

## EMBRACING THE 'OTHER': MAHASWETA DEVI, A CRUSADER AND AN ADVOCATE OF TRIBAL RIGHTS

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### Abstract

*Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), better known as 'Ma' among the tribals, campaigned for the downtrodden and the marginalised people of the country. During her literary career, Devi travelled extensively in parts of Northern and Central India, researching on folklores and oral histories of tribal communities. She wrote more than 100 novels and 20 volumes of short stories. The paper examines how Mahasweta Devi has tried to expose in her writings, the exploitations of the tribal communities by the feudal class. Mahasweta Devi has attempted to portray the social ills and the hypocrisy of the state machinery through the travails of her protagonists. Devi's work represents and inspires social justice for subjugated women and disenfranchised communities. The paper further explores how Mahasweta Devi has highlighted the anxiety of the 'other.' The paper observes how Mahasweta Devi's characters refuse to believe the existing ideals of the society, become arbiters of their own fates and figures of resistance. The paper takes into account the fact that Mahasweta Devi never believed that the subjugation of women can be separated from the oppression of the tribal communities by the landowners and bourgeoisie. To sum up, the paper studies the major works of Mahasweta Devi and broadly illustrates how the subaltern is given a voice by the author.*

**Keywords:** Subaltern, tribal communities, society, marginalization, resistance

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**M**ahasweta Devi was born on 14<sup>th</sup> January, 1926 in present day Bangladesh. Her parents were Manish Ghatak, a renowned novelist of the time and her mother was Dharitri Devi, a famous social activist. Thus, from the very beginning of her childhood, Mahasweta Devi was guided by family ambience that was characterized by social awareness and education. During her childhood, she got involved in educating illiterate girls of her age in Dhaka. Her early life was spent in poverty. After her marriage to the playwright Bijon Bhattacharya, Mahasweta Devi started doing odd jobs to augment the family income.

Her literary career started with the publication of her first novel *The Queen of Jhansi* when she was just 30. *The Queen of Jhansi* is a work of fiction that depicted the valour of Rani Laxmi Bai who had fought against the British in the year 1857. Although the novel was initially written in Bengali, the success of the work later propelled the novel into getting translated to languages such as English, Italian, French and others. While writing the novel, the young Mahasweta travelled across the northern part of India. While travelling, she met villagers who narrated the story of Rani Laxmi Bai. This oral history was passed on from generation to generation. In an interview later in life, the novelist had admitted that oral narratives can be authentic sources of history. In fact, memory can be a reliable tool to record history and contemporary society. While listening to the oral histories of Rani Laxmi Bai, Mahasweta Devi also experienced a first-hand account of rural India and its myriad characteristics. Perhaps, this encounter with the villagers later gave birth to the activist Mahasweta Devi who fought tooth and nail against injustices perpetrated by the government and administrative machineries.

As the years passed, Mahasweta Devi's activist mindset came to the fore. In fact, a number of her own family members were themselves involved in social causes. Apart from her parents, her uncle was Ritwik Ghatak who directed films reflecting social issues. Mahasweta Devi's husband Bijon Bhattacharya was a Left leaning playwright who again made plays on contemporary social issues. Thus, activism accompanied her from a very early age. While pursuing her career as an activist, Mahasweta Devi started shedding her middle class trappings and increasingly got involved with the lives of the subaltern tribes with whom she worked. Thus, it was often found that she left Kolkata and visited remote villages where she wrote about tribal communities such as the Lodhas of Midnapore, Khedia Shobors of Purulia and the Dhikaros of Birbhum. During her literary career that spanned more than 3 decades, she wrote more than 100 novels and short stories that gave her readers accounts of marginalized communities such as the tribals, prostitutes, beggars, nomads, labourers and even Naxalite rebels.

Her relentless efforts to depict the subaltern communities received international recognition and she was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1997. Apart from the Ramon Magsaysay, she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi, Padma Shri, Padma Vibhushan, Jnanpith, etc.

Mahasweta Devi was heavily influenced by the infamous Bengal famine that affected the state just after Indian had gained her independence. Furthermore, the Tebhaga movement that was launched under the leadership of the Communist Party brought the novelist close to the social issues that were afflicting Bengal during the time. She soon became a part of the famine relief work of the People's Relief Committee and the cultural squad that mainly participated in activities in the district of Rangpur in undivided Bengal. Her concern for the migrants who were entering Calcutta after 1947 also deserves mention here.

The Tebhaga movement brought her in close contact with the landless farmers who were nothing but pawns in the hands of greedy and avaricious landlords. Mahasweta Devi's fury at the so called middle class society's apathy towards the farmers can also be traced during this time. In fact, it is said that her attraction towards Bijon Bhattacharya was partly due to

the latter's concern for the agrarian society of Bengal. In one of Bijon Bhattacharya's play *Jiyonkanna*, performed at Rangmahal theatre, Kolkata, Mahasweta Devi played one of the lead roles.

After her marriage to Bijon Bhattacharya, the couple moved to Bombay where they started working closely with stalwarts of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) such as Salil Chowdhury and Khwaja Ahmed Abbas. Mahasweta Devi did not produce any notable literary work during this period but her activist side never ceased to exist during this time. She was a keen participant in the numerous discussions at Salil Chowdhury's house. It is said that during this period, she released a consignment of rhesus monkeys stuck in red tape at the Bombay port, in the Khandala region of Maharashtra. The incident is noteworthy because during that time, it was quite against the propriety of a Bengali middle class married woman to be involved in such a daring operation that brought her face to face with the government machinery which was still a prerogative of the male. Thus, we can sense that she was against any kind of injustice. Devi never hesitated to plunge herself whenever she saw injustice committed against the voiceless marginalized sections of the society. 'Mahasweta Devi's writings on tribal life are intimate and clearly identify the state and its agents as violent oppressors of the people.' (Sen) Later in her life, Mahasweta Devi fought for the indigenous tribes of Bengal who were deprived of their lands because of certain government policies. She even established an organization that reported human right violations of the tribal communities to the National Human Rights Commission. Despite her own financial constraints, Mahasweta Devi never shied away from fighting for the cause of the poor and the downtrodden. Whatever money she earned, she donated that for the cause she was fighting for. Through novels such as *Bashai Tudu*, *Aranyer Odhikar*, *Chotti Mundar Tir*, etc. Mahasweta Devi brought forth the stories of tribal heroes like Birsa Munda and others who fought for their rights to their land and the forests. Mahasweta Devi felt that the capitalist greed for more power and money was an offshoot of the colonial craving for wealth and money. Her life as a writer and an activist are intertwined since all her literary contributions focus on the marginalized sections of the society. Her work and involvement with the denotified tribes of India brought her in close contact with Mr. GN Devy, a noted social activist. The association eventually led to the formation of the Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group

(DNT-RAG). Her other activist achievement included filing a public interest litigation in 1998 in the Calcutta High Court. The litigation alleged that the custodial death of Budhan Sabar was not suicide but a result of custodial torture. The allegations were later proved true and the court ordered compensation to the deceased's wife. Mahasweta Devi also got involved with cases of political prisoners and ensured that prisoners imprisoned under judicial custody are granted access to legal recourses. In the recent past, Mahasweta Devi got involved with the Singur and Nandigram movement in the early years of the present century and sided with the farmers whose lands were forcibly taken away by the erstwhile Left Front government in the name of industrialization. Mahasweta Devi never felt comfortable with power and privilege. Rather, she felt at home in the company of the simple tribal people and people wronged by the state. It can be safely summed up that because of her efforts, the lives of people living a subhuman existence could be brought in front of the world.

Coming to some of her works, Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* (Rights of the Forest) published in 1977, provides an account of Birsa Munda and his legendary bravery. The novel also chronicles the tribal armed uprising that protested against the British atrocities and aimed to assert the tribal communities' rights of the forests and hills. Like other stories of her, Mahasweta Devi, in her *Aranyer Adhikar*, paints the state and its machinery as the oppressors. However, it must be noted that the novelist was interested in matters of family as well. The patriarchal society and its many agencies of repression were taken up by the novelist. Mahasweta Devi wanted to expose religious hypocrisy and regressive mindset. In that way, she is a staunch feminist as well because she wanted to highlight the cause of women and how women have always been relegated to the margins of the society. In one such work of her called *Talaq*, she criticizes the custom of having to consummate a marriage with another man if the husband had divorced the wife. In the short story, a rural Muslim couple had to flee from the village because of the aforesaid horrific custom. Some other critics like Urmil Talwar believe that Mahasweta Devi's oeuvre subverts the grand narratives of colonialism, patriarchy, caste system and class division. She depicts the fate of women who are twice colonized and victimized in the Indian social system but resists the term feminism as she proficiently displays the exploitation of the lower class and tribal men as her emphasis is on class and not on gender. (Talwar 218)

Some other areas of concern that find mention in Mahasweta Devi's works are the different resistance movements that have taken place in independent India. Naturally, the Naxalite movement finds mention in her narratives. In *Mother of 1084 (Hajar Churashir Maa)*, Mahasweta devi narrates the story of a grieving mother Sujata Chatterjee who undergoes a process of self-realisation and re-awakening after her son Brati dies in police custody. Brati was a convicted Naxalite but after his custodial death in the hands of the police, his body becomes a metaphor for the many atrocities that the state had committed on the youths in the name of arresting Naxalities. Carlotta Beretta believes that the character of Sujata undergoes a process of self-realizations. She moves from a micro to a macro plane. In fact, 'Sujata, the mother of Brati Chatterjee represents the anguish of all mothers who bear the pain of seeing their children suffer in the hands of the state.' (Beretta 69) Clearly, Mahasweta Devi's support goes for the Naxalites and their ideology. In the story, we also find the feminist side of the novelist that gets highlighted. Mahasweta Devi, through the character of Sujata, exposes the pseudo Bengali middle class morality that was in place during the time. Dibyanath, Sujata's husband, is a classic example of the Bengali middle class babu who refuses to identify Brati as his son because the former believes that Brati had actually shamed the family by joining the Naxalites. His hatred for the Naxalites grows to such an extent that he refuses to identify Brati as his son even ever the latter's death. The character of Dibyanath also fails in his duties as a husband towards his wife, Sujata. Infidelity marks their marriage and Sujata soon discovers that Dibyanath is involved with a number of other women. Thus, this broken marriage also plays a role in paving the way for Sujata's journey of self-realisation. Suata gets in touch with Brati's former comrades and becomes familiar with the ideals of the movement. Her coming close to Somu's family, another revolutionary who is now dead, brings to the fore the economic hardships that most families of Bengal had to face during the time, owing to growing unemployment and faulty state policies. It is said that Mahasweta Devi had a first-hand experience of the Naxalite movement that had affected Bengal in the 1960s and the 1970s. She saw, with her own eyes, the gunning down of youths by the police in the name of ensuring safety of the society. The anguish of Sujata acquires a universal dimension because she represents the anguish that mothers have to face when their children are caught in the quagmire of a corrupt and criminal minded state machinery.

The insensitivity of the state machinery is indicated by the fact that Brati is referred to by a number 1084 and not by his name. 1084 is the number that has been assigned to the dead body of Brati, now lying cold in the police morgue. The novel, time and again, is a chilling reminder of the ruthlessness of the state and how, youths are nothing but pawns in the hands of corrupt leaders.

The next story that I intend to discuss is *Draupadi*. The short story, initially written in Bengali and later translated into English by Gayatri Spivak speaks of an innocent tribal woman named Dopdi Mejhen who is gang raped by the armed forces. Much like her namesake Draupadi in Mahabharata, Dopdi is a rebel whose indomitable spirit the state is unable to crush. She bares her body and dares the state forces to further torture her. This incident rings a bell in the reader's mind when a similar incident happened in Manipur. The fast by Irom Sharmila and the protests by local women against the armed forces are similar in nature to Dopdi Mejhen's courage and rebellious nature. The use of brutal images by the author makes the narrative incisive and heart wrenching. Mahasweta Devi often incorporates local tribal dialects and words that lend an authentic tone to her stories. Furthermore, her use of sarcasm and irony laid bare the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of the state and the society. Her stories are also replete with oral histories and folklores that help in chronicling the social spaces of the tribal communities.

Continuing with her fascination of the tribal culture, Mahasweta Devi, in her novella, *Pterodactyl*, examines the reasons behind the misunderstanding of the tribal communities by the mainstream society and communities. Jogamaya Bayer comments 'The outsiders misapprehension of the adivasis' desperation indicates their indifference to the adivasi culture.' (Bayer 96) For the author, the tribal communities always embodied simplicity and innocence while the mainstream social spaces imbibed hypocrisy and falsity.

As mentioned before, Mahasweta Devi is fascinated by the people living a marginalized existence. In her short story, *The Breast Giver*, Mahasweta Devi narrates the story of Jashoda who is paid to nurse the children of her master and mistress. Through the story, we get an insight into the feudal society that was present in contemporary Bengal villages. The novelist

has always been fascinated by people who never had access to education, healthcare or a stable source of income. Popularly called 'Ma' by the tribal communities in Bengal, Mahasweta Devi was successful in striking a chord with the people living on the periphery. Some critics have complained that Mahasweta Devi's writings are simplistic and they always offer a picture that reflects the tribal communities as saints and the state as an agency of oppression. In fact, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who translated some of Mahasweta Devi's short stories from Bengali to English criticised Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of the tribal subjects. She felt that Devi's tribal characters are always 'noble savages'. Notwithstanding the criticisms, Mahasweta Devi's writings embody a childlike idealism. Her dark humour, unforgiving portrayal of the society and its hypocrisies are considered to be actual depictions of the contemporary social spaces. She was never hesitant to call a spade a spade. She would abandon all forms of civility and demand that an act of injustice be resolved if she felt that someone is wronged. For her, the civility that is automatically associated with the Bengali middle class is nothing but a sham. She was never afraid to tread the difficult path. Until recently, just before her death, Mahasweta Devi actively took sides with the landless peasants of Singur and Nandigram. Despite a failing health and in an advanced age of 80, Devi was one of the leaders of the movement that was spearheaded by the farmers of Bengal protesting against the forcible acquisition of their arable lands by the Bengal government. During this time, she was also a part of the Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR) that fought for the poorer sections of the society.

Mahasweta Devi is often credited to have discovered the first Bengali Dalit writer Manoranjan Byapari. Byapari was a Namasudra by caste and did odd jobs to sustain himself. After working in several cities, he started pulling rickshaws in Kolkata. Manoranjan was illiterate until late 20s but later, he started reading books on his own and gradually developed a literary acumen. It is said that he used to keep books in his rickshaw and whenever, he had some free time, he read them. It so happened that Mahasweta Devi hired Byapari's rickshaw on her way to a South Kolkata college. During that short journey, Manoranjan assumed Mahasweta Devi to be a teacher by seeing her white saree and demeanour. Manoranjan was intrigued by a Bengali word 'jijibisha' and asked the meaning of the word to Mahasweta Devi. The noted writer not only explained the meaning of the word

which was 'will to live' but also, asked him more about his literary interests and his life. She also advised him to write something for a magazine called *Bartika*, that Mahasweta Devi was editing herself. Manoranjan soon started writing for several magazines on issues ranging from Dalit discourses and the marginalization of the Namasudra communities in Bengal. His autobiographical novel *Itibritte Chandal Jibon (Life Story of a Chandal)* won rave reviews and also the Bangla Academy award for literary excellence.

Mahasweta Devi's support for the subaltern communities is proved through many interesting accounts. In an anecdote it was said that Mahasweta Devi often visited the Jharkhand capital of Ranchi. In Ranchi, there was a statue of Birsa Munda which was installed in a place named after the tribal hero. The statue showed Birsa Munda dressed in a turban and dhoti but his hands were in chains. Mahasweta Devi used to demand that the chains be removed. Officials accompanying her used to reply that the British had photographed Birsa Munda in chains and those photographs had become reference points for the sculptors who created the statue. The government officials also tried to justify the chains in the statue by saying that the chains symbolised Munda's struggle for freedom from the British rule. Mahasweta Devi was never convinced with the answers and always demanded that the chains be removed from the statue on the Birsa Munda Chowk. Recently, 116 years after Birsa Munda's death, the Jharkhand government finally decided to remove the chains from the statue. Although Mahasweta Devi is no longer alive to witness the change, the incident proves beyond doubt the novelist's conviction and belief in freedom from subjugation. It also shows the novelist's unflinching faith and love for the dispossessed tribal communities and the landless peasants who still live a miserable existence in contemporary India, thanks to social inequality and repression.

In the present day age, characterised by social hierarchy and caste based injustices, Mahasweta Devi's writings become all the more relevant. Her stories lend a voice to the voiceless. Mahasweta Devi's dream of an egalitarian society is an answer to the numerous instances of intolerance and discrimination that we see around in today's world.

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