



# Unveiling the subaltern voices: a call for the liberation of tribals from ignorance, denial, suppression, and exploitation in the works of Mahasweta Devi

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## Abstract

Mahasweta Devi, a renowned Indian author and social activist, is celebrated for her remarkable contributions to literature and her commitment to advocating for marginalized communities. One of the earliest Indian writers to recognize and explore the deep cultural and national divides between the mainstream and peripheral groups, Devi's works bring into focus the harsh realities faced by tribal communities. She exposed the systemic neglect and exploitation of these marginalized groups, particularly in the context of their exclusion from both history and the nation's contemporary framework. Through her literary activism, Devi became a pivotal figure in using writing as a means of challenging and changing the social order. This paper examines Devi's portrayal of tribal communities, especially through the lens of four critical themes: Ignorance, Denial, Suppression, and Exploitation. Devi's literary approach merges the realms of art and activism, emphasizing that writing is not merely a creative pursuit but a tool for social transformation. She was one of the first to acknowledge the deliberate erasure of tribal voices from the official narrative of India's history. The communities she championed had been, for centuries, excluded and silenced by dominant societal forces. Devi's stories, particularly her short stories, highlight the impacts of this exclusion, presenting a vivid picture of the tribal experience in a society that has, for the most part, remained unaware or indifferent to their existence. The focus of this research is to explore how Ignorance and Denial intersect, with mainstream society failing to acknowledge the rich cultural heritage and contributions of tribal people. This ignorance is not simply a lack of awareness but a deliberate act of omission, further marginalizing the tribal communities and reinforcing their invisibility. The theme of Suppression in Devi's works is a direct consequence of this Ignorance and Denial. Tribals are subjected to systemic oppression—politically, socially, and economically. Devi's characters, representing the marginalized sections of society, are often forced to navigate a hostile environment, where their voices are stifled, and their struggles remain unnoticed. Her stories illustrate the harsh realities of life in rural areas, where tribal people are continuously fighting to preserve their identity and dignity against forces that seek to erase them. Through these narratives, Devi exposes the social and institutional forces that attempt to suppress tribal populations, highlighting the stark contrast between their resilience and the overwhelming power of mainstream society. The final critical element of Devi's portrayal is Exploitation. In her stories, the economic, cultural, and political systems are shown to not only ignore the rights of tribals but also actively exploit their labor, land, and resources. The exploitation is portrayed as an intrinsic part of the social and economic system that perpetuates the suffering of these communities. Devi's short stories bring these issues to the forefront, showing the devastating effects of such exploitation on tribal communities, as well as their struggles for survival and recognition. This study analyses 16 tribal short stories by Mahasweta Devi, examining how each story reflects the interconnected themes of Ignorance, Denial, Suppression, and Exploitation. The research is organized into five chapters, starting with an introduction to Devi's life and work, followed by a review of literature that links her writings to the subaltern theory.

**Keywords:** Mahasweta devi, Tribal, Subaltern, Ignorance, Denial, Suppression, Exploitation, Social activism, Indian literature, Marginalized communities

## Introduction

In this paper, the researcher explores selected tribal short stories with the focus on the themes of Ignorance and Denial. These stories highlight how tribals remain marginalized, often neglected by society, and struggle to gain support or guidance when they need it. Through Mahasweta Devi's writings, the harsh realities faced by tribals, unchanged even after 75 years

of independence, are revealed, showing how they continue to feel colonized.

## Arjun

Mahasweta Devi, an advocate for social justice, uses her ethnographic observations to present tribal life realistically. In "Arjun," tribals suffer from manipulation by both upper castes

and government officials. The story portrays how tribal women, who enjoy equality in their culture, are more aware of their exploitation. Through characters like Diga, Devi shows that even in a desperate situation, there is often a clever way to resist injustice.

"Arjun" depicts the Kheria Shabars, whose lives are filled with denial and exploitation. The tribals are manipulated by local politicians, Bishal Mahato and Ram Haldar, who exploit them for political and economic gain. These leaders, though from different political parties, have the same goal: to profit from the tribals' labor. The story criticizes the exploitation of both the environment and the tribals. The main character, Ketu, faces a dilemma: cutting down the sacred Arjun tree, which will likely send him to jail, or defying Mahato's orders, which may also lead to imprisonment. The story reflects the deep ignorance and lack of agency experienced by the tribals, who are coerced into decisions that benefit the powerful.

The government's justification for cutting the Arjun tree is framed as a necessary step for a new road, showing how political and social systems deny the tribals' rights. Diga, a character with minimal education, outsmarts both Mahato and Haldar by using his knowledge of the tree's significance. He gathers support from other tribals and devises a plan to protect the Arjun tree. The story suggests that education, even informal, can empower marginalized groups to resist exploitation and bring about social change. By the end of the story, Diga's cleverness triumphs over the corrupt officials, delivering a message that education is key to overcoming social injustice.

Ketu's personal struggle reflects the larger issue of tribal survival in a system designed to oppress them. The Shabars are trapped in a cycle of exploitation, with little hope for change. However, Diga's transformation through education represents the potential for resistance and social transformation. "Arjun" challenges readers to question the systems that perpetuate ignorance and denial, urging reflection on how tribal communities are denied their humanity. In conclusion, Mahasweta Devi's "Arjun" emphasizes the critical role of education in empowering marginalized communities and resisting exploitation, ultimately calling for a transformation toward social harmony.

### ***Kunti and Nishadin***

In "Kunti and the Nishadin," Mahasweta Devi portrays the oppression tribal women face, even during the mythical Treta-yug period. Despite enduring centuries of injustice, tribal people, especially women, maintain a positive outlook and refrain from resentment towards the royal class. According to The Hindu's Literary Review, Devi's narrative shifts the focus to women's perspectives, which are often sidelined in mainstream literature. In this retelling of Kunti's story, Devi gives voice to the otherwise voiceless tribal women, highlighting their experiences of neglect and injustice. Kunti's tragic end by fire is presented as a deserved fate in this version, underscoring her role as a symbol of guilt and unresolved legacy, especially regarding her unacknowledged son, Karna.

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Devi's retelling of Kunti and the Nishadin centers on an ethnological encounter between Kshatriya queen Kunti and the tribal Nishadin, reflecting the marginalized status of tribal women. The story deconstructs the patriarchal and gendered narratives of the Mahabharata. Devi challenges the male-dominated interpretations by reimagining Kunti's sexuality and exploring the dynamics of duty versus desire in her relationships with the Gods. Unlike the original epic, where Kunti's encounters with the Gods are framed by duty, Devi's version reveals Kunti's sexual encounter with the Sun God as driven by desire, showing her suppressed eroticism beyond the constraints of patriarchal law. Devi critiques the rigid patriarchy of the Mahabharata, presenting Kunti's sexual autonomy as an area of tension and resistance against cultural preconditions.

The Mahabharata limits Kunti's sexuality by positioning her as a vessel for patriarchal desires, with Pandu's inability to biologically father children leading to the Gods acting as substitutes. Kunti's refusal to acknowledge Karna—her son with the Sun God—symbolizes her internal conflict between her "legitimate" marriage body and the "illegitimate" body created by her sexual encounter outside the confines of marriage. Devi contrasts this repression with the Nishadin's free sexual autonomy, where tribal women celebrate relationships based on desire rather than social norms. The concept of Rajavritta, the entrenched feudal order, is juxtaposed with the Lokavritta, which celebrates natural eroticism and personal choice. Through the Nishadin, Devi critiques the subjugation of female sexuality within patriarchal frameworks and highlights a tribal worldview that allows women to express sexual freedom, unbound by societal expectations.

Devi's story challenges the patriarchal norms and illuminates the power dynamics that shape female identity, particularly Kunti's, revealing how women's sexuality is controlled and denied in mainstream cultural narratives. The clash between these two worlds—the oppressive royal patriarchy and the liberated tribal existence—lays bare the tension between conformity and autonomy for women.

In Mahasweta Devi's short stories, the themes of marginalization and the suppression of women's voices are powerfully explored through the lens of tribal life in Indian society. "Kunti and the Nishadin" and "Souvali" both highlight how marginalized women, specifically tribal women, are positioned as subaltern figures within the larger cultural and historical narratives.

### ***Souvali***

Mahasweta Devi poignantly illustrates the enduring hardships faced by the tribals throughout history, as even in the mythological past, tribal people struggled with issues of identity and recognition. She critiques the mainstream narratives that glorify royal figures while silencing the stories of the oppressed. In "Souvali," the protagonist, a tribal woman, stands as a symbol of resilience against the rigid hierarchical structures. Despite her marginalization, Souvali refuses to accept the subjugation and invisibility imposed upon her and

her son by the royal family. This story challenges the dominant cultural notions of dharma and justice, offering a critique of the power structures that silence the marginalized.

Devi explores the dynamics of ignorance, particularly how the royal and tribal classes exist in completely different realities. Souvali's story revolves around her exploitation as a concubine to King Dhritarashtra, from which she bears a son, Yuyutsu. However, due to her low status as a *dasi* (servant), both she and her son are dismissed from royal recognition. The sense of betrayal and denial of her rights by the royal family forms the crux of her narrative. Despite this, Souvali rejects the notion of victimhood and embraces her dignity by asserting her independence, refusing to follow the prescribed rituals that the royal women would adhere to. Through her story, Devi explores the stark contrast between the raw, emotional lives of the tribal people (*Janavritta*) and the cold, socially regulated lives of the royal families (*Rajavritta*). The story also underlines how the royal family, and especially the royal women, accept the idea of suffering and self-sacrifice as part of their patriarchal duties, whereas Souvali and her son, Souvalya, choose to embrace freedom, rejecting the established norms of both caste and gender.

In the final section of the story, Souvali's defiance of royal conventions is made clear. She refuses to follow the widow's rituals and embraces her autonomy, asserting her right to live according to her own dharma. The stark contrast between Souvali's free will and the constrained, ritualistic lives of royal women underlines the violence of the rigid caste and gender systems. Souvali's story represents a rejection of the hierarchical and phallogocentric societal norms, symbolizing a powerful feminist assertion in the face of centuries of oppression.

By allowing Souvali to reject the traditional roles imposed on her, Devi not only critiques the systems of power but also presents a woman who actively challenges the cultural narrative that has relegated her to the margins. In doing so, Souvali's story offers a vision of liberation through self-determination and independence, a bold act of defiance against an unjust, patriarchal society.

In short, Mahasweta Devi's work in "Souvali" offers a critique of the mainstream historical and cultural narratives, highlighting how marginalized women have historically been denied recognition and voice. Her writings expose the inequalities within both the tribal and royal systems, demonstrating how women, particularly from lower castes, have been systematically oppressed. Through characters like Souvali, Devi calls for a reimagining of social justice and an acknowledgment of those whose stories have long been ignored.

### ***The Five Women***

The Five Women" is a narrative that presents a stark, contrasting view of the Kurukshetra battle from the perspective of five marginalized peasant women whose lives are torn apart by the conflict. Through their eyes, the battle is no longer seen as the legendary Dharmayuddha (righteous war) that aims to establish virtue and punish vice. Instead, it is portrayed as a

brutal, fratricidal struggle fueled by power and greed. The five women—Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vipasha, and Vitasta—are widowed peasants from the Kurujangal region. Their husbands, who were farmers, were forced to fight as foot soldiers (*padatis*) in the war and died in its course.

This story contrasts the lives of the common people (*janavritta*) with those of royalty (*rajavritta*), highlighting the disparity between the suffering of the masses and the privileged lives of the elite. These peasant women embody resilience and strength in the face of immense loss. Despite their suffering, they exhibit a deep sense of maturity and selflessness, which is contrasted with the grieving royal widows. In the narrative, the tribal women, despite enduring significant hardship, show empathy for upper-caste women and refuse to blame them for the devastation caused by the war. Mahasweta Devi's work suggests that tribal communities have a unique capacity for acceptance and resilience, even in the face of overwhelming tragedy.

In the story, the women are approached by Madraja, the head *dasi* of the royal women's quarters, who seeks recruits to serve Uttara, the widowed daughter-in-law of Queen Subhadra. The five peasant women, despite their refusal to serve as *dasīs*, are allowed to remain as Uttara's companions. Their marginalized status is evident as they are ignored by society and relegated to servitude, despite their crucial role in the aftermath of the war. The story critiques the treatment of the tribal people, who were brave warriors but were excluded from the war because of their low social status. Tribal women, like the protagonists, were denied dignity and recognition, forced to search for their husbands' bodies amidst the wreckage of war. The narrative portrays the Kurukshetra war as a cold-blooded power struggle, devoid of righteousness. The five women are depicted as critiquing the glorified narratives surrounding the war. They challenge the notion of a virtuous, holy war, calling it a war driven by greed for a throne.

The women's protest against the glorification of war and the Pandavas' heroism serves as a counter-narrative to the traditional Mahabharata story. They embody the voices of the oppressed and marginalized, who bear the brunt of the violence and destruction caused by the war. As Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav observe, the story gives a voice to the subaltern women, critiquing the valorization of war and heroism. Uttara, who had recently become a widow, finds solace in the company of the five women. While she is grieving the death of her husband, Abhimanyu, she is surrounded by a community of women who have also experienced loss. The five peasant women offer her comfort and companionship, providing a contrast to the royal women who are consumed by their grief and mourning rituals. The tribal women's approach to widowhood is radically different from that of the royal women. The story highlights the denial experienced by these women: first, as women and second, as those denied a voice or representation in the dominant narrative. Tribal women, unlike their royal counterparts, are not confined by rigid social expectations. They are free to express their emotions, laugh, and speak openly, while the royal women are expected to adhere to the strict codes of widowhood, which demand silence and self-restraint.

Through the lives of the five women, Mahasweta Devi presents a critique of the rigid and oppressive norms governing widowhood in royal society, as opposed to the more flexible, life-affirming approach of the tribal women. While the royal women are bound by grief, the tribal women demonstrate resilience and a positive outlook on life, focusing on creation and nature. Their defiance of the societal expectations placed upon them contrasts sharply with the suffering of the royalty. As Uttara is brought back to life through the companionship of these women, she is introduced to the "janavritta" (commoner's life), which is symbolized by the earthy, nature-bound existence of the tribal women. Their resilience and ability to cope with loss provide her with a new perspective on life, contrasting the stifling, grief-laden life of the royal women. The tribal women's role in Uttara's healing also underscores their power in shaping the future of the Kuru dynasty, for she is carrying the last hope of the Pandavas.

Thus, the binary between the elite rajavritta women and the working-class janavritta women is subverted, as the tribal women's perspective and resilience shine through, offering an alternative view of the aftermath of the war. The story suggests that, while the royalty suffers in silence, the common women find ways to overcome grief and devastation, thus ensuring the survival of life and hope even in the aftermath of war.

### ***Dhouli***

Mahasweta Devi's *Dhouli* sheds light on the intersection of caste privilege and patriarchal rape culture, highlighting the exploitation of tribal women. In the story, *Dhouli*, a tribal woman, faces repeated sexual violence by upper-caste men, yet her plight is ignored by society. The story critiques the hypocrisy of Indian nationalism, where the upper castes assert their superiority over the marginalized lower castes, especially the tribals, who are oppressed within the oppression. The harshness of both the state and society aims to extinguish *Dhouli's* presence, denying her basic human rights, including land, water, education, and cultural rights. The brutal treatment of *Dhouli* epitomizes the larger struggle of the tribals, who are subjugated in multiple layers of socio-political exclusion.

In the context of caste-based oppression, the tribals themselves understand the pervasive nature of this discrimination. In a poignant moment, the community reflects on the exploitation of untouchable women by the upper-caste men, saying, "You're not the first dusad girl the Misras have ruined. Dusad, Ganju, Dhobi—who have they spared?" (Mahasweta Devi, *Dhouli*, 3). The ignorance toward these abuses is widespread, with Misrilal, the Brahmin man, attempting to distance himself from the responsibility of ruining *Dhouli's* life, even denying his son and *Dhouli* when they meet later. Misrilal's own mother's callous indifference toward *Dhouli's* suffering highlights the prevailing attitude of the upper-caste class, which sees the exploitation of lower-caste women as both natural and inconsequential. Misrilal's mother compares *Dhouli's* fate to other instances of untouchable women being exploited, creating a chilling picture of societal indifference and hypocrisy.

The story critiques how tribal communities are ignored in the discourse of nation-building and modernity in post-independence India. Even when well-meaning reformers try to intervene, their efforts are rendered ineffective in the face of deeply ingrained social structures that prioritize the interests of the privileged. By the end of the story, *Dhouli* emerges as a symbol of resistance and change. Her transformation from an exploited subaltern woman to a figure of defiance highlights the resilience of marginalized groups, despite their oppression. She represents not only the suffering of caste-based discrimination but also the potential for revolutionary change within the margins.

*Dhouli's* experience of love is shaped by deep-seated denial. When Misrilal asks why she cannot understand love, *Dhouli's* response—"Please don't play with a poor woman like me, sarkar. Your *Dhouli* is dead now. Please don't laugh at the dead, sarkar" (Mahasweta Devi, *Dhouli*, 16)—reflects the despair and emotional numbness that comes with repeated abuse and exploitation. The tribespeople themselves internalize the belief that love is not for them, seeing their lives as governed by survival rather than emotional fulfilment.

*Dhouli's* pregnancy is treated as a commodity by both her community and the upper-caste men who exploit her. The tribal community's harsh judgment of her reveals their ingrained notions of caste purity and control, with *Dhouli's* consensual relationship with Misrilal being deemed a crime by the villagers. In their eyes, her willingness to be involved with a Brahmin's son is an unforgivable offense, which leads to her ultimate alienation. The social stigma forces her into a life of prostitution, as her community expects her to return the favor of the Misras, despite her suffering. The portrayal of *Dhouli's* body as an object, to be consumed by the whims of those in power, underscores the dehumanization of tribal women. The threat of violence, such as burning her alive or hanging her, serves as a constant reminder of the brutal choices faced by those on the margins.

Ultimately, *Dhouli* is not just a story of individual victimization but a broader commentary on the systemic oppression of subaltern women within a patriarchal, caste-ridden society. It exposes the vicious cycle of exploitation and denial that reinforces the social hierarchy, where marginalized women like *Dhouli* are stripped of their agency and reduced to mere instruments of survival and reproduction.

### ***Shanichari***

In the story "*Shanichari*," Mahasweta Devi offers a poignant portrayal of the social, economic, and sexual exploitation of tribal women, particularly in the context of India's underprivileged communities. This narrative touches on multiple layers of suffering, oppression, and survival.

Mahasweta Devi highlights the systemic exploitation of tribal women, often positioned at the intersection of class, caste, and gender oppression. Through *Shanichari's* experiences, Devi critiques the social structures that perpetuate such exploitation, where women, particularly from marginalized communities, are treated as commodities. The story exemplifies how societal



and state mechanisms not only turn a blind eye to these atrocities but also enable them. Shanichari's tragic journey illustrates the collision of patriarchy and capitalism in a country that claims democratic values, yet systematically oppresses the poor and marginalized.

The story reveals how the tribals' poverty and hunger make them vulnerable to exploitation, and how even the promise of a better life—like work at the brick kilns in Kolkata—becomes a trap. Shanichari and her community are portrayed as being caught in a vicious cycle of ignorance and exploitation. They are drawn into a world of forced labor and sexual exploitation, manipulated by figures like Gohuman Bibi, who lures them with false promises of food and clothing. The narrative critiques the way the system dehumanizes these women, where their bodies are commodified and used for the pleasure and profit of others.

The ultimate tragedy of Shanichari's story lies in the denial of her autonomy and her humanity. She is sold into the brick kilns with false promises, and even though she is fully aware of her fate, she is left with no choice but to accept it. This denial is not just of individual agency, but of the entire community's right to dignity and respect. Shanichari's fate—being sold into forced labor and prostitution—is depicted as the result of a broader socio-economic system that reduces tribal women to mere objects for exploitation. The story underscores the multiple layers of denial these women face: denial of freedom, denial of basic human rights, and denial of their identity as individuals with agency.

In sum, the story of Shanichari serves as a powerful critique of a society that perpetuates the commodification and exploitation of women, particularly those from marginalized groups. Mahasweta Devi's narrative not only addresses the brutal realities faced by tribal women but also challenges the broader societal structures that allow such oppression to thrive.

### ***The Fairytale of Rajabasha***

The narrative of *The Fairytale of Rajabasha* by Mahasweta Devi offers a profound commentary on the systemic exploitation of tribal communities, especially tribal women, and their marginalization in the broader social structure. Through the story of Sarjom and Josmina, a Ho tribal couple, Devi sheds light on the deep-rooted issues of class, caste, gender, and exploitation in Indian society, particularly the oppression faced by the marginalized within marginalized groups.

The story presents the tribals as a group that continues to uphold their cultural values and traditions, even in the face of numerous societal and economic challenges. The marriage ritual between Sarjom and Josmina, based on Adivasi customs, reflects a contrast between the freedom and fluidity in the tribal way of life versus the rigid, exploitative norms imposed by mainstream society. Devi captures the voice of the tribals and their aspirations, showing how their lives are shaped by a complex interplay of oppression within and outside their communities.

The title of the story itself is ironic, as it hints at a fairytale-like narrative, only to unfold a dark and tragic tale of exploitation,

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violence, and despair. Sarjom and Josmina, initially filled with hope and love, soon find themselves trapped by the deceit of moneylenders and landowners like Nandlal Shahu, who exploit their innocence. Their life, instead of becoming a romantic fairytale, turns into a cycle of suffering, from the physical exploitation they endure in Punjab to the emotional trauma of Josmina's repeated assaults. Josmina's suffering is amplified by the deeply entrenched patriarchy, both within her own tribal community and in the larger society. Her plight represents the broader subaltern experience of tribal women who are dehumanized by both economic and social structures.

The fairy tale structure in the story underscores the repetitive and never-ending nature of the tribals' exploitation. Their lives, like a traditional fairy tale, are filled with predictable patterns of suffering—only the names and locations change. Devi juxtaposes this with the rise of Punjabi "Adarsh kissans" (ideal farmers), who exploit the tribal people for cheap labor, reflecting the ingrained colonial attitudes towards race and gender. Josmina, a symbol of both tribal and gender oppression, faces violence not only from the non-tribal world but also from within her own community, where she is ostracized for bearing a child of an outsider. Her tragedy lies in the intersection of multiple forms of violence: gender, caste, and class.

The tragic end of Josmina, who ultimately commits suicide due to her social and emotional burdens, serves as a poignant commentary on the cyclical nature of exploitation. Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of Josmina's life and death highlights the continuous and unbreakable chain of violence faced by marginalized women, particularly those belonging to lower castes or tribes. The story reflects the larger socio-political context of the tribal uprising for statehood in Jharkhand in the 1980s, offering a critique of the systemic structures that perpetuate this exploitation under the guise of development and progress.

In short, *The Fairytale of Rajabasha* is not merely the story of two individuals but a powerful allegory of the larger systemic forces that oppress tribal communities, especially women. Mahasweta Devi's narrative challenges the conventional notions of progress and exposes the underlying violence that sustains the social and economic hierarchy. The story also critiques the portrayal of tribal life in mainstream society, urging readers to reflect on the intersections of gender, caste, and class in the perpetuation of subalternity.

### ***Ma from Dusk to Dawn***

This narrative delves into the paradox of the divine mother figure, exploring the plight of Jati, a widow who, driven by desperation, pretends to be possessed by the Goddess. She uses the offerings given to her as a divine being during the day to feed her son at night. The story reflects how Jati is exploited both as a spiritual mother and as a divine figure. The society that once ostracized her readily accepts her as a deity, yet she sees this as a strategy for survival and protection against potential sexual exploitation. Her transformation into a divine being is driven by the necessity to protect herself and her son from starvation and abuse.

The story illustrates the tragic and ironic condition of Jati, who is marginalized and ostracized due to her marriage outside her community. After the death of her husband, she struggles to survive, facing continuous exploitation from men and society. To protect herself and her mentally disabled son, she adopts the persona of a holy woman, "Thakurni," during the day. However, at night, she reverts to being a mother. This dual role, driven by necessity, symbolizes the exploitation of women in society. Despite being seen as a divine figure, Jati's real struggle is to provide for her son, Sadhan, whose insatiable hunger serves as a poignant metaphor for the poverty and deprivation in the community. The narrative critiques the exploitation of women and the apathy of the medical system, as seen through the figure of the doctor, Anadi-daktar, whose greed and indifference worsen Jati's condition. As Jati suffers from starvation and disease, her son is more concerned about his next meal than her health, illustrating the extent of their poverty. The story critiques the neglect of the poor and the exploitation of women in their roles as nurturers.

Jati's transformation into a spiritual figure, Thakurni, during the day, and her return to motherhood at night, underscores the constant denial of her personal needs and desires. Society denies her a chance at dignity, and she is forced into a role where she must pretend to possess divine powers just to survive. The exploitation of women in this context is evident as Jati has to deny her maternal instincts and live a life of hypocrisy to protect her son from hunger and abuse.

Her son, Sadhan, is depicted as a symbol of the brutal consequences of starvation, as his primary concern is food, not his mother's survival. The tragedy lies in the fact that even at the end of Jati's life, her son does not acknowledge her death with sorrow but instead continues to obsess over the rice that would feed him, symbolizing the dehumanizing effects of poverty and deprivation. The story ultimately exposes the societal structures that reduce individuals, particularly women, to mere tools for survival.

### ***Little Ones***

"Little Ones" portrays the effects of starvation on the human body, illustrating how severe malnutrition can reduce adult members of a tribe to the size of children. This narrative unfolds with the interaction between Mr. Singh, a relief officer, and the Aagariya tribe, which has been crippled by famine. The story combines elements of a ghost story with a social commentary, highlighting the dire consequences of governmental neglect and the tribal people's suffering. The story focuses on the tribe's transformation from iron miners to impoverished farmers due to the government's exploitation and land policies. The tribe is presented as a marginalized group that is forced to endure starvation while their traditional occupation is taken from them. The arrival of Mr. Singh, who is assigned to help them, symbolizes the government's incomplete and ineffective relief efforts.

The story highlights the tragedy of the Aagariya tribe, which has been deprived of its traditional livelihood as iron miners and is now left to cultivate barren land. Mr. Singh's arrival is symbolic of the government's ill-informed and ineffectual

efforts to help the tribe. The lack of real assistance, coupled with the exploitation of the tribe's land for iron mining, leaves the people in extreme poverty. The "little ones" in the story are revealed to be adult Aagariya people who have been physically stunted by chronic malnutrition. The story is a damning indictment of the government's neglect of the tribe and its inability to address the root causes of their suffering. The relief officer's attempt to provide aid is ultimately futile, as the systemic oppression and exploitation of the tribe have left them unable to survive.

Mahasweta Devi critiques the way tribal communities are treated by both the government and society. The officials' indifference to the tribe's plight reflects the broader societal denial of the existence of deep-rooted inequality. The Aagariya tribe's transformation into "little ones" is a physical manifestation of the denial of their humanity and the disregard for their basic needs. Devi explores the intersection of caste, class, and land ownership in the exploitation of tribal communities. The story highlights how historical systems of oppression have continued to impoverish and marginalize the Aagariya tribe, with little to no effort from the government to improve their situation. The stunted growth of the tribe serves as a metaphor for the long-term effects of systemic exploitation, where even their physical bodies are shrunk by hunger and neglect.

In the end, "Little Ones" paints a bleak picture of the government's failure to address the needs of its most vulnerable citizens, and the deepening cycle of poverty and malnutrition that has reduced the tribe to a shadow of its former self. The story emphasizes the importance of understanding the social and political forces that contribute to the suffering of marginalized communities.

### ***Seeds and Salt***

Mahasweta Devi's "Seeds" and "Salt" are profound explorations of caste oppression, survival, and denial, highlighting the systemic inequalities faced by marginalized communities, particularly tribals and low-caste individuals, in rural India.

In "Seeds," Mahasweta Devi illustrates the deep-seated exploitation of the lower castes by the upper castes, portraying a harsh reality where even acts of seemingly benevolent land redistribution after independence are manipulative tactics to maintain control over the landless. The protagonist, Dulan Gangu, uses wit and guile to navigate the exploitative structures, ultimately turning the very system that oppresses him into a source of resistance. The story juxtaposes the irony of charity (land donation by the landlords) with the tragic realities of survival. Dulan's life symbolizes the powerlessness of the oppressed, but it also demonstrates their resilience. The act of sowing the bodies of the murdered laborers as seeds is a symbolic and literal act of resistance, transforming suffering into defiance, ensuring that their struggles and sacrifices live on in the harvest.

In "Salt," Mahasweta Devi highlights the ignorance and negligence of the dominant society towards the tribals. The tribals are denied access to essential resources like salt by the

oppressive local landlord, Uttamchand. The story captures the bleakness of their lives, marked by survival through barter and struggle for basic necessities. The salt—which Gandhiji fought for as a symbol of freedom from British colonialism—becomes the symbol of the tribals' suffering. Their fight for something as basic as salt, and the absurdity of their struggle being dismissed as unimportant by the authorities, represents the systemic disregard for their existence. The encounter with Ekoya, the wild elephant, further accentuates the tension between human survival and the forces of nature, which are as unpredictable and hostile as the oppressive systems governing the tribals' lives.

Both stories are a scathing critique of the denial of rights to marginalized groups. Denial manifests in different forms: in "Seeds," it is the denial of justice, land, and human dignity by the landlords and the system; in "Salt," it is the denial of basic human needs and the refusal to acknowledge the value of tribal life. Mahasweta Devi's writing invites readers to reflect on the perils of ignoring the oppressed and the inevitable violence that results when such denials are pushed to their limits.

Through these powerful narratives, Mahasweta Devi pushes for awareness, activism, and justice, urging society to confront its systemic inequalities, acknowledging the power of the oppressed to resist and reclaim their dignity, even in the most dire circumstances.

### **Witch**

Many writers use their words to highlight the struggles of marginalized groups, but few, like Mahasweta Devi, go beyond observation and actively engage with these communities. Devi focuses on the oppressed, particularly women, in both primitive and capitalist societies. She explores the intersection of patriarchy, where women, like land, are treated as property for male control. This societal structure, rooted in ancient times, continues to exploit women, reducing them to mere tools for sexual gratification and reproduction.

Devi's work critiques the apathy of society. In her story, the villagers believe they are free from the fear of the witch (daini) until the birth attendant, Sanichari, encounters an eerie figure in the wilderness. The terror builds as Sanichari experiences supernatural events, leading to her eventual death. The villagers, led by the pahaan (village leader), pursue the daini with a mix of fear and aggression. Despite their pursuit, doubt lingers about whether she is truly a witch, as the story reveals her to be a human victim of fear and superstition. The villagers' hunt reflects the deep-seated anxieties that drive their actions, even when confronted with their own doubts.

In the end, the villagers, armed and determined, confront the witch's cave. They attempt to force her out with smoke, but what they uncover is shocking—a young woman with an infant, not a witch. This moment exposes the harsh reality of their misguided fears. Devi's writing critiques social norms, particularly the treatment of tribal people, and highlights the role of superstition in perpetuating injustice. Her works are deeply rooted in social consciousness, focusing on the exploitation of marginalized groups and advocating for societal change.

Devi's writing is raw and unembellished, presenting the harsh realities of the world. It is a call for social change, emphasizing the need to address the injustices faced by tribal communities and the oppressed. She is a writer of responsibility, using literature to expose societal wrongs and fight for the underprivileged.

### **The Hunt**

Mahasweta Devi, a renowned writer, was a staunch advocate for the rights of the marginalized, particularly the tribal communities. Her works often highlight the struggles of landless workers, tribals, and oppressed women. In "The Hunt," Devi portrays the close relationship between tribals and nature, showcasing how they depend on the forest and its creatures for survival. The story illustrates the intimate bond between the tribal people and nature, positioning nature as a mother figure that sustains them. Despite their connection to nature, the tribals face societal exclusion and oppression. Their lifestyle, though deeply rooted in the forest, often brings them into conflict with the broader society.

"The Hunt" is part of Devi's collection *Imaginary Maps*. It focuses on Mary Oraon, a tribal woman, whose character represents the complexities of surviving in a society that often ignores or rejects its marginalized members. Devi's depiction of Mary is deeply personal, based on a real-life encounter she had in Lapra with a woman who resembled Mary in many ways. Mary is a striking figure, admired by the villagers for her beauty and independence. However, she is also an outsider in her own community because of her illegitimacy, being the daughter of a white man. Despite her distinguished qualities—intelligence, self-reliance, and beauty—she is never fully accepted by the Oraons. Her status as an outsider is marked by the fact that, had she been born to a respected tribal man, the community would have embraced her differently.

Devi emphasizes the dignity and strength of women in tribal society. Mary's life stands in stark contrast to the oppressive conditions many women face in mainstream society. Her courage and determination make her a kind of feminist hero, standing up for her own rights and securing a future for herself and her community. She is a skilled worker, entrepreneur, and a protector of her autonomy, even while living in poverty. She navigates a male-dominated world with resourcefulness and pride.

The story's central theme revolves around the idea of justice and retribution. The Jani Parab (Festival of Justice), a ritual that takes place every twelve years, provides women with the unique opportunity to enact justice and revenge on wrongdoers. This festival symbolizes a moment when women are empowered to take the place of men in administering justice, especially in a society where they are often oppressed.

Mary's role in *The Hunt* is transformative. Initially, she is hesitant and frightened, but as the story unfolds, she becomes an active participant in this quest for justice. When Tehsildar Singh, a symbol of the colonial and exploitative forces, tries to assault her, she becomes the agent of nature's vengeance. She kills him with the cleaver, a powerful act that signifies not just personal vengeance, but justice for all the oppressed tribal

people. Through this act, Mary's role as both a woman and a tribal person is elevated, as she enacts a form of justice that transcends her individual suffering. Her actions are not just personal revenge but a victory for all those who have been wronged.

The symbolic nature of the Jani Parab is central to the story. While it may have originally been about hunting animals, in Mary's case, the hunt becomes a hunt for justice. Tehsildar Singh, who represents exploitation and the destruction of tribal culture, is killed in an act that reclaims power for the tribal people and women, who have been historically marginalized. Mary's victory is also a reclaiming of her womanhood. By killing Tehsildar Singh, she redefines the Jani Parab as a celebration of justice and empowerment for the marginalized, especially women, in a world that has long denied them agency. The hunt thus becomes a means of asserting her identity, dignity, and a reclaiming of her rightful place in both her community and the natural world.

### ***Douloti the Bountiful***

In *Douloti the Bountiful*, Mahasweta Devi highlights the exploitation of tribals as bonded laborers and sex workers, driven by colonial and post-colonial economic structures. The British Empire's deforestation and land conversion policies displaced tribals, pushing them into debt traps set by moneylenders. These tribals, once free, fall into a cycle of bonded labor, sexual exploitation, and slavery, causing a collapse of their social and familial structures. Devi explores this transformation through her characters, illustrating the gendered division of labor and the systemic abuse tribals face. The story ends with Douloti's death, representing the devastating impact of modern forms of enslavement.

Devi focuses on the severe mistreatment of tribal communities, who remain marginalized despite India's post-independence developments. Tribals, especially women and children, face extreme poverty, sexual exploitation, and a lack of government support. Devi's work highlights the continued oppression faced by these communities, as seen through Douloti's death—an image of a woman's suffering that forces the nation to confront what it has long ignored. Douloti's tragic end reflects India's postcolonial neglect of tribal people, reinforcing the idea that, despite political independence, the tribals remain invisible and disenfranchised. Douloti's body symbolizes the forgotten, as she becomes an unwilling representative of India's national identity.

Despite India's independence and constitutional guarantees of equality, tribals continued to be exploited by landowners, as seen in Ganori's descent into bonded labor. Devi connects the economic exploitation of tribal men to the sexual exploitation of tribal women, who are treated as commodities due to their poverty and lack of rights over their bodies. Tribal women face double oppression: as women in a patriarchal society and as members of an oppressed ethnic group. These women are subjected to violence, including rape and forced prostitution, by landowners and authorities seeking to maintain control over the tribals. Devi critiques how decolonization failed to reach the poorest, with women bearing the brunt of this failure.

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Tribals, especially women, continue to be subjected to systemic violence and exploitation, a reality Devi's work brings to the forefront.

### ***Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha***

Mahasweta Devi's work revolves around the lives and struggles of India's tribal populations, especially those from marginalized regions like Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal. She has lived and worked closely with these communities, which deeply informs her writing. Her deep empathy for the tribals, whom she calls the "criminal clans," is a hallmark of her fiction. While her efforts to bring attention to their plight have garnered international recognition, she has faced criticism, with some critics labeling her as a Naxalite due to her radical approach. Her writing primarily focuses on the challenges these tribal communities face—from poverty and oppression to the lack of government support. The lives of these marginalized people are explored in her works, which span from pre-colonial to post-independence times.

The story of *Pterodactyl* follows Puran, a journalist from Bihar, who, disillusioned with urban life and the ignorance surrounding tribal issues, seeks to report on the condition of the tribals. He travels to Pirtha, a remote tribal village ravaged by starvation. Puran's intention is to bring attention to the dire conditions in the village by reporting on the starvation crisis, hoping that his reporting would help get assistance for the villagers. However, Puran soon realizes that this is not just a matter of bringing attention to the issue; it is about addressing a systemic, almost existential crisis that affects tribal communities across India. Devi highlights the tribals' abandonment by the state, their isolation, and the systemic neglect they endure, a situation that Puran's friend Harisharan, a civil servant, also acknowledges. The appearance of a pterodactyl in the village becomes a symbolic element in the narrative. The depiction of the creature in cave paintings by Bikhia, a tribal boy, ties into the larger issue of tribal identity. The pterodactyl, as a prehistoric creature, symbolizes the threat of extinction that tribal cultures face. Devi uses this image to warn that the tribal culture is at risk of disappearing, much like the pterodactyl, due to neglect and misunderstanding from the larger society.

The presence of the pterodactyl is a catalyst for deeper reflection on the relationship between tribal people and the rest of society. Puran's ignorance of tribal issues is a reflection of the broader societal disregard for these communities. The inability of the tribal language to accommodate concepts like "deception" and "suffering" exemplifies the gulf between tribal and non-tribal worlds. Puran is confronted with the realization that tribal society and its language are alien to him, and he begins to understand the deep disconnection between the two. When the pterodactyl finally materializes from the cave paintings into the physical world, it challenges both the rational and symbolic understanding of tribal life. The event, surreal and unexplained, signals the impossibility of reconciling tribal life with the rational, Western-oriented mindset. This clash of worlds—tribal and modern—is central to the story. Devi, however, doesn't simply portray this as a failure of



understanding; she suggests that the separation between these worlds cannot be bridged by simple intellectual or rational explanation. Instead, it speaks to the larger failure of modern society to grasp the essence of tribal existence. Through the image of the pterodactyl, Devi warns that the tribal world, with its unique history, culture, and identity, may be wiped from existence, lost to the indifference of a modern world that refuses to acknowledge or understand it.

### ***Draupadi***

In *Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi presents a radical and powerful narrative that critiques societal structures and gender oppression. The protagonist, Dopdi Mejhen, is a tribal woman caught in the socio-political turmoil of Bengal. The story unfolds against the backdrop of the Naxalbari movement in 1971, where tribals, along with landless peasants, rose up against feudal exploitation. Dopdi, a tribal revolutionary, is captured and brutally raped in captivity by the army. Despite the horrific violence she endures, Dopdi's defiance and courage stand in stark contrast to the helplessness of the women in traditional narratives. Unlike the epic *Draupadi* from the *Mahabharata*, who calls on divine intervention, Dopdi's power comes from her resistance, symbolizing the strength of marginalized women and tribals who reject passivity and subjugation.

The story is set during the 1971 war between Pakistan and Bangladesh, when violence against civilians was widespread, and thousands of women became victims of rape. Dopdi, an active Naxalite, is captured by Senanayak, an army officer. While imprisoned, she undergoes brutal sexual violence. The army's failure to break her spirit is depicted when they demand she cover herself, and she defies them by remaining naked. Dopdi's defiance in the face of this violence is profound—she refuses to accept the shame imposed on her body. The violence she suffers is not just physical; it is also a symbolic attack on her tribal identity and the marginalized status of women in her society. Devi portrays Dopdi as a symbol of resistance, showing how oppression can transform into rebellion.

Dopdi's story can be understood as a rewrite of the *Mahabharata*'s *Draupadi* narrative, but with a twist. Unlike the divine intervention that saves the epic *Draupadi*, Dopdi's defiance stems from her own agency and strength. Devi explores the ways in which women, particularly tribal women, are subjected to systemic violence, and how their bodies are commodified and exploited. Dopdi's rejection of shame and her defiant attitude towards her captors mark her as a figure of resistance. Through her, Devi challenges the hegemonic patriarchal system that dehumanizes women, particularly marginalized ones. Dopdi's refusal to adhere to societal expectations about women's behavior is an act of rebellion. Her nakedness, rather than being a mark of shame, becomes a symbol of strength and resistance to a system that seeks to objectify and marginalize her.

### **Research methodology**

The research employs qualitative textual analysis of Mahasweta Devi's works, using postcolonial and subaltern theories to examine tribal marginalization. Feminist and eco-

critical perspectives explore intersections of gender, class, and ecology, while historical context and comparative analysis deepen the understanding of tribal oppression, resistance, and calls for liberation.

### **Conclusion**

The study titled *Unveiling the Subaltern Voices: A Call for the Liberation of Tribals from Ignorance, Denial, Suppression, and Exploitation in the Works of Mahasweta Devi* provides an in-depth exploration of how Devi's literary works serve as a powerful commentary on the plight of the tribal communities in India. By portraying the tribals not as idealized figures but as ordinary humans with both virtues and flaws, Devi presents an authentic and nuanced perspective on their lives. Through her intricate storytelling, she unearths the systematic ignorance, denial, suppression, and exploitation faced by the tribals, urging society to confront these deep-rooted injustices.

Mahasweta Devi's works have successfully drawn attention to the glorious past of tribal communities while also highlighting the causes of their present marginalization. Her deep empathy, connection, and unwavering commitment to the tribals earned her their love and respect. She was not only a writer but also a journalist and activist, using her voice to advocate for the oppressed and to shed light on their struggles. Her characters, while often struggling, also celebrate life, portraying the resilience and strength of the tribal people. This aspect of her work has contributed to her widespread appeal and ability to resonate with readers across the world.

Her role as a socio-economic commentator who connected with the tribal communities on a personal level made her works more than just fiction—they became a mirror for society to reflect upon its neglect of the marginalized. Her journey, from being called 'Didi' by the tribals to earning the title of "Mother of Sabars," exemplifies her deep-rooted impact on their lives. Devi's writing, which challenges mainstream Indian perceptions of tribal identity, invites readers to reassess their views on tribal culture, society, and history.

Despite her passing, Devi's legacy endures, especially through institutions like the Adivasi Academy, which continue her mission of empowering the tribal communities. The Academy, along with other initiatives inspired by her, ensures that the tribals' voices are heard and their struggles are addressed. Her vision of community-driven change remains a guiding principle for those who continue her work.

### **Scope for further research**

The scope of this research can be extended in several directions. Future studies can explore the themes of Ignorance, Denial, Suppression, and Exploitation in other works by Mahasweta Devi. Comparative studies involving feminist, postcolonial, and subaltern theories can further deepen our understanding of her literary contributions. The translation of her works into regional Indian languages would also open new avenues for research, especially in the field of translation studies, to make her messages more accessible to diverse audiences.

### Limitations

While the research made use of the best available translations, it faced challenges in fully understanding the regional distinctiveness, particularly related to oral literature and the nuances of tribal languages. Certain cultural elements and the deep-rooted connection of the tribals to their language and traditions may not have been entirely conveyed through translations. Additionally, while the study focuses on the broader themes of exploitation and marginalization, a more detailed exploration of Devi's specific portrayal of tribal women and their unique struggles could provide more targeted insights.

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