

The plight of the bonded labourers as projected in Mahasweta Devi's non fiction

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the way in which Mahasweta Devi documents in her non-fiction **Dust on the Road** how the bonded labour system in Palamau, Bihar, operates through intergenerational debt and the failure of state rehabilitation, often forcing laborers back into bondage due to receiving uncultivable land. Devi's investigative reports, such as "Back to Bondage," reveal that feudal *malik* structures in some villages weaponize economic vulnerability to enforce patriarchal, caste-based exploitation of both male and female subaltern bodies.

Key words: Bonded Labor, Subaltern Studies, Agrarian Feudalism, Palamau District, Intergenerational Debt, State Rehabilitation, *Dust on the Road*, Mahasweta Devi.

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi, along with writing fiction depicting the struggles of the marginal people against exploitation, started publishing several articles whose subject has always remained the socially marginalized, the poor and the tribal people and their struggles from 1980 onwards. As she lived with the tribal people, known and seen their problems from very close proximity, she depicted their life with ruthless accuracy, brutally exposing the mechanics of exploitation and oppression by the upper class people of the society. It was when the exploitation that became more oppressive and unbearable, that she felt a desperate urge to communicate to the outside world, about what was happening to the people inside (tribal people) in the name of development, and their struggles of survival. And to a great extent Mahasweta Devi firmly believed that identifying the problems and the awareness of those problems became primarily important. Further, she felt that unless people unite, assess their own situations, bring pressure on the authorities in a united manner, and actively participate in the activities which need to be done for them, no meaningful changes can come about.

In this regard, Mahasweta Devi started writing for newspapers and journals on a wide range of topics. She has written quite a few articles on bonded labourers and contract labourers focussing on the system of bonded and contract labour system in Palamau district in Bihar. This paper is an attempt to project the efforts of the writer in showcasing the problems of bonded labourers in her non-fiction 'Dust on the Road' and also the steps taken in improving their conditions.

Bonded Labourers in Devi's Non-fiction

Mahasweta Devi has written quite a few articles on bonded labourers and contract labourers focussing on the system of bonded and contract labour system in Palamau district in Bihar. Though this district is the least developed one, it is one of the richest places in terms of forests, mineral and natural resources. Under the system of bonded labour, a person loses his status as a free labour and virtually becomes serf labour under a person from whom he had taken a loan. This loan amount may seem to be unbelievably small. After taking the loan amount, he forfeits the freedom and right to seek job anywhere else and also loses all the freedom to sell his labour or the products of his labour in the open market at the market value. He and his family members have to work for the owner till the loan amount is repaid. But, unfortunately, the wages are absurdly low and the rate of interest is so much high that they can never repay the loan amount. Once anybody gets into this system of bonded labour, he will remain so till his death and further any of his family members should continue as a bonded labourer. This kind of system continues for generations. Inter-generational bondage is a common feature of this system. One more absurd fact in this system is that the bonded labourers are not given any freedom to bargain over the wages they are given and hence accept whatever is given to them.

Mahasweta Devi discusses the problems of several contract labourers of Bihar and West Bengal, who are the victims because of their dire poverty and hence driven out of their homes, to work on contract and are cheated of money that they are promised by the contractors. She also projects how young women are taken away as labourers to the brick kilns of West Bengal or Bihar, where they are not only cheated of money but also sexually exploited ruthlessly by the brick kiln owners. This kind of exploitation is already delineated in the collection of short stories '**Out Castes**' by Mahasweta.

Though there were reports which were submitted to the parliament about this system in 1950s, it was only in 1974-76 that the Government of India passed the orders for the abolition of the system, identification of the bonded labourers and their rehabilitation. Though there are helpful measures prescribed, in practice they are not reaching the needy which is evident in Palamau. Mahasweta Devi amply reports and demonstrates how the rehabilitation measures had failed to a large extent as they were inadequate and above all they were provided through officials and sometimes the very people who were responsible for the exploitation of the labourers (land owners). As a part of the rehabilitation measures, the land given to them used to be both insufficient and unfit to raise any crop at all. The animals provided to them mostly were diseased ones and died within a few days. There were instances where some of the released bonded labourers were entrapped again into the bondage again. A few of them were lured away to far of areas in Northern India as contract labourers where the terms used to be extremely harsh which they wouldn't be aware of in the beginning. Mahasweta records that in the city of Calcutta, thousands of migrant labourers, both tribal and non-tribal people have worked for many years on several government projects as the Metro Railway, the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, etc. The poor landless labourers who were recruited by the contractors through several

agents were not paid money that was promised to them. Moreover, for months together, they would have worked for 12 hours a day for food alone. So keeping all these kinds of labour exploitation in mind, she underscores the futility of the different kinds of rehabilitation measures which are supposed to be for the benefit of the exploited lot. She also feels that overall development can start only through a mass movement.

Mahasweta Devi gives a detailed statistical report of the bonded labourers in Semra village near Palamau and also their socio-economic status in her article '**Back to Bondage**' published in 'Business Standard' on 27th May 1981. She says that this village was known as a bonded-labour village. This village was dominated by Brahmins and hence it was the village of maliks or land owners of bonded labourers. When Mahasweta Devi, Rameshwaram, a freelance journalist and a social worker, and a few other social workers entered this village, they first visited a house of a hajam (barber). They had collected the information that 84 bonded labourers were identified in that village and 43 were freed and given land and agricultural equipment, houses for the homeless and bullocks and milch cows according to the government records. But from this family they came to know that 12 acres of land which was given to them for cultivation was somehow snatched by one of the land owners and they are not even allowed to come near that land. More over three of the hajam family members who were fighters died very mysteriously after a puja at the land owner's house, vomiting blood. Now this hajam family had just one acre of land which was bought from somebody else.

If this was the story of rehabilitation measures taken for the benefit of the marginal people with respect to one family and the usefulness of those measures, another story of the consequences of the rehabilitation measures of one more freed bonded labourer Mangru was still heart rending. He was a young man of about 30 years. No doubt he was a freed bonded labourer. But he was not allowed to live a life of that freedom. He was asked again to work in bondage by one of the maliks of the village. When he refused to do so, he was tied up and beaten and crushed so cruelly that his gums and teeth in the mouth were broken and he had started vomiting blood. When he asked for water, the malik urinated on his face. Finally he was taken to the hospital and got treated by the other bonded labourers. Even after the treatment his mouth was all twisted when he opened his mouth. This was the result of any kind of **resistance** by the freed bonded labourers. Apart from this torture, if these freed labourers wanted to continue to lead their lives with the help of the rehabilitation measures taken for them through which they would have got land to cultivate, that was also not possible. Because the land given would be somewhere very far away from the village and it would be a barren rocky land on the slope of a hill, where it would be impossible to attempt soil reclamation even with good irrigation facilities. The river nearby was also dry throughout the year. So people like Mangru had a big question in their mind- why were the freed bonded labourers given such a land that cannot be cultivated and that too far away from their homestead? And how could such measures solve any of their problems? And above all, with such measures how could they survive at all? Finally, some of them had come to the

conclusion that instead of receiving this kind of help from the government and as a result starve to death, it is much better to go back to bondage and eat at least one meal a day.

There were a few meetings held by the social workers in which a few of the freed labourers used to participate and share their experiences and opinions about the awareness of their problems and how they need to come together to fight for the solutions. Though these meetings gave nothing as a material benefit for those people, they served them with some kind of relief from one of the major problems 'Dharumaru system' that they faced from the land owners – according to this system, the land owners can get hold of anyone at any time and force them to give free labour. This was one of the reasons why the labourers felt that it was safe to enter into debt bondage. After those camps which were started to bring awareness in the labourers and help them reduce their problems, this system of 'dharumaru' was under control.

With all these camps and meetings involving the labourers themselves, the atrocity of the land owners still continued at various levels- usurping the lands of the poor, murdering the tribal people, looting and plundering them, raping women etc. Mahasweta Devi says that if you see Palamau with an outsider's eye, you would feel that the landholders, the contractors all think that the poor are born only to serve them.

Mahasweta has given a few more instances of the bonded labourers whose terms and conditions of getting into bondage which is unbelievable- Bikhani Mochi, a bonded labourer had borrowed Rs.55 about 10 or 12 years ago and he still owed the land owner Rs.18 or 19. Sitaram, a young boy of 18 was under bondage for Rs.500 borrowed by his father 38 years ago. The freed labourers faced more problems than the bonded labourers as the relief materials were of no use and hence started selling them and did not have any work to do also. The land owners denied giving them any work on a wage basis. So the situation had become worse than before. So many freed labourers decided to go back to bondage so that they can at least survive. When the freed labourers entered bondage again, their terms were more stringent than before. There were many labourers who never resisted and continued in the bondage and never even stood up to know their rights because they knew very well that this kind of effort would lead them nowhere and rather it would make their condition worse.

Mahasweta Devi projects that there were a few labourers who resisted the system of bondage and as a result faced severe consequences, and there were many more who were passive to the entire system and accepted everything as their fate. She raises a few sharp questions which need the immediate answers as a first step towards solving the problems of the bonded labourers- Why are these people given a short lived experience of being free from bondage and made to participate the camps and meetings which are only farce ones? Why are the land owners given the responsibility of handling the rehabilitation measures? Etc. This kind of efforts from the government only shows that it does not care about whether the bonded labourers are really free or not, whether the money allotted for the rehabilitation measures was sufficient or not and if it was reaching the needy or not, and if not, where was the money going?

In another article 'The Slaves of Palamau' which was published in 'Sunday' in July 1983, Mahasweta Devi talks about how the bonded labourers of the village had risen to the occasion and taken part in the camps and meetings to create awareness in other bonded labourers. Rameshwaram, the editor of 'Inshumaan' and a true friend of bonded labourers had amassed a lot of courage to unite the bonded labourers and urge them to come forward jointly and fight against the exploitation that they were facing. 'Palamau Bandhua Mukti Morcha (PBMM) was organized in 1981. Way back in 1857, there was an armed revolt by the poor and the downtrodden against the joint forces of the Jagirdars and the British. But unfortunately, it was not a successful revolt as it was crushed, the fighters were hanged, the 'loyalists' were granted big jagirs (land). The Brahmins and the rajputs of Palamau are mostly the hereditary zamindars. And after 1857, the landlords and the money lenders usurped all the land and hence the debt-bondage system was born.

After 1981, under the aegis of PBMM, many freed bonded labourers took active part in contacting the other bond labourers addressing them with full clarity of thought. As they talked and shared their experiences, the horror of the misery of bondage became increasingly clear. It was very clear that the liberated bonded labourers faced a lot of hardships as the land owners used to refuse to employ them, but still some of them expressed that they felt very happy to be out of the bondage system. It was because of their active participation that the meetings were successful. Mahasweta Devi writes about one Tetri Bhuyin, a female bonded labourer who had borrowed Rs 12 from a land lord 10 years ago and she had been working for him since then just for a meal a day and some food grain only. That landlord had clearly refused to release her from the bondage. And more over she was cruelly beaten up by him for attending the meetings. Yet she had come again for the next meeting as well. Mangru spoke on behalf of 22 participants of another village where he said that as one of the bonded labourers (Mogol Bhuiya) who was active in such awareness programmes, had given them a lot of courage to come forward and participate in the meetings, so that they can come together to fight against exploitation, they started attending the meetings though their landlords had threatened them to kill if they attended the meetings. Another bonded labourer, Mohammed Kasim who was an old man also stood up to narrate his story which was heart rending- He and his father together had given 77 years of their lives in debt bondage for only Rs10 or 15. And the debt still remained unpaid.

Another fact came to light that the landlords were demanding money to release the bonded labourers which was impossible for them to pay. A few freed labourers said that they envied the bonded labourers because those who are in bondage get meals at least from their landlords but the non-bonded labourers have to starve to death. Another pathetic fact which was revealed during the meetings was that even a 8-year-old child was also taken as a bonded labourer.

Mahasweta devi finds solace in the fact that a step towards the fight against exploitation had been put forward through these meetings and many of the bonded labourers were united and were not afraid any more of the terror created by the landlords and they were themselves coming forward to resist the injustice against them and fight for their rights with a little guidance and assistance. Most of the harijans, Muslims

and tribal people who were in debt bondage had actively participated in the meetings. This seemed to be a positive approach towards the solution for the entire problem of debt bondage.

In the article ‘Palamau in Bondage: forever?’, Mahasweta Devi has discussed a few more problems faced by the bonded labourers and also has talked about the kind of active participation taken by them for their own liberation and raised a few hitherto unanswered questions which were the questions of those marginal people too.

Though Palamau continued to be in the darkness of bondage, there seemed to be a great sense of awakening. The bonded labourers had proved their capabilities by attending the morcha, sitting on the dais, conducting the discussions etc. They had the courage to march to meet the Deputy Commissioner and discuss the solutions for their problems. For good, they had proved that they were capable, intelligent and are ready to shoulder the responsibilities as they were desperate to live a life of dignity. A bandhua mukhia (leader of the bonded labourers) was selected as a representative from each village and very surprisingly many of the representatives were women. Their tasks were to collect the statistical details about the bonded labourers and submit the report to the town office on a regular basis. The details that they collected followed a set guidelines decided by the morcha members - names of the bandhua and his/her father, name of the landlord, amount of debt and the reason behind taking it, years of bondage, generations of bondage and finally the amount demanded by the landlord to release the labourer from the bondage.

From these details collected and submitted by the representatives, it was clear that many of the landlords demanded money for the release of bandhuas to the extent that they cannot pay. It is not that the landlords did not know about the government act for liberation, they knew very well about the act and hence demanded a substantial amount for their release. And some of the landlords were never ready at all to release them at any cost though they knew about the law. Mahasweta Devi’s stringent complaint against the government was that it had spent crores of rupees on family planning slogans but nowhere had been a single attempt to inform the bonded labourers that there is a law according to which they are really free from bondage and need not slog as slaves to repay the debt and that they can seek help from the nearest police station towards their liberation. Amidst all these problems, the bandhuas were astir and were working hard to fight against the injustice. Luckily, the people who lived below poverty line also joined hands with these bandhuas in the hope of deliverance. The sole achievement of the district morcha lied in the fact that the bandhuas had become conscious of the law and fearless of the consequences, though the maliks were dead against any bandhua joining the morcha. Mahasweta Devi has given an instance of how fearless the bandhuas were – when the landlord had beaten up one Ganesh and injured his legs to stop him coming to the morcha, the other bandhuas first gheraoed the landlords and took Ganesh to the police station and saw to it that the landlord was punished and Ganesh was let free.

She has given a detailed account of many incidents where not only men but also the poor young girls are lured and exploited in different ways through this contract labour system. The brick-kiln owners of West Bengal who were mostly from north Bihar used to send the adivasi women who used to be their ex-concubines to remote villages and lure young girls with tales of good jobs near Calcutta. Those ex-concubines were also lured and exploited once upon a time by the kiln owners and were despised by their own folk and finally they had become the virtual outcasts. Henceforth, without any other choice, they continue as the puppets at the hands of their masters in bringing more poor young girls as the labourers. The labourers were made to carry almost 440 bricks over 300 to 400 yards and were paid just one rupee. So on the whole, an adult labourer would be paid Rs.15 and a child labourer would be paid Rs.10. More over rice with salt used to be their only food. Those unfortunate people would have come as paupers and after their contract they would return as paupers with much worse condition. Still they return the next year as they never had any alternative to survive.

The young girls were made to work hard during mornings and were forced to sleep with the owners, the supervising staff, and anybody and everybody above them. If anybody refused, they were locked in a room, beaten up and seared with hot iron. Later, they were made to drink heavily and send for their master's pleasure. Even a girl of 16 was never spared, rather, such girls were preferred more as they used to be fresh and healthy looking virgins. Those unfortunate beings lived in huts worse than pig-holes without any drinking water and sanitary arrangements. They never even had any identity through their names in the register or employment card or identity card. The entire set up used to be very cruel and cunning where no outsider could break into this kind of fortress. This system is not only in West Bengal, it is much worse in Bihar also which Mahasweta considers as a true mirror of India. The tribal people here meet the needs of hundreds of kilns. They have always stayed not only imprisoned but also with a medieval existence far beyond the reach of any labour law or democratic rights. During the months of August, September and monsoon, they literally are without any work and starve and totally helpless. This weakness is always utilized by the agents and they approach the parents of the girls and pay Rs.100-150 as advance money and hence the girls become the contract bound. They are made to work for 12-14 hours during the day, compulsory sex with the owner or his men during early hours of night, sleep in the huts in the late hours of the night. This way their lives undergo a complete change barbarously. Finally, when the kiln closes down, they only get a sari and a railway ticket. The rest of the money would be adjusted against the advance money which the parents would have already taken in the beginning. Even the women in their late pregnancy stage are also made to work hard like any other women without any maternity leave or facilities. The condition of the contract labourers is worse than the beggars. Beggars have freedom at least to beg, but these labourers don't have that freedom also.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi shows and makes the readers aware that though there are many attempts by those unfortunate ones who had started moving from **passivity to resistance** against exploitation and oppression, without the genuine support of the organizations from the mainstream society, their attempts would be a failure and the never-ending exploitation of the marginal people would continue as ever.

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