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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Mahasweta Devi: The Voice of Dalits and Tribal People

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### Abstract

Writing is a mirror that reflects social recorded, financial and political occasions refracted through nonexistent or anecdotal domains of public sayings. Strangely, in such accounts, writing additionally mirrors the irregular characteristics or complexities that exist in social as well as individual connections. Like many other European writers, Indians also have launched a war against such political, social and economic exploitations of the oppressors. As people know that women are more kind enough by heart, that's why they have explored the various social evils and maladies that are continuously ruining the lives of the marginalized people in the form of caste, creed and religion. Apart from writing about feminism and gender discrimination, they have also dealt with the other grave issues that destroy the lives of these

marginalized outcastes. Their works reveal the true picture of the contemporary society where innocence is exploited through the corrupted ideas of human beings in this man-made society. The present research paper has tried to explore the plight of Dalits and Tribals in the works of Mahasweta Devi, one of the great marginal voices in Indian English Literature.

**Keywords:** Marginalization, Downtrodden, Outcastes, Destitution, Deprivation, Innocence, Fractured identity, Falsified mark, Social domination

Mahasweta Devi was born on 14<sup>th</sup> of January, 1926 in a Bangladeshi Brahmin family in Dacca, known then as British India, existing at present as Dhaka in Bangladesh. Her father's name was Manish Ghatak, known with a pseudonym, Jubanashwa. He was a well-known poet and novelist of the Kallol movement. Her father was known as a notable Bengali essayist whose accounts address ghetto life, while her mother, Dharitri Devi was an author and social laborer who advanced proficiency among the oppressed kids. Her family was also recognized social worker. Her brother or Mahasweta's maternal uncle, Sachin Chaudhury was the founder editor of Economic and Political Weekly of India. Her uncle, Ritwik Ghatak was a famous filmmaker. Mahasweta Devi was admitted in Eden Montessori School in Dhaka for her prior schooling and after that she moved to West Bengal where she studied in Midnapore Mission Girls High School and Beltala Girls School where she completed her matriculation and started to enter her maturity of thought and imagination. Mahasweta Devi wedded Bijon Bhattacharya, a prestigious writer and one of the establishing fathers of the Indian Individual's Theater Affiliation development. The writing interest of the two has been forwarded by her child Nabarun Bhattacharya from Bijon additionally and he came to be recognized as a political writer of the issues and concerns of human life. Mahasweta Devi's marriage with Bijon didn't keep going peacefully and comfortably forever and for some unknown facts and reasons, this relationship came to an end with the clarifying the fact of mismatched marriage. She got much more depressed with and attempted suicide by taking on overdose of sleeping pills due to a terrible spell of depression. But the attempt failed and when she woke up it was the image of her son which came first in her mind and filled her heart with an intense emotion to live for him. In 1963 she took Master's degree in English Literature from Calcutta University. After her master, from 1964-1984 onwards she served as a lecturer in English at Bijoygraph Jyotish Ray College. During this time, she met Asit Gupta, an aspiring writer and involved with him emotionally. Consequently, she again married him but this marriage also did not work out and came to an end in 1976, which made her liberate from the shackles of wedded life for good.

Her activism saw her personally and creatively involving herself in the affairs of the marginalized societies, especially the life of tribals and Dalits. Devi started writing furiously by publishing novels, stories and articles roaring against the rampant evils of Indian societies. Not only the novels and short stories, but Devi also wrote plays, children's books, adapted folklore for her youths and translated many works in the regional language so that they can be understood well by the locales. She has been reported to write down the biographies of her own father Manish Ghatak and the Chinese writer Lu Xun. At this time, she made herself as a

marked intensification of social activities through her writings. Undoubtedly, the writings during 1956-65 were impelled to earn money for her livelihood or in the basic need, yet these literary pieces also presented a piece of evidence for her inclination for exposing social realities that became the hallmarks of her vast career. As soon as she got popularity and she moved ahead her steps in the growth of writings, an activist orientation began to surface in her writings.

During the early adulthood of Mahasweta Devi, India was making itself a persevered country through the incredible changes like the Quit India Movement started in 1942, the Incomparable Calcutta Uproars happened in 1946, and finally Independent India's 1947 Parcel and the demands of the different nations for India and Pakistan which prompted extraordinary brutality over the powerless people in fringe locales. During this time, like a true literary figure, Devi got depressed and irritated and joined aid projects in Bengal, appropriating nourishment and finding the livings among dead bodies in the avenues. Culture and politics of communist party from the different areas left a marking impression upon Mahasweta Devi and finally, she was closely associated with this organization and when the horrible famine of 1943 hit Bengal, she as the true activist took an active part in the relief works for those wounded people. CPI was founded in 1928, but it was seen uproaring at the time when Devi was being educated in the University. After her college education in 1947, she married the renowned playwright and actor Bijon Bhattacharya, who was a member of the communist party of India but the superiority of male did not comfort her and her marital life was destroyed because the CPI had legally recognized for its contribution through Bijon like active workers in this organizing propoganda and electoral work that's why she could not dominate him. It was an important influence on the mind and heart of Devi. Though she did never join the party yet she co-operated it through the help of her husband.

As far as her literal perception is concerned, the deep study of the sociological conception or thought has narrated people well that from the day of creation of this universe, pain runs parallel in human heart and the virtue leads to frame work of literature and art in the form of creation. It is the awareness of the pain that fills human heart for upgrading and upraising their voices in the form of Protest and Resistance. The pain or sufferings of human beings is a real test for both the artist and the literature that one produces in bringing a change of society and it is due to these qualities that marks the great scriptures of the world. In the context of Mahasweta Devi, it is the perception that makes her works, soulful, painful, resentful and changeable which provides them the status of being classics of protest and resistance. The historical structure of the society narrates thought that it has always been divided on the bases of race, caste, creed, community, etc. despite of considering the modern or upgraded thought and one can find that no nation is an exception to these problems. Each society is caught in the whirlpool of problems in one or other means which can be seen hither and thither.

In the western countries, the readers know that people are victimized for their colour in being Black while in India people are seen differently on their caste, creed, race and religion. The people who are unaware or outdated from their caste and culture are called outcaste or downtrodden. These outcastes are considered untouchables in some parts of the nation which make people ashamed of their humanity. They are mostly oppressed by the upper caste society and deprived of standard sections of the living pattern of life. In India, there are 232m Dalits

and 120m odd adivasis who are considered as the tribals groups, living mainly in remote parts of the country, constituting a considerable part of the population. India is known as one of the biggest democratic countries all over the world, where everyone supposed to possess equal rights and opportunities, while it is very shameful that this large considerable part of population is found to be live on margin. Considering it as a blot on Hinduism over the centuries, many social reformers have raised voices against such abusive system of Indian society and fought fiercely against this shameful situation but with at least success. The social awakening thought of Sri Aurobindo can be used here as an increasing tendency to deny the highest benefits of common life and cultural crisis to the Sudra and the women which brought down the Indian society to the level of Western conquerors. Due to the explosion of such awakening consideration, one can pursue from the mid twentieth century onwards to a new awakening of the conscious people which has taken place in the improvement of Gandhi like leaders. In this connection, one can also observe that internationalization of politics and human rights have acted as nice tools to make newly educated masses conscious of the fact of human values. In this way, the suppressed voices of the marginalized and the lower classes are started to be highlighted around the world as a reinforcement of the hegemonic cultural marks. These subjugated and marginalized voices raised many questions about their identity, privilege and status which came to be supported by the mass of people and in this regard of concern Indian English has got Mahasweta Devi as a mighty tone in the favor of these outcastes and downtrodden societies.

The social as well as literary corpus of Mahasweta Devi is really huge which has got more than 175 publications with her name. She wrote primarily in Bengali but almost all her important works have been translated in English by her well wishers. Her first publication was an essay on Tagore's My Boyhood Days, which was written for a Bengali children's magazine. Her first major publication was Jhansir Rani, a fictionalized biography of the legendary Queen of Jhansi, in 1956. In 1957, she published Nati (Dancer), a novel and her Hajar Churashir Ma (Mother of 1084), published in 1974, remained the milestone in her creative journey of her non-fictionalized world. It changed the course of Devi's literary career which also charted the terrain that she would take in the coming years. Undoubtedly, it was followed by Aranyer Adhikar (Right to the Forest), the Sahitya Akademi award-winning novel, which came out in 1977, and gave another significant landmark in the direction of Devi's literary contribution. With these two prominent novels, she established herself as a very conscious social writer who could deal with explosive issues of social importance but from this point, she turned her attention towards a literature of protest and resistance. She got herself increasingly involved with the plight of the tribals in her literary portrayals. Agniprabha (The Womb of Fire), 1978 and Choti Munda O Tar Teer (Chotti Munda and His Arrow) 1980, are her most prominent voices in the forms of novels on the tribals, their struggle and their repression by the state.

In the list of Indian women writers, Mahasweta Devi shines distinctly due to her artistic acumen, and unique craftsmanship in her writings. The contribution of Mahasweta Devi in Indian English literature has much more significance both in the terms of protest and resistance. Her development of thought for upgrading the downtrodden society and her magic portrayals of Dalits and tribal people make her so popular among the learners that she was recognized as

one of the most widely translated Indian women writers who worked on the margin of Indian society. In the words of Salgado, Devi was “recognized as the foremost living writer in Bengali, she has taken up the case of the tribal people of India through political activism and writing.” (Salgado, 131) Through her literary criteria, Devi recreates a span of history by narrating satirical incidents against government policies, advanced people and heart rendering stories for the farmers, Dalits, tribal and invoiced students. Devi’s writings whether they are fictions or non-fictions have been translated time and again into English which is enough to understand her thought of modernity and social upgradation. She has achieved a great literary fame among her readers both in India and the world of literariness and what ensures her on the apex of the modern Indian writers, is her sense of protest and resistance of the downtrodden people of India.

In her writings, she focuses her creativity to provide a literary expression to the harsh realities of the poor as well as socio-political incidents and physical and emotional exploitation of these people in the context of modernity and post modernity by creating a platform for Black women writers around the world. They are often seen continuously in struggle against caste, creed, racism, exploitation and other violations of human foundational rights. The tribals and the Scheduled Caste (Dalits) people who were considered to be the bottom of India's caste hierarchy along with other oppressed communities remains the main subject of Mahasweta Devi’s creative spans. Either it is a struggle against political authorities or most serious problems like demands of land by the poor, a share of crops, minimizing wages for their ages, the conveniences of roads and schools, urging for drinking water, self respect of human beings or some other related social and economical issues, Devi remains the hallmark of her creative world. With the ground level reports of society, Devi describes their life with brutal accuracy, exposing the war of exploitation and oppression and seems to fight against the dominant sections of the society for the marginalized community.

Dr. Nelson Mandela once said that writers should help us to think what has been unthinkable and Devi stands in this regard at the apex of unthinkable. She steps out of her class and gender and bridges social differences with her outstanding writings. Whenever she saw human rights violation, like the condition of unpaid and bonded slaves or inhumanity against marginalized people, she raised her voice fearlessly through her writings or social works with a protest against them either she has been claimed against or she has to bear disputes in the public or courts. Her writings have shown a new ray of hope for the painful and exploited human beings and it may be the reason that’s why she is so popularized among her readers. Her concern for the downtrodden and marginalized can be expressed by her affirmation that Independence has not brought any change in the lives of tribal people and surprisingly it has added their suffering by the exploitative methods of ruling classes. In the sense of protest and resistance, she not only observes its tenets but she also explains that, “Our leaders made no special plans for the people living below poverty line or for women who do not know what human rights are. Instead of tackling these basic problems they made conditions worse with misguided policies. They have done more injury and injustice to our people than the British” (*The Hindu: Literary Review*).

Mahasweta Devi has often been seen in leading the movement of people against the dirty politics of the government of West Bengal, the state of her domicile. Very fearlessly, she has criticized the policy of Bengali government which grabbed the agricultural land to the great industrialists from the common farmers and thrown into industrial houses at pity prices. Her leading role in such activities helped many hands of intellectuals, artists, writers and theatre workers and join them together with the leading protest against the controversial policies. Particularly, its implementation has been seen in Singur and Nandigram. She, not only participate in these protest movements of tribal people and other members of the underclass but continually involves herself in creating group consciousness among them for their rights. For this purpose, she used different weapons like Bortika (Bengali Torch) in the form of a quarterly journal which she has been publishing from 1980 onwards serving as a tool where common and ordinary people like peasants, agricultural labourers, tribal and Dalit people and other marginalized lower sections of the society can share their grievances, experiences and views.

In Indian society, the indigenous tribes have been regarded as the lowest categories, even Devi accepts primarily to Hegglund, “the struggles of decolonization are fundamentally cultural and there exists a tension between the myths and rituals of the indigenous tribes and the pervasive modernity of national bureaucracy and multinational capitalism that penetrates even the most remote regions of the Indian subcontinent” (Hegglund, 1). Speaking at Raman Magsaysay award, Mahasweta Devi has no hesitation before committee to accept that, “My India still lives behind the curtain of darkness, a curtain that separates the mainstream society from [the] poor and the deprived...As the century comes to an end, it is important that we all make an attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and see our true faces in the process” (Tiwari, 1).

In the opinion of the celebrated Keralite litterateur and the most powerful confessional voice in Indian English Literature, Kamala Das, “Mahasweta Devi... is a wonderful, fearless woman. She has learned of the tribals, she has lived with them, and she is dealing with material she’s acquainted with. Write about her. Make a cult out of her” (Sharma, 163). With such thoughts and arguments, a humble attempt is made by the present research to see Mahasweta Devi in the prism of her short stories which have great records of her concerns for the trajectory conditions of the tribes. Some of the protest and resistance movements are relevant to study Devi’s short stories and the most important movement in relation to her short stories are the concerns of Dalit and Adivasis who were on the margin of society.

Such social and theoretical movements came into existence in order to escape from the social stigma and injustice that was prevailing in Indian caste system. Dalits or Adivasis expressed their anger and frustration through resistance and protest at the failure of policies in order to get rid of subjugation from the privilege created by upper class of society, aiming for enhancing education and upgrades of these untouchables, and finding a respected place for them within the concept of real Hinduism. Many of them also worked to abolish the idea of untouchability so that they can get rid of restrictions posed on them to get entry into temples and do a respectable job just like of the upper-class people. The Sudras or the untouchables joined their hands against the conservative Movements in order to take a strong stance against

the discriminatory acts that they were facing. The main agenda of these movements was to refuse the old law and order of the class, race, creed and caste and protest of lower castes to pay taxes imposed on them by landlords and to oppose forced labour system. The anger and opposition were also against the modern educational system where privileges and other opportunities, provided by the British government were enjoyed by the upper castes. During the phase of 1966–75, she wrote a few dazzling short stories. This period was a period of transition in the life of Mahasweta Devi as she was caught in terrible restlessness, preparing for major changes in her life, both in terms of writings and her other activities. Draupadi is one of the famous short stories of Mahasweta Devi which have been set among the tribal people in Bengal. Dopdi, the protagonist of the story has consciousness of what is happening in the society on the bases of caste. She was working as farmhand for Surja Sahu but was badly exploited by him who has converted her into a slave. Dopdi and her husband Dulna bear it for a long time but finally when they lost their patience, they kill Surja Sahu and his son and destroyed that form of oppression. This revolted spirit of Dopdi gave her readers to consider her as a notorious character in the area but the reality is that she protested against a domination which was against humanity. The protests by the backward castes against the upper castes can be seen in this story of Devi, which demands for their rights and fights against the upper castes/classes and those in power. It is the issue of displacement which completely changed the Adivasis' relationship with the land when the concept of individual property rights came into existence, thereby ending their sustainable lifestyles and it has been nicely described in her short stories like "Shishu" (Little Ones) and "Draupadi". In these stories, Devi depicts the notion of oppression of the tribals through their displacement which was made possible through certain governmental rules.

On the murder of Surja Sahu and his son, Dopdi was highly wanted and the reward of hundred rupees was declared to make her caught by the local administration. Her picture was posterred hither and thither as, "Name Dopdi Mejhen, age twenty-seven, husband Dulna Majhen (deceased), domicile Cherakhan, Bankrajharh, information whether dead or alive and/ or assistance in arrest, one hundred rupees..." (*Breast Stories*, 19) The interesting fact is that when Surja and his family were enjoying the luxury of having wells and tube wells in the compound, no administration tries to persuade them that these outcastes have also rights on the natural resources of the earth but when Dopdi like outcastes revolted against, the whole administration is looking to follow these outcastes and running them down. The story narrates that they were not allowed to get water and benefited with from them even in the drought conditions which forced them to do such a criminal act. How it is shameful in a civilized society but the upper society seeks chances for both wife and husband who went underground for a long time in order to avoid the punishment of police. The armed forces tried their level best to locate them in various districts of West Bengal. The armed police failed in finding them as they know the tactics to hide themselves and also the same appearance of all tribal of the area help them to save from the clutches of police. Since Dulna and Dopdi belong to the category of tribal fighters and their fighting power is greater than that of a gentleman, that's why they were also protected by other tribal but for the hundred rupees, they sold their loyalty. It is described in the story, "Since after escaping from Bakuli, Dopdi and Dulna have worked at the house of virtually

every landowner; they can efficiently inform the killers about their targets and announce proudly that they too are soldiers, *rank and file*" (*Breast Stories*, 23).

Finally, when the armed forces find a link for these culprits, the forest of Jharkani is surrounded by trained and skillful soldiers. The heinous and rewarded work of Gharani, who was an army informant, saw a young man lying on a flat stone in a downward position to drink water, has been described in the story well. The soldiers instantly shot him who was later recognized as Dulna Majhi, "As they threw him off spread-eagled and brought bloody foam to his mouth, he roared "Ma-ho" and then went limp. They realized later that it was the redoubtable Dulna Majhi..." (*Breast Stories* 24) no one came forward to claim for Dulna Majhi's corpse. But the search for Dopdi still continues as it was a very hard and fast challenge for government to locate her but how she could be ignored if the whole government was pursuing her. After a long searching operation, Dopdi was also apprehended, caught and tortured. Tears rolled down from the eyes of poor Dopdi after realizing her offensive task and condition after losing her husband and the common living life.

At this, her oppressors believed that such kind of torture would leave Dopdi weak and she will lose her courage and power but what happened there was the surprising element for her readers. Dopdi threw away her clothes of external identity and started laughing towards Senanayak, exclaiming with the words, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (*Breast Stories* 36). In these words of Dopdi, one can see her protest and resistance as she is telling Senanayak that his methods of torture would not work at all if the dominant tone of protest follows him or his administration. His attempts to victimize her will not make her emotionally, mentally and physically weak, but will add more courage and power to fight against her atrocities and this is the quality of the writer which made her indomitable. Such dominant idea of Dopdi makes her portrayal as a male figure and Senanyak has to become the feminine in his thought and action. Such representation of Devi makes her very powerful literary voice which makes her male figure terrified by the female one. The readers can understand that Draupadi is the representation of millions of tribal women who wish to fight against exploitation and marginalization when they can dare to challenge oppressors. Thus, Draupadi is a metaphorical resistance and protest against the oppressors of society as well as of government authorities who called themselves highly administrative and civilized but always exploited to the lower caste people.

Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi protests violently by throwing away her clothes which is a falsified mark of civilized society. Devi wants to expose her readers that if the falsified mark as the cloth is taken as the glimpse of respects and regards in the society, then what's need of it in the absence of basic needs and fulfillments. This resistance is seen in this story: "The guard pushes the water forward. Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. There were tears on her piece of cloth with her teeth...Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail behind...Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. She comes closer and pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts" (Draupadi, 103-104).



To conclude, India's tribal individuals got tongue into Devi's essential concerns. She considers them to be individuals as significant of social persecution in India as of others but Devi has also utilized news coverage as a road for communicating her social concerns and for grassroots sorting out from the glimpse of the past. Devi's contribution with DNT/RAG has caused people to notice existing bad reputation of India, and she constantly moves in the direction of amending those treacheries and makes them favorable for the nation. If one does something for the sake of others, they become compel to regard and respect one. Accordingly, numerous tribal individuals, influenced by Devi's concerns have such a great amount of fondness for her that they started to call her 'Didi', translated into English as an 'older sister'. The unbelievable and brilliant motherly writer of Bengal died on Jul 28, 2016 because of her different organs disappointment or one can say that she passed her life after achieving her goal for the improving status of the poor and poverty. Thus, Devi's vibrant voice, clear vision and current issues as she has pointed out in her works highlighted the subjugation of the underclass society which dispossessed the basic needs of life. The readers can also find that her flow of thoughts on the pain, agony, anxiety, anger and depression of these marginalized exposes the depths of human understanding at the core of life.

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