

Mahasweta Devi's Titu Mir : A History written by 'Subalterns'

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The history created by 'subalterns' in the Indian freedom struggle largely goes unnoticed because their contribution to the Independence Movement is never properly documented. Many small scale subaltern resistances in the interiors of India went unrecorded, unsung and forgotten from the mainstream memory. Historians of colonial era have deliberately termed the 'tribal resistance' and 'peasant uprising' as 'old fashioned' and 'unimportant' scuffling so that Indians could be portrayed more as collaborators with the British rather than participants in the act(s) of resistance against the Empire(Guha). The writers and scholars of post- colonial India have all chosen to remain silent on the voice of the subalterns. Ranjeet Guha points this out: "What clearly is left out of this un- historical historiography is the *politics of the people*. For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country - that is , the people." In her works Mahashweta Devi underlines that the subaltern's role and contribution in freedom struggle has not been recognized. The nation owes a lot to these common people who sacrificed their lives for the independence of the country.

India makes progress, produces Steel, the tribals give up their land and receive nothing. They are suffering spectators of India that is travelling towards the 21st century... Although they fought bravely against the British, they have not been treated as part of India's freedom struggle. (Imaginary Maps.III)

Mahashweta Devi defines literature as a responsible act; a 'brave act' that helps her overcome the 'sense of shame' or 'guilt '. Focusing her writing on the exploitation and oppression of the poor and the dispossessed, Devi actively participates in their struggle against the system. Though she writes in Bengali, the translation of her works have made her a well known writer at world level. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is known as 'Dwarpalika' of Mahashweta Devi to the Western world. Through her voluminous writing , Devi has highlighted the oppression of tribals, peasants, landless labourers, bonded slaves and prostitutes at the hands of ruthless landlords, colonial rulers or state machinery.

Titu Mir, one of her creative masterpieces, traces the Odyssey of a truly heroic figure of public imagination. It records the life of a peasant leader who led a revolt against the British in 1830-1831. The novel celebrates the organised uprising of common men who fought with 'lathis' against the British cannons. The evil effects of Permanent settlement Act, 1791 and forced cultivation of Indigo compelled the bravehearts like Titu Mir to become a rebel. In" this warmly told historical adventure tale Mahashweta Devi brings history alive in the person of a charismatic hero, all the time, as is typical of her, embedded him in the larger socio economic situation of the times."(Blurb of Book)

Set in the background of Sanyasi Revolt, Wahabi Movement and Permanent Settlement Act, this saga of a braveheart tells how Titu Mir cutting across the religious divide of Hindu- Muslim community brought all the subalterns together to fight against the Imperial forces. In her fictional discourse *Titu Mir*, Mahashweta Devi interweaves the life history of Titu Mir and his brigade with the socio- political history of the times. The fictional discourse of Devi is authenticated by folktales, legends and oral narratives of tribal people which are passed on from one generation to the other. In the second chapter of the novel, Devi sets the historical tone of the novel wherein she re counts the horrible memory of the Bengal famine of 1770 in which fifteen million people “lost their life like flies.”

"No crop could be harvested that year as people had died like flies. The Sahibs bought up all the rice cheap, stored in their silos and sold it at exorbitant prices. That had caused so many deaths.... Titu had heard now, in those days, processions of living skeletons lined the roads. People eat anything that could lay their hands on- leaves of trees, roots, bark. Then there were robbers, decoits. They would say, keep your gold, we don't want it. Give us food, give us rice".

(8-9)

Mahashweta Devi beautifully interweaves the history with fiction while narrating the life history of this unsung hero. The boy Titu's chance meeting with the leader of the Sanyasi Movement in the outskirts of the village left an indelible impression on him. Despite the warning by company officials, he actually helped the rebel leader and for the rest of his life he never forgot the encounter. And when Titu became the famous Titu Mir, the night unwittingly played its part in the making of the man. (17)

The subalterns were making history in the form of the Sanyasi Revolt. Though it was called' Sanyasi Revolt' but peasants, weavers, fakirs, farmers potters, labourers, everyone revolted against the British Raj under the leadership of 'Sadhus 'and ' Sanyasis' There were reasons that led to 'Sanyasi Revolt' . "Fifteen million people had died in that famine, yet the company had not seen fit to waive that year's tax. The year 1770 saw the famine; in 1771 the tax collected was even higher. Meanwhile the Governor General Warren Hastings was setting up the Asiatic society, had founded the Calcutta Madrassa, got essays written on Hindu law and the *Ain-i -Akbari* translated into English. But his priority was to put the company and its revenues on a firm footing and for that even as the famine of 1770 reduced Bengal to a charnel ground, Hastings squeezed the people into yielding yet more revenue. Much more this time, seven years in fact, the Sanyasi revolt had begun with the attack on the company's plantations in Dhaka. Though it was called the Sanyasi revolt, fakirs, sadhus, weavers, farmers potters, labourers -everyone participated in it- and it had gone on for eighteen long years."(9)

The heroes of this revolt Suvan Ali , Neyaju Shah and Buddhu Shah are stamped as robbers by the British because they were common people and they were fighting for the country's freedom from colonial powers. Their acts of defiance didn't get a place in historical discourse but Mahashweta Devi through Titu's grandmother brings out the spirit of this revolt , " Yes,yes ,the fakirs and the Sanyasis were out with their sticks and the white sahibs were shooting with their guns. What a war that was! Just the other day, as well. First there was the

famine, and we were hardly out of that when there was war."(5) Sanyasi revolt was not a campaign of a few religious people, it was supported by all their followers who believed in them . Sanyasis were fighting against the company and the government. Their battle cry was Din! Din! and the Hari! Hari! . It was a revolt cutting across the religious lines in which all the subalterns joined hands against the British much before the mainstream leaders gave people a call to be united against the colonial powers.

Titu lived during the period when the absentee landlords, forcibly or willingly, were converting their fertile land to the cultivation of Indigo. Titu points out the burden of poor peasants.....Abba Jan! We can no longer live off farming alone. The zamindar pays the government a fixed sum but we bear the cost of revels, his charity and his every little whim. This is a double burden for us (20). The managers of the estate leased out the land to company for Indigo plantations without caring for the suffering of the poor tenant farmers. The common people were reeling under utter poverty as they were paying high taxes to absentee landlords. Tarini Sanyal , indigo planter's agent, speaks to Sardar Ramchand Chakraborty, a chief lathi of Bhudeb Pal Chaudhary:

Look, the Sahib won't talk directly to people and the Zamindar will never come here to see for himself. So you arrange a fat commission for yourself with Sahib; mark off the land and say that the zamindar has given his permission. Whether the people knuckle down to planting Indigo or not, is my job to oversee. (31)

Permanent Settlement Act brought severe agricultural changes in Bengal. The peasant community reeling under poverty had no saviour. Only Titu Mir understood the pain of poor farmers. He could not stand the exploitation of the vendors at the marketplace. When the police man forcibly takes fruits and vegetables from the vendor's basket, Titu intervenes. The colonial masters were exporting sacks of goodies from the ports of Bengal whereas our own farmers were dying of starvation. They lived a miserable life.

"Their backs were largely strangers to new clothes, their roofs to fresh straw, their stomach to good rice. They were fearful people and they had much to be afraid of-estate managers, revenue collectors, market bailiffs ,plantation agents mollahs and maulvis, ghosts and ghouls and djinns and fairies ,sages and wandering mendicants. Their fears made sure their situation remained unchanged."(49)

History only records the facts but fiction provide us an insight into the plight of poor farmers. Their situation demanded that they should join hands against their oppressors and write their own destiny and create history for generations to come.The British ruled that if land revenues were not deposited well in time the landlord would forfeit his right to the land and his land would be auctioned. Because of this ruling many new managers became owners of the land and they had no respect for Mother Earth and it's fertility.

Titu never knew any fears, he always cherished courage. His meeting with 'Wahabi' leader at Calcutta nourished the dormant seeds of rebelliousness in him. Inspired by Syed Ahmed, the renowned 'Wahabi' leader Titu visited Mecca. On his return he became a wahabi, started wearing a tahband , grew beard and tonsured his head. The novel analyses the spread of new creed among poor working class of muslims. The poor peasants who were the followers of this

creed stopped paying interest, stopped following the godmen and stopped contributing to the estate 's fund for occasional purposes. With the result, the Zamindars, pirs , fakirs and saints all were furious with this new awakening among poor people. The wahabis were against all kinds of oppression. It was a movement against injustice and oppression. That's why all subalterns created a history by joining hands in this fight against colonial powers. Syed Ahmad knew it well that that poor working class will certainly come forward.

It is too much to expect the rich landlords, the mollahs and maulvis, or the saints and pirs to heed your call. But I believe unshakably that the poor weavers, both Hindu and Muslim, the farmers, cotton ginners, fabric dyers, all these folk will definitely respond to your call. It is always they who come forward. Our fight is against injustice of all kinds , against all torture and oppression. And who but they suffer of all society's injustice and endure its harshest oppression ? So they will come". (64)

The Hindu Muslim unity in fighting the colonial powers had the key role to play. Titu Mir says: " however much they say we hate the Hindus.... it is not true . We hate no religion. If we did, the rich Muslims would not be enemies in our eyes .Our faith is the faith of freedom." (107). *Titu Mir* is also remarkable in the sense that it celebrates those rare moments of Indian history when Hindu and Muslim fought together against the Imperial forces. This way subalterns created history cutting across the religious divide later created by the British colonial powers.

Titu's followers prepared themselves for a prolonged warfare. They built a state of the art bamboo- fort at Narkelberia near Barasat. The private army of zamindars like Devansh Ray and the British forces met with a series of defeats at the hands of his followers in the guerrilla warfare. Titu's followers used unripe fruits, lathis, stones and bricks as weapons. Titu challenged the oppressive system perpetuated by cruel landlords as well as the colonial forces. The subalterns as a united force 'spoke 'against the imperial forces and emerged as survivors , irrespective of the defeat. The British forces, armed with cannons and muskets, attacked on 14th November 1831 on Titu Mir and his followers. Without the equipment, the followers of Titu Mir could not with stand the attack. "Lathis against bayonets ,Spears against guns."(115) The bamboo castle was destroyed And Titu was killed. The British commander McDonald used the cannon on Titu. The gunner said," but that is not a fortification, you are aiming at man!"(116). The British were not ready to take a chance. They dreaded from his dead body." If we do not burn his body Titu mir will not be totally destroyed. If his followers get hold of his dead body they will start another rebellion."but burning bamboo fort and the dead body of Titu Mir was not an end of rebellion. The peasant rebellion by Birsa Munda and Titu Mir continue to inspire and motivate subaltern's resistance against imperialism. Though this uprising was not on the scale of battles by historical kings but it was an organized effort of subalterns showcasing the power of united effort by common men. These people are not ordinary souls , they are heroic figures who refused to surrender before imperialistic forces. Their undying spirit for survival makes them heroic figures. What makes *Titu Mir* a relevant text is that even after independence, farmers are dissatisfied in our country because of various

reasons. Their fate has not changed, only the hands that rule have changed. Whether *Titu Mir* is a beginning, an end or merely one chapter in an ending story needs to be answered.

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