

No Relief, No Water : Cruelty, Hunger and Untouchability in Mahasweta's *Water*

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Abstract: Mahasweta's play *Water* is one of her few plays that deals with the socio-political realism of the Naxalite period between 1967-1977. In this play the themes of cruelty, exploitation, hunger, untouchability, violence and resistance have been deftly dealt with. Mahasweta has realistically presented how the Naxalites were treated with death sentence during that time and how the administrative positions were used to suppress the voices of the legitimate demands of the poor. The social issues are presented through the characters like Santosh- the biggest landowner and moneylender, SDO- the corrupt government official, Maghai – the water-diviner, Dhura – the young revolutionary, and Jiten- an ideal teacher. Attempts will be made to show in this paper how the caste discrimination was shamelessly rooted in the then society and how the jotedars and moneylenders in the rural areas wielded more power than the higher government officials. These rich people who traded in relief materials meant for the poorest were pillars to the administration as they could influence the majority. So, they would go unpunished by denying legitimate wage to the agricultural labourers and refusing drinking water to the penniless from government wells as they belonged to the communities of Dom, Chandal, Keot and Tior – the untouchables.

Key Words: realism, naxalite, hunger, untouchability, corrupt, cruelty

Mahasweta Devi is an exceptionally committed writer and documents in her works her contemporary times through working for the dispossessed and the disinherited ones who being the *adivasis* of the country live on the fringes. These people originally lived in the lap of nature, but the wealthy and powerful ones with government assistance have displaced them from their places and grabbed whatever they had. The people who walk through the pages of Mahasweta's writings are Mundas, Santals, Lodhas, Kherias, Mahalis, Gonds, Doms, Chandals, Keots, Tiors, Sabors, Oraons and many more. They are not only dislodged from their original homelands, they are also thoroughly denied the basic rights of a human being. In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak she says, 'They can't keep their land; 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...' (**Imaginary Maps**, iii). In the introduction to *Agnigarbha* Mahasweta writes about the exploited tribals : 'They have to struggle to procure the water, the seeds and the fertilizers they need for their fields. They live in poverty and hunger. The economic gains that the country has achieved since Independence have not benefited the middle classes, the workers and the agricultural labourers' (**Five Plays**, ix). But Mahasweta wonders that no writer faithfully described the reality of the rural Bengal in that period. She satirically writes : 'While nobody pays heed to their claims to the right to survive, the hirelings of the affluent middle class and the idle rich weave narcissistic fantasies in the name of literature' (**Five Plays**, ix). The writer expresses in the **Introduction** : 'Hence I have to go

on writing to the best of my ability in defence of the dispossessed and the disinherited, so that I may never have reason to feel ashamed to face myself. For all writers are accountable to their own generation and have to answer for themselves' (**Operation? Bashai Tudu**, xxvi).

The play *Water* has at its background the violent eruption of Naxalite movements in 1970-71. In the starting of the play we see that three young Naxal men were secretly helped by Dhura, an ordinary and lower caste villager of Charsa, so that they could safely escape to Purulia by train after murdering the daroga of Chunakhali. While anxiously waiting for the train they mainly discussed about the vicious moneylender and the big landowner Santosh Pujari of Charsa. Dhura told them : 'There's nothing he'll stop at. He goes to the town, collects money for relief, and won't spend a paisa for the stricken village itself. Look at his house, rising from height to height. There are twenty villages bound to him in debt for ever. He'll leave nobody in peace' (125). What added salt to such wound was the acute crisis of water in 1971 drought. Dhura's father, Maghai, was the only water-diviner in the locality of Charsa and Santosh had to solely depend on Maghai for spotting the place of water-source in order to dig new tubewell. But these people, the Doms, the Chandals, the Keots, the Tiors who were stigmatized by the wealthy ones as lower castes, were inhumanly denied water by Santosh and people such like. Denial of water to the lower castes is a recurrent theme in *Mahasweta*. In **Draupadi** we see that the jotedar, Surja Sahu, managed higher government officials to dig two tubewells and three wells within the compound of his residence at the government money. There was drought in Birbhum, the poor villagers went without water, but in jotedar's house there was plenty of it. *Mahasweta* writes, 'No water anywhere, drought in Birbhum. Unlimited water at Surja Sahu's house, as clear as crow's eye' (183). Dhura complained to them 'They won't allow us to touch it. Even at the government wells, we aren't allowed to draw water. That's why we have to go and dig at the sands of Charsa' (126). The three young Naxal men promised that they would return to Charsa to give the locals relief from Santosh. As a result of long-suffering and humiliation Dhura also desperately wanted Santosh be killed by Naxals. He provoked them : 'The Naxal terror rises where the moneylender is evil, and the landowner too. But you raise it at one place, and leave out another identical one. Why? Santosh here is both moneylender and landowner and viciously evil' (128).

After the three left for Purulia by train, Dhura went to spend night with his aunt's daughter, Sona, and her husband who was a railway coolie. They got heavily drunk and Dhura also met Pakhi, Sona's husband's sister who had fallen in love with Dhura, but Dhura did not want to marry her as he had no assured source of income. On that night Dhura in a drunken state met Santosh and SDO at the Charsa station and cleverly came to know from Santosh that the Naxals were hiding themselves in Charsa and got train from Charsa Railway Platform for their destination. But during the search by the police they were caught red handed and killed at Patul.

Dhura did not want his father, Maghai, act as water-diviner for Santosh. He asked his mother, Phulmani, angrily : 'But why? Why does father have to act the water-diviner for Santosh whenever he asks him to? And for him, the shadow of a dom pollutes his pitcher, and he throws away the water. That's how he treats us. Doesn't he? Tell me that' (143). To the lower castes living in Charsa 'It's only the village Charsa and its dom ghetto and Santosh who are real'(144) and everything in the world seemed to be fantasy. Among few real things 'The one thing that's most dreadfully real is the hunger gnawing at one's stomach, Dhura. There's nothing more real than hunger' (144). No one, obviously among the poorest ones, in this village ever had a full stomach. But Santosh's burns were flooded with paddy, and heaps of molasses and mustard seeds. When they had works, they had rice, but when they were without works, they had to take *amani*. Dhura accused his father for serving Santosh who grabbed all the water. Maghai tried to make calm him down saying that his role of a water-diviner was left to him by his ancestors, so he could not leave that.

Santosh planned to diminish Maghai's role of a water-diviner in the locality as he was among the poor villagers demanding government relief and water with other villagers. Maghai also demanded that Santosh should appoint local villagers to dig wells, otherwise he would not divine water for Santosh. As a mark of revenge, Santosh employed college boys to blast earth to locate the source of water. Dhura angrily told his father 'The bastard draws the relief, draws a lion's share out of it for himself, gives the rest to his brother-in-law and then there's nothing for anybody else. At puja time, he feeds his servants and farm labourers and has it photographed for the newspapers, so that he can claim that he has fed so many people'(149).

But the college boys could not trace water-source for Santosh, so he rushed to Maghai. Dhura and his mother were completely reluctant to allow Maghai go with Santosh. Phulmani told Maghai, 'Go ahead, listen to him. I won't. As far back as my memory goes, I've been listening to the same thing from him and been scratching at the sands of the Charasa, scratching...(151). Dhura told Santosh that the Panchayat wells were meant to be used by the public, but unfortunately the lower castes were denied access to them. In the daytime, the wells were used for washing Santosh's cattle, in the night the deprived and thirsty people would try to steal water, but Santosh's dogs used to guard the wells.

Finally, Maghai went to help Santosh to show respect to his ancestors as he inherited this from them. When Maghai was performing his activities for tracing the source of water, a teacher, Jiten, was present there. He was an ideal person, had spent a term in jail as political prisoner in 1942, and believed in the ideals of Gandhi. His life was dedicated to the service of those who were deprived and agonized. The officers who failed to trace the water-source scientifically ridiculed Maghai's efforts by terming it 'mumbo-jumbo'(155). Jiten being a teacher supported Maghai's performance and told them that 'There must be a scientific explanation for his knowledge. There may be things we know nothing about' (156). Ultimately, Maghai traced the water-source for Santosh successfully.

It was towards the evening when Phulmani went in and out of the house restlessly in summer looking for Maghai and Dhura who had left house early in the morning. Jiten came to meet Maghai for some business, but he did not find him. From Phulmani he came to know that she had been waiting for them for a long time with anxiety because she desperately needed to go to the river Charasa to dig holes in the sands with bare hands. They were denied water as Santosh's need came before everybody else's. She continued 'His cattle, his servants, his contract labourers, his temples, his houses, his cowsheds, his barns, his farm labourers. So he has five big wells and three small ones. All for his exclusive use' (159). But the doms, the chandals, the lower castes were denied water. In **Operation? Bashai Tudu** Bashai told Kali satirically, 'There were organizations to stop the persecution of the harijans. The Indian Constitution did not allow for casteism and untouchability. But the Harijans went without their daily bread and a roof of leaves over their heads. 'The poor of India' were a subject for research. Research on what? On the minimum on which a man could survive, on the minimum that the government could very well afford to give the people. What a wonderful country! Fermented rice water is on sale in the West Bengal districts. People collect and live on the water drained from cooked rice and flowing down the mud drains near cheap hotels' (56-57). She also continued 'Santosh is the government's favourite son-in-law. The bastard filches from the government relief, sells kerosene from the rationed stocks at double the price. And doesn't the government know?'(159-160) Aware of the plight of the lower castes in Charasa Jiten wanted to go to the town to meet the SDO to apprise him of Santosh's rules in the village. During the conversation Maghai was brought by Dhura and others. He was burnt in the scorching heat of summer. Getting back some physical strength after Jiten's treatment Maghai told him what had happened with Santosh. Trouble started when Santosh refused them legitimate wage for cultivating the land. Maghai remarked 'His father, his

grandfather, they used to filch from the relief. But they were no demon-eaters, for that's what he is. We till his land as *Khetmazdoors* for a pittance and some snacks (161)'. Santosh forced them to take thirty paise or to leave. He also threatened them to appoint *dawals* for cultivating the land. Because of the drought there was plenty of *dawals* who would work fifteen paise a day and a snack. In this context few lines from **Operation? Bashai Tudu** would be penetrating : 'It was scorching hot this April. The rain was insufficient in May through early June. The Naxalite conflagration had died down. As a repercussion of what happened in 1970-71, the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers of Western Bengal had been reduced to a *wandering zoo*. 'We don't have a home anywhere,' or in the harvesting seasons, 'Are you looking for day-labourers? You don't have to pay us in cash, we'll work for a meal' – such were the plaintive cries that spread like golden-winged kites and burst against the gates of all those who owned plots of cropland'(119). So, for legitimate wage they had a hot exchange of words with Santosh in blazing sun and Maghai fell sick for empty stomach. Jiten requested the villagers to send their children to school. The boys of brahman community went to a separate school at Patul as the village school was attended by the doms and chandals. Moreover what Maghai commented was a harsh reality : 'What'll they do with learning? Some of them have to graze cattle, others collect firewood, the girls have to help their mothers. They can't afford to go to school. And if they could, where'd they get books?'(164) Jiten assured the villagers that the students of primary school were entitled to get free books, slates, and copybooks. All the study materials were handed over to Santosh for distribution but Santosh illegally kept them stored in his godowns.

Jiten wanted a decent life for these grief-torn people. Maghai was thinking that Santosh would not allow Jiten stay in that village for long. He was really scared of Santosh because Santosh wielded much power. He was the landowner of landowners, the moneylender of moneylenders. On every occasion he briefed the SDO and the police chief. Government relief for the marginalized was sent through him. He felt of Santosh : 'Oh god, there are times I have a vision of a dawn, with Santosh rising in the east, turning the sky a blazing red and pouring down sheets of fire (169)'. Santosh had another reason to refuse them water as he suspected Dhura's link with the Naxals who were killed by police at the Bankra Sadar Station.

Jiten met the SDO in the town and intimated him how Santosh was stealing from the money and material meant for the poor. Moreover, he was also venomously practising caste discrimination in the locality. On Jiten's accusation SDO's first reaction was :

SDO : No, there isn't.

Jiten : Are you sure ?

SDO : Officially speaking, there isn't.

Jiten : But I've seen it, it's very much there.

SDO: Unofficially speaking, I'll admit it's there. It's there in the blood of the people... how can you get rid of it'? (173)

Though highly unfortunate, it was true that SDO did not discharge his duty properly. He expressed to Jiten his helpless condition – if he punished a moneylender, the minister would jump on him. He knew that there were millions of rupees lent out on interest illegally in Charsa district, multiplying continuously. SDO instead of addressing the problem, he advised Jiten to get transferred to a school in a prosperous village like Patul with an upper-caste majority. When Jiten was talking to SDO, Santosh was anxiously waiting outside. After the departure of SDO Santosh came in and wanted to bribe Jiten to manage him, but Jiten declined his proposal. Jiten rebuked SDO 'This Santosh Pujari is, by your standards, a decent, educated man. You said so yourself. The most influential person in the block' (176). He continued 'He's a dirty man. He was beaten up twice at the Charsa Station. Once for selling illicit liquor. The other time for

molesting a coolie girl. Twice arrested, twice released' (177). In the early 1970s there were some troubles over harvesting paddy and Santosh was the culprit. But the investigating officer favoured Santosh and did not punish him in any of the cases. Santosh had an unlicensed gun, the local police officer knew that but let Santosh go with it. Such a man like Santosh was entrusted with the cash and relief materials by the administration.

Jiten spent his term in Hazaribagh Prison in 1942 as a political prisoner with Aghorilal who set up an ashram at Kasunda. He visited the ashram as an invitee on the foundation day and came to know how Aghorilal and his people solved the problem of water. At Kasunda the village landowners were with the villagers in solving the problem of water. After seeing what they had done for water, Jiten leaving the celebration and dinner behind got into a bus straight away to come to Charsa. The teacher gave them ideas how to build up dam. The region had many boulders and they needed to gather the boulders and dam the river up within its high banks. During monsoon few boulders might be washed away, but there would be water stored after monsoon was over. If they could pile boulders on the riverbed within the dam, the gaps would be filled up with the silt which would work as cement. The dam would hold seven feet of water at least. Maghai was so astonished with the idea that he started to visualize the dam through his mental eye : 'We'll start at once, Teacher ! I can see the dam, it's all there, it's real, we have built it now, we have gathered the water, we've taught the whore of the Charsa a lesson at last, she won't keep us in the throes of her bitter, dry love any more. Oh, what heaps of water ! Dhura's mother draws water, Dhura and I till the land. Dhura, look at the crops, the sheer abundance of it ! Now we've sown the seeds, and we bathe in the dam. O Teacher!' (182-183) Santosh was so jealous of Jiten that he vitiated SDO's mind to punish him for helping the lower-castes in building dam. He briefed SDO 'Jiten the teacher is all rotten inside. Educated, mahishya by caste, he had no business to serve the casteless! (190) Being provoked by Santosh, SDO asked a police officer to gather information about Santosh. But the police officer got nothing remarkable, 'Nothing incriminating. Has never been an operator, has worked all his life in the tribal and scheduled caste belts' (192). The police officer also reported that Jiten did not claim political pension. SDO instantly reacted, 'His very character is a report against him. Don't you remember the Naxalites? They didn't run after money, they never cared to make a fast buck and yet they drove the country to disaster' (193). So, SDO, by power of his official position, labelled teacher as a Naxalite. SDO commented, 'He's manufacturing super guns, live ones, human ones. He's training cadres for the struggle, and the dom and chandal men have begun fighting for their rights' (193). On the opening day of the dam the villagers arranged a puja dedicated to Manasa, the goddess of snakes. On this auspicious occasion, all the villagers went mad in happiness – they were singing and dancing. The police forces dislodged the boulders and violently attacked the innocent and unarmed villagers. Jiten and Dhura fell unconscious being seriously hit by butt of rifle. Maghai Dom was shot dead and seventeen got severely wounded. But the police could not take Maghai's dead body to morgue, he was carried away by the river.

Caste discrimination is one of the incurable diseases in Indian society. What is more pathetic is that when men like Santosh practises it to meet their narrow ends, the higher government officials add fuel to the lust of the jotedars and moneylenders. Regarding the downtrodden, SDO made such dirty remark 'Charsa, bursting with problems, the scheduled castes there a devilish lot'(192). To conclude, the following lines spoken by Bashai to Kali Santra might be most relevant : 'The babus are a caste by themselves, like the Bagdis, and the Kaoras, yes, a caste.....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'm 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'(Operation? Bashai Tudu, 28).

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