

AN ETHNOLINGUISTIC APPROACH TO MAHASWETA DEVI'S DRAUPADI AND THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF IT BY SPIVAK

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Abstract: Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi* is a cult classic now, originally written in Bengali (north Bengal dialect) about an Adivasi character. A story was mainly written for Bengali readers and for that reason we can see in the story, even in themselves many Adivasi characters talking in Bengali. Here and there from some instances we can come to the conclusion that these Adivasi people are Santhal, apart from that we can also know about their ethnicity if we do have knowledge about the Naxalite insurgency happened in Bengal during the 70s as the insurgency was primarily initiated by the Santhal bonded labours. The aim of my paper is to approach this text and the English translation of it by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak from ethnolinguistic perspective and to examine the life and culture and physical and mental turmoil of them expressed through their own language and how that essence is recreated or fail to recreate in Spivak's translation.

Index Terms: Naxal, Naxalite Movement, Santhals, Exploitation, Ethnolinguistics.

Santhals are one of the oldest and largest ethnic groups of India. They have a very rich cultural and linguistic history. According to linguistic Paul Sidwell, their language falls into the group of Austro-Asiatic language group. Santhal is a name given by the *diku* or *dikku* (non-santhals) and they call themselves *Hor* or *Hor hapan*, which literally means 'human' or 'the sons of the humankind' (Majhi, 2010). They are the simplest of the people, but they first revolted against the exploitation of the British Raj and *Baniyas* in Indian history. This revolt is known as 'Santhal- Hul' which was led by Sidho and Kanhu Murmu in 1855 (Calcutta Review, 1856).

This paper will try to analyse the short story *Draupadi* by Mahasweta devi, a renowned Bengali writer, from an ethnolinguistic point of view and try to analyse the life and emotions of the Santhali characters in the context of Naxalite Movement as depicted by Mahasweta Devi in her short story.

Ethnolinguistics, or cultural linguistics, refers to the intermingling of ethnology and linguistics, and is a discipline which studies the relation between language and culture, especially how different cultural groups perceive, interpret, and put reality into words. This scientific field of study involves the branch of anthropology called *ethnology*, which investigates the social aspects of cultural groups, comparing and drawing distinctions between them; and *linguistics*, the scientific discipline that studies language – the systematic study of any language that focuses on its structure (e.g., units, rules that command the association of units) (Salzmann, 2004).

Operation? Basai Tudu, a prequel novella to the short story *Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi records the age-old exploitation of the Santhals and in the general sense of the Adivasis in the following manner,

"If someone born as an Adivasi, he or she also born with this sense of deprivation, no upper caste Varna Hindu can ever empathize with that feeling. This sense of deprivation dates far back. Dark coloured Adivasis are the firstborn of this deep and dark Bharatbarsha. Only after them, we can name the others. The others looted everything from them and shared among them. That is when the sense of deprivation first made its mark. This sense grew heavier and heavier after that. Shaks, Huns, Pathans, Moghuls – came one after another into this country and no one ever cared for them." (Devi, 1978; translation self).

Mahasweta Devi goes on to say that even after the British regime their situation has not been changed to any good but worsened, and the Adivasis keep surrendering their basic rights to the point where they are totally helpless. They have become the bonded-labours to the *jotdars* (Landowners) for generation after generation as their ancestors could not paid their debts, and now they are starving to death or they depend on the mercy of the *jotdars*.

Basai Tudu, the legendary protagonist of the novella *Operation? Basai Tudu*, who dreams for a better day for the bonded-labours, collects some of them and forms a group, whose sole aim is to punish those landowners who does not pay them the minimum 10% wage that they should get according to the government order. Sometimes they take the means of violence if they (Landlords and Jotdars) are not threatened by their unity. Again and again Basai ascertains that he does not belong to the Naxal groups nor he is a member of any political party but a representative of the land-tillers, and he will continue his fight for the basic rights of them. This echoes the

fact that the fictional character of Basai Tudu is more or less based on the real character of Jungle Santhal who, inspired by the ideas of Mao Zedong, united the Adivasis of the Naxalbari (Pandita, 2011) against the exploitation of the *jotdars* and led many insurgencies, hence the Maoists in India is synonymous with the term Naxals.

Dopdi Mejhen is introduced in this novella very briefly. She was the love-interest of Basai Tudu, and he wanted to marry her. In many Adivasi culture in India as well as among the Santhals a girl or woman can choose herself whom to marry. Dopdi chose Dulna Majhi. Hence she became Dopdi Mejhen, Mejhen in the sense of the wife of Majhi. In the Santhali cultural tradition Majhi is someone who is the head of the *Mandwa* (a group of five important people who plays various important role during all the social festivals and in other cultural events in a Santhal village). In Santhali language the wife of Majhi is simply called *Majhi-Bahu*, and gets equal respect from other villagers as her husband gets. She can even perform some of the social rituals like her Majhi husband. Again, we can see among the *Dikus* (a Santhali term that denotes non-Santhals or simply 'outsiders') that regardless their different surnames, they mention every Santhali Adivasi people as *Majhi* or according to them the Adivasi people who speak Santhali are Majhi.

We cannot find any reference to either in the story but certainly we can say that Dopdi has this leadership quality in herself. Many a times in the mentioned novella we find her leading an insurgency from the forefront with Basai, as a deputy. Even the story *Draupadi* begins with this conversation between two policemen, where she is mentioned as someone "Most notorious female. Long wanted in many..." (Spivak, 1997)

Here it is to note that apart from the word 'female', the line used in the Bengali version of *Draupadi* is same. So why Mahasweta Devi used the word 'Meyechele' while rest of the original line is in English! "Most notorious meyecchale. Long wanted in many..." (Devi, 1978) Because the word 'meyechele' denotes a female obviously, but it has other connotations also, like not a conventional female who can be called a 'Lady', sometimes the word 'meyechele' denotes a female person not belonging to the conventional 'Bhadrasmaj'. And how truly we can guess this mentality from the conversation between the two policemen, even when reading from a dossier written in English, their sub-conscious mind prevented them to mention Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal, as a female but a "meyechele". Mahasweta Devi obviously knew about this mean mentality of the *Dikus*, but that essence is lost in the translation of Spivak.

Spivak also knew about this limitation of her translation and she rightly addressed this limitation in the "Translator's preface" of *Draupadi*. She confesses, "Mahasweta has followed the Bengali practice of calling each so-called untouchable caste by the name of its menial and unclean task within the rigid structural functionalism of institutionalized Hinduism. I have been unable to reproduce this in my translation." (Spivak, 1997)

This can be seen again in the conversation between the two policemen as they could not suppress their racial surprise when they find out that the *Mejhen* surname is associated with a name that is not common to the tribal.

From the very story we come to know that this name *Draupadi* was given to her by the wife of Surja Sahu, a person who has no idea about the Santhali Adivasi culture. But thought that it would suit her because of her skin colour. That is why this name becomes corrupted as Dopdi, because *Draupadi* may be a very important mythological character to Surja Sahu's Hindu wife, but it does not carry any significance to the tribal.

The only similarity between these two namesakes apart from their skin colour is that both of them chose who to marry, though the mythological character had to accept four more men as her husbands. Ironically the tribal one will be raped by more than five men for making her ready for further interrogation. They thought that this will break her. But unlike *Draupadi*, Dopdi will not call for help from anyone and even deny asking for water from her violators. She will reject the last piece of clothes and face the *Senanayaka* naked. A tribal female body, which is objectified frequently, will become the symbol of unbreakable spirit. A denial to the conventional shame of bareness. This will proved to be so unconventional that the *Senanayaka* will be afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*.

In Spivak's translation the word 'target' is in Italics. Obviously it refers to the changed scenario of who is hunted and who is the hunter. In the original Bengali version the word '*Nirashtra*' (unarmed) catches the eye. In the last lines of the story we see Dopdi pushing the *Senanayaka* by her bare breasts which were violated in the night before to break her and to make her ashamed of her nakedness. Nobody thought that Dopdi's bare breast will become the symbol of defiance, a weapon against the patriarchy as well as against the *Bhadra Samaj* (Sophisticated Society).

I conclude my paper by giving two instances which proves how important the Adivasis, mainly Santhals, and their language became in regard of the Naxal Insurgencies.

Dopdi along with her husband Dulna Majhi became so notorious and wanted criminals because of the Operation Bakuli, where they killed the most notorious *Jotdar* Surja Sahu along with his son. Not only they masterminded the operation but completing their task excitedly they sang and ululated something in their mother tongue (ironically noted by Mahasweta Devi as 'savage tongue') which was 'incomprehensible even to the Santhals' (Devi, 1978: Spivak, 1997);

“Samaray hijulenako mar goekope”

and,

“Hende rambra keche keche

Pundi rambra keche keche.”(Devi, 1978)

Neither Mahasweta Devi nor Spivak ever translated these in Bengali or in English, as that is the very point of the story. This ‘war cry’ caused a fear in the heart of the Police Captain Arjan Singh because of his ignorance to the language. To make the first cry comprehensible, it should be;

“Samngre hijuh lenkhanko dal goyk kope”

“If they come any near kill them all”(Translation self)

The second one is more of a proverb which again symbolises about killing them all by severely beating them. To explain it, ‘hende rambra’ means black lentils and ‘pundi rambra’ means white lentils, which the Adivasis store for hard times by ‘grinding it to its extent’ (*keche keche*).

The other incident regarding language dilemma happened when Dulna Majhi was killed and he uttered while dying, ‘Ma-ho’. This simple phrase which actually means ‘look what they have done’ (which can also be translated as ‘be cautious and look out’) created a much comedic chaos among the police force, as they thought it might be a ‘violent slogan’ in tribal language. Two tribal-specialists were even flown from Calcutta and they consulted the dictionaries of Hoffman-Jeffer and Golden-Palmer but to no avail. The omniscient *Senanayak* finally summons the water carrier of the camp, Chamru. He comically made it more complicated for them by saying, it was a war cry of the Santhals when they participated Gandhian protest march against the Britishers.

It is to be mentioned that after all the years of independence of our country, Adivasi people and their language and culture are the most neglected topics of the *dikus*, this negligence kept them blind to the age old exploitation of the Adivasis and hence they failed to connect to the emotions of them totally. Mahasweta Devi very carefully recorded it and Spivak beautifully transcribed it.

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