

Remembering “Amma”: A Tribute to Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016)

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Remembrance forms a core motif of penning or delivering an obituary. Recurrent events from the past interact with one another to achieve a structure from the random thoughts that are evoked when a fellow traveller or compatriot's journey ends, leaving behind trails of memories for her contemporaries or comrades to recollect. Mahasweta Devi (14 January, 1926-8 July, 2016) was a comrade in the sense that she had successfully injected the germ of social reform/activism associated with the idea of community-based research in this part of the globe. This definitely has influenced later generations of researchers like us whom she mentored at several junctures. Mahasweta's literary career is a culmination of these tireless researches she had been doing on the marginal communities from her location, which gradually spread to have an international outreach. This is definitely not the space to ponder deeply on the politics of representation of the “subaltern” voice/s in her narratives and validate their authenticities or draw graphic details of the various deviations. There is enough scope for those academic quests that can filter through seminars or conferences on the “representation of marginal voices,” and multiple volumes on Mahasweta can be published to satiate our triangle of academic rewards induced desire. But Mahasweta preferred to remain outside this domain as she had recognised the victims of this system long back and chose the path of activism. Writing was activism to her.

She was a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award (1986), Bharatiya Jnanpith Award (1996), Ramon Magsaysay Award (1996), the Padma Vibhushan (2006) and various other awards, for her socio-literary-cultural contributions. Rewards, recognition meant another way of channelling that ideology. The money she received from her “works” came to the people about whom she wrote, the Kheria Sabars of Purulia or the Lodhas of Medinipur. Mahasweta will be remembered for her literary works for sure, but she is a case study of the “reception of the received.” At a *smaran* (programme remembering the departed soul) organised by Sahitya Academy, Kolkata after the demise of this bestselling and widely translated author, Professor Manabendra Bandyopadhyay – retired professor of

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Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University – spoke at length about his *kbukudi* (Mahasweta). As a pioneer comparatist, he delved deep into the literary system of Bangla literature, and its interaction with other regional and World Literature that ultimately produced Mahasweta. Literary as well as extra literary events like IPTA (Indian Peoples Theatre Association), *Debigarjan*, *Dhonrai*, Ashapura, Muouchak, Ismat Chughtai, Qurtulain Haider, all contributed in the formulation of a language that could capture the experiences she gathered during her research. She had received all these events (historical as well as literary) and they formed the initial draft of her portrayal of the characters she encountered.

My first interaction with Mahasweta Devi can be traced back to the 1990s, during my early school days, when I received a collection of her short stories as a gift. There was another phase when I could sense a negative energy around Mahasweta Devi in our *bamponthi* (left leaning) household as she did not subscribe to the dominant political ethos of middle class Bengalis that predominantly mediated all the sensibilities of the Bengali *bhadrolok*. I must acknowledge that I have never been an avid reader of her works though I had access to her Bangla originals as well as the various academic translations. Meanwhile, I was trying to formulate my PhD proposal in 2008. I had a keen interest in Indigenous performance culture and had worked on my Master's dissertation on the storytelling techniques of the Indigenous peoples of Canada. While framing my research question I was haunted by the realities of my locatedness. If I have to clarify a bit more, then I must say, as a student of Comparative Literature I was intrigued by the various issues that were shaping the Indigenous identity in this part of the globe as well.

I met Ganesh Devy (founder member of the Tribal Academy in Tejgadh and Bhasha Research and Publication) when I was a student in the Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, Kolkata and came to know about the work he was doing at the Tejgadh Tribal Academy in Vadodara, Gujarat. Dakxin Bajrange was a discovery who referred to some *amma* (mother) in his talk which he delivered at the International Conference on Tribal Art and Ownership in Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh in the year 2008. I shall gradually unveil the interconnectedness of the narrative I am trying to trace historically.

By the year 1871 the British had already formulated the Criminal Tribes act to monitor the non-sedentary service providers in India. Nomadism was and is still a way of life for many communities who were the service providers. But the British were suspicious of the non-settled race as they closely aligned citizenship with land ownership which was again associated with taxation. Several communities were beyond this economic framework and failed to fulfil colonial policies. Gradually, a list of Criminal tribes was prepared who were actually victims of a colonial policy. They were de-notified in 1952, became habitual offenders in 1959 (The Bombay Habitual Offenders Act 1959), and this stigma still continues.

Budhan, a Kheria Sabar youth, died in police custody in 1998. Mahasweta steered a movement with Budhan's widow Shyamali. Gradually the Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti was formed in 1968; it was later registered in 1989, and is still working relentlessly on the plight of the Kheria Sabars in the remotest corners of Akarbaid, a village our GPS system would fail to recognise.

Budhan's story travelled all the way to the Western part of India and the famous trio of Ganesh Devy, Lakshman Gaikwad and Mahasweta Devi formed the Denotified Rights Action Group (DNT RAG, 1998). Eminent scholars like Gayatri Spivak who were closely associated with Mahasweta joined this movement and are still continuing their work in their capacity.

This core group met the Chhara community in the same year in Ahmedabad and later these talented performers performed the street play *Budhan*. Stories travel. Mahasweta and other activists had established a library within Chharanagar in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The idea was to create a space for young minds to interact and subsequently decolonise through their Art. The historical judgement of justice Ruma Pal (that reinstated the fact that Budhan Sabar, a member of the Kheria community in Purulia did not commit suicide but succumbed to inhuman conduct while in police custody) was published in the *Budhan* magazine published by Bhasha, and members of the Chhara community immediately identified with the plight of the Denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic in other parts of India. The product was a cultural intervention known as Budhan theatre which is still fighting for the cause of Denotified Tribes in India since 1998.

Mahasweta, along with her compatriots, travelled long distances and met several communities like the Pardhis, Nats, Madaris, Wadars, Chamtha and Gosains to form a network. The idea was to collect information and demand reforms. Mahasweta's considerable energy and time went on addressing the various issues of these people who could always visit her and stay at her residence. She became Amma for those who needed her, and also continued her literary career which had its *robstoff* in these various interactions. "Draupadi" (1976), "Bichhan" (1977), "Shikar" (1978) were a series of *jihad* against the dominant discourse that marginalised the tribes in question for centuries. The communities that were represented in her literary works were primarily from the Bagdi, Dome, Onraon, Dusad, Mallah, Ojha and other communities. At this point, it must be mentioned that Mahasweta created her own language of resistance. She considered her literary intervention as historical documents. To be more specific, she focused on events that went beyond the literariness of a literary work. "Behula" deals with an age-old practice of curing snake bites amongst the Ojhas. What it does simultaneously is it historicise the living condition of these rural poor who are deprived of basic facilities as they are situated far away from the town or city. Things have not changed much in certain areas in the interiors of Bagmundi, Purulia where several semi-nomadic communities live in the foothills of the Ayodhya hills. The reader must acknowledge that the political overtones

of *Haazar Churashir Maa* (1973-74) cannot be equated with the other narratives that question the formation of a Nation after independence, such as “Stanadayani.” She frames her understanding of injustices committed on women in her novella *Rudali* which is again different from her “Draupadi.” Location, class, caste are interwoven into the framework of her narratives (as a strategy) that makes the reception of her works even more complex. *Douloti* (1985) is definitely one of her works which unfolds the politics of a particular region (the Palamou region of India).

There were hardly any vehicles when she initially travelled to these remote villages, and I had often seen her staring outside her windows when I narrated my “field experience” of working with the Kheria Sabar, Lodhas and other DNTs (Denotified and Nomadic Tribes) – Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic populations of our subcontinent – in 2014. She had set up the network, knew everyone by name and would listen to our tales carefully. She wanted to be with them. She was so passionate about her work that as we were interviewing her she voiced her serious reservations about the way these tribal communities were mistreated and abused in public in various pockets of our country whenever they came in contact with non-tribal members of the society. She said she was anxiously eager to know why the Bengali educated middleclass were so disinterested in the people she wrote about, whereas her literary works were well received by the Bengali intelligentsia and her works were widely translated and available. There was a passive empathy but no level of identification even when Mahasweta herself became an institution, her political affiliation created news and her personal life was scrutinised. She wanted to rest in peace with her characters in the quiet shade of the Mohuan tree in the Tejgadh tribal academy. Devy fulfilled her desire and Amma is with the people who never forgot her meaningful intervention.

Works Cited

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