

Reflections on *Adivasi* Silence: An Interview with the Eminent Activist for Tribal Rights and Environmental Crusader Mahasweta Devi

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An eminent social activist and well-known writer in India, Mahasweta Devi (1926-) has written about tribal activities and participated in activism in support of tribals, poor and marginalised sections and their displacement and dispossession. She has more than a hundred books to her credit and her works in Bengali have been extensively translated into English and other foreign languages. Her fictional texts such as *Rudali* (1997), *Hazar Chaursein ki Maa* (1974) (Mother of 1084) and *Choli ke Peeche* (1997) (Under the Bodice) have

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been made into films by directors such as Kalpana Lajmi, Govind Nihalani and Italo Spinelli.² Her works have been discussed and analysed from different vantage points such as those of subaltern studies, feminist studies, anthropology and ethnography. Her texts also powerfully expose the controversies surrounding the forest laws of India and the plight of forest dwellers. Devi marks her stance as an environmental crusader in India by voicing her protests for the restoration of forests as well as land and forest rights to the original inhabitants of the area or *Adivasis*. My current research is linked to this aspect of Mahasweta Devi's writing.

An eloquent speaker, Mahasweta Devi has always inspired her audience with her fiery speeches. Activist struggles have always demanded her presence all over the country and her support and hard work for the liberation of tribals from oppression makes her an important spokesperson of tribal rights in India. One such event, which articulated tribal aphasia, was the World Languages Meet. Organised from 6-8 January 2012 at Baroda in Gujarat it had Smt. Mahasweta Devi as one of its proposed speakers. The conference was one of the greatest events in Asia, for it was a summit of nine hundred languages, including regional, tribal and international languages. Mahasweta Devi was unable to attend the conference due to her ill health. It was a matter of concern for me since I couldn't meet the person whom I had been eagerly waiting to interview. Much to my delight, Mahasweta Devi herself gave me a call enquiring about the details of an interview scheduled for earlier. I met her at her Kolkata residence on 5 March 2012, ready to interview her. The humid air in Kolkata was only slightly reduced by the prospect and anxiety of meeting a renowned writer and activist of Devi's stature. Her house was inviting, especially with the care and affection provided to an unacquainted guest. Despite her age (87 years), the enthusiasm in her words and expressions had me spellbound. The shelves in her meeting room were filled with books and so was her writing table. Aesop once declared, "appearances are often deceiving"; Devi's apparent air of seriousness gave me an initial impression that she was rather strict and outspoken. However, her motherly disposition revealed itself to me during the course of our interaction, making the task of interviewing a pleasure. After an initial briefing, the interview began. Profound in thought and discussion, I was charmed by the calm replies to my ceaseless questions.

The following are excerpts from the interview with Mahasweta Devi, conducted on 5 March 2012.

² *Rudali* was made into a movie in 1993, *Hazar Chaursein ki Maa* was directed by Govind Nihalni in 1997 and *Choli ke Peeche* was directed by Italo Spinelli in 2010.

Madam, where do you situate yourself in this particular division of activist writer and writer activist?

I have always been a writer and researcher. My activism was disapproved of by the mainstream and I was side-lined for taking part in social welfare activities for the tribals. I have gone to tribal areas; I have covered large areas, like tribal districts in West Bengal, Bihar, etc.

Writers or activists crusading against the onslaught of the mainstream are usually termed crusaders against development and perpetrators of violence against the authority of the state. You have been branded as a Naxalite for your devoted work for tribals, the poor and their environment. What are your views on this?

Medha Patkar, the environmental activist has been actively engaged in activities for the welfare of tribals and the quality of her work such as Narmada Bachao Andolan proves her regard and concern for the poor and their environment. I hail from a reputed family and my husband was also connected with IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association), a wing of the Communist Party. The first book to be written and documented by me was the *The Queen of Jhansi* (1956). As a writer, I have written many books of which only a few may survive. The concern for the poor and tribals has led to my participation in the seasonal protests or people's protests and justice has been permitted to them on several occasions. I have been very active and have covered remote and inaccessible areas of tribal inhabitation or areas where people don't have the courage to venture. People have regard and belief in my writing; they are convinced that my writing will include their views and ideas and hence provide them with justice.

Your work, Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi (1997), clearly maps the areas of activist struggles. The work also sharply critiques the bonded labour system. How do you react to this issue of bonded labour?

Bonded labour is different. During the 1980s I came across illiterate debt and bonded labourers. They have a small patch of land to cultivate on and if they don't have money they approach the moneylender. The moneylender takes the labourers for granted and gives a loan by taking their thumb impression. The person who forfeits his signature become a bonded labourer for the incurred amount and is indebted since the debt mounts from year to year. If you borrow fifty rupees at the end of the year you have to pay five hundred rupees and then it exceeds a thousand rupees. In Palamau, I went walking from village to village especially those regions where it was prevalent and started fighting against it.

The texts such as Stanadayini (1997), Draupadi (1997), Old Women (1999) have strong resonances of body parables where the female body becomes a subject of articulation or representation of unethical treatment of nature. There exists a great link between the exploitation of the tribal women and the exploitation of the land. How do you relate to this particular perspective?

Exploitation does not cease with the physical exploitation of the tribal women. People who wish to exploit will use strong force to abuse women since their only need is a woman.

Why are tribals denied access to the environment, which has nurtured and shaped their cultural milieu and livelihood?

The tribals are not denied access to the environment but they are denied all possible human rights because they do not know what the government is providing them on paper. Last year I went to North Bengal. It was the time when the Government of India declared that tribals who stay in the forests will be sanctioned the forest land. I go to Kutch Bihar, a tribal dominated area and I find the term “tribals” recorded in Bengali. Most of them are illiterate and the forest department does not have any right to give them land. Therefore, in order to obtain what Government of India declares on paper to be theirs, they will have to approach the land revenue office. They have to do it after rummaging through all files and official papers and then they are to ascertain their right. How can they solve the problems? The tribals of West Bengal at least are becoming conscious or more awake to the point that children must go to school. They have started sending their children to school. In some areas, they are doing quite well.

Belief in the healing qualities of nature is unique to tribal tradition and cosmogony. How do you comment on this?

I would like to comment that the art of healing comes as a part of their tribalness.

You have played an important role in improving the condition of denotified tribes in India. The establishment of the organisation DNT-RAG is an example in this regard? How free are the de-notified tribes in India? Even after the denotification why aren't they allowed to assimilate into the mainstream?

The issue concerning the denotified tribes has an entirely different representation. The British government declared that differences did persist and according to them, they were born criminals and hence they must be depicted

as criminal tribes. In West Bengal, the denotified criminal tribes were found in places such as Medinipur which consisted of sizable population of Lodhas, Shabars in Purulia and Dhikaru in Bilmore. Ostracism prevailed against the Lodhas, and being a member of the tribe meant cruel treatment and death. When I was working among the Shabar community in neglected districts of West Bengal, Budhan Shabar was brutally murdered. When Budhan was killed, the incident enraged me and I approached the High court and filed a case against the state government. I am extremely happy about the verdict because the criminal tribe act was banned in India. The ultimate judgement came from the Supreme Court, since the criminal tribe act was an all-India issue and a large number of tribes had suffered. After the ban of the criminal tribes act, many tribes had wanted to come to Kolkata but they could not, so I went to Delhi to meet different tribes. They came in masses and I advised them on education and asked them to receive basic education. The work for the denotification of tribals assumes a positive stand since it saved many tribes in places such as Maharashtra, South India and Gujarat.

Do tribals in your works come under the umbrella term of “developmental refugees”?

Yes, the construction of big dams and other projects affects not only tribals but non-tribals as well. There are so many areas I know where even a regular supply of drinking water, irrigation water and minimum human rights have not been granted. Both tribals and non-tribals are affected by the building of dams.

Why are the negative terms being attributed with reference to the umbrella term “tribals”?

This is inhumane, because I have not seen more civilised people; in India they are the most civilised people. I will explain this to you. In a tribe there is no gender distinction; if a father has two daughters whatever land he has will be equally distributed among the two. If there is a daughter and a son, it will be equally distributed between the daughter and the son and gender division is absent. Dowry is totally absent; dowry in their system is paid by the bridegroom. If the dowry cannot be paid in cash, they have to pay something to the bride's father, may be a cow or a bullock or fruit-yielding trees. Dowry system is absent for it is uncivilised and widow remarriage is necessary. Marriages are an option since there is no prevalence of the dowry system. I think these systems are highly civilised. India should actually deal with issues regarding the dowry system. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar had to fight especially for legalising widow remarriage in the society. I don't know about your state, Kerala. The diversity in India at times hinders the flow of information from one place to another. As a result, North India doesn't know enough of South India and vice versa.

“Ulgulan” or revolution by the tribal communities was to uphold their rights to land, agriculture and their cultural value. They were spearheaded by various tribal heroes in your works. Does a similar revolution form a part of the modern resistance?

“Ulgulan” or revolution is in Mundari language. In Santhali it is “Hul.” These days there are so many tribal societies that have been forced to abandon their places and are displaced. This usually occurs in dry areas where the entire society does not have enough land for example to dig a pond. Hence, all of them will contribute land somewhere and a pond is dug at the cost of the society for amongst them there is a great understanding. Women hold a better position and the people’s voice matters first. Authorities these days are afraid to disturb the people for the fear that they may rise and protest.

Dust on the Road echoes the agonies of tribals and the writing represents an idea that the main aim of concern is land and forests? Why doesn’t the government pay heed to their agonies even with the enforcement of Forest Regulation ACT and Join Forestry Management?

When has the government ever done anything for the needy? The government hasn’t done anything, whether for the tribals or for the non-tribal poor. Everything is there on paper or it rather exists in the printed version. I can speak of my place: all over West Bengal, there are very few doctors, so few health centres. The villagers in order to reach the nearest hospital have to first cross the village, then the river and have to walk on foot. In order to reach a hospital they can actually see from their homes they have to spend two days on the road. How can they reach it? Every right for the common people is there on paper, but very few in reality.

What are your views on the recent issues of Narmada and Mullaperiyar dams? Are the dams necessary? The construction of dams has always led to unequal distribution of power, and displacement of the poor. How do you respond to the issue of dams and their role in the Indian environment?

Dams were not present in the earlier days. Suddenly dams have come into being. Why has this come into being all of a sudden? In West Bengal, in the case of the distribution of ration cards, there are the APL (Above Poverty Line) and BPL (Below Poverty Line) cards; people who are APL can easily acquire BPL cards, and people who are BPL can get the APL cards, and even if they get the APL cards it does not solve any problem. I have become someone who protests all the time these days, because I write in newspapers and magazines. In West Bengal itself there are places without electricity, the district towns have access to it but it is scanty in villages.

A few characters such as Puran of Pterodactyl (1995), Singh of Shishu (1979), Sukechandji of Fundamental Rights (1979) try to foreground the fact that they are responsible for the backwardness of tribal communities. Has this realisation created a great change in the minds of the national readers? How do you react to the tribal situation and the reaction to it by the mainstream discourses of power?

Yes. I have been highly praised in West Bengal for the interest I take in the tribals. Tribals are not my personal property. No one has been prevented from going to the tribals and to see how they live. If one observes of how tribals, the non-tribal poor and the middle class survive and live in the villages, their condition is noticeably terrible. There are some *Achutha* communities (or untouchables) such as the cobblers and doms, who cremate dead bodies and help in the cremation. There is many such deprived caste communities with whom no one is concerned, that's what surprises me. When I write about the tribals I am being acclaimed for being great owing to my devoted work among the tribals. Who asked you not to go to the tribals? There are many families where parents can't send their children to be educated and yet many rights have been given on paper by the government for the tribals and the non-tribals.

The tribal practise of oral history portrays their relationship with the land, integration and oneness with the environment. Has the infiltration of the mainstream community brought a great change in their primeval concept?

Oral history does not belong to the tribals alone. I don't know if you have a grandmother or a great grandmother; had she moved from village to city she would say, there was a time when certain events had happened, this is oral history. Especially among the tribals I have seen areas where one sits and goes on reciting stories, this is called oral history. When you remember your childhood and what your grandmother had said it is called oral history. Land is the most vital element. Their relationship with land is everything. It is in them and perhaps it will take over hundred or more years to change this concept. It is still in them but it is also true that the people in tribal areas are moving to other places because the state cannot provide them with jobs. They have to eat, it is certain that they have to eat at least two times a day. In North Bengal, especially the Darjeeling area, when tea gardens and coffee gardens are being cultivated the contractors and the tea exporters go to Santhal areas, from where men and women are taken to remote areas for doing physically demanding hard work, and it's inconceivable since they have been settled there for a long time.

Do the forests in your works embody the idea of it being a site of cultural regeneration or an area of political refusal or revolt?

Tribals are also a part of mangraphy; they cannot extricate themselves from pristine forests which form a part of their sacred history.

Your works emphasise that “land” is the source of all evils? The concept of land has meted out evils and brutalities on the tribals, the poor and dispossessed? How do you react to this idea?

In India, land is the source of all evils.

Tribal worldviews regain a sense of sacredness. Your depiction of tribal sanctity helps me to read you as an environmental crusader? Ma’am, which books of yours do you think contribute most to the environmental issues?

Chotti Munda (1980), “Pterodactyl” is very important. *Aranyer Adhikhar* (1977) was written in my first phase of writing. I wrote *Aranyer Adhikhar*, about Birsa Munda’s uprising, using mostly paper work and little fieldwork, though later I have written better books. Birsa Munda rebellion was not well-known to the readers, they knew about Santhal rebellion or Hul. Birsa Munda’s rebellion is known as “Ulgulan.” Most of my books have an environmental ethos.

Most of your works are centred on the forests, hence they can be termed as “forest fiction.” “Aranyakas” and “forest society” viewed humans as an essential part of their representation. I would like to read your forest fictions as Neo-Aranyakas, which portray a shift from texts of wisdom to texts of turbulence. How do you consider this interpretation?

In my childhood, I went to Santiniketan when Tagore was alive. At that time Santiniketan was a small place and had only a few students. Tagore’s direct influence was prevalent. What Tagore taught through his teaching was to “care for nature,” planting trees and digging ponds in the nearby tribal areas. Our school was very different. I first went to school when I was 10 years old, i.e, to Santiniketan in 1936. In those days, co-education was not so prevalent. In Santiniketan, girls and boys studied together and we used to have food underneath trees with towels spread out to sit on and to have our food. I was very influenced by Tagore’s teaching. Tagore was a great person. When the rains came, there would be an air of festivity because Santiniketan was not very green. The best thing about Santiniketan was Tagore’s unwritten rule that you had to plant trees and small saplings. We had to water the plants and take care of them. It was a part of his teaching and all the things had to be written down.

As said earlier, I would like to read your forest fictions as Neo-Aranyakas which portray a shift from texts of wisdom to texts of turbulence. How do you read this interpretation?

India was well covered with forests. Forests have been cut down. The tribals with their resistance could not claim the forests because they could not convince us, the so-called civilised human beings that the forests are not to be cut down. This is one of the reasons for West Bengal being barren now, many areas in India have turned barren, Delhi was once a green city.

What are your opinions about the inclusion of tribal and dalit texts in Indian syllabi? Initiatives are taken by some universities and colleges to include such texts, but isn't it necessary that we develop a syllabus which would give a greater understanding of the "other" than an eluding commentary?

The exclusion of the tribal and dalit texts is entirely wrong. I have been fighting against this practice. Of course, they (the tribals) are India. India does not mean the caste India, or the highly educated Muslims alone.

How do you view the image of the 16th century undivided India as portrayed as the cover page of Imaginary Maps (1995), though the stories highlight the situation of post-Independent India which is internally colonised in the name of decolonisation?

The remnants of the 16th century are still prevalent in us. The rulers or the middle class had little information about the tribals. Nowadays, we find these issues have come to the forefront. We are generally very much against nature, preserving nature and have very little understanding of both nature and people.

What are your opinions on tribals and nature being museumised in India for the better understanding of the West and mainstream discourses of power?

This is a dreadful and ridiculous act. This only proves that my view that we are becoming increasingly uncivilised is absolutely correct.