

**Promoting Collective Intellectual Revolt through English  
Translations of Tribal Sufferings –  
A Reading of Mahasweta Devi's Texts**

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**Abstract**

Translation is considered a vital tool for dissemination of cultural values. Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), a Bengali writer, is a chronicler and social activist documenting the sufferings of the *adivasis* dwelling in West Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand. She has documented the sufferings of the tribal bonded labourers in post-colonial India. Most of her writings have been brought to the literary vision of global readers through English translations by Gayathri Spivak, Anjum Katyal, Ipsita Chanda, Maitreya Ghatak, Samik Bandyopadhyay, Radha Chakravarty, Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, Pinaki Bhattacharya, Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee, Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta, Rimi B. Chatterjee and Subhransu Maitra. Considering documentation as a primary tool for change, Devi exposes the bare facets of Indian tribes in her writings. Their post-colonial sufferings are brought to the light of the literary world through translations. The Prefaces in *Imaginary Maps* and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* elaborate the meticulous steps taken by the translator. The aim of the paper is to trace the extension of collective intellectual revolt regarding the tribal sufferings among the English readers. Translations of these tribal texts have earned global attention and have paved the way for tribal liberation through intellectual revolt.

**Keywords:** dissemination, documentating, post-colonial suffering, global attention

Collective Intellectual Revolt is a movement that attempts to raise the voice for the suffering humanity. Tribes are the primitive race dwelling in the forest. Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), a Bengali writer, is a chronicler and social activist documenting the sufferings of the *adivasis* dwelling in West Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand. Devi mixes the high-literary style of

older Bengali literature with tribal language. She has come to be regarded as one of India's most radical writers. In newspapers and journals, she has written articles in support of the tribals and their rights. "I am wary of the West," (Shands,19) Devi says in an interview with Gayatri Spivak. She underlines that "the tribal population of India is about one-sixth of the total population of the country" and yet they have not been a part of decolonization, even though "they have paid the price" (Spivak "In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics"ix, xi). Debasish Chattopadhyay, a critic, suggests that Devi's "voice does not simply ventriloquize the plight of those at the edges of civilization, but goes deeper to analyse and reflect upon how the power structures that engender marginalization are replicated in the texture of the society of the marginalized." (p.111).

Tribes in post-colonial India suffer a lot due to bonded labour. In the Author in Conversation in *Imaginary Maps*, Devi states, "They (Tribes) are suffering spectators of the India that is traveling toward the twenty-first century." (xi). In the decolonized India, the tribals have paid the price. The entire tribes have been butchered. Their land has been taken away. The Indian tribals are dispossessed of their land. Eviction of tribals in large numbers forces them to lead a life of poverty with no compensation. Lack of literacy, health facilities and transportation drive the tribal community to lead a life of pauperization. Hence, the entire tribal community is forced to beg to the government for their daily need. Voicing the pathetic plight of these communities is considered a crucial part in the writings of Mahasweta Devi.

Devi documents the sufferings of the tribes in her literary oeuvre. Originally written in Bengali, she could reflect on the sad pathetic state of the tribes living in those areas. Leading a simple complacent life, the tribal community is noted for its astounding heights and commitment. As a social activist, Devi considers that only an organized revolt can redeem these suffers from the affliction inflicted on them. In her writings, Devi exposes the bare facets of Indian tribes. Devi writes "Whatever has come in the name of development has spelled disaster for the tribes. . . . Our double task is to resist "development" actively and to learn to love." (*Imaginary Maps*, xxii)

Devi is a committed artist working for a communal remediation. In her writings written originally in Bengali, a collective and communal support is considered a crucial step for tribal uplift. Most of her writings have been brought to the literary vision of global readers through English translations by Gayathri Spivak, Anjum Katyal, Ipsita Chanda, Maitreya Ghatak, Samik Bandyopadhyay, Radha Chakravarty, Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, Pinaki Bhattacharya, Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee, Sagaree and Mandira Sengupta, Rimi B. Chatterjee and Subhransu Maitra. Among these the translations of Gayathiri Spivak *Imaginary Maps* and *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* have been taken for the preparation of this paper.

Spivak in Translator's Preface admits that the utmost crucial step of the translation is that "Mahasweta must not be commodified as a "national cultural artifact," only accessible to "Indians"." The primary goal of translation according to Spivak is to extend the lost identity of tribal force to the US so as to earn 'serious intellectual investigation'. The translator envisions 'a collective struggle supplemented by the impossibility of full ethical engagement with the future always around the corner, there is no victory, but only victories that are also warnings. The subaltern sufferings can be solved by organized protests.

In addition to the interview with Spivak, Devi undergoes a meticulous reading of the manuscript of the translation of the writings of Spivak. She made suggestions, noted omissions in passages and corrected occasional mistranslations supplying names for government agencies there by the translation has been recognized as an authorized translation.

Devi's most striking characteristics are the sustained aura of subaltern speech devoid of the loss of dignity. Translation of it may affect the normativity from the speech of the rural gentry. Spivak attempts to translate these characteristics in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. A translator has to be faithful to the original text. So, Barbara Johnson calls a translator a "faithful bigamist". Spivak tries to use 'archaic prose' to preserve the spirit of the original. Greatly delighted, Devi appreciated her as

'Gayatri, what I am really enjoying in your translation is how you've shown that dialect can be dignified'. (*Chotti*, viii)

Devi admits in her interviews that the tribes cherish unwritten oral tradition passed on from generation after generation. Due to industrialization and globalization, the tribes lose their original true identity and the entire cultural values are being pushed to the verge of extinct. She also quotes that the tribal life is also facing a threat due to the sudden corrupt bureaucrats and landlords. In the name of uplift these people exploit the tribes and amass the nature's wealth. In addition, the tribes are forced to lead a life of poverty and malnutrition. The ministry and the political group could not stop these violations inflicted on the tribal folk.

The translations of these sufferings in Devi's writings are to earn global attention among the intellectual section of audience. Though protective measures against these violations have been made through collective and collaborative revolts against the oppressors, their silent revolts need to earn global attention. Translations of the tribal literature, of late, have earned global attention. This may help preserve value based complacent tribal culture. The English translators of Devi have rightly propagated the tribal sufferings through collective intellectual revolt across

nations. In short, the translators of Devi take the suffering of the local tribal folk to the intellectual arena and thereby assist in protecting the tribal race from the verge of extinction.

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