

## **Echoes from the Woods Indigenous Accounts in *Aranyer Adhikar* by Mahasweta Devi**

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### **Abstract**

This study analyses the depiction of indigenous narratives in Mahasweta Devi's novel *Aranyer Adhikar*, emphasising the text's emphasis on the voices, struggles, and cultural identity of Adivasi groups in colonial India. The story depicts the historical struggle of tribal communities to colonial exploitation, land dispossession, and socio-economic marginalisation. The depiction of Birsa Munda and the Munda society emphasises the profound connection between indigenous peoples and the forest, framing land not only as territory but as a wellspring of identity, spirituality, and collective memory. The study examines how the novel contests prevailing historical narratives by highlighting subaltern voices and underscoring indigenous agency. The study examines themes of resistance, cultural survival, ecological belonging, and the politics of representation through a postcolonial and subaltern lens. It examines how Mahasweta Devi utilises writing as a vehicle for social activism, chronicling the experiences of marginalised groups while opposing colonial and feudal systems of oppression. This paper posits that *Aranyer Adhikar* is a crucial literary contribution that enhances indigenous viewpoints and aids in the recontextualization of Indian history through marginalised narratives, by placing the novel within the wider discussions of indigenous literature and current debates on tribal rights in India.

**Keywords:** Forest and culture, Indigenous narratives, Adivasi identity, Tribal resistance, Marginalised voices, Subaltern studies, colonial history

### **Introduction**

Indian literature has historically been a potent tool for challenging prevailing historical narratives and elevating marginalised voices. Mahasweta Devi, whose writings highlight the lived reality of tribal and subaltern people in India, is one of the authors who has made a substantial contribution to this tradition. Her seminal work, *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Rights of the Forest), examines the Munda tribe's historical resistance against colonial tyranny under Birsa Munda's leadership. In addition to narrating a historical uprising, the story reclaims indigenous viewpoints that have frequently been ignored or marginalised in popular historiography. Saroj Bandyopadhyaya notes that Bengali literature often serves as "a mirror to the changing consciousness of society," reflecting the sociopolitical realities of its era (Bandyopadhyaya 10).

*Aranyer Adhikar* places the tribal conflict in the larger framework of socioeconomic marginalisation, land confiscation, and colonial exploitation. The book portrays nature as an essential component of tribal identity and cultural survival, highlighting the close relationships that exist between indigenous cultures and the forest. According to academics, Devi's story highlights indigenous environmental knowledge and ecological belonging. The book illustrates how tribal tribes view the forest as "a living cultural space that sustains both identity and resistance," according to Priyansu Sekhar Routray (Routray 98). The interdependence of land, culture, and indigenous knowledge systems is highlighted by this ecological aspect.

Devi's work also reveals the systematic violence that colonial officials, landlords, and missionary organisations inflict upon tribal tribes. The book emphasises the structural oppression that Adivasi communities endure through striking portrayals of injustice and exploitation. *Aranyer Adhikar* describes how indigenous people experienced "economic exploitation and social marginalisation under colonial rule," according to K. Mahendrarvarman and T. Deivasigamani (Mahendrarvarman and Deivasigamani 99). The text serves as a literary tale and a kind of social critique by highlighting these inequalities. Devi's interpretation of Birsa Munda turns the historical person into a representation of resistance and group empowerment. According to Trisita Karmakar, Birsa is portrayed in the book as a leader whose fight exemplifies "the socio-political consciousness and resilience of tribal existence" (Karmakar 3). Through this portrayal, the book questions prevailing historical accounts and gives long-suppressed subaltern voices more prominence.

Thus, this study looks at how themes of resistance, ecological belonging, and cultural identity are used by *Aranyer Adhikar* to create indigenous narratives. The study examines how Mahasweta Devi's work reimagines Indian history from the viewpoint of marginalised people and affirms the lasting significance of tribal voices in contemporary literary and cultural discussions by placing the book within postcolonial and subaltern discourses.

### **Review of Literature**

Routray, M. P. S. (2026) emphasises the connection between indigenous communities and their surroundings in his eco-critical analysis of *Aranyer Adhikar*. According to the study, Mahasweta Devi emphasises the ecological knowledge ingrained in Adivasi culture and depicts the forest as an essential area for survival, resistance, and identity. Routray shows how the book emphasises indigenous environmental principles and sustainable cooperation with nature while criticising colonial exploitation. According to Tanika Sarkar (2012), *Aranyer Adhikar* is a story of cultural and political rebirth. She contends that Mahasweta Devi reframes rebellion as a transformative process that reaffirms indigenous identity and dignity rather than just as a historical occurrence. The rhetorical devices employed to depict Birsa Munda's movement as both resistance and a recovery of tribal sovereignty are the main subject of Sarkar's analysis. Iftakhar Ahmed (2023) takes an eco-critical approach to *Aranyer Adhikar*, examining how Mahasweta Devi portrays the forest as a crucial component of tribal identity and way of life. According to the study, the book highlights indigenous ecological expertise while criticising colonial exploitation of natural resources. Ahmed adds that the work offers a potent commentary on indigenous populations' rights and environmental justice.

### **Methodology**

This study examines indigenous narratives in *Aranyer Adhikar* through a qualitative textual analysis employing postcolonial and subaltern frameworks. While secondary sources aid in interpretation, primary study concentrates on Mahasweta Devi's text. The method focuses on how literature reconstructs tribal resistance and "articulates the lived realities of marginalised communities."

### **Discussion**

Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* is discussed with an emphasis on how the book depicts indigenous narratives and the hardships faced by Adivasi communities during colonial control. The story emphasises themes of resistance, identity, and cultural survival through the historical figure of Birsa Munda. By highlighting marginalised voices and indigenous viewpoints

within Indian literary discourse, scholars note that the novel challenges dominant historical narratives and reconstructs tribal agency (Bose 188).

### **Indigenous Peoples' Stories: Voices from the Woods**

Indian literature has grown in importance as a platform for expressing marginalised cultural identities and histories. Mahasweta Devi is one of the authors that introduced indigenous communities' experiences into popular literature. Her book *Aranyer Adhikar* highlights indigenous viewpoints that are frequently overlooked in traditional historical narratives while reconstructing the Munda tribe's historical battle against colonial domination. The novel exposes the socio-political and cultural difficulties of Adivasi groups and their relationship with land, forest, and identity via the story of Birsa Munda and the tribal community he headed.

The literary endeavour of Mahasweta Devi is firmly anchored in social responsibility and activity. Her literature aims to highlight structural injustices that impact marginalised communities, according to academics. According to Debesh Bandopadhyay, Devi's writings serve as a kind of social intervention that blends political awareness with literary inventiveness (Bandopadhyay 54).

### **Adivasi Identity and Indigenous Narratives**

The portrayal of indigenous stories and the affirmation of Adivasi cultural identity are two of *Aranyer Adhikar's* main concerns. The story highlights the Munda tribe's collective fight for sovereignty and dignity while depicting their way of life, traditions, and rituals. Mahasweta Devi's story "reconstructs the historical agency of tribal communities through narrative resistance," according to Brinda Bose (Bose 188). The prevailing narrative, which frequently downplays indigenous contributions to anti-colonial resistance, is challenged by this reconstruction.

### **Birsa Munda as a Resistance Symbol**

*Aranyer Adhikar's* depiction of Birsa Munda as a leader and symbol of resistance is among its most potent features. In the book, Birsa—a tribal revolutionary who spearheaded the Munda uprising against British colonial rule—becomes a symbol of indigenous agency and collective empowerment. According to Trisita Karmakar, Mahasweta Devi portrays Birsa as a hero whose leadership embodies the tribal community's sociopolitical goals (Karmakar 3).

The story depicts the rise of political consciousness in indigenous communities through the character of Birsa. The Munda people's increasing awareness of injustice is reflected in Birsa's development from a typical tribal youth to a dynamic leader. His battle against predatory landlords and colonial authorities serves as a metaphor for the larger struggle for social justice and land rights. Birsa is portrayed in the book as a leader who gives the Munda people hope and solidarity. The idea that resistance is both a political and cultural act is strengthened by his message of liberation, which strikes a deep chord with the community's cultural values and beliefs.

### **Indigenous Identity, Forest, and Land**

The close bond between indigenous populations and the forest is another important element in *Aranyer Adhikar*. For the Munda tribe, the forest is a holy place that preserves cultural identity and collective memory rather than just being a physical setting. The narrative frequently highlights how tribal existence is based on land and forest. This connection between identity and environment is highlighted in eco-critical analyses of the book. The forest serves as "a living cultural and spiritual space for Adivasi communities," according to Priyansu Sekhar

Routray (Routray 98). The story illustrates how indigenous people depend on the forest for social order, spirituality, and food. Mahasweta Devi criticises colonial tactics that aimed to control and exploit forest resources by highlighting this relationship.

### **Social Injustice and Colonial Exploitation**

*Aranyer Adhikar* offers a potent indictment of social inequality and imperial exploitation. The book describes how missionaries, local landlords, and British colonial officials worked together to force harsh regimes on native tribes. Forced labour, high taxes, and limitations on access to forest resources were all part of these systems. According to K. Mahendrarvarman and T. Deivasigamani, the book highlights how tribal groups were routinely exploited throughout colonial authority. Mahasweta Devi depicts the Munda people's suffering as a result of governmental and economic systems intended to subjugate native communities, according to their analysis (Mahendrarvarman and Deivasigamani 99). This viewpoint emphasises how important Mahasweta Devi's work is in tackling issues of inequity and marginalisation.

### **Subaltern Voices and Narrative Techniques**

*Aranyer Adhikar's* storytelling approach, which aims to highlight under-represented voices and subvert prevailing historical narratives, is one of its distinguishing characteristics. Instead of reconstructing history from the viewpoint of colonial rulers, Mahasweta Devi does so from the standpoint of marginalised populations. This strategy is in line with the more general goals of subaltern studies, which are to restore the viewpoints and experiences of communities that have been left out of mainstream historiography.

### **Indigenous Writing and Its Significance in the Present World**

The current significance of indigenous environmental knowledge in resolving ecological crises is highlighted by Routray's eco-critical analysis (Routray 101). The novel questions contemporary development theories that put economic expansion ahead of environmental sustainability by portraying tribal societies as guardians of ecological wisdom. *Aranyer Adhikar's* ability to spark fresh conversations on representation and social justice contributes to its ongoing significance. Scholars point out that Mahasweta Devi's depiction of tribal resistance challenges readers to reevaluate prevailing accounts of Indian history and to acknowledge the achievements of under-represented groups. *Aranyer Adhikar* is still regarded as a key work in Indian literature and is essential to comprehending indigenous stories, ecological awareness, and the politics of representation in modern discourse.

### **Conclusion**

Mahasweta Devi's analysis of *Aranyer Adhikar* demonstrates how the book effectively highlights indigenous narratives and the historical struggles of Adivasi groups in colonial India. The narrative reconstructs a suppressed history of resistance and collective empowerment through the depiction of Birsa Munda and the Munda insurrection. Mahasweta Devi presents land as an essential source of cultural identity, spirituality, and survival, highlighting the close relationships that exist between tribal groups and the forest. According to academics, the story "reconstructs the historical agency of tribal communities through narrative resistance" (Bose 188). In the end, the book continues to be an important literary contribution that advances current debates in India about environmental justice, cultural preservation, and indigenous rights.

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