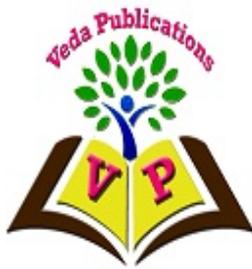




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE ADIVASI STRUGGLE FOR RIGHTS AND RESISTANCE IN MAHASHWETA DEVI'S *CHOTTI MUNDA AND HIS ARROWS***

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Received on : 09-01-2026

Accepted on : 28-01-2026

Available online: 09-02-2026

The process of amalgamation begins with acknowledgement of communities which results in the diversification of cultures and languages. However when the subject of integration is taken into consideration a subaltern treatment is witnessed towards the Adivasi. Mahashweta Devi in *Chotti Munda Ebong Tar Tir*, translated into English by Gayatri C. Spivak exposes the dark picture of mainstream bigotry and prejudice against the naive and most sociable community of the country. The often neglected and misunderstood Adivasi community is identified as savage and therefore control is imposed on them through bond labour. This paper deals with the constant struggle of the Adivasis for food, water and land which are the fundamental rights of a human being. The chronic pain of enduring subjugation and marginalisation by the outsiders in their very land was a threat to identity and lives of the adivasi. The paper also deals with the awakening of the Adivasi regarding their rights and identity to retaliate on the injustice done upon the Adivasi. The re-incarnation of the Birsa Munda spirit is witnessed when every Adivasi stood by Chotti. With arrows in their hands the Adivasi announced a rebellion against the non- adivasi for the injustice inflicted on them.

Keywords: *Adivasi, Struggle, Rights, Subaltern, Resistance.*



The conventional system of the mainstream media towards the Adivasi had for decades never been questioned. The work of Mahashweta Devi uncovers delinquent behaviour of the mainstream India through fictional representation of adivasi struggle in life. Devi had the opportunity to dwell among the Adivasi which unleashed various startling facts of repression and prejudice against the tribe. The colonial temperament of independent India where power holders considered the Adivasi as subaltern while inflicting pain on them has the most urgent need of a voice to echo throughout the country. The Adivasi community of India considered as lowly on humanitarian ground were confiscated from their human rights and were forced to be enslaved for survival. Mahashweta Devi's work provides the voice of resilience to safeguard the rights, culture and identity of the Adivasi against the exploitation done in independent India. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* reconsiders the margin between the oppressor and oppressed "marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat" if given the opportunity "can speak and know their conditions." (78)

The Adivasi were completely depended on nature for food. The forest provides them with a wide variety of fresh leafy eatables as well as good proportion of meat. The relationship between Adivasi and food is not just a necessity but a source of preserving their cultural authenticity. Terry Eagleton mentions about food that "...it is never just food. Like the post-structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable, as gift, threat, poison, recompense, barter, seduction, solidarity, suffocation." (Qtd in

Sahani 1) Food habits play a significant role in determining the ethnicity. However food became a tool of manipulation to dictate the hungry bellies as well as minds of the Adivasi through bonded labour. A whole line of generation gives bonded labour for a bond taken by the forefathers. Devi says, "It's very easy to bind the Adivasi in debts. If they once put their thumbprint on paper, they give bonded labour for generations." (Devi 25) Devi narrates the inhuman treatment by the landowners who refuse to offer food and drinks to Adivasi during famine. Several incidents highlight the colonial mindset of the landowners trying to captivate the Adivasi even after independence. When the drought drastically hit the Chotti village, the indigenous lives were left to starve and die. A woman died of acidity after eating only barks from the trees due to lack of food. Mundas from Chotti village were abstained from having staple food. Tirathnath manipulated the hapless labourers that he would offer grains only if the Adivasi gave bonded labour. However the devilish tricker Tirath gave away rotten, bug eaten grains as a wage to labourers for he could not sell it in the market. There was also a time when the Adivasis were banned from hunting and raising bows and arrows. Bows and arrows were not just weapons but identity of every Adivasi. Putting a ban is not only imposing colonial power but stripping them from their identity.

Geographical invasion has split and scattered the sanctity of Adivasi land. The community's outlook towards their land and territory in terms of ownership is absolutely different from that of the outsiders. The outsiders exploited the long preserved ancestral land of the Adivasi for monetary gain. The mineral rich land had attracted many invaders,



traders and goons resulting in exploitation of the natural resources. The ignorance of the Adivasi and the dominance of power allowed the outsiders to capture their ancestral land. The outsiders adopted the strategy of colonial rule by "seizing, delimiting and asserting control over a physical geographical area." (Mbembe 79)".

Before the pre-independence era Tirathnath and many outsiders like him were hired as menial landowners who later became the supreme power over the Adivasi. Tirathnath now, manipulates and cheats the Adivasi in the name of bonded labour and makes double benefit of good harvest and savings instead of paying wages to the labourers. There existed an inextricable connection between the Adivasi and land. It is the land through which an Adivasi curves his/her identity by having ownership over various natural assets and forests. The struggle for land rights has brought Chotti and his comrades at the verge of death. Tirathnath conspired to seize Adivasi land without prior consent of the Adivasi and legal procedure. He took advantage of Adivasi illiteracy and only through a vocal announcement took control of Harmu's land. Harmu cultivated his own land and gave half of the harvest to Tirathnath. Despite the policy of half-harvest half-rights Harmu lost ownership of his land because it produced more harvest and Tirath couldn't hold on to his greed. The Adivasis are diligent workers, sweating their blood to make even the barren soil bloom to life. On the other hand the avaricious landowners try to grab every other fertile land of the Adivasi. Harmu had a heated argument with Tirathnath after which the latter decided to give his trash land instead of the earlier fertile one. The Adivasi were allotted "stony land,

barren land, dry land..." and they convert barren one into fertile soil "with their heart's blood." (123) An inhumane and subaltern conduct is witnessed to subjugate the Adivasi in the name of power. A colonial power structure governed fear and domination among the Adivasi and the same control is practised by the fellow Indians upon another. Tirathnath sent ten of his men to grab the fertile land which Chotti cultivated. Armed with guns the men threatened Harmu and others and thereupon started a fight among the two parties. It was during this ongoing scene when the daroga and his men and the tribal officer arrived. Though Harmu and other Adivasi boys ended up in jail yet the courage to stand up against the injustice was the beginning of a rebellion.

The geopolitics of natural resources is another strategy used by those in power to gain supremacy over the Adivasi. The access to potable water determined the economic as well as political power on the land. During drought potable water is a luxury only for the landowners. The politics and dominance of the outsider on natural resources have created a situation of unrest among the Adivasi. With drought the village turns into desert- cracked lands, rusted leaves, dry rivers etc, all screamed for a drop of water. Tirathnath seems to have owned the wells of Chotti village having access to potable water throughout the year. While the Adivasi received water either from the railway station or from Tirathnath's well under his grace. However, the moneylender Tirathnath agreed to share water only to his bonded labour. The system of government has failed to provide any aid to the Adivasi during drought. The government officials were so blind to



the agony and thirst of the Adivasi that no drought relief camp was set up or any initiative was taken to help the survivors. Chotti reprimands the negligence of the government only to realise the dearth, they are living in. "...Yet we're human. We suffer t' same thirst as ye. There's no difference 'tween ye and we." (Devi 99) The water problem of Chotti village was solved when a hole was dug into the heart of the river and there laid fresh water beneath the river.

The Adivasi of India considered as another marginalised indigenous community undergoes numerous exploitation and subjugation. The Adivasi women were physically and emotionally exploited under the terror regime of outsiders. The goons in the guise of Youth League leaders attempted to execute their evil plan by physically abusing Basmati Oraon. Basmati accidentally hit Pahlwan with a timber and it resulted in hurting the male ego of the Youth League who planned to avenge the mistake by a sexual assault. It was due to Chotti's intellect and resourcefulness that Basmati was able to get rid of the situation. The Youth League supported by the system of government disturbed the entire harmony and livelihood of the Adivasi tribe. Romeo, Dildar and Pahlwan- the three respectable goons have access to favouritism in every action of extortion, killing and violence. The trio demands cut from the wages of the labourers. Any objection or revolt to their demand would result loss of life. The so called political people consider the Adivasi as savage mongers since they dwell in the interior area of the forest. Their drive is to cleanse them for a civilized nation. These tactics to impose control over the Adivasi is described as colonised phenomena. An entire Munda village was turned to ashes when the villagers refused to come

to terms with the manager. This resulted in the fading away of Pahan into the dense forest never to be seen again. The phantom of the burning village had disturbed Pahan psychologically to such a great extent that the pain was unfathomable.

Adivasi is the tribe from where great warriors like Birsa Munda hailed. The tribe is skilled in archery, weapons and unity to overcome any conflict or adversary. The Adivasi were known for conventional peaceful existence. The Munda community were tolerant to the vulnerability caused by the oppressive forces. Despite oppression the Adivasi were considerate enough to save the lives of their oppressor. However the wretchedness with greater intensity in the subsequent days turned the tribe into stone. The resilience of the Adivasi against injustice and exploitation has not dried up. Remorseful Chotti lamented on the unvarying exploits of the people in power. Chotti verily comprehended the policies of the government that the Adivasi will not receive any kind of aid or security against the injustice done upon them. Chotti ignited the extinguished fire among the Adivasi to fight for their rights. The Adivasi stopped giving bonded labour to the landowners and started to cultivate their own crops. Moreover the brick and timber factory became a source for them to earn enough wages to survive. The struggle for existence among the Adivasi and outsiders became grave when financial autonomy of Adivasi community was curtailed by the Youth League. An interminable fight to attain identity, harmony and honour are some the objectives for which the Adivasi have united to resist the powerful. The Adivasi understood the futility of non-violence where liquidate was the only means of elimination of exploitation.



In *The History of Sexuality Volume One*, Foucault states that, "Where there is power there is resistance." (95) One cannot narrate the domination of power unless resistance emerges out of oppression. Resistance is observed through different form of non-violent protest against the dominion of power until violent resistance emerges out of the oppression. Chotti carried out non-violent resistance at the initial stage. The killing of four Adivasi by the powerful goons led Chotti to question the tribal officer, Dilip Tarwe of the region. "We'll take four bodies. All died the same way....Pahan and Pahani ne'er worked on Lala's land. They were comin' out to look at t'fire. They killed 'em lord, they killed 'em." (Devi 213) Bows and arrows serves as the cultural identity and weapon of the Adivasi. The use of arrow in the novel has symbolic resemblance to resistance through violence. Dhani Munda had courage to withstand the British as well as the powerful forces of independent India through the arrows he carried. Chotti and his sons weaponized arrow to push back the assailants storming havoc in their lives. The men in power backed up by the government faced a deadly closure of life with the sharp arrows piercing through their hearts. The Adivasi were summoned to gather at the Durga festival by the government officials for identification of the murderer. Chotti and the whole Adivasi community came forward armed to narrate that their pent up frustration, pain and humiliation was the reason behind the killings. "What did you give us? You'll raise terror over us to try their murder ...What do they know? Now hear, I killed 'em." (Devi 286)

A powerful speech of Chotti stirred the atmosphere of Chotti village. The question on

governance and hostility with confidence allowed the Adivasi to relief their troubled minds and heavy hearts. The most significant and awakening scene of Chotti lifting the bow invoked the lost warriorhood of the Adivasi clan and thereby began the era of resistance. He "brings all adivasi struggle into the present, today into the united struggle of the adivasi and the outcaste." (Devi 287) The announcement was loud and clear to fight subjugation and resist threats trying to eliminate Adivasi identity and existence. Chotti releases the arrow and then "he mingles with all time and become river, folklore, eternal." (Devi 287) The impact has been made, the revolution began with thousands of arrows raised to protect their man Chotti, their identity and existence. The story narrates a powerful role of Chotti, sings Mundari tales; lifestyles and religion as a medium of resistance against outside forces. Mahashweta Devi's portrayal of subaltern exploitation and vulnerability with vivid images of prejudice on the part of the government and its officials has failed the independent structure of the country. The Adivasi community hopes and longs to witness an indiscriminate socialist nation where republic and their well being is the prime concern.

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