

Life of the ‘Indigenous’ as in Mahasweta Devi’s novel ‘The Mother of 1084’

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The life of Indigenous in the novel ‘The mother of 1084’

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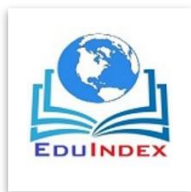
Abstract-*The novel ‘Mother of 1084’ is a story that Mahasweta Devi wrote during the 1960’s and 1970’s after the most critical period of the Naxalite movement in West Bengal. She expanded the conventional borders of Bengali literary expression with her innovative use of language. The story starts from ‘Kantapukur’ in the state of West Bengal. A body tagged 1084 has to be identified in the morgue. The four bodies at the morgue were that of the Naxalites who had been killed during a police encounter. The oppression of the lower class in the society forced the people, especially the youth to join the Naxalite movement. The novel ‘Mother of 1084’ is about how the indigenous communities in the state of West Bengal were exploited by the upper class people as well as the government. It drove them to join the Naxalite movement in order to fight against the unjust rules of the government. Through the novel Mahasweta Devi shows how Brati the protagonist of the story helps and supports his friends who are from the marginalized section of the society. This paper aims at showing how the so called marginalized people want to have an identity of their own in the society despite the political problems face. This paper also gives a deeper insight to various other problems or barriers faced by the marginalized people in West Bengal and various other states.*

Keywords: *barriers, indigenous, marginalized, Naxalite, oppression*

Introduction- Born on 14th January 1926 to an educated family Mahasweta Devi was a well-known Bengali literary figure, journalist, a political activist, and also a self-recognized communist who always worked for the rights of the tribal or the indigenous people of Bengal. Her works consists of over hundred novels and a collection of over twenty short stories that was originally written in Bengali but later it was translated into various other languages. Her first novel ‘Jhansi Rani’ that was published in the year 1956 is a biography of ‘Rani of Jhansi’. Her works often depicted the brutal subjugation of the tribal people and the untouchables by the dominant upper class and the government officials. When asked what was her source of inspiration to write she said-

“The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat. For me, the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly noble, suffering human beings. Why should I look for my raw material elsewhere, once I have started knowing them? Sometimes it seems to me that my writing is really their doing”. [5]

Mahasweta Devi has been honoured with various awards like Sahitya Akademi Award (in Bengali), Jnanpith Award and Ramon Magsaysay Award along with Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan. Some of her most notable works are-Jhansi Rani - a biography published in the year 1956, Hazar Churashir Ki Ma (Mother of 1084) - a novel published in the year 1974, Aranye Adhikar - a novel published in the year 1979, Agnigarbha - a collection of short stories published in the year 1978.



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Mahasweta Devi who passed away on 28th July 2016, was one such literary figures who expanded the conventional borders of Bengali Literature with her innovative use of language.

The indigenous people are none other than the natives of a particular place or region. They are spread around a vast area and follow a particular system of living. After the invasion of Europeans to most of the regions in India they termed the local people of that particular community as the ‘uncivilized’ or the ‘primitives’, and these people were imperilled to various types of racism and also discrimination. So we can assume that this type of treatment was the root-cause for them to become the Naxalites.

A Naxal or a Naxalite is a person who claims themselves to be a part of the communist party, they can also be called as the Marxist.

Mahasweta Devi in her work ‘The mother of 1084’ talks about how Brati the key character and one who is also from one of the upper classes of the society in Bengal becomes a Naxalite. The story revolves around the Naxalbari movement that started in the state of Bengal during the year 1967.

The story starts from the morgue Kantapukur where there are four bodies of young Naxalites and, in that, one is unclaimed and tagged as ‘1084’. From this point the entire story revolves around how this ‘1084’ later recognised as Brati becomes a Naxalite, what or who inspired him to take this path and lastly how the society of Bengal reacted to the bold step taken by Brati and his comrades.

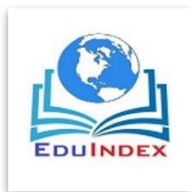
Devi through various scenes and instances tries to show the troubles faced by the Naxalites and the Indigenous people of West Bengal. In the novel it is mentioned that Brati and his mates protested by writing slogans against the government on the walls of their houses. The slogans they wrote were like-“The Prison’s our University. From the barrel of the gun... This Decade will be the Decade of the Liberation. Hate the Moderate, Mark him; destroy him” [1].

This slogan that they painted on the walls at the nightfall suggests that they were well aware of what the consequences they would face and still they did it fearlessly. The reason for them to do this and turn into Naxals was that; after the mid-1940s more and more people moved to Bengal from various other places and there was a radical change, the villages had been replaced by colonies and the opposition government had indirectly taken the revenge by denying almost all the rights of the lower cast people of that region, and as the time passed their situation only worsened because the ‘poor’ were getting poorer and the ‘rich’ were getting richer. Those who had grown rich over the years did not do anything to help these people.

In the novel the narrator also tells that the fact that he was a Naxalite was known to his family only after his death. She tells that the around him forced him to change, and that is why he kept his outside life a secret, even from his own mother. He goes on letting her feel that she knows everything about him, when the fact is that she doesn’t know the slightest bit of what Brati was up to. He wasn’t naïve, he knew what was right and wrong, and that was why he decided to help his friends Somu, Birju, Laltu and Partha who were from the lower strata of the society.

Devi argues in the favour of Brati and tells that doing a good deed can also lead you to a merciless death and that was what happened on the night of sixteenth of January, his only intention on that day was to rescue his friends from the opposition but unfortunately it led him to his death also. She describes the scene through the lines-“Staccato sound of shots. Stench of gunpowder on the still winter air- the stink of gunpowder- the dark faces receding-” [1].

In the novel she also mentions that even the police officials were sided with the opposition and that is why they could easily kill the boys and escape without any



questioning or punishment. She mentions the involvement of the police with the opposition by telling that- “.....Strange, the van needed no directions. It made straight to the football ground. As the lights of the van hit the spot, some figures ran away. When the lights began to catch the faces, the van slowed down deliberately. By the van reached the spot, they had all had time to escape” [1].

The police officials were not only controlled by the opposition party, but they were also controlled by the elite class of the society, and it was because of this that Brati's name was not mentioned anywhere with the other Naxalites who were brutally murdered. Brati's father Dibyanath saw to it that his son's name was not mentioned anywhere not because he loved him, it was because he loved his 'fame' and 'status' more than anything.

Mahasweta Devi through her book says that the punishment given to these Naxalites were merciless. She tells about Nandini, who was a friend to Brati and also a part of the group. She describes how after the death of her companions Nandini was arrested by the police and taken to prison, then there she was tortured to such an extent that she almost lost both her eye sights. She also mentions how the bodies of the dead Naxals were tied to the police jeep and tagged along all through the way to the station.

In the book she also tells, once this movement started, Calcutta was only safe for the old people and it became a great threat for the young people, especially the youth. There were some areas that were strictly restricted.

Through the characters of Brati and his friends Mahasweta Devi portrays the harsh reality in the state of Calcutta during the 1970s. She gives examples through various scenes and lines as to how unjustly the society treated the Naxals. Their death didn't mean anything to the others and through the novel she tries to tell that the society felt that the only punishment deserved to the people who went against the government was death and they claimed that whatever happened to Brati and his friends were justified.

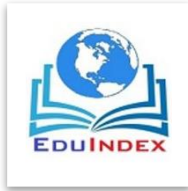
In the novel she quotes that “they had developed a burning faith in faithlessness of everything that spelt 'Establishment', and yet never thought that there could be people who pose as friends and betray them” and that was what had to Brati and his friends, they believed everyone blindly that 'Anindya' who was part of their crew backstabbed them by telling about their secrets and plans to the opposition.

In the year 2012 Mahasweta Devi gave an inaugural speech at the Frankfurt Book Fair- her speech was said to be very emotional that it brought tears in the eyes of the audiences. During her speech she said- “I have said over and over, our Independence was false; there has been no Independence for these dispossessed peoples, still deprived of their most basic rights.”

This situation is being clearly illustrated in her novel 'Mother of 1084' where she describes the situation of the marginalized through the character of Somu's mother. She describes how Somu even though a bright student gives up education and joins the movement. He does this because of the various problems they faced in the society. After his death, the situation of his family only becomes more worst because the society starts taunting them and pinpoints at them by telling that their dead son was a criminal.

It was not only his family that faced these problems, in fact there were even others who had to face such similar problems. The narrator is disturbed by this entire situation and she says that- “Those who died are lost anyway. But those who are alive won't ever be able to come home again” [1].

In the novel Mahasweta Devi not only shows the situation of the Naxalites and the difficulties of their families, but she also shows how the upper class of the society tries to buy the government with their money. She shows this through the character of Dibyanath where we can see that as soon as he receives the news about Brati's death the first thing he does is that he calls up the authorities and the newspapers and asks them to delete Brati's



name from the list, he tries to cover the existence of Brati itself. He does this because he didn't want to stain his or his family name, because they were very well-known people of the society. Through the entire novel we can see how he tries to avoid Brati's name and the fact that he died as a Naxalite.

After the 1960's and 70's these internal fights had stopped to an extinct, the blood shed had reduced in the streets of Calcutta, life had gone back to normal for most of them, the struggles faced by the young Naxalites had long been forgotten, and the people who backstabbed them were roaming around freely with a different identity. People like Brati only remained in the hearts of few, but they were never allowed to utter these names. After the fights even the patrolling had stopped. Police vans no longer guarded the streets of the state, people vaguely saw a van here or there.

Though the Naxalite movement started from Suliguri, over a period of time it spread over other regions of India like Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. Naxalism still resides in some of these places but in most of them they are rarely present. Even today we see on television and read in newspaper the attack happening on these Naxals, but no one ever talks about them or these attacks.

From this we can say that these Naxalites are still ignored to a limit. But as of 2015, there were certain rights given to them. They were given education rights, the government set up schools in most of the affected areas, good roads and bridges came and they even got access to cell phones and internet.

Even though they get all these facilities, some of them are still not happy because even though with all these facilities given, in the society they are still the marginalised.

From this we can say that the situations and the life of the Naxals are like the bubbles because bubbles are seen and enjoyed until they burst, and once it bursts its existence is forgotten, and the situation of these Naxalites are the same even though they fight for their society, once they die the society itself forgets them.

Mother of 1084- As translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay [1]

www.mapsofindia.com[2]

www.scribd.in[3]

www.indiatribalheritage.org[4]

www.timesofindia.com [5] and

www.academia.com[6]