

Chotti Munda and
His Arrow

Mahasweta Devi

Translated and Introduced by
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Chotti Munda and His Arrow

Chotti Munda and
His Arrow

Mahasweta Devi

Translated and Introduced by
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Copyright © 1980 by Mahasweta Devi

Copyright © in this translation 2002, 2003 by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5018, USA
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JE, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton South, Melbourne, Victoria 3053, Australia
Kurfürstendamm 57, 10707 Berlin, Germany

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

First published by Seagull Books Private Ltd

This edition published 2003 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd, by arrangement with Seagull Books Private Ltd

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 1-405-10704-9 (hardback); ISBN 1-405-10705-7 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 11/13 pt Baskerville
by Kolam Information Services Pvt Ltd, Pondicherry, India
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom
by MPG Books Ltd, Bodwin, Cornwall

For further information on
Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:
<http://www.blackwellpublishing.com>

Contents

vii

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

ix

'TELLING HISTORY'

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAHASWETA DEVI

1

CHOTTI MUNDA AND HIS ARROW

289

TRANSLATOR'S AFTERWORD

293

NOTES

298

THE SELECTED WORKS OF MAHASWETA DEVI

Translator's Foreword

IT HAS BEEN MY PRACTICE to underline the words in English in the original. It makes the text awkward to view.* I do this because I prepare a scholarly translation, in the hope that the teacher/scholar will get a sense of the English lexicalized into Bengali on various levels as a mark of the very history that is one of the animators of the text. This is the first novel where Mahasweta articulates tribal history with colonial and post-colonial history. Much of her earlier work was concerned with colonial history and precolonial history. After *Chotti*, the text of tribality frees itself from the burden of a merely 'Indian' history.

This is the first novel by Mahasweta Devi that I have translated. In the hope that the teacher/scholar will move to Mahasweta's racy Bengali with its occasional lyric simplicity, I have included page references to the original.* I have used the first edition (1980) of *Chotti Munda ebang Tar Tir*, published in Kolkata by Karuna Prakashani.

One of the most striking characteristics of the novel is the sustained aura of subaltern speech, without the loss of dignity of the speakers. It is as if normativity has been withdrawn from the speech of the rural gentry. For the longest time I was afraid to attempt to translate this characteristic. Yet, as Barbara Johnson says felicitously, a translator must be a 'faithful bigamist.'¹ In the interest of keeping the faith, I had to try; straight, slightly archaic prose killed the feel of the book. To my great delight, among the first things Mahasweta Devi said to me when I reached Kolkata was (in my translation, of course), 'Gayatri, what I am really enjoying in your translation is how you've shown that dialect can be dignified.' Shown! It was she who had 'shown' this in the text and created a test of faith for me.

I can only hope that other readers will echo the reaction of the first famous reader of *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak
Kolkata-New Delhi
5-6 January, 2002

NOTES

- 1 Barbara Johnson, 'Taking Fidelity Philosophically' in Joseph F. Graham (ed.), *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 143.

*Publisher's note

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translation of the Bengali text included underlining of words which appeared in English in the original, as well as page references to the original. This edition dispenses with both of these editorial practices.

'Telling History'

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

interviews Mahasweta Devi

GCS: Chotti Munda, the hero of your novel, is a figure of continuity, from the Ulgulan,¹ to the Emergency,² and post-Emergency.

MD: When, in the 60s, I would go to Munda villages, their marketplaces or anywhere, they would talk still of Birsa's uprising and of Dhani Munda who was a legendary figure. And you say Emergency and post-Emergency. I used to visit that region from '63 to '75 continuously. I have seen with my own eyes what the Emergency meant, what was done. The criminalization of politics, letting the lumpen loose in the lower caste and tribal belts.³ Inhuman torture and oppression. I have also seen resistance. That is the time when Naxal boys were harboured there, given shelter, allowed to escape.⁴ What *Chotti Munda* or my other stories and books depict is a continuing struggle.

Tribal history is not seen as a continuity in Indian historiography. (I use the word tribal, not indigenous people or aborigine, because it is appropriate to the Indian context.) Yet it is still continuing, the tribals are still being evicted from their land. Indeed, Birsa Munda comes late. His movement was from 1895 to 1900. Before that there were many tribal rebellions.⁵ The first Santal rebellion was Baba Tirka Majhi's rebellion (1780–85). I receive letters about this because I wrote a short novel, not so very well written either, on Baba Tirka Majhi. He was ultimately hanged and a statue erected in the heart of Bhagalpur. That place is now known as Tirka Majhi Chowk. To appease tribal voters the government have named a University after Sidhu-Kanhu, the Santal rebellion heroes.⁶ There is a Baba Tirka Majhi university in

Bhagalpur. There they want to erect a statue. Some people at Bhagalpur University claim that Tirka Majhi is fiction, that nothing like that ever happened. I go back and find and check and write to them. Tirka Majhi's name does not come into the official histories.

Yet after each rebellion—always related to land and labour—they were evicted from their home places. In the context of the tribal world of Eastern India, which is what I know, they migrated towards Bengal, they were taken to Assam as tea garden labourers, kept in Bengal to clear the mangrove forests in the Sunderbans, the indigo planters brought them, this is continuing history, there is no break in it.

GCS: In the novel, you emphasize the role of story—*galpakatha*—and rumour—*kimbadanti*—in Chotti's life. And the novel has an open end, a thousand hands raised but the conclusion forever suspended. Please tell us about the relationship between history and story. You don't for example talk about the actual followers of the Birsa cult—the Birsaites—at all—

MD: No.

GCS: And you have put some details in Chotti's life which are like Birsa's life. Keeping pace with the historical continuity this is a sort of fictive continuity. I want you to talk about the relationship between what is called history and story, the writer writing a story as she attempts to set the record straight.

MD: These people do not find anyone writing about them, and they do not have script. They compose the stream of events into song. By being made into song, into words, they become something . . . a continuity. Their history is like a big flowing river going somewhere, not without a destination. Not without. These phases come like small streams joining into it, making their history. I wrote in *Pterodactyl*⁷ that the tribal world is like a continent handed over to us, and we never tried to explore it, know its mysteries, we only destroyed it. It's very difficult to reknit that entire experience without knowing what their potentiality was, how much they had to give. We did not respect them. About *Chotti Munda*. I find that Birsa's uprising did not die with Birsa. And so through the figure of Dhani, I wanted to say that there had to be a magic arrow, not magic in the narrow sense, but an arrow that Dhani Munda wants to hand over. This arrow is a symbol for the person who will carry on that continuity. Chotti is an emblem of that.

GCS: In a sense, as a reader, I felt that to understand what that magic is was part of my task.

MD: Yes. And this is unwritten history. I had to learn it by being with the people. For all those years, in those years, I was technically married to someone, but that life was very barren, so that was the time when I covered many miles on foot. I know those places, the riverbeds, the trees . . .

GCS: The role of the imagination is so important: the imagination holds the river, the stone, the tree. Everything you have said so far makes it clear that what you do is, in your own words, to read between the lines of tribal experience—

MD: Which is not written—

GCS: Yes, the unwritten lines, to read between the unwritten lines of the tribal story, the tribal experience, the songs. In this novel, by insisting like a refrain that everything in Chotti's life becomes *gal-pakatha*, you have actually not seen this as a deficiency. You have seen this as the creative principle itself, and of history as well.

MD: What I can do must also be woven into a song and sung, this song continues, then another phase, another song, these songs are sung here and there—that it continues to live, this is also resistance. Thus they are making the thing alive. Chotti here is a symbol or representation of tribal aspiration. This is why the beginning of the book opens into a mythic ancestor—continuity placed within an open frame at both ends.

Indeed, it is not only at the two ends that the book is open but also at the centre. In my travels I saw this old man with whom I was not so well acquainted. I knew other tribals well, and all of them revered him, oh he's a legendary chap, and all these [archers] you see here and there, he is the person who has taught them all. So that legendary Chotti Munda provides me with a legend at the book's centre. Where did I see him? One day I was travelling by bus. Some tribals stopped the bus because they wanted to go somewhere, there was a mela—a fair—not a big thing, but there will be an arrow competition. I was entranced. They climbed on to the top of the bus. Archery was very much in their blood. And in Hesalong market I saw this fantastic archery competition, for which an old Munda was brought as judge. He sat on the platform. It was a time honoured tradition that at the end, being the best archer of the area, he would shoot last and hit the target. All these things get stored in the brain somewhere—

It struck me then, I have to write about the tribals, I have to, because these things will vanish, there will be more industries . . .

GCS: . . . yes—

MD: I have to document it, these things will vanish. And thus came *Chotti Munda*. In it, so many experiences, I had stored them so lovingly—*Chotti* is my best beloved book. I had such a great *asthirata* in me, such a restlessness; an *udbeg*, this anxiety: I have to write, somehow I have to document this period which I have experienced because it is going away, it is vanishing.

GCS: It's vanishing, yes, yes . . .

MD: Today, if I go back, I will not find them like that. It has all been sullied, been polluted, and they are very vulnerable. I have read about the American Indians, when smallpox and other diseases came, they had no resistance against it, and these people had no resistance against the cultural invasion that took place. It is cultural, it is economic, it is connected with the land, with everything, they want to rob the tribal of everything.

GCS: In this book you say that India is village but we do not hear from that India. Today, we hear a lot about globalization and the urban. I would like you to talk about the continuing importance of the rural, and also of the role of the lumpen—Romeo and Pahlwan are two such characters in your novel.

MD: From '72 to '75—and '75 brought in the Emergency—Mrs Gandhi's younger son, Sanjay Gandhi, and his Youth Congress unleashed a great deal of harassment upon the people. The region in the background of which I have written the novel was one of these areas. During Emergency, nothing happened that did not happen before, although the lumpenization in the lower echelons of politics was perhaps made more systematic. But during Emergency everything came out. In the newspapers at that time. Since the time of Independence we have had a free press, but at the time of Emergency for the first time rural reporting got some coverage, for the first time investigative reporting came about. Because Emergency was also the time when part of the middle class, part of the student population, were touched, like the Naxalites. Their homes were invaded, middle-class smugness was broken to pieces. And yet the break-up of the Emergency was not because of such measures. It was precisely because tightening of centralization was interfering with the operation of the power-lines in country towns and villages, backed up by the lumpen ele-

ment, that the Emergency was not allowed to continue. I have tried to show that in *Chotti*.

GCS: Yes. I'd like to go back to the importance of the rural. If I could just point at what I think is one of the astonishingly powerful things about the novel, is that you actually show, not just Mundas acting, but Mundas and outcaste Hindus coming together. There is the self-consciousness in Chotti Munda that Munda customs will become things that are only done on festival days, that in today's India, we have to be together. This togetherness of the rural, please say something more about that.

MD: I am talking about a place of great caste difference between the lower castes, but with the tribals they were one in everything. The Munda is considered the first comer in Indian tribal society. Other kinds of tribals, building a hut, or doing something new, would have to invite a Munda boy who would come and consecrate it. He had to be brought, offered sweets, given a gift. And I was exhilarated to see all those so-called lower castes, the Dusads, Ganjus, Chamars, doing the same thing, inviting the Munda boy. Festivals thus became joint festivals. They joined the railway porters when any puja was there, and the porters in turn went happily to join their Sohrai, Karam, Holi [celebrations].

GCS: I see. Therefore, when you were talking about them coming together in their struggle, you were also as a novelist recording something you were seeing at work.

MD: It is my firm belief in the last phase of my creative years of my life that this solidarity is resistance. This is the only way to resist globalization. Globalization does not mean that someone from America, some white man, is coming and doing something. When the British left, they left our brains colonized, and it remains like that. If we have to know about tribals, we have to go back in tradition, in oral tradition, re-read something that is not written, or written in human beings, generation after generation. But we also celebrate its changefulness in the name of solidarity today. Changing their tradition, indeed. You have seen the Sabars,⁸ cultivating their field, just this triumph, they have dug a well and water is coming up, they have never done agriculture but they are doing it; this changefulness is resistance against globalization. Globalization is not only coming from America and the first world, my own country has always wanted to rob the people of everything. The tragedy of India at Independence was not

introducing thorough land reform. A basically feudal land system was allowed to stay. A feudal land system can only nurture and sustain a feudal value system. A feudal value system is anti-women, anti-poor people, against toiling people. It is the landowners who formed the ministry, and became the rulers of the country, why should they do anything else?

GCS: It is my understanding that the main demand, even at the time of the Ulgulan, was that the Khuntkatti⁹ way of agriculture should be restored, and that they were able to get some legislation from the British. Of course, no lasting impact was made because, as you say, those in power managed to stop this. But in fact the Mundas were talking about the kind of thing that would have helped land reform.

MD: Yes, yes, yes. They wanted the rulers to allow their land system to stay. The land distribution system could have been implemented while keeping their own system alive. In those regions, when they clear forests, suddenly they come across a place with a big stone. When they bury their dead, they place a stone. You realize that this was the site of a Khuntkatti village. This was found in the Santal rebellion oral tradition kathas or sagas also, that Khuntkatti villagers chose villages founded on calculation. Somewhere they would go, and what shall I say . . .

GCS: Put the stake down . . .

MD: Put the stake down, and then they would start a village, because their own village had become overcrowded.

GCS: Your novella *Pterodactyl* was published about a decade after *Chotti Munda*? That novella seems to me to be more tragic. There seems to be a kind of a pessimistic grandeur to it. Will you comment on *Chotti* as an early tribal novel—*Aranyer Adhikar*¹⁰ was of course before that—it seems to me more upbeat, there is more hope in it. Am I right in saying this?

MD: But in *Pterodactyl* also there is hope, because they are saying at the end that they will plant thorns and eat the tuber. They're learning to cope with the modern, they aren't accepting defeat, they will not be crushed. They know charity will come and go, that the government will do nothing. But they are not accepting defeat. *Pterodactyl* is the crux of my tribal experience. I do not see them as defeated and crushed.

GCS: No, I didn't mean defeated and crushed. I suppose I meant withheld.

MD: Pessimist, it's not pessimistic.

GCS: Well, maybe that's the wrong word. Tragedy is after all the grandest kind of literature there can be. I was wrong to say pessimistic. There is this kind of disillusionment with all this aid and these government efforts. They have decided that they will survive from the thorn, that is a little bit different from the way Chotti manages with the Daroga in spite of his disillusionments.

MD: *Chotti* was written when I came to this house, when I was for the first time liberated from the middle-class inhibitions—in a surge, written from my connections with the first forest movement, the Gua firing in which nineteen tribals were killed, but the government gave out that only eleven persons were killed. Then Laro Jonko, that dauntless, fantastic woman warrior of the tribals, she came here. I could not enter Singhbhum but, with the help of Laro, I got reports, who all were killed and who was buried where. So I wrote that article for *Economic and Political Weekly*, that these persons have been killed, but their names have not been included. Gua firing.¹¹ That was the time I saw the forest movement. They worship sal trees, and the government was introducing teak (saguna). The cry went up: *saguana hatao*, sal *bachao*. This became a war of the tribals. They destroyed teak nurseries, planted sal. I was very close to them in those days. You can read about it in *Dust on the Road*. Out of this feeling of exhilaration came *Chotti Munda*. I was dying to write that story, it was Puja time and no paper would print it because it was so long.¹² So ultimately from Bangladesh, Ekhlasuddin Ahmed came and took it, and the Eid number of *Bichitra*, Bangladesh, published it first.

GCS: I see. And that was 1979?

MD: That was 1980.

GCS: When you say that *Pterodactyl* is the culmination of your tribal experience, I agree with you completely. I have felt that there is in *Pterodactyl* your knowledge of the Sabars. When you wrote *Chotti Munda* you did not know the Sabars yet.

MD: No, no . . .

GCS: That kind of uncanny silence, that resonant silence of the Sabars, which is its own kind of resistance, that's in *Pterodactyl*, that's why *Pterodactyl* is a more mysterious text than *Chotti*. *Chotti* belongs to—

MD: Yes, *Chotti* is very open . . . it's like sky, and jungle and river . . .

GCS: I think one of these days you should write about the woman warriors. In the police reports there's plenty of mention of intrepid women who were actually fighting. They were also punished by the authorities, and I wondered why in Dhani Munda's memory, there is no recollection of these brave women—

MD: He wants to go back to Sali, he said I want to go back to Sali. About Sali, in Birsa's story it's written extensively—

GCS: Oh, I know—

MD: And Birsa wants to go to Sali. He wants to see Sali's son Pariwa, Pariwa who was formally adopted by—

GCS: Yes, by Birsa.

MD: When Birsa was arrested, Sali was with him and another woman. He was with two women, and those two women forgot his directions and they tried to cook something. Steam went up, and the police came and caught him. And again we come back to rice. Rice remains the motivating factor. Hunger.

GCS: There you go. Absolutely. Chotti's wife, you represent her as a wonderfully brave, resourceful imaginative woman. But she is an exception, she is a leader. I want—

MD: Motia is a leader too. Women do not do it all the time by going to the battlefield and raising their machetes. But Motia, in her own way, that Dhobin, who kicked at Tirathnath and went to open a laundry in Patna—that is women's resistance as well.

GCS: Yes, you're quite right, I agree with you, but I still would say, as an obstinate reader, I want you, one of these days—

MD: I will write, about Laro—

GCS: To write about the women warriors.

MD: Laro is someone I know, I will write about her. And about women participating, those were again tribals brought from the Chhotanagpur plateau, settled in Sunderbans, who took part in Tebhaga.¹³

GCS: I'm not being a literary critic here or a translator, it is just a reader's request.

MD: I know, I know.

GCS: I began with Draupudi after all, she was a fighter. She fought in the end in a woman's way—Senanayak was afraid in front of a woman's body.¹⁴

MD: By just making them nonexistent, they do not exist for her, all this male stuff, they are trying to do this, by mass raping, by

gangraping also you just cannot destroy a woman's spirit, she does not recognize their existence, they are nonexistent for her.

GCS: But I think it is good that you point at these women who are in the interstices of *Chotti Munda*, who resist in their own way. Let me now ask you about the international reader. Your work has been very beautifully translated into many Indian languages. I hope you will approve of the fact that I don't translate for the Indian reader who doesn't read any Indian languages. I translate for the readership in the rest of the world. I would like you to say something, if you would, for the international reader. I am thinking also of the figure of Amlesh Khurana in your novel. I was wondering if you would say anything specifically to the well-meaning South Asian diasporic, what's called NRI [Non-Resident Indian] here, I'm also particularly interested because I'm one of them. Amlesh Khurana lives abroad.

MD: Gayatri, you surprised me. I never expected that you would translate my story, and I'd become known to the non-Indian reader. Amlesh Khurana—I have not come to that part of the book as yet—went as an NGO to help them, with foreign funds, isn't it?

GCS: Let me interrupt you since you wrote it a long time ago and haven't come to it yet. It's the Government of India that loves Amlesh, NGO culture is not around yet. He's very well meaning, but he has this artificial picture, he doesn't know the reality of the place, so he tries to help through this totally unrealistic idea, he wants Munda villages, he wants leper villages, he wants untouchable villages, he thinks that everything is in nice little compartments, and that's what I was talking about when I said South Asian diasporics who have an idea about the place they came from but don't really know what it's like, and they will read your novels and stories—so if you want to tell them something . . .

MD: You see, reading my books here also, not to think of readers beyond India, but sitting here in Calcutta, I'm always receiving earnest offers from people who want to go to the Kheria Sabars¹⁵ and work for them. I always tell them, they won't accept you. What have you done for them to accept you? You don't know tribals. Your grievance and mine, Gayatri, has always been with people who cannot respect them, do not know them, cannot realize that they are superior human beings, although often obstinate. These people come with well meaning ideas, this sort of approach, and tribals have a lot of resistance. The tribal will say

yes to everything, but he will remain basically closed. The international NGOs will pour money in one place, provide the expertise of skilled people, to raise the place that has submitted a project. This is indirectly serving the interest of the so-called colonizers, because that place automatically becomes cut off from the rest of the area, creates anger, distrust, and then the developers start making money from it. In very few cases does the effort reach, to use the actual Government of India jargon, the target beneficiary. That kind of help is not needed. Now the tragedy is that the Government of India itself has become a beggar. And everywhere the state governments are giving in to the NGOs. So many NGOs, for so many purposes, so much money. They want their packaged programmes, literacy completed within this and this, then inoculation, then—

GCS: That's globalization, to take away the redistributive powers of the state and to give everything to these NGOs who only want their money spent on time. Philanthropy is not democratic. These NGOs are philanthropic at best, they are not democratic.

MD: Yes.

GCS: I have come to feel and maybe this is not correct, that in fact it's not really a great deal of money spent that is needed—

MD: No.

GCS: I feel like saying to people, if you want to help, don't go.

MD: Let them be.

GCS: This is my feeling, leave them alone. If you want to help—

MD: Just let them be. I've seen many places, many organizations, where I disagree with the purpose with which the money is given, and I am angry and disgusted.

GCS: Now, Mahasweta-di, I want you to forget all our discussions and to put yourself back in the frame of mind, take your time and think about it, more than twenty years ago, in the frame of mind where you wanted to write, you said that you wrote in a frenzy, you wrote in seven days, what was it that you wanted to do and what was it that you felt you had done? Take yourself back to then, not to today's Mahasweta Devi, but the person in those years and tell me about the novel in your own way, and about the character.

MD: Yes. I had been going to Palamau, and touring all over the district of Palamau, it was forest. At that time, the forest and trees meant so much to me, still do, and I saw how they sustained themselves. I'll never forget those fantastic days when I'd go to the

Chotti nallah—the rivulet. Chotti is actually the source of the Damodar. When it enters Bengal it becomes Damodar. But where Chotti starts, the source, it was fantastic. In the morning I'd find, on the sands of the river, tracks of bears; in the night they come, cross over, eat berries and go. And I saw the bridge where Chotti saved Tirathnath. On two sides there are two low hills, and there is a slope, the train goes up. When elephants crossed the rail lines, the train stopped there, it was fantastic to see, an entire train stopping, letting the elephants pass in their slow grandeur. . . . At that time I found the animals unconscious, because the train did not matter to them, did not exist for all these trees, birds, snakes . . .

GCS: I should let you have the last word but I have to tell you something. You know what fills me with the greatest anguish, it's Birsa—twenty-five, a twenty-five-year old boy of such courage, dying in jail, that last stuff, you know, vomiting blood, making that sound, and dying suddenly. That fills me with anguish. You know, we hear of death in custody, and that is an intolerable thing. But when I think of Birsa in his twenties, with that kind of courage and imagination and leadership, dying that way in jail, that fills me with anguish.

MD: Slow arsenic poisoning. I made a conference with the doctors. And he dragged his chains, in a small room, from this end to that end. You have read my story 'Lifer'—it's like that. Terrible. Birsa himself was a gentle person. He did not learn to kill alone. Of course they learn to use arrows and other weapons, but they don't go to kill alone. They also help nature to survive. They use weapons, but they are not bloodthirsty. They are basically gentle, polite, highly civilized, and this innate blood civilization runs back thousands of years. A tribal lives in harmony with the nature around him, with human beings, even intruders. With everyone. So when he kills, it is a necessary killing.

GCS: And in fact, in Singh's book, in the Appendix, there is a conversation between the lawyer and the judge. The way in which they decided that these people were violent, it's a farce.¹⁶

MD: An absolute farce.

GCS: There was no justice.

MD: About Chotti also, throughout the book you'll see, Chotti is never raising his arrow to kill anyone, he is basically a civilized polite person. If we think of what Gandhi means, patience,

tolerance, forgiveness, tribals have it. The way they suffer us is because they have a very ancient civilization. They can do it, we cannot. We get angry, lose our tempers, become beasts, they do not. When they do it, one must understand their extreme desperation. In Birsa it was like that, and in Dhani don't you find it fantastic that he had to go back to Sailrakab?

GCS: I think the conception of Dhani's character is extremely beautiful.

MD: Fantastic, na? Because I read that Dhani suffered for so many years, I had to make Dhani like that.

GCS: But you never met him?

MD: No. Dhani it was impossible to meet—

GCS: Of course, of course—

MD: Because it was so long ago . . .

GCS: When in this novel, Chotti is likened to Gandhi, I thought of the ancient Lochhu Sabar¹⁷ who was in the national liberation movement—as if Lochhu was speaking, but you hadn't met Lochhu yet!

MD: No, no, I hadn't. But when I went to the Sabars, I found answers to all my questions, everything I had written about tribals, I found in them. That's why I'm so vulnerable about them, so touchy, one can take advantage of them so easily. That's why I cannot do anything when I think of their faces. Lochhu-da and you and me in Akarbaid. Do you remember with what dignity he said, 'Stop, I'm narrating history.'

GCS: I'm now telling history—ami itihās bolchhi. Yes, I do remember. Let us end here, Lochhu-da on history is a good place to end. Thank you again.

NOTES

- 1 The second half of the eighteenth century saw the disintegration of the tribal agrarian order in India under a steady influx of non-tribal people—land hungry peasants and unscrupulous traders—accelerated by the local administration acting in collusion with the British administration. The tribals reacted to these developments in the form of a series of uprisings in an attempt to throw out the intruders from their homeland. The process of armed resistance and revitalization movements aimed at reconstructing tribal society continued sporadically, finally blending and culminating in the last uprising of the Mundas, the Ulgulan or 'The Great Tumult', led by Birsa Munda (1874-1901), the legendary tribal leader, from December 1899-January 1900 in the

- Ranchi and northern Singhbhum districts of Bihar. The uprising was suppressed, ending in the surrender of the insurgents, followed by the capture and death in captivity of Birsa Munda. See K. S. Singh, *Birsa Munda and His Movement 1874-1901: A Study of a Millenarian Movement in Chotanagpur* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1983). (It is accepted practice to use the word 'tribal' in the Indian context—as distinct from Muslims, Hindus, and other religious communities.)
- 2 During the period 1971-77, when Mrs Indira Gandhi (1917–84) was Prime Minister of India, the country faced food shortage and rising prices (1973–74) leading to political grievances, popular demonstrations and movements, discontent among a group of MPs in her own Congress Party, a countrywide agitation led by Jayaprakash Narayan against corruption and misrule, and finally a ruling of the Allahabad High Court on 12 June 1975 declaring Mrs Gandhi's 1971 election invalid. Jayaprakash Narayan, originally a member of the Socialist Party, had shifted his ideological position to a point where he advocated non-party democracy; his moral credibility led to him being chosen to spearhead the united opposition to Mrs Gandhi. The leading opposition parties joined forces and organized a mass mobilization campaign demanding her resignation. In a final bid to decisively end all opposition to her continuance in office and to keep the discontent among her political opponents at bay, Emergency was declared by the President of India on 26 June 1975, under Article 352 of the Constitution. All her principal opponents—in the opposition and in her own Party—were arrested. Civil liberties were curtailed and strict censorship imposed. See Paul R. Brass, *The Politics of India since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
 - 3 The term 'lumpenproletariat', originally used by Karl Marx, is used to denote, in Marxist terminology, 'the amorphous urban social group below the proletariat, "the scum, the leavings, the refuse of all classes", among which Marx included swindlers, confidence tricksters, brothel-keepers, rag-and-bone merchants, beggars and other "flotsam of society"; lower classes of society who are unorganized and uncommitted to any political or ideological position'—Samik Bandyopadhyay (compiled and ed.) *The New Samsad English Bengali Dictionary* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 2000). This is the connotation of the word lumpen—lexicalized as a noun, and allowances made for differences in social idiom—in the Bengali and Indian context as well.
 - 4 '. . . the Naxalite movement in West Bengal, broke out in the tribal region of Naxalbari in northern Bengal in May 1967, when a policeman, Sonam Wangdi, was killed by armed tribals resisting a police combing of the village, killing nine, including six women and two children. The regional movement grew and spread fast, drawing in a wide assortment of elements, including a considerable section of urban students; but with inadequate organizational control and sharp differences in the leadership over both ideological and strategic issues, mounting persecution, and, above all else, the Left establishment's use of state machinery both to disinform the people and the ranks alike and to drive power to the extreme of brutality, the movement collapsed in 1971.' [Samik Bandyopadhyay, Introduction to Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997), p. xi]

- 5 The expansion of British domination in India and the growth of an Indo-British administrative system, compounded with ruthless extortion, fraud and oppression by up-country merchants and moneylenders, led to economic, social and political discontent, particularly in agrarian and tribal society throughout India. Agitations and militant movements started in different regions—the most notable among these being the Bareilly Rising of 1816; the Kol Rising of 1831–32 and other uprisings in Chhotanagpur and Palamau; Muslim uprisings like the Ferazee disturbances at Barasat in 1831 under the guidance of Syed Ahmad and his disciple Meer Niser Ali or Titu Mir, and later the leadership of Deedu Mir; the Moplah outbreaks in August 1849, 1851, 1852 and September 1855, and the Santal Insurrection of 1855–57 led by Sidhu and Kanhu (see note 6). See Kalikinkar Datta, *The Santal Insurrection of 1855–57* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1988), p.1.
- 6 The Santal brothers Sidhu and Kanhu were regarded as the ‘chosen ones’—apostles appointed by their God (Thakur) in a revelation. Leaders of the Santal Insurrection, 1855–57 (*ibid.*, pp. 14–15).
- 7 Mahasweta Devi’s *Pterodactyl*, Puran Sahay, *O Pirtha* was first published in the Bengali literary journal *Pratikshan* in its Special Autumn Issue in 1987. Subsequently published by Prama Prakashani in 1989. Available in English translation by Spivak in *Imaginary Maps* (Calcutta: Thema, 1993; New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 8 The Sanskritized ‘Savara’ means hunter. The Sabar or hunter tribe is today reduced to extreme social disenfranchisement, but retains some of the pre-capitalist communitarian virtues.
- 9 Khuntkatti: Tenure of the members of the lineage (*khunt*) who reclaimed lands (*katti*). The original land tenure system of the Munda (see notes on p. 295 for details).
- 10 *Aranyer Adhikar* was first published in serialized form in 1975 in *Betar Jagat* [a fortnightly programme magazine (now defunct) published by All India Radio, Calcutta]. It was first published as a book by Karuna Prakashani in 1977 [Baishakh 1384 B.S.].
- 11 ‘On 8 September 1980, the Bihar Military Police (BMP) confronted by tribals assembled under the flag of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in the small, picturesque town of Gua [in Singhbhum district], chased some tribals who had to run to the hospital carrying a comrade injured in police firing. Eleven were shot dead within the hospital. The BMP had, according to a tribal, fired 60 to 70 rounds and people of the surrounding area remain convinced that many more than the officially admitted number of 11 died that day’—Mahasweta Devi, ‘Witch Sabbath At Singhbhum’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3 October 1981, collected in Maitreya Ghatak (ed.), *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997), p. 48.
- 12 Publishers of periodicals all over West Bengal bring out Special Autumn Numbers [*‘sharadiya sankhya’*] just before Durga Puja, the major annual religious festival celebrated around October each year, which is perhaps the most important socio-cultural event of the annual Bengali calendar.

Poets, novelists, essayists, playwrights are commissioned well in advance; major graphic artists and designers are involved in planning the layout and design; leading contemporary artists contribute illustrations and covers. This is also a forum for discovering new literary talents. A particular play or short story or novel would normally be reworked by the author and subsequently printed by a publisher in a revised/enlarged version. Some of the greatest works in Bengali literature have emerged as part of this process. This is also the time for annual vacation, with holidays for Durga, Lakshmi and Kali Puja—all of which follow, one after the other—usually adding up to a substantial number of days, and families often buy a couple of *sharadiya sankhyas* as reading material, a custom that has become part of the urban Bengali ethos.

- 13 Tebhaga: [Lit. three shares] A movement of tenant cultivators or sharecroppers (1946–47), led by the Communist Party, against the jotedars or rich peasants in the four districts of North Bengal, demanding a radical revision of the crop-sharing system so as to reduce the landlord's share of the produce from half to one-third.
- 14 Mahasweta Devi's story, 'Draupadi' in Spivak's translation, *Breast Stories* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998).
- 15 The Kheria Sabars are a minority hunter tribe, concentrated mainly in Purulia district, West Bengal, but also to be found in the forest areas of Medinipur and Bankura districts of West Bengal. Officially notified as a criminal tribe [by the British Government] (with Lodhas and Sabars) in 1871; denotified in 1952 by the Government of India, and accorded the status of a 'Scheduled Tribe' according to the 1947-49 Constitution of India. Cf. Mahasweta Devi, 'The Kherias of West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7 September 1985; collected in Maitreya Ghatak (ed.), *Dust on the Road*. See also *Bortika*, Kheria Sabar Special Number, July–December 1987.
- 16 This exchange, reported in *The Bengalee*, 23 May 1900, between the Munda's Counsel and the Magistrate, illustrates a typical day in the trial of Munda prisoners—Singh, *Birsa Munda*, p. 259–66.
- 17 During the movement for Indian Independence in 1942, Lochhu Sabar mobilized thousands of tribals, armed with bows and arrows, and under the leadership of the Gandhiite leader Rebatī Chattopadhyay attacked the Burrabazar Police Precinct [thana] in Purulia and was arrested with several others. He spent ten years in jail. He is 88 years old and lives in Jehanabad village in Purulia District in southwestern West Bengal.

HIS NAME IS CHOTTI MUNDA. Chotti is of course also the name of a river. There is a story behind a river giving him a name. Stories grow around him all the time. It seems that mica or coal came out of the ground wherever his forefather Purti Munda went. As a result stories grew about him as well. Purti brought his wife and kids from Chaibasha to Palamau. Cleared the forest and settled a home. This time weapons of stone emerged from under the soil of his fields. Immediately there was talk. Suddenly one day many kinds of people—White-Bengali-Bihari—appeared and evicted him from his home. Stone Age arms give the right to the Government's Department of Archaeology.

His spirit was quite broken. Why does coal or mica appear if he breaks ground? Why do Whites-Bengalis-Biharis appear right away? What is the reason? Why can he not live in peace anywhere? However remote the place he travels to, something will come out from under ground, immediately a big settlement will grow there. His Mundari world will shrink. He doesn't want anything, after all. A small village. All the locals adivasi, worshippers of god Haram. Followers of a priest, the pahan.

That he's failing at this, is Haram god angry with him then? Pahan says in a melancholy voice, Purti Munda! T'woulda been better if ye'd been Hindu, been Christian. Now if we keep ye, our lives will also be spent wanderin' this way.

His wife said the same thing. Where'er ye go, why da things come out from under ground?

Come, let's go elsewhere.

They made a home by Chotti River. The riverbank is like a high hill, and the hut is on this slope. He fishes in the bosom of the river at evening. One day at glimmering twilight he saw amazed that there was gold dust in the sand that had come up in his net.

He sat down on the sand. He remembers how White men and Biharis jumped at the sight of coal and mica, how instantly they disfigured adivasi areas with slums of tile-roofed dwellings. Who knows what such people will do if they see gold? These hills, these forests, this river will once again be spoiled. With great loss of spirit he brought up sand once more in his open palms. Gold again. Now he decides. The Hindu enthusiastic sect Sadan, Christian missionary and tea garden recruiters, all three want to get him. Purti Munda went in search of the recruiter. Let his wife and kids live. At departure he tells his wife, there's a kid in your belly. Call him Chotti if it's a boy.

Purti Munda was most ill-fated. In search of the recruiter he enters a prosperous Hindu village and sleeps under the very tree from whose roots the stolen plate of the landowner begins to emerge. As a result he is caught and jailed immediately. Recruited as soon as freed. Then Mauritius. What happened after that is unknown. But river names keep inscribing themselves as the names of his descendants. That is the reason why the two great-grandsons of Purti Munda are named after rivers—Chotti Munda and Koel Munda. Their home is still on the banks of the Chotti. Even today. But Purti Munda's wishes were not fulfilled. He had escaped for fear that outsiders in search of gold would make the place all mixed up. Now the Southeastern Railway runs three miles from the spot. There is a station called Chotti. The reason that there is a station for this settlement is that the settlement is populated by Biharis, Bengalis, Punjabis. The adivasis stay at a distance, in villages. Once a year the place named Chotti fills with adivasis. At the Chotti fair on Bijoya, the high holiday celebrating the Hindu great goddess's triumph. Adivasis from thirty villages nearby come to this fair on that day. They make huge tigers, elephants, horses of paper stuck on bamboo frames. They carry the animals and dance. Women dance too. They drink moua, the adivasis' berry liquor. Non-adivasi men are forbidden to go near these dancers at the fair. If they do they might harass the adivasi women sexually and the State dislikes fires in dry grass. Police come from the Tohri thana to avoid such

incidents. The dance goes on from eleven in the morning to three o' clock. Then the real fun of Chotti fair starts. The fair is held in a spacious field. There is an adivasi archery competition there in that meadow. The target is gradually moved back. Hitting the final bull's eye is exceedingly difficult. Two iron rings are tied onto two successive bamboo poles. There are three such rings. The bull's eye must be hit through all these rings.

A most exacting feat of archery. From the adivasi side the prize is a pig. For a long time now the police Daroga gives five rupees. Tirathnath Lala-the-trader gives five rupees, Harbans Chadha the owner of the brick kiln gives five rupees, Anwar the fruitseller gives five rupees. Every year there is fierce competition around this test. Every year the Daroga thinks, there's sure to be rioting. Yet every year the contestants stay up the night eating pork and rice—the meat of this pig and a couple more that they slaughter—and drinking liquor. The Daroga is annually astonished that there is never a quarrel between the winners and the losers.

Chotti Munda says, Why s'd there be quarrel? One village wins at a time. It's now no more than a game. Why s'd there be a quarrel over't?

Until about eighteen years ago Chotti Munda won the contest each year. But the final time he won, his kinsman Donka Munda had said to the judges, 'Tis no' right.

What is not right?

To let Chotti Munda enter t' field.

Why?

Everyone knows his arrer has a spell on't. Th' arrer will hit bull's eye e'en if he shoots with eyes shut.

Chotti! Is this true?

Yes, Chotti had said.

Then, surprising everyone, he had pulled out some other person's arrow from the target. Had said to Donka, Gie me yer bow.

Putting the arrow to Donka's bow, pulling the string, he spoke to the arrow, Ye'll get a bad name me son, ye hav'n't been able ta hit t' bull's eye, go me son, hit t' bull's eye now.

He shot talking and hit the bull's eye. Donka touched his knee and showed respect. Shall I show wit' bow of each who failed, Chotti had asked. True, there is a spell. But see I didn' use t' spellbound arrer. I hit t' bull's eye with me grandson's arrer. But it's also true that I'll not swerve from t' bull's eye as long as that spellbound arrer is with me.

Then it's not right that you join the game, someone had said. You're sixty now, why not be a judge? There is always one from your community.

A' right.

From then on Chotti Munda is a judge at the games. What sure aim, the Daroga said. If only you held a rifle.

A man-man shoots an arrer, Chotti had said. A man-zero shoots a bullet.

The Daroga swallowed the remark because it was Chotti's. Why he eats Chotti's words is another story. Everything is for story-telling in Chotti Munda's life for many reasons.

II

THERE WAS A GREAT FLOOD in the Chotti river the year of Chotti's birth. Stones floated in the sweep of the flood-water. The flood lost force as soon as Chotti was born. It was then that the Brahman station master had said, This is not an inconsequential child.

This is the original story. The station master didn't even know of Chotti's birth. He wouldn't have said it even if he had known. No one would have understood even if he had said it. For the station master's tongue was too short. His speech got garbled. He made do with gestures. It's futile to say these things. The story had been around for a long time. The flood had gone down by its own law. That too no one remembers.

Chotti was obstinate from childhood. Koel's hand was truer in archery. But Chotti's resolve was to be a master archer, to pierce the bull's eye at Chotti fair. He went to his sister's in-law's house when he was an adolescent. There he saw his sister's grandfather-in-law, Dhani Munda. Dhani must have been close to ninety when Chotti saw him. Dhani counted his age by the measure of the two maturing and ageing cycles of the sal and teak trees in the forest—from his childhood to this day.

Dhani Munda is old but not decrepit. He winked at Chotti and said, I have a spellbound arrer. If ten birds fly in t' sky, an' ye tell th' arrer get me t' third one, it'll do it.

Is this true?

Ask yer sister Parmi.