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Epic Struggles over India's Forests in Mahasweta Devi's Short Fiction / الصراع الملحمي على غابات الهند في قصة ماهاسويتا ديفي
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Epic Struggles over India's Forests in Mahasweta Devi's Short Fiction

Jennifer Wenzel

In 1984, satellite data suggested to the Government of India what millions of forest dwellers already knew: deforestation had reached crisis proportions in the previous decade. The information, seemingly irrefutable in its scientific objectivity, that 1.5 million hectares of forest cover had been lost each year during the 1970s, and that less than 10% of India remained under forest cover, spurred the central government to action. In the late 1980s, Indian forest policy was re-oriented towards "social forestry," which aimed to reconcile the conflicting demands of the "national interest" and industry with the needs of local users dependent upon forests as sources of food, fuel, and fodder essential to their daily survival. The national and internationally-sponsored "social forestry" programs created after the 1984 report have, for the most part, only continued the state and commercial appropriation of forest resources, at the cost of those directly dependent on the forests, that officially began with the British and the Indian Forest Act of 1865. But while the "scientific" system of forest management introduced by the British and intensified after Independence has had disastrous environmental and social consequences, to place the blame for misuse of forests solely on imperialism is to overlook crucial tensions and contradictions within Indian culture, contradictions that center around the significance of forests and challenge the very notion of an "Indian culture."

Mahasweta Devi, the Bengali writer, journalist, and activist who has worked for decades to publicize and ameliorate the plight of India's rural poor and tribals, also received urgent information regarding the state of India's forests in the early 1980s. "When these forests disappear, we will also disappear": so a tribal inhabitant of the region of Singhbhum, near the border of the states of West Bengal and Bihar, told Mahasweta, without benefit of extraterrestrial information-gathering technology (Special Correspondent 1901). Although it is not quite accurate these days to say that satellites cannot

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see people, it is clear that satellite data does not link human survival with forests in the way that Mahasweta's informant had done. Mahasweta's persistent concern has been to dramatize the consequences of lack of access to basic necessities of human survival — as evidenced even in the titles of short stories such as "Salt," "Paddy Seeds," and "Water." Yet while both her fiction and her journalism document the desperation of landlessness and bonded labor, Mahasweta is also sensitive to the long-standing cultural and social conflicts in Indian society, exacerbated rather than resolved after Independence, that are among the causes of current desperation; Mahasweta has long been critical of "mainstream" India's benign neglect of its adivasis, or indigenous peoples. The readings of Mahasweta's stories "Draupadi" and "Douloti the Bountiful" in this essay consider Mahasweta's engagement with these conflicts, as represented in the Indian epic tradition, in order to suggest how ancient contests over the cultural significance of forests may inform India's contemporary forest crisis.

Most observers of Indian environmentalism are quick to point out the significant differences between its concerns and those of mainstream environmentalism in the northern hemisphere. Both Gail Omvedt, in *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Social Tradition in India*, and Anil Agarwal, author of the seminal "Citizen's Reports on the Indian Environment" (1979),[1] which helped to galvanize urban, middle-class environmentalism, insist that the environmental situation in India today is not about "quality of life," as in the North, but rather about the conditions of production and survival itself (Omvedt 139; Agarwal 169). Vandana Shiva, an Indian economist who documents and warns against the interrelated economic and ecological consequences of models of economic development exported from the First World, also contrasts Western environmentalism, as a "luxury of the rich," with Third World movements that "are a survival imperative for the majority of people whose survival is not taken care of by the market economy but is threatened by its expansion" (*Ecology* 32). But as Omvedt suggests in her extended examination of environmental movements in India, the anti-consumerism focus of urban middle-class Indian environmentalism often recognizes subsistence- and survival-based issues — issues pertinent to rural Indians and forest dwellers, directly dependent on local natural resources — only in terms of their tenuous connection to high-caste, and middle-class, concerns. These tensions

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fragment what could be a broad-based, nation-wide movement for environmental rationality and justice.

Rabindranath Tagore, who played such an important role in the late period of the Bengali Renaissance and thus contributed substantially to the cultural component of Indian nationalism, identified "the distinctiveness of Indian culture. . . [in] its having defined life in the forest as the highest form of cultural evolution" (Shiva, *Staying Alive* 55). Vandana Shiva quotes at length from Tagore's monograph, *Tapovan*:

> Indian civilization has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest, not the city. India's best ideas have come where man was in communion with trees and rivers and lakes, away from the crowds. The peace of the forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man. The culture of the forest has fueled the culture of Indian society. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilization. (qtd. in *Staying Alive* 55)

In leaning on Tagore, Shiva bolsters her environmental argument with the imprimatur of one of the revered figures of Indian nationalism, thus constructing a rhetorical position which is soundly anti-imperialist and "indigenous." She draws on pride in the continuity of India's literate culture through references to the ancient *Rig Veda*, in which "forests are described as Aranyani or mother goddess who takes care of wildlife and ensures the availability of food to man" (*Ecology* 75). India has been *aranya sanskriti*, a "forest culture," where "the protection and propagation of forests as a deeply ingrained civilisational characteristic. . .is evident from the existence of sacred groves in river catchments and fore-shores of tanks, and from village woodlots" (ibid). Thus the scientific management of forests introduced by the British displaced indigenous knowledge about and management of forests, and, by extension, Indian culture itself.

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Shiva is certainly not wrong to identify Indian culture with the forest. The *Aranyakas*, or "forest books," including among them *Brihadaranyaka*, "the great mystic doctrine of the forest," are late Vedic meditative texts that date from 700-600 B. C. (Dimock et al 16). Reflection in the forest is one of the stages of ideal Hindu life; the *sanyaasi* leaves behind the familial and domestic concerns of the household in Hinduism's solution to the mid-life crisis. The title of Tagore's *Tapovan* refers precisely to the forest grove in which the ascetic *sanyaasi* finds his meditative refuge. But such an equation — India as *aranya sanskriti* — seems to suggest two propositions which potentially hinder, rather than enable, efforts to manage India's forests in ecologically and socially just ways. The first dangerous proposition is that brahmanical Hinduism *is* Indian culture; that "indigenous knowledge" about environmental preservation is indigenous specifically to Hinduism. Such an argument makes itself frighteningly available to contemporary Hindu nationalism, whose political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, has won nation-wide electoral victories in recent years; it also drives a considerable wedge between middle-class "mainstream" Indians and their tribal, non-Hinduized counterparts within India's environmental movements. The second proposition which arises from the notion of *aranya sanskriti* is that the continuing devastation of India's forests late in this century is solely a result of Western imperialism, that if India was a "forest culture" before the British, nothing remains of that pre-colonial culture, and the minds of those in whose charge the forests rest remain completely colonized.

The modern, industrial orientation of the post-Independence Indian nation-state is conveniently and increasingly susceptible to the power of economic globalization. But it is important to consider the possibility that the intensification of forest exploitation after Independence is a symptom not only of lingering Westernization, but also of basic conflicts within (or between) Indian culture(s) that were unresolved and exacerbated during the colonial period. In this essay, I will suggest a modification of Shiva's thesis: to be sure, India is a forest culture, but it is a culture that has been defined, throughout its long history, as much by *contests* over its forests as by peaceful existence within them.

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The First Epic Struggles: How Bharat Became Great

Writers sympathetic to those outside the Hindu "mainstream" — lower castes and tribals — have criticized Vandana Shiva's narrow vision of India as a (Hindu) forest culture in *Staying Alive*.[2] One such critic wrote in 1990:

> When we talk of India in terms of its civilisation we must clearly distinguish between two kinds of regions. One is the hill-forest regions. . . . The other is the plains. Various streams have contributed to Indian civilisation, but that which dominates it, or its mainstream, is clearly the culture that came with settled agriculture in the Ganga-Jamuna doab. This is the seat of the caste system and the Hindu religious order. . . . This 'mainstream' Indian civilisation was set up by subjugating the forest dwellers, and clearing the forests for settled cultivation. . . . Far from these sacred groves being "created and maintained throughout India", the destruction of these sacred groves, or their marginalisation and replacement by temples . . . is the expression of the 'mainstream' Indian civilisation's subjugation of the tribals. Of course, this subjugation was periodically contested by the tribes and that is why the forest has been portrayed as peopled by fearful and malevolent spirits. Does not the Ramayana represent exactly this suppression of the forest order by the newly-formed kingdom? (DN 795-96).

Such an account of conflict within Indian civilization suggests that the forest in India evokes both the "'sense of intimate harmony, with people and forests equal occupants of a communal habitat'" that one Western scholar associates with tropical forests, and forests as "'dark places of danger'" that he finds in the "'folklore of temperate zones'" (Myers qtd. in Shiva, *Ecology* 77). Indeed, Mahasweta Devi plays upon this dual resonance of the forest in a number of her short stories. In "The Witch Hunt," illicit lovers draw upon the tradition of the forest as a culturally sanctioned romantic getaway, yet during one forest tryst, they are exposed when they come upon the seemingly bestial "witch" who has been terrifying the surrounding villages. In the short story "Paddy Seeds" and the play *Water*, the space of the

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forest is transformed from an erotic refuge into a political one: the forest is frequently referenced in these two texts as the place where everyone knows guerrillas are supposed to hide, as a woman chides a fugitive who sought refuge in her cowshed: "Even an old she-goat holds more intelligence. It's not bad that you got the moneylender in the leg with a pick axe. It would have been better if you could get him in the neck and rid us of the curse. But don't you know you're supposed to hide in the forest? Whoever heard of such an idiot, coming back to the village? Go away now, and hide in the forest!" ("Paddy Seeds" 159).

The forest as political refuge draws both upon its traditional idyllic associations and those of the "dark place of danger," "peopled by fearful and malevolent spirits"; to some degree, its valence depends upon one's relationship to the dominant "mainstream" political and cultural order. Later in Mahasweta's "Paddy Seeds," when Dulan, the husband of the woman quoted above, is considering a course of action against an oppressive landlord, he muses about the differences between poverty-stricken high caste Hindus and untouchables: "They [lower class, high caste Hindus] are not thrown into the fire so readily, with such impunity. The god of fire must have to this day remained partial to the meat of the untouchable, ever since the time of the burning of the Khandava forest, which gave him the taste for roasted flesh of the dark-skinned dwellers of the forest" (169). This reference to an episode of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, in which an entire forest and all of its inhabitants are burned by the warrior-heroes of the epic to facilitate a brahman ascetic's sacrifice to the fire god Agni — along with DN's reference to the "suppression of the forest order" in the *Ramayana*, the other major epic — suggests that an examination of these epics will provide an understanding of the traditionally ambivalent cultural status of the forest that informs Mahasweta's fiction.

Many Headed Demons: The Diversity of the Epic Tradition

The *Mahabharata*, the tale of war between the five Pandava brothers and their 100 cousins, the Kauravas, is an accretive work of 18 volumes that was composed in Sanskrit and compiled between 400 BC. and AD. 400. Edward Dimock writes that the *Mahabharata* "became the founding library of Brahmin-Indian civilization. It is necessary to understand the epic as an encyclopedia of that

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civilization. . . . It includes history, legend, edification; religion and art; drama and morality" (53). It also includes a version of the *Ramayana* narrative, which took shape as an epic in its own right between 200 BC. and AD. 200, and in its seven *parvas*, or sections, is a much more tightly focused narrative about the travails of prince (and later king) Rama and his wife Sita, but no less influential in Indian culture than the more expansive *Mahabharata*.

As one might expect with a work compiled over the course of eight centuries, the *Mahabharata* is an inclusive artifact of cultural conflict; scholars taking an anthropological approach recognize this aspect of the epic readily. Swain calls the *Mahabharata* "a complete document on national integration" (177), and K. S. Singh explains the social processes which probably produced such a "document," or archive:

> stories and legends churned out by various communities and territorial groups were incorporated into this corpus. This is probably the finest example of the making of the consciousness of a people, of a civilisation and of a moral order, from the interaction of various communities and their cultures (*The Mahabharata* 8).

The process of "interaction" that Singh describes differs significantly from the conventional idea of a Sanskrit "great tradition" that is diluted into vernacular, regional "little traditions" in a trickle-down process of influence. Instead, as Dimock proposes: "It is probable that many of the local deities, myths, rites, and perhaps literary themes now considered the property of the 'great' Indian cultural tradition were originally those of the Austric speaking peoples," or non-Aryan forest dwellers (5).

Despite the Sanskrit *Ramayana*'s narrative consistency and its traditional attribution to a single author, Valmiki, scholars of folk and tribal traditions identify a similar multidirectional process of cultural exchange for the *Ramayana* as for the *Mahabharata*. Handoo applies Swain's thesis of "national integration" in the *Mahabharata* to both epics, as he sees that

> both the stories of Rama and Krishna must have become *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* respectively when India might have struggled for a unified cultural identity; when

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> this vast country might have suffered a political upheaval, when ethnic diversity, its conflicts and the deteriorating value system might have threatened the very structure of this country as a nation. (17)

Rather than accepting the Sanskrit Valmiki *Ramayana* as the seminal text from which variants of the *Rama-katha*, or Rama story, were adapted, A. K. Ramanujan, in his essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas," examines different "tellings" of the Rama story "neither as totally individual stories nor as 'divergences' from the 'real' version by Valmiki, but as the expression of an extraordinarily rich set of [narrative] resources" (Richman, Introduction 7-8). Even what is accepted as the Valmiki *Ramayana* itself has existed in at least five distinct stages, according to J. L. Brockington, who identifies a process of "brahmanization" in the text's evolution, with each version "more consistent with orthodox beliefs and practises" than the last (Lamb 237).

Some might argue that the "brahmanization" of a two thousand year old narrative tradition continues in the late twentieth century. The serialized broadcast in 1987-88 on Doordarshan, the Indian national television station, of a version of the *Ramayana* has — despite its "multiculturalist" attempts at integrating various tellings — furthered Hindu nationalists' aspirations to equate the story of Rama with the story of India, or to "identify the nation with the community of believers, sacred space with national territory, and sacred history with national history" (Van der Veer 144). Van der Veer suggests that the telecast has "facilitated the Ayodhya campaign of the VHP [Vishva Hindu Parishad] and BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party]"; these Hindu nationalist organizations seek to prove, through moral persuasion as well as archaeological "evidence," that the Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya, in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, lies on the site of the birthplace of Rama. The violence that spread through northern India after the December 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid reveals the human consequences of such archaeological "readings" which attempt to unearth the actual sites of the "historical" events recorded in the epics.[3] As Gail Omvedt has remarked about Hindu nationalism's convenient erasure of the diversity of the epic tradition, "the new fundamentalists ignored these countertraditions or even the more pacific interpretations of Rama-worship and instead emphasized an armed, muscular Rama, killing the infidel" (183).

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In her introduction to *Many Ramayanas*, a collection of essays on the diversity of the *Rama-katha* tradition, Paula Richman writes that "selective tellings — ones which adopt a nontraditional perspective on otherwise familiar features of the tale — have proved an effective means for conveying political views and for inculcating religious teachings" (12). But as the efforts of Hindu nationalists demonstrate, all tellings of the Rama story, not least ones which claim to be the most "traditional," can be "an effective means for conveying political views." Lal Kishan Advani, the leader of the Hindu nationalist party BJP, undertook a S*warna Jayanti Rath Yatra*, or golden jubilee chariot-journey, across India in the summer of 1997 to commemorate its fifty years of independence; he was also anxious to draw and demonstrate support for the BJP against the United Front, a coalition of the Janata Dal, Congress, and parties to the left, which together shared a majority of parliamentary seats over the BJP. Such a political move takes a page out of the epic tradition, where both the Pandavas (of the *Mahabharata*) and Rama "had to roam in the wilderness. . .before they could establish the real order of kingship based on shared values of economic and political power. . . . *[P]adayatra*, as a folk metaphor of real or symbolic social and political change has its well defined roots in the ancient epics of India" (Handoo 20). Advani's *yatra* reveals the contradiction within Hindu nationalism: on the one hand, the epics "prove" that India is a Hindu nation, *fait accompli*, but an epic-inspired contemporary *yatra*, coupled as it is with anti-Muslim and anti-tribal rhetoric, reveals the inaccuracy of the claim that Hinduism is coterminous with the boundaries of the subcontinent.[4]

By examining the cultural conflict within both the epic narratives and their contemporary tellings, I aim to foreground the violence — past and present — that is obscured when one makes a seemingly innocent claim such as Tagore's, that out of India's "forest culture" came the "unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, [that] became the principle of Indian civilization." K. S. Singh has written that tribal versions of the *Rama-katha* "may be considered 'irreverent' by orthodox standards" ("Tribal Versions" 51); so too my examination of the epic tradition in terms of struggles between forest and plains dwellers for land, resources, and cultural clout. But I am more sympathetic to the conviction of the Ramnamis, a central Indian group of outcaste Rama devotees, who excise offensive brahmanical passages from their texts:

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as an elderly Ramnami explained while tearing out pages, "'The Ramayan is so great we cannot possibly damage it; we can only make it better!'" (qtd. in Lamb 251).

"Nature changes its aspect"

Handoo has argued that the dichotomy which drives the epic tradition is "cultivated/non-cultivated," where the cultivated (and cultivating) heroes must tame the uncultivated wilderness, often peopled with demons or other inhuman characters, in order to establish their *raj*. One of Rama's tasks in the forest is "to rid it of the *rakshasas* [demons] who torment the human ascetics"; among the *rakshasas* is Ravana, who steals away Rama's wife while they are exiled in the forest (Erndl 71). Likewise, in the midst of the feud between the Pandava and Kaurava cousins in the *Mahabharata* are the Nagas, who like the *rakshasas* are not quite "human" inhabitants of the forest. It should be no surprise that conflicts between "civilized" kingdoms and "savage" bands — human or otherwise, should be the focus of the epics, as the span of centuries during which the epics were composed also saw conflicts between hunter-gatherer communities and newly arrived agricultural groups. In *Yuganta*, Iravati Karve reads the *Mahabharata* as an account of struggle between the warring Aryan cousins and the Nagas: "the main motive for this struggle was the possession of land" (136). Karve explains that "the pastoral Aryan people kept large herds of cattle and practised agriculture with the help of animal-drawn ploughs. Their history records many instances of either burning or cutting down forests" (140). Applying their ecological expertise to Karve's thesis, Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha in *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* describe a "continual march of agriculture and pastoralism over territory held by food gatherers. . . . Since the forest, with its wild animal populations, served as a resource base for the enemy, its destruction, rather than its conservation, would now have assumed priority" (78). Thus the fire worship which characterizes the Vedic texts was politically, economically, and ecologically significant: the fire god Agni "could be invoked in the task of subordinating hunter-gatherers and colonizing their resource base . . . . The main ritual was fire worship, the Yajna, a ritual in which huge quantities of wood and animal fat were consumed" (78).

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Rama's obligation to clear the forest of pesky *rakshasas* also takes on new meaning, as the Brahmans who performed these fire-sacrifices were

> pioneers, establishing their outposts in forests and initiating rituals which consumed large quantities of wood and animal fat. Thus provoked, the native food gatherers, termed demons or *Rakshasas*, would attempt to disrupt the holocaust and save their resource base in order to retain control over their territories. Specialist warriors, Kshatriyas, would then rush to the rescue of the Brahmans who had furnished them with the appropriate provocation to invade these territories. (Gadgil and Guha 79)

The burning of the Khandava forest, the episode from the *Mahabharata* to which Mahasweta Devi's character Dulan alludes in her short story "Paddy Seeds," is paradigmatic of these forest conflicts between brahmans (aided by kshatriya warriors like the Pandava brothers and Rama) and forest dwellers that fuelled the appetite of agricultural dynasties for arable land. Both Rama and the Pandava brothers are exiled to the forest when conflicts within their kshatriya warrior families necessitate their removal from both the line of succession and the "cultivated" area of the kingdom. Once in the wilderness, however, they waste no time: the kshatriyas redirect their familial and intra-caste hostilities against the forest dwellers, thus making good on their exile by expanding territory available for agriculture. Rama returns to Ayodhya after his exile, but the Pandavas build their great capital city, Indraprastha, near the site of their forest exile. Arjuna, one of the five Pandava brothers, and Krishna, an ally of the Pandavas, encounter a brahman ascetic during an outing to the forest who asks them for food. Revealing himself to be Agni, the fire god, he implores them to burn the Khandava forest for his food, promising them in exchange the chariot and weapons which will eventually bring them victory against the Kaurava cousins (Karve 137). Karve describes how Krishna and Arjuna ignited the forest and

> guarded all sides so tightly that the creatures fleeing from the blaze found not a single chink to escape through . . . . The creatures driven back into the forest were burned

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> alive. Those who ran out fell under their weapons. . . . [F]inally having consumed the flesh and fat of every last creature in the forest, Agni went away satisfied (138).

Maya, an *asura* (demon), escaped from the forest, was spared, and in return built the Pandavas a palace near the site of the destroyed forest. Karve points out that the destruction of the animal/human Nagas within the forest violated the kshatriya code of "defend[ing] the helpless," and she concludes that "if you spared a human being — even to make a slave out of him — he would in the course of time acquire certain rights. There was indeed great danger in sparing the lives of those who owned the land. Krishna and Arjuna, therefore, must have felt the necessity of completely wiping out the enemy," who in this case are the forest-dwellers, not the hostile Kaurava cousins (145).[5] When in Mahasweta's story "Paddy Seeds," a rivalry between two cousins, both Rajput landlords, results in the burning to the ground of an entire low caste village, Dulan thinks immediately of the burning of the Khandava forest and its continual re-enactments:

> It was not the first time and would not be the last. From time to time, with the flames and the screams of the massacred leaping into the sky, the lowly untouchable must be made to realize that it meant nothing at all that the government had passed laws and appointed officers to enforce them and that the Constitution held declarations. They must not forget that the Rajputs remain Rajputs, the Brahmans remain Brahmans, and all the Dusads, Ganjus, Chamars, and Dhobis remain under their feet. (168-9)

For Tagore, the forest has bequeathed "democratic pluralism" upon Indian civilization; for Dulan, the trappings of modern democracy have failed to resolve the ancient conflict symbolized in the charred remains of the Khandava forest.

Just as the landlord Lachman Singh refers to Dulan as a "beast" ("Paddy Seeds" 171), the forest dwellers in the epics — the Nagas and *rakshasas* — are often dehumanized, described either as supernatural demons or as animals; from a brahmanical perspective, episodes such as the Khandava forest burning are pest control rather than genocide. But modern-day forest dwellers have attempted to rehabilitate the word "rakshasa," locating in its Sanskrit etymology — from *raksha*,

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which means "protection" — the true nature of those sacrifice-spoiling "demons." Jotirao Phule, a dalit Maharashtrian nationalist, critical of the Hindu orientation of the Indian National Congress, wrote in his 1885 *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) that "'the original inhabitants with whom these earth-born gods, the brahmans, fought, were not inappropriately termed Rakshasas, that is the protectors of the land. The incredible and foolish legends regarding their form and shape are no doubt mere chimeras, the fact being that these people were of superior stature and hardy make'" (qtd. in Omvedt 13). A century later, Waharu Sonavane, also from Maharashtra, echoed Phule's reading of the epics in his 1990 presidential address to the fifth Adivasi Sahitya Sammelan (tribal literary conference) at Nelson Mandela Nagar:

> Most free adivasi tribes became toiling castes, giving their surplus to rajas and brahmans, and looking on each other as inferior. . . . This society had the capacity to slowly transform adivasi tribes and absorb them into the caste hierarchy, at lower levels. We are those who faced all this and yet remained free. . . . The rakshasas are the adivasis of those times. Adivasis were still living their lives in the depths of the forest, and on the tops of hills and mountains. Adivasis had complete authority over these forests and hills. (13)

Waharu's ethnic pride rings clear in his address. The description of the epics' forest landscape in *The Literatures of India: An Introduction* contains a more scholarly "objectivity," loud in its silence about the process of social transformation that Waharu identified in the epics:

> The "forest" means any tract of land that is not under active cultivation; it may indeed be a forest, but it may also be wilderness in general. In it live all who are not part of the ordered society of village and town: . . . great ascetics whose aeons of austerities have created in them incredible powers, and also monsters of every conceivable description, bent on disturbing the meditations and mortifications of the hermits and ascetics. Nature changes its aspect according to the

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> aspects of those who people it. It provides the scenic surroundings of fruit-bearing trees, blossoming vines, clear and tranquil ponds covered with lotuses and water-lilies. It also provides the lairs of unspeakable horrors that emerge from the stark bleak wasteland of sheer mountain drops, impenetrable rain forest, and barren desert. (Dimock et al 64)

Clearly, the ambivalence of the epic forest landscape, described here from a literary perspective, is a result of the conflict between adivasi and Hindu visions of a peaceful forest and their struggles for control over it. "Nature changes its aspect" for the adivasis when the march of settled agriculture, accompanied by Brahman sacrifice, challenges their "complete authority over these forests"; and for the ascetics, "tranquil ponds" so conducive to meditation metamorphose into "unspeakable horrors" when those "monsters" emerge from their lairs to challenge the appropriation of their forest resources. India can only be defined as a "forest culture" when the contest between these conflicting visions of the forest is recognized; the great Hindu tradition of forest meditation was only possible through the subjugation of an earlier forest culture.

Decades after Independence, Hindu attitudes towards tribals are still critically described in terms of the now discredited *mission civilisatrice*: in 1975, a columnist for the *Hindustan Times* called "for the abandonment of the 'civilizing mission' of bureaucrats in tribal areas and strongly urge[d] that the tendency to mould tribals in their own image and to denigrate tribal manners and customs be guarded against" (qtd. in Gupta et al 73 n. 16). More recently, in a 1987 article entitled "The Plains Man's Burden," Arun Sinha explores the centuries-old Hindu "civilizing mission" at length, complete with quotations from Rudyard Kipling's "Pharaoh and the Sergeant" and "The White Man's Burden." Noting the tenacity of tribal culture in the face of Hindu attempts to eliminate it, Sinha concludes: "For once, the Plains Man might think the tree of his civilizing mission was bearing wrong fruits" (2053). The roots of that tree are the epic narratives, which tell the story of the original conquest; Sinha would probably disparage these as the stories an oppressor culture tells to itself to celebrate and legitimate its (incomplete) victory. But the vast narrative resources of the epic tradition have always been available to counterhegemonic tellings, and Mahasweta Devi embraces, rather

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than rejects, the epic tradition in her attempts to communicate the costs — past and present — of the "civilizing mission."

Denuded and Degraded: Women Exiled in the Forest

In the conversation between Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Mahasweta Devi which opens *Imaginary Maps*, their collaborative 1995 collection of stories and essays, Spivak begins with the prompt, "History and fact first." Eschewing dates and statistics, Mahasweta turns instead to the epics to explain the place of tribals in relation to the rest of Indian society. But while she notes that the *Ramayana* "seems to contain evidence of how [the tribals] were oppressed, evicted from their homeland, and then forced to occupy the lower reaches of Indian culture," Mahasweta also makes clear that the female heroines of the epics have a special relationship to tribal society ("The Author in Conversation," ix). Draupadi, wife to the five Pandava brothers and described as dark-skinned, is possibly connected to Himalayan polyandrous tribes, and Sita, wife of Rama, is for the tribals of South India not a human being but rather "the wind in the grass, . . . the flowing river" ("The Author in Conversation," ix). Although Mahasweta, like many Indian writers, draws on the narrative resources of the epic tradition throughout her work — as we have noted already with Dulan in "Paddy Seeds" — the characters of Draupadi and Sita receive extended attention in two stories set in the tumultuous 1970s. Mahasweta's stories "Draupadi" and "Douloti the Bountiful" draw on the epic forest conflict between Hindu and tribal cultures to elucidate the dynamics underlying contemporary forms of exploitation and protest.

In a well-known episode of the *Mahabharata*, the eldest of Draupadi's five Pandava husbands stakes her in a dice match against his rival cousins, when he has already staked and lost his kingdom, his wealth, his four brothers, and himself. When he loses her too, Draupadi does not go gently, but rather challenges the legitimacy of the match and his right to stake her after he has already lost himself. When her trenchant argument threatens to win over some of the Kaurava cousins, she is ordered to be stripped in order to begin her life as sweeper and gentleman's chambermaid; after all, as partner to five husbands, she is already a "public woman," nearly a whore. Draupadi appeals to her five husbands to protect her from the humiliation of a public disrobing, but when they do nothing, she puts

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her faith in the god Krishna. Draupadi's sari is unwound, but thanks to Krishna, as the cloth is pulled off, still more cloth appears, sparing her from humiliation. Draupadi consequently is offered three requests, and she wins back her eldest husband, his brothers, and their kingdom.

This episode from the epic is recast in Mahasweta's story "Draupadi," in which the title character is a tribal guerrilla in the peasant Naxalite uprisings in northern West Bengal that spread through eastern India in the late 1960s and early 70s. Mahasweta's Draupadi Mehjen has but one husband, though by the time we meet her in the story, she is a widow. Her husband, Dulna Majhi, has been killed in a "police encounter," hunted down like an animal by the Special Forces mobilized against the Naxalites, and later used as bait to entrap Draupadi. Draupadi avoids the trap, but she is ultimately captured by the Special Forces and interrogated, stripped, and raped multiple times by several men. Mahasweta's Draupadi invokes no god, wins no boon. When she is summoned before the military specialist, Senanayak, she rejects the cloth offered to her, and instead confronts him: naked, bloodied, defiant, she dares him to respond.

Operation Forest Jhadkani, whose objective is the neutralization of Dulna and Draupadi, hiding out in the Jhadkani forest after the 1971 massacre in Operation Bakuli, draws again on the trope of the forest as political refuge. As with the Khandava forest episode from the *Mahabharata*, the aspirations of the state result in massive casualties for inhabitants of the forest:

> The Special Forces, attempting to pierce that dark by an armed search, compelled quite a few migrant Santals [of the Santhal tribe], male and female farm workers, in the various districts of West Bengal to meet their Maker against their will . . . . Finally the impenetrable forest of Jhadkani is surrounded by real soldiers, the *army* enters and splits the battlefield, looking for fugitives. Cartographers make draughts of the forest. Soldiers in hiding guard the falls and springs that are the only source of drinking water; they are still guarding, still looking. (149, 152)

The army's mapped extermination of forest inhabitants and control of their resources are accompanied by an attenuated form of cultural invasion as well. The Jhadkani forest is obviously a "dark

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place of danger," but the army maintains a stiff upper lip: "'Wild area' is incorrect. The battalion is provided with supervised nutrition, arrangements to worship according to religion, opportunity to listen to 'Vividh-Bharati' [a radio program] and to see Sanjeev Kumar and the Lord Krishna face-to-face in the movie *This is Life*. No. The area is not 'wild'" (154). Beyond the armed conflict of the army and the guerrillas is a cultural chasm which hampers the army's efforts; identifying Dulna and Draupadi is difficult because, as Mahasweta's narrator notes wryly, "all tribals of the Austro-Asiatic Munda tribes appear the same to the Special Forces," and because Dulna and Draupadi's utterances in "a savage tongue" are inscrutable even to the "two tribal-specialist types [who] are flown in from Calcutta" (150). As "escaped corpses" who somehow walked away from the Bakuli massacre, Dulna and Draupadi even seem to take on the demonic aspect of their *rakshasa* ancestors for the army officers. But the true problem is that for the army, the gulf between the tribal guerrillas and Indian society isn't wide enough; the urban students who joined with the peasants in the Naxalite struggle reveal the dangerous potential of the forest: "The ones who remain have lived a long time in the primitive world of the forest . . . . They must have forgotten book learning. Perhaps they are orienting their book learning to the soil they live on and learning new combat and survival techniques . . . . Those who are working practically will not be exterminated so easily" (154). The challenge that the forest poses to an established political order must be contained not least because it is potentially contagious.

When Mahasweta's heroine recognizes that she is being followed, "she thinks of nothing but entering the forest" to warn her comrades of the escalating military presence (157). Indeed, given the army's obvious fear of the forest, it would make sense for her to retreat there, as she reflects, "You fucking jackal of a nark, deadly afraid of death, you can't run around in the forest. I'd run you out of breath, throw you in a ditch, and finish you off" (158). But despite the topographical advantages of the forest, she is more concerned about not giving *anything* away — the location of the hideout, information, a comrade's life: she "will not enter the forest with a nark at her back" (158). Swearing to her dead husband, "by my life . . . .[n]othing must be told," she thinks steadfastly of the guerrillas' pledge, borne of experience, "No *comrade* will let the others be destroyed for her own sake" and remembers proudly that her husband "didn't lose anyone else's life" (158, 159). Such is obviously sound strategy, but it is also

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a condemnation of the epic Draupadi's eldest husband, Yudhisthira, who in the fateful dice match wagered away *everything* — kingdom, brothers, himself, wife — and only Draupadi questioned his authority to wager her when he had already lost himself.

Mahasweta's story ends with a rewriting of the epic Draupadi's defiance. Where, in the epic, Draupadi argues with her eldest husband before appealing to Krishna to spare her the shame of a public disrobing, here she "pushed Senanayak with her two mangled breasts" and challenges him "'kounter'"[6] her; but "for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid" (162). In this suspended scene which concludes the story, common sense and history tell us that this Draupadi would probably not be granted three wishes for her bravery were the narrative to continue. But because Mahasweta ends the story here, this terrifying moment of confrontation transcends history, engulfs time, and crystallizes Draupadi's defiance. Draupadi of the *Mahabharata* cries in disbelief at her immanent shame and at her husbands' impotence in the face of it: "Is morality gone? Or else how can you be looking on this atrocity? There are my husbands . . . . I do not understand why they stand there transfixed" (Narayan 79).[7] But Mahasweta's Draupadi knows that, in a certain sense, morality *is* gone; she expects no better from her enemies, and instead challenges them to behold the atrocity they've already committed: "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?. . . . There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do?" (161-62). For this Draupadi, Lord Krishna appears only on the silver screen.

In her foreword to her translation of "Draupadi" that appeared in *Critical Inquiry*, Spivak accurately concludes that Mahasweta's telling is not a "refutation" of the epic, but rather that Mahasweta's character is "at once a palimpsest and a contradiction" (388). Indeed, she is called "Draupadi" in the story's title and its conclusion, but in the rest of the story, and in her own mind, she is "Dopdi," which is probably a vernacularization of the Sanskrit "Draupadi." Mahasweta's character may engage in guerrilla warfare, but she is a Santhal tribal, outside of the Hindu caste system, and certainly not of the kshatriya (warrior) caste, as her epic namesake is said to be. Polyandry was never the norm in India, and in the epic, Draupadi and her husbands enter into it accidentally and with the same misgivings as their enemies: as wife to more than one man, Draupadi could be seen as a

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public woman. But at the moment of her disrobing, Draupadi defends her right to sexual honor, even though her status is outside of the norm. Likewise, Mahasweta's Dopdi uses her mutilated body to impress upon her enemies that it is they who have made her into a bloody whore, not the fact that as a widow, she hides out in the forest with young men.[8] Principled, disciplined subversion of caste Hindu sexual norms is at the heart of the figure of Draupadi.

Not surprisingly, it is Sita, "heroine" of the *Ramayana*, rather than Draupadi, who is commonly upheld as a model of Indian womanhood and/or wifehood. Sita insists on accompanying her husband Rama during his 14-year exile to the forest. She endures the privations of the forest cheerfully, but she is soon captured by the lovestruck *rakshasa* king, Ravana. Ravana tricks Rama and his brother Lakshmana, disguises himself as a brahman sage to win Sita's confidence, and steals her away to his kingdom. In *Iramavataram*, the eleventh or twelfth century Tamil poet Kampan's telling of the Rama story, Ravana scoops up the earth around Sita so as not to defile her with an unwelcome touch. Sita refuses to yield to him, remaining staunchly true to Rama, and Rama eventually kills Ravana and recaptures Sita. At their reunion, however, Rama discards her, saying that he cannot take back a woman who has lived in a stranger's house. In disbelief at Rama's doubt of her fidelity, Sita orders Rama's brother, Lakshmana, to light a fire, into which she jumps. All creation screams. The god of fire, Agni, brings her out of the fire unscathed, saying that the heat of her purity burned even him. Rama takes her back, claiming that he was only testing her, but upon his assumption of the throne he discards her again, citing rumors of her infidelity with Ravana. She takes refuge in the forest, bears Rama's twin sons, and eventually elects to return to the bosom of the earth, her mother, as she was "born" in a time of drought by being discovered in a furrow.

Like Draupadi and Dopdi, Sita wanders in the wilderness of the forest, rather than being sheltered safely at home, and like Dopdi, she lives in the company of men not her husband. But her every action is a manifestation of fidelity to her marital vow to Rama — her original journey to the forest, her stepping into the flames and finally into the earth. Rama fails to see that she has lived by the very standard that he and societal convention demand of her. Unquestioning obedience of one's husband is obviously a trait attractive to a patriarchy, and thus Sita has been constructed as a paragon of womanhood. In Mahasweta's "Douloti the Bountiful," Douloti Nagesia, a young tribal

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woman unwittingly sold into bonded prostitution,[9] rivals Sita in obedient, passive goodness by remaining steadfastly faithful to her pimp and johns, rather than to a husband.

The intertextual relationship between this story and the *Ramayana* tradition is much more subtle than that between Mahasweta's Dopdi and her epic namesake. Since most, but not all, of the seven sections of the short story can be loosely associated with the seven *parvas* of the Valmiki *Ramayana*, "Douloti" is not exactly a retelling of the Rama story, but considered together, textual details overwhelmingly suggest a parallel between Douloti and Sita. Douloti Nagesia's destitute and disabled father, Ganori "Crook" Nagesia, is tricked into selling her into bonded prostitution, believing the "fairy tale" that a brahman wants to marry his daughter. Douloti's father cannot reject the brahman Paramananda's offer; the "marriage" enables his entire family to be freed from their bond to a corrupt landlord. Paramananda turns out to be a pimp, just as Ravana turned out to be a lovestruck demon instead of an ascetic. Others in the Nagesia village of Seora are suspicious of the deal; Rajbi, a washerwoman, says of Paramananda: "You can take a look at his eyes and see that the guy's a devil" (51). Like Ravana in the Tamil Rama story, Paramananda doesn't touch Douloti himself, reserving her lucrative virginity for his clients. She works at his brothel for nearly 14 years, without complaining or even being able to conceive of escape or resistance. Douloti is a prostitute, but she seems to attempt a kind of wifely fidelity: the early years of her prostitution allow her to maintain consecutive monogamous relationships with two clients, the second of whom showers her with gifts and calls her a "very good girl," for she never asks him for money on the side (81).

In a reversal of the spatial dynamics of the epic, Douloti is "exiled" to the town of Madhpura for the 14 years of her prostitution, 1962-1975; thoughts of her forest village Seora never leave her. Soon after her arrival in Madhpura, sitting in an enclosed room, Douloti remembers, her "own place is much better. You can see trees and sky if you stand at its door" (52). Near the end of her exile, when a feverish Douloti meets her uncle Bono, she thinks to him silently: "Remember that banyan tree in Seora village? Speak of it. I swung myself on its branches when I went to graze the goats. . . . I lost those days long ago. I get all of it back when I see you. You yourself don't know how much you give me" (87). For Douloti's father, the town of Tohri, where he goes to hospital after the accident that cripples him, is

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a wilderness full of buses and electric lights; "It is not Munabar's empire like Seora" (37). The forest periphery is landlord and bondmaster Munabar Singh Chandela's metropolis; he moved from the city of Ranchi to the remote region of Palamau when he "reclaimed jungle areas and gave the tribals wages in those areas" (42). Despite Munabar's predilection for his Seora empire over his large house in town, other caste Hindus still think of Palamau as a dangerous wilderness. The prostitution business flourishes in Madhpura town precisely because of Palamau's remoteness; unlike Rama, contractors and workers on road, bridge, and other projects around Madhpura "don't bring their wives, it's a wild area" (77).

This tension between conflicting associations of town and forest is evident in the story's incongruous visions of the Indian nation itself. On the one hand, those development projects whose workers provide a steady flow of customers to the brothel represent infrastructural attempts to tame the wilderness. But Mahasweta sardonically describes Latiaji, Douloti's bestial first exclusive customer, as a "highly trusted government contractor" who builds shoddy roads, bridges, and offices for the Forestry Department; when his projects collapse, "Latia leaves the scene of action with the money and finally another contractor builds the bridge. . . . Nobody has yet been able to blame him for theft, or interfering with government funds. In a jungle area everything is profit" (65). Likewise, social and political integration of this remote area into the nation-state are represented in descriptions of the 1961 census and the 1962 election. But government officials sent to administer these national procedures are frustrated by the villagers' resistance and seeming ignorance; they want to include dead children in the census and "will vote for whomever Munabar tells them to vote for. They don't know what the vote or the election signifies" (32). When a "Delhi holy man" tries to explain the inclusive concept of Mother India to the villagers, Rajbi the washerwoman plays dumb: "My place is Seora village. What do you call a country? I know tahsil. . .I know station, I don't know country. India is not the country" (41).

The attempts of the Indian nation-state to transform the villagers into citizens are reminiscent of *Ramrajya*, Rama's achievement of just rule across the subcontinent. Competing with the census in the plot of the story is another documentation project that produces a far different vision of the Indian nation. Father Bomfuller, a missionary, is travelling the country making a survey of bonded

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labor "on behalf of a committee of the central government" (85). In a preview of what Bomfuller might find, Mahasweta's narrator echoes the sacred geography of Rama's journey from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka when (s)he maps the vocabulary of bonded labor and records its "different names in different regions" (61). In the course of their efforts, Bomfuller and his assistants represent a spectrum of strategies for ending bonded labor. Bomfuller wants to document its incidence and thereby "build a case" for legislative action (85); a local schoolmaster, Mohan Srivastava, trusts that police will enforce such a law; Prasad Mahato, a socialist harijan activist, wants both a law and grass-roots organizing; Puranchand, a Gandhian, argues for "peaceful means" (86). Bono Nagesia, Douloti's uncle and the only member of Bomfuller's group who has been a bonded laborer, knows that legislators keep bonded laborers and visit bonded prostitutes, that police are more likely to kill than to protect bonded laborers, and that many of the suffering bondslaves, or kamiyas, won't survive to see the passage of a law. Bono's perspective is sadly validated when "Bomfuller's survey report reached Delhi, and was imprisoned in a *file*" (89). While Bomfuller speaks of the need to arouse public opinion, and Prasad the socialist proclaims: "There will be a fire," Bono demurs: "There is no one to light that fire. If there was, would the kamiya society be so large in Palamu? There are people for passing laws, there are people to ride *jeeps*, but no one to light the fire" (88).

There is no Rama, in other words, to rescue Douloti from the demon Paramananda; no one to be her Lakshmana, the brother of Rama who lit the fire for the *agnipariksha* (trial by fire) that proved Sita's fidelity the first time. The words of Valmiki's Sita, uttered after Rama has disavowed her the first time and before she steps into the flames, express strikingly the strange kind of fidelity Douloti the prostitute feels: "I could not help it if my body was touched by another, but there was no desire involved; fate is to blame. That part of me that is wholly under my control — my heart — is always focused on you [Rama]. Can I help it if the limbs of my body are ruled by others?" (qtd. in Shulman 92). In a lyric passage that interrupts "Douloti," a narrative voice says of the kamiya-whores, "The boss has made them land/He plows and plows their bodies' land and raises a crop" (60). Douloti herself comes to understand her plight as a kind of "fate," determined not by divine forces or the seasons of nature but instead by seemingly inevitable human behavior:

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> The social system that makes Crook Nagesia a kamiya is made by men. Therefore do Douloti, Somni, Reoti have to quench the hunger of male flesh. . . . Why should Douloti be afraid? She has understood now that this is natural. Now she has no fear, no sorrow, no desire (61).

In the *Rama-katha* of the Birhor tribe of Chotanagpur, Sita uses a magic spell during her captivity in Ravana's capital of Lanka to produce "ugly sores all over her body to repulse Ravana" (Naik 45). The women who attend her in Lanka are unable to heal the sores. In Mahasweta's narrative, it is Douloti's body, rather than her will, which produces the venereal "red swellings all over the place. . . [f]iery hot inside the passage" that prevent her from taking clients (89). In the absence of a valorous Rama or a dutiful Lakshmana, and in her own lack of ability to conceive of her plight as unjust, Douloti's body sets the limits of her ordeal; venereal disease and tuberculosis light the fire, and her exhausted frame finds rest in the earth.

Douloti's final "act" is as terrifyingly spectacular as Dopdi challenging the military strategist or Sita stepping into the flames. Released from her bond because the burning fever and sores prevent her from working, Douloti aims to return to Seora. Early on the morning of August 15, India's Independence Day, Douloti collapses in a schoolyard upon a liquid chalk map of India prepared for the day's festivities. She is burned by fever rather than fire, as Sita was; instead of being engulfed by a welcoming mother earth, Douloti engulfs a patriotic spatial representation of Mother India:

> Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labor spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan [the schoolmaster] for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India (93).

As with the conflicting visions of India represented by the national census and Bomfuller's survey of bonded labor, Douloti's

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body replaces the flag and the map of the subcontinent as the object of a patriotic gaze. Douloti's death obstructs the nation-state's celebration in the same way that Sita prevents Rama from ritually recognizing his consolidation of power. Having banished Sita to the forest, even after she proved herself in the flames of the *agnipariksha*, Rama finds that he requires his wife's presence for the *rajyasuya* sacrifice, which marks the establishment of his rule over the country. Instead, Sita takes her leave of Rama's kingdom and life itself with a final affirmation of her fidelity: "'Since I have never thought of any man but Rama, let the Goddess Madhavi [the Earth] split open before me'" (qtd. in Sutherland 77).

Although Sita is conventionally conceived of as an exemplum of wifely and womanly submissiveness, her principled rejection of Rama's request makes her seem instead a model of agency compared with Douloti, whose final thoughts are of "the smell of catkins by the wayside" and the "homecoming bells" of cattle at dusk (93). She notices that "People had lit a fire, the smoke was rising," but only a sudden pain in her chest suggests to her that she will not be reunited with her family in Seora, that, in epic terms, the smoke of the *agnipariksha*, lit here only as part of an anonymous evening routine, will immediately become the death embrace of earth. Nonetheless, Mohan, along with the crowd that had gathered to watch the raising of the Independence flag, takes the place of Rama as witness to this Sita's trial. Despite being an embodiment of *dharma*, which translates loosely as "duty" or "right action," Rama occasionally loses his moral footing. In Valmiki, when Sita steps into the flames, the gods cry out to Rama, chastising him for his petty suspicion and its consequences: "How can you, who are the creator of the entire world and the most enlightened being, ignore Sita as she is falling into the fire? Don't you know yourself, best of all the gods?" (qtd. in Shulman 93). To which Rama responds, "Who am I really? To whom do I belong? Whence have I come?" (qtd. in Shulman 93). After Rama gets his answers, Sita is delivered safely from the flames. Shulman describes this moment as one which recurs throughout Valmiki, where "the divine hero who fails to remember that he is a god comes to know himself, at least for brief moments, through hearing (always from others) his story" (93).[10] In Mahasweta's telling of the Rama story, Mohan the schoolmaster and the assembled patriotic crowd, as well as the reader, become witnesses to the injustice that is Douloti's life and death. Just as Rama's suspicion of Sita was unworthy of him, tolerating bonded

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labor and bonded prostitution is surely unworthy of an independent nation; Douloti's demise is even more spectacular for her inability to articulate, or even to conceive the possibility of protest.

If Rama's story, "more than any other sacred story in India, has been interpreted as a blueprint for right human action" (Erndl 67), Mahasweta seems to force Indian readers to step into Rama's place, to question who they are, what their nation is, how they can ignore the plight of Douloti and the thousands of bonded laborers like her. Douloti has so thoroughly internalized the expectation that she be obedient, passive, and dutiful that she is incapable, to her dying breath, of being anything but a woman who lives up to, even exceeds, Sita's example. Mahasweta's character reveals the distance between the epics' vision of a just society and the realities of independent India: if Douloti is a better woman than Sita, then everyone else had better be prepared to be a better man than Rama.

Though "Douloti" predates the most recent intensification of Hindu nationalists to establish their version of *ramrajya* — an ideal political order that Gandhi promoted earlier in this century — Mahasweta uses the epic tradition to demonstrate the urgent need for social and political change and to condemn a blind faith in textuality that justifies human suffering. The Rama story revolves around *dharma*; "Douloti the Bountiful" revolves around "fate," and more often than not, fate is what is written down — in law books, in bondmasters' faked ledgers of accounts, in contracts, even in studies of bonded labor which obscure the fact that landlessness is the primary cause of indebtedness. Thus at the birth of a Nagesia child, "our lord Fate. . . .look[ing] like a head-shaved brahman. . . .writes with a thick pen in high-Hindi in the clothbound ledger. You will spend your life as you are born" (23). Bondmasters and bondslaves alike repeat the unsubstantiated refrain, "it is written in the great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* that ending bonded labor is against religion" (81). Mahasweta turns those great epics strategically against themselves — or, more precisely, against those tellings and invocations employed in the service of divinely justified oppression. If, as the Hindu nationalists claim, all Indians are to be the heirs of a narrowly defined epic tradition, Mahasweta shows how they have failed either to receive or to deserve their inheritance in independent India.

The great struggle to tame the forest, to domesticate those outside the Hindu tradition, continues on both social and ecological

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fronts. In "Draupadi," "the forest belt of Jhadkani. . . . is a carbuncle on the government's backside" (153). The army specialist Senanayak advocates the use of guerilla methods to capture the guerillas hiding in the forest, but Dopdi's refusal to retreat to the safety of the forest forces Senanayak to confront her on open ground, sparing her comrades and, perhaps, the forest itself. Although Douloti clings to the memory of the banyan tree in her village, there is no "forest culture" for her to return to; Munabar Singh Chandela, the landlord and bondmaster of Seora, built his empire by "reclaiming" forest areas, turning tribals into wage laborers paid to fell the trees central to their culture and very survival. During the 14 years Douloti has been forced to prostitute herself to forest contractors and road builders, her own parents have turned to gathering wood to sell in order to survive. Paramananda, the purported brahman priest who becomes Douloti's pimp, misappropriates not only the religious authority of the epics but also a version of environmentalist rhetoric, as he tells Douloti's father, "The earth is everyone's mother. Our birth and our life are on this soil" (44). In Mahasweta's stories, we see the violence that is obscured in Tagore's description of the "diverse processes of renewal of life which are always in play in the forest"; the epics themselves indicate the sociopolitical processes of destruction of life long at play in the forest, and Tagore's "always" now seems overly optimistic. Is it merely coincidence that denudation — which threatened Draupadi — and degradation — which threatened Sita — are the words most commonly used to describe the plight of India's fragile forests?

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Notes

1 Since 1979, these "State of India's Environment" reports have been published by the Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi, of which Agarwal is the director.

2 Despite Shiva's obvious commitment to the survival of low castes and tribals in the face of alienation from natural resources, she continues to rely on Tagore's remarks in her later work, including *Ecology and the Politics of Survival* (1991) and a very recently, in "Bioethics: A Third World Issue," where Shiva uses the same excerpt from Tagore's *Tapovan* to argue against those who claim that bioethics "are largely a luxury of developed countries which the Third World cannot afford" (Shiva, "Bioethics"). Thanks to Barbara Harlow for alerting me to this exchange.

3 See Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, 134-168, for a fascinating account of this archaeological method of "reading" the epics.

4 Occurring simultaneously with the *rath yatra* is the BJP-sponsored "Operation *Ghar Vaapasi* (Return Home)," an attempt to "reconvert" 100,000 central Indian tribals to Hinduism by the end of 1997. Contemporary Hindu nationalists hold that tribals are Hindu (albeit extremely low-caste) at birth and the "reconversion" is purportedly aimed against the activities of Christian missionaries, active in the region for over a century. Tribals interviewed in N. D. Sharma's *Indian Express* article think of the Operation as a conversion effort, rather than an invitation to "return" to Hinduism, and indicate that their official religious status is less important to them than receiving economic assistance.

5 Karve suggests that the Pandavas' violence against the forest dwellers within their larger struggle against their Kaurava cousins is also highlighted in an earlier episode in the *Mahabharata*, when the five Pandava brothers and their mother discover and escape from a Kaurava plot to kill them by burning the house where they are staying. On the night when a tribal woman and her five sons have come to stay with them, the Pandavas set fire to the house themselves and escape through an underground tunnel, leaving their tribal guests as convenient evidence that the Pandavas have

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indeed perished in the blaze. Karve relies heavily on the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute's "critical" edition of the epic, which contains only the episodes which exist in all extant manuscripts and commentaries. She notes that episodes of the *Mahabharata* presumed to be "later" than the common narrative of the critical edition represent the tribal family as cruel, thus mitigating the Pandavas' betrayal of their tribal guests and bringing the narrative closer to the Kshatriya code and Brahmanical ideals. See Karve 6-7 and 76-77.

6 In her Translator's Foreword to "Draupadi," Spivak explains that "kounter" is "an abbreviation for 'killed by police in an encounter,' the code description for death by police torture" (391). Draupadi's husband Dulna was killed in such an "encounter."

7 After the miracle of the infinite folds of Draupadi's cloth, her husband Bhima, more noted for his brawn than his brains, swears to avenge the Kauravas' treatment of Draupadi. Interestingly, Bhima is a hero to many of the tribes of India; he is integrated into the lineages of their gods, and for the tribes of central India, he is credited with domesticating buffaloes for agriculture, obtaining paddy seeds from the gods, discovering the intoxicant qualities of the fruit of the *mahua* tree, founding the trade of blacksmithing, and, most importantly, being "rain maker and god of harvest" (Misra 167). Dulna and Draupadi's efforts are directed primarily against landlords who horde water in a time of extreme drought, to which the tribal tracts of central India are highly prone.

8 The mutilation of Dopdi's body also echoes the treatment in the Rama story of Surpanakha, sister of Rama's nemesis, the *rakshasa* king Ravana. Surpanakha offers herself to Rama during his exile in the forest; he and his brother Laksmana toy with her, and Laksmana finally cuts off her nipples and her nose. Kathleen Erndl argues that "it is not surprising that she is said to be a widow . . . . Surpanakha's unmarried state is thus the major source of her evil nature; being a *rakshasi* is at best a contributing factor" (84). See Erndl's "The Mutilation of Surpanakha," in *Many Ramanayas*, for a fascinating examination of various tellings of the Surpanakha episode.

9 Bonded laborers accept loans from moneylenders and become their bondslaves; the loans are calculated with such usurious interest that they can almost never be repaid (if accounts are kept at all). The bondmaster can appropriate the labor of the debtor's entire

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family, even that of future generations. Bonded labor was outlawed in India in 1976; the practice continues, not least because former bonded laborers often do not have the resources to sustain themselves without the daily meal the bondmaster often provides.

[10] Shulman's reading of Rama as a "divine hero" in the Valmiki *Ramayana* conflicts with the views of many scholars, who point to the medieval *bhakti* tradition of personal devotion to a god as the cultural phenomenon which led Rama to be construed, in later tellings, as an *avatar* of Vishnu. Shulman addresses the *avatar* issue inadequately; nonetheless his account of this episode remains important to my own reading of "Douloti."

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