

Research Journal of Pharmaceutical, Biological and Chemical Sciences

An application of Ecosocialism to the study of Mahasweta Devi's "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha".

G Loganayaki^{1*}, and B Krishnamurthy²,

¹Asst. Prof., Dept. of English, SRC, SASTRA University, Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Former Head, Dept. of English, SRC, SASTRA University, Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

Social ecology claims that the environmental crisis is a result of the hierarchical organization of the society. Mahasweta Devi's short story "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha" very well illustrates the concepts of eco socialism. In this short story tribal communities are considered as vulnerable population due to their small size, isolation and low level of literacy. They are solely dependent on environment in which they live. The tribal ecology is mainly disturbed by the mainstream people. This paper focuses on the social ecology with special reference to Pirtha village, a district in Madhyapradesh. The topography of the region is vividly painted as 'burnt – out desert'. The study has tried to describe what starvation has done to the human body. The Agrarian tribe is downtrodden by the Government officials as uncivilized, 'jungle' and who have 'no honest way of living'. So there is a need for bio-centric equality that all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual identity. Though the story center on Pirtha, a district in Madhyapradesh, it is the mirror of India.

Keywords: Tribal, Pterodactyl, Pirtha, pastoral, social ecology, bio-centric

**Corresponding author*

“Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha”, the third story in the book *Imaginary Maps* (IM) is an abstract of Mahasweta Devi’s entire tribal experience. It communicates the agony of the tribals, the marginalized people. It analyses the cultural and environmental issues of the tribal in modern India. In the name of development in India, the ecological and sociological aspects of tribal community are disturbed to a large extent. So this story can be analyzed through the scale of eco socialism.

Social ecology claims that the environmental crisis is a result of the hierarchical organization of power and the authoritarian mentality rooted in the structures of our society. The Western ideology of dominating the natural world arises from these social relationships. Murray Bookchin is the key thinker of social ecology movement. He strongly states that the domination of nature by man stems from the domination of human by human. The alternative is society based on ecological principles; an organic unity in diversity, free of hierarchy and based on mutual respect for the interrelationship of all aspects of life. If we change human society then our relationship with the rest of nature will become transformed.

Social ecology emphasizes that human beings are basically highly intelligent primates. Far from being unnatural, humans are an expression of a deep natural process. Bookchin believes that human consciousness is a result of nature striving for increasing complexity and awareness. Humans are part of biological evolution, which Bookchin calls 'first Nature', but also have a unique social awareness which he calls 'second nature'. Our second nature, the development of technology, science, social institutions, towns and cities, all depended on human abilities that evolved from first nature. Social ecology integrates first (biotic nature) with second (human nature). Human society and non-human nature are connected in one evolutionary flow.

Humans build cities and towns to create a comfortable place to live, just like any other species. The problem is that the environmental changes we produce are far greater than those of other species. Our 'second nature' has become a problem for ourselves and non-human life. How and why this happens is the key to solve our ecological crisis. Mahasweta Devi’s short story very well illustrates the concepts of eco socialism.

Pirtha is a tribal district in Madhya Pradesh. The people in that district nearly cover 22.97% of the entire population. But the government officers forget their existence and there by their identity is lost. Not only the common tribal man but also the great tribal heroes also disappears from the government records. In order to highlight this pathetic situation Mahasweta Devi, an activist cum writer uses the image of the pterodactyl to warn the outer world that the tribal people and their environment would be wiped out of history like the extinct bird (pterodactyl). Puran Sahay, a radical journalist, belongs to the region of Palamau. Harisharan, the Block development officer and his intimate friend invites him to Pirtha and requests him to write a report on the drought and famine that prevail in Pirtha.

Though there is a periodical rainfall in Pirtha, the region is as dry as a dust bowl. The land and its people are deprived of their source of water. The reason behind this drought is manmade.

“_what’s the reason for the famine this time?
_Man made. It’s always that way here”(Im-122)

Remembering the past age of pastoral plenty the story depicts the loss of the tribal culture. Shankar is a literate tribal who contemplates on the transformation that has taken place in the lives of Nagesria tribals and their history.

“_Once there was forest, hill, river, and us. We had villages, homes, land,... Soma, we lived. Then there was game to hunt. It rained, Peacock danced, we lived. People grew, the community grew, some of us moved to a distance. We asked the earth’s permission, we are setting down stakes to build a roof, setting land to grow crops. The chief of our society told us where we should settle land fit for living. There we built homes, made villages, settled land each for himself. We worshipped the tree that was the spirit of our village. Then we lived, only us.”(Im-119) .

This passage shows how the tribals lived on perfect communion with the natural surroundings. They cannot survive without nature or forest. Their entire life cycle that is birth, marriage and death all are linked to nature. They feel peace and secured in the lap of nature. They also worship their ancestors before beginning or

ending their daily duty for they trust that their ancestors' soul guard them from evil things."-We buried our dead. We lowered the body at the cross-roads. We scattered the seed of koda and rice. Then at the time of buried we gave oil, cloth, rice, fruit. We laid the body down with the ancestors. After the funeral we laid a rock on the grave. There are many, many burial grounds like this. The souls of the ancestors were at peace. Blessed us. We lived"(Im-119)

The intrusion of the outsiders brings a drastic change. The pastoral is lost. The nature is violated. The encroachment of the forest and building of roads has resulted in the easy access of the tribal lands by bourgeoisies and other profiteers. Shankar voicing the agony of his people, says:

"Why did the foreigners come? We were kings. Became subjects. Were subjects, became slaves. Owed nothing, they made us debtors. Alas , they enslaved and bound us. They named us Hali, named us Kamiya , in many tongues. Our land vanished like dust before a storm, our fields, our homes, all disappeared. The ones who came were not human beings. Oh, we climb hills and build homes, the road comes chasing us. The forest disappears; they make the four corners unclean. Oh, we had our ancestor's graves! They were ground underfoot to build roads, houses, schools, hospitals. We wanted none of this, and anyway they didn't do it for us"(IM)-119-120)

Through this passage, one can understand that the tribals are not for the civilization that exploits nature and their eco system. Mahasweta Devi condemns the Government and the officials for the measures undertaken in the name of tribal welfare. Shankar's lamentations very well explain the condition of tribals in Pirtha village.

"-Alas! In pain we are stone, mute. We failed to give peace to the ancestors. We are coming to an end rubbed off the soil. And so the unquiet soul casts its shadow and haves. We didn't know how it would look. This is surely the ancestor's spirit! This is surely the curse of the savaged land, village, field, home, forest! Now no one can save us. Now we are all unclean, in mourning...you can't do anything for us. We became unclean as soon as you entered our lives. No more roads, no more relief-what will you give to a people in exchange for the vanished land, home, field, burial-ground?(Im-120)

The civilization and development enjoyed by the main stream people are at the cost of landless and homeless tribal. The progress in the country swallows all the natural entitles and thereby disturbs the ecological balance of the tribals lives. Looting of lands in the name of development projects make the survival of the tribals a great question mark. In order to cater to their needs, the tribals are to lead the life of bounded slaves.

The tribals lived in the harmony with nature. They could better understand their land and agricultural patterns than anyone else. As they were the native of the place, they knew the traditional agrarian policy that is suitable for their land structure. The government has introduced the scheme to provide pesticides and fertilizers to enhance the production of tribal agrarian society. But the scheme is not implemented transparently and honestly. It is perfectly utilized by the traders and main stream people. "After all, festivals and insecticides come to my block office gives to the tribals only in name, they don't deliver the goods, offer a nominal sum of money and say we bought it"(Im-122)

The main stream people even change the pattern of crop cultivation. To cater to the needs, the tribals usually cultivate crops such as koda, kutki, soma and khajra. But they were substituted by high yielding variety of crops such as soyabeans, rice, jawar and bajra. These drastic changes in the agrarian style have increased the number of tribal suicides-because these high yielding crops benefit and profit only the main stream people and not the tribal community.

The pesticides and fertilizers that are used in the fields for high yielding drink the life of tribals. The prevailing drought raised the concern of the officials and the barren lands are sprayed with pesticides in preparation for cultivation. "Characters came down from the Block office and saw there was no agriculture at all, and they sprayed insecticide all over the dusty fields. Think of it. You can see the fields are burnt out...(IM-122). The unexpected rains wash away the sprayed pesticides and gathers in the wells and rivers used by the tribals. The khajra plants form the important diet if Pirtha region. The trees are about three feet tall with edible tubers. The pesticides also gather in the loots and tubers of khajra. The tribals eat the poisonous fleshy

roots of the khajra and drink the contaminated water as these are the only resource for survival. This result in the death of some of tribals exploiting their ecological system. "The rain fell on the fields and fallow lands on the hillside and the poisonous water flowed into the wells they had dug...They died of drinking that very water."(Im-122-123)

The tribals are closely attached to nature. Every tribal community has a special tree which is interconnected with their lives. Walter Fernondes in his "Forest and Tribal informed economy, Dependence and management Traditions" suggest that tribal communities have many beliefs and Myths which are "closely related to the preservation of economically important species which are linked to the origin and continuity of the tribe".(pg.-61). Just as Sagawan tree signifies life to Korju tribe, Ho tribe believes in sal tree as their life. Modern developments pave way to deforestation of these trees in forest and exploit the tribal life in adverse. Mahaweta Devi says,"The ho language has no synonym for 'exploitation'...Puran thinks, do the tribals , whose life is nothing but exploitation, nothing but deprivation, have a synonym for 'exploitation' in any of their languages?"(Im-119)

The tribals remember their past through oral songs. "They have captured their history by observing the rules of birth-marriage-death-social justice. There is no alphabet, they have caught the past in their songs".(Im-119). Due to their exploitation and suppression, the tribals can no more live in peace with nature. Their happiness and harmony is destroyed. Shankar raises several questions to identify the reasons behind their suffering. "-Ah misfortune! As ants come before a flood, as white ants fly in teeming swarms before the rains, so did our news reach strangers. Did we make a mistake in our worshipping? Did someone tear a leaf from a tree before it was consecrated, before the new fruit, new leaf, new flower came in the spring time, in the month of Phalgun? Did one of us kill a pregnant doe in the hunt? Did someone insult the elders? The community's rule is to protect orphans, was that rule broken somewhere. I don't know where we became guilty."(Im-119). The questions in the above passage clearly establish that the tribals are fault free and guilt free. They are in no way responsible for their sufferings. They suffer due to the intrusion of foreigners (outsiders/main stream people). The tribals cultivate the crops according to their needs and not to their greeds. This is evident through, "one thing is true, we must plant the khajra that keeps us alive. If Baola keeps us alive, we must plant Baola. Otherwise everything will be desert, and we will have to leave."(Im-185).

The knowledge and actions of the tribals are closely influenced by nature and their surroundings. Harisharan tells, "For the poor, it's the kalpataru, the fabled tree of gifts . Split the leaf to weave mats and cut the tubes, leave the very end. Another plant will come up. And if you don't pick it, the bottom of the tuber will spread, many plants will come up"(Im-126). Such practices among the tribals help to maintain the ecological balance. This is not with the case with the mainstream people. Their thoughts and knowledge are materialistic and selfish. Their actions always end with the exploitation of ecological balance.

What do the tribals want? "The tribals want human recognition, respect, because he or she is the child of an ancient civilization".(Im-177-178). But the modern society "turns them into beggars, who are nowhere implicated in Indian education, development, science, industry, agriculture, technology. They remain spectators".(Im-178)

Mahesweta Devi's anger towards modern developments can be seen through her words, "They (tribals) have not received anything from modern India. This metal road has come to them to serve the interests of those very money lenders form Bhalpura and Rajaura who will snatch their harvests to recover their loans, those patient customers who wait like vultures for the moment when starving parents will sell their children in the extremity of despair , and fall to feeding on carrion, the advance men of those labor contractors who will make the aboriginals their bonded-slaves with the seduction of 'ten rupees a day and a full stomach'".(Im-146).

The ratio of development in modern India is highly pathetic, "one person eats well by keeping five hundred starving, one person graduates college while six hundred remain illiterate and one person buys an apartment keeping how many hundred homeless, such complicated ratios"(Im-162). With this development, Mahasweta Devi wonders how the tribals will be treated in the future. "Will they put the past behind them, tear up their roots and leave this place to go to a housing development? Tribals in a tribal colony. In India of the future, will they be preserved as endangered species or mingle in the mainstream? Or will the tribals

change their character and become different? Even animals preserved behind wire netting are not safe. Somewhere the zoo keepers themselves caught and ate the captive deer.”(Im-152)

Mahasweta Devi clearly states that there are two different worlds-the world of tribal and the world of mainstream. Both worlds cannot come in union. They stay parallel to each other. In her conversation with Gaytiri Spivak, she says. “The pterodactyl is pre-historic. Modern man, the journalist, does not know anything about it. There is no point of communication with the pterodactyl. The pterodactyl cannot say what message it has brought. The journalist, the representative of the mainstream people, has no point of contact with the tribals,. Their roads have run parallel. He does not know the tribal wants, what the tribal holds most dear to the heart. The tribals want to stay in the place which they know as their own. They want the respect that they hold for their dead ancestors. Whatever has come in the name of development has spelled disaster for the tribes.”(Im-15-16).

Through *Puran*, the miseries and agonies of the tribals come to light. Mahasweta Devi sees the exploitation of nature as equal with the exploitation of tribals. Mainstream’s control over nature reflects the domination of tribals as it is the tribals who are the most closely linked to nature. This automatically paves way for the need of Eco-socialism. The development projects of building dams, roads, bridges and factories not only make the tribals homeless, but spell doom to their very existence.

Mahasweta Devi’s use of the pterodactyl, symbolically focuses on the historical past and endangered future of the tribals. The cave painting found at Pirtha clearly reflects the devastation of the tribal land. Moreover, the issues like draught, famine and the change in agricultural practices reddens the people of Pirtha. Their lives are severely affected as they are deprived of the use of natural resources like the rivers and lakes which are their main sources for survival. *Puran* makes the reader aware of the conditions of the tribals who are dominated, captivated, ignored, exploited and enslaved by the mainstream people. In place of the existing hierarchical and class system, social ecology proposes an egalitarian society based on mutual aid, caring and communitarian values. People in this new society would appreciate that the interests of the collective are inseparable from those of each individual. Property would be shared and, ideally, belong to the community as a whole. This transformation is to be achieved through radical collective action and co-operative social movements.

The story, thus highlights the close link between human and nature and how human stands to suffer by disaffiliation. In the name of mainstream absorption, the tribal loses his individuality, nativity and strength and stands in prospect of losing identity with all its rich culture. The analysis also illustrates Mahasweta Devi’s commitment at once to social justice and environmental protection.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abrams, M.H and Galt Geoffrey Harpham. *A Handbook of Literary Terms*. New Delhi: Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 2009.Print.
- [2] Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*.3rd ed. U.K: Manchester University press, 2012.Print.
- [3] Bookchin, Murray. *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays in Dialectical Naturalism*. New Delhi: Rawat, 1996. Print.
- [4] Devi, Mahasweta. *Bitter Soil*. Tr. by Ipsita Chanda. Calcutta: Seagull, 2009.Print.
- [5] _____ . *Dust on the Road*. Tr. by Maitreya Ghatak. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010. Print.
- [6] Glotfelty, Cherryll and Harold Fromm.eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Georgia: Georgia UP, 1996.Print.
- [7] Love, Glen A. *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment*. London: Virginia UP, 2003.Print.
- [8] Sen, Nivedita and Nikhil Yadav.ed. *Mahasweta Devi: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2008.Print.
- [9] en.wikipedia.org/wiki/mahasweta-devi
- [10] www.themanbookerprize.com/content/mahasweta-devi