

**MAHASWETA DEVI AND BAMA: VOICES AGAINST  
PATRIARCHY AND SOCIETY- A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

**A Thesis Submitted to Kuvempu University for the Award of  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis entitled **Mahasweta Devi and Bama: Voices Against Patriarchy and Society– A Comparative Study** submitted to Kuvempu University, Shivamogga District, Karnataka, for the fulfillment of the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English is a record of original and independent research work done by me during 2011 – 2018 under the supervision and guidance of **Dr. Nagya Naik B.H.**, Professor, Department of P.G. Studies and Research in English, Kuvempu University, and it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any Degree, Diploma, Fellowship or other similar title to any candidate of this University or any other University.



**Mahesh Naik S**

**Place:** Shivamogga


**Date:** 05.03.2018

## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis, entitled **Mahasweta Devi and Bama: Voices Against Patriarchy and Society– A Comparative Study** is a record of original research work done by **Mahesh Naik S** at the Department of P.G. Studies and Research in English, Kuvempu University, Shivamogga District, Karnataka, as a Part-time Research Scholar during the period of study 2011 – 2018 under my guidance and supervision for the fulfillment of the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English. I further certify that this research work has not previously formed the basis for the award of any Degree, Diploma, Fellowship or other similar title to any candidate of this University or any other University.

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my father, mother, wife and sons with respect, gratitude and love.

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis looks into the social and patriarchal issues in the selected works of Mahasweta Devi and Bama. The major issues discussed in this thesis are related to two marginalized communities– tribals, dalits, and women. The study, regarding patriarchy, has considered tribal, Dalit, Brahmin, employed, rural, urban, poor and rich women from the texts of the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi and the Tamil Dalit writer Bama for analysis. In this process the research has explored how these women are oppressed and exploited by men who appear in different forms like husband, employer and official. The study has also tried to record different reactions of these women to their oppression, subjugation, humiliation and discrimination.

The present society is acting in the twenty first century, and is being considered as modern society. Modern society gives more prominence to secular culture than to religion and practices based on religion. The decline of social order based on caste and the rise of scientific, rationalist way of looking at the world are also treated as prominent features of modern society. But its behaviour, in many respects, still reflects the features of traditional society. Though the world is moving ahead scientifically and technically, many of the traditional customs and values regarding caste, class, ill-treatment of women by men, oppressive attitude of the rich over the poor, of the powerful over the powerless, and of the high caste over the lower caste are still functioning strongly in this society.

Regarding society the research has taken both men and women from tribal and Dalit communities which appear in the works of these two writers. The thesis has recorded the pain, torture, agony and tension these marginalized undergo due to unjust

and inhuman treatment by the landlords, upper caste people, government officials, religious heads, etc.

This thesis is relevant to the field of comparative study for two reasons: first, it compares the works of two different writers, in the sense they hail from different backgrounds— social, cultural, economic and linguistic. Second, it compares the lives of two different victimized communities— tribal and Dalit. The study also finds some relevance to subaltern studies as the subject it examines includes tribals and Dalits. A feminist angle cannot be denied as the thesis analyses patriarchal oppression in the works. So the study gives new dimensions to the reading of the texts of the writers.

Studies have been made on comparing two writers who write about their own people. Though the people the writers write about are different, each writer belongs to the community he/she writes about. The present study analyses the works of Mahasweta Devi who is a non-tribal and writes about tribals and untouchables, and the works of Bama who is a Dalit and writes about Dalits. These kinds of study which compare two writers of whom one writes about other people and the other about her own people are very rare. In order to fill the research lacuna the present study has been conducted with following objectives to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the domain of comparative studies.

The research critically investigates the challenges that exist in the lives of tribals and Dalits who have to live and transact with different kinds of people as well as with their own groups. Besides this the study also looks into the possibilities of the ways through which literary works can be used as a medium for giving voice to tribals and



Dalits. The research compares the differences and similarities of the issues that the two writers deal with in their works regarding tribals, Dalits, and women.

The first chapter gives the meaning and role of patriarchy in Indian context and explains in brief how woman has been dominated by man in our society. The chapter also focuses on the basic tenets of Hindu society giving importance on Caste System in India through different periods. Introduction to the selected works of both writers has also been provided in this chapter. The second chapter offers important details about the geographical, cultural, familial and literary backgrounds of both writers. The chapter finds that irrespective of their huge differences they have striking similarities in their concern and responsibility towards the downtrodden. The third chapter provides the complexities of tribal and Dalit societies. The chapter analyses the societal, cultural, economical, and political factors of tribal and Dalit communities. The fourth chapter focuses on women as victims of patriarchy giving reference to Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* and *Five Plays*, and Bama's *Sangati*. The fifth chapter focuses on tribals and Dalits as victims of society analyzing Mahasweta Devi's *Five Plays* and *Bitter Soil*, and Bama's *Karukku* and *Vanmam*. The sixth chapter provides the conclusion and findings of the research.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction: Patriarchy and Society

#### 1.1. Introduction

##### A. Patriarchy

Women have been treated as 'objects' by the male-dominated society in India and elsewhere. However, there is no uniform pattern of social, cultural and economic distinctions between men and women. In contemporary India, gender-based consciousness has its origin in emergence of the middle classes and their problems. Patriarchy is very strong in India despite several movements for the upliftment of women launched by women's organizations during the pre-and the post-independence periods.

Leaders of the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj were concerned with issues like *sati*, remarriage, divorce, female education, purdah system, polygamy, and dowry. Justice Ranade criticised child marriages, polygyny, restrictions on remarriage of widows, and non-access to education. Raja Ram Mohan Roy played an important role in getting the *sati* system abolished. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Maharishi Karve pleaded for remarriage of widows. Gandhiji took interest in collective mobilisation of women to fight for political freedom as well as for their social and political rights.

The declaring of 1975-85 decade as the International Women's decade also gave impetus to women's movements for removing the notion of inferiority of women and giving them a sense of identity. The Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) established by the Government of India in 1953, also promotes and strengthens voluntary efforts for the welfare of women.

Women are treated as inferior in their own families by parents-in-law and even by their husbands. They are stationed at the receiving end. This is generally true of families belonging to all castes and classes, but it is more often found among those groups who are still under the influence of feudalism or have feudalistic lifestyles and values. Even, the neo-rich in the countryside have put restrictions on women's higher education, migration and jobs. The fact is that women have been made dependent by men and by the social milieu they have created for them.

Howsoever high the status of women might have been raised under the law, in practice they continue to suffer from discrimination, harassment and humiliation. They are not taken seriously in obtaining opinions, not treated as equals to men, and not given due respect. As Lois Tyson writes, "*Traditional gender roles* cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify inequities, which still occur today . . ." (85).

In the relationship between man and woman, it is an individual with a powerful personality who acquires a position of dominance. Generally, it is a man who commands power over a woman, though in a few cases, a woman also might exercise control over a man. In Indian culture, since the very early periods, women as a group have been dominated by men and their status has been low in the family and society. Nobody can deny that ours is a patriarchal society even today. Let us look at the meaning of the term 'patriarchy.'

The word “Patriarchy” literally means the rule of father or the ‘patriarch’ and originally it was used to describe specific type of ‘male-dominant’ family. However recently it is used more generally to refer to the dominance of male and to the power relationship by which woman is kept subordinate in number of ways.

According to standard sociological theory, patriarchy is the result of sociological constructions that are passed down from generation to generation. These constructions are most pronounced in societies with traditional cultures and less economic development. The patriarchal nature of ancient Indian society has lead to very different expectations for the behaviour of women than that of men.

The belief that men are superior to women has been used, feminists have observed, to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power, in other words, to keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political, and social power. That is, the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically produced.

## **B. Society**

Structuring of society on the basis of different social status of various groups is a common feature of human societies. But the traditional pattern of social stratification in India has certain characteristics which are rather unique. To make a broad division of Indian society, it can be classified as traditional society and modern society. Traditional society lays emphasis on religion (and magic) in behavioural norms and values, implying

continuity (deep links) with a real or imagined past. It widely accepts rituals, sacrifices and holy feasts. Broadly speaking, traditional society is described as one in which:

- Individual's status is determined by his birth and he does not strive for social mobility.
- Individual's behaviour is governed by customs, traditions, norms and values having deep links with the past. The social practices of people vary only slightly from generation to generation.
- Social organization (stable pattern of social relationships of individuals and sub-groups within a society that provides regularity and predictability in social interaction) is based on hierarchy.
- Kinship relations predominate in interaction and individual identifies himself with primary groups.
- Individual is given more importance in social relations than what his position actually warrants.
- People are conservative.
- Economy is simple, i.e., tool economy (and not machine economy) prevails and is conspicuous and economic productivity above subsistence level is relatively low.
- Mythical thought (and not logical reasoning) predominates in society.

Modern society is substantial break with traditional society. It focuses on science and reason. The distinctive characteristics of modern society (which also distinguish it from traditional society) are:

- It gives more prominence to secular culture than to religion.

- It declines feudal economy (getting services by the owner of land) and extensive ownership of private property, and accumulation of capital on a long term basis.
- The dominance of secular political authority over state and marginalization of religious influence from state/political matters.
- The decline of social order based on caste, the emergence of new classes, and changed relations between men and women.
- The rise of scientific, rationalist way of looking at the world.

Thus, while the traditional society is characterized by ritual, custom, collectivity, community ownership, status quo and continuity and simple division of labour, the modern society is characterized by rise of science, emphasis on reason and rationality, belief in progress, viewing government and the state as essential in bringing about progress, emphasis on economic development and complex division of labour, perceiving human-being as capable of acquiring great control over nature and environment.

The study aims at finding whether the ‘traditional outlook’ on caste and gender is changed in the modern society.

## **1.2. Argument of the Study**

The study argues that through their works Mahasweta Devi and Bama try to render voice to the voiceless or if the marginalized have some voice, they try to put some strength to that voice so that it can be heard to the concerned authority and the mainstream. Both writers explore the issues—social, economical, political, religious and cultural—related to the marginalized.

While Mahasweta Devi focuses on the plight of tribals, Bama depicts the ‘nailed’ condition of Dalits. The two writers—though they belong to different regions, cultures, social, economic and educational backgrounds—share similar sense of responsibility towards the oppressed. The suffering, endurance, strategy, struggle and protest of the voiceless are present in their works. They are also comparable with reference to their ‘harsh’ use of language in their works. Issues related to the oppressed and the oppressor are unfolded in their works, despite the fact that the victims are different.

Genre-wise these writers’ works strike a similarity. Works of these writers which seem like novels are not novels in traditional sense of the term. They don’t have a ‘plot’ or ‘climax.’

### **1.3. Approach**

The approach to study Mahasweta Devi and Bama’s works is to analyze how the two writers present a literary commentary on the discrimination, negligence, exploitation inequality, injustice, torture heaped on tribals and Dalits respectively. The researcher uses an approach that is sociological in unfolding the various issues in the selected texts. The study examines texts in the societal, cultural and economical context in which they are written and received. In the case of Mahasweta Devi, the study examines the representation of such societal elements (tribal) within the texts itself. But it examines her society (Dalit society) to understand the texts regarding Bama. Using the two writers’ works, the researcher investigates how the two communities suffer, tolerate and rebel because of the various social, religious, economical and political reasons. Their (tribals and Dalits) low position—social, political, religious and economic—has burdened them



with the atrocities committed against them. The researcher strongly agrees with B. R. Ambedkar's view that:

. . . the system of caste and the system of untouchability form really the steel frame of Hindu society. This division cannot easily be wiped out for the simple reason that it is not based on rational, economic or racial grounds. On the other hand, the chances are that untouchability will endure far longer into the future than the optimist reformer is likely to admit on account of the fact that it is based on religious dogma. What makes it so difficult, to break the system of untouchability is the religious sanction which it has behind it. (Rodrigues 98)

Using the two writers' works, the researcher investigates how tribals and Dalits are made to suffer even after seven decades of independence and constitutional protection to all. The researcher looks into the reasons that have made the tribals and the Dalits separated from the mainstream which enjoys the 'freedom' and why the marginalized are unable to come to the centre which is their rightful place. The researcher seeks the 'forces' that try to force back these marginalized further to the margin.

The writers' works describe the lives of tribals mainly—in the works of Mahasweta Devi—and Dalits—in the works of Bama—caught in struggles of survival, equality and justice.

Mahasweta Devi's fiction portrays vividly the lives of tribals. The study also considers her works which tell about the patriarchal exploitation of non-tribal women for examination. She depicts, in her works, the pitiable condition of tribals and women whether poor or affluent, and whether low class or high class. Her works also bring out

the hidden anger which bursts out after a prolonged suffering of these marginalized. The landlords, money lenders, religious heads and the police's inhuman faces are also unveiled in her works. The cruel and shameless attitude and behaviour of patriarchy are strongly satirized and condemned in her works. Her fictional depiction subtly conveys the fact that women, irrespective of their class, social, financial and cultural conditions are subjected to various types of oppression and exploitation in the web of patriarchal system.

Bama, in her works, depicts horrible truths about castism both outside and inside Christianity. The fact that places like church, convents and Christian schools still foster anti-Dalit notions is described realistically in her works. Here also, like in the works of Mahasweta Devi, these subaltern are victimized under a dominant anti-dalit attitude. It could certainly be argued that Bama equips herself with education, awareness and boldness, in the sense that she becomes conscious of the unjust and inhuman treatment of Dalits wherever she goes and makes her will protest against this. Being a Dalit she knows very well what a Dalit mean in the view of non-Dalits. Her works depict very convincingly the effort of Dalits to come out of 'subhuman' treatment of them by caste Hindus by becoming Christians is in vain. She also throws light on Dalit women who are doubly victimized as Dalit and women. Therefore, the two writers exhibit genuine concern about the unprivileged and it seems they try to teach them how to voice their grievances and protest so that their voice be heard.

#### **1.4. Questions of the Study**

The present study interrogates how far Mahasweta Devi's works are similar or different from Bama's works and in what ways both writers' works can be used to explore how the issues related to the marginalized are dealt with, though Mahasweta Devi (being a non-tribal) brings in her works both tribal and non-tribal characters whereas Bama (being a Dalit) talks exclusively about dalit issues?

Other sub-questions include:

- Do Devi and Bama explore the same issues regarding the oppressed?
- How do the two writers depict women as subaltern?

#### **1.5. Aims of the Study**

This study aims at critically examining the relevant sociological and patriarchal issues regarding tribals, Dalits and women of both communities with reference to Mahasweta Devi and Bama's works. It also aims at identifying the challenges that exist for tribals and Dalits living within non-tribal and non-Dalit groups. In addition, the study aims at exploring the ways through which literary works can be used as a medium for creating awareness among tribals and Dalits, arriving at some solutions for their problems, and bringing a positive change in the non-tribal and the non-Dalits and drawing attention of the concerned towards the issues of the oppressed. Further, the thesis attempts to investigate the challenges that both communities face in resisting the influence of the exploiters and how they overcome these challenges.

### **1.6. Significance of the Study**

The study becomes significant and is meaningful in order to draw a comparison between the works of Mahasweta Devi, a Bengali writer and Bama, a Tamil writer in terms of life and struggle of tribals and Dalits. It also depicts the plight women undergo due to male exploitation. It helps to show that, in spite of their difference in terms of their region, custom, culture, social and economical backgrounds and the language they use for their writing, they share a common responsibility towards the unprivileged and downtrodden.

The study emanates from the need to contribute to critical studies that look for the connection of literary writings by writers who try to give a voice for the marginalized though he/she is not one among them and who write and register a protest for the people being one among them.

### **1.7. Relevance of the Study**

This thesis is relevant to the field of comparative study for two reasons: first, it compares the writing of two different writers, in the sense they hail from different backgrounds-social, cultural, economic and linguistic. Second, it compares the lives of two different victimized communities-tribal and Dalit. The study also finds some relevance to subaltern studies as the subject it examines include tribals and Dalits. A feminist angle cannot be denied as the thesis analyses patriarchal oppression in the works. So the study gives new dimensions to the reading of the texts of the writers.

The study demonstrates how Mahasweta Devi and Bama are out with dedication and determination for bringing justice, equality and a meaning to the lives of the

marginalized. In the two writers' works, one can find the hard struggle, tolerance, frustration, strategy, perseverance, food habits, beliefs and an unwavering will power of the oppressed to lead life without giving up.

### **1.8. Limitation of the Study**

This study is limited to Mahasweta Devi's collection of short stories, *Breast Stories* (1998), *Bitter Soil* (1998), and her collection of short plays, *Five Plays* (1997). The subject of these works is compared to the subject of Bama's *Karukku* (2000), *Sangati* (2005), and *Vanmam* (2008). These works share common perspective on the condition and treatment of tribals and Dalits.

### **1.9. Methodology**

This thesis adopts literary analysis with special focus on textual analysis and comparative studies. This research employs feminist and Marxist theories that assist in understanding the authors their texts and their issues. While Devi's writings stem from her acquaintance with tribal issues and her living with them, Bama's works stem from her own personal experiences of the life in her community and her interactions with the people of high community.

### **1.10. Literary Theory**

Though Mahasweta Devi and Bama have never called themselves feminists, feminist theory can be critically applied to their works. In this sense, the thesis examines how these writers try to uncover the ideology of patriarchal society in their works. The study investigates whether the texts naturalize the oppression of women through its

stereotypical representation of women as vulnerable, seductress, obstacle, sexual object of the male desire, a procreating device and so on. The thesis also looks into the fact that the woman is typecast as “Mother Nature,” thus reducing her to the perpetually giving, all-forgiving nature that never demands anything, is willing to suffer anything. As feminist criticism is also political in its scope, the study searches for the links between the economic conditions, work-place conditions and political hegemony that influence, inform and create gender oppression, inequalities and exploitative mechanisms against the women.

The study also explores the works from a Marxist point of view. The oppressed classes believe in the order of inequality as “natural” or “preordained,” and do not even recognize that they are oppressed. The thesis assumes significance in interrogating how this ideology is at work in the works of the writers. The study finds various instances where attempts have been made to ‘colonize’ the ‘consciousness’ of the marginalized by the mainstream in the writers’ works. The mainstream convince the marginalized to see their situation the way the mainstream wants them to see it, to convince them that they are mentally, spiritually, culturally and socio-economically inferior to them and their lot will be improved under their “guidance” and “protection.”

The study underscores the significance of understanding communities and groups which have been perceived as the ‘other’ by the mainstream cultures. The study documents the subaltern existence, the impact of various historical events on their individual and collective life and their agency in transforming their conditions. Antonio Gramsci’s idea that the hegemony of the ruling/dominant class is maintained through coercion and consent is also taken into consideration for the study to investigate how the

writers' works deal with it. The works show the state, society and church as coercive apparatuses. It is interesting to study how long the ruled (here tribals, Dalits and women) must be made to accept things as they are, i.e., accept and 'consent' to oppression of their own. Louis Althusser also shares this idea when he says that power is also maintained through the actual 'consent' of the subjects. The apparatuses like the political groups, the media, the education system, the political groups, the church and art instill a set of ideas and convince the subjects that they have chosen.

## **1.11. Women in different periods of History**

### **1.11.1. Women in Ancient India**

According to Ram Ahuja, there are two schools of thought regarding the status of women in ancient India. One school has described women as "the equals of men" while the other school holds that women were held not only in disrespect but even in positive hatred. Both schools refer to several passages from religious literature to prove their point. Manu has said: "Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes, but where they are not unhappy, the family ever prospers." He has also said: "Where women are honoured, the gods are pleased but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields any reward" (qtd. in Ahuja, *Social System* 91). These opinions show the honour enjoyed by women in this age. But Manu has also wanted men to consider women as things of possession and the way Draupadi was pawned by Yudhistira in the game of dice undoubtedly go to prove that in the early stages of civilization, women were regarded no better than chattels and slaves. Women were held to be weak-minded and unworthy of being trusted. They were regarded as means of satisfying the physical

desires of men, to serve them and to secure them progeny. In the Ramayana, it is said: “The faces of women are like flowers; their words are like the drops of honey but their hearts are like sharp razor; the interior of them no one can know” (qtd. in Ahuja, *Social System* 91). This again emphasizes the negative opinion formed about women at that time.

### **1.11.2. Women in the Vedic Period**

The social status of women in the Vedic period can be ascertained from the extent of freedom they enjoyed or the restrictions imposed on them. Women never observed purdah in the Vedic period. They enjoyed freedom in selecting their mates. They could educate themselves. Widows were permitted to remarry. Divorce was, however, not permissible to them. But then it was not permissible to men either. In the household, they enjoyed complete freedom and were treated as *Ardhanginis* (better halves). In the Mahabharata, it was mentioned: “The sweet-speeched wives are their husband’s friends on the occasion of joy; they are as their (husband’s) fathers on occasions of religious acts; and they are as mothers in hours of illness and woe” (qtd. in Ahuja, *Social System* 92). In domestic life, women used to be supreme. Thus, in the social field, woman’s position was not one of complete disability but one dictated by justice and fairness.

In the economic field also, women enjoyed freedom. They did not serve and earn wages only because it was not necessary for them. Home was the place of production. Spinning and weaving of clothes was done at home. Women helped their husbands in agricultural pursuits also. Some women were engaged in the teaching work too.



In inheriting property, women's rights were limited. As a daughter, though a woman had no share in her father's property, yet each unmarried daughter was entitled to one-fourth share of patrimony received by her brothers. Mother's property, after her death, was equally divided among sons and unmarried daughters. Married daughters, however, received only a token of respect. *Stridhan* was inherited only by unmarried daughters. As a wife, a woman had no direct share in her husband's property. However, a forsaken wife was entitled to one-third of her husband's wealth. If a wife was poor, her husband had to provide for her maintenance. But if the property was divided during the lifetime of husband, his wife was to get an equal share with her sons. As a widow, a woman was supposed to lead an ascetic life and had no share in her husband's property. As a widowed mother, however, she had some rights. All this reveals that though there was a general prejudice against allowing women to hold property, yet some protection was given to them as daughters and wives.

The political status of women depends on the political situation and the existing political system in the country. Since the political system in ancient India was based on monarchy, there were no legislatures, political parties, diplomatic relations, and international conferences. In such a situation, the question of giving voting right or freedom for contesting elections and holding political posts to women did not arise. Women were not permitted entry in the *sabhas* (assemblies) because these places besides being used for taking political decisions, were also used for gambling, drinking and such other purposes.

In the religious field, wife enjoyed full rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with her husband. In fact, the performance of religious ceremonies

was considered invalid without wife joining her husband as his full partner. Women even participated actively in religious discourses. The participation of Gargi Vachaknavi (daughter of Sage Vachaknu and also known as Brahmavadini) along with many male learned exponents and representatives of the different schools of philosophy in the conference—described as the conference of its kind in the world—convened by the philosopher king Janaka of Videha for codifying the scientific religious doctrines and practices, indicates the high religious status of women in ancient India. Maitreyi (one of two wives of the Vedic Sage Yajnavalkya) is another example of such woman philosopher of the times. Jaimini's *Purva-Mimansa* has been interpreted by Sabara Swami (an ancient Indian philosopher and commentator on Jaimini's *Purva-Mimansa*) as dealing with the equal rights of men and women to the performance of the highest religious ceremonies. Hemadri (an ancient scholar) refers to educated *kumaris* (unmarried girls) as *vidushis* who should be married to equally learned husbands called *manishis* (qtd. in Ahuja, *Social System* 93).

It may, thus, be concluded that in Vedic India, the status of women was not low. They had ample rights in the social and the religious fields and limited rights in the economic and the political fields. They were not treated as inferior or subordinate but equal to men.

### **1.11.3. Women in the Buddhist Period**

The origin of Buddhism has been treated as reaction to Hinduism. Many unjustifiable social rigours, like introducing the practice of pre-puberty marriages and denying right to education, right to mate selection, right to participate in the religious

discourses, etc., were imposed on women during the periods of Brahmanas and Puranas. In the Buddhist period, the status of women improved a little, though there was no tremendous change. In the religious field, women came to occupy a distinctly superior place. They had their own *sanghs*, called *Bhikshuni Sangh*, which was guided by the same rules and regulations as those of the monks. The *sangh* opened to them avenues of cultural activities and social service and ample opportunities for public life. In the social field, they had an honoured place according to the traditions of Brahmanical religion. Their political and economic status, however, remained unchanged.

#### **1.11.4. Women in the Medieval Period**

The first invasion of India by the Muslims took place in the eighth century— the period in which Sankracharya lived. The Hindu society was engaged in evolving, under the leadership of Sankracharya. Sankracharya re-emphasized the supremacy of Vedas to counter the spread of Buddhism, and the Vedas had given a status of equality to women. India experienced a second Muslim invasion in the eleventh century when Mohmmad Ghazni conquered India. From this period onwards till the middle of the eighteenth century, when the British authority was established in the country, that is, during nearly 700 years, the breakdown of social institutions, the upsetting of traditional political structures, the vast migration of people, and the economic depression in the country— all these contributed to a general depression of social life, specially among women. The *purdah* system came to be followed to such an extent that rigorous seclusion of women became the rule. The facilities of education totally vanished. However, during the fifteenth century, the situation had undergone some change. Ramanujacharya organized the first Bhakti movement during this period, which introduced new trends in the social

and the religious life of women in India. The *bhaktas* (saints) like Chaitanya, Nanak, Meera, Kabir, Ramdas, Tulsi and Turkaram, stood for the right of women to religious worship. Though their (*bhaktas*) total conception of women's status was not quite free from the then prevailing attitude to womanhood, yet this movement unlocked the gate of religious freedom to women. As a result of this freedom, they secured certain social freedom also. The *purdah* system was abolished. Attending *kathas* and *kirtans* (religious prayers) freed women from the circumscribed domestic life. The 'Grihastashram' emphasized upon in the Bhakti movement, did not permit saints to take to *sanyas* without the consent of wife. This implied giving an important right to women. This (Bhakti) movement had other effect also. Since the time of Manu, women were debarred from education. The saints encouraged women to read religious books and to educate themselves. Thus, the Bhakti movement gave a new life to women. However, since this movement did not bring any change in the economic structure, so women continued to hold low status in the society. Their status later on improved due to the effects of the British rule.

#### **1.11.5. Women in the British Period**

*Sati*, infanticide, slavery, child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage and lack of women's rights were some of the social problems which attracted the attention of the British and social reformers. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the practice of *sati* was confined to Hooghly, Nadia and Burdwan districts of Bengal, Ghazipur of Uttar Pradesh and Shahabad of Bihar. It was also found in other parts of India, but only as a rare phenomenon. In southern India, it was practiced in Ganjam, Masulipatnam and Tanjore districts. In Rajasthan, Punjab and Kashmir, the practice was confined mainly to

women of high castes. In Delhi, Charles Metcalfe stopped the practice. Aligarh and Agra seldom had occurrences of *sati*. In Bengal alone three-fourths of the total occurrences of *sati* occurred in British India. It occurred among all castes, but it was more among the Brahmanas and Rajputs. Among the princely families, the sense of pride and heroism elevated the *sati* into a noble act. But, on the whole, the rite was practiced by women whose husbands belonged to the middle and lower middle classes. The following factors could be attributed to the practice of *sati*: (1) the position of women in the Hindu system, (2) the institution of polygamy, especially among the Kulin Brahmanas. (3) the enforced widowhood and austerity, (4) social convention, (5) the sense of salvation attached to the rite, and (6) antiquity and adoration of the practice.

The British had shown interest in the abolition of *sati* in 1813. The persuasive propaganda techniques failed to prevent the occurrence of the practice. The police also did not prove effective. Raja Ram Mohan Roy took it upon himself to eradicate this social evil. He announced that the rite of *sati* was not a part of the *Shastras*. It was not an integral part of the Hindu religion. A number of religious leaders opposed Ram Mohan Roy's crusade against *sati*. Through the cooperation of the princes, it was virtually stopped in the princely states. But it was not made an illegal act for a long time. Even today, occurrences of *sati* are reported from various parts of the country. And in most of the cases, the police have either reached late or remained ineffective. In Jhunjhunu town of Rajasthan, a huge temple of *sati*—known as Rani *Sati* Mandir—is a place of worship by all castes and communities.

Female infanticide was found mainly among the Rajputs of Benaras, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and in parts of Punjab and Sind and among some Sikhs.

The institution of female infanticide arose due to (1) the deplorable position of women in Hindu society, (2) the dowry system, and (3) the sense of honour and pride. Marriage of a female is considered compulsory. In 1779, infanticide was declared to be murder by the Bengal Regulation XXI. In 1804, this was extended to other parts of India. However, the practice continued for a long time after this regulation. Now the female infanticide exists in another form— abortion, though it is against law.

Child marriage is prevalent even today among the rural people, and among the urban illiterate and poor. The institution of child marriage is also the result of hypergamy, dowry, and notion of virginity and chastity. It has resulted in the problems of over population, poverty, unemployment, ill-health, dependence upon parents, etc. The first legislation was passed in 1860 under which the minimum age for consummation of marriage in the case of girls was raised to ten. In 1891, the age of consent for girls was raised to twelve, and in 1925 to thirteen. In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint Act (Sharda Bill) was passed. Under this Act, which came into being in 1930, the minimum age of marriage for a girl was fixed at fourteen and for a boy at eighteen. According to the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, the minimum age for a bride is fifteen, and for a bridegroom it is eighteen. Luckily the present minimum age for a bride is eighteen, and for a bridegroom it is twenty one as per the Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act 1978. The legislations have not proved effective in this case. Education, economic pressure, and migration to towns and cities from rural areas have certainly contributed to the raising of the age at marriage of both the sexes. However, child marriage persists unchecked. Many a time, even political leaders of repute have enacted child marriages of their wards. No stringent actions are taken for violation of these laws.

Slavery was of two types: (1) domestic, and (2) predial (agricultural). There were also institutions of the *nautch* (dance) girls and prostitutes. The latter was found particularly in the princely states. Predial slavery was found in Bengal, Madras, Assam, Coorg and southern Bombay Presidency. The slaves of this category were insolvent debtors. Some of them were migrants from Rajputana. Even slaves were sold out. There was also the practice of entering a contract by a person to work for a specific period of time either to pay the debt or to “have a fresh one.” Domestic slavery was confined to females. The foreigners also indulged in the purchase of children in a clandestine manner and exported them overseas. Proclamations were made in Bengal, Madras, Bombay, etc., to prevent the institution of slavery. Today, the institution exists in the form of bonded labour. It is known by different names in different states. The British policy of apparent and selective non-interference in social matters encouraged the institution of slavery and other institutions which supported this evil.

Some Women’s organizations like the Banga Mahila Samaj and the Ladies Theosophical Society functioned at local levels to promote modern ideals for women, but the pioneering work was done by those organizations which functioned on a national basis. Of these, five important national organizations were: Bharat Mahila Parishad (started in 1904 with the main aim to struggle for the emancipation of women), Bharat Stri Mahamandal (founded in 1910), Women’s Indian Association (started in 1917 by Annie Besant), National Council of Women in India (founded in 1925 by Lady Aberden and Lady Tata), and All India Women’s Conference (established in 1927 through the efforts of Margaret Cousins and others). Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust was

started after the death of Kasturba Gandhi. These organizations took up issues like women's education, abolition of social evils— such as *purdah* and child marriage.

With the efforts of Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. In 1861, a Widow Marriage Association was formed. The Arya Samaj gave top priority to this programme. The following legislations have enhanced the status of Hindu women in matters of marriage, adoption, employment and inheritance: (1) the Hindu Law of Inheritance (Amendment Act) of 1929, (2) the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937, (3) the Hindu Marriage Disability Removal Act of 1946, (4) the Special Marriage Act of 1954, (5) the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, (6) the Hindu Succession Act and the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956, (7) the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, (8) the Maternity Benefits Act of 1961, (9) the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, and (10) the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1983.

The laws pertaining to employment are: the Factory Act, 1948; the Employees State Insurance Act, 1948; and the Maternity Benefit Acts. The 1948 Factory Act focuses on working hours, equal wages, load to be carried, sanitational facilities, hospitals, and so forth. The Employees State Insurance Act provides five benefits: sickness, maternity, disability, dependent, and medical.

Though these legislative measures have improved women's status to a large extent but (i) the legislation is extremely meager and touches only the fringe of the problem, (ii) it is lopsided, that is, some laws have lower precision and accuracy than the others, (iii) the phrasing of some laws is so loose that they cannot be properly



implemented, (iv) the machinery to implement legislation is costly, inefficient and complicated. It may, therefore, be said that legislation has not been effective to wipe out the hardships suffered by women. Theoretically, women might have been given more freedom but in practice they still suffer from inhuman dignities and unworthy treatment causing shame or loss of respect.

The analysis of the above factors points out the change in the conditions that kept women in situations of inferiority, dependence, and exploitation. Nevertheless, the change was not fully planned and was very slow.

### **1.12. Basic Tenets of Hindu Society**

Focusing on the basic tenets and the normative principles of Hinduism, it may be said that Hinduism believes in equality, *karma* and *rebirth* ideas, *moksha* (salvation) as the ultimate goal of life, toleration as individual character, non-violence as important feature of social life, and the merger of individual soul into the ultimate soul. Broadly speaking, the basic tenets of Hinduism may be classified as:

- *Purusharthas*: Values of Hindu Culture.
- *Ashramas*: Stages of Life in Realising the Ideal of Life.
- *Varnas*: Four-fold Order of Society.

Since the thesis takes tribals, Dalits and women for its study, here the third tenet of Hindu society is described.

Varna order was the division of people into groups on the basis of aptitudes and abilities and vocations. The aptitudes and abilities were classified as those (a) for

scholarship, (b) for administration and defence, (c) for production and distribution, and (d) for unskilled labour. The first group of people came to be called Brahmins; the second group Kshatriyas; third group Vaishyas; and the last group Sudras. According to the belief of the time the Brahmins had the qualities of self restraint, austerity, purity, serenity, forgiveness, simplicity, wisdom and philosophic insight into truth and reality. The Kshatriyas had the qualities of courage, strength, firmness, skillfulness, charitableness and administrative ability. The Vaishyas had the qualities of hard work, intelligence, and quick decision-making. The Sudras lacked abilities and aptitudes. Hence they had to work under other's direction and accept their authority and dominance.

The duties (*dharmas*) of Brahmins were: offering prayers, performing ceremonies and sacrifices, and teaching. The duties of Kshatriyas were: protecting people from external aggression and internal disturbances as well as governing them, punishing the wicked and contributing liberally for nation-building institutions. The duties of Vaishyas were: engaging in agriculture, procuring commodities from others and selling them, rearing cattle and rendering help to the poor and the needy. The duties of Sudras were to do those things which others want them to do. Sudras were not permitted to read *Vedas* or observe Vedic rites or recite *mantras* (incantations).

Thus the foundations of untouchability were laid in ancient times itself. The immigrant Aryans were very different from the non-Aryan dark-skinned people whom they found living in India. The Aryans considered themselves superior and were proud of their race, language and religion. They considered non-Aryans to be non-humans. Thus, the Aryans maintained a distance from the earlier settlers or *dasas*.

### 1.13. Caste System (Practice of Untouchability) at Different Periods

The caste system, as it exists today, has developed through many centuries. Its structure and functioning in ancient period (from 4000 B.C. to 700 A.D. i.e., Vedic, Brahmanical, Maurya and post-Maurya periods) was much different from the medieval (Rajput and Muslim, i.e., 700A.D to 1757 A.D.) and the British periods (i.e., 1757-1947 A.D.).

There are two views pertaining to the prevalence of the caste system in the Vedic period (1500-322 B.C.). One school which consists sociologists like Haug, Kern, Dutt, Apte and Kamble, holds that the caste system had existed and Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were the three caste divisions that the society of *Rig Veda* period clearly recognized. However, Sudra caste did not exist. The other school which comprises Weber and Ghurye maintains that these three were not castes but *varnas* which were not hereditary but flexible. In the Brahmanical period that followed the *Brahmanas* and *Upnishads*, the hierarchical system of four *varnas* had firmly established itself and remained enduring for all times to come. The privileges enjoyed by the Brahmins through the instrumentality of religion enabled them to impose several restrictions. Brahmins and Kshatriyas remained in conflict with each other trying to assert their superiority over the other, but Kshatriyas increased their power over Vaishyas and Sudras. On the issue of social relations among various social groups, caste distinctions became clearer in the *Samhitas* and the *Brahmanas*. In the latter part of the Epic period, priesthood became hereditary and inevitably the Brahmins began to pay attention to the purity of the blood and attaining a position of superiority over others. They prescribed codes of social behaviour and relationships through *Grihsutras* and *Dharmasutras*. It may, therefore, be

said that the starting point of the caste system was the later Vedic Age (800-500 B.C.) and the Epic Age (500-200 B.C.). Since the basis of social stratification was division of labour, in its original form, it was a class system rather than a caste system. The racial factor, the occupational bias, the philosophy of action, and the religious concept of purity and pollution– all contributed to the formation of the caste system.

In the Maurya period (i.e., from 322-184 B.C.), whole of India was politically united for the first time under one head and rule. Political unity led to cultural unity of the country. Kautilya's writings give some idea about the social organization and functioning of the caste system in this period. Kautilya (a Brahmin minister of ruler Chandragupta Maurya) tried to remove various restrictions imposed by the Brahmins on the Sudras by declaring that the royal law would supersede the *dharma* law. The rights and the privileges of Brahmins received a further blow in the days of Ashoka, grandson of Chandragupta Maurya. Ashoka's religious policy was broadly based on toleration and universal brotherhood which did not recognise the caste barriers. The caste system, because of all these measures could not develop as a rigid institution in this period.

In post-Maurya period, a fresh stimulus was provided to the revival of the Brahmanical religion and the development of the caste system. Brahmins gave themselves special privileges in *Manu Smriti* (185 B.C.) and imposed various restrictions on the Sudras. The *Smriti* prescribed severe punishment of Sudras for insulting Brahmins (cutting out tongue, thrusting iron-nail in mouth, pouring hot oil into ears). Thus, equality in law was completely destroyed by such prescriptions and the caste system developed on rigid lines and assumed a new structure. The Gupta period (that followed the Sanga period from 300-500 A.D.) was the period of Hindu renaissance. Brahminism became the

ethnic religion of India in this period and caste system got a further incentive. However, it did not become very rigid. Marriage rules were elastic and examples of inter-marriages and inter-dining were not unknown. Sudras were permitted to become traders, artisans and agriculturists. But untouchability existed in this period more or less in its present form. The untouchables lived outside i.e., main settlements. In post-Gupta period (Harsh Vardhana and other: 606-700 A.D.) also, the caste system continued to have the same structure as it had in the Gupta period. An elaborate account of social religious and economic conditions of India of this period is available in the writings of Chinese scholar Hieun Tsang who visited India in 630 A.D. and remained here for 13 years. He writes that caste ruled the social structure, Brahminism dominated, and persons following unclean occupations (scavengers, butchers, etc.) had to live outside the four walls of the city.

The Medieval period includes the Rajput period (700-1200 A.D.) and the Muslim period (1200-1757 A.D.). In the Rajput period, the cultural life of the Hindus was not very different from the one found in earlier periods. The Indian social system did not change due to political security. Brahmins gave themselves more privileges. The *mathas*, established by Shankaracharya, became the centres of luxurious life. The system of *devdasi* fostered the growth of temple prostitution which led to the growth of the loosening of moral codes. Rajputs' loyalty to their own clans made them indifferent to the larger patriotism of the whole country. New castes and sub-castes came into being which were so circumscribed by vested interests that they had evil repercussions on the social and political life of the country. Consequently, foreign Muslims started attacking India. The foundation of the Muslim empire in India was laid down by Mohamood Gori

in 1175 A.D. which was followed by Mughal attacks. The caste system in the Muslim period (1206-1857 A.D.) became still more rigid because Muslims were not absorbed in the elastic Hindu-fold. Their religion (Islam), being fiercely monotheistic, could not allow any compromise with polytheism. Since Muslims led a religious crusade against India and tried to convert people to Islam, Brahmins assuming upon themselves the responsibility of protecting the Hindus from being proselytized, imposed severe restrictions on Hindus, making caste system a very rigid system. Though some *Bhaktas* (saints) like Ramanuj, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Chaitanya, Tukaram, Tulsidas, Namdev, etc., preached *Bhakti* cult in this period which denounced idolatry and caste, and preached equality of all people, protested against excessive ritualism and domination of the priestly class, yet this cult could not disintegrate the caste system. Brahmins could retain their leadership of Hindus because temples were used not only for religious purposes but also for social, political and cultural activities. Brahmins made caste distinctions more rigorous by declaring that all those Hindus who worked with or for Muslims would be treated as *Malechha*, like Muslims. Thus, castes like *Sunar* (goldsmiths), *Luhar* (blacksmiths), *Nai* (barbers), *Dhobi* (washermen), *Khati* (carpenters) and the like came to be treated as castes of low status.

In early British (or pre-industrial) period, the material development of the country, contact with the outer world, social-economic policies of the government, and some legislative measures taken, brought about a change in our religious doctrines, social practices, and also in the caste structure of the society. The judicial powers of the caste councils were transferred to the civil and the criminal courts. The Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, and the Special Marriage Act

of 1872 also attacked the caste system. The integrity of the caste system got a further blow when through some social measures some of the disabilities of untouchables were removed. However, the British government had taken these measures purely for administrative reasons and not because it wanted to abolish the caste system. Some social movements of social reformers also attacked the caste system. The Brahmo Samaj movement led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy rejected the barriers of caste divisions and stood for universalisation and brotherhood of man. The Prarthana Sabha movement supported by Justice Ranade also devoted its attention to social reform such as inter-caste marriage, interdining and remarriage of widows, etc. The Arya Samaj movement founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Ramakrishna Mission movement raised voice against caste and preached its abolition. The Lingayat movement in South India also preached the giving up of the caste system. However, all these attacks did not remove the rigidity of the caste system in this period (i.e., in the first quarter of the twentieth century) though some structural features of caste were definitely affected.

The industrial phase in the British period started from 1920-25 onwards after the First World War. The processes of industrialization and urbanization (migration of people from villages to cities) affected caste structure to a great extent. Industrial growth provided new sources of livelihood to people and made occupational mobility possible. New transportation facilities also made frequent communication possible, which threw together millions of people of all castes. Taboos against food-sharing started weakening when industrial workers belonging to different castes started living together in the same house, leaving their families behind in villages.

Urbanisation and growth of cities also considerably changed the functioning of the caste system. Not only were commensal inhibitions relaxed but the authority of the Brahmins also came to be questioned. The anonymity, congestion, mobility, secularism and changeability of the city make the operation of the caste virtually impossible. Changes in the rigidities of the caste system were due to the growth of city life. Due to the migration of Brahmins to the towns, the non-Brahmins refused to show same respect to them which they showed before, and inter-caste eating and drinking taboos were also weakened. It may, thus, be said that the structure and the functioning of the caste system and its ritual economic and social aspects were greatly changed in the industrial phase of the British period.

#### **1.14. Caste System (Practice of Untouchability) in Present India**

After the political independence of the country in 1947, besides industrialization and urbanization, other factors which affected the caste system are: merger of various states, enactment of several laws, spread of education, socio-religious reform measures and movements, westernization, growth of modern professions, spatial mobility and the growth of the market economy. Broadly speaking, the following changes in caste functioning may be pointed out in the present times.

- Caste system is not in the process of abolition but is making adequate adjustment with modern changes.
- The religious basis of caste has cramped. Old social practices of imposing restrictions of varied types have dwindled. Caste no longer restricts newly valued individual freedom.



- Caste no longer determines the occupational career of an individual, though his social status continues to be dependent on his caste membership.
- Serious efforts are being made to grant equality to the backward castes/Dalits.
- Inter-caste conflicts are increasing. However, these are more for achieving power than on grounds of ritual status.
- Casteism has increased.
- The dominance of a caste in a village no longer depends upon its ritual status.
- Caste and politics have come to affect each other.
- On the one hand, some caste organizations have strengthened while on the other hand, a large number of castes have lost their group solidarity and a sense of responsibility.

Today, Brahmins may interdine with 'clean' Sudras but not generally with members of the polluting castes. The caste ranking contains an explosive class character. A couple of dozens of castes hold the monopoly of economic resources, political power and available educational and cultural facilities. It will not be possible to abolish caste hierarchy and caste system without adopting basic changes in the economic structure.

The Constitution of India says that: (i) the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on the ground of caste, (equal opportunity to all castes), (ii) no citizen shall, on the ground of caste, be subject to restriction regarding access to or use of shops, restaurants and public wells and tanks (removal of civil disabilities), and (iii) the practice of untouchability is forbidden. Similarly, there are no restrictions on the following of any occupation. Feelings of equality, liberty and fraternity have been promoted which have cut the very roots of caste. A special officer (Commissioner) was appointed in 1951 for

looking after the scheduled castes and the backward classes. In spite of these changes in the last several decades, and particularly in the last two decades, casteism and the evils of caste have not been rooted out. D.N. Majumdar has maintained in one of his books that just as a broken or a poisoned finger is amputated and not the whole hand, similarly untouchability, exploitation of one caste by another, and such other harmful concomitants of the caste system should be done away with and not the whole system.

It is true that the caste system is a stumbling block in attaining the material and spiritual prosperity or in the social and national development. So long this cankerous system holds sway, we cannot achieve our social ideals. Hence, the sooner its death-knell is sounded, the higher our prospects of progress. Yet it is a fact that it is not easy to abolish this system.

### **1.15. Review of Literature**

Several authors and critics have discussed Mahasweta Devi and Bama's fiction in different ways. The researcher, here, provides an overview of the relevant and important literature in the research area in order to identify the gap.

Vandana Gupta writing on women who have been engaged in some or other form of literary activity comments:

The gendered nature of their psycho-sexual contexts along with the extraneous censors placed upon women by family, community, society and publication patriarchy delimits their writings in terms of the choice of subject-matter, language and genre. Their subject matter must conform to the norms of 'social acceptability/appropriateness,' their language must be gendered/feminine,

sanitized and safe, the genre must be in consonance with practical constraints of their social beings/domestic position/space. . . . (14-15)

The researcher shows here that these two writers ‘violate’ this tradition of ‘generic’ curtailment of women’s creativity by touching upon the ‘untouchable’ subject and using the language which is too harsh.

M Umar in his article “Mahasweta Devi’s Victim Consciousness: A Perspective” which appears in the book *Postmodern Indian English Fiction: Some Perspectives*, edited by Abha Shukla Kaushik focuses on the writers who have shown social concern with deep commitment and tries to speak for the oppressed.

While expressing his views on the practice of untouchability in India in the chapter “Untouchability” in *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*, edited by Valerian Rodrigues Ambedkar argues:

Indian history records the attempts of many a Mahatma to uproot untouchability from the Indian soil. They include such great men as Buddha, Ramanuja and the Vaishnava saints of modern times. It would be hazardous to assume that a system which has withstood all this onslaught will collapse. The Hindu looks upon the observance of untouchability as an act of religious merit, and non-observance of it as sin. (98)

The researcher discusses how untouchability, the most evil system that can only be seen in India is still alive even after seven decades of independence.

Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav in the Introduction to *Mahasweta Devi an Anthology of Recent Criticism* explore victimization of tribals as they argue that:

The most common form of victimization in Devi's stories is that of women succumbing to male sexual violence rampant in rural areas. They usually give in without resistance . . . at times they get pregnant . . . and are often sold for money by their own fathers. . . . Prostitution becomes their meager means of livelihood, which perpetuates the brutality routinizes the indignity of their sexual exploitation. However, a few of the tribal women militantly fight back, even at the cost of their own criminalization, contravening the seemingly essentialist interpretation of the tribal woman as a passive subject, resigned to her lot. (20)

The researcher analyses the circumstances and reasons for their exploitation and rebel. The researcher argues that even men after undergoing trauma for a certain period fight back the oppressor in their own way.

Shibu Simon and Sarojini Sudha believe that conditions of women have not been changed considerably though the Constitution grants them many privileges. They point out that:

Though the constitution of India grants equality to women in various fields of life, a large number of women either ill-equipped or, not in a position to propel themselves out of their traditionally unsatisfactory socio-economic conditions. Oppression and atrocities are still rampant. Patriarchy continues to be embedded in the social system in many parts of India denying a majority of women the choice to decide on even how to live. There are infinite variations of the status of

women differing according to the culture, family structure, caste, class etc. There are specificities such as rural women and urban women, middle class and lower class women, Brahmin and Dalit women. . . . (3)

The researcher focuses on tribal and Dalit women and discusses these views in Chapter four. The researcher analyses how women, though belong to different class or caste suffer differently.

Samik Bandyopadhyay in the Introduction to Mahasweta Devi's *Five Plays* quotes Devi who takes the 'system' to task:

After thirty-one 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 for all my writing. (ix)

The writer uses the characters in her works to show her anger and displeasure with the system. The researcher investigates the factors that make the writer so harsh about the system.

Although Article 17 of the Indian Constitution banned untouchability in 1950, Dalits still suffer widespread discrimination and mistreatment. Amitabh Bhatt in "Plight of Dalits in India and Abroad" in *Encyclopaedia of the Plight of Dalits and New Media*, Volume 1 states that:

As a UN member state, India is bound to the provisions in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The articles I & II of UDHR state that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” and that the human rights protected in the UDHR belong to everyone “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” India is violating its obligations under the UDHR as it has failed to protect Dalits against discrimination, degradation and violence.

(34)

It can be argued that both writers highlight throughout their works how tribals and Dalits are denied their rights as citizens of India and are crushed down.

Darshana Trivedi, in his article, “Literature of Their Own: Dalit Literary theory in Indian Context” explores the social commitment exhibited by Dalit Literature and the language used to express their (Dalit writers) experiences. He quotes Gangadhar Pantwane, a professor of Marathi who says:

To me, dalit is not a caste  
 He is a man exploited by  
 the social and economic  
 traditions of this country. (2)

The researcher looks into the factors, both social and economic, which make Dalits ‘weak’ and ‘poor’ so that they become easy targets of exploitation.

Raj Kumar focuses on the plight of Dalit women in his *Dalit Personal Narratives Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. He discusses victimization of women in these words:

And being women, they become the victims of the patriarchal social order in their families and outside. The social scientists studying the conditions of Dalit women believe that they are alienated at three levels— due to their caste, class and gender positions. While the upper caste men sexually exploit them in their workplaces, at home they are beaten up by their own men. Thus, violence against Dalit women is rampant. (217)

The researcher throws light on the various levels of suffering and exploitation tribal and Dalit women as well as non-Dalit women undergo in Chapter four.

In the Introduction to *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* Mulk Raj Anand expresses hope and a desire to see Dalits who could live without pain and discrimination. He hopes that, “Let them be judged from the impact of their anguish, their aspiration to breath freely the air, without praying to be allowed to crawl on earth on which they are born. . . . Let them lift their heads- up to the Sun, the moon and the stars, looking for light” (xvi).

The thesis makes an honest attempt to show that how these two writers tread the paths of thorns to make the tribals and Dalits raise their voice against the injustice and humiliation they come across in their lives.

Commenting on the trials and tribulations of women, in “Bama’s *Sangati*,” R. Srinivasan observes, “Bama portrays woman characters as more onerous than men. In this novel they find no time to realize themselves, and often suppress their desires for the welfare of their family, children and their monstrous husbands” (175). Savita Goel in her research paper writes about tribal women in the selected works of Mahasweta Devi. In her paper she tells, “Mahasweta insinuates that the sexual harassment of women

perpetrates because of the corrupt police. A prostitute, Kalavati, underwent an abortion and fell ill but a drunk customer raped her and she died. A police case was filed but the customer bribed the police and escaped scot-free” (204). The thesis unfolds many such ghastly incidents in which women are inhumanly treated without caring that women too have self respect and can feel pain.

In an interview to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Mahasweta Devi says, “By just making them nonexistent, they do not exist for her, all this male stuff, they are trying to do this, by mass raping, by gangraping also you just cannot destroy a woman’s spirit, she does not recognize their existence, they are nonexistent for her” ( *Chotti Munda* xvi-xvii). The researcher makes an attempt to show Mahasweta Devi’s this anger pervading in all her works not only against patriarchy, but also against government, moneylenders and landlords and such agencies of exploitation and oppression.

Bama says about her experience of practice of untouchability in India in an interview to Jaydeep Sarangi published in the online journal *Muse India* Vol. 45. She opines, “My experiences here are dehumanizing– wherever I go, whatever I do and however I try, I cannot escape from the caste tentacles. Each caste tries to dominate and suppress the other below it. Not only from womb to tomb, but even after one’s death caste follows and segregate– even in the graves.” The researcher makes a detailed study of how the works of the writer disclose the treatment given to Dalits.



## 1.16. Introduction to the Primary Sources

Mahasweta Devi has authored a number of texts. Keeping in view the relevance of the title of the thesis the following three works have been considered for the study. Bama's three popular works have been selected for the analysis.

### 1.16.1. Mahasweta Devi's Works

**1.16.1.1. *Five Plays* (1997):** As the title itself suggests this book is a collection of five plays—"Mother of 1084," "Aajir," "Urvashi and Johnny," "Bayen," and "Water" translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay. This collection unravels the varied forms of oppression and exploitation of the marginalized. The first story "Mother of 1084" is about Sujata Chatterjee and Brati, her son. It deals with issues like patriarchy and naxalism. This play revolves around the Naxalite movement which was formed in the 1960s by a group of Indian communists that supported Maoist ideology. It was gaining strength, especially among students. Brati is one of such students who gets killed by the state for his ideology. It is a reconstruction of the events that took place during the ruthless suppression of the Naxalite movement and its aftermaths. The second story "Aajir" is about a slave called Paatan. It gives heart-rending picture of slavery which is hereditary. The slavery is not of an individual, but of the entire family. The protagonist has to suffer the yoke of slavery for the blunder of his ancestors who sold themselves. The bond of slavery prohibits him to love and marry. Paatan discovers it too late that the bond has long turned to dust. The third one "Urvashi and Johnny" is written in the backdrop of the Emergency. It delineates the two orphans' love story. They, in their hope to bring happiness to the world, lose their own happiness. The complexities of the urban life lived on the streets of Calcutta are explained in detail. The play captures the pain,

shock, helplessness and utter disappointment the Emergency had brought to the people's sensibility in India. It is a pathetic story of people who neither have roof nor root. A mother's agony is portrayed vividly in the fourth play "Bayen." The protagonist Chandidasi is a professional gravedigger. Burying dead children and guarding the graves during night is her profession which she performs with utmost devotion. She has a son called Bhagirath. People presume that she has a stink eye. Some superstitious beliefs of the villagers make her mark as a witch and she is isolated from her family and society. Patriarchal system, with the help of superstition, is shown as an exploiting agency. "Water" is about an untouchable water diviner as well as a landless farmer Maghai who divines water sources for Santosh Babu, a Brahmin but has no water to drink for himself, his family and his community. The village head Santosh is a local landowner and moneylender. He acts as a spokesperson of the poor rural farming community. He denies them many things including water. He raises several objections traditionally justifying the denial of water to the Domes. The dam built by the Domes with the help of Jiten, the teacher is destroyed by Santosh with the intervention of the police. Maghai dies and his wife, son and Jiten are arrested.

**1.16.1.2. *Bitter Soil* (1998):** The four stories in the book are translated by Ipsita Chanda. The stories "Little Ones," "Seeds," "The Witch," and "Salt" hold a mirror to caste and class oppression and exploitation in India. Exploitation and resistance are the themes of the stories. "Little Ones" discusses the problems of food and exploitation the tribals face and the consequences. The story describes what malnutrition and starvation can do to the human body. Their bodies become skinny and shorter in height due to lack of nutrition. Their undersized physique makes them look like kids. The government officials label the

Aagaria tribe as *junglee* and uncivilized human beings with no honesty. The government and its officials' insensitivity towards tribal people is exposed in the story. "Seeds" portrays the height of oppression of the tribals by the mahajans and the hidden anger of the tribals. Dulan Ganju, the protagonist, has to guard the barren land which is given to him by the mahajan Lachman Singh. Later it is revealed that in that piece of land the corpses of a few tribals whom Lachman Singh had killed are buried. Lachman kills even Dulan's son and other tribals for demanding rightful wages and makes Dulan bury those corpses in that land. Unable to bear the burden of his intense mental turmoil and the extremity of oppression by Lachman Singh, Dulan kills Lachman Singh and buries under the heap of stones. "The Witch" shows the exploitation of tribal women by the upper caste men and covering of their 'sins' by using religion. The story narrates some untoward incidents that take place in some of the tribal villages due to a false fear of *daini* let loose by the religious head and 'Hindu deota of Tahar' Hanuman Misra. Somri, the slow-witted, dumb daughter of the *pahaan* of Tura village is spoilt by the *thakur's* son. Just to hide this shameful and inhuman act Hanuman Misra spreads the *daini* alarm stressing not to kill but just stone the *daini*. Before giving birth to a child Somri runs from forest to forest hiding, being chased away and eating raw flesh. "Salt" is set in Jhujhar, a tribal village along the Palamau Reserve forest. It explores the pathetic situation of the tribals who are deprived of arable forest land. The entire village is suffering under the bane of forced labour without wages by the landowner and trader Uttamchand. When the tribal youths demand half the share of the crops, the infuriated Uttamchand stops selling salt to these tribals as a way of revenge. The tribals resort to all kinds of strategies to cope with the problem. Finally Purti Munda finds an unusual source

of salt, that is, the salt lick for wild animals. In their effort to steal salt from this salt lick, Purti Munda and the other two tribals are killed by *ekoa*, the lone elephant.

**1.16.1.3. *Breast Stories*** (1998): Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak the book consists of three short stories—"Draupadi," "Breast-Giver," and "Behind the Bodice." All the stories have women as protagonists. These stories have one thing in common— the breast. This image of breast works as a metaphor for the exploitation of women from unprivileged communities. The Aboriginal Dopdi (Draupadi) is the protagonist of "Draupadi." She is captured by Senanayak, an Army Officer. She is brutally raped by the army under Senanayak's orders. When the rapists later tell her to put on her clothes Draupadi defies them and remains publicly naked. Senanayak is found wonderstruck when she strips her clothes and confronts him with her gaping wounds. The story portrays Draupadi's strength and courage to challenge the male dominated system. "Breast-Giver" is a sad tale of a Brahmin woman Jashoda who is portrayed as a marginalized woman. Her husband's loss of feet in an accident by a member of the rich Haldar family forces her to work as a wet-nurse in that family. While she is useful both her husband and the Haldars rever her and she is compared to 'Mother of the World.' After her breasts become empty and she suffers from breast-cancer she is forsaken by the Haldars as well as her husband. She finds her end in her long suffering death. "Behind the Bodice" narrates the proletarian Gangor's pride in her breasts and her downfall because of the same breasts. Upin, a popular photographer, makes her breasts an object of his photography. His senseless obsession with her breasts lead to some unexpected events which force Gangor into prostitution. Thus this book spins around three woman

protagonists who become victims of corrupt social system and inhuman patriarchal set up. They are exploited and put to inhuman treatment by this callous system.

### **1.16.2. Bama's Works**

**1.16.2.1. *Karukku*:** This work was first published in Tamil in 1992. Its translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom came in 2000. In the same year the book won Crossword Book Award. "Though structured like a novel, this text is not fiction," as Mini Krishnan, the editor of the book puts it in the Editor's Note in the book. It is an autobiography that narrates Bama's life experiences. But this narration is not linear. This work is considered as an elegy to the community she grew up in. The writer presents the pervasiveness of caste oppression of her community by the police, upper-castes, and the convent. The work explores what life is like outside the mainstream. Bama writes her bitter experiences as a nun, as a Dalit and as a woman. The text provides a critique of the Church's attitude towards Dalits.

**1.16.2.2. *Sangati*:** The first edition of the work in Tamil appeared in 1994 and the translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom came in 2005. Sangati means happenings, news, and events and the book is woven with many interconnected 'sangatis.' The work is an honest attempt to look at a part of the lives of Dalit women. So one can see a series of incidents with a lot of women protagonists. It shows how these women make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. Issue of gender discrimination is also raised in this book by providing a real picture of how discrimination in bringing up a boy and a girl from their birth itself. The Dalit women are shown as women who have the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel themselves upwards, to change their problem-filled lives.

The work also shows the women's urge to demolish the troubles and to live happily even in times of trouble, boredom, and depression.

**1.16.2.3. *Vanmam*:** Written in 2002 in Tamil, it is translated into English by Malini Seshadri in 2008. The work throws light on the inter-caste rivalry within Dalit communities. It highlights the animosity between the Pallars and the Parayas. It describes how the land owners of the dominant Naicker caste stoke fires of this hostility to benefit themselves. They ignore the misery, loss, and death that the Dalits have to undergo. The ghastly events that are explained in the text take place in the village of Kandampatti. People of both castes undergo various difficulties and a lot of blood is shed due to this feud. But finally these Dalit communities realize the need of unity and solidarity of Dalits to withstand the upper-caste domination and exploitation. They sink their past differences and show a united front at the panchayat polls. They make history by capturing power for the very first time from the entrenched dominant caste leadership.

## **1.17. Outline of Thesis Chapters**

The thesis consists of six chapters which are as below.

### **1.17.1. Chapter One**

This chapter offers description of patriarchy and society and throws light on the status of women and practice of Untouchability at different periods in history. The section also discusses the methodology of the research. The chapter therefore introduces the research problem; the aims and significance of the study; survey of literature; and concludes by providing an outline of the chapters of the thesis. It introduces the works of the writers taken for the research.

### **1.17.2. Chapter Two**

This section focuses on the similarities and contrasts the writers share in various aspects. Their social, economical and cultural background has found place in this chapter. The subject the writers mainly concerned with, their way of treating the subject is also explained here. Their academic achievements and literary excellence is taken care of here. The relationship and commitment Mahasweta Devi and Bama share with tribals and Dalits respectively has been taken into consideration. This section deals with the language the writers use—sometimes straight forward, sometimes harsh and some other time brutal—the way they make their characters behave or act, kinds of characters that appear in their works, and how the writers differ or have the similarity with the characters they deal with. The writers consider voicing the experiences of the marginalized (here tribals and Dalits) in their own language and vocabulary has some significance. By this they seem to break the orthodox mainstream culture of usage of language.

### **1.17.3. Chapter Three**

A study of tribal and Dalit societies, cultures and economies is made in this chapter. The formation of tribal and Dalit societies is also taken care of. The dependency and attachment of tribals with land and its resources and the impact of colonial Raj on the lives of tribals is studied carefully. The different meanings of the term ‘Dalit’ are explained here. The difference between *Oor* and Colony, the kinds of services Dalits are expected to perform and performed, codes which the untouchables are required to follow are discussed in this section. Analysis of caste system in Tamil Nadu is made here.

#### 1.17.4. Chapter Four

“Mother of 1084,” and “Bayen” from *Five Plays* and *Breast Stories* by Mahasweta Devi and Bama’s *Sangati* are taken for the study in this chapter. Gender discrimination in Indian society in different forms is discussed in detail in this chapter. The concept of womanhood and the actual position of women in Indian society are explained in this section. The chapter focuses on tribal and Dalit women’s subjugation and exploitation by various forces like the moneylenders, zamindars, police, upper-caste people and husbands due to their low economic and social status. This section also brings out the similarities in suffering of tribal and Dalit women, their reactions to their predicament, their strategies of survival and their will to continue life amidst various problems.

#### 1.17.5. Chapter Five

“Aajir,” and “Water” from *Five Plays* and *Bitter Soil* by Mahasweta Devi and Bama’s *Karukku* and *Vanmam* are considered for the research in this chapter. This chapter unfolds the reasons for tribals and Dalits’ victimhood as portrayed in the works of the writers. Both their economical and social position put them to constant oppression, humiliation and suffering. At the same time the writers present these characters who can rebel and challenge the subjugation. The chapter studies how a person cannot escape the pangs of lower caste status even though he/she changes the caste by converting to other caste.



### **1.17.6. Chapter Six**

This chapter emphasizes on the conclusion of the study focusing on the findings of the research. It also suggests and recommends for further research in the area of Comparative and Subaltern literature.

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## Chapter Two

### Mahasweta Devi and Bama: Voices for the Marginalized

#### 2.1. Introduction

The individuals or the groups were marginalized either in the name of religion, race, region, community, caste, gender, and nationality or even ideology. The centre can subdue and suppress the marginalized voices, but can never silence them forever. Once they find their true voice, they cease to be marginalized. Often a question is raised whether the marginalized can speak. It is a fact that the marginalized cannot remain mute for a long time. They have to speak and find an outlet for their fears and tears, anguish and anger. Thus they register their existence. This issue of registering ones existence assumes much prominence for an individual when identity becomes a struggle to survive with dignity and equality. It may be the marginalized, the subaltern, the Dalit or the tribal, one thing remains constant and that is his daily struggle for existence as the repressed, downtrodden and exploited section of society.

Subaltern communities have been the subjects of anthropological, social and literary studies. The subaltern have been the objects of research studies but whether their representation is an authentic one or not is the question to be discussed. The representation of the subaltern experience by the elites brings in the issues of authenticity and authority. Some scholars are of the opinion that theory has a particular role to play and that role has to be based on experience and universal reason. They do not approve of non-Dalits even if it is complimentary of Dalits. They do not approve of non-Dalits theorizing the Dalit experience. According to them lived experience is the experience of

being a subject and not an experience by a subject or about a subject. They opine that it is impossible for a non-Dalit to experience the Dalit experience of humiliation and seclusion. That means a non-subaltern view of the subaltern cannot be authentic. The study upholds this argument but at the same time it also argues that empathic individuals who are not part of the experience have the advantage of obtaining an objective view of the whole experience, both that of the oppressor and the oppressed. This work stands as a different one in the sense that it compares two different writers– Mahasweta Devi and Bama where one is an ‘outsider’ and the other is an ‘insider.’ Mahasweta Devi becomes an outsider when she shows her genuine concern for tribals and of course she also has her concern for other marginalized who are not tribals. Bama is an insider as her works predominantly talk about her people. Hence, here lies the real challenge of the present research work. Moreover the writers belong to two different backgrounds– geographical, cultural, social and economical. Mahasweta Devi is from West Bengal, an eastern state stretching from the Himalayas in the North to the Bay of Bengal in the South. The Bengali language is known for its rich literary heritage. West Bengal has a long tradition in folk literature, evidenced by the *Charyapada*, *Mangal Kavya*, and *Srikrishna Kirtana*. The great writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Michael Madhusudhan Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazul Islam and Sharath Chandra Chattopadhyay and many other writers have made Bengali literature rich and popular. We cannot forget social reformers like Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda. It is known for a tradition of folk drama called ‘jatra.’ While Bengali women traditionally wear the ‘sari’ and ‘salwar kameez’ men are fond of ‘dhoti’ and ‘kurta.’ Boiled rice is served with a variety of vegetables, thick lentil soups and fish and meat preparation of mutton and chicken.

## 2.2. Mahasweta Devi: Life, Career and Achievements

Mahasweta Devi was born on 14 January 1926 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her parents are well known in literary field. Her father was Manish Ghatak who was a well known poet and novelist and he used the pseudonym Jubanashwa. The noted filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak was one of his brothers. Dharitri Devi who was a writer and a social worker was Mahasweta Devi's mother. Her (Dharitri Devi) brothers were also very popular in various fields. Sankha Chaudhury was a noted sculptor and Sachin Choudhary was the founder-editor of the *Economic and Political Weekly of India*. She completed her B.A. (Hons) at Vishwabharati University in Shantiniketan and M. A. at Calcutta University. She married a renowned playwright Bijon Bhattacharya in 1947. In 1962, she married writer Asit Gupta after divorcing Bijon Bhattacharya. She worked as a teacher, journalist and creative writer. She died on 28 July 2016.

Mahasweta Devi has been actively associated with many grassroots level social movements regarding the issues of bonded labour, feudalism, state negligence and forceful acquisition of agricultural land. She has been at the forefront of many of these movements, especially those which have to do with tribal issues. She travelled deep into the tribal hinterland of Bihar and West Bengal to understand the real condition of tribal existence. She founded and edited the radical working-class periodical *Bortika*. This represented marginal writing that included rural peasants, factory workers and tribals. She grew familiarity and fondness with tribals in areas like Palamu (Jharkand), Murshidabad, Medinipur, and Purulia (West Bengal).



Mahasweta Devi's predominant concerns are the exploitation of the adivasis by the landed rich or the administrative machinery, bonded labour, the destitution and misery of the city dwellers, the plight of women who are breadwinners and/or victims of male sexual violence, dependent widows, and ill-treated wives.

Mahasweta Devi's involvement with the tribals, as she herself puts it, started before 1965 when she started to going to Palamu, a poor district in the state of the present Jharkhand. She covered the entire district on foot. "I walked miles, stayed somewhere overnight, went from place to place. Thus the bonded labour system, in its naked savagery and its bloody exploitation of woman, became clear to me" (*Imaginary Maps* iv). She started getting bonded labourers organized. She started 'Palamu District Bonded Labour Liberation Organization' in Palamu by writing on a broken mud wall of Seora village with a piece of chalk. She led a procession through the streets of Palamu and went to the District Commissioner with thousands of bonded labourers. The women led the procession, shouting slogans: 'Bonded System Must End,' and many others.

Mahasweta Devi strived hard to improve the economic condition as well as educational condition of the tribals. She made the Kheriyas of Chhattisgarh agree to contribute Rs. 10 per month to a *Samity* founded by a group of concerned rural gentry. She encouraged the tribals to learn handicrafts and sell them in Kolkata. Even they got orders to decorate Durga Pujas in the city. She also initiated organizing Sabar Melas where the locals staged their skills of hands and earned some money. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also joined hands with Mahasweta Devi in such welfare works. Spivak opened four elementary schools in four Sabar hamlets. Mahasweta Devi raised

money from Peerless, and Shell to build four simple school rooms, with a tiny bedroom for Spivak.

Mahasweta Devi's oeuvre largely comprises stories around contemporary social and political realities, a majority of which span a reasonably free time range in independent India, or located in fictitious or real settings. The social exploitation and sexual violation depicted in them are not singular but keep recurring incessantly. Their ending often laments the all pervasive tyranny and injustice that their protagonists are victims of. The temporal and spatial range of other stories extends from capturing tribal communities living at the edges of the forest to upper middle class urban society. The police, ostensibly upholders of law and order, also collude with the system to commit violence on vulnerable people. Even passive negligence by the government and bureaucracy leads to untold suffering for people in urban, rural and tribal areas. She accepted as her true kin the unlettered, downtrodden masses, the harijans, the tribals, the bonded labourers, the simple village people exploited and oppressed for generations in Indian villages.

Her single-minded devotion and an inner dynamism born of a deep conviction of the justness of her cause enabled her to overleap the class barrier and to become a trusted friend of the village people. The government departments found her presence embarrassing, because this indefatigable woman wrote myriads of letters to them demanding minimum living conditions for the villages, demanding facilities that were their due and yet which they never got because of the vested interest of the land owning upper castes, and the indifference and corruption of the government officials. The tribals,

Harijans, the Mundas, Santhals, Lodhas, the Ganjus and Dusads, knew her as their near one, their elder sister.

The people she writes about appear as characters in her fiction. The intimate knowledge of ground realities of the people she writes about characterizes her creative writing. In fact, creative writing is only one side of Mahasweta Devi. There are several other dimensions to her personality. She cannot be branded by any conventional label such as writer, social activist, reporter, editor or organizer of people's groups at the grassroots level.

Her journey of writing began with *Jhansir Rani* (The Queen of Jhansi), a biography of the woman ruler of a princely state in north India, who fought against the British in 1857, in the first War of Independence, was published in 1956. After that she authored non-fiction works, edited books, and wrote textbooks for school children. Though she focused on many subjects in her writing, the focal point of her creative writing remained the socially marginalized, the poor and the tribals, and their struggles. With her intimate knowledge of what happened at the ground level, she depicts their life with brutal accuracy, savagely exposing the mechanics of exploitation and oppression by dominant sections of the society, who have the direct support of the state system—politicians, the police, and the administration. The process through which resources meant for the development of the poor evaporate even before they 'trickle down' to the people for whom they are meant; how the system has a vested interest in keeping the poor in poverty, turning them into beggars for the very resources which should be theirs by right are vividly exposed in her writing.

Mahasweta Devi has been criticized by literary purists who feel that she is merely a chronicler of social reality. But even a superficial reading of her fiction will establish that this is unjustified. She transcends the boundaries of material concerns and highlights the value of universal consciousness of exploitation and the strength to protest against it. Dr. Nelson Mandela, handing over the Jnanpeeth—the highest literary award—in Delhi said that “she holds a mirror to the conditions of the world as we enter the new millennium.”

Her admiration for those who raise their voice in protest is apparent in her writings, and has remained consistent through her writing career. Whenever it is a struggle for political power or more immediate problems like demands for land, a higher share of the crop, minimum wages, roads, schools, drinking water or for sheer human dignity, these remain the hallmark of her fiction.

Mahasweta Devi also wrote for newspapers and journals on a wide range of topics— the deprivation amongst and discrimination against tribals and the rural poor; police atrocities; official crimes of omission and commission; struggles of the poor for survival, identity and dignity; the need of literacy, education, irrigation, drinking water; the non-payment of minimum wages to workers in various unorganized sectors; problems of environment and ecology, and the need for more effective monitoring of government programmes so that they reached their target groups, organization of the rural poor. She worked for different journals and newspapers like *Jugantar* (a Bengali newspaper), *Dainik Basumati* (a Bengali daily), and *Aajkal* (a Bengali newspaper). *Bortika* is a Bengali quarterly which she edited.

Besides the works taken for the study in this thesis, the researcher has taken a few of important works by Mahasweta Devi just to emphasise the fact that her concern about tribal negligence, bonded labour, sexual harassment and the like constitute the main theme in most of her works. *Imaginary Maps*, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, *Rudali*, and *Old Women* are discussed briefly here.

***Imaginary Maps***: This work is translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and is the collection of three stories—“The Hunt,” “Douloti the Bountiful,” and “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha.” The stories deal with varied subjects. “The Hunt” focuses on how Mary Oraon, the tribal daughter of a white planter, kills her ‘mainstream exploiter-cum-potential-rapist.’ Mary is a daughter of an Oraon mother and Australian father. Mary loves a Muslim lad Jalim on his promise of marriage. But the broker (Tehsildar Singh) who comes to Mary’s place (Kuruda) for timber business tries to molest her. But finally Mary kills him in his attempt to rape her. Thus “The Hunt” unfolds ecological devastation and sexual assault on adivasi women. It also shows how the protagonist Mary Oraon puts a befitting end to all this.

The problem of bonded labour and its detrimental impact on the adivasi women gets unfolded in “Douloti the Bountiful.” The callous system exploits these women endlessly and inhumanly. The story exhibits the abuse of female bodies in the portrayal of Douloti’s plight. Ganori Nagesia is one of the unfortunate bonded labourers of Munabar Singh. Ganori’s daughter Douloti is deceived by Lord Paramananda in the name of marriage. He makes her a prostitute by selling her to a brothel house. Douloti has to pay through life for a loan of three hundred rupees taken by her father raising over a forty thousand rupees for her masters by the time she dies at the age of twenty-seven. Her body

is found rotten and bleeding covering the map of India. This image raises disturbing questions what independent India has done for the tribal population.

“Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha” tells the tale of a group of people who are affected by frequent droughts and who are on the margin of extinction. Through the extinct bird pterodactyl the story unfolds how the mainstream is unaware of the presence of the indigenous people. The story ends with a serious concern that eventhough the indigenous people are wiped out from this planet, many of us may not be aware of their once existence. The story implies that these people have to be saved. It suggests that their survival is at high risk and ‘what has been done to the entire tribal world of India.’

***Chotti Munda and His Arrow:*** This novel is translated and introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. This novel encompasses many layers. It runs for decades mainly focusing on the changes from colonial rule to the post independence period keeping Chotti Munda as the protagonist. The unrest of the 1970s is also discussed in the novel. Naxal related and the ‘Youth League’ issues are the vital ones in this regard. Two naxal activists (one is Swarup) who have commitment to bring some improvement in the lives of the tribals and such marginalized are killed by the police. Romeo and Pahlwan who are supported by the ruling party torment the tribals in the name of ‘contractor’s cut’ are finally killed by the tribals.

The novel traces some forced and some welcome changes in the daily lives of a rural community which mainly includes the adivasis and the untouchables. Lot of Mundas and Oraons flee their villages to escape from the perennial bane of bonded labour and join the Mission hoping for a better life. It is viewed as leaving their own God

Haramdeo and accepting a new God Jesus Christ. The Mundas of the Kumri village desert the village and go to the Mission just because they are unable to tolerate the suffering caused due to bonded labour, drought and famine. The adivasis and the untouchables slowly turn their labour towards mining and brick kilns from their traditional farming activities. A hospital is built in their area where Chotti's wife takes ill children of her community and gets them cured. Some adivasis of some villages have learnt to sell curd in the market in order to earn some money.

A desire to own their own piece of land is brought out in Chotti's brooding when they will become wealthy though they serve the earth and spend all the time there their lives. He laments that Mundas have nothing to call their own. Chotti is also worried about the fact that Munda identity is at stake as they start joining for coal mining wearing shirts and shoes which is an alien habit to them.

Though Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 declares practice of bonded labour as illegal, moneylenders-landlords like Tirathnath are not ready to accept the law. They want the adivasis dependent on them to work for them. Chotti is doubtful of its implementation. All this convey government's negligence in implementing such laws or schemes that would be beneficial to tribals. The novel vividly delineates that the police consider the killings of Romeo and Pahlwan by the adivasis as an 'unexpected event' and whenever the adivasis are killed by the 'Dikus' (moneylenders-landlords and the Police or the 'government people'), it won't be taken as 'unexpected event.' Besides these significant issues the novel celebrates the legendary archer Chotti's wisdom, farsighted leadership and kindness. Thus the novel touches upon varied issues that have become matters of social concern.

**Rudali:** This piece of short fiction is translated by Anjum Katyal. The story revolves around a poor and lowcaste woman Sanichari. The text analyses an evolution in the protagonist Sanichari. She emerges at the end as better equipped to adapt and survive than she is at the beginning. She lives a life of desperate poverty when the story begins. Her mother-in-law remarks often that she is cursed and doomed to suffer as she was born on an unlucky day of the week (Saturday or sanichar, hence her name, Sanichari). But Sanichari can't understand why those born on so-called 'lucky' days are also not better than her. The text underscores that it is neither fate nor a question of being born on some particular day makes any change in a tribal's life. It's an economic condition that has made them to live in the same way. By placing the central character Sanichari in a socio-economic context, the text emphasizes that her problems are common to her class, caste and gender. Her story is linked to a larger discourse of struggle and exploitation. She loses her near and dear ones one after the other.

The malik-mahajan Ramavatar Singh's oppression is a constant presence in the text. He embodies a system which dehumanizes, brutalizes and controls the emotions of an individual. Thus sorrow is controlled by the malik-mahajan, but Sanichari uses the tears as produce, a source of earning by professional mourners. The text spotlights the highercaste malik-mahajans' criminality, greed, vicious discrimination against the lowercastes, power to manipulate police and investigative procedures.

The important events that happen in Sanichari's life have a direct connection between the personal event and the exploitative system. Every death is mediated by the religious demands that follow for rituals which further impoverish the already poor. Sanichari's husband dies of cholera after drinking the contaminated and putrid



‘sanctified’ milk donated to the Shiva idol by the rich. She is made to pay twice over for ritual offerings. The second time, in order to appease the local village priest she is forced into indebtedness to Ramavatar Singh.

Every loss she suffers is because of the dire poverty. The constricted life and the total lack of hope of any change or improvement in her life break her confidence and make her panic-stricken. Her daughter-in-law Parbatia and her grandson Haroa both leave because they refuse to submit to the harsh conditions. Her son Budhua contracts tuberculosis while hauling sacks of wheat for Ramavatar’s son Lachman Singh.

The entire text is a critique of the socio-economic and religious systems, and the nexus between them. By showing the dire poverty of the villagers, the ways in which they are exploited, the absolute power of the malik-mahajans and the corruption within the privileged classes, the author constructs a powerful indictment.

*Old Women:* This volume consists of two stories— “Statue” and “The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur” translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. These stories articulate two old women’s—Dulali in “Statue” and Andi in “The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur”—pain and struggle of their impoverished life. The stories give a very touching and poignant view of the life these women are forced to live.

“Statue” unfolds an unsuccessful and sorrow-filled tale of tabooed love between Dulali (a Bhunya by caste) and Dindayal Thakur (a Brahman by caste) in the village of Chhatim. The protagonist Dulali is of 78 years old when the story begins. She is made to stay in a single-room hut past the courtyard of the Bhunya house. Her white hair, torn clothes and emaciated body tell about the kind of life she is leading. She is given some

rice, salt, oil, and lentil at month's end and two saris yearly. After some time when the amount of these groceries decreases and become irregular, she makes no protest. She accepts hunger pangs as unalterable reality. But she was not like this in her childhood days. She belongs to a royal family which knew no hunger. She is married at four and becomes a widow at six. Dulali as a young widow of 17 knows very well that though she and Dindayal Thakur love each other, their love will not be successful. She tells this often to Dindayal, but he cannot hide this love from their parents. When it becomes an issue and disturbs both the families she is treated as an outcaste and is kept separately by her father. Since then she has been destined to go through this hellish sort of life.

Besides Dulali's tragic life the story focuses on some social and national issues. Dindayal Thakur is presented as a revolutionary who is all prepared to serve for the welfare of common people. He is ready to marry Dulali who is a widow and from a different caste. His revolutionary ideals are treated as terrorism and he is caught when he tries a train robbery and is hanged. This happens in pre-independence period. In post-independence time Nabin, Dulali's nephew struggles hard to bring a road, a hospital and a school to his village. But the government and the elected representatives of that area are interested in erecting a statue of Dindayal Thakur who now is considered as a patriot. The story ends with an unasked question if the statue was necessary in the village which badly needs a road.

"The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur" narrates another old woman's grief-filled story. The basic comforts of a decent life are possible for the residents of Mohanpur only in fairy tale. Starvation, famine, suffering, disease and decrepitude are part of their lives. Old Andi with her fallen waist and dim eyesight sweats herself for her belly's sake.

Since she cannot see properly she once catches a water snake thinking it as an eel and gets scolded by everyone in the family. She badly needs her eye-sight back as she has to do many things for herself. Eager to get her eye-sight clear and unable to afford more money for an advanced treatment Andi buys some fake medicine from a person in a market giving him two rupees and puts in her eyes. That medicine melts her irises. She has to be carried from one hospital to the other and finally gets admitted to the hospital at Tamli village and lies under the tree dreaming all kinds of things she will eat at the hospital.

**Awards won by Mahasweta Devi:** Mahasweta Devi has received many prestigious awards for her writings as a writer, journalist and activist. Important among them are:

- Padmashree Award in 1986
- Jnanapith Award in 1996 – India’s highest Literary Award (for *Mother of 1084*)
- Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1997 – Asia’s version of Nobel Prize
- Indira Gandhi Award for National Intergration in 2005
- Padma Vibhushan Award in 2006
- 2007 SAARC Literary Award

### **2.3. Bama: Life, Career and Achievements**

The caste system in India made the untouchables, as they were branded, impeded from all freedom. The hegemony and poverty suffered by these people were seldom known. Despite being citizens of this country, the untouchables were deprived of their legal rights. Though the Dalits have fallen into the pit of depression and have been living

as prisoners for centuries, they have gathered to accentuate their tribulations lately. They have imbibed new concepts of living and are trying to discover their identity and recuperate their culture.

Bama belongs to Tamil Nadu which lies in the southernmost part of the Indian peninsula. It is bounded by the Eastern Ghats on the North, by the Nilgiri, the Annamalai Hills on the West, by the Bay of Bengal in the East, by the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Strait on the Southeast, and by the Indian ocean on the South. Tamil, a Dravidian language, is one of the oldest surviving classical languages in the world. Tamil literature has a rich and long literary tradition spanning more than 2000 years. Nayanmars (sages of Shaivism) and Alvars (sages of Vaishnavism) heralded the great Bhakti movement by their devotional poems. Chola and Pandya empires patronized many poets. Writers like Subramania Bharati changed the direction of Tamil literature. Thiruvalluvar (*Tirukkural*), Illango Adigal (*Cilappatikaram*), Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, Gopalakrishna Bharathi, Bharatidasan, Kalki Krishnamurthi, Meena Kandaswamy, Jayakantan and other writers have made Tamil literature to prosper. Rice is the major staple food of the Tamil people. Along with rice sambar, rasam, butter milk is the common combination for dinner. Breakfast usually includes idli, pongal, dosai, and vadai. Men put on traditional outfits such as 'dhoti' or 'lungi' with a shirt and 'angavastra' while female beautify themselves in 'sari' and 'blouse.'

Bama is a celebrated Dalit writer in Tamil whose works have been translated into English, French and other regional languages. She was born in 1958 at Pudhupatti in Virudhunagar district of Tamil Nadu in a Catholic family. Her first name was Faustima Mary Fatima Rani. Bama's grandfather had converted from Hinduism to Christianity.

Her ancestors were from Dalit community. Her father, Susairaj, was employed with the Indian Army. Her mother was Sebasthiamma. Her grandmother and mother were labourers who toiled for the landlords. She had her early education in her village and completed her degree at St. Mary's College, Tuthukkudi. After taking B.Ed. Bama started working as a teacher. Her life took a turn when she took the vows to become a nun. Thus Bama happens to come from a Tamil Dalit community called parayas, who are, even to this day, considered to be the lowest of the low in the Indian caste society. In order to get rid of the low social positions—like the Dalit communities elsewhere—Bama's family members and relations became Christians. But religious conversion in India has hardly brought any remarkable improvement in the lives of Dalits. Because, even after their conversion to other religions they are still looked down upon by their upper-caste neighbours. Religious conversion does not necessarily bring emancipation in a Dalit's life. And, hence, conversion is a debated question among Dalits.

Bama is greatly influenced by Rabindranath Tagore and Kahlil Gibran. She in fact identifies herself with Gibran. As she herself puts it in an interview to *Outlook* Gibran spent a part of his life in the Church and she has also spent her time there. It struck her very much. It was his experiences at the monastery that provoked him to write and it was the same with her too. She uses the language of her people— a language that was not recognized by the 'pundits of literature,' was not accepted by any literary circle in Tamil Nadu, and was not included in the norms of Tamil literature. In this connection she observes in the same interview, "But after my book *Karukku* was published, the attention it drew and the way it was talked about all over state forced the critics to accept the users

of the dialect into their fold. The grammar has become a part of the language. It makes me feel proud.”

A large portion of Dalit literature is in autobiographical form. It often bears a ‘confessional characteristic’ made by the authors themselves. The ‘confession’ is mostly made to invoke the bitter experience the authors have gone through in their lives. It is in this sense that they invoke a pain that is mostly personal, and yet they narrate their stories with a realization that the other members of their community also suffer in the same way.

Bama’s autobiography is full of such questions. Coming from a low social position Bama has always led a hard life. She has had to fight hundreds of odd battles daily. Through hard work and perseverance she completes her college education and becomes a teacher at a convent. Inspired by the life of Jesus Christ she becomes a Catholic nun and prepares herself to serve the poor and the destitute. But when she enters into a religious order she finds that here too, obstacles exist for people from the lower castes. She comes to a realization that majority of the church authorities are from the upper caste who deliberately discriminate against people from the lower caste. Bama herself is humiliated several times simply because she happens to be a Dalit Christian. And when it becomes impossible for her to continue her job she finally resigns and goes back to her village to join the community life.

The casteism suffered by Bama had awakened her to delve into the past history and culture and forced her to rewrite, reproduce and celebrate its value. Instead of becoming sadomasochistic, the Dalits are slowly occupying the lacuna with their assertion and identity. A supportive, cohesive community and familial bonding alone

might reduce the damage done to the oppressed people. The life of Bama proves how the fortifying support of the family and community enables her to overcome her vulnerability and create an independent mind which would help in the formation of concrete self image. She refuses to be stereotyped, instead with her self confidence and resistance she almost terrorizes her opponents. The hope and optimism inherent in the writings of Bama make her different from other writers of her clan.

Bama has created a Dalit spoken idiom which renders a distinct resonance to her writing. Her autobiographical writings break all conventions of life writings. Her texts are remarkably resistant to the recuperative powers of public discourse on a number of levels. It is through the careful interweaving of conflicting narratives that they are able to 'voice' and 'make heard' what the upper caste narratives cannot hear, cannot read and cannot speak.

Besides her popular novels Bama has authored a collection of short stories called *Harum-Scarum Saar and Other Stories* which is translated by N. Ravi Shankar and was published in 2006. The stories focus some notable individuals like Kisubukkaran, Ponnathayi, Malandithatha, and Ammasi. The stories display small rebellions through the characters. A small boy urinates on the plant whose leaves his employer uses to do her cooking. A family choose to symbolically throw away the *pongal* received from their landlord in a most unequal exchange. A boy refuses to give up a hard-won seat in a bus simply because the man asking claims higher caste status. These rebellions are not overt or violent in nature. The societal order is overturned in subtle ways, through the use of irreverent speech and the accumulation of small acts of defiance. These rebellious

pranksters use their words and actions to slowly erase the distinctions between themselves and their “betters.”

The characters in these stories display a gleeful contempt of those oppressing them. This book tries to show the underdogs’ victory, however temporarily, and their remaining active, often playful agents rather than simple victims. At the same time the collection also unfolds the magnitude of the odds these characters have to face. As in her other works, in this work also words are used as instruments of subversion to shake up the established order. The common thread in these stories is the refusal by some members of the Dalit community to kowtow to their upper-caste “masters.”

**Awards won by Bama:** Bama has been recognized at both national and international levels through her writings. She has received the following awards:

- Kural Amaippu Award (1992)
- Cross Word Book Award (2000)
- Dalit Murasu Kalai Illakkiya Award (2001)
- Amuthan Adigal Illakkiya Parisu (2003)

A comparative reading of the works of Mahasweta Devi and Bama displays the differences and similarities not only between the writers’ approach to life but also between the socio-political, cultural and religious contours of the communities they deal with. Oppression, exploitation, and gender discrimination have similarities but the strategies undertaken to resist, to fight and to struggle differ as the communities’ mode of living and living conditions differ. They resist only for their survival and it becomes a challenge to live in the much hegemonic situation against the casteist, androgenic world.



Socio-psychological inferiority, desire for liberation and equality and anger against marginalization form the recurring themes in the writings which deal with the subaltern. Mahasweta Devi and Bama subvert the literary traditions through their writings of life experiences, memories, music and rituals that connect the past with the present. There is an authentic call for action by bringing a catalytic recollection of the past history, exploitation and expression. Through these 're-visions' the provoked writers challenge the 'world of exploitation' with their aggression, audacity and combativeness and put in resistance and claim a deserving positions for the marginalized. These writers highlight the disabilities and difficulties together with atrocities and inhuman treatment meted out to the disabled. The main object is to produce social awakening among the downtrodden.

Mahasweta Devi and Bama explore and expose the exploitation and subjugation suffered by the tribal and Dalit communities respectively to find that all forms of exploitation are identical because they are applied against the only object, human beings. But they want to remind the world that the basic problem is restoration of man to his proper place. The writers voice the problems of the oppressed or write about the atrocities committed upon these communities to assert their identity and they take step towards the centre thereby assuming cultural stability. Sense of identity and confidence has driven the tribals and Dalits to attain empowerment to some extent. Their writings deal with oppression overtly but concomitantly they contain an optimistic vision and an underlying resistance throughout. Whenever there is the deepest oppression, the possibility of resistance rescue the victims and they acquire the potential to strike back. The liberation of the oppressed people is a global struggle, which demands rights of equality, freedom and liberty that is often denied to them. In response to oppression the marginalized

people struggle and resist from within the shackles of oppression, casteism or patriarchal supremacy. Besides oppression, hope and certainty, the belief that the end of oppression is near that a better world is truly possible mobilizes the masses for a collective struggle. The momentum of hope incites the oppressed so that they can fight for equality and liberation and resist whatever is detrimental to their progress. Tribal and Dalit history documents the sufferings undergone by these communities and the struggle to overcome the patriarchal domination and the economics of slavery.

The excessive oppressive force repressed Bama which generated anger and rebellion within her. She needed an outlet to resist the forces that subjugated her and the outcome was *Karukku*. She expresses a desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy the bonds of unjust social structure.

The central concern of Dalit writing must be an active one that fights for human rights, social justice and equality. In the afterword to *Karukku*, Bama writes, “It has been a great joy to dalits aiming to live with self-respect, proclaiming aloud ‘Dalit endru sollada; talai nimirndu nillada’: Say you are a Dalit; lift up your head and stand tall” (106). The short statement explains that subaltern can also speak. Bama has, through her writing, tried to raise an awareness of the Dalit experience and explaining a changing Dalit identity. There is a powerful sense of self and community as Dalit which rejects the notion of Varna, refuses to Sanskritize and to evaluate Dalit lifestyle according to main stream Hindu values. Bama rightly explains what writing is for her in these words: “I experience writing as the breaking of the unbroken and forced silence of the victims and letting the victims and the militants in the victims speak up” (*Karukku* 21). She develops

a strategy of resistance that will speak to the muted and create a space from where the subaltern as a female and as a Dalit could speak.

Bama's language is lively, genre-breaking, iconoclastic and a constant reminder of the speaker. The local language is formalized and universalized. Her language is a Dalit style of using language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upper caste, upper class Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout and demands a new pattern of reading Dalit Tamil. She is accused of using obscene and vulgar language in her novels by mainstream writers and critics. But Bama's challenge is to preserve the language of her people and she deliberately uses the dialect of the paraya community. The language is purely rustic and without any sophistication so that it may appear to be vulgar and incestuous but the illiterate women are not expected to speak the language of the refined, modest women. The sharp, violent expletives are a weapon to resist the supremacy of the men whether belonging to their own community or to the upper caste. The voice that is raised against the oppressor is a survival technique of the oppressed.

#### **2.4. Mahasweta Devi and Tribals**

In the 60s, Mahasweta Devi would go to Munda villages, their market places and collect information about tribals. Mahasweta Devi gathered sources of the first Santal rebellion— Baba Tirka Majhi's rebellion (1780-85) and Birsa Munda and his movement (1895-1900). Baba Tirka Majhi was ultimately hanged and a statue erected in the heart of Bhagalpur. That place is now known as Tirka Majhi Chowk. Mahasweta Devi writes how the government has named some universities after Sidhu-Kanhu and Baba Tirka Majhi,

the Santal rebellion heroes to appease tribal voters. She traces their plight that occurs after each rebellion— always related to land and labour. They were evicted from their home places. In the context of the tribal world of Eastern India, as she puts it, “They migrated towards Bengal, they were taken to Assam as tea garden labourers, kept in Bengal to clear the mangrove forests in the Sundarbans, the indigo planters brought them, this is continuing history, there is no break in it” (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* x).

It seems that Mahasweta Devi wanted to become a voice in writing about/for them. In an interview to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Devi tells, “These people do not find anyone writing about them, and they do not have script. They compose the stream of events into song. By being made into song, into words, they become something . . . a continuity” (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow* x). Her words in *Bitter Soil* strengthen this notion of hers. “So the sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies: The feudal minded landowner, his henchmen, the so-called religious head-of the administrative system, all of whom, as a combined force, are out for lower-caste blood” (ix). Her empirical research into oral history as it lives in the cultures and memories of tribal communities is a first of its kind.

Her writings have been based on truth. Ex: ‘Little Ones.’ Chronic malnutrition has the result of stunting human and animal bodies. Here the Aagariyas have been reduced to pygmies due to starvation over generations. Mahasweta Devi justifies their violence and anger for some people eat three meals a day while they are forced to starve.

Mahasweta Devi was a dedicated political social activist who was working with and for tribals and marginalized communities like the landless labourers of eastern India

for years. She was also a socio-political commentator whose articles appeared frequently in the *Economic and Political Weekly*.

Commenting on Mahasweta Devi's stories Tutun Mukharjee in her article "Of Other Voices: Mahasweta Devi's Short Stories Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak" writes,

Mahasweta Devi's stories are an extension of her activism and her reportage. Her intention is not to romanticize the tribals and given them a heroic life within the sealed subjectivity of her fiction but to imaginatively recreate their lives by transgressing the boundaries of life and fiction. She draws upon her experience with them and her knowledge of their philosophy of living—each life a confirmation of courage, wisdom and endurance. The stories are linked together with the common thread of profound ecological loss. . . . (101)

Mahasweta Devi had to learn the history of tribals by being with the people as that is unwritten history. She had to cover many miles on foot. She knew those places, riverbeds and trees personally. She feels sorry for the tribals as their culture, tradition and skills have been sullied, been polluted, and for becoming vulnerable. She feels that these people have no resistance against the cultural invasion that has been taking place.

Mahasweta Devi's characters in her works are real people in life. Her words in *Bitter Soil* tell about this fact more vividly.

I saw with my own eyes the brutalities of the existing land-system. In one of my stories, 'Douloti', there is a character, Crooked Nagesia. I saw this man, whose right side, from arm to ankle, was deformed. Why? Because he was a debt-bonded

labourer. And, in the month of May, his *malik* made him lift a paddy-laden cart to take to the village market. He fell and his right side was crushed under the heavy cart. I asked the *malik*, Why not use bullocks? He answered , If a bullock dies in this heat, I lose a thousand rupees. He is just a bonded labourer. His life has no value. (viii)

Mahasweta Devi's dedication towards the marginalized can be understood well when she says,

Life is not arithmetic, and man is not made for the game of politics. For me, all political programmes and creeds should aim at the realization of the claims of man to survival and justice. I desire a transformation of the present social system. I do not believe in narrow party politics. After thirty-one 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 for all my writing. (*Five Plays* viii-ix)

The two classes of characters that dominate Mahasweta Devi's stories and novels are the mothers bearing the brunt of social and political oppression, and enduring and resisting with indomitable will; and the sensitive individual, initially apolitical, but with the strongest of ties binding him to a community, growing to the role of a leader of the people, as he absorbs into his felt, personal awareness the huge, impersonal dehumanizing experience of exploitation that his community endures. Mahasweta Devi throws up leaders of men, moulded, groomed, trained and matured by a whole

community, through and within its experience of suffering. Her *Bashai Tudus* and *Chotti Mundas* are products of exploitation, direct and inhuman.

There is continuum between Mahasweta Devi's mothers and leaders of men, between the cold, growing awareness of the former shaping into resistance, or stopping at the very edge of defiance, and the superstitious community in *Bayen*, to the tribal Naxalite, Draupadi, in the story named after her. Mahasweta Devi's mothers are too earthly and emotionally charged to bear overtones of any mystical-mythical or archetypal motherhood.

## **2.5. Bama and Dalits**

Bama explores the multiple structures of oppression that operate in the lives of Dalits in her writing. Her mode of writing—sometimes confessional and conversational—departs from the literary discourse that stands alienated from the marginalized subjects. Bama employs the vocabulary and spoken idiom of the marginalized in her literary works. She writes about those hitherto marginalized in literary discourse in a language that has been held unliterary. She articulates the experiences of the oppressed in the language of the oppressed. She likes to foreground Dalits' resistance to oppression rather than merely record their victimization on account of their low, unprivileged position.

Bama's re-reading and interpretation of the Christian scriptures as an adult enables her to carve out both a social vision and a message of hope for Dalits by emphasizing the revolutionary aspects of Christianity, the values of equality, social justice and love towards all. Her own life experiences urge her towards actively engaging

in alleviating the sufferings of the oppressed. When she becomes a nun, it is in the stubborn hope that she will have a chance to put these aspirations into effect. Her own experience is part of a larger movement among Dalits.

Bama, who has self respect and believes every Dalit has it, fills courage and confidence in them. In her opinion, “Marginalized people, those who have been pushed to the very edges of society, have to put aside their internal enmities if they are to reclaim their self respect and their rightful place in society . . .” (*Vanmam* vii). Bama believes that wealth, power, social standing, status bestowed by having been born into a particular caste— all these weaken human relationships. When people are denied humane treatment, when their self respect as human beings is destroyed, they raise protesting voices.

The ten-year anniversary of the publication of *Karukku* was celebrated in July 2004 in Chennai. In her speech Bama said:

Ten years ago when I went to attend a meeting (conducted as part of the centenary celebration of Dr. Ambedkar), I was told that I came there like a child who carried a small flag flying on the road in the Civil Rights Movement. It may be true then. But now I have become aware of things and the politics of representation. My writings reflect that. (*Vanmam* xix)

This awareness could be found not merely in Bama the writer alone, but also among Dalit communities who agitated over Bama’s writings as exploiting the Dalit way of life began to find her acceptable. The Dalit youths were instrumental in arranging reading sessions of Bama’s *Karukku* and it secured local recognition for Bama. She repeatedly cites in many of her interviews this local recognition as a greater achievement



than the writing of international acclaim. As a writer alive to the environment, Bama's focus changed from invoking Dalit victimhood (as seen in *Karukku*) towards focusing in the interrelationship between caste and patriarchy in her writings. Unlike the victimhood articulated subjectively in *Karukku*, her second work *Sangati* focused on the complexities involved in the oppression of Dalit women. Bama has tried to freeze her trauma as well as the trauma of her community in her works so that there will be something physical to remind people of atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages. Her words have made her community find a place in the mainstream media.

In her village she came to know about different castes and experienced a lot of discrimination based on caste, class and gender. She was treated inhumanly and faced a lot of discrimination and rejection. During school holidays she used to accompany her grandmother to work in the landlord's fields. She has seen how her grandmother was ill-treated because of her caste. She grew up in her village experiencing all kinds of atrocities.

In Tamil Nadu, within the Christian community in which Dalits have sought asylum, they continue to be considered untouchables. In many places, they are segregated inside the church during worship or discouraged from serving at worship/ritual or be part of the church choir. Their dead cannot be buried in common cemeteries. Dalits have little participation in the decision-making processes in the parish committees. Church properties, like lands and groves, are given on lease to the upper-caste Christians but not to Dalits. Within the churches' organizational structures, they are discriminated against in their recruitments to the clergy and in the distribution of positions of power and privilege. Dalit priests normally do not hold higher posts in the dioceses.

Bama's use of Dalit spoken idiom as her narrational voice gives a distinct resonance to her writing. The author-narrator and the characters use the same non-standardized, spoken Dalit vocabulary. Her syntax reflects the speech patterns of Dalit women. She uses the confessional, conversational mode of narration in both *Karukku* and *Sangati*. This is a calculated step which brings Bama to her communities fold, argues M.S.S. Pandian: "Bama's conscious choice of spoken Dalit Tamil, ungoverned by the tyranny of the elaborate grammatical rules, as the medium to voice the story of her community is indeed instructive" (132).

Her writing celebrates Dalit women's subversive strategies to overcome their oppression. While some women curse and overwhelm their alcoholic, violent husbands with their verbal tirade and thereby escape physical violence, some others wrestle with the men while a few of them choose to walk out on their abusive husbands. Bama's writing is an activist intervention. All Dalit writing is to be perceived as political writing, as a strategy of resistance to social oppression. Bama through her writing hopes to influence Dalit women readers to shape their lives positively. Her works lay a lot of emphasis on empowerment of Dalits through education.

Bama's works tell about oppressed people, about their pains, agonies, disappointments, defeats, humiliations and depressions. They also speak about their struggle for 'annihilation of caste' in order to build a casteless society. They reveal their resistant and rebellious character, their strength and stamina to live amidst all odds and their resilient nature to love life and live it happily. They bring out their inborn tendency to celebrate life and to fight against caste ridden society by breaking through this

inhuman system, without breaking themselves. Her works intend to liberate them and give them their identity. They heal them and strengthen them to fight for their rights.

The writers uphold the view that this vast majority which is vulnerable and poor, untouchable and isolated, must be brought together. And to bring them together, they must be made conscious of their capacity as worthy members of humanity.

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## **Chapter Three**

### **Tribal and Dalit Society, Culture, Economy and Polity**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

As sociologists describe a society is a group of people with common territory, interaction and culture. That means every society has its own characteristic features. Hence a tribal society is different from a Dalit society. Culture has been the core subject matter of Anthropology as it helps us in many ways to understand a society. The learned behaviour common to a group of people transmitted from one generation to another is called culture. Culture as the widest context of human behaviour is important as it reflects the life of the people as a whole. The members of a society whether developed or backward follow a common economic way of life, from which originates the concept of work culture of the group. It can be said that the general understanding of one's society is the understanding of their culture. From the way of life, the economic position of the group can be assessed in terms of food, clothing, lifestyle, etc. The thesis analyses some important aspects of these two societies (tribal and Dalit) briefly. The kind of life people belonging to different societies lead usually depends on their economical and political conditions. The economical and political factors of a community or group have direct impact on the lives of the people of that community or group. The chapter looks into the typical cultural, economical and political aspects of tribals and Dalits.

#### **3.2. Tribal Society**

Though it is not easy to classify the Indian tribes into different groups due to multiplicity of factors and complexity of problems involved, for the sake of classification



the tribes of India may be classified on the basis of their i) territorial distribution, ii) linguistic affiliation, iii) physical and racial characteristics, iv) occupation or economy, v) cultural contact and vi) religious beliefs.

Further, Indian tribes are classified into three zones based on tribal geography and demography as:

- a) The north and north-eastern zone
- b) The central or the middle zone
- c) The southern zone

The northern and north-eastern zone consists of the sub-Himalayan region and the mountain valleys of the eastern frontiers of India. The tribal people of Assam, Manipur and Tripura may be included in the eastern part of this geographical zone while in the northern part are included the tribals of eastern Kashmir, eastern Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and northern Uttar Pradesh. Some of the important tribes living between Assam and Tibet are Aka, Dafla, Miri, Gurung, Mishmi, Apanani, Khamti, Singpho and Naga. South of the Naga hills running through the states of Manipur, Tripura and the Chittagong hill tracts live the Kuki, the Lushai, the Khasi and the Garo. In the sub-Himalayan region of Sikkim and the northern parts of Darjeeling the primitive tribes known as Lepcha are located. The Himalayan region of Uttar Pradesh also contains some important tribes like Tharu, Bhoska, Jounsari, Bhotia, Raji, etc. As a result of geographical similarities most of the tribes of this zone are engaged in either terrace cultivation or shifting cultivation and are steeped in poverty and economic backwardness.

The middle zone consists of plateaus and mountaneous belt between the Indo-Gangetic plain to the north and roughly the Krishna river to the south. In this zone we have another massing of tribal peoples in Madhya Pradesh with extensions in Uttar Pradesh, southern Rajasthan, southern Maharastra, Bihar and Orissa. The important tribes inhabiting this zone are the Savara, Gadaba and Borido of the Ganjam district; the Juang, Kharia, Khond Bhumji and the Bhiya of the Orissa hills. In the plateau of Chotanagpur live the Munda, the Santhal, the Oraon, the Ho and the Birhor. The other popular tribes found in this zone are Katkari, Kol, the Bhil, the Gond, the Koraku, the Agariya, the Pardhan and the Baiga. Most of the tribes of this zone practise shifting cultivation as means of their livelihood but the Oraon, Santhal, Munda and Gond have learnt plough cultivation as result of their cultural companies with their neighbouring rural populations.

Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu are included in the southern zone. The most important tribes such as Kadar, Kanikkar, Malvadan, Malakuravan, Toda, Soliga, Siddi, Yerava, Badaga, Kota, etc., inhabit this zone. Most of the tribal groups of this zone depend upon hunting and fishing for food gathering.

There are also tribes like Jarwa, Onge, North Sentinelese, Andamanese and Nicobari living on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The complexity of tribal society is due to socio-economic, political, cultural and also ecological differences that exist in that society. After independence, the complexities became intensified due to penetration of wider social and economic forces. The changing topography and landscape, land ownership status including land alienation, shift in labour relations or relation of production, consequent migration to towns and cities, increasing

monetization and integration with the market economy through production, credit, and a host of other factors such as intervention of the state and its bureaucracy are the prime features shaping and influencing the social structure and relationships of the tribal communities.

The tribal groups do not constitute a homogeneous entity, either socially or economically. There are regional and sub regional differences engendered by historical conditions of growth or development opportunities. Those living in the forest or jungle area are more backward than those living in the roadside areas or villages. Despite policies and programmes of regional development, the interior tribal region including the hilly tracts have substantially lagged behind in terms of basic amenities or facilities such as school, water supply, electricity, market, communication network, and so on. Backwardness among the tribals is due to the backwardness of the region which is a result of lopsided development.

The tribal population of India is about one-sixth of the total population of the country. The tribes are divided into many groups. India belonged to these tribals long before the incursion of the Aryan-speaking peoples. Tribals had no sense of property. There was communal land-holding because, just like the Native Americans, they believed that land and forest and river belong to everyone. In 1885, the Red Indian Chief Seathl of Suwamish tribe of the State of Washington addressed a letter to President Franklin Pierce of the United States in which he observes, "How can you buy or sell the sky—the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. We do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us?" (*Words Beyond* 38). Indian tribes do have the same reverence towards nature and natural resources.

We come across many places of tribal dwelling in Mahasweta Devi's works like, Palamu, Purulia, Tohri, Kuruda, etc. Palamu is a district which is situated in the north-west part of Jharkhand. Daltonganj is one of the sub-divisions of this state which appears in some of the works of Mahasweta Devi. Tohri is a medium size village located in Kishangarh Bas of Alwar district, Rajasthan.

As long as the forests were there, the hunting tribe did not suffer so much, because the forests used to provide them with food, shelter and timber. But now the forests are gone, the tribals are in dire distress. Some, like the Santhals or the Oraons from the Deccan have advanced because they took to agriculture long ago. But the small hunting tribes, like the Lodhas and Kherias, suffer deeply. Mahasweta Devi complains that the Government of India has pauperized them. They have to beg for everything.

**3.3. Tribal Culture:** We have got an image that tribes are isolated, segregated and are an economically backward group who live in a world of their own where maximum interaction takes place between the people of their own community both at home and work domain. Such an image gives a curious orientation to the study of tribal culture. Culture holds a community or a group together. That means culture differs from one community to the other. Culture comprises of the distinctive practices related to costume, food, gods/goddesses, worship, funeral and such other significant traits. As Ram Ahuja puts it culture is "knowledge, attitudes, ideas, behavior, religious beliefs, and moral doctrines of individuals who compose the community or the society" (290). People and groups define themselves and conform to society's shared values. The chief characteristics of tribal culture are:

- a) They inhabit and remain within a definite and common topography.
- b) The members of a tribe speak a common language.
- c) The members of a tribe generally marry into their own group.
- d) The members of the tribe have faith in their having descended from a common, real or mythical, ancestor and hence believe in blood relationships with other members.
- e) Tribal religion is mainly based on naturalism or nature worship. They worship the Sun, rivers, mountains, stars, trees and other natural objects.
- f) Tribals follow the custom of totem. The totem is considered to be the originator of a particular tribe. It's killing and eating is a taboo for the people of the particular tribe.

According to D. N. Majumdar the tribal culture falls into three groups:

- a) those who are culturally most distant from the rural-urban groups; that is, more or less out of contact,
- b) those under the influence of the culture of rural-urban groups and have developed discomforts and problems consequently,
- c) those who, though in contact with rural-urban groups, have not suffered thereof, or have turned the corner and do not suffer any more, though they may have in the past, because they have now got acculturated into rural or urban culture.

The main components of tribal culture are hunting, dancing, singing, worshipping and cultivation. During particular festivals they go for hunting as a ritual. And hunting is also a method of collecting food for their survival. Many of the tribals know the basic

skill of hunting. This hunting or archery competition occupies a prominent place in many of Mahasweta Devi's works. Wherever there is a celebration there would be *moua*, singing and dancing. Both men and women actively take part in such celebrations. Smoking *beedi* is a common feature in the men and women of many tribal communities. They worship their own clan deity. They believe in ghosts and spirits of their ancestors as well as their anger and curse. They have their own village head called *pahaan*. Though most of the tribals do not have their own land, their main occupation is cultivation.

But these age-old cultural traits of the adivasis have undergone many changes as time has changed. Some of the significant factors which are considered responsible for the changes are: government's schemes/measures, spread of education, communication facilities, occupational mobility, community development projects, frequent contacts with the neighbouring Hindus in the urban areas, construction of dams in the tribal areas, and impact of Christianity.

### **3.4. Tribal Economy and Polity**

Tribal economy is characterized by small size, simple technology, absence of price system and saving. Family as the unit of production and consumption and gift and ceremonial exchange, periodical markets, interdependence and involvement of community in economic activities are other characteristics of tribal economy. Moreover, tribal economy is subsistence type, and tribals are involved in various economic activities just for survival.

The type of economic activities is to be undertaken by a particular tribe at a particular place is determined by their cultural practices and religious beliefs. Land and

forest are the twin major sources of living of the tribals and they have become so close a part of their life that it became a philosophy and prime mover of their civilization. The alienation from the land along with other factors led to the alienation of the tribals from the forests. Large scale tree felling and deforestation in the tribal areas, apart from all its attendant effects such as imbalances in the eco-system, denudation, desertification of the lands and so on shook the lives of the tribals very much.

Search for raw material and its requirement in the manufacturing industry, paved the way for different industrial and other capitalist groups to enter tribal areas and monopolize the forest and mineral resources. Besides this all these cheap tribal labour is an added attraction to the mining and industrial activity and construction of big projects and dams. This has totally disturbed the tranquility in tribal areas.

These ill effects of the deforestation resulted in destroying the vital resources of soil, water, vegetation systems apart from valuable food staples which tribals are accustomed to use as food in the lean season. Food is no more available freely to the tribal children and scarcity and drought situations make them go hungry.

It is talked about the tribal as a colonial subject who was doubly colonized, first by the mainstream, dominantly Hindu caste society which sought to occupy forest and agricultural land belonging ancestrally to the tribes. Other demographic/sociological disturbances were caused by the British administration extending the land revenue system to the tribal belts. Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 that introduced an economic system of recompense and colonial re-assessment of the system of land revenue led to large scale demographic shifts disadvantageous to tribals. Not only the system of taxation was new

to the land but all accompanying matters of governance and colonial policing brought the interests of the tribals and the colonial Raj in stark opposition to each other.

Colonial era brought with it not just the legal regime but also material technologies that were introduced in assessing and exploiting natural resources for industrial consumption. The onslaughts of the steadily encroaching complex societies led to a rupture within the social organization of the forest dwellers. The tribal's extraordinary sensitivity to natural processes had led to a specialized body of knowledge possessed by tribals alone, giving them unique access to the hidden, deeper parts of the jungle, forest gathering and cultivation being their primary means of assurance.

Mahasweta Devi's ideas about the Munda struggle of 'land as identity' have many contemporary overtones. The struggle is not only about arable land that has productive value, this productive value being measured in terms of agricultural yield and its price in the market economy. The struggle, then as now, is about forest not only because the tribals have sustained themselves on forest as a resource of their livelihood but also that their relationship with forests was a central aspect of their traditional system of farming. This was a contract with one's environments, imbued with religious sentiment and expressed in mythical terms. Colonial understanding of principles of ownership led to a highly competitive, rapacious claiming of land to demarcate and settle its ownership.

Even within a single region or specific geographical territory, the tribal inhabitants are not socially and economically homogenous. There are distinct differences based on land-ownership, education, access to and utilization of institutional resources,



and so on. They are stratified along the economic axis. Thus there are better-off or well-to-do tribals. They own productive and irrigated land; produce and sell their surplus in near or distant markets; own durable long-term assets; wield social and political power through village and taluka panchayats; educate their sons and daughters in urban, metropolitan areas to ensure mobility and progress; and utilize most of the benefits and concessions meant for the tribals or members of a deprived community.

A majority of their poorer, resourceless tribal counterparts also live in the same areas, and within the same ethnic group. They are landless and poor farmers, and serve as agricultural labourers on meager wages. They live in huts in poor state of health and their children are deprived of educational opportunities beyond the primary level. Sheer economic compulsion forces them to migrate to irrigated villages or towns as wage labourers. They are the tribals belonging to the lower strata, exposed to acute poverty, ill-health and illiteracy.

The lower strata comprise a large majority of the tribal population (60 to 80 per cent) with regional variations. In rural areas, this lower stratum consists of households of small and marginal farmers, the landless and artisans such as the *Kotwalia*, *Kolcha* or *Boradia*. Those with agricultural land are unable to eke out their living entirely on cultivation. Their land is small-sized, unirrigated and often of inferior soil quality. An entire family cannot subsist on land, and hence the search for alternate job opportunities in the irrigated villages as agricultural labourers or in towns and cities as casual labourers.

These small or marginal farmers are in debt for variety of reasons. Government subsidies or loan assistance do not reach them in full measure or in time. They do try subsidiary occupations such as running shops in weekly markets, as construction labourers near their villages or as milk producers in cooperative dairy schemes. But whatever they do for survival, it is always a question of subsistence and not of growth or development. These households always remain on the margin of existence and this increases their dependence on the other classes in the village or the region. Acute poverty and lack of a permanent source of income and livelihood place these households in extremely disadvantageous situations.

The conditions of the landless as well as the artisans are worse off. They live in the villages in hut-like dwellings, and without any permanent source of employment or income. If village is agriculturally developed, they might get some employment as farm labourers. Their women folk might get work on someone else's fields or as domestic servants. Their children can hope for some earning activity as cattle-grazers or *Govalia*. But in all these activities, the wages are much below the expected level.

There is a surplus of labourers in the rural market economy, and that puts these local landless labouring households in a dependent and disadvantageous situation. The local farmers increasingly resort to a strategy of employing migrant labourers on routine agricultural operations.

The conditions of the artisans are very critical. Depleting forests and forest resources have reduced *kotwalias* to a status of nomadic proletariat. They do not get

bamboos for their traditional activity. They live in miserable conditions, lacking the minimum standards of health, housing and education.

In urban areas, the households of the lower strata tribals are chiefly engaged in the unorganized sector. Their wages are low. There is very little job security. No regular employment status. As the day breaks, these tribal labourers including women assemble at the city square to sell their labour. They are for hire, for low skilled and manual jobs. These tribals are seasonal migrants and new to the city and its social network.

Moreover these problems arise from their shrinking economic base due to massive felling of trees caused by commercial exploitation of forest wealth. More and more tribals are becoming aliens in their own area. The tribal view of ownership of the forest land and the land which they cultivate is sharply different from the concept of ownership of the land by the State, introduced after the advent of the British in India. The loss of ownership of land led to loss of autonomy and ingress of a different socio-economic order. The economic modernization through construction of big power projects, opening of mines and construction of large dams is leading to displacement and impoverishment of tribals.

The political system of the tribal village is assemblies or panchayats. Generally men are village chiefs (*munda*) or village priests (*pahan*). But in some situations women can become village chief or priest. This can be as widows, when their husbands have been *munda* or *pahan*. A woman may be given this position only in instances where there are no male children, or where the sons are not yet majors. The tribals have taken active participation in many rebellions like the Kol rebellion of the 1830s in Singhbhum, the

present Jharkhand, the great Santhal rebellion of the 1850s, the Munda uprising of the end of the nineteenth century, and in the campaigns of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha.

### **3.5. Dalit Society**

Dalits are given the lowest social status in the traditional Hindu social structure. In the past they were believed to be so impure that caste Hindus considered their presence to be polluting. The impure status was related to their historic hereditary occupations that caste Hindus considered to be “polluting” or debased, such as working with leather, etc.

Dalit is not a new word. Apparently, it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of ‘depressed classes,’ a term the British used for what are now called the Scheduled Castes. It gives the meaning as ‘ground, broken or reduced to pieces generally.’ It derives from a Sanskrit word meaning ‘crushed’ and is understood in all the Indian languages. It has been said that Sanskrit has borrowed the root word ‘dal’ from Hebrew which may refer either to physical weakness or to a lowly, insignificant position in society. Since the early 1970s, the word has come into increasingly wider usage in the press and in common parlance where it is normally used in the original, narrower, caste based sense. In the communal analysis of caste, Dalits are the people within Hindu society who belong to these castes which Hindu religion considers to be polluting by virtue of hereditary occupation.

In 1970s the Dalit Panthers revived the term and expanded its reference to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. The Dalit Panthers was founded by two writers, Namdev Dhasal and Raja Dhale, in April 1972. The very emergence of the Dalit

Panthers was due to the increasing exploitation and humiliation of the Dalit community in the villages and towns of Maharashtra. The main objective of this movement was to create a counter-culture and to bestow separate identity for the Dalits in society.

Caste and Brahminic or Sanskritic Hinduism reinforce each other and discriminate against the Dalit segment of India's population. The Vedas, Smritis and Shastras were all instruments of torture which Hinduism used against the untouchables. Untouchables could not enter Hindu temples and caste-Hindu houses or take water from common village wells. Most Dalits did the most degrading jobs, lived on the outskirts of villages and were variously known as outcastes, Panchamas (fifth colour), Ati-Sudras (extreme Sudras), Avarnas (outside the Varna scheme), and Antyajjas (the last born).

Generally the village where Dalits live is divided into *Oor* and Colony. The former is the residential area of the higher castes, and the latter the residential area of the Dalits. The *Oor* territory is understood by the people of the village as sacred and pure, because it is the place where higher caste people live and temples are situated. The Colony is seen as polluted and low, since it is the place the Dalits live and where lies the cremation ground or cemetery and paddy fields. This is the area that is closely related to the services that the Untouchables have to do, that is, burning or burying the dead and labouring on the land. It is also a low-lying area, which gets flooded during the monsoon. Even the church, presbytery and convent in the colony area are seen together with the Colony. From the point of view of the *Oor* people, the church and its priests and nuns are placed on par with the Dalits. They associate Christianity only with the Dalits. For them it is a Dalit religion. Anybody from the *Oor* coming into the Colony is hardly seen. If there is some work to be done with the Dalits the person from the *Oor* stands on the road

before the first house in the Colony, transacts business and goes away. This territorial division of pure *Oor* and impure Colony has a bearing also on how the people are valued according to the space or territory they reside in. A *Oor* person is valued highly and respected with human dignity, but a Colony person is polluted and is marginalized outside the village. S/he is considered not only lower than the *Oor* people, but also sub-human, if not non-human.

To Ambedkar, Indian villages were not a single social unit as often claimed, but constituted mainly of castes. In *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writing and Speeches*, Vol. 1, Ambedkar argues as follows:

. . . the Hindus live in the village and the Untouchables live in the Ghettoes. The object is to free the Untouchables from the thralldom of the Hindus. So long as the present arrangement continues it is impossible for the Untouchables either to free themselves from the yoke of the Hindus or to get rid of their Untouchability. It is the close knit association of the Untouchables with the Hindus living in the same villages which marks them out as Untouchables and which enables the Hindus to identify them as being Untouchables. India is admittedly a land of villages and so long as the village system provides an easy method of marking out and identifying the Untouchables, the Untouchable has no escape from Untouchability. (425)

Economically, the Touchables (Hindus) form a strong and powerful community, while the Untouchables are a poor and a dependent community. Socially the Touchables occupy the ruling race, while the Untouchables occupy the position of a subject race of

hereditary bondsmen. It is further states that in every village the 'touchables' have a code, which the untouchables are required to follow. These include the following:

1. The untouchables must live in separate quarters away from the habitation of the Hindus.
2. Their quarters must be located towards the south, since the south is the most inauspicious of the four directions.
3. They must observe the rule of distance, pollution or shadow of pollution as the case may be.
4. They should not acquire wealth such as land or cattle and also should not build a house with a tiled roof.
5. They have no right to put on a clean dress, wear shoes, put on a watch or gold ornaments.
6. Even giving high-sounding names to their children is prohibited.
7. Sitting on a chair in the presence of a Hindu, riding on a horse or palanquin through the village, taking a procession of untouchables through village, not saluting a Hindu, speaking a cultured language and coming into the village on a sacred day— all these are considered as offences under these codes.
8. Besides, going about speaking and thereby fouling the air and food of the Hindus, and wearing the outward marks of a touchable and passing himself off a touchable are also offences punishable under these codes.

The code also consists of duties that the untouchables have to perform for the 'touchables.' These include carrying the message of any event to the house of a Hindu and doing all manual work on important occasions without any remuneration. Such duties also include resubmission of their women to members of the village community to be made the subject of indecent fun.

To ensure that these codes of conduct are strictly observed and adhered to, most villages have the village panchayat, known as Chavadi Court in Tamil Nadu. If any of the untouchables go against the order of the chief of the village panchayat who is often the head of the caste Hindus in the village, they are subjected to rigorous punishment. The caste Hindus do so with a view to striking terror in the hearts of untouchables and to demonstrate the absolute power of the village panchayat chief.

Such is the picture of the inside life in an Indian village. In this Republic there is no place for democracy to the oppressed. There is no room for equality for the deprived. There is no room for liberty and there is no room for fraternity for the marginalized. The Indian village is the very negation of a Republic in the view of a Dalit. If it is a Republic, it is a Republic of the Touchables, by the Touchables and for the Touchables. The Republic is an Empire of the caste Hindus over the Untouchables. It is a kind of colonialism of the caste Hindus designed to exploit the Untouchables. The Untouchables are there only to wait, serve and submit.

### **3.6. Caste System in Tamil Society**

Unlike other parts of India where caste can be comfortably classified under the Varna divisions, Tamil society is characterized primarily by the three-fold division of



Brahmins, Non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas or 'Untouchables.' While the Brahmins are considered the highest in the caste hierarchy, the non-Brahmin castes are considered the middle-level castes. The more visible middle-level castes in Tamil Nadu in general include the land-owning such as Vellalar, Naicker, Ahamudayar (Servai), Maravar (Thevar), Kallar, Konar (Yadavar) and the Telugu-speaking Naidu; trading castes such as Chettiyar, artisan castes like Kusavar or Kuyavan (potter), Kothan (mason), Thachan (carpenter), Kollan (blacksmith), Thattans or Nahai Aasari (goldsmith); and the servicing castes such as Ambattan (barbers) and Vannan (washermen). The more visible castes among the Scheduled Castes are the Pallars, Parayars and Chakkiliyars.

The Parayas or Parayars were close to the bottom in the caste hierarchy and were engaged in diverse fields of activities. The term *parayan* is derived from the Tamil word *parai* (drum), as certain Parayars act as drummers at funerals and village festivals. In the southern part of Tamil Nadu the Parayars are considered below the Pallars in the caste hierarchy. But the Parayars do not acknowledge the Pallars' supremacy. For earning their livelihood, they continue to play drums on auspicious occasions and others for caste Hindus as well as Pallars. They also make and sold household items made of palm leaf. Their association with leather works and drum beating and the habit of eating beef seem to have had an impact in pushing them down the caste ladder. The Pallars consider themselves to be superior to the Parayars in social status and treat them as untouchables. They use the Parayars as a symbol of abuse, although the only difference between the two is that the Pallars refrain from eating beef while the Parayars relish it. Next to the Parayars in the caste hierarchy are the Chakkiliyars. Their traditional occupations are sweeping, scavenging and removing dead animals, tanning and making footwear.

The relationship between the higher castes and lower ones has always been very hostile in Tamil Nadu, particularly between the middle-level castes and the Dalits. And in such a relationship, the losers are often those at the bottom of the caste ladder and the gainers are those above due to unjust and unequal distribution of power and status.

**3.7. Dalit Culture:** The form of subjection of Dalits is different from the form of subjection of the Adivasis. While the Adivasis were excluded ‘spatially,’ the Dalits were excluded ‘socially’ and were specifically denied religious roles on grounds of ritual impurity.

The term ‘Dalit’ includes many ‘scheduled castes’ in it. Dalit culture differs according to the caste. The costume and food habits are the important differences that commonly found in these castes. A few Dalits (castes) eat beef while a few do not. Like tribal culture Dalit culture is also associated with music and song/rhythm. Each event like festival, marriage, birth, and death has a specific rhythm or song. Love, kidding, and everyday incidents form the content of these songs.

The factors which have brought about changes in tribal culture have brought about changes in Dalit culture also. That too spread of education and Christianity has made a lot of impact on Dalit culture. Many Dalits have embraced Christianity due to various reasons like poverty, and illtreatment by the caste Hindus.

The survival of Dalit culture has depended on the three forms of power and oppression (social, economical and political) exerted upon it, and on the level of surviving energy and vitality available to individuals and groups to organize their own experience and their mutual activities in isolation from dominant culture.

### 3.8. Dalit Economy and Polity

Dalits, who have sub-human identity according to their living space, are seen as innately unqualified to own land. Instead, they are only to be objects for the use of the higher castes in the *Oor*. The Dalits internalized this objecthood as theirs to the extent that even though there had been many chances to buy and own lands they gave up the idea simply. It is because they, as the Colony people, felt diffident about owning land in the village. One of the ways that symbolized the Dalits' dependence and poverty is the service of village watchman, one of the five traditional services that the Dalits did for the *Oor* higher castes. In many aspects he symbolized the state of dependence and poverty in which the Dalits lived. The village watchman had many duties, among which four were important. They were,

i) regulating the water flow from the village tank to the land and guarding the paddy

fields,

ii) taking messages of death and festivals to other villages where the relatives of the *Oor*

higher higher castes are,

iii) guarding the village during major village festivals,

iv) cremating dead bodies.

The village watchman was mainly in charge of channeling water to the fields of standing crops according to the decisions taken in the *Oor* council, and no farmer in the village was allowed to regulate the water to their fields. He had to do the duty at night to allow other farming activities to go on during the day. He was paid in grains most of the time or in cash sometimes on a per acre basis.

The service of village watchman had always been seen as a servile work and considered less than human. This was reinforced in the ways in which the village watchman was treated. Not only was he not paid in proportion to the work he did but also he used to be given handouts such as grain, cloth and remainders of the threshing floor, given water by pouring it into his palms instead of in a glass. All this signified their subordination to the *Oor*.

Some upper castes in Tamil Nadu are convinced that the Parayars are not capable of owning any land or any property. They believe that there is something in the Parayars' blood that does not let them become owners; they are only suitable for being servants. There are also proverbs and sayings that reinforce this idea not only in the minds of the higher caste people but also in the minds of the Parayars. Some such proverbs are: 'you can believe it when you hear that donkeys own land but do not when you hear that Parayars own land'; 'salt thrown into the sea and money given to the Parayars are the same'; 'if a Parayar is seen in a joyful mood, it means he has his porridge in his pot'; 'the relationship with a barren woman and the relationship with the Parayars without a piece of land cannot be fruitful.'

Apart from these C. Joe Arun tells about two myths told to him by both the higher caste Vanniyars and the Parayars. One myth runs like this:

In the beginning, God (*Parama Sivan*) conducted a competition for his two sons. They were asked to cultivate paddy on the land and whoever reaped the bigger harvest would win the competition. The elder one worked sincerely on the land day in and day out, and at the end, he brought three hundred bags of unhusked

paddy to God. But God was not there to see the harvest so he went to rest. Later God came to the threshing ground to see the sons' harvest where he saw only the younger brother standing on the floor in front of the paddy of the elder son. Mistaking it for that of the younger son he awarded him with the land and when the elder son came, God asked him to go and work on the land of the younger son.

(235)

These myths, the Parayars feel, were used to justify their state of landlessness as something willed by God that they would not be able to change whatever they did to reverse the situation. The proverbs and myths, and the discourses repeated by the higher castes, the Parayars believe, made them internalize their state of landlessness as part of their genetic make-up and this was further strengthened by the life they lived for so long as labourers.

In fact, during the British period the rulers had tried to implement some affirmative measures to the welfare of the outcastes. British Government provided the outcastes with free lands known as Panchami Lands. The history of Panchami land is traced back to the 1870s during which the missionaries from Scotland who established churches among the Parayars in Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu area for the first time brought to light the plight of the Parayars. The then District Collector of Chengalpattu, J. H. A. Tremen Heere published a report on the conditions of the Dalits in 1891. On having learnt the abject conditions of the Dalits through this report, the British Colonial Government passed a law in the British Parliament to assign land to them. Since the land was allotted to Dalits who were called the fifth *varna*, *panchamas*, it was called Panchami land. The law said that the Dalits were strictly forbidden to sell or give it on

lease within ten years of allotment, and if they wanted to sell it after ten years of use, they could do so only to other Dalits. The British Government knowing well the wily nature of the higher castes laid down strict terms and conditions, and one of the terms was that the lands could not be sold, mortgaged, exchanged, leased or gifted away to non-Dalits. In the 1950s, due to a severe drought and famine all over Tamil Nadu, many Parayars moved to other parts of the state for survival. The higher caste people, using this opportunity, allegedly bought the land in exchange for food, a few measures of rice, ragi, millet and for a mere pittance and forced the Parayars to imprint their thump mark on blank court stamp papers. But later these issues led to serious conflicts which resulted in Panchami Land Struggle. All these efforts and struggles have made the Dalits to own some land. But much has to be done to bring a considerable change in their economic life.

Indian low-caste politics are generally traced back to Jotirao Phule who is regarded as the forerunner of both the Dalit and low-caste movements. From a methodological view point, Dalit politics consist partly of such practices as rallies to promote reservation and the establishment of political parties, and partly as political discourse self-reflexively analyzing and interpreting caste discrimination in contemporary India.

Around 1917, the political movement of Dalits and low-caste people split and evolved as two separate movements. The Dalit movement gained a stronghold in Western India, while the non-Brahmin movement, consisting primarily of low-caste Sudras, established a stronghold in South India. During colonialism, both movements had in common their opposition to the higher castes, rather than British colonial rule. The non-

Brahmin movement concentrated on waging a struggle against the Brahmins, and thereby focused on mobilizing all non-high-caste-groups. The untouchable movement, which emerged under the leadership of B. R. Ambedkar in Western India, focused on the specifically outcaste position of Dalits, and became increasingly opposed to any joint coalition with the low-caste Sudras.

Later, in the post-independence phase the split between the Dalit movement and the non-Brahmin movement was largely overcome with the founding of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) on 14 April 1984 (Ambedkar's birth anniversary). The BSP referred to the united segments of untouchables, Sudras, tribals and all those considered to be of little value or importance according to the high-caste norms. Towards the end of the 1980s Janata Dal under V. P. Singh emerged as Dalit and low-caste all-India party to be reckoned with.

Thus the issues of Dalit and low-caste have been playing a vital role in Indian politics. The strength of Dalits in terms of polity has yet to be made 'felt.'

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## Chapter Four

### Women: Victims of Patriarchy

#### 4.1. Introduction

Gender based discrimination is rooted in all aspects of social, economical and political existence. Women's subordination is all round— economic, social, religious, cultural, political and ideological. Low representation in governance and decision making process, low education and economic status and social exclusion are the crucial challenges to social inclusion. The problem of tribal and Dalit women is more complex and double rounded than other women. They are not only the victims of gender biased discriminations but also suffer by the severe caste based discriminations. Tribal and Dalit women have many disadvantages to compare with upper caste women. They are socially untouchable, economically exploited, politically bypassed, educationally illiterate and sexually trafficked.

Feminist literary theories speak of a term “double burden” which refers to the dual oppression experienced by women who are paid workers and unpaid homemakers, wives and mothers in the household. This concept assumes that the primary site of a woman's oppression is in the private sphere and the oppression doubles when she takes up the employment in the public sphere. But the tribal and Dalit women bear the “triple burden” when they participate in the employment.

As far as oppression of women is concerned, the conditions are no better in India, where ‘defenseless’ women are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment. Many of them go for cheap labour and so economic dependency becomes inevitable. Irrespective of urban or rural area most women have experienced sexual harassment and molestation.

Many of these rape cases go unnoticed as the victims do not dare to face humiliation and public shame. Rape is also used to reiterate the female subservience and to establish male power and generally they serve as a threat to tribal and Dalit women who try to raise their voice against these atrocities. 'Might is right' policy is adopted to keep the tribal and Dalit agricultural labourers under control.

Talking generally about Indian women Mahatma Gandhi has somewhere remarked that woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. And he added that she has the right to participate in very minutest detail in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. Here Gandhi is talking about the expected role of Indian women, which is quite different from their actual role and position in the society. In the strongly patrilineal Indian society the women, in general, occupy a position lower than that of the men in all spheres of life.

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy worked hard for the betterment of women folk. He strongly believed that the Vedas and scriptures of Hinduism are responsible for the degraded position of women. He started the Self-Respect Movement to remove the social evils that mainly hindered women's progress.

However, there is a basic contradiction between the concept of Indian womanhood and the actual position of women in Indian society. A woman is the source of strength, an object of purity and veneration. A virtuous wife is a *sati-savitri* and she possesses great power. A mother is to be highly respected. Motherhood has been glorified in Indian literature, sayings and thoughts.

Whatever the social or historical reason may be, for this apparent difference in the concept and actual role of women in India, it becomes clear that the early Hindu society realized the importance of the role of women in the socio-cultural life of the community. But being patrilineal it relegated her to a second position. The loss in position was aptly compensated and stabilized by glorifying womanhood, particularly the motherhood.

With independence women and Dalits secured all those rights that were returned to Indians as the members of a free country. But even today women and Dalits have not secured certain rights that are constitutionally enforced. Such rights and provisions are rarely practiced in reality.

Women are expected to keep the secrets of the family and are coerced to conform to the image of silent sufferers. The more they suffer the more they are respected and empathized with. Suffering is one of the values imposed on the Indian women and are socialized to hear and suffer in silence right from their childhood, conforming with the image of the sacrificing, self-less woman for whom the self has no meaning. For the upper class woman modernity brought in the possibility of an individual domain but the subaltern woman's identity is bound with her community. Her identity is individual and collective simultaneously. Her story is the story of the community.

The dominating communities have always viewed the marginalized, with a feeling of fear and contempt. They had constructed ideological, textual walls of separation so as to keep them suppressed. They have created the most unpleasant images of the suppressed that, to shatter these stereotyped images it takes a lot of unlearning and rereading of the texts. According to these imposed images, for many, women are sexual

objects, seducers, reproductive machines with an air of mystery around them. They have to be ruled, domesticated or else they may ruin the social institutions of family and marriage. They believe that women are not endowed with any appreciable skills other than those that can please the male members. Woman is endowed with this image by our culture and society. Whereas a lower class woman is pictured as aggressive, lacking in female grace and sexually over active. A tribal woman is portrayed as a free being with no restrictions or norms. To come of these misconceptions constructed over the years, the study of their lives is very essential. The portrayal of lower class women as muted ones cannot be fully accepted because these women have contested the restrictive structures in their own way and always resisted the exploitations by adopting various strategies. Many times they have lost their battles and the significance of the lower class women's agency is that their battles are fought every day, every second, over issues that may be termed insignificant and trivial by the women activists of the elite classes who fight for greater issues of prominence like political representation, divorce and property rights. Everyday necessities like sanitation, water, minimum hours of rest, violence-free atmosphere at home and work place, free space for work, child care during working hours and medical facilities are scarcely available and she has to wage her own battles to have an access to the bare necessities of life.

A lower class woman's identity has to be understood in between these extreme points, the way she survives battling for the basic needs without giving up, the way she manages to keep her creative abilities intact amid the monotonous life patterns, the kind of survival strategies she employs to survive and improve. The personal narratives provide us with an understanding of the communities and groups that society always kept

at a distance. The subaltern groups cannot be studied under one particular framework as their lives and oppressive patterns that condition their lives are diverse in their own ways.

The women we see in the works of these writers belong to tribal and Dalit communities. Women of these communities suffer twin disadvantages: (a) lower socio-economic status, and (b) gender based disabilities. Low education and low household income compel them to get into low-level wage earning activities; as domestic servants, cart-pullers, helpers, construction labourers, bobbin fillers, coolies, scrap collectors, rag pickers, vendors, and so on. These are all low paid occupations with little security or status. They are also required to take care of the needs of adult and younger members of their household. Looking after their siblings and doing other household chores have to be undertaken by them.

Thus, in a struggle for survival, the contribution of female members of these communities is several-fold. And yet, there is very little recognition or acknowledgement of what the female members do. The parents force their daughters to discontinue studies, and go out to earn and supplement the household income. Some married women work for their living in addition to doing domestic chores. Their unemployed, disabled or drunken husbands shout at them and demand food, money and other services.

Not that all of these women suffer such experience silently. In a few cases, women desert their husbands and even children. This indicates the preparedness on the part of these women to retaliate and to teach such men a lesson by snapping relationships. Such instances of desertion or remarriage are not looked down upon in these communities. These women do participate in social, economical and cultural activities.



The migrant tribal woman labourers have to face such traumatic and excruciating experiences during their work at distant places. They are afraid very much of the powerful contractors or the middlemen as they feel that if they report about their awful working conditions to the government officials, they would be either oppressed or even killed by the contractors. Most of the tribal woman labourers are illiterate and ignorant of the places/government offices where they have to lodge their complaints. Even the government officials are not being able to fully protect the migrant labourers' sufferings because the labourers are properly tutored by the contractors to tell the inspecting officials that they are happy with the working conditions. And the tribal woman labourers actually do so because in the event of disobedience of the contractors' directives, they may lose their job.

The accommodation provided for the migrant tribal woman labourers working at different labour centres is not only inadequate but also unhygienic. The tribal migrant labourers are quartered in small huts. Besides there are no arrangements for drinking water and there are no toilets.

The greatest humiliation that the tribal woman labourers have to suffer is that of sexual exploitation. Apart from being raped by contractors, young tribal girls have to face same fate at the hands of local hoodlums. The labour contractors and the employers think that the tribal female labourers do not have any character as they drink and dance and can sleep with any one for a small favour.

Non-payment, underpayment for the entrusted work, discriminatory work allotment, allocation of menial jobs and service oriented work, export of women to

distant places adds to the misery of tribal women. Changes in their environment and traditional ways create not only a psychological disenchantment but also render them physically helpless.

The women, in their tribes, participate in worships, rituals, etc., and enjoy a better status than the caste Hindus in some aspects, but not in these two important aspects—property rights and political participation. The land passes through the male line. The society is both patrilineal and patrilocal. Further, women perform a major share of the total social labour. The result of their labour is accumulated in male hands. The other important inequality is that of political participation. The traditional village assembly is virtually an all-male institution. Membership is of the male head of the household or someone else in his stead. It is only in the rare circumstance that if there is no suitable male in the household that a woman may be a member of the assembly (*panchayat*).

#### **4.2. Women in Mahasweta Devi's Works**

*Breast Stories*, and “Mother of 1084,” and “Bayen” from *Five Plays* are taken for the analysis here. The researcher has considered the short story “Breast-Giver” (from *Breast Stories*) and the play “Mother of 1084” which deal with non-tribal characters mainly to make it clear that Mahasweta Devi is equally concerned with all women whether they are tribal or Dalit or Brahmin or poor or rich.

##### **4.2.1. *Breast Stories***

This book is a collection of three short stories: “Draupadi,” “Breast-Giver,” and “Behind the Bodice.” These stories have female body as their common theme. These female bodies are exploited by the male who act in different roles— police and husband.

In all the three stories the breast occupies the prominent position. In “Draupadi,” it is treated as an erotic object of torture and revenge. In “Breast-Giver,” it is a survival object transformed into a commodity. In “Behind the Bodice,” it is an object of sexuality.

**“Draupadi”:** On the surface, “Draupadi” seems to tell a familiar tale from the most revered Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. Draupadi, in the epic, is the most celebrated heroine married to the five sons of Pandu. She is a gifted woman for she is protected from an insult to her chastity. The incarnate Krishna provides her with clothes when the brother of enemy chief attempts to pull her sari. But she could not be stripped to shamelessness for the idea of Sustaining Law rises to her rescue in the shape of Lord Krishna. On the contrary, the episode retold is a telling commentary on the present social system which is bent on getting rid of all those persons who defy its insensitive ethics.

As we look at the socio-historical background of the story we can see how it is linked with the Naxalbari peasants’ rebellion of 1967 in which the peasants and the tribal cultivators joined hands with the intellectuals to resist the government-landlord nexus for greater freedom and reform.

Dopdi Mejhen, the protagonist in the story, is an adivasi revolutionary. The innocent tribal woman grows into a hardcore rebel and becomes notorious in the circles of the privileged, long before the story begins. She has been a witness to the death of Bashai Tudu and her own husband, Dulna Mejhi. As soon as Bashai Tudu is killed, Dulna and Dopdi decide to continue the struggle. So they become one with the people for whose sake the heroes like Bashai strove and died. Strengthened by the support from the couple the masses begin to demand better wages from the landlords. Irked by the unusual

situation the land-owners decide to suppress the revolt. The government responds quickly whenever its patrons get threatened, and goes to their rescue. As a part of this, the army takes to the forest in search of the main instigators. Having known well about the forest's topography, Dopdi and Dulna disappear into it.

This time, Captain Arjan Singh, the architect of Operation Bakuli, and a reliable army man, is sent to operate in the forest belt of Jhadkhani where the 'black-skinned' couple is in action. Surprisingly enough, Arjan Singh, with all his experience, could not make much headway in his assignment. Instead, he feels threatened whenever his plans are foiled by the illiterate couple. The official records show how their memories haunt the army and how their mysterious escapades cause anxiety and depression in Arjan Singh.

Dulan and Dopdi worked at harvests, *rotating* between Birbhum . . . and Bankura. In 1971, in the famous *Operation* Bakuli, when three villages were *cordoned* off and *machine gunned*, they too lay in the ground, faking dead. In fact they were the main culprits. Murdering Surja Sahu and his son, occupying upper-caste wells and tubewells during the drought, not surrendering those three young men to the police. In the morning, at the time of body count, the couple could not be found. The blood-sugar of Captain . . . rose at once. . . . (*Breast Stories* 20)

Thus, Dopdi and Dulna have escaped throwing dust in the army's eyes into "Neanderthal darkness" for a long time. Whenever the army attempts to pierce that dark by an armed search, many migrant labourers, male and female farm workers are compelled to "meet their Maker against their will." The couple's unflinching commitment scares many an officer out of his wits. When Captain Arjan Singh is forced

to retire prematurely, Mr. Senanayak, the specialist in combat and extreme-left politics, takes upon himself the task of hunting the couple. Aware of the opposition's strength, he prepares his subjects mentally by quoting from the army Handbook. He knows that Dopdi and Dulna belong to the category of guerilla fighters. Senanyak, like a typical military man, adopts the principle: "*In order to destroy the enemy, become one*" (*Breast Stories* 22). Nevertheless he seems to have understood them only theoretically for he finds no other way than getting rid of them by means of apprehension and elimination.

But the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor continues. More people and more places rise against the establishments that have thrived on them for ages. Dopdi and Dulna, since their escape from Bakuli, have worked at the house of every landowner. The dehumanized act of elimination which the privileged resort to with tacit support of the people in power has only aggravated the situation further, resulting in a senseless orgy of murders, assaults, counter-assaults, sadistic tortures. Having been informed, the army enters the forest, and shoots Dulna Mejhi as he is lying on his stomach on a flat stone, dipping his face to drink water. What is more shocking is that the corpse of Dulna Mejhi is used as to attract more rebels. The method of trapping adopted by the representatives of civilized society symbolizes the degeneration of man into a cold-blooded man-hunter.

Neither the fear of torture nor the loss of life desists the committed persons, like Dopdi, from fighting for common good. She holds the fort after Dulna's killing. In fact, his death seems to have given a new direction to her struggle. So she learns to be bold. The government declares two hundred rupees as a reward for her arrest. Dopdi's activities cause a war scare among the army persons. As a result, the hunt for her is

intensified. Freakish as he seems to be, Senanayak adapts himself to the new situation. He might not be satisfied until he sees the annihilation of the last of the enemy group. If anyone is captured in open combat “their eyeballs, intestines, stomachs, hearts, genitals and so on become the food of fox, vulture, hyena, wildcat, ant and worm, and the untouchables go off happily to sell their bare skeletons” (*Breast Stories* 25).

Having found that it is not easy to dispatch the persons who are good at using primitive weapons, the army sets traps at every bend of the falls where Dopdi and her followers are expected. At long last, she is caught while she is acting as a courier. She knows about her arrest and the tortures that follow. The story does not end here. The apprehension of Dopdi Mejhén, in fact, sets going the story. And what happens to Dopdi hereafter gives it a new dimension. Apprehended in the evening, Dopdi is taken to the camp. Senanayak, after his dinner, issues orders to “prepare her for the night.”

Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nailheads shift from her brain. 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? (*Breast Stories* 34)

A series of ironies is set off by the opposition of Dopdi and Draupadi in the story. Dopdi, thus, becomes a victim of multiple rapes. The process of ‘making’ her continues till dawn for everyone in the camp is allowed to pacify his animal desires. 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. Senanayak and his subjects appear to have surpassed their counterparts in the epic. In the epic, the enemy's attempt to strip Draupadi is rendered useless by the miracles of incarnate Krishna.

Senanayak orders her to be brought in for further interrogation. But, suddenly there is trouble. She behaves as if she has gone crazy. She pours the water meant for her washing down on the ground. She tears her piece of cloth with an indomitable laughter. Senanayak is surprised to see her naked walking towards him. Dopdi, when asked what all this is and why she doesn't put cloth on, replies, "with her hand on her hip . . . the object of your search. . . . You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me? . . . what is the use of clothes? You can strip me, how can you cloth me again? Are you a man?" (*Breast Stories* 36).

The spontaneity with which Dopdi reacts is in fact reflects Mahasweta Devi's revolutionary attitude to such inhuman treatment of a human by another human and challenges male supremacy and brutality on the woman.

In both the cases as well as in the original Draupadi myth, we see an extreme form of male subjugation and oppression. A desire for freedom of choice, a desire for learning and the ability to resist meet with sexual harassment in public. Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi is an aberration, an anathema, and hence incapable of saving herself from physical violence. (Uniyal 106)

What a woman considers sacred and important in her life is plundered. So there is nothing more that she is scared about. Decided to be naked at her own insistence, Dopdi

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, *kounter me*” (*Breast Stories* 37). Dopdi remains unconquered. And her defiance is not only an act of militant spontaneity but an infallible challenge to the male-dominated world. Here we witness an emergence of a female body badly bruised and hurt and yet capable of arousing fear. Dopdi’s abject refusal is a significant departure from the usual norms. Seemingly it is not Dopdi who has been “stripped,” in her courage lays her ability to strip the mask of civility. It is she who rips the male hegemony by walking naked in front of the oppressor. “She stresses on the materiality of what women are for men; literally a ‘target’ on which they can exercise their power” (Goel 208). In her ironic dissent is her rejection of and challenge to male identity and sexuality. Unarmed, unclothed, underprivileged woman is able to give a voice to her unspoken grief through this gesture of defiance. In contrast to the Draupadi of the epic, she remains more heroic but more oppressed and so more authentic human being. In the face of gory of fact of death by annihilation by the patriarchal and political system, she seeks to vindicate the very principles of life. Unlike the ancient Draupadi, she does not seek help from the existing patriarchal order, for there is none. She seeks revenge on her own terms. It is this challenge to the male authority which becomes a significant gesture in the story.

This story sketches the gendered subject enmeshed in the lateral mappings and relationships which reveal the cartography of power and social control. Significantly, the protagonist Dopdi stirs mythic memories and their subject-representation and constitution is deliberately palimpsest and contradictory. Draupadi, the heroine of the epic the *Mahabharata*, is a unique and exceptional woman, married to five husbands, yet odd and



unpaired. An unforgettable episode in the epic is the attempt made by the enemy chief, Dushyashana, to disrobe Draupadi. But there is the miraculous intervention of the divine law-giver—Lord Krishna—and Draupadi is infinitely clothed and cannot be publicly stripped. Dopdi (the tribal form of the Sanskrit name) in Mahasweta Devi's story is stripped and gang-raped as punishment for her political misdemeanour and impertinence. Dopdi refuses to put on her 'cloth' as she mocks the law-giver, Senanayak. Thus Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi acquires a new self-definition and becomes the active maker of her own meaning. She refuses, refuses to remain the object of a male narrative, asserts herself as 'subject' and emphasizes on the truth of her own presence and becomes that which counters male knowledge, power and glory.

**“Breast-Giver”**: The protagonist's name in this story is Jashoda. Mahasweta Devi keeps Jashoda's name unchanged from the Sanskrit scriptural form. The mythic Jashoda's story is well known. Jashoda is the mythic all-nurturing Mother-figure, the divine Mother suckling the Holy Child, Lord Krishna. The Jashoda of the story also fosters the children of the Haldar family as 'milk-mother.' But she is not as lucky as the mythic foster-mother of Lord Krishna. Because the present Jashoda has to die an orphan's death though she has her own children and her foster-children. Here Mahasweta Devi outlines woman's identity as body, worker and object. She is depicted as a typical Indian woman-wife-mother.

It is as if she were Kandalicharan's wife from birth, the mother of twenty children, living or dead, counted on her fingers. Jashoda does not remember at all when there was no child in her womb, when she didn't feel faint in morning, when Kangali's body didn't *drill* her body like a geologist in a darkness lit by an

oil lamp. She never had the time to calculate if she could or could not bear motherhood. (*Breast Stories* 39)

The above lines explain that she has been married at her early age and her body has not found rest from child-bearing process. She never asked for at least a year's pause or no pause was given to her by her husband. She has taken motherhood as her profession and considers her husband as 'guru.' She respects him as God. When he meets with an accident and is hospitalized, she fasts at the temple, goes through a ritual, and travels to the outskirts to pray at the feet of the local guru. She never once wants to blame her husband for the present misfortune. Her mother-love wells up for Kangalicharan as much as for the children. She wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a 'fulsome harvest.' She is fully a typical Indian woman whose unreasonable, unreasoning, and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children, "whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness, have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women from Sati-Savitri-Sita" (*Breast Stories* 47).

The second son of the Haldars whose wife is often pregnant is interested in his wife remaining beautiful at the same time. When he hears about Jashoda's surplus milk he tells his wife, "I've got a divine engine in my hands! You'll breed yearly *and* keep your body" (*Breast Stories* 50). In the rich son's view she is an engine. To preserve the 'shape' of his wife he thinks of hiring Jashoda for her surplus milk in her breasts. The entire Haldar family agrees to make Jashoda 'the infants' suckling mother.' When the second son puts this proposal before his mother,

She thinks to herself and realizes that the proposal was worth a million rupees. Daughters-in-law *will* be mothers. When they are mothers, they will suckle their children. Since they will be mothers as long as possible—progressive suckling will ruin their shape. Then if the sons look outside, or harass the maid-servants, she won't have a voice to object. Going out because they can't get it at home—this is just. If Jashoda becomes the infants' suckling mother, her daily meals, clothes on feast days, and some monthly pay will be enough. (*Breast Stories* 51)

When Jashoda tells Kangalicharan about this and tells him not to 'disturb' her much he contemplates on the proposal made by the Haldars that night. But his 'Gopal frame of mind' disappears instantly when he sees the amounts of grains-oil-vegetables coming from that house. At the same time his cunning male mind thinks and explains to Jashoda: "You will have milk in your breasts only if you have child in your belly. Now you will have to think about that and suffer. You are a faithful wife, a goddess. You will yourself will be pregnant, be filled with a child, rear it at your breast . . ." Innocent Jashoda realizes the justice of these words and says with tears in her eyes, "You are husband, you are guru, if I forget and say no, correct me. Where after all is the pain? . . . Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit?" (*Breast Stories* 51).

After her position as a wet nurse in the Haldars' house everyone's devotion to Jashoda becomes so strong that at weddings, naming, and sacred threading they invite her and give her the position of chief fruitful woman. Thus Jashoda becomes vocal and she herself starts thinking, "A woman breeds, so here medicine, there blood pressure, here doctor's visits. Showoffs! Look at me! I've become a year-breeder! So is my body

failing, or is my milk drying? Makes your skin crawl? I hear they are drying their milk with injishuns. Never heard of such things!” (*Breast Stories* 54).

But Jashoda’s fortune starts dwindling when the Mistress of the Haldar dies. The eldest daughter-in-law tells Jashoda that she will get food only if she takes the responsibility of cooking in the house. She has to give her consent finally as her husband refuses to take care of her by saying, “I don’t want to see your face again. Buzz off!” She also learns that her husband has developed an illicit affair with a woman. First, the house which treated her as milk-mother turns her down and then her husband deserts her. Half-crazed by the injustice of the world she comes to the Haldar house and joins as a cook. Jashoda’s good fortune was her ability to bear children. All this misfortune happens to her as soon as this vanishes. Once Basini’s crowd (the maid servant of the Haldar house) used to wash her feet and drink the water. Now Basini says easily, ““You’ll wash your own dishes. Are you my master, that I’ll wash your dishes. You are the master’s servant as much as I am”” (*Breast Stories* 59, 62). Even the Haldaress starts warning Jashoda for her loud voice. She understands that now no one will attend to a word she says. She cooks and serves in silence and in the late afternoon she goes to the temple porch and starts to weep.

As days pass her body seems to keel over. She does not understand why nothing pleases her. Everything seems confused inside her head. When she sits down to cook she thinks she’s the milk-mother of this house. She is going home in a showy sari with a free meal in her hand. Her breasts feel empty, as if wasted.

Due to excessive breast feeding (almost fifty children) she catches breast cancer. She is shifted to the hospital where she undergoes treatment for her breast cancer. The sores on the breasts start to spread rotten stink. In the beginning, Kanganicharan, her sons and a few boys from the Haldar house visit the hospital. But gradually they stop coming to hospital. She suffers a dreadful and hellish pain until she succumbs to the cancer. Jashoda who fed her own twenty and Haldar family's thirty children has to die with nobody around her. Her husband praised her when grocery from the Haldar house was coming to his house, but neglects her as soon as the grocery is stopped. She is not treated as a wife (by her husband) or as a human being (by the members of the Haldar house). The Haldar house almost worshipped her when she suckled the babies and neglects her when her breasts become dry. She is used as fruit and thrown as peel by the rich (the Haldar house) and the male (her husband). Once used for her will and now left empty and lacking Jashoda suffers a painful and sickened death. Her plentiful breasts now become a gaping wound. She dies friendless, with no one left to put a bit of water in the mouth. She lives a life of sacrifice for all, and dies forsaken by all.

**“Behind the Bodice”:** The story outlines the poignant life of a rural woman who is forced to become a whore. Gangor is a migrant labourer who migrates to Jharoa along with her clan people to save herself from semi famine. Upin, “the itinerant ace photographer,” comes in contact with this “highbreasted rural woman” by capturing her photograph when she “sits slack with her breast shoved into an infant’s mouth. The breast is covered with the end of her cloth” (*Breast Stories* 143). She works on a piece wage in the kilns for light bricks and tiles. Upin takes a photo of Gangor when he sees the baby suckling. She does not object, but she puts out her hand and asks for money. Upin takes

out all the money from his pocket and gives it to her. Upin, a professional photographer, is excited to see her “mammal projections.” He finds nothing wrong in it when Gangor demands him for money for taking her photograph. He sees some justice in the demand as he also earns money by selling these pictures. For him these “statuesque breasts” are things which have to be praised and respected. For him her breasts appear like “the paintings of Ajanta” and he is appreciative of “the cleavage of her Konark chest.”

Though Gangor exhibits presence of mind and business skill when she demands for hundred rupees per picture from Upin when he tries to capture photo for the second time, in fact she is a helpless woman who badly needs money to take care of her child and her husband. She is fed up with the kind of work and wages in the kilns. She tells Ujan (Upin’s assistant) with tears and keening, “with her cloth in her mouth. . . . Tell the camera-Sir, why not take me away? A cloth to wear . . . a bite to eat . . . a place to sleep for mother and child. . . . What to do Sir . . . no field, no land, living is very hard . . . pots and pans . . . stove and knife . . . cleaning rooms . . . laundry . . . I’ll do anything Sir . . .” (*Breast Stories* 146).

But Ujan sends her away threatening.

Upin can’t come out of the thought of Gangor’s “bodyline.” At the same time it seems that he anticipates some impending danger to these breasts when he says to Ujan, “Ujan . . . can’t keep such a *bodyline* . . . not a thing will remain—do you realize that the breasts of the girls at Elora are eroding?” (*Breast Stories* 147).

After a gap of some days Upin suddenly starts to look for Gangor. He walks and travels but cannot trace either Gangor or her group. Nobody says anything about where

they are. When, at last, he knows something about Gangor from the Caretaker, it startles him. Upin's pictures of Gangor have brought her to her present situation. She is refused by her husband and her people. They feel ashamed to be identified with Gangor in any way. This man's world begins to talk of her carelessly and ruthlessly. The Caretaker has no sympathy for Gangor when he says, "The Gangors of this world don't come to die Sir, they come to kill. Shameless country girl . . . jiggling her body all the time . . . saying to the market people, didn't snap your *photos*, snapped mine. See!" The present Gangor is a changed woman. Now she wears a red and yellow polyester cloth, smelling of stale dirt, a very dark choli, very insolent breasts, oiled and braided hair, darting suspicious glance. She has been made a whore. Upin's photography has changed her life completely. The police gang rape her. She lodges complaint and a court case also takes place, but she gets no justice. This only results in one more gang rape in the lock up. Ultimately she is branded as prostitute and becomes the same. The breasts which were a source of appreciation and respect now have become objects of attraction to lure clients. After coming to know about all these incidents since his last encounter with Gangor, Upin is left terrified. Gangor takes him to the shed as a client and makes a prostitute's offer which makes him dumbfounded with shock. "Will Gangor unwind her cloth, or just lift it? Do your stuff, twenty rupees. Spend the night, fifty, tell me quick" (*Breast Stories* 152, 156). The once Gangor who demanded hundred rupees per picture is now asking just fifty rupees to use her entire body for the whole night. Upin cannot bear to hear these words. Gangor also feels somewhere in her heart that Upin too is responsible for her present pitiable, indecent way of living. The same breasts about which Gangor was proud, the same breasts which Upin took photographs with a lot of praise have become

objects that can be used as they like just for a paltry sum. It is even disturbing for Upin when she takes off her choli and throws it at Upin. There are no breasts. “Two scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat. The two raging volcanic caters spew liquid lava at Upin” (*Breast Stories* 157). Upin stands up weaving unsteady. Unable to bear the sight of those empty breasts runs along the railway track and brings an end to his life himself. But these two issues– Gangor’s rape by the police and Upin’s death become no issues at all. Life turns to its normal mode as usual. No one by the name of Gangor lives there in Jharoa after this incident. The file of searching the missing Upin Puri sinks way under other files.

**4.2.2. *Five Plays*:** It is an anthology of five plays– “Mother of 1084,” “Aajir,” “Bayen,” “Urvashi and Johnny,” and “Water.” The first and the fourth contain non-tribal protagonists while the remaining have the untouchables or the tribals as protagonists. These plays vary in terms of the themes they deal with. In this chapter “Mother of 1084,” and “Bayen” are considered for discussion as they focus on women issues.

**“Mother of 1084”:** The play is set against the backdrop of the climactic phase of the annihilation of the urban Naxalites and its aftermath. The militant movement was started as a severe revolt of landless workers and tribal people against landlords and moneylenders. In the urban area, students were also attracted to join this movement and their families paid big prices for that. At the same time the play unfolds a moving story of an apathetic, apolitical mother who is ignorant of her own son and his ideals. This is an attempt to highlight the condition of the suppressed emotions of a mother and woman. The protagonist Sujata is a middle class woman, a sensitive wife and a loving mother but a stranger in her own house-hold that has reduced her to an insignificant cog. She finds



herself caught in a web— a conflict between a sympathetic mother and a silent protestor against the immoral tendencies of the members of her family. The conflict assumes a new form when she encounters cold indifference from the family at the news of Brati's death with which the play actually begins. Sujata feels suffocated under the weight of the stifling values enjoined on her by the patriarchal society. At the same time she does not venture to disentangle herself from those values. Though she is aware of her husband's womanizing and other vices, she does not protest against them. She is depicted as a woman who never cries out, and who does not even groan. She has a shadowy existence. She is subservient, silent, faithful and without an existence of her own. She continues to discharge her familial duties bearing calmly all kinds of humiliation.

The play unveils the hypocrisy of marriage system and family system and depicts the trauma of emotional breakdown, a kind of emotional exploitation of the female character. It concentrates on the social problem that assumes great importance. Sujata stands as an ideal mother that is beyond any doubt and this is why she feels guilty for Brati's death and tries to find out if she was responsible to any extent in Brati's killing. She decides to conduct a quest for the discovery of truth about her son which ends up as a self-discovery. She arrives at this discovery through a series of encounters and meetings with people beyond her circuit of experience. Through them, she intends to forge a connection with Brati or what he strove and died for. She visualizes in Brati's revolt, an articulation of the silent resentment she has carried against the members of her family. Sujata's meeting with the mother of Somu, one of the fellow activists of Brati, brings her face to face with the baffling reality when she says: "I lost my son, my son's father, and I, with this tortoise's life of mine shall live on forever, the two funeral pyres burning

within!” (*Five Plays* 7). The reference to a ‘tortoise’s life’ hints at the self protective and sheltered life which the woman needs to outgrow. In the suffering of the members of Somu’s family Sujata could hear an echo of her own silent scream of torment and desperation. Sujata’s meeting with Nandini, an activist and a faithful follower of Brati provides her with an insight into a part of her son’s life that she had never before known. She also learns that Brati, as a true rebel, did not allow his familial sentiments to prevail upon his revolutionary fervour and hence had not revealed his true self to Sujata.

Sujata’s visits to these people bring her in confrontation with certain secret areas of understanding and awareness when Nandini says: “It’s deadly crime when people do not belong to one another by virtue of kinship or ties of blood. Everyone remains a stranger these days to everyone. It’s a crime to allow this to persist. It’s an obligation these days to know one’s son” (*Five Plays* 21). Sujata realizes that by not trying to forge a relationship with Brati, she has unwittingly become part of a complacent and selfish society. Thus in the company of Nandini, the crippled girl who is nearly blinded by the police, and who continues to cherish hopes in human dignity, Sujata’s true self is unveiled.

The reaction of her family members towards Brati’s death seems shocking. The family remains coldly indifferent to Brati’s tragic death and focuses its attention mainly on saving its social prestige and for that the family tries to keep that news hidden from society. Sujata’s husband Dibyanath always believes himself as the master and his wife as his slave. He is presented as a typical monarchic husband who holds the view that a wife has to love, respect and obey her husband. He is not even willing to go to identify Brati’s dead body. He even advises Sujata not to identify Brati’s dead body. The only

thing that comes, at this juncture, to the mind of her husband is whether it would be alright to park his car in front of the morgue. He makes all the efforts to see that Brati's name should not appear in the news paper. All these happenings worsen Sujata's condition. She feels, "Jyothi and Jyothi's father . . . (*pause*) are rushing about the place to hush up the news . . . (*pause*) . . . and so I'm all alone . . ." (*Five Plays* 5). The issue doesn't stop to this extent but after that her family members even try to wipe out all those memories that are related to Brati, which is like killing Brati's soul. They remove Brati's photograph from drawing room wall and even hide his belongings just to wipe out his memories. The stark insensitivity of the family members is exposed when they insist on Sujata to wipe out any such detail. Brati's family even snatches his name and so he dies as a 'Corpse No. 1084' and thus makes Sujata the mother of 1084.

Until Brati's death Sujata felt as a part of the family but Brati's death changes her thinking. She suddenly realizes that the family, in which she is living, has no concern with her presence and that she and Brati had never been the part of that family. She has no place of her own in her family. Family's negligent attitude for Sujata can be often seen. We know that her presence or absence at important occasions at home does not matter much for the family when she answers Nandini's call. "Nandini? . . . Yes, this is Brati's mother . . . OK, I'll come . . . Right, at four o'clock then . . . No, I'm not going to the bank today. It's Tuli's engagement today . . . No, they didn't ask me when they fixed the day" (*Five Plays* 6).

Sujata is alienated by her family and she lives all alone amongst them. She comes to know all about this only when she becomes aware of the cause for which Brati had revolted. But she realizes that she and Brati both underwent the same injustice. It can be

said that Brati was very close to Sujata when he lived, and so his death leaves an unfathomable vacuum for Sujata which she tries to fill with his memories. Sujata finds Brati's presence in the silence of his room and that is why she loves to spend maximum time in his room and always keeps the keys of it with herself. She cannot go away from Brati and he remains by her side always. Brati, from his childhood, knows Sujata's aloofness and therefore Brati's death shatters Sujata's life. She never blames Brati in front of anyone. She makes up her mind for not to seek consolation from those who first think of themselves when Brati's dead body was still in morgue. As the play progresses Sujata's identification with Brati becomes total and on the other hand, the rift between her and her husband becomes unbridgeable. In fact, for Sujata, Dibyanath dies the moment Brati dies. Her discovery of Brati and his cause helps her rediscover her self and her cause as a mother, a woman, and above all, a human being. So, finally, she revolts against the hypocrisy of the system. The play ends with Sujata breaking down at her daughter's engagement party, passionately exhorting the audience not to be silent sufferers but respond actively to social reality. She lashes out at the police and then the brutally complacent and ignorant people. Addressing the audience she says: "Why don't you speak? Speak, for heaven's sake, speak, speak, speak! How long will you endure in silence? Where is the place where there is no killer, no bullets, no prison, no vans?" (*Five Plays* 31).

Sujata's voice comes out as universal protest against the heartless society in which we all live. From a silent suffering and a sense of imprisoned guilt within, Sujata moves in the direction of issuing a clarion call to women in society to awake and arise or be forever fallen.

“**Bayen**”: In this play one can see the poignant transformation of a beautiful and capable woman, a devoted wife and mother, reach its tragic climax when she begins to internalize her own demonization, when she accepts the narrative of the Other and believes that she is indeed a *bayen*. Mahasweta Devi portrays vividly the phalanx of social forces arrayed against a young woman. As a young woman without father, brother or other male relatives, a lone woman in a patriarchal structure, Chandidasi is a vulnerable target. When she marries she does gain a male protector. It is he, for all his professed love, who first accuses her, who first utters the dreaded word *bayen*. She is formally branded as witch only after her husband Malinder beats his drum and shouts in front of the village, “I . . . Malinder Gangaputta . . . strike my drum (*beats the drum frantically*) . . . to declare that my wife has turned into a Bayen, a Bayen!” (*Five Plays* 87). The operations of power are clearly exposed. Hunger and poverty are the catalysts that bring to the surface subconscious fears and prejudices. When the little child of Chandi’s sister-in-law dies during an epidemic of small pox, the fact that she had a little earlier visited Chandi is enough proof of Chandi’s evil nature.

When the story begins, Chandi is fearless, almost a goddess in her calm acceptance of her work. She cannot understand why the villagers viewed her work as fearful or detestable. She was performing a necessary act because the dead must be buried. She is untouched by the irrational and superstitious fears that assail the men and women of the village. The story is her transformation from a fearless creature who confidently asserted “I have no fear” to the villagers and to her future husband. Alone she is not afraid, but the birth of her son and the rush of maternal feelings suddenly make her aware of the cruelties of the world, the irrational nature of danger, the pitfalls that

surround a child as he grows up. Her heart is filled with compassion towards the whole living race and for the first time she identifies herself with the villagers, praying for each and every child in the village that each should live forever. It is at this point that she is first branded a *bayen*, a visitor of death on children.

By conferring demonic powers on her, the community manages to render her powerless. They succeed in

Marginalizing a woman who threatens to transgress social norms by taking pride in her own position in the community and her family. . . . It is only by deploying control over its women through “the magico-ritual spheres” that the males of lower caste—and therefore exploited and actually powerless—communities endeavour to assert some nebulous sense of power themselves. (Basu 38)

The irony of the witch is that while invested with demonic powers, she is incapable of saving herself. She is helpless, so that patriarchy is perceived as fearless, triumphant, and superior to the demonic female force.

As Mahasweta Devi holds up the anatomy of witchcraft, we see clearly the anomalies and contradictions of the senseless acts of the villagers. After branding Chandi as malevolent, as desiring to kill the villagers, she is given the responsibility of not harming the others. Like the untouchable and the leper, she has to warn others of her presence by ringing a bell. The villagers see nothing strange in demanding her cooperation in the completion of her degradation. At one point she is told that her evil is not in her control. She has but to look at a young boy to suck his blood. Yet in obvious contradiction, the *bayen* is expected to keep away from the village.

Chandi cannot speak because she begins to accept the text or the narrative of the Other. She believes that she is a *bayen*, accepts her evilness, cooperates in the violent negation of her own self, and occupies the space allotted to her by the villagers. The following lines show how patriarchy snubs the woman's individuality.

As Kalu Dom's descendant and fearless attendant on the dead, she has access to a freedom and power that generate subconscious fear and insecurity in the minds of the Dome community. The figure of the bayen becomes a collective projection of this unease, and her expulsion typifies the rejection meted out by a patriarchal society to women who threaten the stability of existing social codes by their distinctiveness and individuality. (Radha Chakravarthy 100)

She cannot resist, not only because of the strength of the forces arrayed against her but because she believes that she deserves to be punished. When her son tries to reclaim her as his mother, Chandi is terrified. She has to face the knowledge that she could cause the death of her own son and must drive him away. When her son seeks her out, she is terrified that inadvertently she would cause his death. She knows that knowingly, consciously, she has never wished anyone any harm but if evil is within her, out of the control of her rational self, then it is imperative that she obeys the strictures of the wiser Other. So for all her yearning, she thrusts son away and admonishes: "Hasn't the Gangaputta told his son, there is poison in the air into which I breathe, there's poison in my touch? And the school-going son doesn't know it?" (*Five Plays* 88).

Only her death frees the son to claim her as mother and reject her *bayen* construct. He tells the guard, ". . . my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi . . . sir. Not

a Bayen. She was never a Bayen, my mother” (*Five Plays* 91). It is bitterly ironic that she can regain her identity only by annihilating herself to save the forces that destroyed her.

### **4.3. Women in Bama’s Works**

Bama foregrounds multilayered oppression against Dalit women. She focuses on the ‘work’ that is routinely done by Dalit women both at home and outside. She explores how violence against Dalit women is legitimised and institutionalised by state, family, church and upper caste communities. Her fiction documents how Dalit women toil and get exploited at home and outside, are subjected to violent treatment by upper caste landlords, the panchayat, the police as well as Dalit men within their homes. In her representation of Dalit women, Bama presents them primarily as workers who join the work force right from girlhood and toil through adolescence, womanhood, middle age almost until their last breath.

Exploitation and negligence towards women, especially in Dalit society, begins from girlhood. Dalit community perceives a girl child as a potential source of cheap, unpaid labour. She almost becomes a second mother to her siblings. Thus she works as a caretaker of the family in the absence of the mother who can take up her heavy workload at the farm outside and leave the domestic responsibilities to her daughter. A Dalit girl’s chores largely include fetching firewood, cooking, feeding, washing and taking care of such things.

#### **4.3.1. *Sangati***

*Sangati* is an appalling analysis of the lives of Dalit women. In Tamil, *sangati* means news, events, or happenings. The text shows how these women face the double



disadvantage of caste and gender discrimination. The book contains many narratives woven together to unfold the social inequities, economic hardships, suffered by Dalit women. Women with different age group (several generations) and different kinds of experience of life appear in the novel one after the other to exhibit the life of exploitation, oppression, humiliation, injustice, cruelty, trauma and disparity they undergo. The book provides an insight into the lives of women who have been trapped not only by patriarchy but also by caste-hatred. The book also presents many of these women as strong women “who have the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel themselves upwards, to roar (their defiance) changed their difficult, problem filled lives and quickly stanch their tears” (*Sangati* i). It has a series of powerful episodes involving memorable characters. Individual episodes, anecdotes and memories of personal experience are narrated in first person. There is a multiplicity of voices in ‘a voice.’ Here instead of a single narrator, many Dalit women speak to the reader. Bama examines the different issues that oppress different women but at the same time has an admiration for those Dalit women who could cope with the caste and gender discrimination. She explains why men vent all their anger at home, the reason for the street quarrels, the use of abusive language and submission to the police and upper caste men. Lack of education and lack of self awareness make them submissive and exploitive.

Bama in this narrative brings out the women oppression in her village. Her chief concern is for the Dalit problems. The central theme in her creations is the existential predicament of the Dalit women. It is projected through the problems of the protagonists’ struggle against patriarchy. She unfolds before us the social problems which are responsible for the sufferings of Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular.

The signs of patriarchy start to be noticed from the birth of girl children itself. Bama very aptly describes this disparity in treatment of boy children and girl children. Boy babies are never let to cry. If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls. A boy is breast-fed longer. They wean the girls quickly, making them forget the breast. Quick attention is given to a boy's illness where as they do it half-heartedly in the case of a girl. When they become a bit older the treatment remains the same. Boys will eat as much as they wish and run off to play. As for the girls they have to stay at home and keep on working all the time, cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes and so on. If they get any chance and time to go to play, they have to carry the little babies with them. Bama gives her *Paatti's* (grandmother) example. She cared for her grandsons much more than she cared for her granddaughters. "If she brought anything home when she returned from work, it was always the grandsons she called first. . . . If she brought mangoes, we only got the skin, the stones and such; she gave the best pieces of fruit to the boys" (*Sangati* 7-8).

Even pregnant women are not treated with due care they ought to be. Many Dalit women who are in their full term of pregnancy have to go to the fields for some work or the other. And a few of them even give birth in the fields itself. Bama's *Paatti* narrates such an incident which had taken in her village. A woman goes to the field to cut the grass and she "was pregnant at that time, nearly full term. She went into labour then and there, and delivered the child straight away. She cut off the umbilical cord with the sickle she had taken with her to cut the grass, dug a hole and buried the placenta, and walked home carrying her baby and her bundle of grass" (*Sangati* 6). They can't stay at home

during such critical period also. If they stay at home it will be very difficult for them to get food. Even their cows and calves die of hunger. The husbands of these pregnant wives do not think about taking care of them. It does not enter their mind that women in such critical conditions should not be sent outside for work. The *Paatti*'s words echo the hardships Dalit women undergo everyday of their life. She complains, "We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they have finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man" (*Sangati* 6). The grandmother once goes to the hospital and sees to her astonishment the pigs which are "as white as the European nuns" in the hospital. Her remark that these pigs are reared on wheat and milk powder and biscuits presents a contrasting picture of the lives of these Dalits who have to struggle hard for their gruel.

Besides having the burden of going to the fields for cutting grass, gathering firewood, the Dalit women have to safeguard themselves from upper-caste men who cast their lusty glances on them and try to molest them. *Paatti* warns Bama about these shameful acts of the upper-caste men. "Women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper-caste fellows clap eyes on you, you're finished. They'll drag you off and rape you, that's for sure" (*Sangati* 8). Dalit men restrict their women from going to cinemas just because of the fear of upper-caste men.

Wife-beating is one of the most common forms of patriarchal oppression of women. Husbands find number of reasons to beat their wives. In Bama's community women shoulder the responsibility of running the household by going to the fields as labourers, gathering firewood, fetching water, cooking and cleaning and keeping busy in

one or the other kind of work. Besides this they have to submit themselves to the physical desires of their husbands in spite of their tiredness. Bama's uncle beats his wife "Because the man was crazy with lust. Because he wanted her every single day. How could she agree to his frenzy after she worked all hours of the day and night, inside the house and out? He is an animal, that fellow. When she refused, he practically broke her half" (*Sangati* 10). If somebody tries to stop him he will shout that she is his wife and he can beat her or even kill her if he wants. This attitude of her uncle shows the way husbands consider their wives. For them wives are not more than objects.

There is no end to such domestic violence of wife-beating. The book presents two more such incidents. Thaayi is relatively good-looking woman with light-skin. Her husband regularly beats her with his belt. He grows suspicious of her morality as she is fair and beautiful. Her physical beauty has an adverse effect on her. He establishes control over her by the sound beatings so that she may not even dare to look at others. She lives with him like a slave. She has to undergo physical as well as mental agony. Bama once happens to see her husband beating her up again and again with the belt from his waist. If anybody comes to her rescue, the beating will become more violent. He insults his wife abusing in vulgar words, "You common whore, you, any passing loafer will come in support of you, you mother fucker's daughter. You will go with ten men" This pitiful sight makes Bama think about men who think that just because they have tied the *talis* around their wives' necks they can beat them as they like. The words of Bama's mother focus on the tragic side of the marriage. "It's as if you become a slave from the very day you are married. That's why all the men scold their wives and keep their wives under control" (*Sangati* 43). There are some husbands who do not leave even their

pregnant wives. Bama witnesses such an incident. A man chases a pregnant wife, catches her and drags on the earth as he pulls her along. The reason people find for this inhuman behaviour is that she argued with him about giving her wages to him.

But fortunately all the women are not like Bama's aunt or Thaayi in the community of Bama. There are some women who simply do not tolerate the blows of their husbands. Raakkamma's husband Paakkiraj is a drunkard and picks up a quarrel with his wife regularly. But Raakkamma is not a quiet woman. Before he can hit her she will scream and shriek. She defends herself using her big tongue. When he drags her by her hair and pushes her down kicking her lower belly, Raakkamma gets up and wails out aloud. She shouts obscenities, she scoops out the earth and flung it about. "How dare you kick me, you low life? Your hand will get leprosy! How dare you pull my hair?" (*Sangati* 61). Her vile and vulgar way of abusing her husband saves her from her husband's blows.

Bama talks about another form of domestic violence where the father and the brother of a girl beat her black and blue. She tells about a girl of their streets who has fallen in love with a boy from another caste. Both the boy and the girl like each other. The father and her younger brother who come to know about this beat up her violently. The girl's mother's account of their torture to the girl tells the height of oppression of women by men in one's own house itself.

This girl was coming home from the school where she works, to drink her mid-day kanji. That boy, her brother, caught her by the hair even before she could come into the house, and dragged her in right from the street. He kept on lifting

her by the hair and smashing her down against the floor. Her forehead was broken and bruised, and blood poured over her face. While she was cowering, unable to bear the pain, he pulled her by the hair so roughly that it came off in bunches. He kicked her in the ribs again and again until she couldn't even breathe. Her father came rushing up when he saw what was going on. I thought he must surely be coming to pull the boy away. Instead, he brought a piece of firewood and aimed four blows at her. (*Sangati* 107)

This incident almost reminds us of recent 'honour killing' incidents. Bama makes use of this case to criticize the hypocrisy of the church. She writes that though the church says that inter-caste marriages are a good thing, the priests are always blocking them. When the girl goes and tells her story to the parish priest, instead of helping her, "He spoke about her as if she had been behaving like a whore, cast suspicion on her morals, met her in a room all alone and leered at her, made false promises to her, and kept her running between the church and her home like a dog; but he never organized a wedding or anything for her" (*Sangati* 108).

Bama is greatly disturbed by this kind of brutal behaviour of the men of her streets. She reflects on how these men go about drinking and beating their wives. She wonders whether all this violence is because there is nowhere else for them to exert their male pride or to show off their authority. All the suppressed anger is vented when they come home and beat up their wives to pulp. Being Dalits they cannot wag their tails before the upper-caste landlords. Bama writes about this:

Even though they are male, because they are Dalits, they have to be like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their landlords. There is no way they can show their strength in those circumstances. So they show it at home on their wives and children. But then, is it the fate of our women to be tormented both outside their houses and within? (*Sangati* 65)

Dalit women have to carry on every household duty themselves. It becomes worse in the families where men do not support in any manner to run the house. When *Paatti*'s granddaughter Mariamma comes of age no rituals are performed correctly. As Mariamma's mother is dead, her relatives cook whatever they have with them. And Mariamma, after the eight days of the rituals, pulls down the *kuchulu* (a small hut like temporary construction) herself in which she used to sit during the ritual. She herself burns it and sets it off for work. But her father does not take any care about his daughter. He "is a drunkard and goes off to his kept woman. He couldn't care less for his children? He's satisfied so long as his stomach is filled" (*Sangati* 16). Thus she is not served with good food and falls ill and takes to bed the very next week. After she recovers she goes for the work of digging wells. While carrying away a basket of rubble from the deep well her foot slips and she falls all the way down. Severely injured she is taken to the government hospital. After a few days in the hospital she sets out again to find work.

One day while carrying home her firewood she sees an irrigation pump-set and goes to drink a couple of mouthfuls of water. The pump-set belongs to one landlord Kumarasami and he is at the pump-set shed then. All of a sudden he seizes her hand and pulls her inside. Frightened out of her wits, she leaves everything and runs home. Her friends warn her not to tell anybody about this incident because if she tells the people

about the incident it is she who will get the blame and will be called a whore. Even the children know that nobody will believe their words and they cannot stand up to upper-caste people like Kumarasami. By this time Kumarasami who is afraid of his shameful act and to save his face meets the headman of Paraya community, the *naattaamai*. He fabricates a story that he saw Mariamma and Manikkam were behaving in a dirty way in his fields. The community headman who believes every word of this upper-caste zamindar summons everyone to a meeting. The men who have gathered there do not allow the women to talk. They behave as if the women know nothing about what is right and what is wrong and they themselves know everything. They even try to drive them away from the meeting place where they have gathered out of curiosity. “Will you she-donkeys get out of here or do we have to stamp on you? The more we drive the wretches away, the more they come back and make trouble.” Though Mariamma explains what happened at pump-set, and a woman also supports her by telling the gathering that it was the *mudalaali* Kumarasami who tried to rape her, the *naattaamai* does not believe their words. He even does not ask the other women who went with her to gather firewood to know about the reality of the complaint. Instead he puts blame on her by saying, “Do you hear that? Slut of a girl! In order to get out of it, she promptly sticks all the blame on the *mudalaali*. These creatures will come and dig out your eyes even when you are awake” (*Sangati* 23, 24). Her father also does not come to her rescue by defending her. Mariamma is asked to pay two hundred rupees as fine and Manikkam one hundred rupees. The *naattaamai* finishes the proceedings of the meeting by saying, “It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies”



(*Sangati* 26). By narrating this incident Bama criticizes the ‘justice’ given to Mariamma. If the *naattaamai* believed that both Mariamma and Manikkam were at fault, he should have fined them equally. But even in declaring punishment the woman is made to suffer more than the man. His above view on the morality of man and woman also tell us of patriarchal way of looking at such issues. Many of the women talk about the unfairness of the judgment. But they can do nothing in the decision taken by men.

The book unfolds many such incidents where girls are sexually harassed and yet have to shut their mouths because they know for sure that the blame for this will be ultimately fixed on them. A woman called Arokkyam tells about another such an incident that happens when a girl called Paralokam goes to pull up grass for the cow to the field of an upper-caste fellow. There the owner of the fields says that he will help her lift the bundle on her head. “That was his excuse for squeezing her breasts” (*Sangati* 26). But she too keeps quiet fearing the blame falls on her and she will be called a whore and punished.

Since almost all men spend their earnings on alcohol and for their own belly, women take all the responsibilities of the household. If such families have girls, then the burden of running the household falls on them. The girl Bama’s argument with her grandmother focuses on the restrictions girls have even about simple things. She utters these words as a representative of marginalized female community. She tells her grandmother, “We aren’t allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can’t stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control” (*Sangati* 29).

By observing the fate of women, especially, of Dalit women, Bama feels that God has created women only for the convenience of men. Women have to make sure that men don't suffer discomfort, that they are consoled and comforted, all their needs looked after and all their bodily needs satisfied. She appeals women to give up the belief that a married life of complete service to a man is their only fate. She gives a call to bring up girl children to think in new ways from an early age. She stresses the need of educating boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults. She hopes if Dalit children are reared like this from their birth itself then there will come a day when men and women live with equal rights, equal opportunity and equal peace.

Velliamma gets married at an early age. Her husband leaves her with three daughters and nothing else. At that young age Velliamma devoid of any worldly experience, shoulders the burden of looking after the three daughters. Slowly she learns the trade of midwifery and tries to support the family from what she earns as a midwife. But being a Dalit woman, she is discarded by the higher caste women. So she goes to the field to work as a coolie. All these misfortunes crop up in her life because of waywardness, dissoluteness, profligacy, and drunkenness of her husband. She is disowned and deserted by her husband. All alone, she struggles hard to bring up the children.

Pathima's great aunt is initiated into marriage at a tender age when she does not understand what really married life is. She is so innocent that she does not know how to lead a married life. Her innocence leads to fear and she is unable to fulfill her husband's sexual needs. She is virtually blown out at the treatment meted out to her. But as time

passes things take the worst turn, as she is not blessed with a male child but only with three daughters.

Maikkanni (Seyarani), the eleven year old girl, is the eldest in her family. She has three brothers and a sister. Malnutrition and hard work have stunted her growth and she looks as though she were an eight-year-old girl. Her father and mother elope and get married. But the bliss of the marriage does not run long. Once Seyarani was born her father starts living with another woman. But the lascivious father visits her mother on and off to satisfy his physical needs. Her mother gives birth to seven children in succession but her father turns a blind eye to the welfare of children and her mother. During her mother's delivery she goes to the match factory. She as a destitute undergoes humiliation at young age. She does the domestic chores, and looks after the younger ones, and works in the field also. In the match factory she is subjected to severe beating, her father snatches away her income. To go there she has to get up so early that, "even if I feel so sleepy I can hardly open my eyes, I get up all the same, pour some *kuuzh* into a container and run with it" (*Sangati* 71). There she has to work in the stink and frequently has to be beaten by the contractor. She becomes an object of exploitation at home and in the workplace.

Thus the text is a collection of anecdotes not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also their rebellious nature. Raj Kumar quotes Jyothi Lanjewar, a Dalit poet and critic, who after evaluating the portrayal of Dalit women in Dalit literature writes,

The female characters in Dalit literature are dynamic and not static. Dalit writers do not look upon widows, prostitutes, deprived women, as Dalit, exploited, with compassion alone; but they make them valiant, create commotion in their inner minds and take them towards radiance. . . . The individual mind's conflict takes the form of group mind's conflict. . . . They revolt to protect their self-respect. They do not brood over the injustices perpetrated on them, nor do they just rave against it, but take up arms and prepare to fight. (219-20)

These women dare to make fun of the class in power that oppresses them. They are presented as women who bounce back like a ball and not curl up like a hit bitch. The book also shows how absolute power rests with men in the community and in the institutions led by them like the Caste Courts and the church.

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## Chapter Five

### Tribals and Dalits: Victims of Society

#### 5.1. Introduction

Voices from the marginalized sections have been profane with their singular experience of oppression, exploitation, subjugation, suffering and endurance. Having remained silent for so long, their muted anguish finds no alternative until the unbreakable experience of humiliation sensitizes their identity and urges them to make themselves move from invisibility to visibility. This move signals the breaking of age-old silence, an act of self assertion as well as self perception. The journey from anonymity to presence, though very hard, is rewarding for the marginalized self.

To create and maintain a true self in society by breaking the age-old silence to which they are subjected to is the human need. However, such an endeavour becomes an ordeal for those who are doubly oppressed, for those who are muted and mutilated physically and psychologically through the distinction of caste/class and sex. They are the silenced people of the marginalized community. Powerlessness and the inability to assert their self make the behavioural pattern of these people to be determined according to the norm of oppressors.

#### 5.2. Tribals in the Works of Mahasweta Devi

**5.2.1. *Five Plays*:** It is a collection of five plays— “Mother of 1084,” “Aajir,” “Bayen,” “Urvashi and Johnny,” and “Water.” The first and the fourth contain non-tribal protagonists while the remaining have the untouchables or the tribals as protagonists. These plays vary in terms of the themes they deal with. In this chapter “Mother of 1084,”

and “Bayen” are not considered for discussion as they focus on women issues and they have been taken up for analysis in the previous chapter.

“**Aajir**”: The play throws light on the austerity of bonded labour system by revealing the tragic story of a slave. *Aajir*, in Bengali, means one who has sold oneself into slavery for a paltry sum. It is of the powerful constraints of the bonded labour system. It is based on the cruel bonded labour system in certain rural parts of India from which wild debt system emerged. The peasants and labourers, once indebted, have no way out to save themselves. The life of these people remains of no value at all. They either flee or commit suicide. The person under the evils of this system gets the label of ‘serf labourer’ and works for his master like a beast for a very small amount of loan. Suppose the person dies meantime, his son or someone in the family is forced to continue as a farm labourer. The Intergenerational bondage is a common feature of this system. A short conversation between Golak Kura and Raavan Shunri in the play is highly supportive of this.

GOLAK. We’ll be slaves, husband and wife. Our children?

RAAVAN. They’ll be slaves too.

GOLAK. Their descendants?

RAAVAN. I’ll buy them all up. (*Five Plays* 35-36)

Golak Kura signs the bond of slavery to gain food amidst extreme starvation. Raavan Shunri’s bond was a lasting engagement with slavery. Both Golak and his wife Gairabi sign the bond and accept slavery. Food and three rupees each is estimated as the highest price for both of them. Golak signs the bond out of the fear of drought. Even

Golak and Gairabi consider themselves fortunate to be Raavan Shunri's slaves. The bond never contained any remark that the descendents of Golak Kura would be the slaves of Raavan Shunri but still the exploitation continues generation after generation. The illiterate and the poor have been extensively cheated and forced to work as slaves.

Maatang Shunri (descendant of Ravan Shunri) wants that Paatan (descendant of Golak Kura) should not forget his identity as a slave. It comes out of his feudal mentality which does not allow him to free himself from master-slave predisposition. He calls him 'a horrible sinner.' In his opinion "Why does he forget he's an aajir? His forefathers sold him away. He won't keep that in mind, he dreams of marrying, having a family of his own. Looking upon the face of his own son" (*Five Plays* 38).

Beating slaves has a long past in the bondage system. It is a sign of imposing one's dominance on the other. The Negroes were taken to the farms as slaves and severely beaten for no mistake. The people under British colonial power were also suppressed for their attempts to unite for freedom. Suppressor has not any fear of losing his power till the suppressed is ignorant and diverted. One's awareness for freedom is a warning for losing the power for the other. The slave is usually taken away from the possibility of freedom by imposing slavery on his mind. Paatan, like other slaves, feels strongly that he has a rare chance to set himself free from the state of slavery. Maatang continues to beat Paatan out of the fear of losing his mastership. He does not want that Paatan should speak about his marriage. Slave's marriage is the first step to inactivate master's tyranny.

Paatan's deep longing for a gipsy woman, his constant visits to her hut has a relational essence. Paatan's growing concern for the gipsy woman is out of the need of an emotional asylum required for any human being. His attraction towards a woman is as natural as of a butterfly's to the flower. Paatan dreams of his freedom in his marriage with the gipsy woman. Mahasweta Devi explores the pathetic world of gipsy folk in the play. The gipsy community is not in a position to reside at a particular place. There is not proper education and care provided to their kids. Lack of education and restricted economical sources make their living more horrible. Paatan and gipsy woman are in an equal position because there is no future waiting ahead for both of them. Their future has lost its way into the desert sand of inhumanity and inequality. Paatan finds his salvation through his marriage with the gipsy woman. He pleads:

PAATAN. Take me away with you.

GIPSY WOMAN. Where can I go with an aajir? Wherever you go, they'll  
drag you back and flog you to death. . . .

PAATAN. The world's enormous! Purulia, Bankura, Dumka, can be  
anywhere! . . .

I'll make a home for us, we'll have a son, I'll offer water to my  
forefathers! (*Five Plays* 44)

Paatan's struggle for freedom proves to be a nightmare. The men sent after him by the mistress beat him austerely. The mob sings:

The world is not for you.

The gipsy woman's not for you.

As long as the aajir's bond is there,  
 you're just a maimed beast,  
 and Maatang's your God. (*Five Plays* 46)

The mob's song encapsulates the very condition of a slave. A slave should not dream an independent life. He has to be in bondage for his entire life.

Paatan's pragmatic realization that he cannot finish the pitiful condition comes out after his unsuccessful attempt to flee away. Paatan perceives clearly: "Where's there a place without a Master, without the villagers, without you, with the aajir's bond?" He does want to know about the unexpected move of the mistress. Earlier, she was ready to free him from the slavery by handing over the age-old bond. But she sends men to catch and to bring him back. He was promised to hand over the bond, bound in a *gaamchha* (a piece of cloth). Like a caged bird, Paatan also tries to set himself free from the tizzy. He wanted to breathe free air. The mistress was with him to leave the village but fails to hand over any bond to him. The bond was turned to dust long back. He could not trust her. He strangles her to death. Maatang discloses that there was no such bond he saw really. Instead of showing any fear of punishment, Paatan expresses in delight: "Like everyone else in the world I was a free man (*stating a fact*), and I alone didn't know" (*Five Plays* 48, 51). Thus the play unveils the misaligned life of a marginalized held captive under the inhuman system called bonded labour which denies him basic human desires and rights.

**“Water”**: The lives of the marginalized can be put at hazard by non-availability of certain essential things like water. Mahasweta Devi has clearly shown the same



condition in “Salt” in which three tribals and an elephant die just because of salt. And these basic necessities are unavailable not on their own, but the moneylenders or traders or mahajans deliberately make them not to be available to these subaltern people. It is once again proved here that the haves won’t let the have-nots to live a decent, humane and panic-free life.

Maghai Dome is a poor Untouchable water diviner. He knows all about water. Every year he spots the place for Santosh Babu who digs there and that becomes a well. Santosh is a vicious evil moneylender and landowner. He has an illicit distillery. He is also the head of the village panchayat. He is in collusion with the SDO and the police. Even the government doctor sent to treat the lower castes visits only Santosh’s house and the village goes without treatment. Santosh acts like ‘government’s own son-in-law.’ He can easily filch the materials from the government relief sent for these untouchables. Mahasweta Devi presents two contrasting lives led by Santosh and the Untouchables. While Santosh enjoys all the comforts of life, the Untouchables have to die in drought. Santosh has oil massage; he is bathed by his servant; his wife gives him breakfast, the thickened milk, sugar-puffs, and *chida* (flattened rice). At the other side of the village children and women die of starvation. Besides filching the relief materials meant for the Untouchables, Santosh wants labour free of charge from these people. For the present drought he blames these downtrodden because they have broken this custom of giving free labour which was there for ages. The Untouchables of Charsa know very well that the relief materials which are already collected by Santosh will not be available to them. And they are afraid that Santosh will tell the police that the lower castes of Charsa have all turned Naxals if they press persistently for the relief materials. Santosh’s denial to

give kerosene due to them against their ration cards results in their people dying of snakebite. Not only kerosene but water is also denied from Santosh's wells some of which are dug for these people from government fund. The villagers find it very hard to live without water, as it is a terrible drought. So they go and ask Santosh for a well. They tell about their suffering and pain.

PHULMANI. These two hands of mine are full of sores, Santosh, all from scratches scratching about the sands of the Charsa for water. . . . This year we demand a well for our use.

SANTOSH. What? A new well?

PHULMANI. No. We'll draw from our Panchayat well, we'll not let your cattle be washed there.

SANTOSH. Now look here, Dhura's mother . . .

PHULMANI. We've looked on enough. We die without water, our little ones go thirsty, our women dig at the sands for a cupful of water. Who'd play such a cruel game with the water that we need to quench our thirst? (*Five Plays* 103-04)

Santosh's hard heart does not consider their rightful demand. He says that this year digging a well for the Untouchables is not possible as there is a drought. The women who have suffered enough by scraping in the sand bed of the river for water pray for water. Phulmani's words exhibit the anguish of womenfolk, "Could I turn into a thunderblast and pierce the hardened earth, or turn into a cloud and pour into the ravines, I'd find solace. God, you are not there. If you had been there once, you're dead now. Else

how'd Santosh alone have all your water, your gift to all living creatures?" (*Five Plays* 106).

However these Domes suffer, whoever die Santosh does not allow these Untouchables to touch the wells, even the government wells. They are not allowed to draw water from these wells. So these people, especially the women have to go and dig at the sands of Charasa river for water. These people know nothing about the government's laws for them. But they know one thing for sure that there is no Untouchability in their subdivision. Even Santosh also agrees that the government has decreed that there will be no Untouchability. Still he and his caste brothers and his relations won't let them draw water from any well. All the wells dug in that area are used by these Brahmins. But the excuse Santosh gives for not allowing these people to touch the well is that they (Brahmans) worship their gods in their houses and the Domes, Chamars, Dushads and Chandals eat pigs and fowl. So, according to Santosh the water is polluted if they touch the wells. But Maghai has a different opinion about this observation of Santosh. It shows how the Brahmins fill in the minds of the lower castes to keep away them (lower castes) from their (Brahmans) locality. Maghai says, "When the Charasa overflows its banks, you bathe in its water, so do we, and the water remains unpolluted. It seems it's only the water in the well that gets polluted!" (*Five Plays* 104). Santosh also tells Dhura, Maghai's son, to get his pair of she buffaloes released from the government pen which the latter does and is paid four rupees for that. That means these Untouchables can be used for the service the upper caste need and exploit them as they want. Dhura's touching the buffaloes does not pollute the buffaloes and Santosh drinks milk of these buffaloes. These Brahmins seem to forget all these things which are done by the Untouchables for them.

They know and agree the ban on practicing untouchability in India. This knowledge remains in their head only and does not come out in the form of practice. Here these lower caste people have to beg and prostrate before Santosh for the basic need like water, that too which is their fundamental right. These upper caste landlords are so arrogant and unjust that they do not allow the lower caste people to draw water from the wells which are dug for them by the government. The government officials who are well aware of these happenings do not utter a word against such rich people and forget that they are there in their respective posts to serve the poor and the needy. Instead of guarding the interests of the lower castes they ‘guard’ the property of the rich for the silly favours they receive from them.

The drought has shaken the lives of these lower caste people to the core. They have no memory of eating full stomach in their lives.

DHURA. But have you ever had a full stomach? We’ve never had a full stomach, neither you nor me nor mother.

MAGHAI. (*smiling inscrutably, like one of those grand old wise men*).

Didn’t I tell you there’s nothing more real than hunger?

DHURA. All the paddy, all the lentils that Charsa grows, and Santosh’s barns bursting with paddy, and piles of molasses and mustard seeds, and what not?

MAGHAI. (*shaking his head*). They’re not for us son. (*Five Plays* 109)

These lines remind W. H. Auden’s “Refugee Blues” where the refugee laments, “Say this city has ten million souls / Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes / Yet

there's no place for us, my dear, yet no place for us." While the refugees feel shelterless, insecure and frightened being away from their country, here the Untouchables lead a life of insecurity to life, food and job in their own land.

The writer presents Dhura, a young man, as her voice. A life of starvation has made him angry with the way they (are made to) live. Maghai feels it's their fate to be hungry though the earth is full of paddy. Dhura strongly disagrees with his father's view. Hunger occupies their life. They spend their days in getting something to fill their stomach, at least half.

DHURA. Sure. What else? When we have work, we have rice. Without work, all we have is *amani*. It's strange, with all the rice that the earth grows, we still go hungry.

MAGHAI. That's our fate, Dhura.

DHURA. There I don't agree with you. I won't accept fate. What a shame, we burn our hearts to cinders to divine water, then to raise it from the bowels of the earth, and then they refuse us a drop of water, not a drop for the Domes and Chandals. I spit upon fate, if that's our fate. (*Five Plays* 110-11)

Dhura is absolutely angry with his father who divines water for Santosh who not at all allows these fellows to the wells. While Dhura is disgusted by this kind of fate, his father finds some pride in his work as this work, according to him, was left to him by their ancestors. He is caught in a myth of the King Bhagirath and the holy Ganga. When the King Bhagirath brought the holy Ganga down from the heavens, the mother Earth

asked Ganga a little bit of water to keep hidden in her bowels. So the Ganga flowed into the secret depths of the mother Earth. Maghai's earliest ancestor had come all prepared to offer *puja* to the holy river at her advent. But by the time he arrived, Bhagirath had already left with Ganga. So he stuffed himself up with booze, gathered that all he had brought with him to offer to the holy river, and offered *puja* to the Ganga. Once he closed his eyes to do obeisance, the drunken stupor took over, and he fell asleep. When he opened his eyes, there was no sign any longer of the Ganga. It was emptiness all around. Then, from the bowels of the earth, the Ganga herself spoke: "You are my chosen priest. I'm the goddess, the nether Ganga, whenever men dig for a well or a pond, you'll gather the offerings, pray for water, and go around looking for where the water lies hidden till I tell you where to dig" (*Five Plays* 111). Being caught in this myth Maghai forgets the reality. So in spite of Santosh's not giving him and his clansmen any water from those wells he still works as water-diviner for this Brahman. He does not try to understand the hard reality of hunger and exploitation that has surrounded them.

It is an irony that Maghai who divined water for Santosh and who had no easy access to drinking water has to be carried away in the flood of water. His is a tragic death as he has to die when their age old problem of water is about to be solved but ends in a disaster. Santosh-SDO-police nexus make the villagers' effort to find some solution to their perennial problem futile. This unholy collusion spoils the dam which the Domes constructed with plenty of hopes and lots of effort. The SDO whose duty is to see that these lower caste people get the most basic need like water joins hands with Santosh and the police and gets the dam demolished. Instead of carrying out his duty, he acts against

the ethics of his duty. He suspects people with noble intention who work for the Untouchables and supports the people with money and exploiting nature.

POLICE OFFICER. He has never claimed a political pension.

SDO. But why?

POLICE OFFICER. When he was asked to apply, Jiten Maity told

Samanta, serving your country is serving your own people, you don't demand money for that!

SDO. How, dangerous!

POLICE OFFICER. There's no report against him from any source.

SDO. His very character is a report against him. Don't you remember the

Naxalites? They didn't run after money, they never cared to make a fast buck, and yet they drove the country to disaster.

POLICE OFFICER. But Maity believes in non-violence.

SDO. Dangerous. . . . He must be doubly dangerous. He's acting just like

the Naxalites. Dangerous. (*Five Plays* 143)

The way he thinks of Jiten Maity, the teacher, who helps the harijans, is a mockery of the government which forgets its constitutional duty to provide protection to the helpless against the atrocities and exploitation by the landowners. The SDO doesn't help these people nor leave others to help them. Instead he treats the teacher as a Naxalite and takes action against him. Thus this government official, joining hands with the money lender Santosh wipes out the destiny which had taken a good turn for the Untouchables of Charsa. These untouchables who know nothing about the legal

provisions for them, who do not have anybody to support them, who are occupied by solutionless problems, now lose their head Maghai, and the SDO gets arrested Dhura and Jiten and they become helpless and hopeless for the remaining part of their life. In this way the play investigates the dynamics of rural poverty and the role of the local landed elite, local village officials and the police. The endemic disarray of Indian rural poor at large is represented in this play.

**5.2.2. *Bitter Soil*:** The book contains four stories which unveil the devastated conditions of the marginalized. The police, a mahajan, a Religious Head and a trader create havoc in the lives of the downtrodden. “The Little Ones” shows the atrocity committed on the adivasis of a village by the police and its impact on their lives, in fact on their bodies. “Seeds” tells the trauma of an untouchable who has to guard the corpses of his clansmen and his son buried in his piece of barren land. Unbearable sorrow and hidden anger draws him to the extent of killing the mahajan who was responsible for all those buried corpses. “The Witch” narrates the helplessness of the tribal people of a few villages. Fear and tension fills their lives as the Religious Head Hanuman Misra unleashes a false *daini* terror. The main culprits of this false story about a witch are a *pahaan* and his slow-witted daughter. “Salt” shows how the simple everyday need like salt can be used to take revenge on the adivasis. A trader makes salt unavailable to the tribals just because he has to pay them rightful wages. And this unavailability of salt in the market to the tribals leads to the tragic deaths of three tribals and an elephant. Thus while “The Little Ones,” “Seeds,” and “Salt” portray the suffering and oppression of the tribals due to land and wage related issues, “The Witch” unfolds the superstitious beliefs of the adivasis as



responsible for the tension and fear they go through until the truth is known. The detailed study of these stories helps us understand them better.

“**Little Ones**”: The place where the story takes place is a burnt-out desert– Lohri. The description of the place itself holds a mirror to the condition of the people who live there. The place looks “as if the earth here bears a fire of unbearable heat in her womb. So the trees are stunted, the breast of the river a dried-out cremation ground, the villages dim behind a film of dust. The earth is a strange colour. Even in the land of red earth, such a deep brownish-red is rarely seen” (*Bitter Soil* 1). Of course, it is a mere description of land and not the people. But the fact is that the life of these tribal people directly depends on land where they live. So one can easily understand the plight of the life led here.

The introduction of the relief-officer further focuses on the life of these people. That means the inhabitants are in need of relief as they are in a terrible condition. Not only the government but also the Christian missionaries set up some relief centres in this area. Whenever there is a famine these villagers leave their kids at the mission gate believing that the missionaries won’t abandon them and if they stay with them they will die. Somehow the missionaries keep them alive.

As it is known from the conversation between the relief-officer and the BDO these people do not farm as they have no land. That’s why the present pitiable life of these people. The intensity of the burden of life of these people is reflected in the “near-naked, shriveled, worm-ridden, swollen bellied” adivasi men and women who come for relief. The romantic impression of the relief-officer about these people that adivasi men

played flute and the adivasi women danced with flowers in their hair, singing is shattered. It is true that they sing now also. But now the songs are like the “lonely wailing of an old witch.” No officer wants to work in this area. The BDO of this area wants to be transferred from this place as soon as possible.

After the rebellion in which some officers who blast the hillock flat are killed by the Aagariyas as narrated by the BDO to the relief-officer, the Aagariyas of Kubha village vanish into the jungle. As retaliation to this the police burn Kubha village to ashes and sprinkle salt on the earth to make it a barren land. Now nothing grows here. This is how the government takes revenge on them.

Another thing which is told by the BDO is just like to add salt on the wound. The relief distributors sell most of the relief materials like blankets, clothing and sugar. They don't reach the needy. The poverty of these people is inexplicable. They are indeed in dire straits. According to the BDO if these people are given land, they sell it off to the mahajans because they have no water, no seeds, no plough and no bullocks. Even if they are provided with all these they will still sell to the mahajans because they say they sold them to repay the debt which was taken to eat until the harvest.

The Aagariyas who had fled the village of Kubha live on stolen relief goods. Their bodies have been changed incredibly. They are of the size of young boys and girls with “long and white hair and empty, sagging breasts and dry, shriveled, wrinkled penis.” Among 150 to 200 Aagariyas who were made as forest-dwellers after the rebellion, only 14 are alive when the relief-officer meets them in a bizarre situation. The other Aagariyas are dead not being able to eat.

The story exposes government's efforts to put in danger the resources these adivasis depend upon. They also believe that their gods Lohasur (God of Iron), Aagariyasur (God of Fire), and Koilasur (God of Coal), dwell in the hillock which was blasted flat. Their beliefs and resources are thus destroyed and caused the rebellion in which they had to kill some officers. What the police did after was still to aggravate the situation as they burn the village and spread salt on the land. Their very sources of living were thus snatched from them or made useless by these forces. Even many of the government officers steal the relief-goods which are meant for the adivasis.

**“Seeds”**: Like the land in “Little Ones,” the land of Kuruda where the story takes place is also unfertile. It is “uneven, arid, sun-baked. Grass doesn't grow here even after the rains. The occasional raised serpent hoods of cactus plants, a few *neem* trees. In the middle of this scorched wasteland where no cattle graze is a low-lying boat-shaped piece of land. . . . Here there are only stray aloe plants, leaves thorny like the pineapple.” The description of the central character Dulan Ganju coincides with the description of the land. “. . . he's old, his skin gnarled and knotted, a loincloth wrapped around his waist, from which a quilt bag hangs” (*Bitter Soil* 21, 22).

It is hard for these people to find food here. Starvation and exploitation for generations have taught them many lessons. They evolve their own strategies to hold life in their fragile bodies. While women exhibit their professional squabbling abilities, men fool the government into giving them seeds every year, for the pieces of barren land, which were given to them by the mahajans because of the effort of the Sarvodaya activists, collect government fertilizer and sell it off, extract money for a plough and

buffalo year after year. Even some men poison animals like buffalo belonging to mahajans and sell the skin after skinning them.

These Sarvodaya activists somehow made the landlords remorseful and the landlords began to give away little bits of “infertile-stony-barren land.” For the landlords who have hundreds of acres of fertile land, giving away some unfertile land doesn’t really matter. They just get rid of such land and earn a good name at the same time. When Lachman Singh offers such a piece of barren land Dulan Ganju does not want to take it. But Lachman Singh’s anger and power makes Dulan Ganju to accept the land. After getting the land Dulan Ganju touches Lachman Singh’s knees and makes him to write a letter to the BDO advocating that Dulan gets money in installments to buy a plough and bullocks, seed and fertilizer.

The drive for survival prompts Dulan Ganju to exploit situations by using his natural guile rather than force. He fools his powerful adversaries not by strength, but by wit and cunning, and all the stratagems of survival and at his fingertips. The villagers are appreciative of Dulan Ganju’s single-handed strategic warfare. Everyone knows about Lachman Singh’s buffaloes, but no one tells on Dulan Ganju. He sells a pumpkin to a landlord’s house and takes money from both the wife, and the mother of the landlord. When some vegetables and fruits are brought in a bullock cart from Lachman Singh’s house to sell he walks beside the cart, shooping away imaginary birds, and continuously lifts things.

The following words tell about their hunger and the kind of food these people use to eat. “Can hunger be measured? The land of one’s stomach keeps increasing. We

haven't died yet. Didn't we eat rats during the famine? Why should we die from eating seeds? If we do, at least we'll have died eating rice! We'll go to heaven" (*Bitter Soil* 30).

The government or any government official has never helped these low caste people. The government has never protected their rights. Officers like BDO never help them farming. Their children never get to enter the government's primary school. The landlords force them to harvest their crops for four annas a day or one meal at gun point. There is a lot of tension over this. The villagers want a raise of four annas. Knowing all this, whenever there's trouble, the SDO brings the police and picks up the labourers. The landlords are let off without a word.

The brutality of the mahajans and moneylenders is revealed in Lachman Singh's killing of Karan Dushad and his brother Bulaki Dushad. Karan's demand for a raise in the wages is met with his and his brother's murder. Lachman Singh, accompanied by his Rajput caste-brothers, attacks the Dushad quarters in Tamadih. The entire village is burnt down. The two corpses are brought to Dulan Ganju's barren land and he is made to bury them at gun point of Lachman Singh. Terrified, head bowed, he digs deep holes with his shovel. Lachman Singh stands on the edge of the field, supervising and chewing *paan*. One can easily understand the trauma Dulan Ganju might have been undergoing at the time. But for Lachman Singh it is like an ordinary thing, that is, digging the ground for planting something.

The police come the next day. The place becomes a witness for a lot of hullabaloo. Ultimately the police report that Karan and his brother Bulaki weren't even present there during the incident. No one says a word against Lachman Singh. One of his

henchmen spends a few days in jail for arson. The government gives a pittance to those rendered homeless, for the construction of new huts.

From then on, Dulan Ganju sleeps on the land guarding the dead bodies of his clansmen. This causes a great explosion, a landslide in the strata of his mind. It results in mental upheaval. He thinks how easy it is for Lachman Singh to kill and bury human beings. Dulan Ganju believes that just as a man's life is linked to so many rites and rituals, so is his death. But Lachman Singh has proved that these customs are meaningless for these aboriginals. These killings have happened before and will happen again. These moneylenders believe that these types of killings are necessary just to remind these people that government, laws, appointment of officers and constitutional decrees are nothing to them. All this causes havoc in Dulan Ganju's mind. He has to conceal two corpses in his heart.

Lachman Singh exploits the adivasis and harijans by paying low wages. But no officer can question this. Because he "buys the BDO a scooter and the *daroga* a transistor and occupies the *bigha*-and-a-half of land belonging to Karan and Bakuli as repayment for an old loan" (*Bitter Soil* 36).

Exploitation, oppression and taking lives of these people by Lachman Singh do not stop with the killings of Karan and Bulaki. He shoots eleven labourers dead for they ask for their rightful wages (five rupees eight paise). Four of them are buried in Dulan Ganju's barren piece of land and according to the police only seven are reported to be killed in the incident. Lachman Singh is released without being charged. The SDO who tries to bring some justice to these labourers is demoted for undermining the harmony

between the labourers and the landowners by inciting the former to revolt. Now the labourers are forced to work for one rupee without food or water. To worsen the matter four annas out of each day's wages have to be given to the contractor, whether they are contracted by him or not.

But when Dulan Ganju's son Dhatua resists it the most he has to lose his life. Lachman Singh gets him buried in the same barren piece of land belonging to Dulan Ganju. Lachman Singh threatens him not to open his mouth. Or else his wife, son, son's wife, grandson, no one will be spared. Dulan Ganju's sorrow, pain, hidden anger know no bounds. These mahajans can dare to kill any adivasi and yet warn their relatives and clansmen and can go off without remorse in them. Mahasweta Devi's concern for the untouchables and anger against the system and the feudal landlords bursts out here. In the Introduction to the book Mahasweta Devi tells:

In 1947 came Independence. Systematic and thorough land reform by the Government, redistributing rural and urban land above the land ceiling to landless and marginal farmers, could have saved India from lop-sided development. This was not done. . . . The Government of India allowed the feudal land-system to remain unchanged in the rest of India. The upper-caste landowners are still as feudal as they were, abiding by values which are against women and the so-called lower castes. For the last five decades, one India has remained basically feudal, while the other has remained a victim of class and caste oppression. (*Bitter Soil* viii)

Dulan Ganju, unable to control the havoc in his mind and unable to bear the atrocities of Lachman Singh anymore, kills him and in his killing his anger, pain, torture undergone are expressed clearly. These words by Dulan Ganju to Lachman Singh tell this more vividly.

What was our agreement, *malik*? That I shouldn't farm. Why not? You will sow corpses, and I'll guard them. Why? Otherwise you'll 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. (*Bitter Soil* 53)

Lachman Singh meets a befitting end. Contended Dulan Ganju shares his paddy with his fellow peasants in a sacred spirit of sharing. The play implies that the suppressed, unable to bear the burden of extreme torture and oppression find their own ways of struggle and survival strategy.

**“The Witch”**: Mahajans like Lachman Singh exploit and suppress the adivasis and the untouchables due to the latter's poverty. Religious Heads like Hanuman Misra use the superstitious beliefs of these adivasis and untouchables to hide their inhuman acts. “The Witch” explores the suffering, anxiety, tension, fear, death caused to the downtrodden due to a Brahmin priest's deliberate false predictions. The *daini* fear unleashed by Hanuman Misra makes many villages suffer unknown miseries. He says that the gods have sent him an awesome dream. He further adds that a terrifying, naked



woman uttered the words ‘I am famine,’ before floating away on a bloodsoaked cloud. According to the almanac, she is a *daini*. This *daini* has to be found and driven away. If she is wounded, if she bleeds, or if she is burnt to death, a terrible calamity will be visited upon them. He also says that these people belonging to these villages—Kuruda, Hesadi, Murhai, Tura and other villages—are sinners. He explains the matter of sin thus:

They are great sinners. Or else, during the Naxal upheaval, Emergency, why would the police ransack their villages? How come they did not touch the higher castes? They are big sinners, these Ganju-Dushad-Dhobi-Oraon-Mundas. The last two groups are worst. Today they worship their own barbaric gods, tomorrow Jesus in the *missions*, the day after, the Hindu gods! They show no discretion in the matter of worship. So they get no protection or patronage from any particular god during famine-drought-police attacks. (*Bitter Soil* 59)

Thus Hanuman Misra unleashes a nameless horror of the unknown into the atmosphere. People begin to wilt in unnamed horror. “. . . *The Witch*, expose how ideology shapes these discursive structures, embedding them deep within the social and individual psyche. Under siege from the mainstream forces, under social and economic threat, the patriarchal religious forces gain greater power” (Manuel 7). Everyone begins to suspect everyone else, to mistrust the behaviour of near and dear ones. All husbands-fathers-brothers-sons are compelled to keep watch upon the women. Do they cast shadows on the ground; when they return from the fields after defecating and urinating, does a crow fly above their heads; is the person who finishes the outdoor-work at night and returns to latch the door the same as the person who went out— a strict surveillance was maintained to note all this.

Suspicion, fear and superstition cause a series of blunders in the villages. One Sodan Ganju suspects his old mother to be a *daini*, yells and summons his neighbours. They make her walk, to check if her feet touched the ground, or whether she caste a shadow. Then with razor they split open the skin of her hand to check whether her blood is red or black. Only then is the old woman released. The *pahaan* of Kuruda himself thinks that he has turned into a *dain*. One Birsa Dushad kills his only young black cow suspecting it a *daini*, and afterwards realizing that without the cow he is doomed, he hangs himself.

The poignancy of the *daini* terror is revealed when the *pahaan* of Tura identifies the *daini* as his daughter Somri. She is a dumb, slow-witted girl. The *pahaan* of Tura had sent her to the household of Hanuman Misra in Tahar to work in the cowshed. But he knows nothing about her for the last five months. Hanuman Misra says that she has gone away. Even though the *pahaan* of Tura searched for her he hadn't been able to find her. When he learns that Hanuman Misra's son has spoilt her and goes to ask he is humiliated. That's why Misra has spread these stories about *daini*. After being thrown away from Hanuman Misra's household this pregnant Somri spends hiding herself, being chased away from one village to the other, eating raw flesh of dead birds and animals. The pathetic condition of Somri holds mirror to the atrocities and suppression the upper caste people commit on the downtrodden. These people do not know the meaning of humanity and suffering. They always think of their own wellbeing and suffering of others have no significance at all for them.

**“Salt”:** Whenever the marginalized people demand for justice they are bound to face some dire consequences. The mahajans, though agree reluctantly in some cases to

give the wages as demanded by the labourers, find some way or the other to avenge for the demand for justice. Their raised voices will be silenced by crooked methods. The downtrodden are made to suffer for their raised voices. Sometimes the guns of the mahajans do this job while some other time the police are used for the same. But mahajans cum traders like Uttamchand Bania find a typical way to ‘stifle’ the voices of the downtrodden. “Salt” unfolds how by making salt unavailable to the tribals in the market vengeance can be taken on them.

The area which belongs to the village of Jhujhar was bought up from the adivasis by one of Uttamchand’s forefathers very long back. The adivasis of the village are bound in the shackles of *bethbegari*, wageless labour, to Uttamchand for the past few generations. To repay the unrecorded debts of their forefathers, year after year, at harvesting time, they trudge twelve miles to Uttamchand’s village, Tahar, and, in return for a meal and handful of crop, offer *begar* (wageless labour). The crop-share that they get is added to the debit side of the accounts ledger. They don’t even know that *bethbegari* is illegal. But when the Adivasi Office informs them about its illegality, they know that it is impossible for them to take Uttamchand to court. Because the court, the Adivasi Welfare Office are far away from their village, and finding a lawyer to advise and counsel them is out of their reach.

But as a relief for the adivasis from this wageless labour a youth-team comes to the village and informs them extracting wageless labour is illegal. The team takes Purti Munda, the most ‘vocal’ personality of the village, to Uttamchand and in front of him tells Uttamchand that no adivasi will give wageless labour anymore. If any one is forced, they will make sure he gets legal redress. Uttamchand nods his head in consent to

whatever the youths say. He accepts the defeat, but vows to avenge himself. He proclaims— “I will kill them by salt.”

Only he can make such an arrogant proclamation, because the people of Jhujhar buy their necessities from the markets of nearby villages. And all the grocery shops in these markets belong to Uttamchand. He says: “Let them find out what *ghato* tastes like without salt. What *nimak haraami*—after being fed and clothed by me for so long, how dare they bite the hand that feeds them” (*Bitter Soil* 128).

At first, Purti and the others don't give much importance to the unavailability of salt in the market. But when it hits them, they just cannot explain that their lives are impossible without salt and their *ghato* flavours with salt alone. Whatever efforts they make to get and store salt do not carry long. Besides providing taste to the food salt has many biological functions to perform in a human body. Now there is a danger of suffering from all those malfunctions of the organs in their bodies. Even the youths' effort to convince Uttamchand to sell salt in the market so that it is available to the adivasis is failed. But Purti does not abandon his effort to get salt. He comes to know from a forest guard that salt-earth is given to elephants of the forest. They put it at certain spots. From then onwards Purti silently 'combs' the jungle every day. Finally, one day, he comes upon the elephants' salt lick. He sees a herd of elephants eating salt-earth. Purti along with other two men starts to steal this salt-earth, strain it and use it. But this does not last long. An old elephant which has been exiled from the herd watches the trio. In an attempt to steal the salt-earth these three men are attacked by this elephant and are killed. The Forest Department gets the elephant killed.

It is incomprehensible to think that the three men died trying to steal the elephant's salt-earth, a thing as cheap as salt. Because of salt three men and an elephant have to be killed. If the adivasis could buy salt, these killings would not have happened. The person who is responsible for all this 'could be avoided deaths' remains completely out of the purview of guilt or crime. The system or the law which allowed him to refuse to sell salt to the adivasis is not put to any blame.

### **5.3. Dalits in the Works of Bama**

The meaning of 'Dalit' in Hindi and Marathi is "ground down, depressed", and is now used politicized Untouchables in preference to any other designation. Dalit also means one who is downtrodden both socially and economically. The term is one of pride. Untouchables have been oppressed by others; there is nothing inherently wrong with them. Their insistence on the use of Dalit has been recognized officially, and the state governments of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh are using the term 'Dalit' rather than harijan, Scheduled Caste, or Untouchable.

The term 'Dalit' represents a political identity rather than just a caste name. Before this term originated, they had to endure the stigma associated with the patronizing names, imposed on them by upper caste people. These include 'Paraya,' 'Untouchable' and even 'Harijan' coined by Gandhiji, which had negative connotations. It is the term 'Dalit' which exactly conveys their struggle for humanity.

The Dalits are socially weak, economically needy and politically powerless, despite the protective policies followed by the government under the provisions of the constitution (guaranteeing them educational concession and scholarships, employment

and political reservations and socio-economic welfare benefits). The term 'Dalit' thus describes a condition of being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights and refers to people who are suppressed on the ground of their lowly birth. The word 'Dalit' is a descriptive word evocative of bondage and agony, the anguish and frustrated aspirations of a vast victimized section of the Indian population right down the ages.

People who are discriminated against and socially excluded on account of their caste and who militantly oppose such a system of discrimination and dehumanization are Dalits. It also includes people who are marginalized due to class and gender.

Gandhiji called them Harijans (the children of God), the high caste Hindus called them Untouchables, while they called themselves Dalits. Dalits are those who have been deprived of education and free trade. The practice of Untouchability was formally outlawed by the Constitution of India in 1950. But the Dalits are still subjugated to extreme form of social and economic exclusion, discrimination and torture. Their attempts to assert their rights are often met with strong resistance from the higher castes, resulting in inhuman torture and atrocities.

Dalits have voiced their dissatisfaction against the unequal social order through writings. The experiences articulated by the Dalit writers have not been expressed in any other literature. Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. It is believed that one of the first Dalit writers was Madara Chennaiah, an Eleventh Century cobbler saint, who lived during the reign of Chalukyas and who is also regarded by some scholars as the 'father of Vachana Poetry.' In the modern era, Dalit literature received its

first impetus with the advent of leaders like Mahatma Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in Maharashtra, who brought forth the issues of Dalits through their insightful writings.

In Dalit writing we can find the idea of Dalit Consciousness present throughout. It is basically an issue related with the realization of human sensibility. It is a reformative thought of Dalits' life. It includes optimistic point of view, sorrow and pain, and social relationship with society. It is against exploitation and has enmity against discrimination and humiliation. It is a kind of power of oppressed and exploited people which has given them a freedom of speaking, writing and living.

The anguish expressed in Dalit literature is not that of an individual but of the entire outcast society and thus it assumes a social character. Dalit literature expresses rejection of unequal order and demands equality, liberty, fraternity and justice, and there is revolt in their writings to overcome the anguish and rejection. The Dalit consciousness is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle against the caste system and discrimination where the human beings are the focus.

### **5.3.1. Plight of Dalit Christians**

The hard work of Dalits in the creation of an Indian society is decisive. The reward that the high caste society awarded to the Untouchables for shedding their sweat and blood in the agricultural fields, in the cattle sheds of the caste people, in the tanneries and in cleaning the public places by removing human excreta were torture and oppression which caused to their dehumanization. It is this context that the Gospel reached the Dalits. The reason for them to show a leaning tendency towards Christianity was that

they believed that Christianity would liberate them from their existing situation and effect a recreation because the subject of the Gospel is liberation.

The social consequences of conversion to Christianity were different for Dalits and for members of higher castes. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century, when most of the Dalit mass conversions occurred, higher caste people were completely cut off from their family and jati upon conversion to Christianity. But the Dalit converts were not made outcasts but almost always continued to live with their caste fellows on the periphery of the villages. They also continued to marry within their own jatis. Moreover, their place in the village economy and social system was not altered by conversion.

The Christian population, like the Indian population as a whole, is predominantly rural. In the overwhelming majority of villages where Dalit Christians live, the dominant castes are Hindu, so social identity and social relationships are determined by Hindu rather than by Christian norms and values. There the sacred view of caste still generally prevails. Dalit Christians are simply categorized with other Dalits and treated accordingly.

By embracing Christianity, the Dalits have not found themselves emancipated from economic and social inequalities. Conversions have neither offered the Dalits a way of escape from the bondage of caste nor have they fostered the social transformation of the Dalit Christians. They still live under the same conditions of discrimination, exploitation and oppression. The Indian church has to introspect itself of its treatment of Dalits. If a Dalit is alienated in society and he becomes a Christian, he is alienated again.



The Christian authorities tell them, ‘if you become Christian then there is no discrimination,’ but once they become Christian they are looked down upon by Christians of higher castes. A higher caste Christian will never marry a Dalit Christian, yet they say ‘we are all one.’

Many Dalits believe that the church has sinned more than others in perpetuating social injustices against Dalit Christians. Casteism is rampant in the church. Humiliating discrimination on the basis of caste does not spare the Dalit Christians even in death. Separate places are marked out for them in the parish churches and burial grounds. Thus they are aliens in their own church. Though they are numerically strong they are powerless and marginalized. It is painful that they are at the mercy of the minority masters. Theological education, medical work, charitable work and all other social works and even welfare of the Dalit Christians are now controlled, managed and administered by the powerful minority.

**5.3.2. *Karukku*:** The word *karukku* means the saw-like double-edged stem of the palmyra leaf. Another Tamil word *karu* means embryo or seed, which also means freshness or newness. Bama herself in the preface to the book brings the connection between the saw-edged palmyra leaf and her own life. She recollects: “Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra *karukku* in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them; but later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew in this book” (*Karukku* xiii). The embryo Bama refers to is the Dalit consciousness and the symbol is the new revolution, which aims at bringing a new social order into the Indian society. Apart from ‘scratching’ and ‘tearing,’ *Karukku* has also other functions– it can help Dalits to regain their lost dignity. As she writes:

“There are other Dalit hearts like mine, with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged karukku, challenging their oppressors” (*Karukku* xiii). Thus, *Karukku* signifies both Dalit oppression and Dalit struggle to get out from such an oppressive state. When the British came to India, a number of Untouchables converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. As added incentive they were given a little food and money. It did not take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches with separate services, and separate priest. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Parish Bishop.

*Karukku* is the depiction of a collective trauma—of Bama’s community—whose length cannot be measured in time. She just tried to freeze that in one book so that there would be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages.

The excessive oppressive force generated anger and rebellion within her. She needed an outlet to resist the forces that subjugated her and the outcome was *Karukku*. She expresses a desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy the bonds of unjust social structure. The driving forces that shape her book are the numerous events that occurred in her life which inspired her to write with dedication about her community’s need.

The element of resistance in her texts is the strength that she incurred to raise up even from the edge of defeat. She as a nun was happy to teach the children and argue

with the other nuns about the discrimination, “I enjoyed standing up to the authorities and teaching with some skill and success” (*Karukku* 20). She was constantly resisting the authorities and was fighting against the injustice of casteism. She wants the people of her community to be aware of discrimination, resist enslavement and submission and to demonstrate to the world that among human beings there is none who are high or low. This notion of hers echoes the motto of Dalit literature. In this connection Darshan Trivedi aptly remarks, “Dalit literature is a journey from main stream literature to marginal literature, from grand narrative to little narrative, from individual identity to group identity, from ideal to real, . . . from self-justification to self-affirmation” (7). She believes that those who have found their happiness by exploiting them are not going to let them go easily. It is they who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed just society where all are equal.

The narrator sees, feels and experiences the humiliation caused due to her caste at the age of eight or nine itself. The Naickers who are the upper caste treat the Parayas, the lower caste to which Bama belongs, very inhumanly. The Parayas are afraid of these Naickers due to caste factor. Once the narrator sees an elder Paraya walking towards the Naicker’s house holding out the vadai packet by its string without touching it. As the belief goes the Naickers are upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they do, they will be polluted. The narrator feels that how the people can believe that it is disgusting if a Paraya holds the packet in his hands, even though the vadai has been wrapped first in a banana leaf, and then parcelled in a paper. The sight of this elder of her community going of meekly to the shop to fetch snacks and handing them over reverently, bowing and shrinking to this Naicker who just sits there and stuffs them into

his mouth makes the narrator infuriated. The upper caste people think so much of themselves because they have money, but they have lost all human feelings.

These kinds of humiliation and oppression of the Parayas by the Naickers is an age-old 'practice.' The narrator's both grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. The Naicker children would call these old women by their names and order something or the other to do for them. And these women would address them as *Ayya*, Master and run about to do their bidding. Even the way they were given their drinking water was disquieting. The Naicker women would pour out the water from some height, while the women received and drank with cupped hands held to their mouths. Some Paraya women would go to Naicker houses, sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt, and they bring home the leftover rice and curry from the previous evening. This feeling of purity and impurity is deeply rooted in the Naickers as well as the Parayas. "The Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Paatti's vessel, and went away. Her vessel, it seemed, must not touch Paatti's; it would be polluted." The narrator's grandmother believed that, "These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper-caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower-caste? Can we change this?" (*Karukku* 14).

The narrator broods over the incidents of inequality, humiliation and learns from her brother that they are never given any honour or dignity or respect because they were born as Parayas. They were stripped of all that. Her brother tells her that if they study and make progress, they can throw away the indignities. At school also the narrator experiences the brunt of caste. If anything bad happens in the school they will hold these

'cheri-children' responsible for that. Every one seems to think Harijan children are contemptible, but use them for cheap labour. The headmaster and the priest take her to task because a coconut falls as she just touches it. She goes to the priest to bring a letter from him to the headmaster. The narrator begs him to give her permission to go back to school. The priest's first response is, "After all, you are from the cheri. You might have done it" (*Karukku* 17). When she takes the letter to the headmaster, he abuses her roundly, using every bad word that comes to his mouth. Even the warden-sister scolds them if they eat a little more and look plump though they pay the fee like everyone else for their food. At the college also she has to face such humiliation because of her caste. But she stands boldly in those situations and shows a kind of obstinate attitude towards the authorities who make fun of her.

The public conveyances are not spared from this inhuman practice. The upper-caste people do not sit next to an Untouchable. They will prefer to get up and stand all the way rather than sit next to a Dalit.

After her Bachelor of Education, she joins a school as a teacher. A nun asks her whether she is a Nadar (an upper-caste). By this time Bama has developed a lot of courage and confidence about herself. She straightaway says that she is a Parayar. She feels there that these nuns collectively oppress Dalit children and teachers very much. A thought of becoming a nun and helping these children who are humiliated strikes her. Finally she resigns and enters a religious order. Before selecting and entering that order Bama reads about the woman who founded that particular order. That woman had lived and died for the poor and lowly. The narrator wants to be like her. But her beginning experience here itself is not better than her previous experiences in schools and colleges

both as a student and a teacher. A sister makes a nuisance and humiliates her on two dates of birth of the narrator (One on her degree certificate and the other on her Christening certificate).

After her training as a nun she is sent to a convent. She is shocked to see the convent and the school attached to it. Most of the students of the school are from very wealthy households. The people who look after the menial jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories are Harijan. In the convent they speak very insultingly about low-caste people. In the opinion of these upper-caste nuns the low-caste people are all degraded in every way. They think the Harijans have no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture.

Bama painfully writes about the humiliation a low-caste has to undergo in this society irrespective of his/her education or profession. She is pained by the fact that the low caste has to face humiliation irrespective of his education. She is shocked to see this kind of treatment everywhere.

In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy. . . . And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us. (*Karukku* 23)

Oppression of the low-caste by the upper-caste is seen everywhere in our society. As they have money, power and influence they often try to ‘teach a lesson’ to the lower

castes even there is no provocation or there is a trivial provocation. There is a dispute between the Chaaliyars and the Parayas over the cemetery which actually belongs to the latter. This dispute grows to the extent of a fight which witnesses attacks with weapons on each other. When such a fight is taking place between them, all of a sudden a huge gang of policemen come out of the Chaaliyar settlement with batons in their hands and drive the Dalits back ruthlessly, mercilessly beating them before arresting. A few men escape and tell the men who are working in the fields not to return, but to stay there among the mountains and woods. The women take gruel to these men when they go to work in the fields. This is a planned attack arranged by the Chaaliyar folk who

invited some people known as the 'Reserve Police' all the way from Sivakasi, butchered a sheep for them and arranged a feast. They've taken an oath to destroy our boys, they say, so without counting the cost they are slaughtering sheep at the rate of two a day and feasting the police. Do we have such means? Here we are, struggling just for this watery gruel. So how will be the police or the government be on our side? (*Karukku* 31)

This reflects many such events in Mahasweta Devi's works also where the tribals or the Untouchables are made to run and hide to escape from the police attack which is mainly instigated by the upper-caste landlords.

The police prowl round and about for a few days. They thrash soundly every Dalit whom they catch while the women shout and yell in protest. The police do not spare houses to search for the hiding men. The police behave in an uncivilized manner with the women. They behave deplorably with these women as they go from house to house.

“They used obscene language and swore at them, told them that since their husbands were away they should be ready to entertain the police at night, winked at them and shoved their guns against their bodies” (*Karukku* 35).

For the downtrodden, leading life is a hard task. Without putting their bodies to toil it is impossible to earn their livelihood. Their economic condition makes them to do all sorts of physical labour. Bama’s community also does work of various kinds. They do agricultural labour like ploughing, manuring, watering, sowing the seeds, spreading the seedlings and planting them out. After this follow the work of weeding, spraying the fields with fertilizer, reaping the grain, working on the threshing floors and the like. Apart from this work in the fields they do the constructing labour like digging wells, carrying loads of earth, gravel and stone. If they do not get any of these works, they have to go up to the hills to gather firewood, or to the kilns to make bricks. They also go off to collect stray onions and groundnuts. It is a life of struggle and hardship. Bama explains how her mother had to suffer to take care of the family in these words: “On one occasion she brought home a bundle of firewood, leaned it against the wall and began vomiting vast gobs of blood. But it was only by toiling like this, without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood, that people of my community could even survive” (*Karukku* 45). Even though they work so hard night and day, their economic condition and life style have not improved. They never receive a payment that is appropriate to their labour. They eat the same *kuuzh* every day, it is the same broken-grain gruel and it is the same watery dried-fish curry. This damned fate does not spare even the children of the community. As soon as children grow up to be ten or twelve years of age, they have to go and find some way of making money. They work at match-box factory sticking



labels on match boxes. They also make firecrackers using chemicals and return home exhausted in the evening. At an age when they should be going to school, studying like everyone else and playing about in the evenings, they are shut up in the factories instead. Until this time they (especially the girls) will go about carrying their younger siblings. They will even gather a few twigs and sticks, and learn to boil a little gruel. It is always the girl children who have to look after all the chores at home.

Bama narrates satirically the way the priest and the Mother Superior of the convent treat her community. At the start of the New Year, it is the custom for the entire congregation to go, family by family, both to the Priest and Mother Superior, carrying gifts of fruit and biscuits. They will garland the priest and the Mother Superior and pay their respects. Even though their people have never tasted the fruit themselves, they somehow go through every effort to buy the fruit for the Church elders. They make their offering, kneel before them in all humility and receive the sign of the cross on their foreheads. On such an occasion a woman laments, “The priest who was here before this always gave us a couple of orange sweets, five or six holy pictures and a new calendar when we came with our gifts. This one just puts a cross on us and tells us to go away.” The Mother Superior retorts insultingly to the woman who has given her gifts and asked for a holy picture, “Have you given me some money in order to buy you holy pictures? Very well, now, you may all go home quickly without leaning on the walls or touching anything” (*Karukku* 57, 58).

For the downtrodden it is very difficult to pursue education after some stage. That too for downtrodden girl children it almost becomes a mirage. If they manage to get admission to the higher classes somehow, completing that part of education becomes

another toughest challenge for them. Bama explains how she undergoes the situations of shame, disappointment, humiliation and grief when she joins a college after her eleventh class. Her mother joins her to the college by pawning her earrings. Her beginning experience at the college throws light on the economic conditions of Dalits.

For a whole week I went around in the same skirt, jacket and davani. All my classmates looked at me as if I was some outlandish creature. Some of them asked me, did I only possess one set of clothing? Didn't I have any others? I felt deeply humiliated. I told them my mother was bringing my belongings, and I went to the hostel and wept. Meanwhile, my father wrote to me from the army, very abusively. "You listened to the nuns' advice and joined college; so now ask them to give you the money; go on, go to them." (*Karukku* 64)

During the College Day celebration because of having no decent dress suitable to the occasion and to avoid humiliation as her classmates arrive dressed in silk saris and decked in their best things, she goes and locks herself in the bathroom. There she weeps realizing how deeply shamed one can be for the lack of a few rupees in one's hand. But she knows it very well that these humiliations and disappointments will not be there for a long time. As soon as she completes her education and gets a job and starts earning everything will be changed. So she studies hard forgetting all these inconveniences. And what happens next holds a mirror to Bama's determination and perseverance to prove her ability as Dalit girl. When the teachers, nuns and friends see her progress in studies they praise her. She becomes a role model in her class.

She finishes her B.Ed. and starts to work. She feels independent. Now she can buy the sari or jacket of her fancy and wear it. She becomes aware that if one has a little money in one's hands one can gain some authority, and status and prestige. She could have lived comfortably after getting a job. But her service-minded conscience does not let her live happily while her people, however hard they work, live on gruel every day, wear nothing more than a couple of rags, own neither property nor land nor even a decent house to live in. She realizes that if only the children on her street acquire a little education and find jobs, then they too can live reasonably well. This train of thoughts leads her to the 'foolish desire' of becoming a nun and entering a convent to work hard for the other children who struggle as she has done.

But soon she realizes, to her dismay, after entering the order that the convent she has entered doesn't even care to glance at poor children. She observes in that convent that they treat the people who suffer from poverty in one way, and those who have money in their pockets in a totally different way. She unfolds the hypocrisy of convent life. Thus she makes a scathing attack on the pseudo followers of Christianity, that too nuns and priests. She gives a detailed account of the comforts enjoyed by those in the convent.

Before they become nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a sham. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty. When the bell rang, there was a meal. . . . By turns, at each meal there was meat, fish, or eggs. There was always an abundance of fruit and a variety of vegetables. There was a comfortable room to live in. . . . At ten in the morning there was coffee and snacks. At twelve, a hot meal. Once again tea and snacks at four in the afternoon, and a hot meal at seven. (*Karukku* 66-67)

Bama could have stayed here comfortably with enough to eat, clothes to wear and the chance to travel to different places. But she starts thinking about a life of renunciation and service to the poor. The school is full of children from wealthy families. She becomes frustrated. Her conscience is battered and bruised. Finally she leaves the convent and goes home, utterly dispirited.

Bama finds herself back in her village. She feels herself as the same Bama who was there a few years back. She shares to some extent the poverty of the Dalits who toil far more painfully through fierce heat and beating rain with nothing but gruel and water. She understands the condemned lives of Dalits. While the wealthy feast on the labour of the poor, the poor struggle to fill their belly. She analyses the wide gap between these two sections of our society in these lines:

But the wealthy live off the labour of the poor, like leeches, and their children eat well and fatten; they wear fine clothes, attend good schools, take up high positions and earn more and more money. It seems that our society is divided into those who toil, and those who sit down and feast. They have separated out those whom they consider unfit to touch, pushed them to one side and marginalized them; they make them work like machines yet abuse them unjustly, never allowing them to make any progress. I don't know when such atrocities will ever end. (*Karukku* 68)

Bama very painfully expresses her view about Dalits who patiently accept and endure their hard lives, and believe that they cannot change their caste and the poverty that is the part of that caste. She questions whether it is possible to fight for justice when

one is hungry and thirsty. She feels that knowing this fully well the wealthy control and crush Dalits. She is more worried to see this attitude of exploitation and injustice within their own church. She tells in a complaining tone the church authorities (obviously from upper castes) have made use of ignorant Dalits as their capital. Even though the Dalits are in large numbers in the church, the upper caste Christians enjoy all the benefits of the church. The upper castes hold the higher positions among priests and nuns. The Dalit priests and nuns are pushed aside and marginalized.

The book has a vivid portrayal of the sisters who tell stories in Scripture lessons about the Devil and fill in the young minds the idea of sin. They tell to these Dalit children that if the book used to write about the sins of people by the Devil fills, the Devil will peel the skin of their backs and write their sins there. They also tell them that if people sin greatly, it delights the Devil and makes their guardian angel very sad. In order to escape from this punishment Bama does everything that the sisters tell her to do.

Bama narrates the way of confession, the right method to receive the host at Communion. The sisters have told her that if anybody touches the host with their fingers, blood would flow down their hand. But out of perverse wish when Bama touches it, nothing of the sort as told by the sisters happen. Bama, thus giving different incidents like this unravels the fact how the sisters tell horrible false stories and threaten the children. It seems Bama makes fun of all these false notions of Christianity filled in the minds of people by the sisters just to keep them in 'control.' After entering college Bama slowly overcomes the fear filled in her mind in the name of Devil and sin. She starts to think that the priests and the nuns have deceived her hugely. She had thought that God comes only through these people but now she is sure that God is not with them. When she enters the

order as nun she finds there is no love in the convent, no love among these people who declare all the time that God is loving. But here is no love for the poor and the humble. They claim that God's love is limitless and subject to no condition. But inside the convent there are innumerable conditions.

The present day church, as Bama opines, seems to be a church made up of the priests and nuns and their kith and kin. And these are all from upper castes. These are the ones who are in the positions of power. But when it is considered people as a whole, most of them are lowly people, are Dalits. Bama makes a mockery of the church and the authorities in these words: "In the name of God they actually rob from the poor who struggle for their very livelihood. . . . They make themselves into gods so that they can exploit others. . . . The so-called gods walking about here are the priests and nuns and their relations; no other" (*Karukku* 94).

The work points out how the church distorts the real image and teachings of Jesus. The priests and the nuns frighten the Dalit children telling stories of Satan and Evil. After reading the Bible she understands the real meaning of the teachings of Jesus, "I learnt that God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed. And Jesus too, associated himself mainly with the poor. Yet nobody has stressed this nor pointed it out." She finds that none has taught that "God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, oppose falsehood, never countenances inequality" (*Karukku* 90). Jesus is described differently to different castes and the oppressed are taught in an empty and meaningless ways about humility, obedience, patience, and gentleness. In the convent, Bama keeps quiet about her caste initially, but her anger propells her to reveal her identity and ultimately takes the bold step of leaving the convent. It becomes an act of

resistance, thereby breaking the conventions and though she feels unstable, unprotected and unemployed, she achieves a sort of freedom by doing so. She has no regrets when she leaves the convent because she had a false existence there.

After her return from the convent she has a very difficult time. She is confronted with all sorts of problems. She is treated like an outcast. She has to encounter the anger of the church. She feels their hostility. She gets some letters from known followers of the church castigating her.

In spite of all the discrimination and insults, she feels optimistic because she still has a desire to live which boosted her with courage. She feels proud to believe that she could live in this society which disregards her and her community. In the act of remembering the scenes of insults and oppression, she encodes the modes of resistance that constructs her self in opposition to the hegemonic structure of the caste system. Whenever she questions the dominant upper class authority's hegemonic power, it becomes a political act of resistance.

Bama thus questions the 'norms' of the society she comes across showing her courage and protest. With her own determination to raise a voice against the oppression and humiliation she comes across herself she also fills in a hope in Dalits to do the same. She opens a way of emancipation for the Dalits. Rana Nayar, while writing about different possibilities with regard to women and the narrativisation of their stories, tells, "Third one is the 'narrative of emancipation', within which the woman becomes an instrument of change. She works not just towards her own liberation but that of her race, religion, community or sisterhood" (216).

The book ends with a note of optimism, hope and more than all a sense of awareness. Bama feels that deceiving and fooling the innocence of Dalits in the name of Pusai, Holy Communion, rosary and novena are over. Dalits no longer listen open-mouthed to whatever said in the Church. Dalits have realized that these others have never respected them as human beings, but bent the religion to their benefit.

### **5.3.3. *Vanmam***

As the title of the book itself suggests, the novel discusses vengeance between two Dalit castes— Parayars and Pallars. They appear as the protagonists of the novel. They are shown as two groups which fight viciously and suicidally with each other. The story takes place in the village of Kandampatty, Tamil Nadu. The text depicts violence and brutality that take place mainly due to the enmity that exist between these two Dalit castes. Pallars consider themselves as Hindus whereas Parayars are mostly converted Roman Catholic Christians. The novel also talks about the dominant Naicker caste's strategic role to keep the enmity alive between these two castes so that they can preserve their own status. Even though Naickers appear in the novel occasionally and never directly involve in the actions, their role is felt in the important events that take place in the village. As Malini Seshadri, the translator of the novel, in Translator's Note clearly says, "It is just a narrative of events involving two Dalit castes in one small village in one state in India. Yet it is a microcosm of a bigger world, a sort of inset to the big picture. Intra-Dalit rivalry leading to animosity, the deft manipulation of emotions and prejudices by upper caste landlords" (*Vanmam* x). In the past almost all the Parayars were working in the fields of the Naickers and so were completely dependent on them. But these days



they are no longer dependent on the farm work alone, and so they are not totally dependent on the Naickers anymore. Moreover,

The Parayars do many kinds of jobs nowadays. On a typical Parayar street in Kandampatti, one will find tailors, lawyers, masons, plumbers, drivers, conductors, teachers, policemen and people from many other trades and professions. If there are no jobs in the village itself, the men go elsewhere to lay pipes or dig wells. The women do their part too. They go outside the village to gather wood, sow groundnuts, cut or winnow sesame seeds, or weed the fields. (*Vanmam 7*)

It was a practice for the Parayars and Pallars to pay homage to the Naickers on Pongal festival day. On such a day they would set out for the landlord's house with great festivity, taking with them "offerings of a rooster, one or two large pumpkins, four-five stalks of sugar cane, and a measure of rice" (*Vanmam 7*). But the educated Parayar boys begin to detest this practice as they think that it is humiliating to take so many things for the landlords and then have to stand at a distance and reach for a mere morsel of pongal from them. These educated boys firmly say their elders to stop this practice. The elders, though resist and refuse to skip this practice in the beginning, gradually stop the offerings altogether. The Pallars also give up this practice of making harvest offerings to their landlords, Naickers. So the Naickers are angry with the Parayars for behaving like this and for spoiling the Pallars also.

The incident of the murder of Marraasu, a Parayar, by Karuppusamy, a Pallar, clearly tells the Naickers' role in stoking the fire of enmity between the two castes.

Marraasu waters Ranga Naicker's fields while Karappusamy Palanivelu's. The water from the irrigation channel has to be diverted to the various fields by turn. Over this issue of diverting water there are constant quarrels between Marraasu and Karappusamy. While landlords live in peace, the Parayars and Pallars who are in charge of watering the respective fields turn into sworn enemies. Ranga Naicker would instigate Marraasu, while Palanivelu would stir up Karappusamy to be aggressive and promise to 'take care' of everything. One bad day a quarrel breaks out regarding this irrigation water. A verbal quarrel develops into a physical one and finds a tragic end in the murder of Marraasu. Karappusamy who buries the corpse of Marraasu with the help of another Pallar, Pichamurthy, informs about this murder to his landlord who assures him to 'manage' the situation. When the corpse is found by his (Marraasu) relatives they lodge a complaint in the police station. "But this was of no use, because Palanivelu paid off the police, managed to convince Pichamurthy to be quiet about the whole thing, and saw to it that no case was filed. After all when one has wealth, one can do anything, cover it up, and get away with it!" (*Vanmam* 11). The narrator presents this and many such incidents as eye openers for Dalits. These Dalits—here Marraasu and Karappusamy—fight among themselves for the sake of others (here the Naickers). They won't get anything whether the fields are dry or watered. Out of their hard work someone else is going to reap the benefit. But these Dalits do not understand all this, and risk their lives.

Through the conversation of Saminathan and his mother Mekkamma, Bama suggests the readers about the changes that have occurred in the attitudes of Dalits, especially educated ones. Mekkamma considers the murder of her relative (Marraasu) in the hands of a Pallar as their fate and warns her son not to go to the fields where

Marraasu was murdered. But Saminathan protests, with irritation, his mother's meek and submissive attitude by saying, "Oh, stop it, amma! What is this big 'fate' you're talking about!" (*Vanmam* 12). In fact, the enmity between these two castes started when some Pallars had tried to attack Mannangatti, a Parayar who killed one of the attackers and pulled out his intestines and draped them around his neck like a garland. But after Mannangatti's death, these two castes gradually began to get close to one another. And they even stood for local body election and won the posts which were so far held by the Naickers. This shows their political unity and strength.

This political unity of the Parayars and the Pallars make the upper caste Naickers scared. They even lose some political posts to the Parayars and the Pallars and think that if the two castes work together they will even snatch away important posts like Panchayat President. Scared and jealous Naickers try to break the unity of these two castes. They stir up the Pallars by telling them that the Parayars are Christians and they (Pallars and Naickers) are Hindus and they must stick together. They encourage the Pallars whenever they attack the Parayars. Bama emphasizes in her narration about the importance of political unity between Dalit castes if they want to stand firm against the atrocities and injustice of the high castes. Saminathan's thoughts about his studying law and making his sister and all the children of his street echo Bama's strong opinion on the strength of education to Dalit children to make them raise their voice for justice, equality and dignity.

The boys of Saminathan's age react to the high caste people with some protest in their voice. Bama brings in the novel a group of such boys who have rebellious attitude and a bit of knowledge about exploitation and suppression of their people undergoing.

These boys have gone out of their villages for education which has brought some 'awareness' in them. The novel presents many such incidents where these Dalit boys retort to the remarks of the Naickers. When these boys are swimming in the well of a Naicker, he shouts at them angrily to "come out of the well at once! Do you think this is your father's well?" to which a Parayar boy replies, "Yes, this well was dug by my father. So this is where we will bathe. All the wells in your farms and fields were dug by our people only. So we will go and bathe in any one of them" (*Vanmam* 30). The boys protest the parish priest's refusing to hang Ambedkar's picture in the verandah of his bungalow. The boys request him to hang Ambedkar's picture in the verandah because the priest has Kamaraj's picture hanging in the verandah. Anthony's explanation for this is "Do you know why he has Kamraj's picture hanging there? Because he's a Nadar. That's why" (*Vanmam* 58). The boys insist the priest either he put Ambedkar's picture also, or remove Kamaraj's picture to which the priest flatly refuses. So the boys themselves take the Kamaraj's picture off the wall and put it down. This shows these young Dalit boys have started to take Ambedkar as their role model to fight against discrimination and marginalization these people come across because of their caste. This respect on Ambedkar also reflects in the inauguration of Ambedkar's statue in their village where Anthony makes a speech. He speaks,

"Educate! Organize! Agitate!" That was the great Ambedkar's magic slogan. We must all get a education. We should be aware of social realities. We must realize how society has marginalized us, discriminated against us. And, having realized that, we must unite and fight the injustice. We must not afraid to fight. Because

we are not goats . . . we are lions! Only goats get slaughtered, isn't that so? We will stand firm. We shall strive together to see that justice prevails. (*Vanmam* 61)

Anthony here represents Bama's voice. Her anguish, her concern for the downtrodden can be clearly understood in this speech.

But, after installing the Ambedkar's statue jointly, the Pallars feel not so happy about this. They regret their decision to give donations for the statue. The Naickers use this opportunity to instigate the Pallars by saying,

Enda? Why shouldn't you people protest? Are they such great fellows or what? After all, they're of a lower caste than you. If you challenge them, they will become docile. Just because they have seen some money recently, they've become so arrogant. They've forgotten their true status . . . they're acting big. If we let them go on like this, it's not good for you and not good for us. (*Vanmam* 62)

This instigation leads to murders in both castes (Parayars and Pallars) to take revenge on each other. Because of this vendetta the Parayars have to suffer more than the Pallars. After the murder of Parayar Sesurathanam by some Pallars, the Parayar people set fire on some of the homes of the Pallars. The police come and make the Parayar women get into their vehicle and take to the police station. The novel describes the agony of these innocent women and heartlessness of the police in these words:

Sesurathanam's wife was in the last stages of pregnancy. After seven or eight years of being childless, Chellakili was also expecting a baby. Even worse, Chinnamma was holding a new born infant, less than two months old, in her arms.

Most alarming of all, Selva Mary had left her six-month old baby asleep in the cradle at home, thinking she could soon get back after seeing the corpses in the bazaar. Now she was in a police cell, frantic with worry about what might have happened to her baby. (*Vanmam* 85)

However painfully they plead to release them the police treat them ruthlessly. They kick the women with their boots and hit with lathis. At the village also life becomes unbearable for the women since all the men have fled away. But somehow the women show courage and lead life amidst many difficulties and threats. Even they bury some dead bodies of their men who are murdered by the Pallars. The police harassment makes the life of these women a real hell. Their foulest language and blows make these Dalits' lives miserable.

When the beating first started, the women had gone into their houses, clung to one another and wailed. Thirty to forty of the policemen went around, entering every single house, dragging the women out into the street, and beating them up. With no regard even for the infants and the aged, they kept swishing their lathis down hard again and again. When the beating finally stopped, the women, horribly swollen with bruises all over, sat and cried and cried. (*Vanmam* 89)

The novel raises serious concern about the young Dalits (here Parayars and Pallars). Though their elders warn them not to take any aggressive steps regarding attacks on each other, they neglect their advice. They do not heed to the words of their elders who tell them not to retaliate. They behave like thirsty for blood. At the same time the novel sends a message to all Dalit communities that their welfare lies in their unity and

cooperation. If they want to make their voice heard and improve their social, educational and political condition, they should not pick up quarrels among themselves over any issues. Thus they should make the world—both Dalit and non-Dalit—know the strength of their social and political unity. Dalit as a concept and category has its value, idea, meaning, culture and identifications with human dignity opening up new possibilities. Gauri Viswanathan quotes Ambedkar who says, “The task of removing untouchability and establishing equality that we have undertaken, we must carry out ourselves. Others will not do it. Our life will gain its true meaning if we consider that we are born to carry out this task and set to work in earnest” (221). Fed up and tired Parayars initiate negotiations to establish peace between them and the Pallars. Parayars have suffered more in terms of loss of lives, economic set-back and pending court cases. After some elders’ effort to arrive at peace Pallars and Parayas consent to withdraw cases against each other. They also agree to put a common candidate for the Panchayat Board Election. This agreement and arrangement make the Naickers fume with rage. Kaalaiyan’s (a Parayar) victory as the President is celebrated in the streets of Parayas as well as Pallars. The words of Kaalimuthu of the Pallar street have much significance at this juncture. He says, “It’s not enough that we have won in this Panchayat election. The Dalit voice must resonate in the state legislatures and in the national parliament. . . . As Ambedkar, the champion of the downtrodden, said, we must capture the levers of government power. Let this be the first step towards that goal” (*Vanmam* 134). This win emphasizes the need for unity among Dalits if they like to come out of upper castes’ domination over them. A democratic settlement of inter-caste differences becomes the solution at the end of the novel.

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## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

The present study has made a serious attempt to analyze patriarchal and societal issues portrayed in the works of the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi and the Tamil Dalit writer Bama. The research has shown that these two writers are both critically similar and different at the same time. There are a number of apparent similarities between these two writers regarding the issues they have taken for their writing. So the study has justified the closer analysis of their texts and the patriarchal and societal issues dealt in them.

The research has convincingly established the fact that Mahasweta Devi, though neither a tribal nor an untouchable—unlike Bama who is a Dalit and writes about Dalits—has shown in her works a genuine concern about tribals. The way she unfolds the life (and death) of the tribals layer by layer, the way she raises questions regarding the role of the landlords, police and government in augmenting the misery of the tribals, her unraveling the methods these tribals resort to overcome or challenge or face the difficulties imposed on them undoubtedly prove her dedication and authentication about what she deals with in her works. Thus the study has strongly asserted that to talk or to write about someone or some group or some community or some issue, one need not essentially be one among them. The study believes that a writer should have a heart that feels and a mind that thinks seriously and honestly about the issue he/she writes. Courage and commitment are also needed to such a writer which Mahasweta Devi had in abundance. To get a true experience of tribal life Mahasweta Devi spent days together with them. She walked from village to village.

Bama equally has the concern and responsibility about the social, political and economic condition of her people. The research fully agrees that she has an advantage over Mahasweta Devi as she is one among them about whom she writes. Her three works have focused on different issues concerned with Dalits. The thesis has analyzed thoroughly these issues from various perspectives— church against Dalits, high caste people against Dalits, Dalits against Dalits, high caste men against Dalit women, men against women, and Dalit men against Dalit women.

The research has found that irrespective of different backgrounds, different ways of being brought up and with different experiences the writers have raised their voices for the subaltern and have shown that the subaltern too can raise their voices for justice and against their oppression. The thesis has brought out the silent suffering and strong protest of these marginalized in the works of the writers. It has found that no human being or no community irrespective of its social, economical and political conditions can be exploited for long. At the same time it has emphatically expressed an urgent attention towards the problems of these marginalized.

The works of these two writers are about the marginalized. They are very much concerned with and worried about the problems of discrimination, humiliation, injustice, atrocity, oppression, physical torture, violence and degradation that tribals and Dalits have been undergoing in their lives. Their arguments, anger, protest, expressions and opinions are rooted in these concerns. Their works explore the causes and effects of above mentioned problems. They unravel the difficulties and tensions of the lives of the marginalized. Their texts reflect almost the same preoccupation of patriarchal and societal issues the tribals and the Dalits undergo in their daily life. In fact, the texts taken

for study revolve around the tribal and Dalit communities in particular and the marginalized sections of society in general. So, their texts provide significant potentials for this comparative study.

This research takes ‘how far they are similar or different’ as a valid question. On one hand, Mahasweta Devi is well known for her fiction, which is translated into different Indian and European languages. On the other hand, Bama is popular for her Dalit writing and her works also are translated into other languages. Moreover, the works of these writers are much influenced by the humiliation, injustice, discrimination and atrocity happening on the tribals and Dalits in India. The thesis has investigated the treatment of these issues in the works of the two writers.

Social realities happening around them in the lives of tribals and Dalits play a very significant role for both writers. Their texts attempt to build a real version of what is happening to the tribal and Dalit communities. They also demonstrate the pain and suffering of the individuals they write about.

The research has found that there is significant resemblance between these two writers’ writings in terms of societal and patriarchal issues they present through their texts.

The first chapter has laid out the meaning and role of patriarchy in Indian context. This chapter has explained in brief how woman has been dominated by man in our society. The characteristics of traditional and modern societies have been discussed in this chapter to help to know the kind of society we are living in. The chapter has focused on the introductory part of the study including the argument, the approach, questions of the

study, aims of the study, significance of the study, relevance of the study, limitations of the study, methodology, and literary theory employed in the study. Moreover, the chapter has provided status of women in different periods of history beginning from Ancient India to British India. The changes that have occurred in the status of women over these phases have been discussed in the chapter. The chapter has also focused on the basic tenets of Hindu society giving importance on Caste System in India through different periods. Introduction to the selected works of both writers has also provided in this chapter with basic details like the year of publication and the central theme the texts discuss. The outline of the six chapters has been given in this chapter.

The second chapter has provided important details about the writers. In its introduction head the chapter has discussed what difference it can make on the text if a writer writes as an ‘insider’ and as an ‘outsider.’ The geographical, cultural, familial and literary backgrounds of both writers have been detailed in the chapter. The chapter has found that irrespective of their huge differences they have striking similarities in their concern and responsibility towards the downtrodden. Mahasweta Devi’s works are predominantly concerned with the adivasis’ problems and she travelled into the tribal places to know the real conditions of the tribal existence. Familiarity with these people and their suffering gradually grew in the writer as she stayed with them for some time. The chapter has shown how Mahasweta Devi tried to involve herself with the adivasis and how she tried to organize adivasi labourers by forming some organizations. The chapter has focused on Mahasweta Devi’s journalistic abilities which she used for writing articles for newspapers and journals on a wide range of topics– tribal exploitation, environment, ecology and government programmes.



The chapter has introduced Bama as a Dalit writer and her commitment towards recording authentically Dalit oppression. It has been explored in the chapter how Bama's ancestors, being Hindu, became Christians. Along with this the chapter has provided Bama's social, familial and geographical details as it has been done in the case of Mahasweta Devi. It helps the reader for a better understanding of the similarity and difference between these two writers. Bama's understanding and interpretation of Christian Scriptures, her becoming a nun in order to bring some solace to the suffering of Dalit children have been analyzed in this chapter. The chapter has looked into Bama's experiences as a Dalit girl, Dalit woman, Dalit nun and Dalit teacher. The treatment of Dalits by high caste people in her village, the treatment of Dalit students by high caste teachers in the school, the treatment of Dalit nuns by high caste nuns in the convents have been given a detailed account in this chapter. This section has explored the reasons that made Bama write her famous autobiographical novel *Karukku* where she has given a full vent to her anger and disappointment with the unjust social structure. The idea of Dalit Writing and the use of language by Bama in her works have been briefly explained in this chapter. The style of language used by Bama in her works overturns the decorum and aesthetics of what is called refined Tamil. No rules of grammar and no respect for decorum of words are followed in her texts. In fact, she is criticized for using such language in her texts. Her style of language itself becomes a weapon to resist the oppression.

The third chapter has found the complexities of tribal and Dalit societies. These complexities are due to some significant aspects like socio-economic, politico-cultural, and ecological (mainly tribal society) differences that exist in these societies. The chapter

has analyzed the prime features that have brought considerable changes in tribal societies. The main living sources of tribals are land and forest. In fact, they have an emotional attachment with land and forest which sustain their existence. The chapter has found that large scale of felling trees and deforestation has alienated the tribals from their land and forests. The chapter has also found that the entry of capitalist groups into the forests has left the tribals resourceless. Rich raw materials in the forests and cheap tribal labour have attracted the miners and industrialists to construct big projects and dams in tribal areas. The tranquility of the tribal areas has been disturbed as the soil, water, vegetation systems which the tribals are accustomed to use as food are destroyed. The British government's extension of the land revenue system to the tribal belts brought some sociological disturbances also. The tribals are not in a position to claim rights on the land they have been cultivating as their view of ownership of the land and the state's view of ownership of land is altogether different.

The chapter has explored the origin and meaning of the word 'Dalit.' Since its first use in 1930s, the term has got a wide usage by different organizations. It has included many weaker sections of the society in its long run. The Dalit Panthers of Maharashtra gave this term a greater circulation. The chapter has examined what opinion the Vedas, the Smritis and the Shastras have about the untouchables. Doing the most degrading jobs the Untouchables are living on the outskirts of villages.

The analysis in this chapter has revealed that the territory, in the same village, where the Dalits live is called 'colony' and the place where the high caste people live is called *oor*. The 'colony' is considered as impure, dirty, polluted and low whereas the *oor* is considered as sacred and clean.

The chapter has provided Ambedkar's view on Untouchability as seen by the high caste people who have framed some codes for the untouchables. This discriminatory code itself suggests the dehumanizing way of life the Dalits are leading. The chapter has found that through '*chavadi* courts' these codes of conduct are strictly observed in most of the villages. If these codes are violated, the guilty will be punished by the village panchayat chief who is obviously the Caste Hindu.

The chapter has made a detailed study of caste system in Tamil society. Castes in Tamil society are broadly divided into three groups– Brahmins, Non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas or Untouchables. Pallars, Parayars and Chakkiliyars are the more visible castes among Adi-Dravidas which are close to the bottom of the caste hierarchy. The chapter has provided details in brief about these Scheduled Castes and their occupations. The chapter has examined the kinds of job the Parayars do for their living. All the jobs are menial. They mainly depend on the high caste people for economical support, so they always remain subordinate to them.

The fourth chapter has shown that how women, that too tribal and Dalit women, have become subordinate due to gender and caste biased discrimination. The tribal and Dalit women have to bear the brunt of discrimination more compared to upper caste women. Their discrimination is all pervasive.

The chapter has provided the kinds of harassment tribal and Dalit women have to undergo because of their 'defenseless' position. Sexual harassment, molestation and rape cases of tribal and Dalit women go unnoticed as the victims do not want to be humiliated in society. The chapter has reminded that the society has forgotten words of great

personalities like Mahatma Gandhi who acknowledged woman's mental capabilities equal to man and told that woman has equal rights and freedom and liberty with man. The contrasting treatment of woman in scriptures and in actuality has been argued in this chapter. The more she sacrifices and suffers the higher she is respected. How the woman has been given imposed images as sexual objects, seducers and reproductive machines has been explained in this chapter. The humiliation, exploitation and harassment the tribal and Dalit women have to undergo as labourers have been analyzed in this section. The chapter has furnished details about battles a woman has to fight every day for everyday necessities, for protecting her honour and for establishing her existence firmly in this society. For this she has to employ her own survival strategies. Many a time in her struggle for survival she helps a lot for the survival of her family. But in most of the cases the 'head' of the family does not understand her contribution in this regard.

The chapter has dealt with the issue of victimization of women in Mahasweta Devi's collection of short stories *Breast Stories* and collection of plays *Five Plays*, and Bama's novel *Sangati*. Like Mahasweta Devi, Bama is seriously concerned with the issue of oppression of women, that too, Dalit women. Though both writers belong to different groups and write in different languages, their writings express common concern about these 'defenseless' women. In a patriarchal society, women, that too women with lower status, are very likely to suffer and struggle to survive amidst a pool of difficulties. Mahasweta Devi portrays in the *Breast Stories* the protagonists'—one is tribal, other is a Brahmin and another is a migrated labourer—sufferings caused due to social, political and economical reasons. The chapter has dealt with women as victims of patriarchal set up and here women mean women in general irrespective of their caste, colour or status.

The thesis thus has made an attempt to uphold Mahasweta Devi's genuine concern for the subaltern.

In Mahasweta Devi's works the women protagonists as representative of women folk, outburst their anger against patriarchal set up. The chapter has made it clear how Mahasweta Devi tries to show the injustice, atrocity, shame, discrimination and negligence heaped on women through the protagonists in her works. The protagonists symbolize the women who have suffered beyond limit and then have rebelled, in their own way, against the system after being frustrated and unable to bear exploitation any more. The protagonists realize that they are doomed to the death by this male-dominated, anti-poor establishment. They evolve their own methods to resist this oppression.

The analysis in this chapter has revealed how the conflict in the life of the protagonists is basically a conflict of survival and self-honour. And at the other end, it is a conflict against male dominance which acts in different forms against women. The chapter has also proved that it is a collective resistance against the imposition of patriarchal power structure on women.

The chapter has presented protagonists in *Breast Stories* from different walks of life. The chapter has shown that patriarchal agencies work everywhere irrespective of woman's position, place and condition. Woman as a tribal, woman as a housewife and woman as a migrant labourer undergo oppression in the hands of army officer, husband and photographer and contractor who are obviously the patriarchal representatives. But Mahasweta Devi does not forget to make these protagonists protest the oppressors in strong and condemning way before they are worn out and defeated.

The chapter has portrayed how Mahasweta Devi deals with a tribal poor woman and an urban middle class employed woman in the *Five Plays*. Mahasweta Devi very poignantly portrays the heartless social forces combined together against women who are also mothers. They are ‘forsaken’ by their husbands and are not protected by them when they need protection the most. Mahasweta Devi has drawn mother-son relation poignantly in these two plays– “Mother of 1084” and “Bayen.” The chapter has found that suffering for women starts from their home itself. As wives they undergo untold agonies. The husband whether because of his own ego as male or because of society’s expectations on him as husband or a member of a community often makes his wife suffer. The plays, in fact, refer to the major emotional concerns of women as wives and mothers.

Likewise, Bama in *Sangati* portrays diverse lives of Dalit women. The chapter has depicted social inequities and economic hardships suffered by Dalit women. Through this novel the researcher has discussed the lives of women who have been trapped not only by patriarchy but also by caste hatred. Many voices join together to express a series of incidents. The book unveils a panoramic view of Dalit streets where most of the incidents occur in the novel.

Bama projects the existential predicament of the Dalit women through the different problems of the protagonists and their struggle against patriarchal system. The chapter has analyzed the disparity between male and female that begins from the birth of a girl-child itself. This disparity continues till her death. The chapter has unfolded the kinds of hardship woman has to encounter in this passage of birth and death. Men rarely appear in the novel. If they appear, either they are seen beating their wives or wasting time in the *chavady* without lending helping hand to their wives in doing household

chores. The chapter has investigated the bonding which has forced most of the women to suffer as wives.

In comparing these two works, it is clear that both writers use the socio-economic and political conditions of these tribals, Dalits and women as a background to deal with the issues of patriarchy and society. Both writers expose the reader to the kinds of oppression the marginalized sections face under different circumstances. The writers imply in their works that both home—where protection is guaranteed maximum—and working place are often not safe for women. Husband is presented as blood-sucking creature. Wife has to satisfy all the needs of husband despite her tiresome work outside home to sustain the family. Domestic violence also occupies a place in their works. The chapter has found that many a time man in the form of husband or officer or employer tries to scold or beat or torture or insult to keep woman in control. By violence—verbal or physical—man tries to establish his supremacy over woman. The protagonist in “Draupadi” is gang raped, most of the protagonists in *Sangati* are beaten brutally by their husbands and Dibyanath develops an affair with his secretary in “Mother of 1084.”

The analysis of these three works has revealed the exploitation of women by different patriarchal agencies like husband, officer, and employer. Mahasweta Devi and Bama are largely successful in bringing out the ‘inside story’ of the marginalized and making them find some voice to speak out their story themselves.

Fifth chapter has explored the issue of tribal and Dalit victimization with reference to Mahasweta Devi’s collection of *Five Plays* and *Bitter Soil* and Bama’s autobiographical novel *Karukku* and *Vanmam*. One of the striking similarities in these

works is that they establish a voice of protest against the oppressive agencies. Other common features that the chapter has found in these works are mental and corporal suffering, verbal protest and physical violence with bloodshed. The role of moneylenders, landlords, government officials, high caste people and religious heads in making the marginalized subjugated to money power, caste power and muscle power has been examined in this chapter. Powerlessness and inability of the downtrodden has been considered as an opportunity by those who have power to exploit these tribals and Dalits.

Mahasweta Devi tackles the issue of exploitation through bonded labour in “Aajir” in her collection *Five Plays*. The peasants and labourers have no way out to save themselves, if they are once indebted. This bonded labour does not end even in the death of the bonded labourer, because if the bonded labourer dies, his son or someone in the family has to continue this service. This section of the chapter has revealed that slavery happens not for any huge amount of money, instead it is just for food and a paltry sum taken as loan at the time of drought. This exploitation is perennial. These people’s illiteracy and poverty are the main reasons for their being exploited and being forced to work as slaves. The story has depicted that a slave cannot dream of marriage, family of his own and freedom. This tells that a slave’s bondage is for his entire life.

The suffering of the subaltern does not have any particular pattern. Suffering can come in any form and from any corner for these people. “Water” has shown that how the landlords deceive, exploit and deny providing basic necessity like water. Though the landlords have a number of wells, they do not allow these Untouchables to draw water from them. Even the government wells are under their control. Mahasweta Devi has explained the collusion of government officials with such landlords. This part of the



chapter has focused on two contrasting ways of human life. While the landlord has all the wells, servants, money and eats well, the Untouchables scratch about the sands for water and develop sores on their hands and sleep almost empty stomach. The cattle of the landlords are washed in the wells whereas the children of these Untouchables die due to lack of water. The effort of the Untouchables to build a dam with the assistance and guidance of a teacher is spoilt by the unholy nexus of the landlord, the SDO and the police.

In examining Mahasweta Devi's collection of short stories *Bitter Soil*, the chapter has proved that Mahasweta Devi depicts the height of atrocity committed on adivasis, how they are exploited by using their innocence, ignorance and helplessness. The police, the landlord, the Religious Head and the trader bring destruction in the lives of these downtrodden in "The Little Ones," "Seeds," "The Witch," and "Salt" respectively. The chapter has unfolded appalling facts of the lives of the tribals and the Untouchables. Government's decision of blasting the hillock, killing of the officers who blasted the hillock by the tribals, the police action of burning the whole village, disappearance of the villagers into the jungle and the impact of scarcity of food on the bodies of these tribals in "The Little Ones" has been analyzed in this section thoroughly. The shriveled and wrinkled bodies of these tribals tell the story of the life these Aagariya tribals lived in the jungle. They have to live on stolen goods. Mahasweta Devi discusses the oppression of the tribal labourers by the landlords for asking their rights in "Seeds." The landlords cannot tolerate demands for justice. At the same time Mahasweta Devi has dealt with the survival strategies these tribals evolve amidst the oppression and threat for life.

The research has used the term 'Untouchable' in some places, although it is abolished in the Constitution of India under Article 17 of it, for the reason that it is ubiquitous in the artistic gestalt of Mahasweta Devi.

This section has gone deep into the atrocities the landlords commit and the tribals have to bear with. The landlords behave like dictators. They are not ready to agree to the rightful demands for increase in the wages of the labourers. Instead they try to suppress this voice by killing those who raise voice against them. This section has explored the emotional upheaval of the protagonist who is made to guard the graves of his killed clansmen including his son. The action of the protagonist killing the landlord who had killed his clansmen implies that oppression is not tolerated for a long time. No one can be kept under subjugation forever.

The chapter has tried to show that the tribals are made to suffer due to various reasons. One among them is their superstitious beliefs. "The Witch" has analyzed the miseries and tensions the villagers undergo due to this fear of witch which is unleashed by the Brahmin priest to cover his son's shameless act on a dumb tribal girl. Their ignorance and beliefs in sins, witches and the like is utilized to the maximum extent by this Brahmin priest. The dumb girl has to run from forest to forest with her extended belly and has to eat raw flesh of dead birds. Not only one girl, nor a village, but many villages are made to go through suspicion, fear and commit a series of blunders due to the Brahmin priest's deliberate false predictions in which these villagers have faith. This tale once again establishes the truth that exploitation cannot go a long distance when ultimately the father of the dumb girl recognizes her and the height of poignancy is reached in the dumb girl's giving birth to a child.

Mahasweta Devi appears as one of the rare writers who write a story on a simple subject like salt. The chapter has analyzed the last story “Salt” in *Bitter Soil*. This section has unveiled the importance of salt to adivasis and the impacts of non-availability of salt on their health and life. On the other side the section also has investigated the inhuman attitude of traders who are also landlords. Like in “Seeds,” here also the issue of wage assumes the prominent place in creating the problems that shatter the adivasis’ life. The trader cum landlord avenges the rightful demand of hike in the wages by not selling salt to these adivasis. In fact, he sees to it that salt is unavailable to them around their village. But some young men find some place from where they can collect salt. This collection of salt does not last long as they steal this salt from the salt-earth meant for elephants. In their continuous attempts to steal the salt-earth these young men are killed by the elephant. The section has thus dealt with some serious issue like the death of three young men and an elephant just because of non-availability of salt. And the trader who refuses to sell the salt is left untouched.

The chapter has also analyzed Bama’s *Karukku* and *Sangati*. The protagonists here are poor rural Dalit women. The section of the chapter has provided social, economical and political backgrounds of the Dalits that figure in the novels. An attempt has also been made to explain the term ‘Dalit’ in this section. Since Bama is a Dalit Christian this section has explored the condition of Dalit Christians in Indian society. It has also focused on whether the conversion has brought any significant changes in the lives of the Dalits.

Bama in her well known autobiography *Karukku* deals with the issue of caste. The meaning of the term has been explained in this section. This section has found Bama’s

experience as a Dalit in the village, in the church and in the convent. These experiences differ in nature and seriousness. The section has explored that though the novel is portrayal of Bama's experiences, it is in reality the depiction of a collective trauma of Dalit community. The section has explored Bama's urge to break the bonds of unjust social structure which is built on caste system. The section of this chapter has tried to expose Bama's painful experiences as a girl, as a student, as a teacher and as a nun. The incidents Bama witnesses and a part of them reveal the evil practice of caste that still working in our society. Being a Parayar, Bama has to go through a lot of humiliation and contempt. She has seen an elder Parayar holding out the *vadai* packet by its string as it has to be given to the Naicker who is a high caste fellow. Bama has also witnessed the Naicker women pouring water from a height into the cupped hands of Parayar women to drink. She has been taken to task by the head master and the priest for none of her faults. She is disappointed with her convent life where the upper caste nuns speak very insultingly about the low caste people. Nevertheless she gets confidence, courage and determination from these hard experiences. She starts to feel proud in disclosing her caste. The section has analyzed Bama's brave decision to leave the convent and school as a mark of her dissent against the hypocritical attitudes of the authorities of the church and school. It has also been found in this section that Bama believes emancipation of Dalits is possible only through proper education, self confidence, and courage among Dalits. They should come out of the fear of Sin and Devil which the sisters teach to 'control' the Dalits. She also feels that Dalits have been deceived hugely as they were made to think that God comes only through these sisters and priests. The section has found that Bama's various experiences have taught her that there is no love for poor and the humble in the

church authorities. The Dalits have realized that these high caste church authorities have never respected them as human beings. The section has pointed out how the church distorts the real image and teachings of Jesus.

The analysis of *Vanmam* in this chapter has revealed how the vengeance between two Dalit communities causes bloodshed both sides. Besides the enmity and brutality of these two Dalit castes, the section has also focused on the high caste Naickers' role in stoking the fire of enmity between these two castes. Bama has tried in the novel to expose the effects of intra-Dalit rivalry. The seemingly independent Parayars cause anger and jealousy in the Naickers. So they instigate the Pallars against these Parayars by supporting them in the fights between these two castes. Without understanding the hidden cause of the Naickers in provoking them to be aggressive against each other, the Parayars and Pallars attack each other and lose their lives. If the Pallars kill a Parayar, the latter takes the life of the former. Amidst the frequent violence, Bama raises issues like political unity, education and awareness among Dalit castes. Through the characters like Anthony, Bama exposes her anger against this unjust social system which creates discrimination based on one's caste. In fact, the group of boys in the novel symbolizes a voice of protest against the discrimination, atrocity and negligence that are heaped on them. The two incidents regarding Ambedkar's statue and picture reveal awareness that has been created in the minds of educated boys.

The section of this chapter has portrayed the atrocity of the police on Dalits. The police kick the women with their boots and hit with lathis after an incident of a murder. They use the foulest language and their blows shatter the peace of the Parayars. However, the Parayars and the Pallars reach an understanding and unite after being fed up by the

internal clashes. The novel implies that the welfare of Dalits lies in the unity and cooperation of different Dalit castes.

The chapter has explored the implied facts in these works of Bama that Dalitness is essentially a means towards achieving a sense of cultural identity. The inferiority complex based on “to be Dalit” has now disappeared. Now Dalitness is a source of confrontation. This change has its essence in the desire for justice for all mankind. Dalitness is a matter of appreciating the potential of one’s total being. Thus individual culture, social burden and Dalitness cannot be isolated. For this new Dalit individual, social and cultural freedom has come because of his self-elevation and self-identification. Today’s Dalit literature rejects the degraded Hindu social set-up. Dalit writers relentlessly expose the inhumanities and prejudices of caste, society and instill a new social and cultural consciousness.

The analysis of these works has revealed that most of the tribals and Dalits are socially weak, economically needy and politically powerless despite the protective policies of the government. They have remained unprivileged and deprived of basic rights. Though practice of untouchability is formally outlawed by the constitution of India in 1950, the Dalits are still subjugated to extreme form of social exclusion and torture. This section of society which is discriminated against and socially excluded on account of its caste has frequently raised its voice for justice. Thus the chapter has shown how these two works of the two writers are comparable in terms of the oppression, discrimination, humiliation and atrocity heaped on the characters in them.

Throughout their works, various structures of power that encompass gender and caste, the various cultural and social practices that are anti-tribal and anti-Dalit are ruthlessly exposed. Their texts reflect a resisting, political mode of writing which expose the patriarchal logic which invents the ways for woman's subjugation. Their envisioning and revisioning create space where the possibility of change is kick started and strike sparks that set fire to existing patriarchal narratives.

Much has been accomplished in the realm of tribal development but a great deal still remains to be achieved before a large section of the tribal community is brought on par with the advanced sections of our society.

What is disturbing today is the magnitude of the problems facing up in tribal areas. There has been a rapid erosion of tribal rights on land, water and forest. There are tribal movements of all types. There is a renewed demand for tribal autonomy and self-management of resources by communities. A large section of the tribal communities are being urbanized, criminalized and pauperized. Inequalities are growing in otherwise relatively egalitarian tribal societies.

It is not sufficient to only pass the Acts although the Acts in themselves are steps towards empowerment of tribals and Dalits. To bring in sustainable and developmental change in all the spectrums the overall culture that respects and promotes the rights is very important. We can't see the political mass movements along with the policy interventions, organization of people, capacity building of the victims and marginalized for changing the structure and mindset. To foresee this change in the lives of tribals and

Dalits who are entering in the public sphere gradually, effective implementation of Constitutional provisions is crucial.

The study has revealed two important facets of Mahasweta Devi's social criticism. On the one hand is her deep distrust of the privileged upper classes who are either directly taking part in the oppressive dynamics of Indian society, or living in ivory towers, preferring to ignore its ugly realities. On the other hand she expresses her heartfelt respect for the uneducated poor villagers with their solid goodness and unquivering fortitude. The world of her works is structured throughout on distinctive binary oppositions: between the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed, and cultured opportunism and simple innocence. A constant concern for the oppressed characterizes much of the writing of Mahasweta Devi. Having been aware of the enormous spread of monstrous exploitative mechanism, she always feels "an urge and an obligation to document."

Dalits have organized several protest movements and intensified their struggle against socio-economic and political deprivation and oppression in Indian society. The caste system of today is not the same as it was a hundred years ago. These protest movements have brought various structural-functional changes. And yet though these communities have achieved much in their struggle for socio-economic and political rights in the Indian social system, atrocities against them by caste-Hindus (landlords, money lenders, religious Heads, and such) have increased rather than decreased. However, these atrocities may paradoxically be taken as positive phenomenon in the social life of these marginalized, for wherever and whenever they assert their legitimate rights, the result is confrontation and consequently atrocities. These people are still socio-economically very



poor and weak but psychologically and morally they have become very confident and strong and are able to raise their voice against any kind of exploitation and oppression at any level. The social consciousness generated by the protest movements has played a very effective and important role in making them confident enough to gear up their struggle against age-old discrimination.

As the research has explored in the works of these writers it is obvious that there have been two types of ideology among tribals and Dalits. The first is an acquiescent ideology in which one accepts his/her low status or position and avoids any confrontation with others, but may request the dominant group (oppressor) to allow access to education, employment, etc., in order to serve them better. Such a person is submissive, and the dominant group grants him/her some of the facilities out of generosity. The other popular ideology is protest ideology where the deprived sections of the society who organize themselves to resist innumerable types of exploitation and oppression by the dominant groups.

Both the writers have made assertive efforts for the people they write for. Their protest ideology involves resistance, opposition, confrontation and conflict with the dominant groups (oppressors). These writers have adapted this ideology to achieve their desired goals of social equality, social dignity and de-stigmatized social identity to tribals and Dalits.

The purpose of the current study is to determine the relevant issues related to patriarchy and society with reference to Mahasweta Devi and Bama's works. The present study is set out to identify the difficulties exist for tribal and Dalit communities including

women from different walks of life. The research also aims at exploring the ways through which literature is used as a medium to deal with issues like society and patriarchy. Lastly, this study aims at pointing out and building the literary link between Mahasweta Devi and Bama's works.

The emerging findings from this research have proved that, there are vital elements of similarity between Mahasweta Devi and Bama with reference to their treatment of the characters and concern about the communities their characters represent. The findings assert that, issues of oppression, discrimination, humiliation, atrocity, torture, bloodshed and protest are present in their works, despite the fact that, the language they use and the people they deal with are different.

The study has also found that the writers almost portray the same patriarchal and societal issues in their texts. However, in contrast, the context is different with reference to the characters which appear and the severity applied in the works. In Mahasweta Devi's works characters appear from different walks of life like tribal, Brahmin, untouchable, labourer, employee, housewife, rural and urban and educated and uneducated. Bama's characters almost share similarity. They are rural Dalit agricultural labourers of whom a few are educated. There is a lot of cruelty, hardship, suffering, oppression and injustice in most of Mahasweta Devi's works. Bama's works though have injustice, discrimination, humiliation and suffering, the intensity is relatively low. Moreover, both writers use a lot of words from the native language of their characters in their works. At the same time they provide English translation for most of the words that appear in the works.

The findings have enhanced and confirmed the link between the works of Mahasweta Devi and Bama with reference to their subject matters, use of language and their concern for the marginalized. The research has formed a modest contribution to the field of comparative studies, notably to the field of subaltern studies.

The researcher, in this study, has indicated the ways in which Mahasweta Devi and Bama's texts are comparable with regard to issues of patriarchy and society. Here the study has considered short stories, plays and novels for analysis and argument. However, it is useful to take other genre or genres of literature, such as poetry into consideration for further studies in the field of subaltern studies. This study will act as a base for future studies taking writers whether they represent the characters or protagonists of their works or not, that is to say, whether they are 'outsiders' or 'insiders.' Thus the research has tried to show that comparative studies can be made by taking two writers one of whom writes about his/her and the other writes about other people with the same concern, responsibility, feel and social commitment. The study suggests that more such writings remain hugely unexplored and yet to be considered for research. Attempts in this direction are recommended and future research might, therefore concentrate on the other subaltern writings for research.

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