Mahasveta Devi’s “Draupadi” or “Dopdi” is an intense discourse involving the subaltern positioning of a person in general and a woman in particular. Devi’s texts re-examine the dominant nationalist school of historiography which deals with the elite class of the society, focussing attentions on the neglected and marginalised locations. Devi tries to counter the resisting dominant historiography with a folk historiography.

Dopdi Mejhen belongs to the Santhal tribe and her origins are drawn back to Champabhumi of Bengal. Dopdi and Dulna worked at harvest, rotating between Birbhum, Burdwan, Murshidabad because they are labourers. During this period there was the conflict between the leftists and the government of West Bengal. The left party in order to capture state power took the help of these tribes to achieve their goal. The tribes were oppressed and debarred from their minimum basic needs. A violent group emerged from Naxalbari in West Bengal, The Communist Party of India, led by Charu Majumdar, Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal, in 1967. This violent uprising of the group gave birth to naxalites. The merciless exploitations of the working class in Bankarjharh by landlords, tradesmen and industrialists led the tribe to involve themselves in naxalite group who are considered as left radical communists. It is an accepted notion that the Naxals adhere to the ethics and politics of Maoist ideology. The struggle of the Naxalites is generally against the authority of the state and the people who tend to control or tame the power of an area, thereby making the poor subalterns. The presence of free class and caste system in India supply the required energy to suck life out the poor and uneducated mass. The landlords endorse draconian feudal system in most of these places and, the Naxalites opine that only violent struggle can earn their rights and equality in the society.

Dopdi is an activist in the naxalite movements. Guerrilla warfare is supposed to be the most repulsive style of fighting with primitive weapons. “Dopdi and Dulna belong to the category of guerrilla fighters, for they too killed with hatchets and scythes, bows and arrows”
They involved in this movement to fight against the force which stands as a hindrance in the welfare of their society. The government label them as terrorists because they killed Surja Sahu and his son under the pretext of waging a class war. After this episode Dopdi and Dulna underground themselves in the forest of Jharkhandi. But later when she was caught she was apprehended, tortured, gang raped and brutalised all through the night.

The army troops deployed by the government were able to crack down the naxalites destroying the rebellious section of the people, most significantly the Santhal tribes. This setting of the story “Draupadi” highlights the clash between two binary- elite intellectual and rural struggle. In “Draupadi” Mahasveta Devi’s intervention of history through her narrative discourse subverts the cultural politics of the mainstream historiography. Ranajit Guha points out in the historiography of colonial India that, ‘The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism-colonial elitism and bourgeois nationalist elitism’. (Subaltern Studies Vol.I, pp.1). It has originated as an ideological product of the ruling elite. The subaltern approach towards history is to change the ideological appropriation and make an attempt to focus the contribution of the subordinate class. Mahasveta Devi intervenes into the history dominated by the elitist. The elitist voices of the pre-history are reconstructed by Devi. She grabs our attention by projecting her story through the subaltern voice. In ‘Draupadi’ subaltern Dopdi Mejhen was victim of law fabricated with the view of elitists. Senanayak on the plot degrade and captures Dopdi. Arjan Singh the diabetic Sikh captain who falls on the Granth Sahib and the “five Ks” of the Sikh religion is presented as all brawn and no brain. On the other hand, Mr. Senanayak, the elderly Bengali specialist in combat and extreme-Left politics is wily.

The class struggle undermines the narrative of “Draupadi”. The Santhals in Burdwan, and Birbhum are the minor groups. In a survey, Amiya Kumar Samanta points out that only 7 percent of the population are Santhals, who are minor and 70 percent belongs to upper caste Hindus. The Santhals are the economically poor people who were landless labourers. They have not seen the fruit of development. They are living in an inhuman condition, struggling for their minimum needs essential to survive. Dopdi Mejhen as a naxalite adopted violence as a mean to destroy the old structure of feudal exploitation and class struggle and substitute it with a classless society. Her voice represents the Santhal tribe but the social norms and law are favourable for the so called elites. The labour class are the product of the capitalist class. But when this class of people emerged as a resisting force against these elites for their rights and dignity, they were debarred. The creation of the labour class and their destruction is at the
hands of the elites. Dopdi’s sound of the voice against this destructive and exploitative power is minimised by Senanayak, the symbol of system and law beneficial of the elitists. She was apprehended and to some extent the ruthless state run by corrupt people is seen through Senanayak. The destructive policies to dismantle the uprising peasants can be traced through Senanayak, when he says, “Make her. Do the needful.” (pp.41)

The subaltern voice like that of Dopdi was centred between the adivasi and the tribal society. The lack of written records of their biography, heroic deeds and contributions in movements of the past remained unheard due to illiteracy. Therefore, such subaltern voice exists orally in the folk tales. Some sorts of fragmentation are furnished in such stories because they are circulated from generation after generation. As a result, such subaltern voices are excluded from the history. The elitist’s exploitative authority figured these subalterns as extremists which were a stigma and it was also an obstacle for them to shine in history. The historiography of Indian nationalism is flourished with the elite and their dominance is vivid in various movements and struggles including the freedom movement. Asok Sen points out that, “The freedom struggle monitored by the elite leadership passed through many different phases. Even in its early days the distinction between moderate and extremist was noteworthy”. (Subaltern Studies Vol. V pp.216) The contribution of subaltern voice cannot be ignored. Ranajit Guha asserts that, “parallel to elite politics, there was a domain of people’s politics in which the principal actors were the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the population.” (A Textbook of Historiography pp.492)

Mahasveta Devi in “Draupadi” has concentrated on the sub-human conditions of the tribes of India and the trap of oppressions under which they were caught. Devi through the narrative projected her experiences with sharp edge of realistic world vision. The selection of events and plots proceeds coherently. Dopdi Mejhen emerged from the Santhal background against the oppressive force. Her voice raised question for their basic human rights which are in the hands of elites. The peasant uprising against the corrupted zamindars led them to a violent struggle. Then they took weapon in their hands to wipe out the feudal system which was an obstacle in their struggle. The lives of these people are treated for their own political sake. Voice like that of Dopdi oscillates in between the wall of elitist formulated norms and the elitist historiography.

To conclude, Dopdi’s struggle for her rights and her process to deactivate the exploitative zamindari system is a strong voice against this system. She as such represents the entire lower class of the society deprived of their rights. The rewriting of history from below
excluding the norms of the elite provides a platform to the marginalised and the neglected ones. Subaltern historiography not only violates the nationalist historiography but it also revived the folk heroes like Dopdi. The common people who were beyond the boundary of history in the elitist historiography are now encompassed in the subaltern historiography.

Works Cited:


