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MAHASWETA DEVI'S USE OF SATIRE IN *OPERATION? BASHAI TUDU*

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi's *Operation? Bashai Tudu* is one of her distinguished works. Although it is written in the political context of the Naxalite Movement of 1970-1977, but the novella, in its treatment of the theme goes beyond the gross dimension of the social reality. Minimum Wage for the agricultural labourers is lawfully passed by the Government, but it is not practised by the Jotedars. The tribals have been suffering from malnutrition. Their children are born with many difficulties. Still, they remain deprived by the social system. Knowing everything, administration remains tight-lipped as the leaders of the Party come from the upper sections. She shows that how the landowners are having huge amount of land in false names defying the land-ceiling act. The Jotedars and the money-lenders have nexus with the higher Government officials. Relief fund meant for the aggrieved is used by the Jotedars to increase their own property. Through biting satires Mahasweta exposes to the world how the hypocrisies of the Government and the exploitation of the Jotedars and money-lenders are tyrannizing over the tribals, dalits, bonded and agricultural labourers.

Key Words : tribal, aggrieved, satire, administration, exploitation

Like lyric, ode, tragedy, comedy, satire is a branch of literature which aims to rectify the flaws, follies, vices and ill-manners in the individuals, societies, institutions and establishments through ridiculous and witty representations. There is a positive aspect of satire in its implicit appeal to virtue and ideal manner – to a norm against which the vicious and the foolish are to be judged. It is often maintained that the purpose of a good satirical writing is to reform society by exposing and criticizing its vices and follies. In A Dictionary of Literary Terms satire means, 'Literature which exhibits or examines vice and folly and makes them appear ridiculous or contemptible....it is directed against a person or a type, and it is usually morally censorious. It uses laughter to attack its objects, rather than for mere evocation of mirth or pleasure.' In A Glossary of Literary Terms, 'satire can be described as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation.' In Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory, the function of a satirist is described as '...a kind of self-appointed guardian of standards, ideals and truth; of moral as well as aesthetic values'. The satirist writes '....to correct, censure and ridicule the follies and vices of society and thus to bring contempt and derision upon aberrations from a desirable and civilized norm. Thus satire is a kind of protest, a sublimation and refinement of anger and indignation.'

In the light of the above definitions, Mahasweta's novella, **Operation? Bashai Tudu** could be analysed as a masterpiece of satirical writing where she exposes the hypocrisies of the privileged and the hollowness of the established systems over a community of people who remain extremely deprived and disinherited in their life. Mahasweta who is one of the distinguished writers and social activists had dedicated her whole life to serve the poorest of the poor, mostly Santals, living in the boundary, if not beyond it. The sufferings and pains, oppression and exploitation, suppression and repression in the life of those utilized people have been depicted in a realistic and vivid manner. In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Mahasweta says, 'I had to learn it by being with the people. For all those years, in those years, I was technically married to someone, but that life was very barren, so that was the time when I covered many miles on foot. I know those places, the river beds, the trees....'(Chotti Munda and his Arrow, xi).

As a writer, Mahasweta is highly conscious of the role of an artist. She uses literature as a powerful medium of social criticism. She believes that reforms can be initiated once the conscience is awakened. She pleads that responsibility of the creative writers is to work as the instrument of transformation against the oppressive mechanism of human exploitation. She comments in the Preface to **Operation? Bashai Tudu**: 'For a long time now, Bengali literature has indulged in a denial of reality and has been played by an atrophy of conscience. The writers refuse to see the writing on the wall. The conscientious is turning away from them in revulsion. What can be more surprising than that writers living in a country bedevilled with so many problems.....should fail to find material for their work in their own country and people?'(xxii) She also satirically writes that 'While nobody cares to pay heed to their claims to the right to survive, the hired writers pandering to the middle and upper classes content themselves with weaving narcissistic fantasies in the name of literature. When Rome burned, Nero fiddled, for that was how he thought he could shut his eyes to the logic of the conflagration. But he had to pay for it by being wiped away' (xxii). Mahasweta believes that most of the social and political revolutions intended to bring desirable changes to the life of the poor peasants were beneficial to the aristocrats and the rich.

The people who walk through Mahasweta's writings are mainly tribals-Oraons, Mundas, Santals, Lodhas, Kherias, Mahalis, Gonds, Keots, Medis, Lepchas, Bhutias, Rajbanshis and more. They do not have the basic facilities of life- food, water, shelter, clothes, education, medical treatment. They live at the mercies of the Jotedars and money-lenders. In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Mahasweta asserts: '...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' (Imaginary Maps, iii).

Against such continuing history of societal indifference and Government apathy Mahasweta's **Bashai Tudu** embarks on repeated actions. Although this novella has at its immediate background the violent rebellion of the Naxalites between 1970 and 1977, but in its treatment of social realism and administrative callousness to the indescribable plight of the tribes in post-Independent India, it transcends history. In presenting her subject in factual way she uses satire, irony, mockery, derision, scorn, caricature, sarcasm, invective, and ridicule.

The writer in the very opening line satirizes at the frantic activity of the police at the news 'Bashai is dying' (2). The line runs, "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" (1). Mato Dome brought the news to the police station. He heard it from his father Ratan Dome who was supposed to be in jail but moving freely as he had the power to control thousand votes for the ruling party. Having heard of Ratan's power from Deboki Missir, the clerk at the police station, the Sub Inspector started to hate himself for his wish to see Ratan in jail. When the SI asked Mato: "What did your father say? Where is he? (2)Without no delay reply came from Deoki, "you expect Ratan Dome to come to the police station? Is the police station a place for him? (2)We do not miss to understand the satire inherent in such line.

Kali Santra was known to Bashai as a devoted party worker and had been in the Party for ages. But as he was old he had some communist ideals in him which Bashai respected. But Kali's realization about the new Party babu was completely opposite. As Kali's image was above suspicion he was used by the Party whenever it was required, but after that he was forgotten. Kali felt that, 'The Party had only made use of him. If he ever wore well-laundered clothes, the more successful Party members would take it almost as an affront and cast accusing glances at him. They were all convinced that in return for their services to the Party they deserved everything-houses, cushy jobs, political clout, and news cover. For Kali Santra alone it was obligatory to go on struggling as an honest Party worker, dressed in the cheapest of shirts, a dirty dhoti and a pair of sturdy Bata sneakers' (4). Mahasweta's satirical tone here is obvious. She shows how the new leaders were drowned in material comforts contrary to the Party ideals and they were the more powerful leaders. Even, Kali's son took him as a fool because he could not use his affiliations for personal gains. New generation's lack of value is clearly hinted at by Mahasweta. This Kali Santra was the most trusted person to the higher administration to identify Bashais' corpse all the four times that Bashai had died between 1970 and 1976.

After a lunch with 'Khesari dall' and 'rice' Kali and Bashai were resting under a tree. The conversation continued and it was Bashai who had to say mostly. Disillusioned by the activities of the Party, Bashai left it and was trying to find out his own strategy for snatching away the rights for the dispossessed and the disinherited. Bashai was aware of the class-consciousness in the Party which was against its ideal. Bashai told Kali, 'You came from the class of the babus, that's what you've been in the Party. But what am I, Kali-babu? I'm a Santal, born an agricultural labourer, educated at a Mission School, an agricultural labourer again' (26). Bashai's sharp remark, "The babus are a class by themselves, like the Bagdis, and the Kaoras, yes, a caste. And that's why such a good man like you have to take your stand with the babus only because you are a babu yourself. And then in the Party study *circle* you would give us lecture on the class struggle. No, Kali-babu, you'll never convince me"(28) is a sign of his intense contempt for the whole community. The writer's anger for the privileged is unambiguously expressed. Bashai continued to express his heart-felt realization about the power-structure of the society and he bore hatred for the upper sections. "...I'm Bashai the Santal, one of those who go about almost naked, and feed on mice and snakes when there's a famine. A Santal who had some land could rise a little higher maybe, but I was an agricultural labourer. Kali-babu, a brahman or a Kayastha would never be an agricultural labourer. If here had been a few them, upper caste agricultural labourers, then the agricultural labourers too would have split apart into castes" (28). Bashai's words were as bitter as 'neem' leaves and Kali Santra, despite his uneasiness, had nothing to say. Writer's arrow of satire is pointed and penetrating.

Mahasweta Debi satirizes the character of Samanta Babu, a very big Party comrade. Through this character she shows us how the ordinary Party workers sacrifice their life-blood for the Party, but still remain denied and neglected. At an election meeting at Salihatu, Samanta suddenly fell sick with cholera. Samanta was very critically sick and for Bashai he came back to life again. But Samanta did not recognize Bashai's contribution for him. Later, to Samanta, Bashai was a 'renegade.' The writer shows us how the revered comrades use and throw the ordinary Party workers. She writes that, 'It was only the elections that brought them to rural Bengal. The rest of the time they had only excuses to offer from their seats so far from the villages: they had seen enough of the face of Bengal, it was time they set out to discover the charms of the world abroad" (30).

Bashai was maintaining distance from the Party circle because of his realization that the Party would do nothing for the agricultural and bonded labourers. Kisan Sabha that was founded in 1936 to look after the interest of the peasantry had done nothing for them. Because all that really mattered to the Party was the numbers of vote. As the middle peasantry remained the pillar of the Kisan Sabha and it had the power to control vote in favour of the ruling party, so the Kisan Sabha did not dare take any steps to curb their interests. To Bashai the Party policy was as clear as day light and he felt the gap between appearance and reality.

When Bashai started to fight for justice of the agricultural labourers he came to know that the labour Department had revised the 'MW' every year. But the Government approved 'MW' was never given. In Left politics people seek love and responsibility from the leaders. It dreams of a classless society. It is not used for

personal benefit. People like Bashai and Kali adhered to this ideal. They never boasted of their Party affiliations. But 'Only the leaders were allowed to boast about their sacrifices, their dedication to the cause, their patient abjuration of the pleasures of life. Like Brutus, all of them honourable men' (p. 43). The Party had its sustenance from the committed workers of the grass root levels, but those remained unnoticed and unattended. Bashai understood the naked truth that there was big lie in the Party slogan for peasants' unity. Bashai and Kali went to the canal, and Bashai went down to the water to catch fishes by his harpoon because they needed protein as per the doctor's advice to keep up good health. Bashai turned all around and repented for not having dense forest in the surrounding area. When Kali asked why he was repenting for that, Bashai replied-

"Then we'd have got hares and iguanas. Food for us. We need protein. I tell them to break the wheat grains into two, boil them and eat them for protein. But the bastards wouldn't listen to me." (59).

Bashai's first place of action was Banari. It was a small village lived by few Santal families, mostly keots and chamars. These agricultural labourers were not least affected by the 'MW', but when it was announced, it was done ceremoniously. The slogans seemed to be victorious- 'Workers of the world, Unite!', 'It's no Independence till the workers have their own State! And 'The workers are the rightful owners of the world!' (70). But when the labourers were asked they told 'We are agricultural labourers nonetheless' (71). The novelist lashes out satirically at the administration when she writes that the law for 'MW' brought popularity to the government. The making of this law after several meetings in air-conditioned chambers over steaming cups of Nescafe helped the Government purge its 'sense of guilt' (71). But the law was never put into action. The novelist writes, 'As with the naked and the hungry the world over, the lives of the Santals are determined and regulated by hunger, not by any government. Hunger rules as a tyrant, keeping its subjects always on the run' (71).

Pratap Goldar of Banari was the 'uncrowned king, its patron goddess against disease, its local deity, its incarnation of the ultimate law, all rolled into one' (71). He had only sixteen hundred and sixty-six acres of land defying the government's land ceiling act. In stark contrast with the life style of the poor people he had his private dynamo to generate electricity. He had a large water tank and six pucca wells. All these were done not at his own expenses. He grabbed the money meant for relief to the poor people and increased his level of material comfort. The administration was well aware that the naked and the hungry people had to walk a mile and a half to the river charsha to collect the drinking water by digging the sand with their naked nails. Still, Pratap was entrusted with the relief amount every year. The materials meant for the distressed and the afflicted, like cheap sari, dhoti, medicine and the supplied seeds and food grains were illegally stored at Pratap's house. The Government was utterly indifferent to that. The novelist strikes at the establishment vehemently, 'The naked and the hungry seemed to be the first wife of the administration, inflicted upon it without its consent. Pratap seemed to be its self-chosen second wife and was given pride of place' (72). The administration heavily depended on Pratap for its inspection to the village, the distribution of relief, and the elections. Taking advantage of his position Pratap like pampered child, went on demanding favour throughout the year.

Pratap happily went on possessing the relief fund and using it as his own. Pratap was so powerful that he removed a school teacher belonging to the caste of cobbler from the primary school of Ukhal for marrying an upper class woman. A BDO refused to take bribe and so Pratap managed his transfer successfully. Fund sanctioned for health centre was utilized to make road for Pratap's lorries carrying rice, paddy etc. He was the main money-lender. The room where the district magistrates, ministers, deputy ministers, officers and MLAs were entertained was beautifully decorated. Among several valuable things, there were also eight unlicensed guns. The VIPs sitting in the room wonders 'How peaceful it is here in the village!' (72) How ridiculous it is! Pratap never paid the approved 'MW' to the agricultural labourers. An agricultural labour commissioner, an upper caste one and knowing English well, went to Banari to survey on the spot, but what he experienced was intensely shocking. Ten percent people were not aware of India's independence. They believed the English were given a new name, the India Government. All of them told that they had never heard of Government sanctioned 'MW'. After coming back from Banari to Calcutta, he 'recorded' his report, 'That he exists', he

wrote 'is a miracle'(74).This officer suddenly in mid-winter was transferred to Delhi, 'as a punishment for his indiscreet and excessive zeal in trying to remedy the state of affairs at Banari'(75). Bashai murdered Pradtap and his farmhand for not paying 'MW'. Bashai was also shot dead by the police. There was a sense of relief for the administration and Samanta, the big leader of the Front told Kali in a heavy tone 'Let the Jilla Barta carry an obit. He was our comrade for so many years' (95).

Operation Jagula took place in 1972. It did not happen exactly at Jagula, it happened in the village of Kankdasole, six miles from Jagula. Rameshwar Bhuinya was all in all and had only five thousand acres of village land under false names. He had a rice meal at Kankdasole and his house resembling a fortress was fenced by a high wall. There was a bungalow with the modern facilities, bar, swimming pool, and fishing pond. During Holi, Rameshwar and his kept Baturani would swim on rubber tyres in the private swimming pool. On the Holi occasion Rameshwar would throw a luxurious party for the local VIPs including the magistrate and serve branded liquor which most of them never tasted before. In 1972 Congress was voted to power. At Jagula, police protection was heightened to check the mobility of the Naxalites. It was quite advantageous for Rameshwar. He went on cheating the aggrieved labourers in police protection. He forced the sharecroppers remain bound to him in debt for ever. He also had his private armed goons. She writes mockingly, '1970-1 proved to be of great advantage for the Jotedars and moneylenders. For every Jotedar who lost his head, the administration sent a hundred heads rolling in retaliation' (100). She sharply criticizes, 'Procreation was in the hand of God, a hand nobody could tamper with. Procreation was the sole recreation of the poor of the country, the sole justification of their very existence. A substantial section of those born every year however surrendered their land to Rameshwar's register and became either landless agricultural labourers or joined the ranks of migrant labour. That was their destiny. In a democracy the Government would never violate the fundamental right of a small peasant to be victimized by his Jotedars or his moneylender. The Indian constitution respected every citizen's fundamental right to become whatever he could by dint of his guts'(101).The Jotedars and the moneylenders went on happily cheating the agricultural labourers. The Jotedars would pay them whatever they had decided to pay. 'The Jotedars were the favourite younger spouse of the administration' (101). Rameshwar was attacked by Bashai and his followers. After a long treatment Rameshwar recovered, but Bashai died. Mahasweta throws sarcasm at the administration which brought only two hundred fifty one people at Government expenses to identify Bashai's dead body.

Next place of Operation was Bakuli, 1973. Surja Sau was the biggest Jotedar at Bakuli and had only five hundred acres of land. Of his properties two cowsheds were destroyed in Naxalite days and so he applied for compensation as being one of the poorest and most needy persons. Surja Sau did not draw canal water for cultivation. Mahasweta scorns at him, 'No harvest. Famine. Loans. Loans meant interest. The law for the remission of loan was a farce' (123). The administration would not force Surja Sau to use canal water. She contemptuously writes, 'The Surja Saus- and there were hundreds of them- had the supernatural capacity to keep stored in their memories the calculations for hundreds of loans drawn by hundreds of people over several generations'(123). During the violence at Bakuli 41 Santals were killed, among whom there were ten boys and girls. Bashai was tied tightly to one of the thick roots of Pakud tree and was brutally charged with bullets. With a bitter note of sarcasm Mahasweta writes, '...all the deaths will be ascribed to frontal encounters'(127). Bashai Tudu, too, died in a frontal encounter. The dead bodies of the children were also explained by the theory of 'frontal encounter' (127). The administration out of panic for murdering children framed a story of a 'clash between two groups of people over a land dispute that left three dead'(127).

Jagattaranbabu, father of local MLA, was a brutal moneylender like Shylock. During the celebration of Kali Puja in winter, the Loharis would invite and appease the District Magistrate, the Collector, the Commissioner, and the neighbouring Zamindars. On the basis of a notification in 1974, 'MW' was fixed in 1976, but it remained as a record. In order to apply 'soothing balm to the conscience of the administration' (140), Government appointed sixteen inspectors for almost 3.7 million agricultural labourers to implement minimum wage. Mahasweta goes on condemning, 'None of the inspectors was prepared to give up the fun and frolics of Calcutta life, and distance themselves from the corridors of Writers Buildings, that house of destiny, in going to the districts'(140). As expected, the Jotedar and moneylender had the opportunity to deprive the labourers

according to their sweet will. Jagattaran was attacked by Bashai, and in the process he himself was critically injured. And died suffering from gangrene. Mahasweta shows that Bashai dies several times and is reborn to lead the next operation. Resistance continues.

Through her ironical and satirical narrative technique Mahasweta presents before us the hunger and poverty, affliction and exploitation, tyranny and sufferings in the life of those who are more civilized than the so-called civilized people. In an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Mahasweta says, 'There are no dowry deaths among the tribals' (Imaginary Maps, x). She also says that, 'Among the tribals, insulting or raping a woman is the greatest crime. Rape is unknown to them. Women have a place of honour in tribal society.....One of the causes of the great Santal Revolt of 1855-56 was the raping of tribal women'(Imaginary Maps, xi). Is not the tribal society superior to the known civilized society ? Mahasweta hammers, 'No upper caste Hindu can ever share the sense of deprivation a tribal is born with. It is a deprivation that dates far back. The dark tribal was the first child of a dark India.....The Shakas, the Huns, the Mughals, the Pathans have all merged into the corpus that is India. And the tribals have remained deprived'...(137). Mahasweta's writing is really dangerous for us because it might awaken our dead conscience.

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