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**A STUDY OF POLITICAL SYSTEMS OF PRE-INDEPENDENCE INDIA
IN MAHASWETA DEVI'S *THE QUEEN OF JHANSI***

Anju Rani

M.A. (English)

Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra

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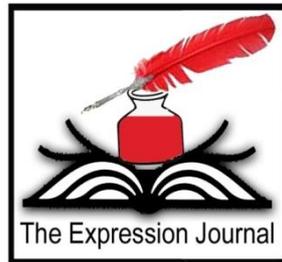
Abstract

Political system deals with the ideas and principles that shape Constitutions, government and social lives in an organized and planned way. It investigates the significance of principles such as the rule of law, separation of power, judicial review, etc. It gives the information about rights and duties of the people of a nation provided by the government of that nation, along with a description of its relationship with two other nations. Politics is a record of the public events and the lives of the leading man, who takes part in the public events such as war and revolution. They are known as leaders who have the power to attract and lead the public with their action and speech. This paper focuses on the political system of the British India in Mahasweta Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi*. Devi elaborates how the British ruled India under their different policies, laws and doctrines. She illustrates The East India Company's laws and policies based on their motive to expand their empire in India and to exploits Indians. In *The Queen of Jhansi*, she defines the Doctrine of Lapse in details. She highlights the role of different Indian political leaders and British Governor General in Indian political situations of the uprising of 1857.

Keywords

Political System, The East India Company, Pre-Independence India,
Doctrine of Lapse and Indian Writing in English.

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Introduction

Every nation has a political system that rules over the people in order to maintain recognized procedures for allocating valued resources. Historically, all civilizations witnessed certain governed systems that played an important role in welfare and progress of the nation. It was termed as a political system that was made by their own people for their safety and security. Such a system has been governed either by an emperor or a set of ministers. Thus the election of ruling government depends on the taste of the people of any nation, for instance, some nation follows democratic system and some follows a monarchy system. It is a record of the public events and the lives of the leading man, who takes part in the public events such as war and revolution. They are known as leaders who have the power to attract and lead the public with their action and speech. A. L. Rowe points out that "politics consists of the public behavior of man in the masses; it is the society, sphere of action. It is the central importance in the life of a society" (Jayapalan 29).

Political theory deals with some doctrines and policies to govern a nation. According to political theory, every society has a political system and government, which fixes and saves same rights and duties of the people, for instance, it provides the freedom to people for their development thereby helping people to express themselves. Historically, there have been various forms of political systems, including autocracy, plutocracy, communism, republic and democracy.

After a close reading of the political nuance of 19th century India, it has become quite evident that the rebellion of 1857 is considered as a major rebellion in the Indian political history, known as the first struggle and fight of the Indian for their freedom and to remove the foreign rule from India. Political system has been an integral part of the society. It has been a direct force in controlling the society. The Indian revolt of 1857 has played a significant role in the political history of Indian literature and also in world literature. It is described by many writers, politician and historians in different ways and styles.

Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi is an Indian Bengali historical fiction writer and social-political activist, who write about various tribes movements. Her works translated into other languages. She was awarded with numerous honorable awards such as Sahitya Academy Award (Bengali) in 1979 for her novel *Aranyer Adhikar*, Padma Shri award in 1986 for her political social work, the highest literary award Jnanpith Award in 1996 by Bhartiya Jananpith, and the second highest civilian award Padma Vibhushan by the Government of India in 2006. She also attained the highest civilian award of Banga Bibhushan in 2011 from the government of West Bengal.

Mahasweta Devi's historical novel, *Jhansir Rani* has been written in 1956, was translated in English by Sagara and Mandira Sengupta and published worldwide in 2010 under the title of *The Queen of Jhansi*. Devi elaborates the political system of pre independence India and describes how the British rule with different policies and doctrines.

A Study of Political Policies in Mahasweta Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi*

Mahasweta Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi* describes the political system of pre independence India. The political system helps in deciding and making new policies in the society. In ancient time, India was divided into small states and the each state followed a monarchy system. After the arrival of the East India Company, the king was appointed by the British. The decision making power of the king was transferred in the hand of the British ignoring the welfare of the people. The Indian kings had no authority in fact, all the powers rested in hand of the British rulers. They had no knowledge about India's culture, tradition, customs and belief systems. Indian kings have to rule their states according to the wishes of the British Raj. Mahasweta Devi elaborated the monopoly of British rulers in *The Queen of Jhansi* and describes a pact, which was established between Shivrao Bhau and the East India Company. It is about the current political situation of that time:

In 1804, a pact was established between Shivrao Bhahu and the East India Company. Shivrao Bhau sent his kharitia, or official letter, detailing mutual military help, containing seven conditions, to the Governor General through John Bailey, the current political representative for Bundelkhand. The Governor General accepted the conditions and signed the treaty. Since several conditions had not been mentioned in the original treaty, Shivrao Bhau submitted them in 1806. John Bailey handed these conditions over to the Governor General George Barlow in Kothra. In return for their royalty, the Company acknowledged Shivrao Bhau's and his heirs' right to the throne of Jhansi; they were granted freedom to rule the kingdom as they wished. (14)

In 1835, Raghunathe Rao was chosen to be king by Colonel Sleeman, in spite of Sakhubai's obstructions. But, he was afflicted with leprosy, and died in 1838. After his death, the question of the throne was raised, and four claims were made by, respectively, Ragunath Rao's legal wife, Ali Bahadur, Krishna Rao, Vinayak Chandorkar and Gangadhar Rao, the youngest son of Shivrao Bhau .The East India Company had chosen Gangadhar Rao to be king, after investigating all these claims. He had to notify the current political representative of Bundelkhand to Sir Simon Fraser. The British gave the permission to be a free king to Gangadhar Rao, only on condition that he keeps a British army, and the kings have to pay their charges.

The doctrine and policies are made according to a tradition and custom of the nation. But the British system made all the policies that served their purpose. The basic idea was to earn more money from the states, which was a significant political cause of the revolt of 1857.

Their policies neglected the welfare of the common people. Out of all these policies and doctrine, one of the doctrines was the Doctrine of the Laps. This policy restricted the king to adopt a son from ruling and claiming the legal right to the throne and carrying on the family's right to rule, was totally against according to the Indian culture and the Hindu religion. Hindu religion gave the permit of adoption of a child; the adopted child had all the right to their adopted parent's property and followed the same duties towards their parents as performed by the biological child. The East India Company has made the policies and rules contrary to this law. Their policies were unfit in the Indian environment, culture, religion and tradition. It was against the Indian political system, which created the unrest and revolutionary environment among Indians.

The East India Company's victory was ensured at Jhansi, because the king of Jhansi died without illegitimate heir to the throne and his wife, Lakshmibai, was forced to abandon her royal titles and rights, under the policy of the Doctrine of Lapse. The Queen wrote some letters to the East India Company for the permission of adoption of child. Dalhousie consulted on the matter with another member of the council and wrote a summary of it and kept the petition in the government portfolio. Mahasweta Devi gave the details of the official letter and the decision of the British members:

The adoption taken by Gangadhar is absolutely without foundation ... In 1812, when Shivrao Bhau wanted to re-enact the same pact in the interest of Ramchandra Rao, the British government rejected it on the basis of an agreement that Peshwa Bajirao II had made during the pact of 1804... Shiverao Bhau died in 1814... Raghunath Rao, the next ruler, died in 1838. There were four new claimants ... Gangadhar Rao was selected by the verdict. This clearly proves the fact that Jhansi is one those states that do lose autonomy in the absence of a male heir and hence are liable to be taken over by the government.

Maharani Lakshmibai has cited examples of Orchha, Datia, and Jalun ... It is true that in 1832 a case of adoption was approved in Jalaun, but its' terrible consequences prompted the British Government to take it over in 1840 ... The Court of Directors of East India Company in England was informed by the Foreign Office in India:

4-3-1854 (letter no. 21). (70, 71)

According to the doctrine of the lapse, the British restricted her adopted son from legal right to the throne and carrying on the family's right to rule. This doctrine forbade a long-standing social tradition of passing of title and land to adopt heirs. The British government created this type of policy to dominate and control the British leadership in many royal provinces and regions. This policy was associated with the name of Lord Dalhousie, who was the Governor General of India in 1846. This policy was made to control over any ruler's region, who was either not capable of producing a legitimate male heir or was found incompetent to rule; it resulted in many kings losing their claim to royal domains and possession. This policy was executed in 1848 by the East India Company under command of Lord Dalhousie. After enacting this policy the East India Company control over the Indian states one after another on different dates, such as Nagpur and Jhansi (1854), Satara (1848), Jaitpur (1849) and Kerauli, which describes by Devi in her book: "Dalhousie did not actually introduce the law of possession of the state on the basis of the Doctrine of Lapse, although, it was associated with his name. In principle, the law had been in effect for a long time. It had also been utilized from time to time. After enacting it, Dalhousie took over the Indian states one after another: Nagpur,

Satara and Kerauli were absorbed into British India” (53, 54). Even the British historians Kaye and Malleson were fully supported the British rules and policies in India, but they did not justify this annexation of Jhansi.

The British took the possessions of Jhansi under the doctrine of lapse, and rejected Lakshmibai’s idea of the adoption. They said that it was against the British laws and political policies. The Queen realized the dual policy of the British but she was forced to accept the pension of five thousand rupees, for her son and the huge circle of dependent relatives. The thought never occurred in her mind that Dalhousie could dispose her from her husband’s private property. The king had a mansion in Parola, Pune and Kashi, along with some money and jewelry, which was a part of his private property. Dalhousie presumed a sharp political policy and informed Malcolm that the adoption of Damodher Rao had no political significance, because he could never be the king of Jhansi. Dalhousie dismissed the social legitimacy of a son adoption, according to the Hindu religion. He wrote a letter to Malcolm:

I apprehend that it is beyond the power of the Government so to dispose of the property of the late Raja, which by law will belong to the son whom he adopted. The adoption was good for the conveyance of private rights, though not for the transfer of the Principality.

(Minute by Dalhousie) (25-3-1854). (Devi78)

The relationship between the ruler and the ruled were quite clear as it gave an insight into the political inclination of the British. Apart from it, a few British social servants had a sympathetic attitude towards the Indians, and it was observed that all the attempts of the British were political motivation having no personal connections.

Religion, always affects the political system of the nation because all the policies are made according to the religion and tradition of that place. Any king or political party can’t rule the nation for a long period to make the political policies and rules while challenging the social laws and traditions. The ruler creates policies and principals, according to tradition, custom and belief system of a society. During the 18th -19th century in India, there was an encounter of east and which were totally opposite to each other. The British was spreading Christianity in India, they start denouncing the Hindu and Muslim religions. They presented the government policies, which was in contrast to Hindu and Muslim religion and favored the Christianity. They ate the meat and opened a slaughter house in the center of the Jhansi, where they killed the cows, pigs and other animals brutally. The Queen protested against this attack on faith of Indians, but was dismissed. A political awareness was absent among the public. They attached their occupation of the property to Jhansi’s Mahalakshmi temple, where the British opens a slaughterhouse and openly displays butchered animals. The Mahalakshmi temple was made by the queen’s ancestors. The historians Kaye and Malleson described about the grievances and miseries of the Indian in *The Queen of Jhansi*:

Other grievances, such as the slaughter of Kine amid a Hindu population, and the resumption of grants made by former rulers for the support of the Hindu temple, whilst fomenting the discontent of the population with their change of masters, formed subjects for further remonstrance; but personal indignity was that which rankled the most deeply in the breast of this high spirited lady, and made her hail with gratitude’s the symptoms of disaffection which, in the, early part of 1857, began to appear amongst the native soldiers of the hated English. (Devi 84, 85)

The British had different policies for the Indian and British soldier. In the army high rank Indian officer's salary was very low in comparison of the British soldiers that lead to revolt that was called as the Sepoy revolt. The Sepoy word was used for the native Indian soldiers. The history of the early mutinies leads to unhappiness among the Sepoys. The reasons might be attributed either to an unjust cutting of pay or an interference with the religious prejudices of the Indian soldiers. During the Afghan war in 1839, Indian officers expressed their disaffection and anger against the British Raj. The Muslims were displeased because they were employed against other Muslims and the Hindus for living in the foreign country and under conditions which offended the rules of their religion. When the soldiers raised their voice against the British, they were shot and hanged by the British officers:

The Muslims questioned fighting against their own kind despite the prohibition in the Koran The fearless Subedar of the 27th Native Infantry voiced his protest. After a trial, the officer ordered him to be hanged. The Subedar never returned and was hanged to death. Only an envelope bearing the government's stamp was delivered to his village by a postman. The soldiers shut up after that ... On the eve of their departure to Sindh, 64th Native Infantry rebelled. They did not want to fight a futile war so far from home. Forty of them were discharged. Twenty five of them were hanged in the main street of Lahore. Just let anyone contemplating mutiny see the consequences of doing so. (89)

The return from Kabul led to disqualification of the Hindus from their caste and religion, where the Muslims were reprimanded for not obeying Koranic restriction and fighting against Afghans, who were from the same faith. In this way, the both Hindus and Muslims had to work against their religion and to save their religion they revolted. The British dealt with the religious values and beliefs of the Indians that have been stressed upon as the cause of the rebellion.

The Indian soldier did not receive their salaries for eight months of their work that was the central reason for the economic problems. The demand for their salaries resulted in their hanging and killings by the English officers. The Gwalior incidents of 1853 explain the killings: "In 1853, the soldiers in the Gwalior Continent had not received their salaries for eight months. Jayajirao come with an army and started shooting. Sixteen died and their homes and farmlands were confiscated" (89). The Indian soldiers killed the British soldiers and officers, along with their family, burnt their houses and destroyed all the communication sources. Thus the starting of revolt by the Indian soldiers made some states declare themselves as independent states. The British rule was under threat from this revolt.

Devi also highlights the friendship and smooth relationship between the Indians and British before the revolt of 1857 in *The Queen of Jhansi*. She gives a brief description of the Burmese war, in which the British were helped by the Indian kings. The King Ramchander Rao was a close friend of Colonel. He helped the English in Burmese wars referred by the author: "He had cooperated with the British government in suppressing the thugs, and also helped the British government by donating 70,000 rupees during the Burmese war in 1824. Besides, he had at various times given the British two cannons, 400 cavalrymen, and 1,000 foot-soldiers" (15).

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi illustrates the British system govern the India under their different laws, policies and doctrines. She defines clear picture of the Indian political situations of the uprising of 1857. She highlights the role of various British and Indian political leaders.

Mahasweta Devi brought forward various policies, laws, rules and doctrines of the British exploiting Indians. The doctrines of the Laps executed by the Governor General Lord Dalhousie aimed to expand their empire in India and also control over the states with kings' sans their biological child. She presents the British partial behavior with the Indian, how they were exploited mentally as well as economically. The Indian soldiers thus raised their voice with the help of revolutionary acts in form of the revolt of 1857. She explores the reasons of British victory under the doctrine of laps.

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