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Manuscript Title: Forest Agency in Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar*

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Abstract

Plant blindness persists to be a major challenge in Indian cultural and environmental studies. Forest, in Mahasweta Devi's magnum opus novel *Aranyer Adhikar* (Rights over the Forest), has been studied mostly as a mere setting or as a symbolic representation of the tribal people and of their oppression and resistance, rather than as an active site co-constructing the existing world. This article avoids the perceptual tendency to disregard the agency of plants and asks: What is forest consciousness, and how is it tailored? How do we reimagine plants as meaningful constituents in human thought and culture? How do we understand the *forest agency*?

This article rethinks the advocacy of forests by re-orienting the anthropocentric perspective that smothers the voices of more-than-human entities and imposes meaning upon them. This post-humanist perspective promotes a consciousness that stems "from the accommodativeness of the forest, where there is room for everyone", a spirit that Rabindranath

believes is innate to its inhabitants and is a "gift of forest living" (Religion of the Forest, 46). A conscious reading of narrative instances in *Aranyer Adhikar*, specifically the encounters between Munda tribes, British forces and the forest, paves the way for our understanding of how plants regulate cultural meaning formation, shape environmental ethics and construct historical narratives.

In order to comprehend and acknowledge the plants and forest around us as the constituent components of the existing world, this paper explores the intricacies of human-plant/forest relations in a forest site and resists the dominant hermeneutics based on human phenomenology and proposes strategies of recognising distributed agency in those narrative events of oppression and resistance. Attention to the labyrinthine interactions between humans and forests during war, as well as their mutual vulnerabilities, can extend our idea of plant mobility and identity.

Keywords: *Forest Consciousness; Plant Agency; Critical Plant Studies; Environmental Ethics.*

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Forest, in Mahasweta Devi's novel, *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Rights of the Forest), is imagined as a living sphere: a space where history, politics, myth, and violence enliven the narrative world. By foregrounding the Adivasi resistance and the bounty of Indigenous epistemology, the novel re-envisions the forest as a sentient and active being co-existing and co-evolving in reciprocal dependence on the Adivasis, where ecological entities are co-agents and co-constitutive participants of ethics, resistance, and survival. Here, the forest, as a perceptive and responsive being that communicates, rebels, guards, shelters, agonises, and teaches, transforms the novel's aesthetic, socio-political, and philosophical compasses.

In the preface of *The Rights of the Forest*, while acknowledging her indebtedness to Suresh Singh's *Dust-Storm* and *Hanging Mist* in writing this novel, Mahasweta Devi assents

to Singh's note that the title of the renowned novel (*Aranyer Adhikar*) indicates her deep concern more about the endangerment of forests, while in reality, Birsa's movement was propelled more by the indigenous people's loss of their lands (agricultural and inhabited) than of forest (Devi 8). However, during her stay with the Adivasis and her extensive research on their struggles, Devi realised that the issue of land undeniably gained the dominant position in instigating their disgruntlement, but the Adivasis were, furthermore, seriously conscious about the infringement upon their right over the forest (9). In her novel, emphasizing this discontentment over their loss of primordial right over forest as the primary reason behind the Munda rebellion, Devi concocts the kernel of the environmental consciousness endorsed by both Birsa and his community. Many of Birsa's thoughts and ideas on forest seemed to be united with Devi's concerns about forests (10). She was utterly anxious about the environment, the increasing pollution and destruction of waterbodies, agricultural lands, and forests in the name of development always distressed her.

At the age of ten, Devi was sent to boarding school at Santiniketan, where her encounter with Rabindranath Tagore and his philosophy became a formative influence in her life. In a conversation with Radha Chakravarty about Santiniketan on 2 February 2009, she genuinely claims, "From my childhood, we were taught to care for nature, not to break a single leaf or flower from a tree. Protecting nature, recognising that all creatures had a right to live – this was taught in Santiniketan." About Tagore, she emphasised the relevance of his teachings even today, especially at the time of global warming when the planet Earth is endangered (Chakravarty 199). Devi learned, from Tagore, the importance of "harmony between human and natural worlds" and the worth of "cooperation and coexistence in a heterogeneous environment" (234). Apart from Tagore's forest philosophy, Devi's forest consciousness was also carved out of her continued visits to the Adivasi villages and her constant involvement in tribal movements.

As Sumana Roy, an Indian writer and phytocritic, asserts that Tagore views Indian subcontinent as a "'vast land of forests', or even a large forest" (Roy 27). According to him, India's culture and its innate cosmopolitanism arise from the "accommodativeness of the forest", where everyone is welcomed and has their place. Here, humans are not at the heart of all creation, like all other beings, they are only "a manifestation of life", they are just "one of many" and none of them are excluded by "the structure of the forest" (28). Furthermore, in Religion of the Forest, about forest dwellers Tagore articulates that their "consciousness of the world, merely as the sum total of things that exist, and as governed by laws, is imperfect. But it is perfect when our consciousness realises all things as spiritually one with it, and therefore

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capable of giving us joy. For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing it and making use of it, but realising our own selves in it through expansion of sympathy; not alienating ourselves it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union" (Tagore 49).

Mahasweta Devi, in many of her works, explores the Adivasi encounter with the non-Adivasi, encounters between forest dwellers and non-forest dwellers and contrasting their cultures through her writings, examines the position of the Adivasis or the forest dwellers. This philosophy of forest, coming through Devi echoes in the voice of Birsa, is the deposition of a forest dweller. The forest consciousness of Birsa indicates the primordial unity or entanglement of humans with nonhumans where the ability of nonhumans–water, trees, animals and other inhabitants of the environs–to generate effects on human is recognized and a relational disposition toward nonhumans is acknowledged, conferring them with animating powers that can affect and contour humans.

This article traces the forest consciousness of Adivasi people, focusing largely on the character of Birsa Munda. Unveiling the agential faculties of herbs, creepers, trees, and forest, it positions them as co-agents in subsistence, resistance, and survival. Therefore, this article asks how forests and plants enter into Adivasi storytelling and convey inscriptions of tribal life, how forest in itself turns into a site of anxiety, struggle, memory, and resistance, and how subaltern epistemologies can be incorporated to decolonize ecological thinking. Decolonising ecological thought requires questioning the dominant hermeneutics based on anthropocentric phenomenology that smothers the voices of more-than-human entities and imposes meaning upon them by rendering vegetal life as inert and immobile. The European Enlightenment eradicated the agentic potentials of the nonhuman world in order to indorse the Western man as superior to women, people of colour, and, of course, the others in the environment. In placing the Western man at the top and associating agency to intentionality, the domain of agency was debarred to plants, animals, and other nonhumans in the ecology (Iheka 58). Expounding the disavowal of the plant agency in Western epistemology as a measured "political ploy," structured meticulously to attain the "untrammelled use of plant resources" (Hall 25), Matthew Hall contends that a full understanding of human identity can never be obtained "by ignoring the personhood of plants" that would surely direct humans to adopt a false consciousness about their distinguished and exceptional position in the universe. Moreover, this false sense of identity would only "strengthen and deepen our capacity for destructive ecological behaviour" (14). Disregarding the personhood of plants implies the denial of plant agency and intentionality which is the fundamental cause behind destructive environmental issues like the

ruthless annihilation of various plant species, demolition of forests and greeneries and consequently, the estrangement of plants from cultural and ethical considerations of human beings.

In his criticism of the futile classification of humans as subjects and nonhumans as objects, Bruno Latour disparages the concept of intentionality that excludes the nonhuman from notions of agency. He considers that any "action is not done under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled" (Latour 44). Suspecting the validity of the dominance of human consciousness in recognition of agency, Latour advocates for a re-formation of the social, viewing it as emergent rather than predetermined. According to Jane Bennett, "humans and their intentions participate [in agentive events], but they are not the sole or always the most profound actant in the assemblage" and the agency that arises from such engagement is what she describes as "distributed agency" (Bennett 37–38). Like Latour, she perceives agency as something "distributed along a continuum" of human and nonhuman forces (28). In her own terms, "there was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity" (31). Two major proponents of material ecocriticism, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, extend the notion of agency as a quality "not to be necessarily and exclusively associated with human beings and with human intentionality," rather it is a "pervasive and inbuilt property of matter, as part and parcel of its generative dynamism". Rather than being a set of hierarchically arranged individual participants, reality arises from this dynamism as an entangled "flux of material and discursive forces" (Iovino and Oppermann 3). Michael Marder, a prominent philosopher, contests the norms that plants lack intelligence or agency and promotes the idea of "thinking without heads" as vital to maintain "an ongoing symbiotic relation between this transfigured thinking and the existence of plants" (Marder 10).

He revisualizes plant thinking as "the non-cognitive, non-ideational, and non-imagistic mode of thinking proper to plants" (10). To become intelligent beings, Marder advises, plants do not require to have brains similar to humans or animals; instead, plants exhibit their intellect through their extraordinary ways of being in the world. He, further, comprehends plant-thinking in terms of a '"non-conscious intentionality," where meanings proliferate without the intervention of conscious representations" and if "intentionality does not belong exclusively to consciousness, one could conjecture that it equally pertains to vitality itself, to the contingent itineraries and detours life takes in its active unfolding" (154). The non-conscious life of plants is a form of "thinking before thinking," an inventiveness separate from both authorised

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intelligence and instinctive adaptation (154). Therefore, vegetal life is neither an agentless entity nor at the bottom of the hierarchy of beings, instead, a boisterous element that threatens the very categorisations of life and thought. The reinterpretation contends that plants think, but it is not like human cognition, rather in a way that challenges anthropocentric epistemologies by navigating through modalities of continuity, growth, and permeability. Together, these new-materialists and environmental philosophers destabilise the anthropocentric hermeneutics and reconstruct the vegetal as relational, dynamic, and morally consequential.

One notable feature that has been associated with the materialist turn in academia is the renewed attention to indigenous cosmologies and their rituals and practices. It is fascinating that the "relational epistemology" (as described by Nurit Bird-David) endorsed by several indigenous communities from both India and outside, once dismissed as primitive ideas, is gaining attention in mainstream critical studies. Ancient Indian texts identify "an ecological and karmic link between plants, humans, and animals. Plants are recognized as living, sentient beings with their own purposes and goals. Therefore, plants are considered to be within the realm of moral responsibility and are appropriate recipients of compassion and nonviolent conduct (*ahimsa*)" (Hall160). It seems that we have started to take into consideration what many Indian and other non-Western societies believed and practiced for centuries.

It is indeed here that Mahasweta Devi's novel intervenes. It does not depict trees, rivers and forests as mere abstract signs, or allegories of nature, rather, it demonstrates these as lived registers of violence, misery, and survival among Adivasis. She used to frequently visit Adivasi villages of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Bihar, and West Bengal and meticulously observed their ways of living. Her lifetime involvement with these people profoundly shaped her intellectual outlook and literary oeuvre, establishing her as a distinguished figure among her contemporaries. In Mahasweta Devi's stories and novels, nature and humans are represented as equally stuck in a despotic structure, their survival and devastation interwoven in the same thread (Chakravarty 80). Despite her widespread recognition as a writer and activist dedicated to Adivasi communities, to their lived experiences, struggles, and rights, a significant portion of her works also foregrounds environmental concerns. Apart from *Aranyer Adhikar*, works such as *Agnigarbha*, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, along with several other stories, articulate a deep concern for ecological degradation and the destructive consequences of environmental exploitation. The narrative of *Aranyer Adhikar* is located within the forested landscapes of the Chotanagpur Plateau, covering the regions of Ranchi, Khunti, Singhbhum, and Palamau. Beside Mahasweta Devi, writers like Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay and Buddhadev Guha have written about these forests and the inhabitants.

Aranyer Adhikar is a brilliantly investigated historical novel about the Munda Rebellion of 1899–1900. The Mundas are an Adivasi community of India, primarily found in regions like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal. The novel, set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, chronicles the Munda uprising led by the courageous leader, Birsa Munda. The rebellion was a result of deep discontent against the British Raj and the oppressive rules that encroached their traditional rights to the forest land and disrupted and criminalised their mode of existence, thereby undermining their material, cultural and ecological survival. Mahasweta Devi's depiction of the bureaucratic annexation of forested lands and the eradication of indigenous existence resonates with Guha and Gadgil's criticism of colonial forestry. The enactment of forest policies dislocates native inhabitants and invalidates traditional ecological knowledge. By explicating this process, her novel frames it not just as a historical occurrence but as an historical continuum, in which postcolonial geographies continue to reflect environmental vulnerability and socio-cultural displacement. Her novel locates ecological disruption within a larger historical trajectory of epistemological and material expropriation.

The Chotanagpur plateau, the setting of the novel, with its dense forests, winding rivers and wild animals regulate the life patterns of tribal people. They move, cultivate and harvest in accordance with their natural surroundings. The forest, inhabited by the Adivasis, is packed with Sal, Piyasal, Kendu, Behera, Tamarind, Wild Jamun, Jackfruit, Chatim, gooseberry, Palash, Jujube, Kusum and Shimul trees. The forest paths were covered with bamboo groves, Alkushi bushes and Goyalkenre creepers. In autumn, Shiuli blooms, and the creepers of Alanji springs on forest waterholes in monsoon. The fertile ground is stocked with sweet tubers and roots. Wild animals such as tigers, bears, leopards, wild boars, deer, wolves, and hyenas wander fearlessly in this forest. Rivers rush through the crevice of hills with a resonant roar and silverfishes glide in its water.

The Mundas depend on the forest for food, fuel, and other means of livelihood on the forest. To sustain themselves, they collect wild fruits and vegetables like tubers, wild berries, telakucha, bonkachu, amla, and millets; hunt animals like wild rabbits and porcupines; and cultivate forest lands. Their bond with nature is sculpted by several rituals such as ceremonial hunts, worship of holy groves, agrarian patterns in accordance with cosmic rhythms, and fertility rites. The forest is epitomised as a space of growth, sustenance, renewal, and collective continuity and highly intertwined with the identity and survival of these Adivasi people. It is not just a neutral backdrop; it is a breathing site around which their culture, spirituality, and community revolve and sustain. It is a co-actor in their regular precarity, vulnerability and

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survival. Their existence is regulated by rhythms of the forest ecology – from everyday ghato to mahua fruit collection for oil extraction, from grazing livestock under threat of tigers to kuchila bows making to fight against *diku*s (outsiders). Their threads of existence are determined by seasonal copiousness and scarcity in forest ecology, which engrave adivasi life into the vegetal motifs and pinpoint the symbiotic relationship between tribal lives and forest ecologies.

As Bennett defines agency as something "distributed along a continuum" of human and nonhuman forces (Bennett 28), Latour stretches this relational ontology by identifying ecological components as actants within relational networks (Latour 159). In tribal forest ecologies, trees, rivers, soil, land, Adivasis, and *diku*s do not fit neatly into flat human/nonhuman categories. According to Donna Jeanne Haraway agency is also something shared and humans and nonhumans participate in mutual practices of 'doing, being, and knowing'. Becoming, as she formulates, "is always becoming with – in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake" (Haraway 244). Within this framework, Devi's fiction demonstrates the embeddedness of Adivasi rebellion, their ethics of survival and forest consciousness through the agency of forests, rivers, and landscapes– all of which exert force in constructing socio-political and ecological life.

Tagore's ideas about forest dwellers, when he observes that their consciousness of the world is the "sum total of things that exist". They realise all things to be spiritually united, and their purpose is to live in it, knowing it and making use of it, not through alienating or dominating but through "comprehending" and "uniting" it with themselves in "perfect union" (Tagore 49). It is this unity in diversity which they learn from the forest, forms the basis of harmony and ecological sustainability. Like the forest dwellers in Tagore's writings, Mundas in Devi's novel, also recognize the forest not as a commodity but as kin. Like many indigenous communities, they identify the forest land not as an economic resource but as a sacred mother. In a conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Devi marks that these indigenous 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 belonged to everyone" (Spivak x). The Mundas comprehend themselves to be a part of the forest. Their identity is profoundly intertwined within it. Therefore, any act of forest destruction becomes an assault on their cultural heritage, spiritual values, and communal identity.

In stark contrast to the Adivasis, the *diku*s or the outsiders such as colonial authorities, Zamindars, Jotedars, Bargadars, Missionaries and many other non-tribal people who came into contact with the forest had mostly exploitative objectives in their minds. They came with papers

of ownership, tax demands, revenue extraction, and exploitative policies. The Colonial authorities restructured the forest landscape according to commerce-oriented extractivist logic—through classification, surveys, and forest policies. As Devi depicts, they violently extracted the agency from the forests and reimagined them as "empty" resources is what Matthew Hall recognizes as a "deliberate political ploy," organized systematically "to achieve the untrammelled use of plant resources" (Hall 25). To illustrate this violation, Devi writes, "The *Diku*s come with papers. They show a piece of paper and say the land is theirs. They do not know the language of the trees, only the language of the law." Thus, *Aranyer Adhikar* showcases the ecological imperialism, an invasion that dislocates people while also disrupting the sense of forest and land as entities in themselves. This invasion spreads beyond the corporeal and attacks epistemological and cultural spheres, terminating adivasi cosmologies and enforcing a colonial lens.

Unlike capitalist models, which endorse the prospect of nature as a site of profit, Adivasi affinity with the forest creates of multispecies solidarity that is built on mutual sustenance. For instance, in an episode where Sali provides refuge to Dhani after his escape from the jail, the continuous exchanges among various entities like Sali, wild-jujube, gooseberry, bear, deer, inspector Bharat, bows, taro, banana, leafy greens, ghato, Dhani, waterhole, Parami, piyasal, telakachu and many more contribute to a collective identity. Thus, the identity of Adivasis becomes inseparable from their surrounding ecologies. While Barad states of "agential intra-action" where interactions between various agents like human and nonhuman agents generate identity (Barad 814–815), Stacy Alaimo perceives the process as one that occurs in "the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature" where "the human is almost intermeshed with the more-than- human world" displaying that "the substance of human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (Alaimo 2). The consciousness of these forest dwellers is rooted in their "contact zone", where the worlding of multispecies beings occurs, therefore, agency emerges from coexistence, adaptation, and interdependence, rather than domination and autonomy. In the same way the long relational existence of Mundas with/within forests amounts to their forest consciousness. The history, memory, ethics, and identity of adivasis is now inseparable from the forest. This intermeshed condition is visible through various occurrences in the novel. Birsa's ultimate feeling of intimacy and security in the lap nature is clear in the following extract:

> "He can forget all those words when he comes to the jungle. He can have a dream looking at blue mountains in the horizon. In his dream he sees his forefathers. The two brothers are coming,

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> having crossed the river in spate. Bathed in lightning, the virgin Mother Forest is saying with her arms outstretched, "All these are ours". Rainwater is lapping down their faces. The water of the river is falling prostrate on their feet. A colossal elephant, the guard of the virgin Mother Forest is welcoming them by trumpeting loudly, lifting its trunk skyward. Alone in the forest, Birsa forgets himself and he angrily exclaims to Dhani: "This is my forest!" (Devi 49; trans. Sanatan Bhowal).

Birsa's declaration— 'This is my forest!'—reflects his exceptional wisdom that the forest has instilled in him. This wisdom seems to be inherent among all forest dwellers, but it is Birsa who could realise it through his extraordinary power of observation and introspection.

The forest, in the novel, turns out to be the bearer of the history and keeper of memory, who recites Birsa the story of his forefathers, Chutu and Nagu who first came to her bosom and took shelter. The region was named Chotanagpur after these two brothers. This story settlement was also recollected by Sugana Munda, Birsa's father and Dhani Munda. This draws attention to what material ecocritics Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino informs that matter itself is 'storied' and it embodies "its own narratives in the minds of human agents and in the very structure of its own self-constructive forces" (Oppermann and Iovino 83). Hence, it stores the imprints of cultural history, memory, violence, and trauma.

In Devi's novel, memory, enmeshed with histories of abundance, displacement, resistance, violence, trauma, and survival comes back frequently as stories stored in forest archive. Dhani Munda recollects about those days when life was very simple, they hunted, grazed cows, collected leaves and wood, cut down trees, and cultivated the forest land. He remembers how *diku*s came from outside and broke the ancient khuntkhatti village system of the Mundas, they evicted the adivasis and took over the land and forest, these memories of invasion and violence are caught up to current events of suffering and insurgency. When Karmi, Birsa's mother, recalls the spring celebration of 'Baa-parab' that begins with the blooming of sal flowers; her mother who could tell stories about trees, vines, houses, dhenki, kulo, and rice; and those old times when all the Mundas used to eat rice, these memories of celebration and abundance are attached to the present incidents of scarcity.

In *Aranyer Adhikar*, the forest itself tells the story; it is a storied space of coexistence. Vegetal entities such as sal flower, trees, leaves, vines, wood, and rice become living archives; they are not irrelevant settings but storied material, archived abundance, violation, displacement, resistance, and survival. Vegetal patterns turn into spaces where ecological

memory, violence and trauma are located.

Forest and adivasis, as represented in this novel, are equally stuck in an exploitative framework, their survival and destruction woven in the same thread (Chakravarty 80). The imperatives of Birsa's Ulgulan extended beyond restoring the rights of the Mundas, Hos, Kols, Santals, and Oraons or reforming the Munda identity. It was necessarily to purify the forest mother by liberating her from the possession of the *diku*s who were exploiting her. With this resolution Birsa became the Dharti Aaba, the guardian of the forest. In his struggle and resistance against capitalist power he was not alone, nature had played a direct role in the insurgence. It was a co-resistance based on mutual strength, resilience, and vigour. The forest itself transforms into a war-zone providing the Mundas a position of security and hope in their revolt against the fire armed British forces. The Adivasis who have acquired the philosophy of survival from the forest itself, uses the poisonous fruits of Kuchla to equip themselves. They soaked bows in the pulp of Kuchla fruit to turn them into poisonous weapons. Kuchila bows, sal trees and vegetal density operate the revolt. The forest extends the capacity for collective resistance and ecological endurance, it continued to hide and sustain them as expressed by an old village head when the officers were searching for Birsa, "It's the forest who has hidden him [Birsa]". The continuous trade among various ecological entities and their intervention in the insurgency is what Robin Wall Kimmerer denotes as "the grammar of animacy," wherein rather than objects, subjects constitute the world (Kimmerer 55).

Redefining temporality beyond anthropocentric discourse needs an understanding of Michael Marder's idea of plant time. He argues that rather than moving linearly, plants exist through "hetero-temporality of seasonal changes; the infinite temporality of growth… and the cyclical temporality of iteration, repetition, and reproduction." He describes 'plant-thinking' in terms of a '"non-conscious intentionality," where meanings develop without the interference of conscious efforts. For Marder, the plant's "non-conscious affirmation of repetition prefigures the affirmative movement of the Nietzschean eternal return, with its acceptance of the perpetual recommencement of life" (Marder 113). This recurring time has a resonance with Devi's forest, a world with no ultimate destruction. After destruction, nature resurrects, so does Birsa, the adivasis and the Ulgulan. As Amulya records:

> "I write. Just below me, flows a river. I can hear its voice within myself. Stony soil, wild forest of trees without fruit, mountains rearing their heads like waves stretching to the horizon. On my body, the touch of a cool breeze. They tell me, all of them together: 'Just as we stand for eternal struggle, so also does

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> Birsa's fight. Nothing finishes, on this earth – the Mundari world, soil, stone, forests, rivers, cycle of seasons. The struggle too does not end. It cannot end" (Devi 216; trans. Radha Chakravarty).

In Devi's novel, this cyclical regeneration of tree time has a resonance with the battle and survival process of Birsa and his community. The forest transmits the philosophy of survival in them– like nature they cannot be demolished by a hundred incursions, they "live, revive, continue to struggle" (Chakravarty 82). Birsa did not initiate the rebellion against the British government; he emerged as a leader in the midst of an intense discontent and outcry against autocratic governance. Before him, several tribal chiefs had fought in battles like the Mulki Battle, the Battle of Kheroa, and the Hul. Under Birsa's direction, their disorganised fight intensifies and leads to powerful and direct conflict. The community and their uprising repeatedly resurfaced, not constrained by the linear mode of time. Time itself is moulded under such circumstances; their struggle and survival are measured in terms of repetition, perseverance, and the ability to revive in the face of repeated dispossession rather than advancement.

This novel reconceives forest both as a repository and educator, ethical matter, and political entity. By presenting the forest as an active space, Devi suggests that it is a contributor in the construction of indigenous knowledge. Their conceptions and methods of struggle, endurance, and existence, conditioned by ecological entities, develop into a paradigm for environmental ethics. The trees, animals and rivers are not symbols but voices in moral discourse. The Mundas learn resilience and renewal from the forest and together, they formulate a philosophy of existence, a consciousness which realises all substances as spiritually united and where all beings are welcomed and revered. The simultaneous existence of forest and the Adivasis, their constant exchange of reciprocity continuously structures their identity. They are in an incessant process of becoming with as Haraway describes, a dynamic process whereby individual identities evolve into a collective, hybrid identity. Similarly, any account of the self emerges from an engagement with the lived environment, resonates with Tim Ingold's claim that "it is only because we live in an environment that we can think at all" (Ingold 60). Likewise, Forest consciousness of Birsa and his community emerges from an ongoing engagement with their lived environment. The rhythms of their joy and misery, celebration and mourning, renewal and decay have become intimate with the forest and its intricate ecological world. The trees, shrubs, rivers, waterholes, birds, animals, and the wider multispecies world collectively shaped

Adivasi consciousness as something shared, rooted in the idea of 'unity'. It is also

suggested that Birsa's consciousness is not self-enclosed; but rather develops through persistent personal observation and introspection with collective consciousness of, and among, contiguous life-forms.

To unveil the agential capability of plants in the composition of poetry, John Charles Ryan imagines a poetic sphere and explains it as

> "a dynamic sphere in which the lively plant activates and contributes to the process of poetization and, thereafter, remains as a corporeal trace within the poetic substratum. Rather than a reproduction or reconstitution of the vegetal form in the human mind, the poem conceived of as such embodies a dialectical back-and-forth between the lyrical exertions of the versifier and the autonomy of the vegetal presence inhabiting the poetic work . . . In receiving diverse sensory impressions from the plant, the poeticizing mind enters a field of concourse—a plenum, a poetic sphere—between vegetal nature, personal imagination, and collective cognizance of, and between, life-forms" (Ryan 8–9).

Similar to this poetic sphere, the sphere of Adivasi knowledge is animated by the material presence of forest whose active participation during the formation of consciousness is crucial for stimulating Adivasi thoughts and rituals, and thus, generating assemblages between the external world and the internal world of human psyche, both the somatic and the abstract. The dissemination of forest elements into human psyche modifies and moulds human thoughts, which, in the end, gives rise to humans' acquiring consciousness grounded in their physical entanglement within the material world and their being-with/within-the forest. As labyrinthine structures of the universe, Mundas, forest, rituals, myths, proverbs, and songs are all interweaved together, fabricating amalgamated meanings and values out of their stories, as Devi notes:

> "The wind in the Sal trees does not narrate once; it recites the tales of our ancestors over and over. They say Birsa did not die; he became the leaf, he became the shadow, he became the very air of the forest."

The material world, thereby, is the sum of these interconnecting stories, propagating endlessly and proliferating in complexity. This reveals the agential capacities of more-than-human beings, whose individuality is enacted through shared intercommunal practices, allowing them to pursue their own interests within a relational framework.

Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* detects ecological degradation within a larger historical course

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of epistemological and material expropriation. It critiques capitalist regimes which by invalidating traditional ecological knowledge, usurps and violates forest lands and indigenous communities. As in his novel, *The Over Story*, Richard Powers imagines a new community where "the next new species" will "come to think like rivers and forests and mountains," and learn to "translate between any human language and the language of green things" (Powers 496), Devi's novel celebrates the richness of the endangered culture and epistemology of the real-world indigenous communities who recognise themselves not as the central, but just as a part of all creation. The forest came into an intimate relationship with the community and penetrated deep into their labour and leisure, everyday practices, and modes of contemplation. Instead of perceiving the natural surroundings as inimical or distinct from themselves, they understand all forms of existence as spiritually interconnected. Their philosophy does not estrange themselves from their environments or try to dominate others, rather live with them, know them and make use of them. And through the cultivation of sympathy and solidarity, they recognise and unite themselves with other entities in perfect union and adhere to the spirit of harmony. This consciousness bestowed them with a knowledge beyond the limitation of human cognition and language, they live with them, perceive with them, and think with them. This ethical consciousness is what significant in order to prevent ongoing ecological devastation which has become infectious and currently, at the central of all global concerns. By locating a more ethical engagement with marginalised humans and more-than-human beings, Mahasweta Devi, the visionary writer and activist, calls for a re-evaluation of our epistemology, ontology, and ethics.

The novel ends with a plea to listen: "Let me listen. How would I believe unless I learn to listen?" (Devi 216). This plea suggests that the process of re-evaluation begins with an attention to those who have long been excluded and considered as insentient and therefore, insignificant, this plea is now what resonates through the post-humanist environmental thinkers of today.

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