

DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT: THE REALITY OF TRIBAL SETTLEMENTS AS DEPICTED IN *IMAGINARY MAPS*

Rakhi. N. P.

M.Phil Research Scholar

Department of English,

Bharathiar University,

nprakhi@gmail.com.

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Dr. P. Nagaraj,

Assistant Professor

Department of English,

Bharathiar University.

Abstract

*This paper proposes to analyse the changes happening to tribal communities in India in a globalized era. Most of the developmental processes of the country are blind to the needs and aspirations of the aboriginals. Their proximity to world's finest rivers and forests credited them in no ways. Tribes were driven out these forests and made slaves in industrial firms and fields across the nation with the expansion of British reign. Even after independence the same condition prevails. Most of the laws and articles framed in favour of tribes do not reach them and in no way better their life. Their rivers and forests are looted by the industrialists and rich to cater to their selfish needs. Tribes are abandoned in the onslaught of development happening across India. This situation of tribes is well captured by Mahasweta Devi in her collection of short stories *Imaginary Maps*.*

Key Words: Development, Tribes, Ecological Imperialism, Ecological Refugees, Subalternity

On paper India has a progressive constitution which grants equal opportunities and equal representation to all the citizens in the nation building despite their colour, caste and status. It promises equal consideration to the problems of minorities across nation. Most often it is true in the case of Dalits and Muslims. Though not up to the mark, state tries to give a fair treatment to these downtrodden sections. Tribes, on the other hand, have been largely invisible in the political processes of country for a long time. Developmental policies of the nation are blind to the culture of tribes. Their voice is not heard at all in the political and media circle. Just like them, most of their problems are marginalized. When accused of

negligence towards tribal communities, the main excuse of government is the remoteness of tribal settlements. Tribes are not given any chance to direct the cultural, economic and social development of the country. Tribal understanding of forests or environment does not influence the policy making of the state. State is even now in the hands of industrialists and capitalists. Under the guidance of such radical exponents of development India advances to become an economic super power in Asia. Even amidst the fury of these developmental projects, tribes remain the invisible citizens of India.

Most of the interventions of government and urban omnivores in the settlements of tribes are not constructive in any sense. Tribal settlements lay on the peripheries of rain forests of India. These tribes are largely dependent on these forests for livelihood. This gives uniqueness to the culture of tribes. Their living is conditioned by their proximity to forests and other living beings. Both during British reign and after independence, tribes are subjected to an erasure largely because of dispossession and deforestation. Even now such atrocities are continuing in the name of development. It constitutes another kind of imperialism. Ecological imperialism can also suggest an imposition of western ideas and theories in development and conservation policies which will lead to the erasure of local ecologies. Across India, creation of wild life sanctuaries and relocation of tribes ruined their lives to an extent. Many of the policies of government in the name of development allows for a looting of tribal ecologies. All these lead to a forced alienation of tribals from their primary resources. This state-sponsored ecological imperialism in that sense paves way for acute poverty and famine in tribal areas such as Pirtha and Tohri.

All the three short stories in the collection *Imaginary Maps* illustrate instances of ecological imperialism and its impact on tribal ecologies. Modern society is blind to the requirements of tribes and their intrinsic relation with nature. Tribes' culture is undiscovered and so treaded down by our policy makers. They have no reverence for the lifestyle of tribes and thinks it can be dispensable with modern culture. Puran addresses tribal world to be a "continent!" He continues: "we destroyed it undiscovered, as we are destroying the primordial forest, water, living beings, the human." (Devi 197) This callousness and ignorance of both state and the mainstream society pushes them to the status of mere 'ecological refugees'.

The same ignorance and callousness can be seen in the way developmental programmes are distributed across the nation. Tribes are not given their due in the economic development of the nation. They are denied education, proper health care and the supply of basic amenities such as food and water because they chose to live in the remotest forests of India. Many such instances are there in both "The Hunt" and "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha." Most of the tribes in Tohri and Pirtha do not get proper healthcare. During famine tribes die of malnutrition and absence of health care. The same way, Douloti dies as doctors callously deny her proper treatment. Development or its benefits never reach them but exploiters do. They are exploited for cheap labour in farms and timber plantations. In Tohri, timber merchants like Tehsildar manage to get cheap labour by misleading the tribal chief. Tribes are not given chance for a fixed wage and so exploited at the hands of brokers like

Tehsildar. All these atrocities against tribes exemplify the ignorance of government towards the existence of tribes. Most of tribal communities are not united. So unlike Muslims or Dalits they cannot ask for their rights from the government. As SDO points out: "A few thousand people have now accepted despair. They do not know how to ask, do not ask, but they take if given." (Devi 104) Government ignores their presence because tribes are incapable of shaking the parliament with demonstrations or protests.

Mainstream society including nation builders has always sidelined the aspirations and needs of tribals. Lack of education and access to power drain tribes of the possibilities to bring their problems before policy makers. Being uneducated, they are unaware of the rights which Indian constitution guarantee them. Very rarely that our media or organisations venture to inform tribes of their rights. Puran sarcastically comments that immense deal of labor and money is spent to keep up this directive of non- information.

Radio does not inform them, television does not inform them, newsprint does not inform them, the aspiring MLAs and MPs do not inform them, the state governments do not inform them, the tribal welfare ministries do not inform them. (Devi 110)

Nobody is trying to reach their settlements and make them aware of their rights. If ever somebody tries to do that he will be ousted from the firm in which he is working. Suraj Pratap's experience speaks volumes about that attitude of the nation. He is ousted from the media firm in which he is working for his involvement with tribal causes. That is, the system intentionally tries not to give voice to the problems of tribes. They are largely ignored by the mainstream society.

Though tribes are enfranchised citizens of India, their problems are rarely addressed in the parliament. Elections are held as usual in tribal regions, but no real representative of tribals reaches the parliament. Land lords and higher officials manipulate the way the representatives are elected. In "Douloti the Bountiful", Mohan speaks about how Munabar's beneficiaries are voted to power by the tribes. Ignorant tribes like Ganori will vote for whom their land lord points to. Such representatives will never work for the tribes. Once got elected, they will abandon the tribes. This makes tribals more invisible in the political process of India. As Harisharan comments "the tribal MLA, MP, Minister never open their mouths" (Devi 130) in the parliament for tribes. These representatives are silenced either by their party or by their selfish motives. This makes most of the tribes voiceless.

Media is indifferent to the problems of tribes as they are hankering after sensational issues such as caste-revolt and rapes. Only such issues which will interest the masses are the priorities of journalism in India. These media tycoons hanker after those news items such as rapes, communal riots and gossips from film world which will increase their TRP rating. The Media firm in which Puran works is also of the same kind. It is this furious chase after sensational items lead Puran to disillusionment. Suraj Pratap's ousting from the media firm in which he worked clearly tells what can happen to any journalist who ventures to break the clichés. All these issues of invisibility of tribal problems lead us to think about one of the famous remarks of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that a "subaltern cannot speak". (*Spivak*

Reader 28) Here tribes are erased from both the political and social sphere of the nation. Their voices are not heard at all.

The essay of Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern speak” posits a question of representability and non- representability of subalterns. This question is crucial to the study of both tribes and *Imaginary Maps*. Though tribal problems are largely ignored by the main stream media and society, a trend persists to enquire into their archaic existence. Tribes as the most ancient inhabitants of the world invite the curiosity of both media and archeologists. Even in literature such a tendency prevails. These people entertain a special enthusiasm to study tribes and tribal culture as pieces of curio. This attitude is hazardous to the existence of tribes in many ways.

Mahaswetha in her work “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha” deals with one such issue of misrepresentation through the characters, Puran and Kausalji. As and when Puran sees Bikhia’s ancestral soul he decides that he will not reveal this fact to anybody else. He knows for sure that if he let anyone know about this discovery,

[t]here will be an invasion of the media of the inquisitive world...., and the soul’s warning message, the terrifying news of the tribal being of Pirtha, will all lose their perspective, by many analyses the rodent and the rhododendron will be proven the same. And who can tell, all the countries of the world will conduct investigations out of Pirtha everywhere, into the last forest, the last cave, to see where the prehistoric time and creature are still hidden. (Devi 162-163)

Such an enquiry will not only serve any purpose to the real problems of Pirtha but also invite unnecessary attention to tribal life which is disastrous for their already deteriorating culture. These remarks of Puran clearly justify the politics of Spivak’s question. In most cases, those who speak for the subalterns like tribes will not do justice to them rather than mishandling their problems. This aspect of misrepresentation is even clearer as one observes Kausalji’s enthusiasm to shoot tribes even when they are in mourning.

Kausalji who runs an NGO wants to take ‘photos’, ‘video pictures’ of Pirtha for his Western as well as local audience who’ll pump money into his organization. Kausalji wants to capture all “famine or drought, or the matter of administrative failure or negligence and Kausalji’s role and human suffering” (Devi 168) in a documentary. His kind of representation amounts to a gross appropriation and commercial exploitation of the tribal’s distress. Such an insincere ‘speaking’ for the tribal receives a satiric rejection by the author as well as her tribal subjects. Dimag’s wife and Motia’s Ma point to the connections existing between the documentary films on the Tribals and human-traffickers who come in ‘tur-rucks.’ Shankar, the literate one among the Nagesias of Pirtha, can see through the vested motives operating behind the relief operations: “I know, Sarkar. Everything finally becomes a deal, even giving food to the hungry. At this moment we’re eating his food; in exchange he wants to capture us in film. His dictionary cannot include the self-respect of the hungry” (Devi 169). The story of the tribal will be heard, no doubt, by Kausalji’s film but it won’t be an unadulterated, unmediated, pure recounting of the subaltern saga of suffering: “Take relief, let’em make

fillims', Shankar tells Puran: "We are hungry, naked poor. That will be known on the fillims. But the fillims won't say who made us hungry, naked, and poor. We do not beg, do not want to beg, will people understand this from those pictures?" (Devi 177) Such efforts will never try to bring out the truth of tribal existence.

Mahaswetha's argument stresses on a discussion of responsible representation or ethical responsibility. Mahaswetha brings out the disparity between the kind of Kausalji and Puran. These two represent two possibilities. Kausalji's move to stand firm on his decision to shoot tribes' misery suggests the society's callous ignorance to the feelings of tribes. For them, tribes are an island which they cannot understand or relate. Puran with his interactions during his stay in Pirtha learns to love and respect the tribes. He realizes the gravity of tribes' problems and argues in one instance of the story that "tribal wants human recognition, respect, because he or she is the child of an ancient civilization." (Devi 178) This remark of Puran leads to think much on Spivak's concept of ethical responsibility. It elucidates on the need to love the subaltern and be responsible for them through that love. Here, Mahaswetha feels that what is needed is a love towards the culture of tribes.

For Puran and Mahaswetha, Modern man with his technological advancement is far away from the tribes. This inability of modern man to grasp the culture of tribes induces him to be callous and ignorant towards tribes and their problems. When Puran speaks the words:

Too little can be known, we have destroyed a continent that was kept unknown and undiscovered. The tribal wants human recognition, respect, because he or she is the child of an ancient civilization. In what a death farce we are enthralled as we turn them into beggars, who are nowhere implicated in Indian education, development, science, industry, agriculture, technology. They remain spectators. India marches towards the twenty-first century,' (Devi 177-78).

It becomes the confession of a modern man who fails to understand the ancestral inhabitants of a great civilization. It is his position of being a modern man, a glass wall erected between tribes and himself, makes Puran suspicious of establishing an ethical relationship with the tribes of Pirtha in the beginning. When he sees the pterodactyl, he fears that he cannot establish any communication point with it. His own position of being a modern man prevents him from doing so. Tribals can relate with the bird easily because it is close to their archaic wisdom. But even the existence of such a bird is beyond the technological wisdom of modern world. He says:

[t]here is no communication point between us and the pterodactyl. We belong to two worlds and *there is no communication point*. There was a message in the pterodactyl....We missed it. We suffered a great loss, yet we couldn't know it. (Devi 196)

These words suggest modern man's inability to have an access to archaic wisdom of tribes. But later on, Puran comes to realize: "Only love, a tremendous, excruciating, explosive love can still dedicate us to this work [protect tribes] when the century's sun is in the western sky,

otherwise this aggressive civilization will have to pay a terrible price..." (Devi 197). The same understanding runs through the words of Harisharan when he asks Puran:

[f]or a few thousand years we have not loved them, respected them. Where is the time now, at the last gap of the century....we have never had a real exchange with them, it could have enriched us. (Devi 197)

Both Puran and Harisharan points to the fault of modernity in alienating tribes from the policy making of the state. They did not respect tribes' wisdom and give them any role in the policy making of nation. Both of them feel that these mistakes should be fixed as to ensure the nobility of tribes.

Through the experiences of Puran, Mahaswetha suggests that though a historical correction is impossible, the mainstream can still try to undo some of its past mistakes by engaging with them with an ethical, responsible and profound love. Puran adds: "Love, excruciating love, let that be the first step" (Devi 197). It is only by developing such a profound "love," living and working with/ for them and establishing a kind of "ethical singularity" with the indigenous people that one can achieve a faithful and sincere representation and understanding of the tribes. As Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak writes in the appendix to *Imaginary Maps*, pterodactyl is an "empirical impossibility" (Spivak, "Appendix" 209) to the modern Indian. For the modern tribal Indian, it is his "ancestor's soul". This disparity can be overcome only through an attempt to understand the culture of tribes. It stresses on the need to "learn from below". All the three stories of the collection put forward a need to find an alternative for the current policies of development. In framing such a policy, the modern Indian should learn something from the tribes also. He can no longer be blind to the aspirations of these ancient inhabitants of India.

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says the three tribal histories in the collection *Imaginary Maps* "exemplifies some impossible yet necessary project of changing the minds that innocently supports a vicious system"(Spivak, "Appendix" 202). So long, Modern Indian unknowingly supported a western model of development which pulled his ecology to the verge of devastation. Now it is time for him to look at the other side of wisdom. It will teach us "how to construct a sense of sacred nature which can help mobilize ecological mind-set beyond the reasonable and self-interested grounds of long-term global survival"(Spivak, "Appendix" 202). These stories call for such a non-Eurocentric thought which can exorcise the ghosts of development from our local ecologies.

There may be an impossibility of communication between both tribal world and the modern world. But as Puran says modern man can understand and communicate to tribal culture through love and respect. This will enable him to learn some lessons of sustainability from the tribes. It is high time both modern Indian and modern tribal Indian should join hands for the revival of an already deteriorating Indian ecology. Only such an alliance can undo the harms done to ecology by the reckless exploitation of state and the urban Omnivores. According to Gadgil and Guha, incorporation of tribal wisdom in resource management will enable a steady use of forests.

But reviving the lost ties with nature and tribes calls for an understanding between modern man and the tribes. As Spivak argues, this activism requires both tribes and modern men to develop a co-operation built on ethical responsibility: “a witnessing love and supplementing collective struggle” (Spivak, “Appendix” 205). This is what is exemplified in the act of Mary Oaron in “The Hunt”. Mary Oaron is western and tribal at the same time because of her mixed ancestry. Even when this ambivalent position makes her an outsider in the community, she relates with tribals through her love for them. She combines the power of both the modern and the tribal. Mary improvises a tribal ritual, hunting, to kill her and nature’s exploiter Tehsildar. The same way, one should learn to love the other and initiate a collective struggle to revive our ecologies.

The experience of Pirtha tells both Puran and the readers that water, bread, rice are actually the essentialities in India. Sixty years of blind development denied them to the tribes. It is this realization which makes Puran feels ethically responsible for the lives of the inhabitants of Pirtha. Puran thinks deeply about the problems of tribes and comes up with some solutions in his report. These solutions call for a participation of tribes in the developmental activities in tribal areas. This mindset of Puran is reminiscent of much of the proposals of a movement, Environmentalism of Poor, heralded by Ramachandra Guha and Martinez Alier. They feel that only such policies which incorporate tribal wisdom and participation can be of use to deteriorating tribal ecologies. Gadgil and Guha discuss some of the alternative developmental projects which can be adopted in tribal areas in their book, *Ecology and Equity*. Puran’s proposals also brings about a framework for tribal development programmes which will be friendly to tribal ecologies

According to Puran, the funds for ITDP areas are eaten by officers, contractors and businessman. A proper scrutiny of the functioning of the beaurocracy can solve these problems. Tribal land is strong and infertile. Puran proposes that providing proper irrigation, fertilizers and pesticides will help the tribes to produce at the most four months’ food from that land. Guha and Gadgil feel that much of the deterioration happened to tribal economy is because of the unequal exchange of resources to the industry. State should go for alternative development strategies which incorporate practical proposals from tribal knowledge such as the revival of community management systems. These indigenous communal management systems are far effective in the sense that it enables local communities to live largely in balance with nature, prudently managing their common property resources to satisfy a variety of needs of the community.

Puran observes disparities in the way land and other resources distributed among the population. Most of the fertile land is with the rich. Tribal lands are also usurped by these rich land lords. Puran feels that a proper implementation of land reforms act can solve much of the problems of Pirtha. As tribes are not ready to leave Pirtha, it is better to make available the supply of agricultural resources like water in their places themselves. In order to ensure proper irrigation of lands, rain harvesting can be implemented. It can be accompanied with the revival of traditional methods of irrigation such as tanks and wells (Gadgil and Guha,

Ecology and Equity 134). Strengthening Pirtha pool and constructing dams on it will also be useful (Devi 190).

Puran prescribes afforestation in order to mend the harms done to ecologies through development. Before planting the forests they can themselves say what plants they want, what will help them live. Promoting cottage industries in Pirtha by pooling on their weaving and engraving skills will provide a steady income to the tribals. Tribes can rely on natural resources such as leaves and roots to make artifacts and sell them out in the markets without the intervention of brokers. Puran suggests that much of the conservation policies of India are blind to the needs of tribes. He argues for the rights of tribes on the land of forest and its resources. In *Ecology and Equity*, Gadgil and Guha speaks about a more feasible method of conservation which allows for the existential demands of tribe. Such a method calls for the participation of tribals in the conservation of forests. It will grant tribes the right to collect forest resources and cultivate on the forest land. According to Gadgil and Guha

A decentralized system of biodiversity conservation, which might come to cover all of rural India, provides a great opportunity for developing a symbiotic relationship between systems of folk knowledge, traditional knowledge systems such as Ayurveda, Siddha or Unani medicine and modern scientific knowledge. (*Ecology and Equity* 114)

All these proposals made by Puran, Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil call for the participation of tribes in the framing and execution of tribal development programmes.

Only by bringing tribals to the fore front of the society and rejuvenating their ties with nature, their existence can be assured on earth. For that an inclusion of tribal knowledge into governmental policies is necessary. State should give attention to the needs of tribes and understand their culture. Only through respect and love that such an understanding can be achieved. When state starts to recognise tribes as citizens of India, it also assures tribes' participation in nation building. Most of the third world environmentalists feel that it is high time to ensure the participation of tribals in conservation and forest management. So far government tried to alienate tribes from the peripheries of forests in the name of development and conservation. But activists like Mahaswetha Devi stresses on the need to bring tribes to the forefront of society through their participation in developmental activities. The stories in this collection illustrate how disastrous it is for a tribe to live without forests. In that sense, these stories are a plea to give back tribes their traditional sources of income. It calls for a radical change in the way India's forest policies are framed.

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