

Tribal Health and their Well Being in Mahasweta Devi Works

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ABSTRACT

Mahasweta Devi's texts offer the critique of civilization, the dichotomy of nature and culture and the threat posed by forces of modernization. She offers penetrating insights into the connection between ecological and economic concerns. She is known as a committed artist, documenting the past and continuing struggle of the people. But creative writing is only one side of her literary persona. There are several other dimensions of her persona concerns; activities and priorities which are distinct but closely interrelated. She cannot be branded by any conventional label such as writer, social activist, reporter, editor or organizer of peoples' groups at the grass root level. Each one of these titles is partially true. All these aspects of her personality considered together sharply distinguish her from her contemporaries not just in West Bengal but in the country also. As a creative writer, her contribution is noteworthy, both in significance and volume. Her writings originate from her intimate knowledge of the ground realities. Her stories deal with a diverse range of issues related to the deprivation, degradation of life and environment, exploitation and struggles of the laboring poor and the underprivileged, the landless and small peasants, sharecroppers, bonded labor, contract labor and miners in West Bengal and Bihar. She has a deep sympathy with the tribal people and she documents their life, customs, culture and their problems in the wake of modernization. Her essays deal with the degradation of the ecosystem and lopsided forestation policy of the government which has ruined the primitive life and culture of tribal people. Devi urges for sustainable development concept so that the progress can be made without ecological devastation that is being perpetrated by industrialists and government officials. Devi's perspective on ecology forms an integral part of her entire creative output because she finds a close connection between man and nature. She believes that the survival of mankind is possible only when human beings acknowledges and respect Mother Nature rather than usurp it for personal profit. Her fiction unveils her concern about the alarming imbalance between man and nature due to globalization, privatization and capitalistic policies of different governments. She finds that consistent murder of nature has severely affected the life of poor deprived tribal and the rural women who depend on forests for livelihood and other basic requirements. These oppressed communities are the worst sufferers in the process of globalization and privatization of resources. As a writer, Devi feels that a creative artist plays a vital role in destroying the spurious elements of contemporary civilization and helps in reconstructing the future society. In the author's preface to *Bashai Tudu*, translated and edited by Samik Bandyopadhyay, Devi makes biting comments on the popular writers of the time for their snobbery and insensitiveness to social issues related to the plight of the dispossessed and the disinherited tribal and dalits.

KEYWORDS: tribal, Mahasweta, works, Devi, health, government, dalits, environment, stories, essays

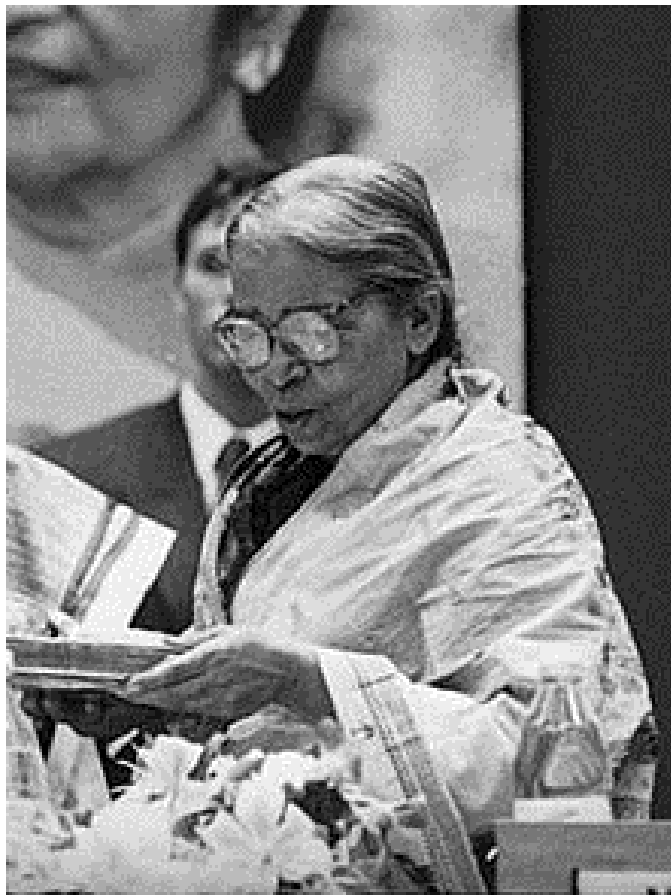
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INTRODUCTION



Mahasweta Devi (14 January 1926 – 28 July 2016) was an Indian writer in Bengali and an activist. Her notable literary works include *Hajar Churashir Maa*, *Rudali*, and *Aranyer Adhikar*. She was a leftist who worked for the rights and empowerment of the tribal people (Lodha and Shabar) of West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh states of India. She was honoured with various literary awards such as the Sahitya Akademi Award (in Bengali), Jnanpith Award and Ramon Magsaysay Award along with India's civilian awards Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan.

Mahasweta Devi story “Draupadi” from *Breast Stories* where she describes how these women are exploited, tortured, humiliated, manipulated and raped by rich social institutions and the protectors of law. However, as Mahasweta Devi makes a remarkable shift in the general perspective about subaltern women by presenting them as decisive and assertive. Women whose value system do not allow them to accept or adhere to the ideology of violence, death and destruction. Rather than adhering to the feelings of helplessness and misery due to their victimization they bounce back with greater vigour against the perpetrators of violence.[1,2]

The stereotypical assumptions of womanhood perpetuated through patriarchal ideology have been challenged by these ‘subaltern’ women to assert their emancipation however insignificant it may be.

Despite consistent degradation at personal, social and political levels through their resilience and conviction tribal women register a metamorphosis in their lives.

She always believed that the real history is created by ordinary people. For her, the endless source of inspiration for writing used to lie in “amazingly noble human beings” and their sufferings. Bengali litterateur and activist Mahasweta Devi, who breathed her last today in Kolkata, has been fighting against social injustice ever since she started holding a pen for a purpose.

Mahasweta Devi was not just an onlooker, but a responsible representative of the subaltern, the downtrodden and the ignored population of the country. It is through her fierce writing that millions of tribal people in India could manifest their misery. This leading Bengali fiction writer and an eminent social activist wrote extensively on emaciated existence of the most marginalised and dispossessed of our people. Her indictment of the society “for the indignity it heaps on its most oppressed constituents” has always been strong.

From depicting brutal oppression of the untouchables by authoritarian upper-caste landlords to narrating stories on how scheduled tribes and their traditions are closely wound up with the forest they live in, her writings have raised hackles of the local and state governments.[3,4]

Her seminal work, *Hajar Churashir Ma* (The Mother of 1084), which deals with the Naxalite movement in West Bengal, captured the sad realities of the movement. In fact, the stories of tribal resistances against the British and other authoritarian entities were poignantly documented in her books such as *Aranyer Adhikar* (Right to the Forest) and *Chotti Munda O Tar Teer* (Chotti Munda and his Arrow). Mahasweta Devi had thrown herself into the fight to reclaim basic rights of the deprived lot and make them self-reliant. She walked her way through remote villages and deserts in search of oral history and folklore. Her “impractical sincerity” towards collecting data for her stories is reflected in each of her creations.

The author had a very first brush with human suffering during the Bengal Famine (1942-44) when she volunteered to provide relief to the victims. She would distribute food, scrutinise the bodies lying on the streets to identify those still alive and take them to relief centres. This was perhaps the watershed moment in her career dominated by literary activism.

Her work with the Sabars, a de-notified tribal community in the Purulia district of West Bengal, earned her the sobriquet, “The Mother of the Sabars”.

As a social worker in the domain of tribal welfare, she rendered her service to the West Bengal Oraon Welfare Society and the All Indian Vandhua Liberation Morcha. She was also the founding member of Aboriginal United Association.[5,6]

Above all, she would be remembered for founding India's first organisation for bonded labourers in 1980 that gave thousands of them an organised platform for raising voice against forced labour

Discussion

Mahasweta Devi was born on January 14, in 1926 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, British India, to poet and novelist Manish Ghatak who used to write under the pseudonym Jubanashwa. Devi's mother, Dharitri Devi, was also a renowned writer and a social worker. Her most notable works are the biography of Rani of Jhansi, Hajar Churashir Maa, Rudali, Murti and Aranyer Adhikar. Devi was felicitated with several awards over her course of life for her contribution to the literary world, such as Sahitya Akademi Award, Jnanpith Award, Ramon Magsaysay Award, along with India's Civilian Awards Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan.[7,8]

Long before Mahasweta Devi started penning miseries of her fellow citizens, she had been herself at the receiving end. She had to do several odd jobs starting from selling dye powder to supplying monkeys for research to the US, so that she can supplement her husband's income, especially after the birth of their son. Even though she could lay her hands to a government job at the Post and Telegraph department, she was targeted as a communist and terminated from her job. She also overcame a broken marriage and a period of acute depression to establish herself as a people's writer. Mahasweta Devi has also been a strong critique of the West Bengal government's industrial policy. Through newspaper columns and interviews, she had mobilised people against forceful confiscation of large tracts of fertile farmlands by the government and ceding them to industrial houses at throwaway prices.

Devi illustrates how any conflict or war results in the women's body being the primary targets of attack by men. In the contexts of both the Naxalite movement and the Bangladesh Liberation war, both men and women are tortured, but it is much worse for women as they additionally undergo sexual abuse. Thus with Spivak's concepts on the subaltern in mind, through Dopdi, Devi represents the gendered subaltern subject who exists at the periphery of society and dares to go against the existing patriarchal structures. Spivak has shown concern regarding the representation of the subaltern in the mainstream discourse on the basis that the subaltern cannot be represented; only re-

presented. However, Devi's use of polyphony not just re-presents the subaltern, it also explores the politics around the category of the 'subaltern.' [9,10]

Bengal in particular, and the whole nation at large, considers Mahasweta Devi a literary treasure. She penned more than 100 novels and over 20 collections of short stories. Her works included political writings, children's fiction as well as plays. The void left in the literary world by her death in 2016 can never be filled. Devi also worked with landless labourers of eastern India, forming an intimate connection with them. Hence, she could understand and begin documenting grassroots-level issues. She became a socio-political commentator of the marginalized community.[29]

Mahasweta Devi edited a Bengali quarterly- Bortika. It was a forum for the poor peasants, tribals, agricultural labourers, industrial labourers, as well as the rickshaw pullers. She represented all the sections of society that had no voice. Even her fictional work is littered with social messages. Her protagonists are the socially marginalized tribals, and she wrote extensively about their struggles. She realized fiction could not properly represent the issues she wanted to bring attention to. Thus she took to writing journals and papers about tribal issues.

In 2007, Mahasweta Devi had started writing an autobiography. However, she could not finish it before her death. The autobiography told stories of the mental trauma and other difficulties that she faced. Devi was married to Bijon Bhattacharya, one of the founding members of the Indian People's Theatre Association. Things turned sour when they separated in 1962. It was during this stage that she suffered mental health issues and financial crisis.[11,12]

Mahasweta Devi was a woman who dared to walk out of an unsatisfactory marriage which was a daring move in the 60s. She sought separation from her husband in a time when it was unthinkable to do so. As a woman, she dared to claim a space for herself, for her writing. She endured social backlash and financial crisis due to her decision to separate. However, she worked several odd jobs like writing letters in English for illiterate people so that she could make ends meet while seeking fulfillment in her writing.

Results

Mahasweta Devi was a woman who utilized her privilege to uplift the minorities. She fought for tribal rights and gave them space. Her 1977 novel Aranyer Adhikar (Right to the Forest) was based on the life of tribal freedom fighter Birsa Munda. She teaches us

how to be a good ally in a time where caste issues are less talked about but are still as prevalent. Devi knew how to connect to marginalized communities at the ground level. Although she wrote about their struggles, she never let her own voice dominate. The narrative belonged to the oppressed communities that was only aided by her skillful writing.[27,28]

Mahasweta Devi once said, "All my writing is about real people and real issues. It doesn't cater to any specific ideology." Although in her youth, she had been a self-proclaimed communist, she was not tied to any particular political party. She believed in the rights of the people. Especially, she stressed that she was not fond of extremist violence. According to her, violence disrupted the lives of adivasi villagers, who became collateral damage in the war between the extremists and the State.[13,14]

Her main sayings were:

I would go so far as to urge a special provision in the University for learning about them. For, unless the academicians and the elite of society start learning about the tribes and support their rights, the tribals' yearning to get a dignified place in India will never be fulfilled. Until that happens, I will use every possible forum to sensitise people about the de-notified tribes and communities.

It is now more than a year since the All India De-Notified Tribes and Communities Right Action Group was set up. But few recognise them as living creatures. As Namwar Singh said at a Delhi University function, "All these years I have lived in Delhi, I have never spared a thought for the Kanjars, Bawarias, Pardhis, Sasis.." But for the major crimes committed in the Capital, they are victimised. What is more crucial, when they need all the understanding and protection, they are being shown on TV channels as the most wanted criminals.[15,16]

I have been working for the tribes of Bengal for three decades. Last year when Budhan, a member of the Shabar tribe I am connected with, was killed, I filed a PIL in the Calcutta High Court. The responsible police officers were suspended, a CBI inquiry is on and the widow was awarded a compensation of Rs 1 lakh. Naturally, when I was asked to deliver the Verrier Elwin Memorial lecture in Baroda last year, I spoke about the denotified tribes. It led to the setting up of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes and Communities Right Action Group. Marathi writer Lakshman Gaekwad is the vice president and G N Devy is the secretary of the Group which brings out a bulletin named Budhan. There are more than 200 tribes and communities, with the population numbering between 5 and 6 crore. The nomadic ones cannot vote because of police persecution and

constant wandering about. The British had notified them in 1871 as Criminals and passed the Criminal Tribes Act, though not all were tribes -- some were simply castes. The Government of India denotified them in 1952, but in 1959 passed the Habitual Offenders Act. It is a repetition of the Act of 1871, with minor change of words. So now, they are oppressed by both, the police and society. Not really. Because all the development schemes initiated for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes, are not applied to them. Therefore, at the age of 75, I am desperate. I urge the government to bring all of them under a general category, De-Notified Communities. This DNC should include all SCs, STs and OBCs, but can have a subplan for the nomadic ones. They can be brought into the fold of development by giving land, facilities of education, health. Women's development can be made possible under Indira Awas Yojana. Non-formal vocational training centres can be opened. Above all, I appeal to the media not to project the police version alone but to go and make enquiries on their own and write field reports on their real condition, so that people understand the reality. Had they been such big criminals, they would not have lived in such abject poverty.[26]

In 1952, when they were denotified, the police and the receivers of stolen goods kept them engaged in criminal activities. For many such communities, crime is the only way to survive. Otherwise they suffer persecution, both by the police and society. But they continue to live in dehumanised conditions everywhere, whether in the metropolises or in the remote villages. I speak from personal experience. I have seen about 60 Lodhas and Shabars of West Bengal being killed for either theft or dacoity, but not a single receiver of stolen goods has been brought to book. The situation in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh is much worse; Delhi is no better. On December 3, policemen from the Baramati Police Station killed three sleeping Pardhis and grievously injured four persons. Two of these were women. I cannot help but ask, again and again: Why do the big swindlers and power wielders go unpunished? Why do these communities pay the price all the time? It is not new for my literature to spring from a fight for the rights of these oppressed and downtrodden people. The tribal revolt against the British at the turn of the century formed the backbone of Aranyer Adhikar, which the Sahitya Akademi had singled out for their awards. My social activism is the driving force of all my literary activities, be it literature -- which brought me into the good books of Jnanpith -- my newspaper columns or the journal I edit, with writing by members of different tribes. The lives of the bonded

labour provided me with a character like Dopadi. Perhaps their stories also impart a narrative immediacy to my language.[17,18]

In the words of the award council, it was "for her compassionate crusade through art and activism to claim for tribal peoples a just and honourable place in India's national life." I did write three stories and novelettes in July. But then I had a stroke which forced me to rest. This is the first time since then that I have stepped out of Calcutta. I have come only to make our thinkers and policy makers see the reality of the denotified tribes. I had gone to Bhopal for a seminar on the subject. It was also the focus of my talk at the Delhi University. And it will take up every waking hour of my stay in Baroda, the headquarters of the Group.

Conclusions

Mahasweta Devi raised her voice several times against the discrimination suffered by tribal people in India. Devi's 1977 novel *Aranyer Adhikar* (Right to the Forest) was about the life of Birsa Munda. And in June 2016, consequent to Devi's activism, the Jharkhand State Government finally saw to the removal of the manacles from the figure of Munda, which had been part of the commemorative sculpture of the notable young tribal leader due to its having been based on a photograph dating from the era of British rule.[19,20]

Devi spearheaded the movement against the industrial policy of the earlier Communist Party of India (Marxist) government of West Bengal. Specifically, she stridently criticized confiscation from farmers of large tracts of fertile agricultural land by the government which then ceded it to industrial houses at throwaway prices. She supported the candidature of Mamata Banerjee in the 2011 West Bengal Legislative Assembly election which resulted in the end of the 34-year long rule of CPI(M). She had connected the policy to the commercialization of Santiniketan of Rabindranath Tagore, where she spent her formative years. Her lead in the Nandigram agitation resulted in a number of intellectuals, artists, writers and theatre workers joining in protest of the controversial policy and particularly its implementation in Singur and Nandigram. She is known to have helped the noted writer Manoranjan Byari to come into prominence as his initial writings were published in her journal and as prompted by her. At the Frankfurt Book Fair 2006, when India was the first country to be the Fair's second time guest nation, she made an impassioned inaugural speech wherein she moved the audience to tears with her lines taken from the famous film song "Mera Joota Hai Japani" by Raj Kapoor.[25]

This is truly the age where the Joota (shoe) is Japani (Japanese), Patloon (pants) is Englistani (British), the Topi (hat) is Roosi (Russian), But the Dil... Dil (heart) is always Hindustani (Indian)... My country, Torn, Tattered, Proud, Beautiful, Hot, Humid, Cold, Sandy, Shining India. My country.[21,22]

In 1997, president Shankar Dayal Sharma commuted two death sentences after Devi led a petition campaign. In 2012, she was one of more than 215 signatories, along with Nandita Das, Aamir Bashir, and Anusha Rizvi, to a petition delivered to president Pranab Mukherjee that opposed the death penalty after the conviction of Ajmal Kasab following the 2008 Mumbai attacks and instead favored life imprisonment. The letter stated, "In the land of Buddha, Mahavira and Gandhiji, let it not be said there is no place in our hearts for mercy."

On 27 February 1947, she married renowned playwright Bijon Bhattacharya, who was one of the founding fathers of the Indian People's Theatre Association movement. In 1948, she gave birth to Nabarun Bhattacharya, who became a novelist and political critic. She worked in a post office but was fired for her communist leaning. She went on to do various jobs, such as selling soaps and writing letters in English for illiterate people. In 1962, she married author Asit Gupta after divorcing Bhattacharya. In 1976, the relationship with Gupta ended.[23,24]

On 23 July 2016, Devi suffered a major heart attack and was admitted to Belle Vue Clinic, Kolkata. Devi died of multiple organ failure on 28 July 2016, aged 90. She had suffered from diabetes, sepsis and urinary infection.

On her death, Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal tweeted "India has lost a great writer. Bengal has lost a glorious mother. I have lost a personal guide. Mahasweta Di rest in peace." Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted "Mahasweta Devi wonderfully illustrated the might of the pen. A voice of compassion, equality & justice, she leaves us deeply saddened. RIP." [30]

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