

## Postcolonial Literature

### Lecture 19

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Welcome again to this series of lectures on postcolonial studies. In our two previous lectures we had dwelt upon the theoretical lens of the speechless subaltern through which to approach Mahasweta Devi's story "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha". In this lecture we will take up the story proper and see how what we have discussed so far about the subaltern position plays out in Devi's narrative. The story is about the journey of Puran Sahay, a journalist, into the heart of a tribal area in Madhya Pradesh called Pirtha. Puran arrives in the region to investigate a strange sighting that has taken place there and an "unearthly terror" that has descended upon the tribal population because of the sighting. Puran has also heard some news about an epidemic going on in Pirtha and about people dying out of starvation. However, near the beginning of the story, there is not much clarity about any of these issues including the sighting and the unearthly terror that has apparently been unleashed.

#### **Puran Sahay**

In a kind of frame narrative which precedes the actual journey to Pirtha, we are told about the history of Puran Sahay. We come to know that his father was a member of the communist party and an idealist, and we learn that some of that idealism has also rubbed on to Puran. Puran had chosen the career of an investigative journalist and his efforts to bring to light the persecution of lower castes and Tribals have earned him praise, but has also brought him in conflict with the local government. Thus in Puran we can recognise a representative figure of the mainstream people who, just like Mahasweta Devi herself or even Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is guided by a sense of ethical imperative to reach out to the disempowered subaltern. Here, however, the story also points out the rarity of such sense of ethical obligation within the mainstream. The news publication group, *Patna Dibasjyoti*, for whom Puran works, also bring out a tabloid magazine with Bollywood news, and we are told that it is this magazine that brings in the most money. Clearly the mainstream readership is less interested in stories of massacre and oppression of the marginalised sections of the society than in interviews of film celebrities. So even in this frame narrative we get a clue as to why the marginalised sections of the society remain voiceless. One of the reasons the subaltern cannot speak is because the mainstream people lacks the will to listen to them. But a more complete answer to the question as to why

the subaltern cannot speak emerges during the course of Puran Sahay's journey to Pirtha. It is to this journey that we will now turn.

### **Government records and official data**

Much like Marlow in the *Heart of Darkness*, Puran Sahay in "Pterodactyl" too only gradually reaches the location which is both the geographical destination of his journey as well as the site of a physical and moral crisis. Again, like Marlow, Puran starts on his journey to Pirtha with certain received ideas regarding the area and the people that he is visiting. In Marlow's case these ideas are shaped by the colonial discourse on Africa and in case of Puran his notions are shaped by the various books, government reports and published statistical data on the region of Madhya Pradesh where Pirtha is located. Thus when Puran is on his way to the Adivasi area on a supply truck which carries government munificence for the Tribals in the form of rice, molasses and popcorn, he opens a book which informs him about the government figures on Madhya Pradesh: 22.97 percent of the population of Madhya Pradesh is tribal. The economy of the state is mainly based on agricultural. The main crops of the region include jawar, wheat and rice. Some "lesser food grain" like Kodo, Kutki and Soma are also grown. In 1983-84 the wave of green revolution which had started in Haryana, Punjab and Western Uttar Pradesh had also swept across Madhya Pradesh, and now the state is on the verge of another revolution – the soya bean revolution.

Having introduced these data, which forms the official discourse on Madhya Pradesh and its population, Devi then masterfully interlaces it with stories of rampant poverty, exploitation and deaths within the tribal community. The government data does nothing to explain these stories, nor does it help Puran explain the reality that he sees in front of him in relief camps of Pirtha – the reality of an emaciated old women holding a skeleton baby in her arms waiting for some form of food. This gap between the reality of Pirtha and the government discourse brings us back to the question of the voice of the subaltern. The reason this gap exists is because the old tribal woman carrying her malnourished child and waiting for food in the relief camp at Pirtha cannot speak about her own condition.

### **Why the Tribals cannot speak**

This absence of tribal discourse is caused by a number of reasons. The foremost among these is of course the sheer apathy of the mainstream people to listen to the voice of the Tribals. The discourse on Madhya Pradesh, ratified by the government and apparently supported by data, builds up a narrative of national progress. Even to make an effort to listen to the tribal would

mean to accommodate within this discourse of progress a scandalous counter-narrative of dispossession and exploitation. To hear the voice of the Tribals would mean acknowledging the disturbing fact that in a state whose economic mainstay is agriculture and which has undergone the green revolution, the inhabitants of Pirtha suffers perennially from draught and has to make do with “lesser food grains” like kodo, kutki and soma – and this too is siphoned off the region by black marketers. As Puran comes to learn, “nobody will allow you to say that an atom of the green revolutionary area of the State of Madhya Pradesh is in the ‘perpetual famine’ zone of extreme backward Tribals”. The Tribals cannot speak because their speech can potentially give a lie to the officially sanctioned discourse of growth, progress and national development.

The voice of the tribal is thus never accorded agency or validity by the mainstream institutions. Instead, his reality of dispossession is papered over by officials who visit the region of Pirtha only during the months of rain and then refuse to admit on paper that the region suffers from severe draught and perineal starvation. His reality is also denied by government regulations which stipulate that a certain number of people need to die before an area can be declared a famine zone. In the sparsely populated tribal area of Pirtha, that magic number of dead bodies is never reached and so a famine never gets declared in that area. Thus, though the old woman holding an emaciated child sits before Puran’s eyes in the relief, she is more a mirage than a reality. The government records and the official data not only denies her existence but indeed denies the entire reality of dispossession that frames this existence.

Apart from this reluctance to admit the tribal voice and tribal reality within the institutionally ratified mainstream discourse, there are other more mundane reasons as to why the Tribals cannot speak. Centuries of deprivation has ensured that the Tribals remain mentally and physically incapable to fight for their voices to be heard. Thus, agitating for socio-political agency remains an unaffordable luxury for the old tribal woman in the relief camp who has to rely on the largesse of NGOs to stave off death. As a well-meaning government official points out to Puran, the Tribals of Pirtha, suffering from perineal starvation and scarcity of resources have become resigned to their subalternity. In his words, “A few thousand people have now accepted despair. They don’t know how to ask, don’t ask, but they take if given”.

Apart from the lack of basic resources like food, what also curtails the ability of the Tribals to find their voice within the mainstream is the language barrier. In any society, the hegemonic discourse privileges certain languages and by doing so establishes a hierarchy among the

various language speakers. Those who speak the privileged languages has greater access to socio-political agency than others. Within the Indian context too we see such privileging of languages like English and Hindi. This ensures that speakers of tribal languages like Ho, Mundari, and Santali remain almost completely cut off from social and political agency. The situation is imagined in the story through the metaphor of an asymptote. In an asymptote, a line perpetually approaches a curve without ever touching it. There is no point of contact in an asymptote, just like there is no point of communication between the mainstream people and the subalternised tribal. In the story therefore, the Tribals that we meet either have enormous difficulty in speaking to Puran – and here I am thinking of the figure of Shankar who can only speak in a trance like state – or they do not speak at all like the child Bikhia.

### **Pterodactyl**

This theme of tribal speechlessness is most powerfully brought to the fore in the story through Puran's encounter with the Pterodactyl in Pirtha. While staying in an abandoned hut in Pirtha, Puran hears in his neighbouring room the soft breathing of a large bird like creature. Since Puran is accustomed to understanding the reality in front of him with reference to books, he reads and identifies the creature as a pterodactyl – a flying reptile of the Mesozoic era. But such bookish knowledge makes the pterodactyl an impossible reality just as the government records and official data makes the old tribal woman in the relief camp an impossible reality. This is in spite of the fact that for Puran both the bird like creature as well as the old woman exists in front of his eyes.

Is the pterodactyl then a symbol of the Tribals? There are indeed points of similarity. Just like Puran finds it impossible to communicate with the Tribals, he also finds it impossible to communicate with the pterodactyl, whose silence in the face of Puran's questioning gaze echoes the speechlessness of the subaltern Tribals. Yet the story does not allow us to fully embrace this interpretation of the pterodactyl as the symbolic equivalent of the tribal reality. The creature presents itself as different things to different people. For the Tribals who had seen it hovering in the night sky and who had then described it as "unearthly terror", the creature is the incarnation of their ancestors' soul. It has come to them as a warning – as a messenger announcing the impending doom of the tribal community under the exploitation of the mainstream civilization. For Puran who draws his categories of understanding from books and documents – it is an extinct species of the pterosaur class. The story doesn't decide either way, but merely gives expression to the sense of frustration that we feel when we encounter

something that we neither know nor we can communicate with. This is precisely the sense of frustration that the elite, guided by an ethical imperative, experiences when facing the speechless subaltern. And here the frustration is not simply because one cannot reach out and help the subaltern but also because one cannot know what essential wisdom the subaltern might hold yet cannot communicate to the mainstream people.

### **The question of ethical action**

What ethical action is possible in this asymptotic situation where there is no point of communication? Devi in her story clearly rules out any attempt to bring “development” to the Tribals. This has been the usual government attitude and much like the elite trying to speak for the subaltern, these actions of development too presume what the Tribals need and desire without ever consulting the Tribals themselves. The patronising gesture of “development” thus merely results in the imposition of things on the tribal society which intensifies their exploitation rather than helping them. For instance, the roads that the government builds from the tribal welfare money without any consultative process connects the Tribals with the mainstream in disastrous ways. As the text says: “These roads have been built with the money sanctioned for tribal welfare so the owners of bonded labour, the moneylender, the touts and pimps, the abductors, and the bestial alcoholic young men lusting after tribal women can enter directly into the tribal habitations.”

The epidemic that Puran finds raging in Pirtha also results from misguided government munificence. To implement the government scheme of “Farm Aid week” people descends upon Pirtha and sprays insecticide all over the dusty fields of the Tribals lying barren because of draught. A sudden flash of rain in the midst of the draught washes the insecticide into the wells the Tribals had dug to store their drinking water. Thus, the Farm Aid initiative ends up poisoning whatever little source of water the Tribals of Pirtha had been able to collect for their survival, and thereby leading to an epidemic.

Mahasweta Devi in her interview with Spivak, from which I had quoted in my previous lecture, thus insist that our first task should be to stop such misguided development of the Tribals in which they do not have any stake. Is there an alternative then? Well Puran in the report that he writes near the end of the story talks about creating enabling conditions by reforming the laws, reforesting the tribal areas, and building schools and centres for basket-weaving, handloom and animal husbandry, so that the Tribals can regain agency and finally be able to speak for themselves. This is in fact the kind of work that we see activists like Mahasweta Devi and

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak engage in. However, we need to remember that even this solution might be the imposition of elites on the Tribals. Indeed, the only solution that Shankar, the lone tribal voice who can speak to the mainstream society in “Pterodactyl”, offers comes in form of this question: “Can you move far away? Very far? Very very far?” Hence, the only ethical gesture that might end the subalternisation of the Tribals may actually involve stopping all sorts of intervention – ethical or otherwise. But are we, the people of the mainstream, willing to pay heed to this request? Are we willing to listen to the subaltern? Are we ready to allow the Tribals to speak? I will leave you to ponder over these questions and we will meet later in the last lecture of this series to discuss the future of postcolonial studies. Thank you.