

“The Hunt”, “Draupadi” and “Pterodactyl”): Short stories by Mahasweta Devi

Tribal India

All three stories are set in the tribal areas of eastern India, with tribal people as protagonists. Tribals are the indigenous people of India, also known as adivasis or forest dwellers. There are many sub-groups of tribals that are spread out over different parts of India. They practice animist religions (and are therefore considered to be outside the fold of formal Hinduism), although large numbers have also converted to Christianity, under the influence of missionaries during the colonial period. The British were never able to hold full sway in large swathes of tribal areas in dense forests.

Tribals constitute roughly 8 percent of India’s population, and are among the most marginalised of social groups in independent India, along with dalits or the lowest of castes. They are considered to be outside the social mainstream and suffer from political marginalization (in spite of affirmative action). The Constitution of India has a list of “scheduled tribes” and guarantees affirmative action for tribals in education and employment. But on the ground reality shows that tribals suffer from lack of proper health-care and education. Development money allocated for tribals is often siphoned off for private gain by corrupt forest officials and bureaucrats.

Nationalist attempts had been made to forge an inclusive nation that involved bringing tribals into the mainstream culture of India. But proponents of tribal welfare also made the counter-argument regarding how that would threaten the very survival of tribal culture.

Social stereotypes about tribals abound in caste society. Indian middle-classes, reproducing colonial attitudes, tend to view tribals as innocent and naïve, backward and primitive, or as dissolute and promiscuous, because of a more liberal social order and open gender relations within tribal groups.



Mahasweta Devi

She is a highly acclaimed writer, journalist and activist who write primarily in Bengali. She has lived and worked with the tribals for the last several decades, representing their cause through both her writing and fiction.



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“Pterodactyl”

The prehistoric; Sacredness of human life: that which cannot be contained within the principle of reason alone

The ungraspable other; the ghost of our ancestors that haunts the present/future: “the unquiet soul of the ancestors” (128)

Limits of understanding and compassion (104)

Limits of anthropological knowledge

Puran Sahay: 45-year-old son of a Communist, lonely widower with a 15-year old son; unrequited relationship with 32-year old Saraswati

Has not built a human relationship with mother/son/Saraswati: how will he do as a journalist?

Travels to Pirtha in MP; “to put Pirtha on the map” (112)

SDO: “There;s nothing there. There’s nothing more to be seen in the tribal areas” (99)

Pirtha block’s map: like a pre-historic creature; famine; place of perennial starvation; despair; no development

Boy’s painting on the stone wall of his room—picture taken by Suraj Pratap—bird? Bat? Iguana? Monstrous shadow (103); signifying danger

Indian middle-class in transition—lower middle class educated women; dalits like Suraj: Puran as an idealist, a writer, a journalist in the provinces

Dilemma: working with the system, using it or rejecting it

Against incommensurability; for solidarity

The story consists of two overlapping narratives. The one that Spivak, the translator, calls the “frame” narrative is the story of Puran, a journalist based in provincial Bihar, who travels to remoter villages and districts in the state to report on issues of caste violence, government corruption, and famine. Unable to commit himself in a proper relationship with his love interest, he uses the opportunities his job affords him as a journalist to escape to remoter areas to confront what seem to be in his view larger, more public concerns of social and economic deprivation and backwardness, especially among India’s “scheduled tribes”. On invitation from his friend Harisharan, a district-level bureaucrat, Puran travels to Pirtha, a back of beyond tribal village settled on harsh land that is in the grip of a severe famine and whose inhabitants are close to death by starvation. Puran hopes that through his reporting of the famine, he could aim to “put Pirtha on the map” and by so doing to enable his friend Harisharan to get the government to bring some amount of relief and aid to the villagers.

In an interview with Spivak, Devi emphasises the fact that in many senses the predicament of Pirtha is not unique to it, but is generalizable for all villages where tribals reside. These adivasi communities, abandoned by state power and marginalised by development processes, constitute the periphery within the heart of the state and nation. It is up to individuals like Puran, then, and a handful of other honest, conscientious and dedicated bureaucrats, to cast light on these darkened spaces on the map, even as they are aware of fighting a losing battle against the onslaught of corruption and flawed development ideologies.

This “frame” narrative of Puran’s intellectual commitment and personal alienation is interwoven with the story of the strange sighting of a pterodactyl in the village. When Puran arrives in Pirtha, the tribals are in mourning and have retreated from all communication with the outside world. Just preceding Puran’s visit, some cave drawings have come to light, although it is not certain if the engravings are prehistoric or contemporary, although at least one of the drawings has been made by Bikhia, a local adivasi boy. The drawing is that of a “large creature”, “webbed wings like a bat and a body like a giant iguana. And four legs...a toothless gaping horrible mouth”. Harisharan hopes that a report on these drawings may help bring attention to Pirtha’s plight, as the paintings seem deeply mysterious and difficult to interpret. For the residents of Pirtha, Bikhia’s painting heralds the return of their ancestral soul as it must have been traumatised by the contemporary predicament of Pirtha residents.

The appearance of this prehistoric creature in one of modern India’s many outposts offers an intellectual and ethical challenge to Puran and his circle of town-based bureaucrats and social entrepreneurs who are there to bring some amount of relief and aid to the besieged villagers. The core of the story then lies in the intractable nature of this “event”. Is it a myth? Is it magical or supernatural? For the appearance of this creature defeats all positivist understandings; it cannot be apprehended alone. As the subdivisional officer puts it to Puran:

“How will I make you understand that it is not possible for those tribals to think reasonably, to offer explanations? You will understand them with your urban mentality? You will fathom the Indian Ocean with a foot-ruler?” (SDO to Puran, p. 104)”

It is this lack of communicability that the SDO expresses here that is celebrated or at least valorised as representing the incommensurability of subaltern and elite understandings and worldviews that the projects of postcolonial criticism and subaltern history for instance have also upheld. It is used to underscore an emphasis on a radical alterity, to which no language or form of communication can possibly offer a solution. This also seems to be the premise that the SDO and Puran both seem to adhere to. When Puran learns that “there are no words for “exploitation” or “deprivation” in the Ho language”, we are told that there was “an explosion in Puran’s head that day”. (p. 118). The absence of words (and by extension of concepts) of words such as exploitation or deprivation, words that saturate the experiences of tribals, from their language establishes a vast abyss between the tribal and non-tribal worlds.

But Devi's fiction, I want to argue, has been typically misread as standing testimony to this apartness and incommensurability. And indeed if the story had not moved in a very unexpected direction towards its close, one could have agreed with such an analysis. But the unexpected turn consists of the creature from the drawings actually taking form and becoming material in the stone hut where Puran has come to stay. After the arrival of the creature in physical form, Bikhia, the boy who has made at least one of the drawings, also comes to stay there, in order to guard the deity-like creature. Throughout the time that Puran and Bikhia stay under the same roof, there is no verbal communication between them, as the two do not share a language, as they don't seem to share concepts and worldviews.

Yet, what does bring them together is a common struggle to grapple with the meaning of this event. While the tension surrounding the appearance of the creature is palpable, the story's conclusion draws together the idea that myth (the story of the creature) can function as analysis (story of adivasi exploitation):

"Looking at Bikhia's tawny matted hair, freshly shaven face, he understood that they were being defeated as they were searching in this world for a reason for the ruthless unconcern of the government and administration. It was then that the shadow of that bird with its wings spread came back as at once *myth* and analysis". (p. 193)

The deception carried out on India's tribals is so massive that it belies explanation on the human scale, a scale that surpasses reason and empathy, justice and logic. The narrative voice tells us that "...from now on they will wait in their suffering and in evil times for that shadow, otherwise this deception cannot be humanly explained". (p. 193) Read attentively, the key phrase here seems to be "otherwise this deception cannot be humanly explained". Here we see Devi bring the supposed supernatural aspect of the sighting of the pterodactyl into the human frame. This is hardly an embrace of the impossibility of representation, nor a rejection of humanism, but intense love for it, and for the possibilities inherent in it for both this gigantic deception as well as for offering explanations that are within human grasp, explanations that have to do with structures of power and the systems of inequality built into them.

It is important to note here that the narrative voice is not the same as Puran's. It establishes distance between Puran the intellectual and Devi the writer for whom, as Spivak puts it in a statement that does not register in her own critical assessment, "the tribal and the non-tribal must pull together, both in the nation, conjuring against the State". If postcolonial theory has theorised endlessly the impossibility of grasping subaltern consciousness, Devi's story offers a strong riposte. Puran may be the alienated intellectual (although how relative that term is), but Bikhia is the subaltern artist. It is their encounter with each other, their visioning of the creature as a form of mystery that is also a solidarity, that opens up the limits of the politics of representation. Bikhia as artist of the cave drawings and as keeper of the deity resists the state-led or capitalist appropriation of tribal art—in restoring magic, in making primitive art precisely not collectable (there are lines in the story about art as a possible venue for adivasi subsistence), in questioning the boundary of the artisanal

object and of primitive art as magical, Bikhia emerges as the adivasi artist who can best challenge the politics of representation in postcolonial India. His refusal to explain his drawings, the magical materialization of it in bodily form that is subject to death, can be read as a refusal not necessarily of representation but of commodification, a gesture that is of a piece with the generalised mourning in the village and its collective refusal of state-led dispensations (of extra-politics, perhaps). Bikhia's art then is also suggestive of art as labour of a collectivity. As the narrative voice records: "Now something has happened that is their very own, a thing beyond the reach of the understanding and grasp and invasion and plunder of the outsider". (p. 193). But Puran's love for Pirtha (the antithesis of "invasion and plunder of the outsider") means that he "cannot remain a distant spectator anywhere in life". Although in the end, "A truck comes by. Puran raises his hand. Steps up", we can envision the change that Puran has undergone in his consciousness and in his solidarities. And the adivasis of Pirtha have successfully mobilised myth as a critique of postcolonial rapacity, as historical explanation.