feudal system and tribal exclusion from socio-economic and political structure of the British colonial Indian. He highlights the draconian exploitation of the 'Paraja' tribe that is merely a toy in the hands of local moneylender-landlord, Ramchandra Bisoi and the Government revenue officer, Garaja Sundra. The union between local moneylender-landlord and the colonial Government body confiscate the tribal from national framework, and throw them at the margin. Sukru Jani, the protagonist of the novel, lives very peacefully in a jungle village, Sarsupadar with his two sons (Tikra and Mandia) and two daughters (Jili and Bili). His wife had died ten years ago. She was killed by a tiger. He is passing a happy life with a dream of marrying his son with Kajodi, a *paraja* girl of his neighbor, and the daughter Jili with Bagla, a *paraja*

boy. But his dream of happy life is shattered by the forest guard who has seductive eyes on Jili. He entraps Sukru jani in illegal deforestation. This conspiracy of the guard leads Sukru jani towards economical exploitation and land displacement. Sukru forces to take a loan of three hundred rupee from Ramchandra Bisoi, a local moneylender. He gets this amount at the cost of his family's liberty. Thus, due to the role of the government machinery, Sukru becomes a bonded labour of Ramchandra Bisoi, a local moneylender-colonizer.

Thus the both period, the colonial and the post-colonial create no difference in the exploitive and marginal condition of the tribal. They remain at the margin in both periods. In pre-independent period, where the tribal faced double marginalization (by the British colonizers and the local mainstream Indian society), and in post-colonial period, they are exploited by the local Indian colonizers. The post-colonial India itself becomes a neo-colonial country for them. In this neo-colonial country, only traditional feudal lords change their skin. They transform themselves as the capitalistic or politician, and always maintain the space of centre-margin binarism. About this space, Spivak writes such as:

There is always a space in the new nation that cannot share in the energy of (the colonization-decolonization) reversal. This space had no established agency traffic within the culture of imperialism. Paradoxically, this space is also outside of organized labour, below the attempted reversal of capital logic. Conventionally, this space is describes as the habitat of the sub-proletariat of subaltern. (78)

In pre-independent India, Ramchandra Bisoi plays the policy of high interest, and makes almost all the tribes population his Goti, a word replaced to bonded slavery. He makes terms and condition according to his own interest, and imposed them on the tribal. He leaves no way for them to come out of their debt. In this practice of creator-debtor, the loan has never been paid only interest is constantly increased arithmetically. The debtor, throughout his life has to work for the moneylender as a bonded labour, and it transfers from one generation to

another. The Sahukar, Ramchandra Bisoi has a variety of labourers, who work for him as bonded slaves on different terms. Some of them "promised in payment of their wages; others were paid in cash" (225). These gotis perform different types of duties, such as to serve "the officials when they came on tour; carrying their baggage to the next camping-place, chopping firewood, setting up camp and so on" (125). The empire of the Sahukar is constantly growing due to the practice of centre-margin binarism and economic exploitation. Gradually he is going on engulfing tribal's land and crops. Mohanty exposes this poignant situation of the tribal in which they have been placed by the non-tribes people. They have swallowed their all natural resources that used to provide them their livelihood. He exposes the miserable condition of the tribal's villages that are, to a great extent, a part of the Sahukar's empire, he writes:

. . . Sahukar's empire lay two small, miserable villages where the tribesmen lived, or rather existed. The ragged, mud-walked huts dropped as if they were too tried to say up; the thatches had grown bald from the wind and the rain; tattered rags, hung from the rafters, and men, women, children, chickens, dogs and swine groveled in the same dust.

The only sound to be heard in these villages all day is wailing of hungry children; their parents slunk out of the huts at sunrise and do not come back until dark. Their lives, between the hours of sunrise and sunset, belonged to the Sahukar. They were his goti. (120)

Sukru Jani, like other Paraja tribes men, also loses his land at the hand of the Sahukar. He along with his two sons remains his goti, and all his effort of liberating himself from bonded slavery proves fruitless, because the Sahukar refuses to discard the ties of his slavery. He grabs all the money and land of Sukru Jani. Apart from this, the Sahukar has a seductive eye on Sukru's daughter Jili. He persuades her and makes his kept. Even the government body also acts as the agent of the Sahukar. The revenue officer and Amin form a union with the Sahukar and contribute in the exploitation of the tribal. They help

him in engulfing the land of the tribal. The role of the government body is well reflected by Mohanty such as:

The Sahukar played his card well and the Amin sent a long report to the higher officials in the district containing numerous allegations against the headman of the kondh, who was much more tractable. The simple tribesmen believed that all their lands were a gift from the head man, who was the real owner. There were no records of owner ship, and the headman could transfer any land from one tenant to another without question. Now, when the headman was removed, the poor kondhs were confused. They did not know to whom the land belonged. (196-97)

The Sahukar with the help of the government body establishes his indirect rule among the tribal people. He captures the head of the tribes who enjoys a supreme position within his community.

The same condition of the tribal's exploitation, as reflected by Mahasweta Devi in *Bashai Tudu*, runs in the post-colonial India. The tribal in this post-colonial India have no independent existence, but their lives depend on the mercy of the jotedars, a word replace to landlord. They work on jotedars' land not as a wage earner laborer, but as bonded slaves or sharecroppers. Their whole life is confined within the loan that remains unpaid for generation to generation. Mahasweta Devi exposes this long-established loan system that is used by the jotedars to entangle the poor landless agricultural laborers. Jagttaran Lohari, an MLA of Khadakhuniya, is a cruel practicnor of the exploitative policy of bonded slavery. He affiances tribal as bonded laborers and paid them nothing as wages. The tribal pass their whole life in paying their loan. After working as a bonded labour for the four generation they could not be paid merely its interest:

The principal remained unpaid through four generations. The interest too remained unpaid. From the days of Jagattaran's father they had been serving as bonded labourers and signing with thumb impressions. Those who had originally drawn the loans were no longer there. So it

was their descendants who gave their thumb impressions. They would have to go on giving free labour in compensation till the principal and the interest was fully paid up . . . The funny thing about bonded labour is that the debt remains unpaid for over seven generations, and Jagattaran goes on playing the game. (130-131)

Besides the exploitative policies of the jotedars, the novel *Bashai Tudu* also exposes the post-colonial government's disability in eradication the colonial practices. It fails to implement 'Minimum Wage Act' and abolish inhuman bonded slavery practice. On the contrary, it assists in the exploitive policies of the jotedars and bestow them hegemonic power to exploit the tribal folk. Mahasweta Devi explicates 1974's order of the government. It pointed out the agricultural consumer price index at 233 points in place of correct figure of 217. It was a blunder mistake that favored to the jotedars. Of taking the advantage of this mistake, the jotedar Haridhan Sardar got an injunction from the 'High Court' against MW Act. The ruling political party took no step to make an improvement in the agricultural consumer price index, because its improvement was against the personal interest of the *samantas* or *jotedars*, who have majority in the ruling government. Kali Santra, a colleague of Bashai Tudu, shows his dissatisfaction against indirect favor of the government and raise question against its policies:

It's our government now...can't it declare MW to be obligatory . . . you do

Not possible . . .

The interest of a few thousand jotedars may have been more important in the earlier regime than those of 3.7 million agricultural labourers. But will it be the same even now? Samanta? Even now?

Not possible . . . n agricultural

The agricultural labourers, under whatever party banner they organize, will remain agricultural labourers. They will fight, they'll be turbulent. But, Samanta, is it the government's plan to let all those who are turbulent to die fighting, get involve in rioting to be caught by the police and get

framed in criminal cases so that the jotedar can rule merrily? (144)

The novel also exposes the role of the police that have a natural responsibility to defend poor and weak's right and make social justice accessible for each, but forget its constitutional duty. It mercilessly kills the tribal rebellions who demand for their right of minimum wage and calls them "Bastard". It makes discrimination between the elite class jotedar and the poor tribal, and work as an agent of the jotedars. DSP, a police officer, crushes the tribal's rebel mercilessly which broke out against Rameshwar Babu's, a jotedar of Jagula village of West Bengal, policy of 'beth-begari' or bonded slavery. Rameshwar Babu practiced 'beth-begari' to exploit tribal as well as other downtrodden economically. On behalf of the jotedar, the police shoot dead landless tribal who were demanding for their right of Minimum Wage. It shows death of social justice at the hand of the police. Surja Sau is another jotedar from Bakuli village. He takes disadvantage of natural famine by increasing loan rate. He looks natural famine as an opportunity to bond and exploit the tribal. About him Mahasweta Devi writes such as, "Surja Sau would still goat in anticipation over the rosy prospects of what the weather, the drought, bad crops, and famine could offer him. Loans meant interest. The lawn for the remission of loans was a frace" (*Bashai Tudue* 106). Here again the police, the administrative body, play a destructive role in the favor of Surja Sau. Arjun Singh, the leading captain of police, shoot down almost thirty nine landless tribal as well as small peasants along with women and children who were demanding for water. Except these, operation Barga, operation Jagula etc. are the example of police led tribal suppression which put on display the administrative body like police as a plaything at the hand of these jotedars. The police address landless laborers as antisocial and leave free bloodsucker like jotedars to tread on the poor landless labourer. Mahasweta Devi raises a question over the government and its governing body that supports to every brutality of jotedars and justifies them at the cost of poor's life. She writes:

The interest of a few thousand jotedars may have been more important in the

earlier regime than those of 3.7 million agricultural labourers. But will it be the same even now? Samanta? Even now? . . . What's the meaning of such an attitude on the part of this government? . . . is it government's plan to let all those who are turbulent to die fighting, get involved in rioting to be caught by the police and get framed in criminal cases so that the jotedar can rule meerily? (*Bashai Tudu* 144)

This quotation shows, the government that was formed constitutionally with great aspirations in Independent India, is completely hijacked by the rich jotedars and ignore the poor labourers who equally struggle with the freedom fighters against the British colonizers. The rich jotedars enjoyed supreme position in colonial period and after independence too, they enjoy the fruit of liberty. The position of these rich jotedars in independent India is remained equal. They become a part of the ruling government. In *Paraja* Mohanty presents pre-independent position of the landlord like the Sahukars Ramachandra Bisoi. He enjoyed full power of domination and established himself at the center. He exploited subalterns like Sukru Jani physically and economically. He controlled the governing body by the power of money and made them work in his own favor. On other hand, the downtrodden and the tribal faced exploitation and physical tortured at the hand of these lords. They had neither self existence nor socially treated as human being. Sukru Jani and his sons Tikra and Mandia were treated by the Sahukar worse than the animal. Being bonded laborers their life completely contingent to the Sahukar. They are bitterly torture and remain suppressed. The social condition created by the Sahukar never allows them to become a part of the center. They lived in the marginal situation.

In post-colonial India, though the situation outwardly change as it is the period in which the domination of the white colonizers extinct, but it gives birth to new colonization or the power of domination to the native mainstream colonizers like feudal or the jamindar. They transform themselves from the old feudal to the new capitalist or the ministers. Mahasweta Devi reflects this new colonial condition of the post-colonial India in *Bashai Tudu*.

The feudal lords like Pratap Goldar, Rameshwaran Bhuinya, Surja Sau, Habib Khan and Irfan Mollah, Jagat Babu etc. from different villages of West Bengal exploit the landless tribal as well as other subaltern labourers in post-colonial India. They change their skin and transform themselves into capitalistic power a part of government. Mahasweta Devi reflects, Rameshwaran Bhuinya besides a jotedar also runs rice mill. Surja Sau is an owner of Kerosene at controlled price. He also runs buses by the name of Ma Phullara Bus Service. Except these, Jagat Babu, jotedar of Kadamkhuinya, is an MLA who uses government machinery to exploit the subaltern. This new position of the traditional feudal or jotedars in Independent India endowment them more power. They occupy the position of new colonizers, who move the economic and administrative system of post-colonial India according to their own interest. Thus the condition of center-margin binarism that was produced by the British colonizers remains unchanged in post-colonial India. The independent India that was born as a new nation in 1947 with a promise of equal liberty for all its inhabitants proves only utopia which dreamt subaltern for golden age. On the contrary, the post-colonial period prove golden age or the era of liberty as well as prosperity for the bloodsucker jotedars who used to exploit subaltern in colonial period and in post-colonial period too they remain a source of maltreatment for the subaltern. The subaltern feel no revolutionize transformation in their precarious condition. They were at the margin in colonial period and face marginalization in post-colonial India too. Though, the subaltern struggled equally with the national leaders for the freedom of the country, but their position in Indian federal has been use and throw. Their involvement in Indian politics, social justice and economy is also lemmatized by the national leaders of the post-colonial India. About this position of subalterns Partha Chatterje in *Mapping Subaltern Studies* examines the history of national struggle against colonialism found two fold policies of the leaders of the mainstream society who prevent subalterns to share pleasant of independence. He writes such as:

Nationals leadership sought to mobilize the peasantry as an anti-colonial force in its project of establishing a nation-state, it was ever distrustful of the consequences of agitational polices among the peasants, suspicious of their supposed ignorance and backward consciousness, careful to keep their participation limited to the forms of bourgeois representative politics in which peasants would be regarded as a part of the nation bout distanced from the institutions of the state . . . the unity remain fragmented and fraught with tension. (10)

In this way, the meaning of the independence for the subalterns in 'shifting paradigms of socio-cultural terrains' of post-colonial India is not more than a transformation of power from white colonizers to the native colonizers. The Native Indian colonizers only changed their skin from old feudal to the modern capitalistic or the ministers. The government that has a natural duty to preserves the constitutional rights of the subalterns " never violate the fundamental right of a small peasant to be victimized by his jotedar or his moneylender" (*Bashai Tudu* 87). This unchanged colonial condition of the tribal and other subaltern in post-colonial India forced them to stand against the system that exploit them and prohibit enjoying the boon of liberty. Both selected novels come to an end with equal purpose i.e. revolt against the oppressive mentality of the local colonial forces. Sukru Jani in *Paraja* committed Sahukar Ramachandra Bisoï's murder and liberated himself from his bonded slavery. On other hand Bashai Tudu gathers hundreds of the Santal under his leadership with primitive weapons. He stands against the new colonizers like jotedars ( Pratap Goldar, Rameshwaran Bhuinya, Surja Sau, Habib Khan and Irfan Mollah, Jagat Babu etc.) of independent India and killed them. Revolt of Sukru Jani and Bashai Tudu is a symbolic reaction of the tribal against the centre-margin mentality of the privilege classes, which Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Devi reflect in their mostly novels. Both novelists depict ceaseless exploitation of the subalterns from colonial to post-colonial India and emphasis on the



need of the eradication of the centre-margin binarism from this shifting paradigm of socio-cultural terrains which enlarge the gap between subaltern and the elite class.

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