

Hegemony, Power Structure and Tribal Resistance: A Subaltern Geopolitics View on Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2018)

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Abstract

Subaltern studies address postcolonial notions, binary oppositions, and power structures, enabling us to perceive history from an oppressed perspective. Similarly, subaltern geopolitics challenges the traditional narratives that often present the interest of the dominant community and omit the marginalised history. It provides perspectives of the dominant group with geographical imaginaries. This article aims to trace hegemony and power structures with geographical imaginaries through the theoretical framework of subaltern geopolitics in Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (2018), translated by Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak. Munda tribes are connected to the land, and the acquisition of land played a pivotal role in the domination and subjugation of the natives. With the subaltern geopolitics, the process of imperialism against the Tribal community during and after the colonisation is studied. Through the lens of hegemony, the cultural exploitation of tribal communities is analysed. It also focuses on the power structure in terms of political and economic structures and elucidates the resistance of the Munda tribal community. The paper identifies three hegemonic power structures that existed during the colonial period, after the colonial period, and in the contemporary period. The article investigates the power structures imposed on Munda tribes through the ownership of the lands and the tribes' resistance, irrespective of government. The paper brings out the significance of resistance and the importance of land in the lives of tribal people. It concludes that resistance against the authorities is the only means of their survival.

Keywords: Power Structures; Hegemony; Subaltern Geopolitics; Tribes; Munda; Resistance

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Introduction

Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (1980) was originally written in Bengali and translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2002). Devi was an Indian Bengali writer, activist, reformer, and paladin for Indian tribal people. She is one of the pioneers of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group (DNT–RAG). Her writings widely focused on documenting the real incidents in fictional representations. As a crusader of tribal people, she documented tribal history and believed that the reader would get to know the actual condition of tribal people through her fiction. She says, "I believe in documentation. After reading my work, the reader should face the truth of facts and feel duly ashamed of the true face of India" (Devi, 1998: x). In 1965, she had a chance to visit Palamu of Jharkhand district, India which was her first acquaintance with tribes. Devi believed that Palamau was the mirror of India, and from that moment till her death, she fought for the welfare of the Indian tribes.

The select novel *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2018) depicts the life of Chotti Munda, a tribal hero and rebellion. The plot encompasses the significant events of his life, which are intertwined with political power and resistance. The plot timeline is between 1900 and 1977, which includes both the colonial and post-colonial periods. Chotti, the novel's protagonist, is a skilled archer and a symbol of tribal cultural identity. Throughout his life, he resisted the exploitation of the ruling class, which included colonisers, landlords, managers, politicians and agents. The novel also depicts socio-political events like the Munda riot headed by Birsa Munda, the Independence of India from the British and the Emergency period. This study critically analyses the selected novel on two conceptions, the period before independence and the period after independence, which helps to identify the power structures, hegemony and resistance during and after colonisation. The third part of this study deals with the Pathalgadi movement, which took place in 2016, to

comprehend the relevance of studying history through fictional representations and how an objective reality can be depicted through different perceptions.

Considering the above backdrop, this study examines the subjugation of the Munda tribal community before and after independence and how it continues even today. For this, the study deploys subaltern geopolitics to probe the power structures created with varied issues linked to land. These structures are propagated through hegemony, and thereby, resistance becomes the only way and an existential part of the Munda tribal community.

The objectives of the study are:

- To elaborate on the discrimination of the tribal community from the colonial period to the contemporary, taking geography as the focal area for such bigotry
- To elucidate how cultural hegemony can be explored through the tribal land
- To highlight how tribal *Munda* community have become the subaltern society through institutional power structure and how resistance remains the only source of survival

Thus, through the lens of subaltern geopolitics, the study examines how the source of domination and subjugation is connected with the land and justifies the Munda tribal community's resistance as their only way of survival.

The study has been divided into four significant sections structurally. The first part deals with the methodology employed in this study. The following section brings out the different perspectives of theories with the existing literature review on subaltern geopolitics, cultural hegemony, power, and resistance. The discussion is classified into three major parts: power structure and resistance during and after colonisation and contemporary India. Finally, the concluding part connects how cultural hegemony and power dominated the Adivasi community through subaltern geopolitics.

Methodology

The paper deploys a qualitative approach (textual analysis) to analyse cultural hegemony, power structure and resistance through subaltern geopolitics in Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (2018). Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony has been applied to study the cultural exploitation of the Munda community. Michael Foucault's power and resistance have been utilised to expose the victimisation of Munda tribes through institutional power structures imposed during colonial, post-colonial and contemporary India. It also elaborates how resistance becomes an inevitable action to fight against power. With Joanne Sharp's subaltern geopolitics, the paper studies how land and geographical imaginaries became one of the primary sources of Munda tribal exploitations. The significant aspect of the article is to present how cultural hegemony and power structure are imposed through subaltern geopolitics, thereby providing the reasons that justify the tribal resistance.

Literature Review

Hegemony

The term 'hegemony' was first used by Gramsci in *Prison Notebooks* (1971), which can be comprehended as

Hegemony entails two things. First of all, it presupposes that the "hegemonic class" takes into consideration the interests of the classes and groups over which it exercises its "hegemony"... Secondly, "hegemony" entails economic leadership besides ethico-political leadership (Ramos, Jr., 1982: 3).

On the other hand, hegemony and the meanings associated with it have been constantly changing based on the area of research. For instance, Dylan Riley's (2011) study elaborates that Gramsci's hegemony is not dictatorship or creating supremacy through physical force but through moral and intellectual components of ideology. According to Gramsci, cultural hegemony is the "dominance of one state over other states and is largely a case of what we call direct exertion of power over" (Gill & Law, 1989: 476). El Aidi & Yechouti (2017) applied Gramsci's

cultural hegemony to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) to reveal the colonialist presuppositions depicting Western discourses about the Orient. In this context, Riley (2011) highlights orientalism as an ideology produced by colonisers on colonised people to manipulate the native people. Though Gramsci is a Marxist, his ideas differ from Marx and Hegel by bridging between dichotomies. This is elaborated by (Gündoğan, 2008), who demonstrates that Gramsci reforms hegemony from civil hegemony into political hegemony. Similarly, Brons (2017) elaborates on people's impulsive agreement to adopt ideas that advance the interests of elites or state authority through the lens of Gramsci's hegemony. He also addresses cultural psychopathy and how the media and culture industry normalise psychopathic behaviour and encourage egocentrism. Earlier, Femia's (1975) study focuses on Gramsci's emphasis on consciousness's role in historical materialism. Thus, these studies suggest an interconnection in the concepts of hegemony, power, ideologies, land, resistance and subaltern history. This intertwined relationship between these conceptions and the existing structures is studied in Mahasweta Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2018) to elaborate on how resistance is the only source of survival for the subaltern.

Subaltern Geopolitics

Subaltern geopolitics is an extension of critical geopolitics that addresses the subaltern and geographical space issues. There is no singular definition, and the term is related to theorists from diverse arenas, including Antonio Gramsci (1971), Ranajit Guha (2016), Chakravorty Spivak (2004) and Sharp (2011). Ferretti (2021) examines a dialectic discourse of subaltern histories and geographies that have been used as tools in constructing decolonisation. He discusses how classical literature was vital in creating a national identity, a sense of citizenship, and notional histories and geographies. In addition, Ashutosh (2019) examines the regional formation of South Asia during the mid-20th century by using subaltern geopolitics, imaginative geographies and wording. He investigates the time and space of

post-colonial limits and proposes that colonial violation and imperial knowledge led to domination, subordination and resistance throughout South Asia. Imaginative geographies highlight colonial knowledge practised in the post-colonial period through the partition of the Indian subcontinent.

Power Structures and Resistance

Marxism focuses on the power structures that exist in society, and Foucault's studies elaborate on how power structures and resistance are connected. Similarly, Stoddart (2007) deals with the concept of Marxist ideology which prompts an understanding of injustice and social inequalities and how it imparts cultural knowledge. He proposes that the power flows in multiple ways throughout everyday life. Studies also suggest that through situations, power is reproduced and enacted in and by the discourse. Van Dijk (1989) formulated a theoretical bridge between structural power and structural discourse, focusing on a macro-level investigation of the societal power of groups and institutions and discourse analysis at the micro level.

Various theorists have studied these power structures and resistance among the Indian tribal population. For instance, Guha (2021) examines how prejudice and social hypocrisies hindered the survival of Indian subaltern people. He questions the schismatic atrocities of mainstream society, which often represent or witness the modern socio-political circumstances of India. Similarly, Philip et al., 2020 elucidate the resistance discourse of tribal women and their participation in identity-seeking and resistance. In another study, Gokani and Josan (2015) deal with the resistance and fight of tribal communities portrayed in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2018) against colonial and feudal powers for their identity. The authors conclude that the tribals were not victims of feudalism and capitalism; instead, they challenged their stereotype and proved their identity.

The Munda Tribes as Subaltern

Antonio Gramsci employed the term "subaltern," borrowed from the military rank to indicate the people "of inferior rank" in his book *Prison Notebook* (1971). The South Asian Subaltern Studies (1982) states subaltern as the history told from the below. Spivak portrays subalterns as "a position without identity" (Chakravorty Spivak, 2004; Sarker, 2016: 816) in her essay "Can the Subalterns Speak?" (2004).

In India, the Indigenous tribal communities are the most discriminated people and are voiceless communities that have been struggling since the colonial period. From the selected novel, the Munda tribal community is identified as the subaltern, as cultural norms and ideologies by non-tribal people dominate them. Subaltern refers to the power relations and it attempts to rewrite history from the binary opposition's perspective. In post-colonial theory, the binary opposition deals with central/ margin relationships. Binary relationships shed light upon dichotomies in the relationships of dominated and dominant groups. Ranajit Guha, the pioneer of South Asian Subaltern Studies, clarifies in his work, *On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India* (2016) that, other than elites, subalterns include peasants, tillers, tribes (Guha, 2016; Kaiwar, 2018). Ranendra, director of Munda tribal institute, clarifies through historical evidence how the subaltern school of historians included Munda tribal history in the subaltern history. Thus, the dehumanisation of the subalterns (the Munda tribe) is elaborated. Second, the notion of power (through ideologies or knowledge) by the East India Company and the Indian government is explained in the text. It also elaborates how land has always been the centre of exploitation and subjugation through subaltern geopolitics. Third, the oppressed Munda tribes (dominated through cultural hegemony) choosing resistance is justified as a means of survival.

Understanding Tribal Problems through Subaltern Geopolitics

Subaltern Geopolitics is a theoretical framework that gives subaltern imaginaries to critical geopolitics and provides postcolonial identity.

Joanne Sharp states, “[s]ubaltern makes direct reference to postcolonial notions of power relations” (Sharp, 2011: 1). Subaltern geopolitics enables the study of the power structure focusing on the land ownership that marginalised the Indian tribal community by the British and Indian governments during different periods.

The novel’s plot represents the struggle of the Munda tribal community, which is connected with land issues and how the possession of land is connected to power. The Munda tribes’ have a binary relationship with elites through geographical imaginaries. The discrimination of power politics emerged with the division of land. The power structure differentiates binaries tribal/ nontribal and elucidates international power relations and Indian politics. In the select fiction, Munda people are controlled by various power structures based on the changing government authorities, and the study has been divided into three parts focusing on the dominating power during different historical periods.

Tribal land has been regularised through various laws during and after colonisation. Tribal people lost their livelihood because of the feudal land system when the *Zamindari* system¹ was imposed by the Permanent Settlement Act in the year 1793. Through this system, *Zamindars* were considered as land owners and tribal people were forced to work in their land. Through the *Zamindari* system, out of 11 per cent 10 were taken by the East India Company and the remaining was taken by *Zamindars*. “When the traditional tribal land system was being replaced, under the British, by an alien land system, the *Diku Zamindars*, the new masters, imposed on tribals and others the concept of forced labour” (Devi, 2018: 328). When the tribes could not access their traditional land system, their entire system collapsed. Through

the Permanent Settlement Act, the bonded slavery system came into practice. The tribals were given less amount of money or food as debt and were forced to work hard in their field for generations as bonded slaves. Another significant implementation by the British is the Criminal Tribes Act, which was introduced in 1871. Through this act, most of the tribal communities were treated as criminals, and it confined the movement of the tribal people. They could not leave their premises, which significantly affected their way of life. With the Permanent Settlement Act² and Criminal Tribes Act,³ the tribal people lost their livelihood. Consequently, they were prompted to work as labourers in the fields of *Zamindars* and Moneylenders.

Discrimination of Tribes through Cultural Hegemony

Hegemony demonstrates how a group of people have been dominated by a particular group, through cultural hegemony. According to Gramsci’s hegemony, domination or power relations take place in two types; the first one is by force, known as coercion (*Dominio*), and the second one is through consensus (*Direzione*) (Ramos, Jr., 1982). Earlier, the idea of hegemony was promoted by Karl Marx, who said, “[t]he ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class” (Bates, 1975: 351). Gramsci extended this idea from Marx. “Gramsci’s notion of hegemony rests, as he himself states, on a fundamental text of Marx” (Boothman, 2008: 201). Hegemony takes place into two types they are coercion and concern. Gramsci emphasises ruling through concern. The concern will be practised through cultural ideology and leadership. “intellectual and moral leadership that embedded a ruling class across society” (Martin, 2023: 1). The current paper brings out

¹ The *Zamindari* system was a tax revenue system that gave ownership rights to intermediaries known as *Zamindars*. Lord Cornwallis introduced the system in 1793 through the Permanent Settlement Act.

² The Permanent Settlement Act was an agreement between East India Company and *Zamindars* to ensure a

regular flow of Tax to East India Company in West Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha.

³ During the British administration in India, several colonial laws were collectively called the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) in 1870. CTA means criminalising an entire community by branding them as habitual criminals, and the act was introduced in 1871.

how hegemony through concern is imposed on tribal communities via cultural ideology.

Cultural hegemony demonstrates cultural domination through the land, and here, the selected text, *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (2018) depicts how tribal land was used to subjugate the tribe in the year 1900. In tribal culture, tribes never owned the land, and they believed that natural resources were not properties or commodities that human beings must own. "Tribal people had no sense of property. There was communal land holding because, just like the Native Americans, they also believed that land, forest and river belong to everyone" (Devi, 1995:x). By utilising the utopian culture, the non-tribal people (the British government and the Indian government) entered the tribal land and proposed ownership of their land. They made the native tribes slaves to them.

Significance of Foucault's Power and Resistance (here, in the lives of the tribes)

Foucault believed that power is a cluster of submissiveness, domination and resistance, and the power can be obtained through surveillance. "Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organisation" (Lison, 2013: 16). Power is exercised through discipline, and it can control people's actions through surveillance. Consequently, resistance becomes an inevitable reaction to all kinds of power imposition. According to him "[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1978: 95-96).

An institutional power structure is evident throughout the discrimination of indigenous tribal communities. In *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (2018), three layers of power structures were followed before and after India's independence. The tribal communities choose resistance to survive against such domination. Resistance is a complex interaction of acts, techniques, and discursive practices that aim to disrupt or modify existing power relations rather than just direct opposition to power. Resistance is the coexistence of power. The tribal resistance escalated to the scale of power domination.

Power and Resistance during the British Colonisation

Dhani Munda: An Individual's Resistance

The British colonial powers brought in domination and subjugation by exerting power and ownership of lands. Tribal relationship with the land and other natural resources is inseparable. This is evident beginning with the naming of the protagonist Chotti who is born on the banks of river Chotti and named after the same. The major plotline begins when Chotti is 14 years old (in the year 1914) and is sent to his uncle's house due to drought in his area. He meets Dhani Munda, a fellow freedom fighter of Birsa Munda. Mahasweta Devi carefully blends real incidents into her fiction. This text can be perceived as a space that provides a closer look into the historical incidents through a subaltern perspective. To elaborate, the mainstream historical perspective could conceal the lives of these people, but these novels highlight the struggle and life of the otherwise unspoken population. Not only Munda people but throughout India, tribal people opposed and protested against the British government. Unfortunately, that history has not been documented by mainstream historians.

The resistance of the Indian tribal community against the oppressive forces was persistent from the colonial period. Dhani Munda is an active member of the Munda riot headed by Birsa Munda against British imperialism. "Dhani Munda, accused and convicted in the Munda riot case headed by Brisa Munda, did his prison term in Ranchi je-hell" (Devi, 2018: 20). Dhani Munda returns to Jejur from Tahar and acclaims that "I am Dhani Munda! I was kicked out, I've come again. Where is t' station, eh? I never seen a station. No one forbids me lads, I have come" (Devi, 2018: 21). Foucault believed that resistance is an integral part of power. Subjugation through power is resisted in many ways, like riots, murders and sometimes even death.

As Dhani Munda participated in the Munda rebellion (1899-1900), he was expelled to the village Chaibhasa from Ranchi by the British Government. The officials keenly observe his

activities. “They won’t let me stay in Chaibasha. Who won’t? Gormen. Why? That is a tale” (Devi, 2018: 8). His change of place for a living might seem like he is not under imprisonment, but his banishment from the village is even worse. The surveillance of the powerful controls his activities. This can be studied in relation to Michael Foucault’s panopticons. Foucault elaborates on controlling people through surveillance as “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977: 201). As a form of resistance towards this invisible and omniscient power structure, Dhani Munda gives Chotti Munda archery practice secretly in the middle of forest regions. He makes his disciple the master of arrow shooting.

In *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison* (1977), Foucault mentions how ‘sovereign power’ was imposed during the mid-eighteenth century. This ‘sovereign power’, the power to kill or let one live is connected with the complex power structures and authorities and is also depicted in the novel. When the Munda people are out of surveillance, they are killed publically. Dhani Munda’s violation of his exile and return to Jejur village can be studied under the resistance lens. But, this resistance is threatened as he gets killed in public for not being in the control of surveillance. Devi writes, “Dhani laughs and weeps, Muneshwar Singh shoots him in the head. Thus, dangerous Dhani Munda dies as a result of ignoring his expulsion” (Devi, 2018: 22).

Zamindars (Dominators) and the Tribal (Dominated)

The only change that tribal communities experienced after independence was that the British authorities dominated them during colonisation and by the Zamindars and money lenders after post-colonisation. Thus, the power structures and resistance for survival continued among the tribal population during colonisation and after the decolonisation. The Zamindars and

the moneylenders were directly connected with tribes and surrounded their livelihood.

Chotti Munda became the archery master and won first prize in every local archery fest. His observation of his land and people makes him realise that tribal cultural systems collapse when land lords enter their land. Through the *Zamindari* system, tribal lands are owned by non-tribal people. After acquiring the tribal land, the landowners and Zamindars oppressed the tribal people in two ways. One is through bonded slavery, where they signed the bond papers and were forced to work as slaves for wages lesser than non-bonded labourers, and the other is through money lending.

Lala Baijnath, a powerful *Zamindar* occupies the tribal lands and makes the Mundas’ sign as bonded slaves by lending them money. “Borrow means bond labour, and all in t’ family line will give bonded labour” (Devi, 2018: 28).⁴ Baijnath convinced most of the tribal by lending money to be bonded slaves. Gramsci’s cultural hegemony deals with ruling through concern. He states that “[t]he ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class” (Bates, 1975: 351). Baijnath’s ruling idea over the Munda people is exhibited through lending money and bonded slavery. “The government’s report: Mundas are leaving their homeland. Mostly they’re going to the Mission. The responsibility lies with the imbecile Zamindar, monstrously greedy moneylender and other factors” (Devi, 2018: 109).

The moneylenders and landlords were more powerful compared to the Mundas, but they never possessed the audacity to oppose the community directly. On the other hand, the Mundas also never stopped opposing these power structures whenever they were abused. Munda and other Dikus believed that Chotti Munda had a spell bond arrow through which he could kill anyone. His skill threatened the landlords, and the authorities refrained from fighting against Chotti and the Mundas. In another instance, Baijnath approaches the police

⁴ The translated text, *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (2018), intentionally followed a non-grammatical structure and

words in order to bring the originality of the text by Spivak. The same version is utilised in the article.

for help but is afraid of the Munda people as he resides in the local area. These instances from the fiction indicate that the Munda community were promise keepers but were also resilient. Thus, they obliged to the working conditions imposed by the landlords and zamindaris but also resisted when mistreated or harmed.

In addition, Munda people thought that lending money for interest was deplorable. When the people wanted to avoid bonded slavery most of the people left their native place as resistance. "Gradually all the Mundas opposed. Money lender, interest- these words are thoroughly despicable to Mundas. This is most deplorable. Putting a thumbprint on paper at the behest of the moneylender it is in the net of interest that they are entangled" (Devi, 2018: 31). These reports mentioned the reason behind their migration. Devi documents that the tribes are genuine and of integrity, and it must not be confused with abiding by subjugation.

Managers as the Power Mediators

In hegemony, coercion is a part of concern. Gramsci calls concern as active and passive. In other words, "[c]oncern has both forms active and passive" (Femia, 1975: 34; Balakrishnan, 2015). An active form of concern deals with direct domination, while a passive concern is associated with indirect concern. Managers dealt with both kinds of hegemonic concerns. They maintained documents for bonded slaves and, at the same time, controlled people through force. This is depicted in the select fiction through the lives of people from Kurmi, a tribal village. The conversation between Pahan, the tribal village leader and Chotti Munda during the Durga festival presents the evil intentions of the Dayalraj, the manager of Lala Baijnath. He makes false accounts while documenting tribal bonds and never had either mercy or empathy towards the tribals. "As usual the manager made the Mundas single minded in the matter of their departure from the village by putting them under duress" (Devi, 2018: 81). Almost 80 people left the village because of this manager. Through a thorough observation, the manager identifies that their cultural systems were the source of resilience and he announces that "the hunt

festival was prohibited" (Devi, 2018: 81) to curb their roles in resisting against the authority. The ulterior motive of such banning is to avoid people gathering at one place and consequently to be cautious in preventing an incident similar to the rebelling of Birsa Munda. The Kurmi village refused to obey the manager and left the village except for Pahan and his wife. When the manager visited Kurmi, he understands the commotion of the natives and set fire to the whole village. "On the hilltop Kurmi village is burning. Sana says, T' manager set fire to t' village" (Devi, 2018: 87). At last manager set fire to the whole Kurmi village out of extreme anger.

Power Structure in the Post-Colonial Period

Political Power as Superior Power

Independence from the British colonisation did not bring supportive changes in the lives of the tribal people of India. Instead, it created a new power structure that resisted their growth and curtailed their lives. "Dikus never thought of the [A]divasis as Indian[s]. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle. In war and Independence, the life of Chotti and his cohorts remained unchanged" (Devi, 2018: 110). After the independence, the new Indian government brought new regulations to develop tribal communities, but the local politicians, agents and zamindars stood between tribes and government policies.

The Central Government understands nothing. Just passes Acts. Look, the Central Government knows full well that if an Act is passed for the welfare of Adivasi or untouchable, it should never be implemented. Why not? Because that will light a fire. Are untouchables and adivasis a factor? And landlord, moneylender, landed farmer. These are the pillars of the government. Who gives campaign funds? Who controls the vote? (Devi, 2018: 279).

Political positions play a significant role in deciding the power structures, and the elections determine platforms to implement power and remain powerful. Political parties needed money from the elite society and votes from the

subaltern community. The space between the elites and the non-elites had been created invisibly by the politicians. "Geographical discontinuity" (Chakravorty Spivak, 2004: 191 Williams et al., 2011) and "Criminalization of Politics" (Devi, 2018: ix) were imposed on the tribal belt. This political stance of the government made the ruling class voiceless.

Chotti Munda comprehended the role of government (with the mediators like the landlords) in escalating the tribal discrimination after the independence. As a community leader, he questioned politicians and landlords about minimum wages and bonded labour abolishment. In that year, 1976, the bonded labour system (Abolishment) Act was implemented. As per this government law, the predominant bonded labour system adopted by the Zamindaris on the tribal people was a punishable offence. The tribal labourers also had minimum wages. The local landlords, with the support of politicians, ensured that laws against bonded slavery and minimum wages were not implemented in certain local areas.

This is happening since India became independent. Did the leaders not know this? Or did Vijaya Modi not know this? Look at the Minimum Wage Act for farm workers. No State Labour Department in India has implemented it. And is it just the government? The ones who wave the red flag and make peasant movements have also said not a word about the minimum wage. Though they're Comnis, they are true Indians, and they know that if you give minimum wage, the big farmers will be enraged. And you cannot do a peasant movement if you anger the rich farmers (Devi, 2018: 279).

On the surface level, it seemed that the government supported Tribes' welfare, but these laws and acts did not reform the lives of the Tribes. In local politics and elections, political parties approached landlords for election money. The government depended on the local landlords for economic support, which was compensated by allowing the landlords to exploit the tribes. Gramsci believed that

hegemony could be implemented through democracy. "There is no hegemony without democracy" (Vacca, 1999: 24). The Munda tribes are victimised to cultural hegemony through democratic politics.

Resistance against the Political Power

Foucault discusses in *The History of Sexuality Volume One* (1978) that resistance is the necessary precondition of power, and without resistance, there will be complete domination and obedience. Resistance can be produced even in mundane activity. When Chotti started leading the tribes, he began with non-violent protests. He did not take an arrow against the government. Romeo was the agent of the politicians and the landlords and was used as the source of power against the tribals. When the local tribes refused to work under Lala, the landlord prompted Romeo to attack the local tribes. In this violent outbreak, many tribal people were injured and four of them were killed. Chotti took all their bodies and protested in front of the tribal welfare office. "Chotti says, We'll take four bodies. All died t' same way. If he wants to save his own skin he has to go to town. Chotti lies flat in front of the tribal director Dilip Tarwe. He says, Pahan or Pahami ne'er worked on Lala's land. They were comin' out to look at t' fire. They killed 'em lord, they killed 'em" (Devi, 2018, p. 243). Protests were essential to let the government be aware of the brutal murders in the tribal region, because the government or other local politicians were indifferent about the death from tribes and dalits. "If ye kill Dusad-Ganju-untouchable not a single Gormen man blinks an eye. If Gormen want untouchable-tribals to die, kill 'em" (Devi, 2018: 245).

Continuation of Zamindari Power after the Independence

When the government announced that bonded labour system is illegal, landlord Lala stood as a barrier between tribes and the law. Chotti attempted to question and resist the illegal domination of Lala through legal methods. The power, money and knowledge acted as a shield to save the landlord though his activities were against the laws, acts and the Tribal community. In addition, Harmu, son of Chotti was sent to jail

to silence the charges. “Who’ll will press charges? If the boss-moneylender takes yer life t’ polis see no fault. if t’ debtor-labourer says a word, they catch ’im. Me dad he went crazy with that Lala’s father’s terror and put a nose ta his neck. And this Lala sends me son Harmu to jehellhouse with land pressure agin t’ Lala lord? There’s allus drought, there’s famine” (Devi, 2018: 272).

Foucault asserted that power is the source of sovereignty and that power and knowledge are reciprocated. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977), he mentions, “there is no power relation without the correlation constituting of the field of knowledge nor knowledge that does not presuppose and constitutes as the same time power” (Foucault, 1977: 27). Knowledge and the economic stability of the landlords ruined the life of Chotti and other Mundas. It is evident that the resistance of the tribes by questioning the landlords, which are in accordance with the laws and acts that favour the tribal communities, were eradicated through extreme measures and knowledge of the landlords. In the instance of Lala, his power was his knowledge, and by employing the same to his benefit, he manipulated the case and saved him from the laws.

The power of landlords is that they manipulate the case through their knowledge. The execution of power politics was ruthlessly utilised in the region of the Indigenous community, and these communities were victimised by the imperialists’ power even after the independence. The impoverished condition of the Adivasis and their struggle to find food to satiate their hunger and quench their thirst stood as a barrier to suing their landlords. According to the laws of government, the police had more power than the landlords, but they were not ready to question them because of the economic power of the elites. The law against bonded slavery could not be implemented to save the exploited due to the high power of elites.

Inevitable Violence against the Landlords

Romeo (the man hired by the landlords to attack the native tribes) and his gang enter the tribal belt, kill several people, and exit the region

without being affected by the laws. Romeo and his friend Pahlwan are the agents of local politicians and landlords. They maintained a legal group called Youth League group. Their major role is to control resisting bonded labourers. Chotti understands that government laws are not helpful to them. This realisation made Chotti take his arrow against the power. “Of course, violence. No mistake there” (Devi, 2018: 287). This wasn’t the first attack by the Youth League Group (Romeo and the gang). They have entered several tribal lands and burnt many tribal villages. This mass massacre was planned to be repeated in the land of Chotti. The powerful authorities choose weapons like guns to silence the masses, which is resisted by the tribe to revolt with bows and arrows against the agents.

Now the arrows gradually stop, and Chotti comes forward and says in a completely other voice to the S.D.O. Because the Daroga spoke to 'em, they did' give bonded labour. They spoke of wages with Lala. On his word, they came to get weekly wages. Lala kep' these others hidden in t' room. Raising his gun this'n—pointing at Romeo—killed Dukha and soon's Dukha cried 'Water!' that'n—pointing at Dildar—he pissed on's face. Then we brought bows, we brought stones, and Dukha he's no more. See if Jugal Dusad's dead with his ribs hurt (Devi, 2018: 299).

The power control and domination of the tribal by authorities persisted for several years. The knowledge of the people about bonded slavery and low wages made them question the landlords who had been exploiting them for the welfare of the elites. Lala prompted Romeo to kill the Munda tribes who disobeyed bonded slavery. Though Chotti’s initial stance was to fight for their rights through non-violence, the illegal and cruel measures taken by Lala to mute his community forced him to choose to take the weapons to resist the brutalities against the tribes.

The Role of Contractors in the Power Structure

“Tell every landlord-moneylender; we will teach these Harijans—God’s people—such a lesson in five years that it will take them five thousand years to raise their head again. Remove these Harijans, these tribal[s]. Let the poor high castes till the fields. If this programme is successful in Bihar, it will work everywhere in India” (Devi, 2018: 230). Youth League group were waging war in the tribal land; many tribal people were killed, including Pahan and his wife. These agents exposed iron-handed power towards the tribal people. Coercion is a part of cultural hegemony that ensures power over a group of people through force. Gramsci believed that coercion unleashes violence and force in order to control. Romeo and his group are the agents of politicians as well as local landlords. So, they unleashed the power of the ruling class through violent measures.

Chotti Munda's Resistance

The tribe were honest even to the people who betrayed them and made them slaves for centuries. The pain that existed for generations was erased with the arrow of Chotti. At the age of 78, Chotti Munda led a riot against the powered people. When Chotti realised that Romeo and Pahlwan were going to eradicate tribal people and the forest, Chotti killed them both with arrows. “The corpses of Romeo and Pahlwan. Both bodies are shot through the heart with arrows” (Devi, 2018: 321). After the murder, the Government officials gather[ed] the Munda villagers to the Durga festival, where 72 tribal villagers gathered to find the murderer. Among the 1000s of tribal and non-tribal people, Chotti Munda accepted that he killed them. Before he accepts his murder, he gives a final speech in front of all, stating:

Me father died by reason of that Lala's dad. I ne'er did a betrayal, and still he sent me son to je-hell, and I saved him from t' wheels of a movin' train! Munda—Oraon—Dusad—Dhobi have never broken trust! And what did we get for that Lord?

What did you give to us? You'll raise terror over us ta try their murder, but did they not raise terror? They went to take t' honour of our daughters, all t' daughters of t' families of t' pahan, his wife, of Motia, of t' railway porter, of Dukha, Jugal, Chhagan—they died, and then there were no polis lord? Did you not work this way? How'll you catch, anyone? Chotti asks. What do they know? Now hear, I killed 'em (Devi, 2018: 325- 326)

After his speech and acceptance of the double murder, Chotti was ready to be arrested, but the tribes and non-tribal people did not allow police to arrest him. In this instance, his speech becomes the source of resistance among the tribe. To elaborate, the resistance against the inhumane authorities has been handed over from the old man Chotti to the tribal and tribal people who arrived at the Durga festival. Devi’s narration induces a visual perception of the never-ending resistance that has begun at the end of the story. “Chotti on one side, SDO on the other, and in-between a thousand of bows upraised in space. And a warning announced in many upraised hands” (Devi, 2018: 327).

As mentioned above, the British Government was the superior power during colonisation, and Indian politicians took the exact same position after independence. Figure 1 demonstrates the power structures of colonial and post-colonial periods. In both periods, the tribal people were at the base and always powerless. The managers and tax collectors were the direct representatives of Zamindars and landlords, who showed no mercy to the Munda people and treated them ruthlessly. In the post-colonial period, the agents and contractors were the power agents of politicians and Zamindars, and they were ready even to wash out Munda people and other lower caste people. In both time zones, the zamindars and landlords were second superior powers who exploited tribal people brutally.

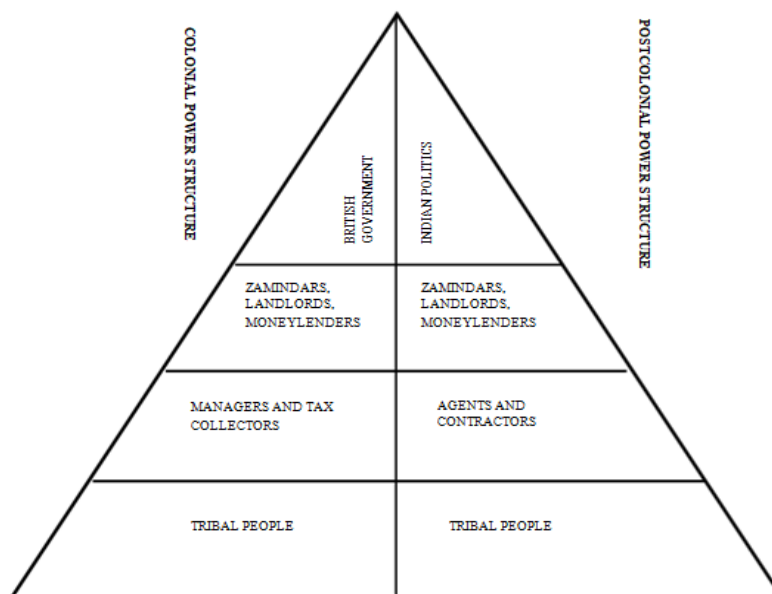


Figure 1: Power Structure of the Colonial and Post-Colonial Period
Source: Created by the Authors'

Power Structure in Contemporary India

Tribal resistance in Indian history is inevitable. During the colonial and postcolonial periods, the natives resisted the imperialistic authorities. Throughout the history of contemporary India, Munda people followed a similar kind of resistance. The Pathalgadi movement is another example of tribal resistance in contemporary society. The Pathalgadi movement started in late 2016 in Khunti district, the birthplace of Birsa Munda. The Jharkhand government attempted to dissolve the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNT)⁵ 1908 to commercialise the land and sell the land to non-tribal people. Consequently, Munda people erected monoliths to reassert their rights. “The movement seeks to replace the power of the central and state government with that of the local gram sabha” (EPW Engage, 2019: 2). The state government wanted to sell

tribal land to non-tribal people, but acts like CNT 1908 and the Santal Pargana Tenancy Act (SPT)⁶ 1876 prohibited outsiders from entering tribal land. Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA)⁷ 1996 and the Forest Rights Act (FRA)⁸ 2006 both provided sufficient power to local tribal people.

Resistance of Modern Munda Tribes

The hegemonic power structure cornered tribal society and made them resist. “The Pathalgadi movement in Jharkhand, in this sense, is a reminder of the renewed struggle of the Adivasis to assert their authority over their landscape” (Singh, 2019: 28). For all the tribal communities, the land is connected to their identity. Throughout history, the resistance and fight of the tribal community against domination and suppression are related to the land and its rights.

⁵ The Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act is an important legislation that safeguards the land rights of tribal tribes in the Chotanagpur plateau region of Jharkhand. The act essentially prohibits non-tribals from receiving tribal land transfers. Without government clearance, tribes cannot sell or transfer their land to non-tribals.

⁶ The Santal Pargana Tenancy Act was enacted by the British Government, which prohibited selling the land of Santal tribal land to non-tribal people. This law allowed the selling of lands within the Santal community.

⁷ On 24 December 1996, the Indian Parliament passed the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act to

resolve this problem and allow tribal self-rule through decentralised governance. This law incorporates tribal communities' traditional traditions into a larger governance framework while acknowledging the distinct socio-cultural backdrop of those areas.

⁸ The Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 is a significant piece of legislation in India that seeks to acknowledge and grant the rights of communities that live in forests, particularly Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs), in the forests that they have historically called home and depended upon for their subsistence.

In the Pathalgadi movement, power structure is employed in the name of development. “The government started a ‘land bank’ policy in which it included thousands of acres of non-cultivable land, to be given away to the companies for ‘development purposes’” (Parashar & Toppo, 2018). In the development process, hegemonic power is structured into political power, non-tribal elites, and Munda people. By abolishing acts, the tribal land could be handed over to non-tribal people. “Grounds for the Pathalgadi movement were laid when the Jharkhand government organised a global investors’ summit titled Momentum Jharkhand in Ranchi on 16–17 February 2017” (EPW Engage, 2019, p. 3). If the investors enter the tribal belt, they will extract natural resources, and tribal natives will be displaced from their place of living. The power politics and economically empowered elites exert their power against Munda tribes. In the Pathalgadi movement, around 39 cases were filed, and 172 were accused in 2018 and 2019. “Of the total 172 accused, police had sought sanction to prosecute 96” (Angad, 2020: 03). After much resistance and suppression, the Munda people avoided the 2019 election. “Our rights have been seized by (Chief Minister) Raghubar Das. No rights, no votes” (Khunti, 2019: 02). In the novel *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (2018), when Chotti raises his arrow to demonstrate his resistance, he is arrested for the same. Similarly, in the Pathalgadi movement, Mundas were arrested when they raised their arrows to express their resistance.

Conclusion

This study aims to demonstrate the influence of subaltern geopolitics in the lives of Indian tribal people, bearing the elements of the cultural hegemony and the power structure of the colonial and postcolonial period with Mahaswetha Devi’s *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (2018). The power dominance over the Munda tribal by the hegemonic class has been elaborated in the fictional representation of Devi. The manuscript employs subaltern imaginaries and geographical location (the tribal belt) and analyses hegemonic power structures within the framework of subaltern geopolitics.

The study elaborates on how power structures are maintained through land acquisition. The subaltern community did not possess the conception of land ownership, and the people with powerful positions exploited the lives of tribes through bondage workers and low wages. The elites structured land as a power source; in this article, the land refers to the tribal belt. Land ownership makes the elite economically stable and possess more power over the subjugated. By analysing Munda’s life in different periods, colonial and post-colonial, it is evident that the power structures have been consistent, and it can be traced to the ownership of the land. Thus, the study concludes with the proposition that the tribal community must resist the authorities and power structures to survive.

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Ethical Approval

This study employs textual analysis and it does not involve direct human or animal subjects and non-identifiable data.

Conflict of Interest and Informed Consent

This study did not receive financial backing from any organisation, so the authors declare that they have no conflict of interest to disclose. Besides, this research does not involve human participants or data collected through interviews, surveys, or direct interactions, and no informed consent has been obtained from any individual.

Author Contribution Statement

While John Vincent A conceptualised and wrote the original draft, Devimeenakshi K reviewed, edited, and developed the final draft.

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