



Rebels of the Forest: Tribal Identity and Oppression in Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* and Vetrimaaran's *Viduthalai*

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ABSTRACT :

Mahasweta Devi's novel *Aranyer Adhikar* and Vetrimaaran's film *Viduthalai* (2023) are two compelling stories that explore tribal identity, past and present oppression, and the enduring spirit of rebellion. The harsh marginalisation of Adivasis (indigenous peoples) of India is depicted in both pieces, despite their extreme differences in medium, era, and area. Birsa Munda, a brave tribal freedom fighter, appears in Mahasweta Devi's novel, which also demonstrates how the British colonial government tried to suppress indigenous liberty. In contrast, Vetrimaaran's *Viduthalai* uses a fictional but politically charged forest rebellion to highlight contemporary state violence and opposition suppression in Tamil Nadu. This paper examines how the forest is portrayed in both narratives as both a literal and symbolic location of conflict, as well as how tribal leaders resist systematic erasure and exploitation. The paper aims to emphasise the ongoing nature of oppression from colonial to postcolonial periods through a detailed comparative analysis and emphasise the critical necessity to provide tribal perspectives a central place in India's sociopolitical discourse.

Keywords: Tribal identity, Adivasi resistance, forest politics, state oppression, human rights

Introduction:

Adivasis, India's indigenous, forest-dwelling communities, occupy a paradoxical and frequently ignored place within the wide and complex fabric of Indian culture. As the original custodians of the land, their histories stretch before the Vedic era, yet they have faced persistent marginalisation, both socially and politically. Their lives, traditions, and struggles have frequently been ignored, romanticised, or misrepresented within dominant narratives shaped by caste hierarchies, class divisions, and urban-centric perspectives. This erasure isn't incidental; it is deeply embedded in colonial and postcolonial structures of knowledge, governance, and development. During the colonial period, the British colonial rulers labelled Adivasis as "primitive" and "criminal tribes," justifying the expropriation of their forests, lands, and cultural independence. Sadly, independence did not bring about their liberation. Instead, post-independence India, under the banners of modernisation, industrial growth, and national security, often continued the colonial legacy of disempowerment. Displacement caused by dam projects, mining, and forest laws, coupled with increased police militarisation and socio-economic neglect, is an ongoing struggle that endures to this day. Literature and film become powerful tools in this atmosphere to challenge existing silences and uplift the voices of marginalised communities. Indian filmmakers like Vetrimaaran, a brave filmmaker renowned for his provocative Tamil films that disagree with abuse of power and support subaltern resistance, and Mahasweta Devi, a passionate writer and activist dedicated to documenting the lives of tribal people in eastern India, are among those who have continuously prioritised Adivasi perspectives. Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar (Rights over the Forest)* (1977) and Vetrimaaran's *Viduthalai* (2023), though separated by time, language, and form, both serve as pointed criticisms of tribal oppression and strong resistance. Devi's novel recounts the life and uprising of Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who sought independence from colonial oppression. Vetrimaaran's film, inspired by Jeyamohan's *Thunaivan*, exposes the brutality faced by forest dwellers under the modern Indian state, depicted through a violent counter-insurgency operation in Tamil Nadu. Both works centre the forest and its indigenous inhabitants, reshaping the forest's image from a wild, chaotic frontier into a sacred area of social identity, rebellion, and community. Through sacrifice, resistance, and a constant fight for liberty, land, and dignity, they prove how Adivasis are active agents influencing their destiny rather than passive victims of history. By examining *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Viduthalai* side by side, this paper aims to investigate how themes of tribal identity, resistance, and state violence have evolved across time, and how they continue to echo today. By doing this, one discovers a common story of the under-represented subaltern, the forgotten heroes, and the forest rebels, who struggle not only for land but also for recognition, voice, and memory.

The forest acts as a physical, inhabited area for native populations as well as a powerful representation of liberation, spirituality, and survival in both pieces. The Adivasis view the forest as their country, which is vital to their identity, culture, and way of life. On the other hand, the forest is seen by outside forces, whether colonial, capitalist, or authoritarian, as a resource to be used or a region to be controlled. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, Mahasweta Devi vividly details the Chotanagpur region, where the Munda community lives in harmony with nature. However, colonial laws like the Forest Act and various

land reforms deprive the tribal people of access to their land. Their forests are converted into revenue-generating plantations and mining sites, effectively turning the tribals into trespassers on their ancestral land. Similarly, in *Viduthalai*, the forest becomes a heavily militarised zone under police occupation as part of anti-insurgency measures. The local tribal inhabitants are caught in the crossfire between the state and rebel leader Vaathiyar. With powerful images showing how state control translates into widespread surveillance, torture, and forced relocation, what was once a refuge turns into a place of terror. In this sense, the forest becomes a controversial area—a site of resistance where the Adivasis struggle to maintain their dignity and very survival in addition to defending their territory.

Birsa Munda, a real-life tribal leader and freedom fighter, is the subject of Mahasweta Devi's fictionalised biography *Aranyer Adhikar*. Birsa, who was born in the 1870s, fought against British laws that denied tribal people of their land and worked to create an indigenous government known as the Munda Raj, which was founded on justice and tribal customs. Devi presents him as an idealist who brings his people together by fusing political opposition, religious reform, and environmental consciousness. The concept of "adhikar" (rights) the right to land, the right to cultural customs, and the right to self-determination, is closely linked to Birsa's uprising. His opposition to the oppressive landlord system and the missionaries who tried to convert the tribesmen is as much spiritual as it is political. In *Viduthalai*, Vaathiyar, portrayed by Vijay Sethupathi, is a fictional leader of the "People's Army," inspired by actual Maoist and Naxalite movements. Although the state labels him a terrorist, Vaathiyar is fundamentally a guardian of the tribal community—opposing displacement, mining activities, and police violence. His charismatic leadership stands in sharp contrast to the state forces' moral complexity. Both Vaathiyar and Birsa are symbolic insurgents whose resistance is based on their personal experiences rather than just belief. They stand for hope for a time when tribal lives are respected and not seen as worthless, in addition to opposition against authority.

A notable similarity across both works is the depiction of the state as a violent, dehumanising entity. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, the British colonial administration employs brute force, legal deception, and imprisonment to crush tribal resistance. Birsa is arrested multiple times, subjected to torture, and ultimately dies under unclear circumstances in jail. His movement is violently suppressed, and his followers are branded as criminals. Similarly, in *Viduthalai*, the modern Indian state exhibits comparable brutality. Under the pretext of national security, police establish a torture camp within the forest, where innocent tribal villagers are detained, beaten, and sexually assaulted. The protagonist, Constable Kumaresan (Soori), initially unaware of these atrocities, gradually witnesses the brutality firsthand and becomes an unwilling participant. The film critiques how democracy can mask authoritarianism, where justice is sacrificed in the name of "order," leading to the criminalisation of entire communities. Whether under colonial rule or post-independence regimes, the methods of state oppression remain unchanged: surveillance, propaganda, and the suppression of dissent.

Both texts emphasise the unique hardships faced by tribal women, subjected not only to economic and cultural marginalisation but also to sexual violence and systemic erasure. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, Mahasweta Devi illustrates that women involved in Birsa's movement are not passive victims; they actively take part in rituals, support the rebellion, and help preserve oral traditions. However, they remain deeply vulnerable, caught between patriarchal tribal norms and external acts of violence. *Viduthalai* offers one of the most harrowing portrayals of custodial rape in Indian cinema. A tribal woman is sexually tortured by the police, and her trauma serves as the moral core of the film. This scene is not gratuitous; it compels the audience to face the human toll of state violence, especially on the most vulnerable members of society. In both works, the violation of women's bodies stands as a symbol of the broader assault on tribal autonomy. Yet, their resilience and resistance also embody an unwavering strength, turning their survival into powerful acts of defiance. Mahasweta Devi was more than just a writer; she was a lifelong activist who lived among tribal communities, chronicled their struggles, and fought tirelessly for their rights both in court and on the streets. *Aranyer Adhikar* is not merely a historical novel; it serves as a political document, written in clear Bengali with tribal dialects and oral traditions seamlessly incorporated. Devi's approach in storytelling challenges the literary elitism that often marginalises indigenous voices. Vetrimaaran's *Viduthalai* employs cinema as a potent tool for political expression. Through techniques like handheld cameras, uncut long takes, and authentic sound design, the film immerses viewers in the chaos and moral decay wrought by state violence. Casting Soori, a comedian, as the protagonist alongside Vijay Sethupathi as the rebel leader also disrupts stereotypes, adding emotional richness to the narrative. Both artists illustrate that art can serve as a form of resistance, an effective means to challenge dominant power structures and elevate subaltern voices.

Conclusion

The findings of *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Viduthalai* force us to face a fundamental contradiction in Indian democracy: how a country that describes itself as founded on freedom and justice frequently ignores its most vulnerable residents, the Adivasis. These two pieces, one with literary roots and the other with cinematic roots, provide a striking and unsettling comparison between the colonial state of the past and the postcolonial state of the present. Despite more than seventy years of independence, the systems of exclusion, violence, and dispossession continue largely unchanged for India's tribal communities. The forest, serving as both a physical setting and a powerful symbol in both narratives, is more than just scenery. It embodies the core of indigenous identity, a space of resistance, and a representation of a different kind of civilisation, one grounded in ecological sustainability, communal bonds, and spiritual harmony with nature. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, the forest is a sacred inheritance, a realm Birsa Munda fights to preserve, not only from material theft but also from ideological colonisation. In *Viduthalai*, the forest becomes a militarised zone where human lives, especially those of tribal populations, are sacrificed in the name of national security and progress. Birsa Munda and Vaathiyar—though separated by time, culture, and circumstances—are united by their vision of justice. They are more than rebels; they are restorers of balance, challenging systems that have historically dehumanised and displaced their communities. Their resistance is not motivated by revenge or hatred, but by love—for their people, their land, and the values of independence and dignity. Both of them serve as counter-narratives to popular history through their stories, serving as a reminder that real progress can only be made with ethics, acceptance, and an understanding of the oppressed people's lived circumstances.

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