

Mahasweta Devi's *Titu Mir*: A Story of Subaltern Solidarity

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Life narratives are often interwoven with the social, economic and political history of the times. In mainstream history, the lives of the underprivileged who contributed to the Indian freedom struggle are barely recorded. The discourse of history is based on written evidence. Since the history of the subaltern classes largely exists in the form of folk-tales, legends and oral narratives, history cannot accommodate these lives in its discourse. Ranajit 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" (Guha 4). I wish to examine how Mahasweta Devi depicts the life-story of Titu Mir who brought the subaltern classes together to fight the British and how the fictional discourse provides an alternative as well as opposition to the historical discourse.

Mahasweta Devi beautifully weaves history with fiction in *Titu Mir*. History is often associated with causes and effects, facts and figures. The discourse of history cannot depict the pain and suffering of the individual lives; it is the fictional discourse which brings out the stories of ordinary people. The famine of 1770 devastated the lives of many people in Bengal. History has given us numbers; the novelist gives us a heart-rending picture of how people were reduced to animal-like existence and died like flies: "...No crop could be harvested that year as people had died like flies. The sahibs had bought up all the rice cheap, stored it 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 ate anything they could lay their hands on—leaves of trees, roots, bark. Then there were robbers, dacoits. They would say, keep your gold, we don't want it. Give us food, give us rice" (8-9).

The novelist depicts the events that led to the Sanyasi Revolt in which all the subaltern classes joined forces to fight the British. The Sanyasi Revolt showed subaltern solidarity:

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 Madrasa, 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 historical events are narrated through stories and proclamations at the marketplace. The police musketeers and the zamindar's messenger inform that the sanyasis and fakirs have been defeated by the British. We come to know the heroes of this revolt through the proclamation: Suvan Ali, Neyaju Shah and Budhu Shah. The British would reward those who would help capture them. When Titu asks them about these people, the answer given is: "This lot's just robbers" (20). Gramsci's comment in the context of the revolt of the South is instructive here: "Southern discontent, for lack of leadership, did not succeed in assuming a normal political form; its manifestations, finding expression only in an anarchic turbulence, were presented as a 'matter for the police' and the courts..." (Hoare and Nowell Smith 94). Any revolt by the lower classes is a matter for the police and the courts. They were stamped as robbers although they were fighting for freedom. Robbers do not become part of mainstream history. When the policeman and the armed guard forcibly take fruits, vegetables and fish from the vendor's baskets, Titu intervenes. This is the first time that Titu appears to be the savior of the poor and the oppressed. The zamindar's men as well as the police exploit the vendors.

Commenting on Mahasweta Devi's style of writing, Samik Bandopadhyay observes: "As a novelist, Mahasweta Devi ...is at her most characteristic when she creates a span of history, allowing individuals to evolve through their interactions with a historical process...Generally, she uses the style of a chronicle, often capturing the tones of oral narratives, in the 'impure idiom of everyday speech drawing on words from several sources simultaneously, and breaking into almost lyrical evocations to celebrate the dramatic high points, the lyrical stretches borne upon a pattern of reiterations and repetitions" (Bandopadhyay vii). The novelist uses conversations between characters to tell history. The narrative proceeds through dialogues. This gives dramatic quality to the narrative. Narration is kept to the minimum. That could be one way of keeping the energy and vibrancy of oral history. Titu talks about the Sanyasi revolt: "When the governor used to hunt tigers in the heart of Calcutta, fakirs and sanyasis like my friend here fought the British troops. Have you heard of Majnu Shah? This man has seen him..." (74). Titu's grandmother also refers to the Sanyasi Revolt. It is through the stories told by the characters that Mahasweta Devi reveals subaltern pasts: "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). Titu tells Hafiz that the fakirs and sanyasis were still engaged in the war with the British. Titu meets Mushirat Shah, one of the heroes of the Sanyasi Revolt. Mushirat Shah talks about the subalterns coming together in the Sanyasi Revolt: "Of course. We fakirs fought in that war, and so did the sanyasis. And when Majnu Shah came, about twenty years ago, we became united" (16). They were fighting the zamindars, the Company and the government. The Sanyasi Revolt was a coalition across religious lines. The fakir's battlecry was "Din! Din!" and the sanyasis' "Har! Har!" It was a class war, the under classes fighting the upper classes and the British.

The novel depicts the effects of Permanent Settlement that was enacted by Cornwallis in 1793. All zamindars were supposed to pay a fixed rent to the British government in perpetuity and their successors were also expected to pay the rent. The zamindars

became loyal servants of the British and forcibly collected ten rupees for every twenty from the people. The novelist depicts their slavery: "Now the Company had a goodly band of landowners, who were ready to say 'The sky is green' or 'It is pitch dark on a full moon night'" (20). Titu brings out the oppression of the farmers by the zamindars in his conversation with his father: "Abbajan! 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). Titu feels that he would not get a job of a *lathial* for the zamindar because he always crosses his men at the market. Titu cannot stand the exploitation of the vendors at the marketplace. First, the zamindar's men fleece the vendors, then the plantation staff fleeces them and then the police harass them.

The Permanent Settlement created a class of absentee landlords who lived in bigger towns and their managers used to look after their estates in the villages. The sahibs were not allowed to lease land in their own names to plant indigo, so they leased land under assumed names of their servants and labourers. Bhudeb Chaudhury brings this out:

The Company doesn't want zamindars like us. These days anyone can be a zamindar if he can raise the taxes. They are based in places like Krishnanagar, Taki, Calcutta while their managers are having a gala time in the villages. That's the kind of landlord they want now: the kind who won't even care to visit occasionally. No more pond-digging or tree-planting in the country. The village schools are closing for want of patronage. And now these indigo sahibs have come to gobble up what's left. It's sure ruin for the people. (23)

Titu's comment on the city of Calcutta reminds one of Antonio Gramsci's observation: "The poverty of the Mezzogiorno was historically "inexplicable" for the popular masses in the North; they did not understand that unity had not taken place on a basis of equality, but as hegemony of the North over the Mezzogiorno in a territorial version of the town-country relationship – in other words, that the North concretely was an "octopus" which enriched itself at the expense of the South, and that its economic-industrial increment was in direct proportion to the impoverishment of the economy and the agriculture of the South" (Hoare and Nowell Smith 70-71). The prosperity of the town is directly proportionate to the impoverishment of the country. This is what Titu says:

It would be best for the world if such a city did not grow any further; the more it grew, the more its markets would suck the substance out of the rest of the country. And how could everything go and sit in Calcutta? The goods on display in every market amazed him...He thought to himself in wonder that the people of Calcutta did no farming, no harvesting, they rowed no boats, and when it rained in the monsoon season they didn't rush to mend any dykes either. They did no physical work whatsoever, yet they managed to put away tons of food! (30)

The novel depicts the agricultural changes that the Permanent Settlement introduced in Bengal. Regular revenues were expected by the company, so the payment of dues that the zamindars owed to the Company was made permanent. Zamindars

were allowed to increase revenues every twelve years. The new class of zamindars was created. This class included traders, brokers, businessmen, agents and contractors. They had to settle in Calcutta. The Company made it clear to the zamindars that if the land revenue was not deposited within the stipulated time, the landlord would lose his right over the land and the land would be auctioned. Many such properties were bought by the emerging class. Some managers became owners of the land by deliberately evading the payments that their masters owed to the Company:

The new men lived in the new city, and they leased out the land or even subleased it, to men who look on the work of raising revenue. The demands of all these claimants had to be satisfied ultimately by the people, and should any of them try to escape their burdens by running away, the landlords could resort to the seventh section of the Settlement Act, enacted specially for their convenience to be invoked against the defaulters. Bhudeb Pal was too much of a conservative to understand the benefits of this new system. What the company needed was the Noni Basu breed of 'absentee landlords'. (36)

Another important historical character that the novel introduces is Syed Ahmed. Syed Ahmed became a Wahabi after he returned from Arabia. He raised his own army and fought Ranjit Singh in Punjab. He was annoyed with Ranjit Singh because Ranjit Singh had signed a treaty with the British and surrendered Punjab, Tonk and Peshwar to the British. Titu was influenced by Syed Ahmed: "Even before he was released from jail, Titu came to hear of Syed Ahmed. The memory of the fakir he had met long ago had not completely faded from his mind. At that time those stories – of hiding in the countryside, fighting a guerrilla war under Majnu Shah and defeating the Company's soldiers – had bred in him a sense of wonder and a thirst of glory" (48).

Maimuna, Titu's wife, appears as a gendered subaltern in the novel. Those who fought the battle deserve a mention in the telling of the story, but those who stayed at home and sacrificed their family life and suffered silently equally deserve the mention. Their silence makes their story all the more painful. The novelist uses the metaphor of silence to describe her character:

Late at night, when everyone was asleep, Titu asked Maimuna, 'But you have *not said anything* to me.'

'What can I say?'

'Everyone has something to say about my leaving.'

'Have I ever said no to anything you've wanted to do? Have I ever stood in your way?'

'Are you sad?'

She was *silent* for a while, then answered, 'What if I am?... (53-54, emphasis added)

The novelist interweaves history with fiction and gives a different perspective on Indian history. One such historical event is the sepoys' revolt at Barrackpore. The Forty-seventh Regiment revolted against the British because they did not want to travel over water to Burma. Burma was posing a threat to the British Empire because it

was establishing its presence in Assam, Chittagong and the British thought that Burma would attack Bengal also. The British also wanted to loot the natural treasures of Burma. The novelist brings out the anonymity of the Indian soldiers who revolted against the British: "The Commander-in-Chief ordered that the cannons be trained on the soldiers. How many died, how many were hurt and escaped towards the Ganga, how many were later hanged, and how many expunged forever from the regimental register, was something no one could count at the time" (56). The novel also throws light on how economy changed after the famine. "This was never a land of usury, lending grain was common. But now we don't accept repayment of just the original amount of grain lent. For every *maun* of edible rice you must return ten *shers* over the measure. For paddy seed, half a *maun* per *maun*. We never used to before; it started after the famine" (58). The plantation managers used to trap poor peasants in debt by lending grain to them. They would then plant indigo on their land.

Gramsci notes that it is the weakest and most marginal sector which reacts first in periods of crisis. Gramsci wrote this in the context of the divide between southern Italy and northern Italy. The industrial North was considered superior to the agrarian South. During the period of the Risorgimento, during the period of political crisis, it was the south which initiated the action. (Hoare and Nowell Smith 92-93). Syed Ahmed also talks about subaltern classes coming together in a period of crisis:

'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 ginnerers, 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, emphasis added)

The novel analyses how the spread of the Wahabi creed challenged the established social order and how the creed was critical of blind beliefs and superstitions. Titu decides to become a Wahabi. Syed Ahmed explains to him the basic tenet of the Wahabi creed: "That no man can arrogate to himself the power that rightfully belongs only to God. That there is no potency and no truth in djinns, fairies, spirits, ghosts and saints. It tells the faithful not to build dargahs and mosques, not to spend money on lavish funerals. It forbids usury, and ostentation at religious festivals" (66). Titu knows that the Wahabi creed would be bitterly resisted by the godmen and money-lenders. In case the poor peasants fail to repay the loans of grain and zamindars forcibly occupy their lands, it would be a sin. So, zamindars' interests would also be harmed. The Wahabi creed is a coalition across religious lines. If a poor Hindu is coerced by a rich Hindu, the Wahabis would support the poor Hindu. The novel throws light on the threat that this creed was posing to the contemporary social and economic order. The poor peasants who were the followers of this creed stopped paying interest, stopped following the godmen, and stopped contributing to the estate's funds for occasional expenses. The zamindars, pirs, fakirs and saints were bound to be furious. One such zamindar in the novel is Krishnadeb Ray, the zamindar of Poonra.

Gramsci observes that the subaltern classes are always subject to the activities of the hegemonic groups:

The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. There undoubtedly does exist a tendency to (at least provisional stages of) unification in the historical activity of these groups, but this tendency is continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups; it therefore can only be demonstrated when an historical cycle is completed and this cycle culminates in a success. Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of the ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only "permanent" victory breaks their subordination and that not immediately. (Hoare and Nowell Smith 54-55).

The poor peasants are subjected to the machinations of the zamindars like Krishnadeb. Krishnadeb forces the Wahabis who have grown beards to pay two and half-rupees per head as tax. When the peasants of Shorporajpur refuse to pay the tax, Krishnadeb gives it religious colour. He thinks that the whole affair is Muslim religious fanaticism because he finds Muslims despicable.

The novel examines the distribution of consent and coercion in the operation of power. When the Wahabis refuse to give consent to Krishnadeb's rule, he uses coercion. Krishnadeb sends three or four hundred *lathials* to attack Shorporajpur. These men ransack people's houses and set the mosque on fire. Ramram Chakravorty, the inspector, prepares a false report that Titu's men set the mosque on fire to put the blame on the zamindar's men. The magistrate cautions both sides to keep the peace in future and dismisses it. The magistrate knows that Krishnadeb's role in the crime would be exposed, so he does not take any action against Titu's men. Krishnadeb gets the Wahabis involved in false cases. He uses the judiciary to punish the Wahabis.

The novelist uses irony to depict how the rich men of Calcutta depended on the exploitation of the poor peasants for their lavish expenses: "These men would waste fortunes betting on fights between bulbuli birds, on lavish expenses for their mothers' funerals and sons' weddings. This Kaliprasanna Mukhopadhyay would later dazzle Gobordanga during his mother's *shraddha*. Fifty thousand paupers were fed on this occasion, and fourteen hundred brahmins and shudras also. *There was such a lavish spread that the people in Calcutta wished their mothers dead so they could get a chance to outdo Kaliprasanna's extravagance*" (88, emphasis added).

Another device that the novelist uses is sarcasm: "The English kept dogs which showed uncommon loyalty to their masters; and we showed our loyalty in ways that dogs could not" (89). The zamindars were more loyal to the British than dogs. The Settlement Act made many zamindars rich. Small-time zamindars like Kaliprasanna could afford to spend lavishly on rituals and ceremonies. As long as the British were getting the revenues, they did not care about the fate of the impoverished peasants who were squeezed dry to pay for the zamindar's lavish expenses. The novelist is no less critical of the planters: "As for the planters, they were the adopted sons of the Company. The Company cherished them" (98). The novel makes the point that the victory of the lower classes may be for a short period, but it is worthy of being recorded: "Is this real, or are we dreaming? The planters have gone, the zamindars have gone. We never knew that you could wield such power with a lathi. *If only these times could last*" (96, emphasis added).

The ruling class uses different strategies to suppress the struggle of the lower classes. In the novel, the British associate the struggles of the lower classes with magic and devilry. The subaltern classes are never given their due and their courage is never acknowledged by the ruling class. Davis thinks that his men are defeated because of some magic. The novelist brings this out: "He saw an old fakir, heading the charge, his lathi in his hand, and thought, surely all this is some devilment hatched by the fakirs. Some curse by that old man must have turned aside the bullet. The same magic, no doubt protected the other men" (91).

The reference to the Sanyasi Revolt occurs again and again in the novel. The old men in the village talk about the revolt: "Many years ago, it was these very injustices that made the sanyasis and fakirs raise their flags and go to war. The poor rallied to those standards, but what good came of it?" (96) "The officers learned that Titu Mir represented a certain section of a religious community. This was enough reason for alarm; they had not forgotten that the Sanyasi Revolt had been organized by religious leaders" (98). The novelist also refers to other important leaders who revolted against the British. Dilawar Hussein, a trusted lieutenant of Syed Ahmed, Saryatullah and Dudu Mian also fought the British. Dilawar Hussein informs Titu that Syed Ahmed became a martyr while fighting the forces of the Sikh ruler. Syed Ahmed wanted his followers to form alternative governments. As a follower of Syed Ahmed, Titu forms his own government in Narkelberia: "...Titu Mir was Badshah, Moizuddin was Wazir or the Chief Minister, Masum was Senapati or the Commander-in-Chief and Bakher Mondol was Jamadar or the Head Constable, among many others elected" (105).

The non-religious character of Titu's fight is brought out by the novelist. 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). Poor Hindus and Muslims accept Titu Mir as their emperor. Titu Mir also represents those moments of Indian history when Hindus and Muslims fought together; it is also a history of their solidarity before the British succeeded in creating a religious divide. Every single effort of the lower classes to fight oppression is of immense value. Gramsci observes: "Every trace of independent initiative on the part of subaltern groups should therefore be of incalculable value for the integral historian" (Hoare and Nowell Smith 55). The small peasants shook the British Empire. The novelist brings this out: "...that so near to Calcutta, so near the army base at Barrackpore, these common farmers should organize themselves and dare to trounce white men so thoroughly was insupportable. Any more of this and the British would be shamed beyond recovery" (109).

The novelist also throws light on the caste-ridden Indian society and how lower caste people face discrimination from upper castes. Titu sends Kanai, Charan Bagdi's son to Bhudeb Pal Choudhuri to give his message. Kanai can repeat anything he hears, like a mynah. The priests in the temple do not appreciate the skill that the boy has: "...Yes, he did have such a skill. That was why the priests in the temple said, the times were really bad: God had seen fit to give such a gift not to the son of a Brahman or a kayastha, but to a Bagdi's boy" (110). Titu condemns the upper castes for this: "...They have everything – wealth, land, all they could want. Yet if Bagdis and Chandals get just a bit of intelligence to see their way by, they're consumed with jealousy" (110).

The novel is critical of the British for carrying out reforms that benefitted a particular class of the society while the poor peasants remained untouched by these reforms. The courts and the police continued to harass them: "...Lord Bentinck...had earned much fame with the abolition of sati from the beneficiaries of the Permanent Settlement, while the common farmers continued to be harassed in the courts, police outposts and plantations" (112). There was a tacit agreement between the British and the local elite about the ways to exploit the lower classes. The novel also suggests that the local elite did not take into account the concerns of the lower classes. The local elite had limited, not expansive hegemony. Commenting on Gramsci's distinction between limited and expansive hegemony, Steve Jones notes: "If a ruling group has to resort to coercion and repression, then it has not achieved an 'expansive' hegemony in which great masses of people spontaneously and actively give their consent to the bloc... the opposite of this (is) limited hegemony... This form of hegemony was limited, since the hegemonic class failed to genuinely adopt the interests of the popular classes and simply neutralized or 'decapitated' them through depriving them of their leadership" (Jones 52).

The novel also shows that the Indian freedom struggle became a transaction between the British and the local elite; the struggles of the lower classes did not have any importance. Ranajit Guha's comment is instructive here:

...nationalism as the sum of the activities and ideas by which the Indian elite responded to the institutions, opportunities and resources, etc. generated by colonialism. There are several versions of this historiography, but the central modality common to them is to describe Indian nationalism as a sort of 'learning process' through which the native elite became involved in politics by trying to negotiate the maze of institutions and the corresponding cultural complex introduced by the colonial authorities in order to govern the country. What made the elite go through the process was, according to this historiography, no lofty idealism addressed to the general good of the nation but the expectation of rewards in the form of a share in the wealth, power and prestige created by and associated with colonial rule; and it was the drive for such rewards with all its concomitant play of collaboration and competition between the ruling power and the native elite as well as between various elements among the latter themselves, which we are told, was what constituted Indian nationalism. (Guha 2)

The novel also throws light on the way the rulers manipulate history and degrade the efforts of the subaltern groups to fight for freedom: "History will be rewritten from today. Some months later the English and Bengali newspapers will get wind of the story and vilify Titu Mir; they will bay for what little remains of the Wahabi's blood. And hired historians will swear that Titu was a thorough communal fanatic" (112). The novel challenges the objectivity of history and attempts to show that history is just another ideological discourse which justifies the practices of the ruling classes. Not only the British but the local elite are also involved in the production of this discourse because the novel points out that the English as well as Bengali newspapers published defamatory stories on Titu Mir. That is why the novelist chooses to tell Titu's story in the form of dialogues to create opposition between the written discourse and the oral discourse.

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