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THE BITTER SOIL: THEME OF POVERTY IN 'LITTLE ONES'

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Mahasweta Devi first as a humanist and next as a writer left an indelible impression on the minds of the people when she chose to work on the most deprived communities in India. She emerged as one of the greatest contemporary Indian writers by becoming a voice of the tribals in India. She played the role of both an activist and a writer. She was successful in juxtaposing creativity and reality in her writings. Most of her writings were based on the factual information gathered by her by touring the tribal areas where no writer would have ever ventured to go. Her oeuvre includes many short stories, novels most of which reflected the despondent life, depressed living conditions, the customs and habits of the Indian tribes. Yet, her novels were never without novelty as she carved a niche for her narrative style.

Mahasweta Devi as a woman of a great spirit worked day and night for the upliftment of millions of Adivasis spread across Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and in many parts of the country being one with them. She listened to their stories personally and transformed them into varied forms of writing such treatises, stories and novels etc. She ambidextrously managed writing and activism and spread the message of commitment by involving scores of activists, intellectuals, writers and people with sensitivity and commitment. She raised her voice through her writings and her voice and the voice of the tribals became inseparable.

The measures taken by the authorities for the removal of poverty among tribals, she says, were so inadequate that the money flowed for the purpose never once reached them. She questions if only the tribals had received any benefits, where could have they gone. She also finds fault with the irresponsible behaviour of the urbanites as there was hardly any concern for the tribals dwelling in the far off lands. There was no love showered upon the tribals and for centuries together, they were ignored. She says we are at the last gasp of the century yet we haven't learnt to respect the tribals. Even today, they live as if their world is different from ours. If we had had any real exchange with them, it could have enriched us.

Mahasweta as an activist could go to any extent in order bring justice to the infinite sufferings of the tribals. In January 2006, she along with GN Devy, Udaynarain Singh of Mysore, went to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and appealed him to do something concrete for the denotified tribes of India. It was in response to that a special commission was formed under Balkrishna Renke of Maharashtra. Renke came out with suggestions for the remedial steps to be taken for the improvement of the lives of the denotified tribes. Mahasweta raised her voice for the tribals, pitied them for their plights. She felt that these innocent tribals were made targets, treated as criminals and what not. Pitiably, they were labeled as 'born criminals' and were subject to beatings, lynching etc. Often they were made to evacuate the places where they were living. It was so unfortunate that without any evidence for their crimes, they were framed in crimes. As an extension to that the British under their colonial rule passed an abominable Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 and crucified the tribes. This act further worsened the situation and made the life of tribals more miserable.

Mahasweta Devi's socio-political novel 'Bitter Soil' stands an example of the plights of the Adivasis and the gross negligence of the authorities. It has four short stories and 'Little ones' is the first of the four. It is a narrative of good length that depicts the theme of starvation of adivasis at its high point. The poignant narrative technique of the author makes the reader engage to the core. The story unravels the impact of starvation on their biological, economical and sociological backdrop and in the most ironical tone explores the plight of the tribals owing to the sheer negligence of the authorities. In the same acerbic tone, she exposes the failure of the authorities in providing rehabilitation measures to the tribals.

The story begins with depiction of a place called Lohri-- a mid-point connecting three districts of Ranchi, Sarguja and Palamau. It is a land of high temperature located on the Tropic of Cancer. The place reminds you one of the burnt-out deserts. It is a place from where iron ore is extracted. For miles together one does not find any farming land. No crops are grown. It looks like a cursed land pervaded by a copper red colour. For a newcomer, it looks like a cremation ground. Wind carries the fine soil of the land and covers all over in the form of dust. Dehydration is a common phenomenon there.

"Little ones" is a tale of the Aagariya class living in Lohri. The Aagariyas are the miners. Their job is to extract iron ore from the mines and forge it into implements. Asur Logundih is their god. Many mythical stories are heard about him. The Aagariya people now fall into dire straits as they are thrust aside their hereditary cast trade. Now they cannot get into the profession of agriculture. They say they are impure. Lohasur, the patron demon of iron does not allow them any iron. The demon of coal also does not allow them any coal. Aagaiyasur, the demon of fire, does not give them fire. Thus they lose their trade and their livelihood.

The story begins with the conversation between the Block Development Officer (BDO) and the newly appointed Relief Officer. It throws light on the sentimental behaviour of the inhabitants of Lohri. Once when the government sent a team to search for iron ore in Lohri, the officers were warned by the adivasis. They said that their demon gods remain there on the hillock and therefore they cannot dig for iron. But, the two Punjabi

officers, a Madrasi geologist who came on a mission did not stop digging. They blasted the hillock flat. Later the Adivasis attacked them and killed them.

Malnutrition is a big issue in Lohri. It prevents the growth of the Aagariyas. As there are no crops, the people go hungry. They have no regular food. The ordinary sized human beings turn into pygmies in two or three generations. They have no honest way of living. To fill their bellies and to survive, they do anything. Mahasweta Devi says, there's no bigger god than one's belly. For the belly's sake everything is permissible. Health comes from good food. If food is not available, there won't be any growth. People remain stunted because of malnutrition. Food is a must for various biological activities. But if food is not available for generations the growth is totally nullified. People living in such horrible conditions remain stunted.

Chronic hunger and malnutrition can cause significant health problems. People who go hungry all the time are likely to be underweight, weighing significantly less than an average person of their size. Their growth makes them look shorter than average. Plan after plan, five year plans are framed. Year after year, crores of rupees are released for various works. But still the plight of the poor remains the same. The government executes relief measures but that will not reach the needy or by the time it reaches the common man it becomes a commodity.

The BDO narrates the Relief Officer, "See, at that Bangladesh-war time, the government sent relief team to Calcutta--clothes, blankets, mosquito nets, utensils, stoves, shoes from all over the world. Didn't we buy it all in the Ranchi Market?" The government sends relief measures to the area wherever the need does arise but does not check whether the same are utilized by them or not. The starved do not need the utensils as much as they need food. Perhaps, this is the reason for selling of the relief goods.

Mahasweta says, the government has failed in eradicating poverty. It's giving a lot of money to voluntary organizations, and it's a fact that behind most active, successful organizations there is foreign money co-existing with domestic money.

The new Relief Officer who has come to Lohri is shocked to see the arid and uninhabitable place. He is repelled to see the near-naked, shrivelled, swollen-bellied adivasi men and women. The notions which he formed in his mind about adivasis are completely different from what is seen here. Prior to his arrival, he was briefed about the supernatural children offering ghostly smiles and how they run away with the relief goods. The BDO narrates the situation in Lohri. He tells him to take the help of boys in guarding the store tent and in other works.

From the next day, Khichri is cooked and distributed. The medical unit gives injections against cholera and typhoid. The place becomes a bustling centre. The Relief Officer is very happy with the ongoing process. He is not impressed with the idea of sending relief material to the villages. But the Tahsildar says, "If the relief is not sent, whoever is not brought there will die. Others cannot carry the weak there, because they themselves

are very weak to walk.” The denotified tribes of India are people who live below the poverty line and starvation is a regular fact of life for them. Poverty, hunger, landlessness, illiteracy and unemployment — these are everyday realities.

The Relief Officer, who is known for his generosity, decides to give top priority to the hungry and starving people. The medical team vaccinates the people and leaves. Even though medicines are given only for cholera and typhoid, he supersedes protocol and sends for large quantities of antibiotic medicines for wounds, baby food, nutri-nuggets etc. from Ranchi. The sincere work of the Relief Officer is recognized by all. Very soon the Relief Officer becomes famous there. The blasted-hillock pond is a taboo for the Agariya boys. The Agariya boys take him to that pond for bathing. There they tell him the legend behind that pond. The relief officer puts his bed before the store tent at night. Being an idealist, he starts thinking about the innocence of the tribals, changing their future, the need for honest and compassionate officers etc. He decides to submit a report to the higher officials in this regard, in Ranchi. He concludes that surviving only on the relief, year after year, for those many people is impossible. Whenever relief comes to the village, those who can walk will come to take relief. Those who can't, those who are too old sit in a circle, and sing like that. They will sing and sing till they die. When the singing starts in one village, the dying old women from the other villages send the youngsters off to collect relief and start keening themselves.

The adivasis come from far off places. Sometimes at night they come carrying lights on the distant horizon. People travel by the light of flaming torches, because the scorching day temperatures make it easier to travel at night. When the little ones come, they come with fast moving steps. Many pairs of feet advance, padding forward with canine caution. Muffled whistles. Another whistle in reply. Someone undoes the tent cords. Then swift and silent activity. The youth arise and hold up the tent flap. Sacks of rice are removed, then sacks of milo. When relief officer is fast asleep, he hears some sound, and in a trice, he is wide awake. He sees the boys tying the tent flap. They disappear into the darkness of the forest at the wink of an eye. The officer goes round the tent and finds that two sacks are missing. He decides to catch them, and get to the bottom of this theft before he leaves.

When the relief officer runs behind them, they run and run and stop at a place where the jungle ends and grass starts. They stand in a circle to the amazement of the officer. They look at the officer in such a way as if they can pounce on him at any time. They are all naked. They have long hair. The women have sagging breasts. They are adolescents but look like little boys and girls. Theirs such appearance made the officer mad. The officer feels whether what he sees is a reality or imagination. The undernourished body and laughable height of the ordinary Indian male appear like a heinous crime of civilization.

The sight makes him astonished and fearful. The relief officer responds incredulously to the horrific sight of people shrunk to dwarfish proportions by a perpetual famine that has also bereft them of their sexual potency and fertility. The relief officer wonders how can one be like that ? What is happening to the five year plans? Upliftment of the downtrodden? Civilization has not entered there. He feels the undernourished body and laughable height of the ordinary Indian male appear a heinous crime of civilization. He feels like a criminal condemned to death. His heart is full of sympathy. Tears stream from his eyes. Mahasweta says, for many such communities, crime is the only way to survive... But they continue to live in dehumanised conditions everywhere. The government sends blankets and clothing as relief. What can those jungle folk do with them? They simply take them and sell it off to the mahajans in exchange for a torch or matches or a mirror. When the relief officer is in such surprise, the old man says that just fourteen of them are left. Their bodies have shriveled and shrunk from lack of food. The men can only piss, they can't get it up any more. Women can't bear children. That is why they steal relief. The officer can't say a word. Standing under the moon, looking at them, hearing their laughter, feeling their penises on his skin, the undernourished body and laughable height of the ordinary Indian male appear a heinous crime of civilization.

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