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MAHASWETA'S DEPICTION OF TRIBAL LIFE IN *OPERATION? BASHAI TUDU*

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ABSTRACT

Tribals are exploited by the Jotedars and money-lenders and they remain deprived of the basic needs of life. In *Operation? Bashai Tudu*, Mahasweta depicts realistically the plights of the disinherited tribals as agricultural labourers and sharecroppers and their revolt against the tyrants. Bashai's fight for minimum wages for the labourers is one of the reasons behind Naxalite Movement in West Bengal. His withdrawal of support from Political Party on the ideological and tactical ground is an inevitable one as the Political Party did nothing in their favour. Bashai's hatred for the upper castes comes from his life-long experiences and sufferings. He embodies the pains of the dejected tribals.

Key Words: tribal, wage, hatred, jotedar, political party

Mahasweta Devi voices for the tormented tribals in society. She delineates in picturesque detail the harsh reality of the down-trodden and the marginalised through most of her writings. She says in an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that '... there is no education for them, no health facilities, no roads, no way of generating income. Nothing is done for them although so much money is allotted for them. They do not want money; they want facilities; they want to live the life of an honourable poor Indian, you might say. But they are denied everything. The tribals of India are denied everything'. Mahasweta writes that tribals' lives are governed by hunger, not by any Government, 'Hunger rules as a tyrant, keeping its subjects always on the run.' She says what she experiences from her long living with such unsung people. People who walk through Mahasweta Debi's writings are Sabors, Oraons, Santals, Lodhas, Kherias, Dhobis, Keots, Mahalis, Dusads and such like. What is exceptional in her writing is that when other writers depict the poor tribals as dejected, yielding, and controllable, she gives voice of protest to her characters who tower over the wretchedness with a spirit of resistance.

In *Operation? Bashai Tudu* Mahasweta Devi is absolutely concerned with the unspeakable conditions of the agricultural labourers in the agrarian society by the all devouring Jotedars and moneylenders. To fight against such extreme forms of injustices and exploitation, Naxalite movement was organized in 1967 and almost all the parts of West Bengal stirred in revolt. The Tebhaga Movement in 1946-47 and 1948-1950 did remain confined to the rights of the sharecroppers. Influenced by the Tebhaga Movement the peasantry in the Kakdwip and Sundarbans struggled for State intervention. The experience of Tebhaga Movement supplied fuel behind the Naxalite Movement. During Tebhaga Movement in 1946-1947 twelve advasi peasants got killed in the North Bengal belt as per Government Record. Estate Acquisition Act was passed in 1954, legalizing a 25-acre limit on

an individual's hold. The revised act on the ceiling of landholding was passed in 1971. Ironically, both the acts remained ineffective contributing to the accumulation of wealth by the jotedars.

The opening sentence of **Operation? Bashai Tudu**, 'The news broke upon the police station all on a sudden, like a hunk of meat dropped among a pack of crows by a kite, sparking off hectic activity' is indicating enough to signal what is going to happen in the novella. The words and phrases 'police', 'sudden', 'hunk of meat', 'pack of crows' and 'kite' make us awe-struck and frightened to a great extent.. This opening is very significant and suggestive. For Kali Santra, the second important character in the text, Bashai was an experience. Many years ago they were in the peasants' movement together. 'Then they had drifted apart from each other on ideological and tactical grounds'. Kali was not told that under the instruction from the Calcutta Headquarter the four Sub-Inspectors had put him in the jeep and drawn him to the spot to identify Bashai's corpse all over the four times that Bashai died between 1970 and 1976.

Having heard from Mato about Bashai's death, Kali secretly reached Mushai Tudu's house to meet Bashai Tudu and saw that everyone of the house addressed him as 'comrade'. After a lunch with khesari daal and rice they were taking rest under a tree and Kali asked, 'Bashai, are you leaving the party? Bashai then cleared his stand why he was maintaining distance from the Party. Bashai's real hopelessness with the Party was when he realized that the Party would not do anything for the poverty-stricken agricultural labourers and sharecroppers. Bashai had been at so many conferences, meetings and proceedings of the Kisan Shabha which was supposed to look after the interests of the peasantry, but did not fulfil the expected goal. Instead, it upheld the interests of the Jotedars and money-lenders. Bashai's realization of the party politics was striking and illuminating. The pain did not end here. Bashai like other santals had to endure humiliation and mental trauma on the basis of caste. He told Kali that the old and new generations of party babus were all alike, 'But do the party babus of the new generation treat the Santals, the Kaoras and the Tiors as their own people, eh? At Samanta Babu's house, didn't I see you and your class served tea in chinaware cups, and an earthen cup for me?' He told Kali that he believed the babus were a caste by themselves as the Bagdis are a caste, the Kaoras are a caste. Bashai's words were unpleasant, but undeniable. He continued that most of the party members as they came from the upper stratas of the society hated Bashai because he was a Santal. He was believed to be one of the Santals who went about almost naked, and lived on mice and snakes during famine. The next statement made by Bashai was razor-sharp and realistic, 'Kali-babu, a brahman or a kayastha would never be an agricultural labourer. If there had been a few of them, upper caste agricultural labourers, then the agricultural labourers too would have split apart into castes. I thank my stars that I am one of those naked, starving bastards who have taken all the kicks and cried in pain and haven't yet broken apart into castes, and can still eat from the same pot of rice'.

Bashai withdrew himself completely from Party and his war was against the Jotedars, money-lenders and the establishments. The Jotedars and the money-lenders were the same persons. They lived a luxurious life on the interests earned from the money borrowed by the poor peasants. But they could be given a fight had there been an organized Kisan Shabha or a communist peasant Front. In order to achieve the lawful right Bashai could go to any length. If the law would be broken by the powerful ones he had to do something stronger, 'Where the law serves, we'd go for the law. Where the Jotedar defies the law, we'd step beyond the law'. Bashai's strategy as a fighter was a guerrilla one. His area of operation was very wide. So, the administration could not easily trace his whereabouts. His every action area was at least forty to fifty miles away from the nearest action area. Thus, he could force the administration in a fix. Bashai knew that 'MW' for the agricultural labourers was passed for the first time in 1953. It was revised in 1959. Then it was revised in 1968. In 1970 no rate approved by the Government was paid by the land owners. In 1974 'MW' was revised twice but was not in practice in 1976. Bashai told Kali 'Do you know the number of agricultural labourers in our State? More than three million seven hundred thousand. They are denied the minimum wages that the Government had made mandatory for them, and the Communist Kisan Sabha is not concerned about it'. So, the oppressed lot, using Bashai as a symbol of heroism for them, chose to embark on action to snatch their right away.

Bashai's first place of action was at Banari in 1970. Pratap Goldar was the most powerful person of this village, Banari which was mostly inhabited by the Santals. All of them were agricultural labourers and so

remained exploited and agonized by Pratap. He had only sixteen hundred and sixty-six acres of land defying the land-ceiling law of the Government.

Oneday in the afternoon Pratap was informed that the agricultural labourers stopped sowing the field and were sitting idle on the bank of the river, Charsha. Pratap hurried to the place to see, but found everything normal. Suddenly, from the gathered labourers one Santal, clad in a sparkling white dhoti, asked Pratap angrily, 'The sowing will be over today. When do they get their wages? They haven't got anything in all these six days. Are you sure you're going to pay? Then why did you go to the bank yesterday to put all your cash in?'. Bashai told after a pause, 'It was the wrong thing to do, Pratap-babu. You'll have your paddy all right. But you won't be there to taste the rice from the paddy'. After murdering Pratap and his farmhand, the dead bodies were carried by them and thrown in a ditch.

The police could not find out Bashai as he had no identity proof. After death he came to have a well-maintained identity. He was five feet and seven inches, had a cut mark on the forehead. A police man told Kali that when he shot, the man raised his hands and was wringing the neck of the wind. It fully resembled with Bashai's mannerism and the dead body was identified as Bashai's. With the passing of time, life resumed its normal course. After fourteen or fifteen days of this operation, the half-yearly Dharmaraja Fair started at Jagula and when all the people were in festive mood some Sodan from Paltakudi came to Kali Santra and told him to take 'Toramycin kapchul' for Bashai who was living in Dishai. Kali quickly left the office with Sodan. After a long silence the administration was violently shaken off by the news that Bashai Tudu was in action again.

It was about November, 1972, when the Operation Jagula happened. It was not exactly at Jagula, it was six miles from Jagula, the village of Kankdasole. Rameshwar Bhuinya, the most powerful Jotedar at Jagula and in its vicinity, had five thousand acres of illegal land in many false names. Like his father, Rameshwar used to hate and capitalize on the lower castes..

Things went on very smoothly. But one day, an information disturbed the whole police administration completely. Deoki asked the SI 'Leave at once. This Bashai is vicious. Shoots spears and arrows with the same ease. Be on your guard. If you kill him, you'll be the DSP for sure, and I'll give you ma salaam'. On reaching the spot of action the SI found that Rameshwar remaining surrounded by Santals was 'facing a santal, squat, middle-aged, strongly built'. They were armed with their ancient weapons—'bows and arrows, sickles, hatchets, pole axes, short spears, throwing spears, multiheaded fish killing spears, long spears'.

'What's the matter?' asked the SI.

'They want the MW. They must have it', said the Santal.

'Who are you?'

.....Bashai Tudu is my name'.

Bashai in no ambiguous terms told the SI that the labourers must be given the Government sanctioned 'MW'. Otherwise there would be no harvesting. Bashai assured the SI and Rameshwar that there would be no trouble if labourers were given the government approved rate. Bashai asked the gathered people :

'What do you say, my people?'

'Your word is final, Bashai.'

'I won't, said Rameshwar.

'You will. Otherwise you'd be a dead man'.

Succumbing to his inherited nature Rameshwar declined to meet the just demand of the labourers. He hoped that the police would do something for him. When SI asked him say something about the legal demand of the labourers, Remeshwar was reluctant to compromise. Bashai roared, 'There are things you start doing some day ,Rameshwar-babu. Do you ever die before you die the first time? You have never paid it, you'll pay it

the first time now. Have you ever seen your paddy burning? You'll see it burning the first time'(P. 108).When Rameshwari again refused to pay the rightful claim ' Bashai's spear pierced his larynx'. Bashai had received a bayonet in his stomach. The DSP, Rameshwari and Bashai were sent to the hospital and the concerned doctors under the special order of the higher authority tried their level best to save Bashai's life. Kali Santra was brought to the hospital to identify Bashai. Kali called,'Bashai !Bashai !Bashai ! Bashai slowly opened his eyes and looked at each other. 'A tremor ran through Bashai's hands. The hands rose for a minute. They wrung the neck of the air'. At the huge expense of the Government , only two hundred and fifty one people were brought to identify Bashai's dead body. Their confirmation left the administration with great relief.

Next operation took place at Bakuli, 1973. Surja Sau was the Jotedar at the village of Bakuli owning five hundred acres of land violating the land ceiling act. Once it was a very disturbed area because Bashai Tudu had spent there a long time as an active activist of the Front. In the pre-Independence Day Bashai had a base there and the village gained popularity as a notorious place from the administration. Surja Sau had grabbed huge amount of money sanctioned as relief for the needy in natural calamity and thus, increased his volume of property. On BDO's request he denied to use canal water for cultivating the land because in that case his money-lending business would suffer a huge loss. The sharecroppers organized a deputation against Surja Sau and the sympathetic BDO apprised them of his conversation with Surja Sau. One evening, after some days of the deputation, the sharecroppers dared go straight to Surja Sau:

'What's this? What do you want?'

'Draw water from the canal.'

'I won't.'

' Draw the water, everything's burning up.'

'Why should I draw it?'

'What will we feed on?'

'That's not my concern'

When DraupadiMejhien asked him why he would not take water from canal,SurjaSau replied,

'I won't draw water to increase the yield.'

'You'll give loans and fatten on the interest?'

'Get out from here'.

A Santal, then, came forward and introduced him as Bashai Tudu. Surja Sau did not believe because he knew Bashai was alive no more. But he was forced to believe. He was brought on the canal bank and forcibly thrown on the ground. The first blow came from Bashai and it was succeeded by many blows from other rebels. The army under the instruction of Captain Arjan Singh, surrounded the Pakud tree where Chadak festival was going on. The first order to the army was ' close the approach to the canal'. At the dead of night few people were wandering near the canal and they were shot dead by the army. Immediately there erupted a violent fight between the army with their upgraded weapons and the local with their traditional ones. In that fight 41 tribals got brutally killed. Suddenly one of the corpses rose up and by his two hands wrung up the neck of the air. He shouted,' I'm Bashai Tudu. Come on , fight, if there's any among you with guts enough. Fight'. He was tied very tightly to one of the roots of the Pakud tree and torrent of bullets from Arjan Singh penetrated Bashai. Rotoni Sau, Surja Sau's brother, pointed out that out of 41 dead bodies two were missing – Dopdi Mejhen and Dulna Majhi. There were no signs of them. When Kali Santra reached SurjaSau's house he was asked to identify Bashai. When examining closely Kali felt that Mushai adopted the role of Bashai, but kept it a secret to his heart. He told SP that the dead body resembled Bashai. The corpse's face was also smashed in that case and only the mannerism remained the same – wringing the neck of air.

Government approved minimum wage was never accepted by the Jotedars and the money-lenders because they considered themselves as the pillars of the state and their fatty subscription to political party encouraged them to violate rules. The administration also did not intervene because 3.7 million people were 'expendable'. As the government remained indifferent to the plights of the tribals, the jotedars used this opportunity to deprive them of their basic wages.

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