

**MAHASWETA DEVI: AN EMBODIMENT OF SOCIAL ACTIVISM**

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**Abstract:**

*In this research paper, after a brief introduction about the term 'activism', an attempt has been made to thoroughly analyse Mahasweta Devi as a social activist. Her activist concerns and preoccupations have been examined threadbare, and her creative oeuvre has been scrutinised through the prism of Post colonialism. The aim is to show how Mahasweta Devi's literary output and activist concerns, her fiction and non-fiction complement each other and are interconnected with the common thematic thread of her activism.*

**Key words:** *Activism, Dalits, Post colonialism, Subaltern, Tribals, Neo-colonialism*

The word activism, derived from the German word *Aktivismus*, implies an intentional, deliberate action, effort or activity to promote direct socio-political change. Social activism thus is an intentional action with the goal of bringing about any social change. But then since the word 'social' is all-inclusive, it can, rather does, incorporate political, economic, environmental, and other related issues as well. Art has been used from times immemorial as a potent tool to highlight socio-political issues and to encourage community and public participation with the general aim of bringing about one or the other change. From the Middle Ages to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, writers have been employing their pen as a sword, highlighting the conflicts and controversies of their time with the aim of either mobilizing public opinion towards a particular point of view or to bring about any other desirable change. Assessed in its historical perspective, Plato, the premier social scientist, was the first person who wanted art to remain in the service of collective welfare. Plato's concern extended to an advisory note to the philosopher statesman advising that only the poets/writers espousing moralistic concerns, which are closely interlinked with socio-political issues, may be allowed to stay in the state. And down the ages the concern of art and literary activity serving the society stayed. The tradition of socio-politically active creative literature has been forwarded by writers like the acclaimed and incredible social-activist of West Bengal Mahasweta Devi (1926- 2016).

Mahasweta being ardent and dedicated social activists and known for her bold and fearless activism world-over, highlights several of the social issues and concerns in her fiction and non-fiction: immature and irresponsible so-called developmental projects that displace and destroy the lives of thousands of tribal and lower-caste citizens of India, the entrenched and ingrained corruption of the Indian bureaucracy and its rotten political system, the oppression and exploitation of women and other marginalised etc.

Mahasweta focuses on hitting very specific, very particular, very local issues over and over again with hardly any attempt of linking them with international problems or universalizing them (though, more-often-than-not, they do have universal significance). She is undeniably an Indian intellectual who writes mostly in her native language Bengali. Her prolific output in the form of novels and short stories are mostly historiographies, rehabilitated folklore, political allegories steeped in local conditions, traditions, dialects, and customs, which need to be understood keeping in view her social activism in its totality.

To Mahasweta "a responsible writer, standing at the turning point in history, has to take stand in defense of the exploited" (Devi 1997: viii). As a corollary to this belief, she as a writer wishes:

To expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies: The feudal-minded landowner, his henchmen, the so-called religious head of the administrative system, all of whom, as a combined force, are out for lower-caste blood. . . peel the mask off the face of the India which is projected by the Government, to expose its naked brutality, savagery, and caste and class exploitation; and place this India, a hydra-headed monster, before a people's court, the people being the oppressed millions (Devi 2009: ix-x).

Besides, she believes that “history should be re-written, acknowledging the debt of mainstream India to the struggles of the tribals in the British and even pre-British days” (Ghatak 2010: 150). For that she wants to write that part of history; document those “old stories”, which she believes are vanishing, “getting lost”, “losing”, “like notes in the face of a dust storm, ancient tales, history, songs, sagas, folklore, folkways” (Devi 1993: 187).

In her very first full length book, *Jhansirani (The Queen of Jhansi)*, published in 1956, she reconstructs the history of the life and times of the Rani of Jhansi (1835-58), drawing not only from all possible conventional archival sources but also from the oral traditions of the people of the area transmitted through generations of lore and legends. Since then Mahasweta has produced more than hundred books (fiction as well as non-fiction) with the same underlying motif of either reconstructing history or exposing the exploiting agencies in most of them, so much so that she is often accused of repetitions and criticised as a mere chronicler of social reality. But that only reinforces her commitment to the cause which she so much cherishes and strives for.

During 1966 to 1975, Mahasweta's literary career took a decisive turn and she wrote the novels of consequence, albeit with the same underlying motif. They were *KaviBandyoghotiGayinerJivana Mrityu (The Life and Death of Poet Bandyoghoti Gayin, 1966)*, representing the struggle of a low-caste boy to achieve human rights; *Andharmanik (Jewel in Darkness, 1967)*, depicting the upheaval of Bengal's social life caused by the Bargi (Maratha cavalry) raids during the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century; and her watershed novel *Hajar Churashir Ma (Mother of 1084, 1974)*, dealing with the radical left Naxalite movement of the early 1970s in an urban setting. It was a sort of transitional period in Mahasweta's life because soon after she underwent radical changes in her life and career, both in terms of creative writing as well as her other activities. Henceforth, she made the scheduled-castes, particularly the tribals of West Bengal and Bihar, as the focal point of her life and literature. This is evident from the fact that from 1976 onwards she used her pen mostly to document as well as spread stories of the historical tribal resistances against the British and the non-British i.e. indigenous exploiters like landowners, contractors etc. In *AranyarAdhikar (Right to the Forest, 1979)*, for instance, she presents a moving account of the intrusion of non-tribals into the heartland of Singbhum in Bihar under the British administration, the ruthless exploitation of the tribals, the disintegration of their agrarian and social order, and their militant struggle against the intruders under Birsa's leadership. Similarly, in her “best beloved book” *Chotti Munda O Tar Teer (Chotti Munda and His Arrow, 1980)* she attempts to reiterate the historical narrative by articulating the tribal history at the cross-section of colonial and post-colonial history. It is a thought-provoking novel which looks at tribal issues in relation to national identity and human rights. The novel moves judiciously through the multifaceted societal and economic changes in India from the British rule to the turbulence of 1970s, exploring along the way what these changes have meant for marginalised communities through the life of its main protagonist Chotti Munda. All these stories were not a part of the conventionally disseminated history; instead, they were a part of the forgotten history the part that had been conveniently kept hidden from and by the mainstream society and historians. Ever since, she has made the socially marginalised like the tribals, the so-called scheduled castes, the other depressed communities and their respective struggles of survival and sustenance as the focal point of her creative endeavours. Whether it is *ByadhKhanda* (1994), *KrishnaDwadoshi* (1995), or more recent work *Dakatey Kahini* (1998), she remains committed to her cause and purpose.

With her penchant for realism and deep intimate knowledge of what goes on at the ground level, she depicts the life of the marginalised with brutal accuracy, bluntly exposing the mechanics of exploitation and oppression by dominant sections of the society, who under the patronage of the state system politicians, the police, and the administration bereft them from the very resources which are in reality meant for their welfare. Thus they are reduced to hapless perpetual beggars who ultimately out of frustration and hopelessness take to violence or to what Mahasweta calls “necessary killing”. According to her “when these people (tribals and other lower-castes) take to violence, they do it out of sheer desperation” (Ghatak 2010: 58). This reminds one of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in which he also defends the right for a colonised people to use violence against the coloniser. It is in recognition to this blunt realism and social commitment of Mahasweta that Dr. Nelson Mandela while handing her the Jnanpith Award in Delhi said, “She holds a mirror to the conditions of the world as we enter the new millennium” (Mojares, online). Her relentless activism through her writings certainly makes her a beacon of hope for socially, politically, and economically marginalised sections of our society.

While Mahasweta's fiction engages with the concept of 'nation' critically, it seems to “approximate a deconstructive, radical subaltern postcolonialist stance” (Gupta 2009: 26). Her narratives can be taken as activist, creative interventions against the modern, brahmanic, and bureaucratic nation-state that in the name of so-called rationalist and secular developmental practices and projects ends up creating hierarchal binaries between the mainstream and the margins. It exposes the replication and perpetuation of the tradition of colonial-colonized power-praxis within the postcolonial independent nation-state. Her fiction seeks to disrupt the geographical and cultural nationalism that homogenizes differences and suppresses multi-cultural character of Indian nation. Her narratives serve to rupture the gendered and patriarchal moorings of Indian nationalism and dismantle the pretensions of welfare nationalism. Thus her works come across as the post-colonial, subaltern, gendered responses that serve to invert such hierarchical binary oppositions as coloniser/colonised, imperialism/nationalism, man/woman, public/private, central/marginal through the strategies of subversion and reversal.

Besides writing fiction, Mahasweta has other preoccupations as an activist. And it was in the decade of 1980's that these preoccupations, which have a significant impact on her oeuvre, started coming to the fore. To Maitreya Ghatak “it was a new phase in her life, a phase of expanding horizons and activities, almost a period of liberation from the narrow insular confines of her urban middle-class existence and environment, many norms of which she found oppressive and unacceptable” (Ghatak 2010: xiii). Even though she had been visiting the tribal areas like Palamau, Murshidabad, Medinipur, and Purulia before also, it is during this period of her life that she felt a desperate urge to reach to a wider audience, apprising them of what was happening to the tribals and other marginalised in the name of development, and their struggles for survival. So, besides writing fiction she started writing for newspapers and journals on the contemporary issues of her interest the oppression and exploitation, discrimination and deprivation of tribals, rural poor and the like; their consequent resistance/struggle for survival, identity and dignity; the need for providing education, irrigation, drinking water to the rural masses; problems relating to environment and ecology, and the need for more effective monitoring of government programmes so that they reach their target groups, organisations of the rural poor etc. Such is her commitment that in 1982 she took leave from her professional teaching assignment, which later culminated in her resignation in 1984, and joined a Bengali newspaper *Jugantar* as a roving reporter. This assignment proved beneficial for her activist self as it provided her the opportunity to travel to and get the first-hand knowledge about the countryside. Moreover, she became intimate with large number of rural folk, activists, and other relevant people, who became part of her vast network and often provided her information and leads which she followed up. Thenceforth she has written for several Bengali newspapers/ dailies like *Dainik Basumati*, *Bartaman*, *Aajkal* with the same penchant for blunt realism and aim of exposing many faces of exploitation. During this period she has written articles and investigative reports for such English-

language periodicals as the *Economic and Political Weekly* (founded by her uncle Sachin Chowdhury), *Business Standard*, *Sunday*, *Frontier*, and *New Republic* as well. Written in English and Bengali, her journalism mapped her passionate commitments. She ranged through such topics as police atrocities, failures in the implementation of government programs, exploitation of sharecroppers and miners, unemployment and landlessness, environmental degradation, and the need to protect and foster tribal languages and identity. Some well-known articles which she wrote during this period are: “Back to Bondage” (1981), “Contract Labour or Bonded Labour?” (1981), “Eucalyptus: Why?” (1983), “Tribal Language and Literature: The Need for Recognition” (1987) etc. Since the thematic concerns of most of her fiction are the same as in her non-fiction, the latter becomes significant to understand and appreciate her fictional writings, particularly the works like *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* which are cryptic in style and highly ironic.

It was during these years only, more specifically in 1980, that she undertook the job of editing a Bengali Quarterly *Bortika* (literally torch), which initially was edited by her father. Under her aegis the journal emerged as a forum where agricultural labourers, rickshaw pullers, small peasants, tribals, workers in factories, and the like could write about their plight and problems ranging from land alienation among tribals and other lower-castes to the problems of Muslim community. *Bortika* was the realisation of her long cherished ideal and belief that “the people I write about should themselves write about their own problems” (Mojares, online). Besides fulfilling this noble dream, Mahasweta through this journal gave the voiceless marginalised people people who hardly find anyone voicing their concerns, an opportunity to voice their predicament and problems directly. This effort of her was groundbreaking, not only because of it being “the first significant effort in alternative literature in Bengali” (Ghatak 2010: xv) but also because of the fact that it records the issues of the underprivileged in their own words, unadulterated and unadorned. The journal also provided a platform to a number of young middle-class people, activists, and persons working for the government to write on a wide range of subjects that concerned the common man. Even here we see her insisting on realism and relevance of subject matter to the day-to-day problems as the criteria for the topics to be published in the journal. This project was certainly a welcome development for the marginalised sections of the society and a significant part of Mahasweta's activist mission: voicing the voiceless. All these journalistic ventures resulted in her growing familiarity and fondness for tribals and other weaker sections of the society. Since then she has been campaigning for tribal mobilisation, focusing on issues like abolishment of bonded labour (even after the 1975 Bonded Labour System Abolition Act!), industrial exploitation, education, and the planning and implementation of developmental schemes.

The most important dimension of Mahasweta's activism, which is perceptible in her creative writing as well, is her belief in the organised group action as a vibrant mode of seeking justice. As early as in 1981, she was involved in the formation of an organisation of bonded labourers in Palamau district along with a local journalist Rameshwaram. In fact, this was the first association of bonded labourers in India. She also took an initiative in reviving the tribal organisation Lodha Shabar Kalyan Samiti in 1982 after a number of Lodha tribals were killed in West Bengal in a series of incidents during 1979-82. Since then she has been associated with a large number of organisations like Paschim Banga Munda Tribal Samaj Sugar Ganthra, Paschim Banga Oraon Tribal Kalyan Samiti, Paschim Banga Sahis Scheduled Caste Kalyan Samiti etc., which have been carrying on local developmental and income-generating work among the most deprived and isolated groups of their respective areas/communities. Most of them are tribal organisations and a few of those traditionally considered untouchable by Hindu society. Her belief in organised group action by these sections of society arises primarily out of her feeling that many basic problems of these people are not addressed by the government or the organised political parties. To her the latter are more interested in using the people as mere voting fodder. At one occasion, she goes to the extent of proclaiming that, “I am convinced that the Government of India never really meant to liberate the *bandhuas*. In our India, acts are for enactment and not for implementation” (Ghatak 2010: 26). She does

not seem to repose much faith in the Panchayat system; she thinks that developmental work in the tribal areas should be entrusted to these grass roots organisations. She ardently believes that no consequential change is possible unless people unite in groups, assess their own situation, bring pressure on the authorities in a united manner, and actively participate in whatever needs to be done. To her organised group action in the form of grassroots' organisations is best suited for planning and implementation of developmental programmes in their respective areas. As she writes in an article "Palamau in Bondage: Forever?":

I believe that only by maximum utilisation of available resources, and the involvement of grassroots-level organisations in the implementation of development programmes, enabling the direct beneficiary to receive maximum help, can the poor and the starving be helped effectively. (Ghatak 2010: 24)

Over the last few decades she has been deeply involved in the affairs of a tribal organisation Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti based in Purulia which she regards as "the last bus stop" of her life. This organisation has made a tremendous impact on the condition of the Kheria tribals. Besides creating new avenues of income for the tribals, the organisation has endowed them with a new identity and a collective strength to protest against their oppression by dominant communities: the police and the administration. The relentless effort of Mahasweta and this organisation has, over the years, led to a perceptible change in the attitude of the police and the administration towards these so-called criminal tribes.

It was in recognition to her work amongst small tribal groups of Purulia and Medinipur districts of West Bengal that she was honoured with the title of Padma Shri in 1986. No doubt her degree of involvement with individual organisations had decreased in her final years, nevertheless, her involvement was always active rather than nominal, as a mere figure head. Whether it was to lead the processions of bonded labourers, sweepers, scavengers, or to mobilise the public opinion against wrong state policies, she always remained actively involved and never shunned from taking sides. Recently we had seen her spearheading the movement against the industrial policy of the government of West Bengal. She had vehemently criticised confiscation of large tracts of fertile agricultural land from farmers by the government and ceding the same to industrial houses at throwaway prices. Her campaign had resulted in a number of intellectuals, artists, writers and theatre workers join in protesting the controversial policy and particularly its implementation in Singur and Nandigram. In fact in November 2011 she had gone to the extent of calling the state government of West Bengal "fascist" for apparently not granting permission to rights groups to hold a protest rally in Kolkata.

In the final analysis it can be easily asserted that every aspect of Mahasweta's activism, be it creative writing, journalism, campaigning, or organisations, espouse the cause of the oppressed and the exploited of our society. All her activities and actions, while exposing many faces of the exploiting agencies, aim at mobilising and motivating the exploited and the oppressed to organise themselves for their own welfare and development. Throughout her life we have seen her writing and fighting on behalf of tribals and other marginalised communities of India. When in 1998 interview she was asked about her future plans she categorically replied: "Fight for the tribals, downtrodden, underprivileged and write creatively if and when I find the time" (Talukdar 2001: 3). And even in her last days of life this *young* octogenarian was raring to do more for the marginalised, especially for the tribals whom she has referred as "my tribals" and did not shun from taking sides, speak up where silence would be shame, and to make trouble where not to do so would be a crime. Her resignation on 23 May 2012 as the chairperson of Paschim Banga Bangla Academy after her recommendation for the prestigious Vidyasagar Puraskar was turned down by the state government only reinforces her unflinching commitment to raising voice against injustice. And as a committed social activist she expected/expects the same from every conscientious individual.

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