

Remembering Mahasweta Devi

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Mahasweta Devi retained an enviable gift for belonging to the most marginalised people throughout her life. Through her writings, she exposed the trajectories of their oppression—the imperialist, the ethnic, the economic, and the gendered—as only a writer like her could do. She was also a singer, organiser, and human rights activist who always stood up for what she believed was correct for the cause of the downtrodden, regardless of who else agreed with her. It is difficult to believe that a year has gone by since she passed away.

When Mahasweta *di* sent me a message saying she wished to have *macher jhol bhat* (fish curry with rice) with me during her visit to my university at Wardha, I was both excited and apprehensive. The excitement was because her gesture, at a time when my husband, Binayak Sen, was being tried on charges of sedition, indicated her love and support in a landscape dotted with hostile right wingers and fence sitters. The apprehension was because I had serious doubts about the availability of good river fish at Wardha (the kind Bengalis eat and invite each other to eat), not to mention my ability to produce a Bengali fish curry that adhered to any gourmet standard!

This, however, was Mahasweta Devi at her typical best. It was not as if I knew her closely. I had first met her sometime in the 1980s, along with Purnendu Ghosh of Chhattisgarh, who had known her during the Tebhaga days, and who remained a supporter of workers' movements all his life. Very much like Mahasweta *di*. I remember that the last time I met her, a few years before she died, her parting words were *onek kaj baki aache*, (there is so much left to be done).

Throughout her life, she retained a legendary gift for getting involved with the underdog in our hierarchical society, of belonging to them, and through her penetrating writing, expose the trajectories of their oppression—the imperialist, the ethnic, the economic, and the gendered—as only a creative writer like her could do. She lived her life during a tumultuous period in the history of Bengal and India, and was a close witness to the Tebhaga movement, as well as the political ferment around the tumultuous decade of the 1970s, that is somewhat inadequately described as the “Naxal” period. The breadth of her engagement was shaped by the political currents around her.

It has always been difficult to pin her down; for persons of letters, she was a social activist, for the latter, she was a

writer. She was also a singer, organiser, human rights activist, and had acted in stage productions. Today, as we remember her a year after she is gone, it is hard to capture the essence of the kind of person she was; I can only try to put some fragmented thoughts together about the remarkable worlds she inhabited.

Mahasweta Ghatak was born into the bosom of the progressive Bangla intellectual world. Her parents, Manish Ghatak and Dharitri Devi (Chaudhuri), were well-known figures in Calcutta's literary and cultural circles. Ghatak, apart from holding a high placed job in the income tax department, was a poet and writer. He also edited *Bartika*, a literary magazine, which continued to be edited after his death by Mahasweta. Ritwik Ghatak, the celebrated film-maker, was his brother. Her mother was a writer in Bangla and English, apart from being active in left-wing women's organisations, and was the sister of Sachin Chaudhuri, the founder editor of the *Economic & Political Weekly*. Mahasweta was educated at Kolkata's Beltala Girls' School and at Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan. The home she grew up in was a hub of cultural and political discussion, and fairly early in her youth, she became active with the cultural wing of the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti, an organisation of women close to the Communist Party of India (CPI), in which her mother was also active.

Antagonism towards Pretensions

Those were momentous days in Bengal, and the young Mahasweta was witness to the Bengal famine with cries of rural migrants streaming into Calcutta with their piteous cry of *ektu phaen dao go ma* (mother, please give me some rice starch). The Tebhaga peasant movement engulfed the region shortly after, under the leadership of the Communist party, and Mahasweta was part of the famine relief work of the People's Relief Committee, and the cultural squad that campaigned for the Tebhaga demands in the Rangpur area of undivided Bengal. She worked closely with Tripti Mitra, the theatre personality, at this time.

This was probably her first encounter with the lives of poor tenant farmers and rural life, but the memories of this

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experience were deep, and have enriched many of the short stories she wrote later. Her fierce antagonism to the pretensions of “mainstream/civilised” society, and her lifelong connect with the oppressed can also be traced to this period. She met Bijon Bhattacharya, dramatist and founder member of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) through common contacts, after her return to Kolkata, and married him shortly after. Mahasweta and Bhattacharya got married in 1947 when she was about 21 years old, and he was nearly 10 years older. Bhattacharya was already well known for his hugely popular play *Nabanna* (Fresh Harvest) published in 1943. His play *Jiyonkanna* was performed the following year in Kolkata’s Rangmahal theatre, with Mahasweta in one of the leading female roles.

The couple moved to Bombay, for closer collaboration with Bombay-based IPTA members like Khwaja Ahmed Abbas and Salil Chowdhury, in bringing out progressive cultural productions. Bhattacharya and Abbas worked together on scripting a film version of *Nabanna* called *Dharti ke Lal*. We do not have too many details of Mahasweta’s own life during this period, except that she was an active participant in the discussions around the many scripts the group worked on, and the many evening *addas* at Sachin Chaudhuri’s house. The episode of the monkeys was an early indication of her total disregard for the niceties of so-called civilised society, and took place around this time. Finding that a consignment of starving rhesus monkeys meant for export was stuck in red tape at the Bombay docks, Mahasweta and a friend physically took the consignment to Khandala, and released the captive monkeys in the hills, where their descendants possibly still roam free.

It was at Sachin Chaudhuri’s house that she read Savarkar’s account of the first Indian war of independence. The character of Laxmibai of Jhansi fascinated her, and leaving her husband and four-year-old son at Bombay, she wandered off to look for primary history regarding the Rani in Jhansi, Orchha, and Indore, where Laxmibai’s son had found shelter after 1858. This was long before the “official” concept of subaltern history had been articulated. However, the effort to

reconstruct the history of Jhansi’s valiant queen, through popular memory, legends, and folk music was unique, and led to the publication of *Jhansir Rani*, Mahasweta Devi’s first novel.

She eventually separated from Bhattacharya over what she called some *matabhed* (differences), and came back to Kolkata to live. This was not unusual. In her personal life, her strong personality and intense emotional responses to events often led to serious differences as compromise and adjustment were not part of her vocabulary. In later years, her relations with many of her left-wing colleagues were soured by her animated participation in the movement against the Left Front government’s land acquisition for the Nano plant at Singur, for the project of the Salaam group at Nandigram, and for her spontaneous statements like the one when she said she wished to see Mamata Banerjee (then an ally of these movements) not just as the chief minister of Bengal but as the Prime Minister of India. Her admiration of the Bengal chief minister did not last at this level for long.

Her Larger Family

Her second marriage to writer Asit Gupta was also short-lived. Relations with her son, poet and writer Nabarun Bhattacharya were similarly strained because of what he considered the sometime irrational political positions she took. Nevertheless, there was no holding Mahasweta back. She always stood up for what she believed was correct for the cause of the downtrodden, regardless of who else agreed with her. Her personal existence and finances were strained throughout her life. She took up clerical jobs in government offices, worked as a sales agent, and eventually, after a master’s degree obtained through private study, taught English in Bijoygarh College at Jadavpur, Kolkata. Of the many awards she received—Desikottama, Padma Shri, Padma Vibhushan, Jnanpith, Sahitya Academy, Magsaysay, and others—many came late in life, and she always used any money she received for the welfare and education of the tribal communities who formed her larger family.

Her extensive travel among and involvement with the denotified tribes and

Adivasis of Bengal, Jharkhand, Gujarat, and other places began shortly after she returned to Kolkata. From this point on, Mahasweta’s life as a writer and as a social activist are intertwined. She took her energy from tribal struggles, was a fierce supporter of their battle for dignity, chronicled their lives and legends in stories and books like *Operation Basha Tudu*, *Aranyer Odhikar*, and *Chotti Mundar Tir*. It was through these writings that she brought to readers (not only of Bangla but several other languages into which her books were translated), the stories of Birsa Munda and tribal men and women fighting for their lives and livelihood, including rights to their land and forests. Mahasweta Devi always viewed these struggles from the point of view of those whose rights and sovereignty had been eroded by the forward march of colonial power.

Mahasweta Devi’s writings on tribal life are intimate, and clearly identify the state and its agents as violent oppressors of the people. Her stories also uphold the strength and dignity of their resistance. Her feminist concerns spring from real life encounters with the patriarchy of religion and the state. In “Talaq,” an impulsive *teen* talaq by a rural Muslim couple married for 27 years can only be undone if they elope together from their village. This is to escape the hard-to-imagine alternative of the wife having to consummate a marriage with another man before she can find her way back to the man she considers husband. In “Draupadi,” Dopdi Mejhen, gang-raped by the armed forces all night before being brought before Senanayak stands proud and naked with signs of torture on her body, and dares him to look at her as she is. Having lived through the Naxal movement and state repression in Kolkata in the 1970s, she saw at first hand the hunting down of leftist youth by the police. The anguish of Sujata in *Hazar Churashir Ma* (Mother of 1084), the mother of Brati Chatterjee, stands for the anguish of all mothers in every revolution in the world who have seen their idealistic children brutally gunned down by a corrupt and criminal state machinery.

Her involvement with the Lodha and Sabar communities in south-east Bengal as well as her work on the denotified tribes in Gujarat together with G N Devy led to

the formation of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG). For the Lodhas and Sabars, at whose call she went again and again to Midnapore and Purulia, she was a mother figure, always at their side when they needed her. In 1998, she filed a public interest litigation in the Calcutta High Court on behalf of Budhan Sabar's wife challenging his custodial death which was passed off as a suicide by the police authorities. This led the high court to order a post-mortem which proved police torture and a compensation was ordered to be paid to Budhan's wife. With a similar zeal, she got involved with the cause of political prisoners, against the development choices made at the cost of the poor's access to common property resources.

Like the Banyan Tree

Mahasweta Devi can also be credited with discovering the first important Dalit writer in Bangla, and launching him on his literary career. Manoranjan Byapari, from a Namasudra refugee background, trying to eke out a livelihood in Kolkata did various odd jobs, was completely illiterate

until his late 20s, and got involved in political gang violence in Kolkata in the late 1970s. He learnt to read Bangla in jail, and came out with an avid thirst for knowledge hidden in the written word. He began to ply a cycle rickshaw around Jadavpur, where Mahasweta Devi lived, and always kept a book under the seat of his rickshaw to read in slack moments. When he came across words that were unknown, he noted them, and sought to find their meanings from appropriate passengers who hired his services. One day, when transporting a lady in a white sari to Bijoygarh College,¹ he concluded that she must be a teacher, and therefore a learned person. He asked her the meaning of *jjibisha* (will to live), a word that had been puzzling him for some time. The lady not only explained the meaning of the word to him, but began a conversation about his life, work, and literary interests. After a few days, she asked him to write for *Bartika*, which she was editing by this time, and thus Manoranjan's first short story was written and published. He went on to write much more about life in the underbelly of society, and two years ago, his autobiographical

novel, *Itibritte Chandal Jibon* (Life Story of a Chandal), won the Bangla Academy award for excellence.

One could go on and on. There are many other aspects to Mahasweta Devi, who like an old banyan tree, had roots reaching to the ground representing many thought currents, action involvements, relationships, and engagements. During the Singur and Nandigram struggles, she emerged as an iconic leader of the movement for sustainability and peoples' voices in development. It was her protest that prompted the Government of Jharkhand to remove the chains from the statue of Birsa Munda at Ranchi, sculpted following a British picture of Birsa in captivity. Although one of India's best-known writers, she was at her most comfortable with the tribal people she loved. She was never comfortable with prestigious positions and high life, and almost never managed to hold on to them for long. It is difficult to believe that a year has passed since she has gone.

NOTE

¹ Vijaygarh Jyotish Ray College where Mahasweta Devi taught at that time.