

# Who is Dopdi Majhen in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*?: A Study of Tribal Women's Plight and Subaltern Resistance

## OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 11

Special Issue: 2

Month: June

Year: 2024

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Impact Factor: 3.025

Citation:


Saha, Arindam, and T. Marx. "Who Is Dopdi Majhen in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*?:  
A Study of Tribal Women's Plight and Subaltern Resistance."  
*Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 11, no. S2, 2024, pp. 30–35.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12606179>


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## Abstract

*Identity is an integral part of the historical trajectory inherent in the realm of power. It is understood by its normative forces and dynamic association with uncertainties of the power structure that is classified as political. Sometimes it has been problematized by enacting heinous activities like violence, oppression, discrimination, humiliation, and othering to clarify the division irrespective of caste, class, and gender in economic, social, and political scenarios. Its multilayered nature commits the being to perform myriad acts with full vigour in the private and public spheres. This study aims to understand the normative forces of identity and its political representations entangled with the female protagonist Dopdi, in *Draupadi* by Mahasweta Devi, translated by Gayatri Chakravathy Spivak, an eminent Postcolonial critic. Mahasweta Devi is a well-known writer and activist who articulated those brutalities committed against subalterns, especially the tribal people in the Indian society, in her writings. Moreover, it also seeks to understand the tribal people, especially the tribal women, and their identical trajectories which are carried out by the diverse groups of organizations, and the peoples' uprisings which help to foreground the convoluted connection between identity and power.*

**Keywords:** Dopdi, Draupadi, Identity, Plight, Political Representation.

## Introduction

Power, resistance, and justice are always embedded in a tangled relationship in societal structure. This relationship is carried out by different groups of organizations, or peoples' movements. This study seeks to understand this convoluted connection in the tribal domain presented through Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* and translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Her narrative shows how the "criminalization of power" forces the indigenous people with no other option than 'violent protests' to regain their basic rights. She prefers to call the characters of her stories 'tribal' as they fit to the Indian context. The protagonist Dopdi Mejhhen in *Draupadi* is a figure of 'continuing struggle'. She is the symbol of 'tribal aspiration'. She focuses on how in the name of land and labour these tribal

people are being displaced from their basic rights like food, shelter, etc. Sometimes they are tagged as Maoists or otherwise Naxalites. The power-play of the state machinery pushes them to the periphery. It converts them into ‘other’, and makes them ‘marginalized’. This process of ‘othering’ the tribal (in the Indian context) or Indigenous/Aboriginal people (in the global context) brings forth the haunting question i.e. where do these people stand on the mainstream map? How much justifiable is their way of struggle in civil society?

Violence needs to be analyzed in light of how it relates to laws and rights within the context of the state’s moral culture. “For a cause, however effective, becomes violent, in the precise sense of the word, only when it enters into moral relations” argues Walter Benjamin (Bullock and Jennings 236). Although Benjamin is not concerned with the nature of violence, he is interested in how it manifests itself in society and, eventually, in the state. So, the question is, how do violence and law interact? Benjamin contends that there are two ways in which violence and the law are intimately connected. In the first place, violence is the method through which law is established and upheld. Second, dominance where violence is committed in the name of power marks the end of the rule of law: “The drafting of laws is the exercise of power, the assumption of authority, and to some extent, the instantaneous outburst of violence” (248). Violence will be law-making if it is used as a method to achieve natural aims, as in an interstate war where one or more governments employ force to disregard long-standing rules like borders. This violence aims to establish new historically recognised laws and borders through a “peace ceremony” (240) that will take place.

### **Re-colonization and Failures of the Postcolonial State**

The paper broadly engages with the emergent domains of multiple tropes of subaltern identity, marginalization, and dissidence in today’s India, with a special focus on Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi*. This article seeks to focus on the failure of the postcolonial state through an investigation into its flawed paradigm of repressive governance and brutalization. In doing so it offers a proper understanding of the discursive triad of power, resistance, and justice as played out in *Draupadi*. The book discusses tribal people who are considered ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘backward’. During the colonial regime, the Britishers put the tribal life-world in isolation and the same policy of exploitation continued in the post-independence era through the coercive measures of the Indian state that exerted its power over the tribal population through oppressive governmental technologies. The seductive narrative of democracy has befooled the tribal people over the years through constitutional enchantments and oppressive rules. A huge section of the Indian population was consequently deprived of their traditional rights. They were made to feel homeless in their own home. Such an exercise of power for the justice of the powerful has relegated the tribal to the very brink of existence. Their rights of ‘being’ are forcefully taken away by the state in the name of development projects that trigger subaltern resistance that ultimately evolves in the form of tribal uprising. The state machinery suppresses their resistance with brutal onslaught. Military operations are being conducted to mop out this ‘threat’ and the real story of the tribal plight is suppressed and a distorted narrative is being promoted by the government through television, newspapers, or literary works to endorse its policy of internal colonization.

This paper attempts an impartial assessment of tribal plight and their resistance and in doing so it probes into the question of democracy, governance, and justice in India. This study examines state coercion and the question of justice. Giorgio Agamben theorized his notion of Homo Sacer as a dissident subaltern who is reduced to his/her bare life by the repressive mechanisms of brutal state power. This research tries to construct an argument that in India, the tribal who dissent against multiple forms of state and corporate violence are branded anti-socials, which aligns with

Agamben's notion of the Homo Sacer, the tag given to the outsider by the 'mighty' Roman Empire. This type of ostracization policy legitimizes the murder of Homo Sacer. L. H. Morgan said in *Ancient Society* that all forms of government are reducible to two general plans. The first one he calls 'social organization' or 'a society (societas)', occurs among all savages and barbarians; it is founded upon 'gentes, phratries and tribes', and the government deals with these people in their capacity as numbers of kinship groups. The second, distinguished as a 'political organization', 'political society' or a 'state (civitas)', is characteristic of civilization; it is founded upon territory and property, and the government deals with people in the residential capacity, as inhabitants of a regional unit such as a township, county, or state (Schapera 3).

India achieved its long-fought independence from the British clutches almost seven decades back. It started its post-independence journey with numerous hopes. But the promises are yet to be delivered. Under the garb of democracy, the government has been playing a dual game with its people. Instead of being the people's nation, our so-called democratic nation appears to be a dreamland of wealth and prosperity for the rich and a 'stony' and 'barren land' for its indigenous people. In *Draupadi*, the ceaseless sufferings of tribal have been the main theme. A government instead of providing the minimum necessities and protection to the life of its indigenous people, is 'murdering' them when they are fighting back for survival and existence. They refuse to give up their rights and dignity and deny to believe in false promises. The majority of the nation is not bothered about their deplorable plight. After decades of suppression, these people are making efforts to assert their rights. Resistance is taking place. Subalterns are speaking in their language. In different corners of the country, the oppressed are taking up arms against the state. Insurgency is the result of the long years of marginalization and deprivation. The tribals have come to realize that if they don't take up weapons against the government, their existence will be at stake. Hence it ought to be remembered that when the tribals are committing activities involving death and destruction, they are forced to do so to survive against various colossal forces.

### ***Draupadi* as a Representation of Power, Resistance, and Justice**

Mahasweta Devi raises the notion of power, resistance, and (in) justice in her writing. The title of the story can be read in various ways with multiple connotations. The main protagonist of the story is Dopdi Mejhen who is a tribal woman who works in the areas of Bankura, Birbhum, Murshidabad, and Bardhaman during the harvesting time. She with her husband, Dulna Majhi lives a normal life. During the drought in 1971, the whole village faced a terrible crisis in the form of insufficiency of water except Surja Sahu, the head of the only upper-caste family in the village. There was more than enough water in the house of Suraj Sahu who did not allow any villagers to get a drop of water. Dopdi and her husband made a plan to seize the water body by hook or by crook. That was possible after murdering Sahu and his son. The result was the shoot-at-sight order against those villagers including Dopdi and her husband. All were gunned down except Dopdi and Dulna who somehow managed to escape temporarily from the clutches of the military. Later Dulna Majhi was shot and Dopdi was imprisoned and that night she was brutally raped. This narrative shakes the root of existence and puts the whole tribal community into an ontological crisis. While attempting to understand the term 'life' in the light of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* he points out the mindset of the Greeks who understand life from the two perspectives – "zoe, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and bios, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group." (Giorgio Agamben 1). This dual existence of life of human beings turns many lives vulnerable, especially the lives of the periphery. Aristotle also expresses his concern regarding the 'life' in *Politics*.

This (life according to the good) is the greatest end both in common for all men and each man separately. But men also come together and maintain the political community in view of simple living, because there is probably some kind of good in the mere fact of living itself (kata to zen auto monon). If there is no great difficulty as to the way of life (kata ton bion), clearly most men will tolerate much suffering and hold on to life (Zoe) as if it were a kind of serenity (euemeria, beautiful day) and natural sweetness. (Aristotle qtd in Agamben 1)

The peripheralisation of life had already started in the classical era. Peripheralization is the process of pushing a tribe away from the centre and into the outermost areas. It is not invented in this modern era. The same bare life (Agamben) is again brought to the forefront by Michael Foucault. At the end of his book *The History of Sexuality* (Volume 1), he observes “the process by which, at the threshold of the modern era, natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power, and politics turns into biopolitics” (Agamben 3). He further asserts “For millennia man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question” (3). Dopdi being an agent of biopolitics has no right to maintain a ‘simple natural life’ (Zoe) as she becomes part of the polis (3). So, the colonized power brutally pushes back those lives (tribal) into the territory. But Dopdi’s resistance questions the mythical character Draupadi. Her definition of life has been choked up when Senanayak, the senior police officer and head behind the famous Operation Bakuli, orders his junior “Make her. Do the needful”. (Spivak, *Critical Inquiry*, 401). After locking up the bird, Dopdi, the narrator calls her by a different name, the name of a mythological figure, Draupadi. She is transformed into a mythic figure. Draupadi was countered physically the whole night. Her bare body becomes homo sacer in the hand of sovereign power. But the resistance along with her bare body against all sorts of obstacles cries out “What more can you do? Come on, counter me – come on, counter me?” (Spivak 402)

### **Tribals as the New Homo Sacer in Contemporary Scenario**

A number of tribal uprisings and tribal resistances are represented in the works of Mahasweta Devi. In reality, the scenario is not different. Recently the government was under tremendous pressure as the rebels left no stone unturned to overthrow the established order. The former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh called the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency the “single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country”. The Home Secretary of India G. K. Pillai said on the escalation of Maoist violence in 2010:

If you see the violence profile of the left-wing extremism itself, it has been going up year after year. Last year was possibly one of the bloodiest years and our estimate is this year it is only likely to go up whether we like it or not. Because we will no longer allow this policy of continued expression by the Maoists to continue unabated and the state has now decided that this must stop and we will take back areas which we have lost. We are in one sense taking back those areas and much of the shouting and violence which is going on is because some of the areas we have, in fact, started to take back. (Pillai 2010)

The government felt that the only way of maintaining its domination over the tribal people is through facilitating systemic violence against them. Instead of pondering over the actual cause of the resistance on the part of the tribal people, the government has adopted brutal measures to curb them. Every kind of dissent, even non-violent protests are termed a criminal offence. The tribal people, the landless, and the hungry peasantry, who are fighting merely for their rights, are branded as Maoists under draconian, undemocratic laws. The uprisings are met with police firings, military operation and sometimes with political hooliganism. The tribals engaged

in this battle against injustice are captured, tortured and put to death by the state. Acts like the 'Armed Forces Special Powers Act' give the army legal authority to kill on suspicion. Military forces are engaged to eliminate such 'internal security threats'. Central Para Military forces, Indian Reserve Battalions, COBRA battalions, and Central Armed Police forces are often deployed in tribal areas (Sethi 2010). Operations like Operation Green Hunt have been carried out. The special police, CRPF, BSF, and the notorious Naga Battalion are committing merciless atrocities in those areas where the tribal people are grouping against the government. Soni Sori, an Adivasi teacher from Bastar was arrested and stones were inserted into her vagina to get her to confess that she was a Maoist courtier. The sheer irony is that Ankit Garg who conducted the brutal interrogation was conferred with the president's police medal for gallantry. (Sethi 2010)

In Chattisgarh, Salwa Judum, a military organization was launched to counter the Naxalite violence in 2005 just days after MoU was signed with the Tatas (Miklian 2009). The militia comprising of the local youth, trained by the Chattisgarh government, known as the "people's militia" or Salwa Judam, wreaks havoc in the region. It was accused of committing "atrocities and abuse against women" and looting and destroying property. But ironically the National Human Rights Commission of India (NHRS) appointed by the Supreme Court of India declared that the Salwa Judam was a spontaneous reaction of the local people against the Maoist atrocities and all the allegations against them were rejected. Similarly, in Bihar, a group was formed by the Bhunihar and Rajput landlords against the Naxalies and other tribal people.

In West Bengal, the government sought assistance from the Central Government. Companies of the Central Reserved Police Force and Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (COBRA) forces were employed. In Lalgurh, an operation was launched after a special meeting between officials, Deputy General of Police and Home Secretary Ardhendu Sen and the whole nation saw the merciless police atrocities against the village people who were fighting for their survival. (Chakraborty 2014). The joint forces in the Jangalmahal area resorted to large-scale torture of the villagers including rape of the women. In May 2006 Planning Commission appointed D. Bandopadhyay, a retired IAS officer, as an expert committee head. In its report, the committee made a forceful plea to depart from the conventional ways of looking at the Naxalite issues and suggested addressing the development-related issues to achieve a long-term solution to the problem. But instead of focusing on the development of the backward areas the state puts forth measures to eliminate the dissenters (Chakraborty 2014).

## **Conclusion**

This study examines the benefits and drawbacks of the state apparatus as well as the breakdown of tribal sense of community in society at large. The government consistently muzzles tribal voices using a variety of hegemonic forces in the name of democracy. They are unable to express their outrage. They are expected to submit to the overwhelming might of the government. Despite the British colonizer's departure, colonialism is still in place. The fact that India has a long history of people giving their lives in the name of an egalitarian society should not be forgotten, nevertheless. No country can advance if 100 million tribal people living on the periphery are falling behind. Walking hand-in-hand is necessary.

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