Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2024, No.1
May 2024
ISSN 2229-3388

A Rights-less Vacuum: Satire, Selfhood, and the Disintegration of Rights in Mahasweta Devi's The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh

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Abstract: This paper analyzes Mahasweta Devi's "The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh" as a scathing critique of the post-colonial Indian state, viewed through the prism of the disintegration of rights. The story's protagonists, the Kheria Sabar tribe, are rendered "non-beings" by a state which refuses to acknowledge their material and political existence, evidenced by their total absence in the census. The paper argues that their central act-the meticulous manufacturing of a miracle-is not a turn to superstition but a required and logical satirical strategy for survival within this "rights-less vacuum". Denied access to the language of law, citizenship, or protest, the Kheria Sabars are forced to deploy the only language the state and capital understand: spectacle, religion, and profit. This analysis deconstructs this ruse as the only form of politics available to the erased. The paper concludes that while the "miracle" succeeds in solving their problem of invisibility, it does not solve their problem of rightlessness: they gain recognition but not rights. The new "selfhood" they fabricate is shown to be a fragile, performative identity, contingent on their god's profitability rather than their humanity. Devi's bitter satire, therefore, reveals a system that will build a road for a stone god but not for a starving people and illustrates skillfully that the "glory" of Sri Sri Ganesh is the ultimate symbol of the state's systemic and human failure.

Keywords: Disintegration of Rights, Post-colonialism, Subaltern Studies, Satire, Political Critique, Adivasi, Citizenship, State Failure, Recognition vs. Rights, Structural Violence

The narrative logic of “The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh” is predicated on establishing this rights-less vacuum as an absolute and totalizing condition. This condition is not merely poverty; it is a state of complete erasure, a form of structural violence that denies the Kheria Sabars' existence in every conceivable metric of the state. The disintegration of rights is first and foremost a material, bodily reality. Devi, a writer whose fiction was a direct extension of her lifelong social activism , grounds their political status in the visceral fact of their starvation. They are reduced to a pre-agricultural, pre-social state of existence, surviving on whatever the indifferent landscape provides: “They ate roots and tubers, and leaves of the forest, and if they caught a snake or a field-rat, it was a feast” (Devi 22). This description is not an ethnographic detail; it is a political indictment. It establishes the Kheria Sabars as existing in a state of “bare life” , bodies that can be allowed to perish without consequence because they are already outside the protective sphere of law and society. Their hunger is not a 'problem' for the state to solve; it is the *intended outcome* of a system that has politically and economically dispossessed them.

This material erasure is compounded and, in fact, *caused* by their political erasure. The most devastating evidence of their "non-being" status is their absence from the state's primary document of biopolitical recognition: the census. Devi makes this the story's central catalyst, the fact that forces their hand. To be uncounted in the census is to be invisible to the state apparatus. It is not a simple bureaucratic oversight but a political act of *un-making* them as citizens. They cannot vote, they cannot receive rations, they cannot petition for aid, they cannot legally exist because, according to the state's official map of reality, they are not there. This fictional premise is a chilling reflection of the real-world legal and social status of the Kheria Sabar, a Denotified Tribe (DNT). Historically, the Kheria Sabar were branded as a "Criminal Tribe" by the British under the colonial Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. This colonial "stigmatic" classification, which legalized their persecution and denied them basic rights, did not vanish with independence; it merely mutated, persisting in the post-colonial state's mechanisms of law and bureaucracy.

Mahasweta Devi's own activism was a direct confrontation with this rights-less vacuum. Her tireless work with the *Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti* and her advocacy following the 1998 custodial death of Budhan Sabar , a Kheria Sabar man who died following an "illegal detention" , are the real-world corollaries to her fiction. Budhan Sabar's death was the ultimate expression of the story's premise: a man so thoroughly a "non-being" in the eyes of the law that his death in police custody was an event that, legally, *could not* happen because he *did not* exist as a rights-bearing subject. The fictional Kheria Sabars' absence from the census is the bureaucratic twin of Budhan Sabar's real-world legal erasure. They are, as scholar Ashish Vaidya terms it in his analysis of Adivasi rights, subject to a profound "structural violence". This violence, first defined by Johan Galtung, is not necessarily direct or physical but is embedded in the "social structures—economic, legal, political... that prevent individuals, groups and societies from reaching their full potential". For the Kheria Sabars, these structures have not just limited their potential; they have actively *disintegrated* their rights to the point of non-existence. It is from this absolute nadir, this total political and material void, that their "desperate and clever political plan" (Devi 23) must be born. The disintegration of rights is the precondition and primary catalyst for the entire narrative. Therefore, the invention of Sri Sri Ganesh is not an act of faith but the only logical and necessary political strategy available to a community of "non-beings" determined to write themselves back into existence.

Flowing directly from the established fact of their absolute erasure, the Kheria Sabars' solution must be understood as the only form of politics available to those who have no rights. A citizen can petition a government, vote in an election, or file a legal complaint. A "non-being," however, lacks the standing to participate in any of these civic rituals. The Kheria Sabars cannot use the language of law because the law does not recognize them as subjects. They cannot use the language of political protest because, as the real-world case of Budhan Sabar demonstrates, their bodies are not protected by the state but are, in fact, *targets* of its violence. Their only recourse, therefore, is to bypass the language of rights entirely and deploy a language that the dominant culture, for all its "modern" trappings, cannot ignore: the language of spectacle, superstition, and, ultimately, profit. Their plan is a masterpiece of subaltern satire.

The "desperate and clever political plan" (Devi 23) is deconstructed by Devi as a meticulous performance, a conscious act of social and political engineering. The genesis of the god is not a moment of religious epiphany but one of calculated political strategy. The plan begins when one of

the Sabars, a leader in this collective act of resistance, fabricates the necessary supernatural cover story. He claims he “had a dream... a 'swapna-adesh,' a divine command in a dream" (Devi 24) to find and worship a particular stone. This "swapna-adesh" is a stroke of satirical genius. It appropriates the very discourse of religious faith that the modern, secular state professes to have moved beyond, yet which still holds immense power over its populace and, crucially, its bureaucracy. The Kheria Sabars, as a community historically stereotyped by the mainstream as primitive and superstitious, satirically *embrace* this stereotype, weaponizing it as a "trickster" performance. As academics like Simon Weaver and Raúl Alberto Mora have argued in the context of "trickster activists," the trickster is a "liminal entity" that "slips through the cracks of orthodoxy". The Kheria Sabars are not simply con-men; they are engaging in a "socially productive" act of "revisualizing the world" to ensure their own survival. They are, in effect, satirically *confirming* the state's prejudice against them (as superstitious tribals) in order to *manipulate* the state.

The core of Devi's satirical critique lies in Kheria Sabars' astute understanding of the post-colonial state's true logic. They correctly diagnose that this system is structurally blind to human rights but acutely, even obsessively, responsive to two things: religious spectacle and economic profit. Their starvation (Devi 22) is an invisible, mundane bureaucratic problem. A "miraculous" stone god, however, is a hyper-visible *event*. Adivasi appeals for land rights are ignored. A "divine command" (Devi 24), however, must be respected, or at least, cannot be *disproven*. The Kheria Sabars have understood that in the modern Indian marketplace of ideas, a human life is worth nothing, but a god is a valuable asset. This is the central hypocrisy that Devi exposes, a theme common in her work that critiques "the hypocrisies of the Government and the exploitation" of the subaltern. The "glory" of Ganesh is the "ridiculous and witty representation" of a system that will ignore a starving village but will build a road to a "miraculous" stone.

This ruse can be theorized at an even deeper level as an act of satirical counter-cartography. In her introduction to *Imaginary Maps*, the collection in which this story appears, translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak offers a powerful analytic. Spivak notes that in a globalized world, "the World Bank has no barrier to its division of that world into a map that is as fantastic as it is real". This new map, she argues, "draws economic rather than national boundaries, as fluid as the spectacular dynamics of international capital". The Kheria Sabars' tragedy, at the story's outset, is that they are erased from *both* maps. They are absent from the state's *political* map (the census) and they are absent from the capital's *economic* map (as starving forest-dwellers, they possess no market value). Their invention of the god is a deliberate and brilliant attempt to *force* their way onto these "imaginary maps." They cannot get on the map as *human citizens*, so they will get on the map as a *profitable religious spectacle*. By manufacturing a miracle, they are creating an economic "spectacle" so potent that it compels the "fluid dynamics of international [and local] capital" —represented by the local merchants, moneylenders, and politicians—to redraw its map and include their village, Ganipur, as a new node of profit. They have, in essence, *hacked* the neoliberal map, using a "swapna-adesh" as their tool. Their satirical performance is the only politics they have, and its target is the dual, overlapping logic of a state that ignores their rights but fetishizes both religion and capital.

The immediate consequences of the Kheria Sabars' "clever political plan" (Devi 23) appear to be a resounding success. The act of creation, the satirical performance, achieves its primary goal: it shatters their invisibility. The very agents of the state and capital that had previously erased them are now

forced to acknowledge their existence, drawn in by the gravitational pull of spectacle and profit. Devi documents this sudden, cynical reversal with biting irony. The first to arrive are the merchants and moneylenders, the local exploiters who “had never given a handful of rice to the Kheria Sabars” (Devi 28) but who now see an opportunity. They are quickly followed by the full apparatus of the post-colonial state, the very institutions that had failed to record the Kheria Sabars in the census. In a single, damning sentence, Devi charts the arrival of "the BDO, the police, the local MLA" (Devi 31). Their arrival signals that the Kheria Sabars have "made it" onto the state's map. But the story's critical question, and the core of its argument, is: *as what*?

The material benefits are tangible and immediate, solving the problem of starvation that began the narrative. Where the tribe once ate "roots and tubers" (Devi 22), a market springs up. A "road" is built to Ganipur, and a "well" is dug (Devi 31-32). These are the tangible markers of "development," the concrete proof that the Kheria Sabars' fabricated god has delivered what their status as human citizens could not. They have successfully traded a fabricated superstition for concrete infrastructure. However, this is precisely where Devi's critique pivots from the *act* of resistance to its *hollow consequences*. The paper’s central argument is that this "success" is the story's final, and most bitter, satire. The Kheria Sabars have achieved *recognition*, but they have conspicuously *failed* to achieve *rights*.

This distinction between recognition and rights is the most crucial finding of Devi's narrative. The Kheria Sabars' fundamental legal status as citizens remains utterly unchanged. They are not granted title or tenure to the land they live on, a foundational demand of Adivasi movements across India.

They are not retroactively added to the census as *human beings* who deserve a state's protection. Instead, their new-found visibility is purely performative and, more dangerously, *contingent*. They are recognized *only* in their new role as "proprietors of a god." Their entire existence has been legitimized not by their inherent worth as humans, but by their accidental discovery—and clever marketing—of a profitable stone. This new "self" is a fabrication, just as the god is, and it is a self that is contingent on the "miracle's continued profitability" (Devi 35). Should the pilgrims stop coming and the market dry up, the road will fall into disrepair, the BDO will stop visiting, and the Kheria Sabars will revert to their "non-being" status, their rights-less vacuum.

This conditional visibility must be analyzed through the framework of "acceptable citizenship". Critical analyses of the modern Indian state, particularly in relation to Adivasi communities, note the immense pressure on these groups to assimilate into the majoritarian fold to be "accepted as citizens". This often means being "pigeonholed into one of the acceptable religions" , namely Hinduism. The Kheria Sabars, in their "desperate and clever" plan, have instinctively or consciously understood this. They did not "discover" a Kheria Sabar forest spirit; they strategically fabricated an incarnation of *Ganesh*, one of the most popular and recognizable deities in the Hindu pantheon. They have, in essence, *proactively performed* the very act of assimilation that the state demands. They have laundered their erased, "unacceptable" Adivasi identity through the "acceptable" identity of mainstream Hinduism. They are "seen" by the MLA, the police, and the BDO not as Kheria Sabar citizens finally worthy of rights, but as humble Hindu devotees, proprietors of a Hindu shrine, and therefore legible and non-threatening components of the Hindu-dominated body politic.

Ultimately, the story is a devastating critique of neoliberal development. The Kheria Sabars' predicament exposes the "irreconcilable conflict" between the neoliberal state's drive for profit and the

Adivasi communities' demand for land and human rights. Scholars have noted that even when rights are granted on paper, such as the Forest Rights Act, they are often rendered "hollow" by a state and a market that prioritize "development" and "extractive industries" over "economically vulnerable populations". The Kheria Sabars, in their genius, recognized the "hollowness" of the language of rights and *bypassed* it entirely. They did not petition for their rights as citizens; they appealed directly to the only language the post-colonial state truly understands: the language of profit. The road and the well are not the fulfillment of a social contract; they are a *business investment* by the state and local merchants (Devi 28-29) to secure a new revenue stream. The BDO and the MLA are not present as protectors of citizens; they are there as managers of a new, profitable economic asset. The "self" the Kheria Sabars have fabricated, this new, visible "selfhood," is not that of a citizen. It is the "self" of a neoliberal subject, an entrepreneur whose very existence is a commodity, its value to be determined by the market.

This analysis concludes, therefore, that the Kheria Sabars' journey from erased "non-beings" to visible "proprietors" is the "satiric search for selfhood" that the prompt identifies, a search forced upon them by the total disintegration of their rights. Mahasweta Devi's narrative synthesizes the concepts of state failure (the vacuum), subaltern resistance (the satirical performance), and the tragically fragile "fabricated self" that results. The journey itself provides a complex and painful answer to the seminal question of subaltern studies: Can the subaltern speak?. Devi's story responds in the affirmative, but with a devastating caveat. The Kheria Sabars, as erased subjects, cannot "speak" in the language of rights and be heard. Their form of resistance, therefore, cannot be one of direct "negation" of power, but must be one of "negotiation". They are forced to "negotiate" with the dominant systems of power—Hindu majoritarianism and neoliberal capitalism—using the only tools they possess: their bodies, their wits, and their capacity for satirical performance.

The "fabricated self" they create *is* the subaltern "speaking," but what it "speaks" is the profound tragedy of its own condition. In order to be *seen* by the state, they must, in a sense, *cease to be themselves*. They must mask their "unacceptable" Kheria Sabar identity beneath the "acceptable" costume of Hindu piety. In order to *survive* materially, they must transform their collective self into a *commodity*, appealing to the neoliberal logic that had previously discarded them. Their "success" is their ultimate failure. It is a survival contingent on their complete capitulation to the very systems that erased them, a "selfhood" purchased at the cost of their own identity. The story's title, "The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh," is the final, brutal turn of Devi's satirical knife. The "glory" belongs entirely to the fabricated stone, the icon of their strategic surrender. It does not, and cannot, belong to the people themselves, who remain rights-less, their new-found visibility just a shimmering, fragile mask. Mahasweta Devi's story proves that when a state system disintegrates human rights, it does not destroy the human will to exist; it forces that will into desperate, satirical, and tragic new forms, de manding the oppressed fabricate a self that is legible to power, even if that self is a lie. The "glory" of Sri Sri Ganesh is the ultimate, enduring symbol of this profound systemic and human failure.

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