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## Significance of Birsa Munda's rebellion: A rereading of Mahasweta Devi's "Aranyer Adhikar"

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### Abstract

This paper is a thoroughgoing study of Mahasweta Devi's novel "Aranyer Adhikar" in order to bring out the past significance of Birsa Munda's great rebellion and its Contemporary relevance. The clarion call of Birsa Munda to establish Mundaraj as well as to get back their rights to the forest by waging a war against the British Raj and the Zamindars forms the core theme of this novel. Mahasweta Devi focuses our attention on the deplorable socio-economic condition of the tribal people in the last half of the nineteenth century. In the colonial era, the tribals were deprived of their basic human rights, the minimum amenities of life and were victims of severe exploitation. Birsa's revolt was triggered off by the inhuman torture inflicted on the tribal communities by the British rulers. Birsa rose in rebellion against the colonial rulers to safeguard the lands of which the tribals were being dispossessed. Looked at from the postcolonial viewpoint, Birsa's great agitation to bring about a sea-change in the lives of the tribals seems to be a distant reality.

**Keywords:** *Right, Subaltern, Tribal uprising, Colonial, Exploitation.*

## **1. Introduction**

We know full well that Mahasweta Devi was a renowned social activist and writer whose heart bled for the harrowing actualities of the tribals living in different parts of the country. Her famous novel entitled “Aranyer Adhikar” published in 1977 (Devi, 1977) is a glorious testimony to the tribal uprising which shook the very foundation of the British rule during the years 1895 - 1901. Birsa Munda was the spearhead of this rebellion. Mahasweta Devi’s “Aranyer Adhikar” is by far the most remarkable novel which gives us a very touching account of the sad predicament of the Subaltern people of India. The tribal communities of our country largely depended on the forests for their subsistence and sustenance. Their existence was at stake as they were being displaced from and dispossessed of the forests which sustained them, nourished them and protected them like a mother.

In the novel “Aranyer Adhikar”, Mahasweta Devi throws a flood of light on the tribal agitation which lasted from the mid - nineteenth century upto the end of the century. The reasons for this Munda uprising are not far to seek. Mahasweta Devi does not simply focus on the historical facts of this rebellion. Being a social activist-cum-novelist, she penetrates deep into the true nature and character of the Munda agitation under the leadership of Birsa Munda. In the novel, she shows us how the intrusion of feudal lords, Zamindars, Police, Labour-Contractors into the otherwise happy and peaceful lives of the tribals made them captive in their own lands. The land revenue system introduced by the British Government paved the way for the influx of a huge number of people who were not tribals or should we say, they were anti-tribals. The novel also highlights how colonialism and the feudal system in India went hand in hand to exploit the tribal people. Ranajit Guha is absolutely on the right track when he talks about this doubly articulated colonialism in India in his essay “Dominance without Hegemony: History and power in colonial india” (Guha & Chakravorty Spivak, 1988).

## **2. Objectives**

The objectives of the proposed study are as follows:

- a. The condition of the tribal communities in the colonial period as highlighted by Mahasweta Devi.
- b. Birsa Munda’s rebellion to get back their rights of the forests as depicted in the novel “Aranyer Adhikar”.
- c. The contemporary condition of the tribals.

## **3. Discussion**

It is significant to note that Mahasweta Devi in her novel “Aranyer Adhikar” gives us a vivid glimpse of the socio-economic condition of the Munda community through the recounting of the history of their community by Dhani Munda, an old veteran rebel (Sharma, 2019). Moreover, in her foreword to the novel, Devi herself points out that before colonialism the tribal people lived a very peaceful and happy life in close contact with nature. They had abundant freedom to roam about in the jungles. They were absolutely free from the evil clutches of the Zamindars, the Police and Land-

Contractors – “They were happier then. They used to go to the forest for hunting. They made field for farming. They had their own god - Singbhonga” (Devi, 1977). But the old pristine happiness of the Munda community was lost because of the introduction of the British land revenue system. Their religious lives were also affected. The Christian missionaries and the Hindu religious gurus intruded into the lives of the tribal communities and started converting them to Christianity or Hinduism. The tribal communities were the worshippers of Mother Nature. They were as helpless as the forest, the trees which were being indiscriminately felled by the British Colonial rulers in conjunction with the indigenous elite of our country.

The avowed mission of Mahasweta Devi as a writer was to depict the severe exploitation of the helpless tribal people at the hands of colonial rulers and feudal landlords. The indiscriminate destruction of the forest leading to the displacement of the tribal communities and landing them in extreme social and economic crisis finds a vibrant expression in her novel “Aranyer Adhikar”. The genesis of Birsa’s rebellion can be traced back to the rebellion of Sarders against landlordism and harsh laws framed by the colonial rulers. Long before the emergence of Birsa as a rebel leader, the agitation of tribal Sarders for that land, for their rights to the forest went on for long years. The Colonial rulers put down their rebellion in a brutal way. But the tribal Sarders did not give up their fight to get back their land.

When Birsa was born to Sugana Munda and Karmi Munda, his father was suffering from extreme poverty, having lost his land to money-lenders. As a small child, Birsa found his father trying hard to subsist somehow. In the prime of his life he developed a strong love for the forest through which he used to wander aimlessly. He felt a never-failing kinship with the forest. In the afternoon whenever he would go to the forest to fetch fresh water from the waterfall there, the pale face of his mother Karmi flashed before his eyes. The forest mother seemed to cry to him and tell him that she was being divested of her resources. Her cries would ring in his ear. Birsa felt instinctively for the forest and realized that the forest must be saved from this onslaught. From his early years Birsa happened to realise the helplessness of the tribal people due to the anti-tribal land laws of the British rulers. The exploitation of the hapless tribal communities, their financial hardships, their displacement from their own lands found a responsive chord in the heart of Birsa.

From his early childhood Birsa came to realize that he must study in order to learn the language of the colonial rulers as well as to save tribal lands and houses from the oppressive British rulers and feudal lords. But as a small boy he could not know that there were a lot of obstacles to the fulfilment of his dream of receiving education. However, he was so eager to read and write that he was admitted to the German Mission School at Burjur to receive primary education. His life at the Burjur German Mission was completely different from his tribal life. After completing his lower primary education successfully, Birsa went to Chaibasa Mission for further studies. There he came in contact with Amulya whom he told that he wanted to get back the land of his father from the money-

lenders. In the meantime the tribal Sarders started their agitation against the British rulers, the Zaminders and money lenders to retrieve their lands. Birsa was sad to know that the British Govt. arrested them, suppressed their agitation and tortured them ruthlessly.

Dhani Munda implored Birsa to leave the Mission by saying that the white men regard the Mundas as naked, barbarians and dacoits. This gave Birsa a rude shock. He believed that the Missionaries in conjunction with the Colonial rulers did not want the Mundas to get back their rights to the forest. He was greatly shocked to hear Father Notrit say that the Munda Sarders were all robbers, plunderers and cheats. This hatred of father Notrit for the Munda Sarders, who were fighting hard for their rightful demands of the land, led Birsa to give up education, leave the Chaibasa Mission and stand by the Munda Sarders for their agitation against the colonial rulers.

The social, political and economic exploitation of the Munda Community made Birsa a rebel - a rebel with a cause. He rose in rebellion against the colonial rulers with the aim of securing Mundaraj and complete independence for the tribal people. To the oppressed and depressed Munda Community Birsa appeared to be a living God. They began to believe that Birsa would be able to free them from the shackles of years of inhuman humiliation and oppression. Birsa gave a clarion call for all the Mundas to stand united and launched a rebellion, a great tumult which he called 'Ulgulan' (Devi, 1977). Like a true leader, Birsa held meetings with the fellow Mundas, convinced them of their respective roles to achieve the goal of Mundaraj and succeeded in uniting them and making them believe in their abilities to fight against those Colonial rulers, Zaminders and money-lenders who were their real enemies. The Mundas all over the Ranchi region believed that Birsa was their 'dharti-aba' (Devi, 1977).

Birsa Munda's all out agitation against the exploitation and plunder of the forests by the tyrannical Colonial British rulers took on a definite shape and a positive colour towards the end of 1899. He apprised the Mundas of the two stages of his ulgulan. In the first place, he wanted to frighten the oppressors by setting fire to their establishments and by shooting arrows. He planned to launch an armed rebellion as the last resort. The whole Munda Community having been victims of injustice and oppression responded whole heartedly to the battle cry of Birsa, their 'Bagvan' (Devi, 1977). Remarkably enough, the unfed, half-fed and almost unarmed Munda Community gathered courage and was ready to fight against the most powerful British rulers. The plight of the Mundas filled Birsa's mind with agony. The Mundas subsisted on their only food - 'ghato' which was the gruel made of china grass (Sharma, 2019). Rice was only a dream to them. Birsa wanted rice for all Mundas. He sought to establish the rights of the Mundas to the resources of the forests. For the survival of his community he had no alternative but to stand up to the blood-sucking colonial rulers and feudal landlords. Ultimately, the rebellion was crushed by the Government forces. Birsa along with a large number of Mundas was arrested and put into the gaol. In the prison-house they were subjected to

inhuman torture. Birsa was broken both in body and mind. He realized the excruciating misery of Dhani Munda, Bharmi, Gaya, Soma, Donka, Majhia and all other Mundas who were kept confined in the dark chamber of the prison. He might be captured, tortured and ill-treated in the jail. He still retained his indomitable spirit and cried out to the fellow Mundas in the jail to keep up their spirits and fight against the exploiters to get back their homes, *i.e.* the forests, for them.

It was, however, unfortunate that Birsa Munda's death by poison in his food was a sheer conspiracy on the part of the jail Superintendent Anderson. Birsa died in the prime of his life. The Superintendent Anderson instructed the jailor to write the blatant lie that Birsa Munda died of cholera in the jail. To the whole Munda community, Birsa was a living God, a great fighter, their emancipator. The British bureaucracy was afraid of Birsa so long as he was alive. Birsa was a tremendous force in mobilising the tribal people to fight for their basic human rights. By putting Birsa to death the British rulers wanted to crush the rebellion once for all. They also attempted to demolish the divine stature of Birsa, fondly nurtured by the tribal people in their hearts. This precisely explains why immediately after his death, the jail Superintendent Anderson ordered for the cremation of Birsa's body, flouting the Munda tradition of burying the body after death. The jail sweeper was entrusted with the task of burning the body of Birsa. But the Mundas believed that "Ulgulan has no end. Bagyan has no death." (Devi, 1977). Birsa and the other Mundas who were imprisoned and meted out physical and mental torture were the pathetic victims of the deliberate miscarriage of justice. Barrister Jacob was correct in pointing out that Birsa might be done to death but his ideas continued to burn bright in the minds of Mundas.

Rightly did Mahasweta Devi remark in the foreword to her novel "Aranyer Adhikar" that Birsa was a modern man, a Renaissance man in the sense that he was far ahead of his time in his thoughts. A modern man educated and enlightened in Christian Schools that Birsa was, he endeavoured to extricate the Mundas from their age-old superstition. He sought to build up a brave new world for the Munda community - a world completely free from the perpetual exploitation and inhuman rule of the British Government aided and abetted by the Zaminders, money-lenders and feudal landlords. He wanted all the Mundas to retain their simplicity, sense of morality and equality. For the tribal people, Birsa dreamt of a new religion, the crowning glory of which must be humanism.

It would be wrong to think that the novel "Aranyer Adhikar" does only focus on the historical colonial perspective of Birsa Munda's relentless agitation against the British rulers. In the novel we find Birsa Munda as a hero of the so-called third world colonial countries. The beginning and end of the novel highlight Birsa's death. The last part of the novel, where we find Amulya, Birsa's classmate, musing upon the lies, the injustice indulged in by the British Government, is really very significant. With an agonised heart Amulya realized that he could not stand by Birsa in his fight against the colonial rulers. The 'historicity of the text and the textuality of history' (Barry, 2010) lie crystallized in Amulya's realization that ulgulan has no end and Birsa cannot die. The tribal people would continue to fight for their basic human rights as well as for their rights to the forest.

If we reflect on Birsa Munda's uprising in the context of the present condition of the tribals, we happen to find that the tribal communities are still lagging far behind in terms of social, political and economic empowerment. They are still groping in the dark for their full rights to the forest. There have been, no doubt, improvements in their social and economic condition. They have been participants in the political activities of the free country. The development of roads, the provision of drinking water, the establishment of schools for the tribal people - all these have been taken care of by the state in recent years. But much more still remains to be done for these hapless tribal people who have been subjected to deprivation of their rights to the forests. The state should be more proactive in ensuring the all-round development of the tribal communities. Birsa Munda raised his protesting voice and led the Munda community to rise in rebellion against the British colonial rulers to get back their rights to the forests. But at the same time he sought to save the environment, the greenery by safeguarding the forests from the plunderers. Herein lies the quintessence of Birsa Munda's rebellion.

#### **4. Conclusion**

To round off, Birsa Munda's rebellion took the entire British Government by storm and the most powerful, tyrannical colonial rulers in collusion with the feudal lords, money-lenders and the Zaminders made an all-out attempt to put down this rebellion with an iron hand. Consequently, Birsa along with a large number of Mundas was arrested, put into the jail, meted out severe mental and physical torture. But it redounds to the credit of Birsa that he succeeded in making the Munda community protest against the colonial rulers, against their evil administration, their judiciary and, above all, against the displacement of the Mundas from their own lands. It can be asserted that Birsa's agitation did not come to an end with his death or, should we say that Birsa's fight for getting back the lands for the tribals still lies smouldering in the hearts of the tribal community.

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