

Indian Tribal Women and Exploitation: A Case Study of ‘Douloti the Bountiful’ by Mahasweta Devi

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Abstract:

The Indian freedom struggle was confined to only a minuscule section of the Indian population. And later only ‘they’ relished the fruits of independence, as a vast majority of ‘Others’—the Tribals/Adivasis and Dalits had nothing to gain after Independence. They continued to be subjugated by the Upper Castes. In this exploitation, their women folk being the most vulnerable, bore the brunt. Douloti is one such woman who suffers from all kinds of torture—sexual, societal and psychological. This paper attempts to study the historicity of subjugation and contemporary exploitation Douloti and other tribal women are subjected to in the short story ‘Douloti the Bountiful’ by Mahasweta Devi.

Keywords: Bonded labour, Kamiyas, Dalits, Subalterns and Tribals/Adivasis.

The achievement of independence was an event to celebrate for only certain sections of the Indian society. The urban populace strived for it and achieved it, but freedom and its many fruits never reached the Tribals. For them it was only a change of the master, as in Fakir Mohan Senapati’s *Six Acres and a Third*, where the villagers on the change of their master from Mangaraj to the town lawyer, reminds each other, “Oh, horse, what difference does it make to you if you are stolen by a thief? You do not get much to eat here; you will not get much to eat there . . . we will remain his slaves” (205-06).

In ‘Douloti the Bountiful’, the ‘freedom’ which should have freed people like Ganori Nagesia, very ironically begets incarceration. In this new India terms like ‘Secularism’, ‘Democracy’, ‘Socialism’, remain mere jargons. Saleem Sinai, in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s*

Children refers to Independent India as ‘the new myth’, ‘a man-made fantasy’, a ‘fable’ (546).

The alienation of the tribals is not something completely alien, as Jawaharlal Nehru, in *The Tribal People of India* confesses: “For half a century or more, we have struggled for freedom and ultimately achieved it . . . we must remember that this experience of hundreds of millions of Indian people was not shared by the tribal folk” (12). Soon after Independence, the Indian Government “withdrew the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871” in 1952 and “enacted [the] Habitual Offender’s Act” (Mohapatra). The Habitual offender’s Act was illusionary, as “with the transition of India to colonial and postcolonial statehood, the disenfranchisement of these groups has continued,” (*Rites of*, 129).

These new provisions should have welcomed the tribals into the mainstream, but they did not. Deprived of their ancestral land they were forced to work as cheap labours in big cities. When visiting these sites the tribals are exploited by the middlemen, as Bono a character in ‘Douloti the Bountiful’ narrates his experience of working at Dhanbad’s coal mines to old Bhuneswar, “Government—unine [Union]—contractor—slum landlord—shopkeeper, each is the other’s friend. . . And at week’s end, double darkness . . . contractor’s hoods . . . snatched the money. We got it only after they took their cut” (25). In such encounters, the women folk are sexually exploited

and paid less. Explaining this predicament in “Can the Subaltern Speak [?] Speculations on Widow Sacrifice”, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, “On the other side of the international division of labor [labour], the subjects of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation. . . [and] . . . The woman is doubly in shadow” (289).

According to Mahasweta Devi, the predicaments of Indian tribals had so far been ignored by the authorities, thus they are like an ‘Undiscovered continent’ existing at the verge of extinction (Chatterjee 2). Sangeeta Ray, in *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In other words*, comments, “Just as Devi refuses to museumize the aboriginals in her stories, so does Spivak refuses to museumize Mahasweta Devi as the authentic witness of tribal living and being” (39). Devi focuses her writings on the castes, tribes and their womenfolk. Some of her female protagonists are in ‘Draupati’, ‘Hajaar Churashir Maa’ and ‘Rudali’. She believes that women are stronger than men but in some poorer sections their sufferings multiply because of their bodies as, “No wonder, [then, that] most common stories of victimization revolve round their falling a prey to the male lust” (Chatterjee 240-41). Douloti is such a victim. She is lured by Paramananda on the promise of marriage and then forced into prostitution. Mukherjee exposes the menace of flesh-trade:

[A]ccording to the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), South Asia is the second largest venue for human trafficking in the world, after East Asia. Over 1,50,000 people are trafficked—mostly for sex work but also for labour [every year]—lured by the false promises of the traffickers (29).

The situation is grimmer in bigger cities as:

“There are several notorious market places near or within the metropolises, where

the women and girls are bought and sold like cattles, Dholpur in Rajasthan, Basai near Agra, Jangalpiti in Andhra Pradesh . . . are some of the best known bargaining centres . . . and virgin and young girls fetch high price” (Ghosh 144-45).

Douloti is dark, woman and a tribal at the same time, thus according to Spivak super-vulnerable as, “Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways” (297). Virgin girls like Douloti are ‘goods’, to be supplied by crooks like Paramananda to lustful costumers like Latia and Singhji and “[the] unquenchable male sexual desires have created a premium demand for fresh untouched hymen” (Cappelli 7). In the story this mentality is exhibited when one morning naked Latia started screaming, “Hey Rampiyari! . . . I am not having fun in Douloti anymore. These goods are thread [-] bare now” (77).

Similarly, Paramananda Mishir, after talking to trade-rival Kishan, laments to Rampiyari, “I know what he’ll do. As long as he sees the goods are drawing customers, he’ll buzz like a dung-fly and try to spoil trade” (54). For people like Paramananda and later his son, Baijnath Mishir [the heir] these Kamiyas are easily available prey for exploitation.

Douloti is a soft victim of the flesh trade. At Paramananda’s unprecedented marriage offer not only she but Crook Nagesia [her father] can fathom the implicit devilish designs as, “[he] filled the sky with his screams, truth is being destroyed, and the Law is being destroyed!” (46). A few moments later when his master Munabar Chandela arrives he explains, “Boss! . . . This god is saying, he’ll end my bonded labor [labour] with money, he’s saying, he’ll marry Douloti” (46). He cannot believe such a formidable fairy tale and only after satisfactory assurance from Chandela, he returns home.

For Douloti a formidable uncertainty becomes a part of her life and unlike the outspoken Draupati in

Mahasweta Devi's another story, she silently accepts her miserably inhuman life as a predetermined outcome of her fate. With the demise of his father, Baijnath Mishir continues the exploitation and his answer to Rampiyari that he will come tomorrow as now it's the time for costumers; establishes his cunning obedience to the trade. He did not even leave Rampiyari as he orders her never to sit in front of him; clearly demarcating who is the boss and who the servant. Talking to her, he rejects his father's dealings as foolish and clarifies that, "I am not my father" (79). He in his exploits is not even ready to leave a 'dried up' poor whore. After Singhji leaves Douloti; Baijnath discussing future prospects of Douloti, grills Rampiyari:

Rampiyari: Douloti will then turn into Somni.

Baijnath: That chewed-up thing? Somni has become a beggar in ten years by father's rule. By my rule Douloti will become a beggar in five years. What's that to me? (82)

He wants to make as much money as possible thus asks Rampiyari, "... tell me who takes how many clients. Why doesn't the number of clients go up?" He always has expansion plans on his mind, thus takes the trade to the villages and ensures that Kamiyas are exploited to the very end of their lives, therefore:

The women at Rampiyari's whorehouse ... [are] put in a system of twenty to thirty clients by the clock. Pick up your cash fast. And when the body is empty?

... He said, "I am putting up rooms for them in the village by the brewery. Let them pull in clients at twelve annas, eight annas" (80).

To sustain the flesh-trade, he continues bringing in new girls every month and; unlike his father, now even children are brought. Due to the infrastructural projects and a crowd of contractors, brokers,

overseers demand for girls goes up and you can make poor girls disappear by cheap tricks. Very rightly so, "a news item in Bartaman, (a Bengali newspaper) dated December 14, 1986 ... disclose[s] that from eight districts in Chotanagpur division in Bihar about ten thousand tribal women became untraced and suspected to have been sold for prostitution" (Ghosh 145).

To the Upper Caste elites, the demonic exploitation of the tribals is something sanctioned by the scriptures as they contain similar incidents credited to the gods. Such an example from the text is the justification Munabar gives to his son:

The caste system and its difference are rules. You are taking the name of Rama the king of the Raghus, but didn't he kill Shambuk? Shambuk was a Sudhra ... Caste difference, untouchability—these are God's rules. You can pray, you can praise Rama, but this will not change ... everything will be as before (40).

This reinforces the justification they put forth to subjugate the weak and their hegemony over matters of religion make it possible for them to even make the tribals believe in it. Thus for the tribals, 'Lord Fate' comes down to earth and not only on the forehead of their children writes bond slavery, but also into their psyche. They silently accept their slavery as something unavoidable. When questioned, they parrot what they have been taught through generations, as does Rampiyari, "How will it end? Paramananda told me that it is written in the great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata that ending bonded labor [labour] is against religion" (81).

Religion is not alone, but there is a systematic nexus—the government, its officers, Brahmins, everyone is neck-deep into the crime against the subalterns, as the poem in the story expresses:

These savants want government support
The government wants the Kulak's support
Land-lander, this new agri-capitalist case
.....

The government wants the support of the
Kulak and the agri-capitalist (49).

This nexus is so deep that anyone crusading against it would give up. Mahasweta Devi, questions, "Who will change this rule?" and quickly answers herself, "Ganori Nagesia is not that man" (22). And then, she as a remote possibility presents Bono Nagesia as he has the guts to reason and fight back. Ganori Nagesia, while talking to his wife admits, "Listen, if there is a real human being in Seora, it is Bono. We are all animals . . . What should he [our master] do with an animal but beat it?" (34).

Bono, after being tricked into bond slavery by Munabar Singh reveals to Ganori "I'm not going to slave for his bond" (30). He is a free bird as "His feet always had wheels. He went here and there. [Upper castes] say money flies in the Bihar air . . . [and Bono says], I am only a Nagesia, a negligible person. Yet shouldn't I try and see?" (23). Bono realising the existence of this rampant exploitation, chooses to fight. We get a demonstration of his wilful determination, when asked by old Bhuneswar about the money and the hood he narrates:

I didn't kill him, uncle. I was watching him and thinking, you've opened a liquor business in the ghetto to suck the coolies' money. You're also taking the honor of their daughters and wives. . . And then. . . It was as if my two hands did a dance. My hands said. Let's wring his neck (26).

Due to the persistent efforts of Bono Nagesia the 'elimination' of the bonded-labour system frequently comes up in the story. Bono empathising with the

Kamiya's plight states, "The boss can grab our women's honor. . . virgin or wife or mother, he doesn't give a damn . . . And here they've brought kamiya women and made them whores . . . And the whore must go on giving the boss money" (74). Somewhere later in the story, in the tribals—Outcastes political debate, Bono projects the irony of the whole endeavour:

Bono: Sir? What will they do by passing laws? Who will enforce them?

Prasad: Government Officers.

Bono: The brahmans, the kayasthas, the Rajputs. No Prasadji, even if there is a law it will be behind the bosses and the money-lenders . . .

Mohan: Let there be a law. If the law is not obeyed, there are the police . . .

Bono: This Mohanbabu you have said like a gentleman. Police never raise their guns towards the boss or the moneylender. The police kill us (86).

Bono hypercritical of Puranchand from the Gandhi Mission agitatedly remarks, "Is honor of our women not honor? The boss lifts our wives and daughters, so you are saying 'Peace peace—Shanti Shanti'. If someone lifted daughter and wife from your family, would you have said Shanti?" (86). Prasad Mahota sensing the need for more militant display of protest declares, "We need organization. I work with the Harijan Association, and all I see is the Harijans and Tribals getting beaten" (86).

But for people like schoolmaster Mohan Srivastava and Father Bomfuller, who are still constantly watching the Kamiyas and Seokias, the law is still supremely puissant. Srivastava's goal is to build a case for abolishing the 'bonded labour' system legally and on behalf of the committee of the Central government, he is making a survey of district Palamu and his report

is titled 'Incidence of Bonded Labour.' He very enthusiastically explains his plan:

The first job is to abolish this system by law. Then we need to make the law workable by the pressure of public opinion . . . Then these freed Kamiyas must have an Association to assure them a living. And, in the case of these women there must be social and economic rehabilitation (86).

Everyone present agrees that if there is a law then there will be conflagration—violent reactions from the Upper castes and Bono realizing this, questions, “You will leave after hearing it all? You won’t help these women? How long will it take to get the law passed?” To this Bomfuller answers, “This condition is the result of many years, Bono. Does the sin of long years go in a day?” (87)

Bono, after leaving Seora and travelling with the mission experiences the situation first hand, “I didn’t know how large our Kamiya society [is] . . . how can I tell how many Kamiyas there are in Chiroa, Chatakpur, Ramkanda, Daho, Palda, Chandoa, Banari?” (72). He is aware of the presence of Kamiyas in other states of the union as well; thus doesn’t feel alone, as the Kamiya society is a humongous. Bono now convinced that except him nobody else is really concerned about the issue, asks Prasadji, “Who will light the fire, Prasadji? There is no one to light the fire. If there was, would the Kamiya society be so large in Palamu?” (88). Finding no cessation to Tribals’ miseries by peaceful methods, he ultimately decides to become a member of the militant Palamu Bhumidas Freedom Party.

Bono perceives that his efforts as an activist with Bomfuller were futile as their report has reached Delhi but unfortunately it is now imprisoned in a file. Justifying the Tribals’ arm struggle Mahasweta Devi in ‘The author in conversation’ believes that “The fight of the Naxalites in Palamu, as in the entire states of Bihar and Andhra [Pradesh], for minimum wages for

forest workers, plantation workers, agricultural workers, is of course only solution to the bonded labour problem” (xix).

While efforts were in progress, poor Douloti was in complete dark. She, due to Brijnath’s greed continued to be grinded in the brothel and her health deteriorated alarmingly as, “Not as a beggar like Somni, not to become a village-prostitute like Jhalo, but destitute in quite another way, Douloti left the whorehouse” (90). While in the hospital at Tohri, she asks the doctor, “I won’t live, isn’t it?” (92). She accepts the undeniable reality that “something is going down, finishing her body. . . Pain is climbing her entire chest, upward, upward,” finally succumbing to the pain, “Douloti lay down. The pain becomes cough, the cough became blood, Douloti closed her eyes” (93).

She died very dramatically, her blood covering the whole of India. Douloti is poor; represents the poor who compose a vast majority of India. Consequently, her death on Independence Day in Independent India is a big blot on our conscientious national fabric. Douloti writes with her blood over the map of India the unsurpassable fact of the continuous exploitation of the Tribals and anticipates its continuity. For her all is not well and beautiful.

To conclude, an obvious question is: why the story is named, ‘Douloti the Bountiful?’ What is so bountiful in her? Is it her ravishing beauty which caught the eye or her vomited blood or the number of clients she entertained? Bono Nagesia is astonished to find that, Douloti having bonded with three hundred rupees in 1962—raised forty thousand rupees over a period of eight years. She was ‘bountiful’ enough to colour the mammoth map of India therefore “Douloti, like a colossal tower signifies the importance of the subaltern while declaring all the while her nonexistence: She is all over India” (*Rites of*, 93). She demonstrates the ignorant masses that such cases

exists all over India—the De-colonized India. Her tragic demise on Independence Day, question the very notion of Independence and the eagle spread over the map of India takes the problem from particular to general. She is a metaphor for the untold plight of the disenfranchised all over the country, and also for the thousands of other Doulotis' who are languishing in the red light areas; dreaming about freedom, waiting for death. Will they be free or would they perish silently like Douloti, is hard to answer.

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