



Birsa Munda: From History to Fiction

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Abstract:

This paper studies Mahasweta Devi's novel Aranyer Adhikar (The Rights of the Forest). The novel tells the story of Birsa Munda's Great Rebellion (Ulgulan) against the British in the late nineteenth century. Birsa Munda, a tribal leader from Chota Nagpur (present day Jharkhand), fought against the British, landlords, and missionaries who took away tribal land, forest, and culture. Mahasweta Devi portrays Birsa not only as a heroic figure but also as a voice of his community, reclaiming histories often ignored in mainstream discourse. His struggle emerges as both political and spiritual, as he inspired his people to assert their rights, dignity and cultural survival.

The paper also argues that Birsa Munda's fight is not just a story of the past. His demand for jal, jangal, jameen (water, forest, land) connects strongly with contemporary issues of displacement, mining, and deforestation faced by tribal communities. Aranyer Adhikar reminds us that the struggle for equality, justice, and respect for nature is still ongoing. In this way, the novel makes Birsa's rebellion meaningful not only as history but also as a lesson for the present.

Keywords: Tribal Uprising, Rebellion, Right, Struggle, Exploitation.

Introduction:

Indian English Literature has played a vital role in preserving the rich cultural heritage of India while simultaneously depicting the social realities surrounding it. Mahasweta Devi, one of the most powerful literary voices of the twentieth century, wrote a historical fiction based on the legend of Birsa Munda in her 1977 novel *Aanyer Adhikar (Rights of the Forest)*. In this work, she reveals how the intrusion of landlords, moneylenders, missionaries and labor contractors into the otherwise happy and peaceful lives of the tribals transformed them into slaves on their own land.

For her commitment to writing and activism, Mahasweta Devi honoured with several prestigious awards, including the

Sahitya Akademi award (1979) the Padma Shri, Ramon Magsaysay, Padma Vibhushan and Jnanpith award. She often stated, without hesitation, that

“My India still lives behind the curtain of darkness, a curtain that separates the mainstream society from [the] poor and the deprived...As the century comes to an end, it is important that we all make an attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and sees our true faces in the process”¹.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translated Mahasweta Devi's novel *Aranyer Adhikar* into English under the title *Right to the Forest*, making Birsa Munda's story accessible to a

wider audience beyond India. In the opinion of the celebrated Keralite litterateur and the most powerful confessional voice in Indian English Literature, Kamala Das, **“Mahasweta Devi... is a wonderful, fearless woman. She has learned of the tribals, she has lived with them, and she is dealing with material she's acquainted with. Write about her. Make a cult out of her.”**²

Regarding her ageless writing, Dinesh Misra in his research article, 'Marginalization of Tribals: Literature as Resistance' comments,

“When Mahasweta Devi wrote *Aranyer Adhikar*, She recreated the Character of Birsa Munda, who led the tribal revolt. In her narrative, history folklore and fiction is all mixed up, to create a state of emotional high. This affects the reader's coincidence. It highlights the spirit and passion of the time. She does not indulge in sentimental romanticization.”³

In the novel, Devi illustrates how the intrusion of landlords, Zamindars, Police, Labour-Contractors into the otherwise peaceful lives of the tribals turned into enslaved on their own land. Birsa emerges as a leader who wished for his community to preserve their simplicity, moral values, and spirit of equality. he envisioned a new faith rooted in tribal traditions, yet its highest principle was humanism. The social, political and economic exploitation of the Munda Community transformed Birsa into a rebel with a cause. His rebellion against the colonial rulers was not merely a protest but a revolutionary struggle aimed at establishing ***Mundaraj* – a vision of self-rule** and complete independence for his people.

To the oppressed and marginalized Munda Community, Birsa appeared as a living

god, a saviour who could free them from centuries humiliation and oppression. The tribals began to believe that he alone could lead them toward liberation. Birsa gave a clarion call for unity and launched a historic rebellion, a great tumult known as '*Ulgulan*'. Like a true leader, he organized meetings with his people, explained their respective roles, and inspired them with the vision of *Mundaraj*. He succeeded in uniting his people and making them believe in their own strength to fight against the colonial rulers, Zaminders and money-lenders who were their real enemies. Soon the Moondas across the Ranchi region believed that Birsa was their '*dharti-aba*'⁵ Birsa Munda used the slogan '*Abua Raj Ete Jana, Maharani Raj Tundu Jana*' which translates to **“Let the queen's kingdom end and our kingdom be established.”**⁶

Mahasweta Devi's novel begins and ends with Birsa's death. In the last part, Amulya, Birsa's classmate, thinks about the lies and injustice of the British government. He feels deep pain in his heart because he could not stand with Birsa in his fight. This shows, that while Birsa gave his life for his people, many others remained silent, and that silence made the struggle even harder. By portraying Birsa as both a historical hero and a symbol of resistance, the novel makes readers realize that the fight against exploitation and injustice is not just matter of the past but an ongoing challenge in the present. Regarding her presentation of tribe in this novel critic Anand Mahanand comments:

The novel, as a form is unparalleled in documenting human lives. Tribal societies, however, as classified and documented by writers can be represented more vividly in fiction and hence, they become more

accessible through novels like Arnyer Adhikar.

In this regard, Arnyer Adhikar and her other works have played a significant role in documenting authentic aboriginal lives.”⁷

Conclusion:

Thus, Mahasweta Devi devoted her life to writing and working for tribals and other marginalized groups. Indian English literature too has contributed to this noble cause by portraying the true struggles of the tribes, so that society may move towards equality and democracy. *Aranyer Adhikar* proves that history and literature together can keep alive the memory of resistance and inspire future generations to continue the fight for justice.

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