

MAHASWETA DEVI'S MULTIFACETED REPRESENTATION OF RURAL PEOPLE IN HER SELECTED NOVELS

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Mahasweta Devi is a significant name in Bengali literature. She has created a unique style in Bengali fiction, remaining unwavering in her own ideologies and values. The renowned writer Bani Basu once mentioned that women face obstacles in asserting themselves in the literary world. Women, in general, face two types of challenges: first, there is an inherent inferiority complex associated with their identity, a feeling of self-consciousness as women, which acts as a barrier. Second, due to the historical dominance of men, women are often pitted against an uneven competition from the very beginning. A female writer must gradually navigate this unequal contest and move ahead. Mahasweta Devi's literary journey is deeply connected to the context of history. However, she does not merely focus on the battles and successes or failures of kings and emperors, but rather, for her, history also involves the existence of our identity, traditions, and values. Therefore, when Mahasweta Devi writes historical novels, they carry a deep philosophical and moral essence. Social exploitation and political subjugation are recurring themes in her works, as they span from historical contexts to political narratives. History and politics consciously emerge in her writing, with contemporary social and political events often depicted beautifully in her novels. There is a strong blending of reality and imagination in her storytelling.

The characters in her novels are mostly marginalized individuals who are often looked down upon by urban intellectuals. Mahasweta Devi's writing is influenced by the Naxalite movement, reflecting her alignment with the struggles of the oppressed. Mahasweta Devi was born on January 14, 1926, on the day of the Poush Sankranti, during a solar eclipse. Her father, Manish Ghatak, was well-known by the pen name Yubanaswa, and her mother was a literature enthusiast who herself wrote and did social service as much as she could. Mahasweta Devi's family held a prominent position in society at the time, which made it unthinkable to reject a daughter. As a result, she was raised with great care and love from a young age. She was the eldest among nine children of Manish Ghatak and Dharitri Devi. In her childhood, Mahasweta Devi was called by several nicknames. Her father called her 'Tutul,' her uncle called her 'Mumtaz,' her aunt called her 'Khukuma,' and her grandmother called her 'Daibki.' Her proper name, however, was given by her grandmother. Her younger sister, Soma Mukhopadhyay, reminisced about Mahasweta Devi in the special issue of *Korok* magazine titled 'Mahasweta' and wrote in the essay "My Sister Mahasweta": "Everything about my sister was strong, practical, and structured in a way that her life remained disciplined. Everything had to be educational... One thing I have noticed about my sister's life: when life became the most brutal or when permanent happiness and peace were repeatedly disturbed, she would remain calm and unwavering deep inside. Perhaps, when reading through history, geography, census reports, or land revenue documents for the next book, stories like 'Andhar Manik,' 'The Life and Death of Poet Bandygoti Gajir,' or 'Operation Basai Tuddu,' 'Stonadayini,' or 'HF 37: A Reportage' were being written. The beginning of merging life and writing was in the late seventies. I have always seen her doing very difficult tasks with great ease. And she could not live without work."¹

Mahasweta Devi often mentioned that her development was significantly influenced by her contemporary environment, history, her family, and her schooling. As the eldest of nine siblings, her parents' and family's influence played a crucial role in both her personal and

literary life. Mahasweta Devi frequently noted that her father never discouraged her from pursuing anything; instead, he actively encouraged her to engage in all activities. Her father, Manish Ghatak, was both a poet and a writer, and also worked in the government. However, she was not heavily influenced by his writing, and the nine siblings in her family were all distinct individuals, each with their own unique identity.

Mahasweta Devi's maternal uncle, Sudhir Ghatak, was a famous cameraman and a contemporary of Bimal Roy, while her other uncle was Ritwik Ghatak, whose name does not need further introduction. Both of Mahasweta Devi's paternal and maternal grandfathers had libraries, which indicates the family's prominent status. From these family libraries, Mahasweta Devi had the opportunity to read many valuable books. Encouraged by her father, she attended theater performances and classical music sessions regularly. Her father's multifaceted talents greatly inspired Mahasweta Devi in various ways. Recalling her father, she wrote an essay titled *Poila Boishakh* in the *Jugantar* magazine (April 15, 1983), where she shared the following: "Yubanaswa of Kollol and the legendary Manish Ghatak was very unusual as a father. He bought me a bicycle in the forties, and in Berhampore, he would ride alongside me on a bicycle. My cousin, Apala, also used to ride a bicycle but often faced severe scolding. I used to roam around for famine relief work or for the Kishore Bahini, which was acceptable to him. However, if I were involved in any business dealings, my father would roar with anger."² The days of struggling with poverty seemed to make Mahashweta Devi even more resilient, determined, and pragmatic. For a while, both Bijan Bhattacharya and Mahashweta Devi had to stay in Mumbai for livelihood. During their time there, she read some writings about Rani of Jhansi, and her enthusiasm for the queen grew. Later, after returning to Kolkata, Mahashweta Devi began to gather more information about the Rani. She visited libraries such as the National Library and the Maratha House Library, but felt unsatisfied. She then managed to earn some money and traveled to Jhansi. There, she immersed herself in the place and felt a personal connection, as if the queen she had read about in books came alive before her eyes. Upon returning to Kolkata, through hard work, she completed her book. Mahashweta's portrayal of village life and the lives of the Santhal people in her novels is remarkable because she did not merely gather historical facts from books, but also visited these places, interacted with the common people, and immersed herself in their world to collect the material for her writing. In doing so, she gave a new life to Indian literature.

The farmer's movement in Bengal, which Mahashweta Devi connected with deeply, is not just a simple event. It has been captured by various writers, and Mahashweta Devi, through her empathy with these farmers, beautifully brought rural life onto the pages of literature. She redefined the relationship between life and history. By collecting experiences from the ground and writing about it, she created works like *Aandhar Manik* (The Dark Jewel), a novel where she discovers history through the lives of ordinary people. The village mentioned in *Aandhar Manik* is not a specific place, but a symbol for thousands of villages in Bangladesh, representing a larger historical and political context. The word "darkness" in the novel symbolizes illiteracy, superstition, and blind faith. The novel centers on the devastation caused by the Maratha invasions in Bengal, which left a profound impact on the rural mindset. Mahashweta Devi captured this transformation beautifully in *Aandhar Manik*.

Mahashweta Devi believed that the true history of a country is not written by kings or elites, but by the stories of ordinary people. To find the truth, one should not rely solely on narratives created by the ruling classes. The folk tales passed down through generations contained the real history, and Mahashweta Devi brought these stories into her novels, thereby giving birth to a new history. In her work, Mahashweta Devi depicted the struggles of the marginalized and downtrodden, especially the Dalits, with great empathy. These characters, who fought against adversity to survive, had a unique place in her works. From the late 1970s, her writings began to reflect more profound changes. In *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Right to the Forest), Mahashweta

portrayed how the Santhals were denied their rights to the forest, exploited, and oppressed, only to eventually rise up against the British colonialists. Mahashweta Devi collected historical data and wrote novels based on these facts, constantly engaging with ordinary people, experiencing their lives, and immersing herself in their world to create her narratives. Her contributions to the Adivasi (tribal) social movement were immense. She lived closely with Adivasi communities, integrating herself into their daily lives, and brought their stories to the forefront in her works. Mahashweta Devi was deeply aware that while India's people were often illiterate, their wisdom, intelligence, and experience were not in any way inferior to those of developed nations. She tirelessly advocated for the marginalized, urging society's lowest strata to rise up. Mahashweta's work was not just about writing, but also about active participation in social service. She led many organizations for the welfare of the Santhal people and fought for their rights through various movements. In the book *The Dust Storm and the Hanging Mist*, Suresh Singh writes about the impact of British administration on tribal regions, which led to uprisings aimed at expelling the intruders. He discusses how agrarian breakdown and the spread of Christianity shaped revitalization movements, culminating in the great rebellion led by Birsa Munda. These movements, along with their socio-political context, played a significant role in the history of Bihar. This work emphasizes how the transformation of agrarian systems led to widespread unrest and the eventual religious-political movements in the region -- *"The movement of the non-tribal population into tribal regions was accelerated by the establishment and consolidation of British Administration in these areas. The tribal reacted to those developments through a series of uprisings in a bid to throw out the intruders from their home land. On the social front the social consequence of agrarian breakdown and the advent of Christianity shaped revitalisation movement blended and culminated in the last uprising of the Murders. The Ulgulander the leadership of Birsa Munda in the Rachi and northern part of Singbhum district of Bihar. "The transformation of the Mundari agrarian System into non-commercial, feudal, Zamindari or individuals tenures was the key to agrarian disorders that climaxed in religious political movement of Bihar."*³

Mahasweta Devi received many awards throughout her life. Some of the notable ones include the Jnanpith Award (1996), Honorary Doctorate from Rabindra Bharati (1998), Sahitya Akademi Award (1979), Honorary D.Litt from Chhatrapati Shah Ji Maharaj University Kanpur (2000), and many other awards. Several of her novels were later adapted into films. Through many ups and downs in her life, Mahasweta Devi moved forward, living a colorful and eventful life through her literary works, journalism, and social service. She worked tirelessly throughout her life and earned the love and respect of people. Her name will forever be written in golden letters for her portrayal of rural people and her creation of rural backgrounds. She always strived to inspire political awareness among the rural population. From *Jhansi Ki Rani* to *Hazar Churashir Maa*, Mahasweta's writing has been expansive. She dreamed of a world free from dirt and an exploitation-free society, where the oppressed would gradually rise and establish themselves at the center of society. Writing for her was not just literary work; it was a means of awakening people. In the preface to her novel *Aranyar Adhikar*, Mahasweta Devi explicitly mentioned her responsibility as a writer. As a contemporary social being, she was committed to fulfilling that responsibility. She did not write just to earn a livelihood. While writing *Jhansi Ki Rani*, she did not rely solely on the book's material but traveled to Bundelkhand to gather the necessary resources for her writing. This makes Mahasweta Devi distinct from other writers.

While writing *Aranyar Adhikar*, she honored Birsa Munda by placing a rebellious character at the center of the novel. Through her works, Mahasweta Devi highlighted the struggles of ordinary people, giving voice to the oppressed. In *Aranyar Adhikar*, the characters resist society's impositions, symbolizing their fight against exploitation. Birsa Munda, who grew up far from the city and desired the end of the suffering of the oppressed, wanted a rural

environment where people could live freely. Through Mahasweta Devi's writing, history awareness has come alive in a new dimension. People control politics, economics, and society, and it is people who make history and exploit others. Mahasweta Devi fought against this exploitation throughout her life. She always struggled against established social values, confronting the suffocating situation imposed by urban mentality on rural life. Mahasweta Devi consistently validated rural life in her novels and made the struggles of rural people permanent in the pages of history. She understood that human values would live on among the downtrodden. Through the warmth of ideological values, Mahasweta Devi created an alternative space in her novels. Mahasweta Devi's *Hazar Churashir Maa*, published in 1974, centers on the tolerant position of the wealthy society of Kolkata. In the novel, we also see a middle-class boy becoming involved in the Naxalite movement. Sujata, despite her husband's excessive lust and indifference, lives her life in despair, and her two children follow their father's ideals. The novel depicts the tension between two opposite value systems, and in this tension, Mahasweta Devi highlights the conflict between light and shadow. As a successful novelist, she points to the conflict and shows the selfishness in urban environments, contrasting it with the simple, inherent nature of rural people.

In the context of India's struggle for independence, the name of Birsa Munda will always be remembered. Birsa Munda's rebellion was not only against foreign rulers but also against the contemporary feudal system. As a writer and contemporary social person, Mahasweta Devi committed herself to society. In an essay in *Mahasweta Devi: Aparajeya Pratirodhi Mukh*, Nirmal Ghosh rightly says: "Man is not an abstract being but a physical entity shaped by blood and flesh, whose life is built on various struggles, joys, and sorrows, in which there is both a plaintiff and a protester. By walking through many paths, he understands life and through that understanding, he grasps theory. And it is through this understanding that he can arrange the diversity, contradictions, and crises of human life... History is the core of her writing, and as a basis, she chooses oral tradition, myth, legend, and the Puranas."⁴

With these influences, Mahasweta Devi constructs a truth of history. In reality, this history becomes the truth of life, a truth that is harsh and unforgiving. Through silent bloodshed, the reader's door remains continuously opened. Readers may unknowingly enter the story and become part of it, thus beginning a process of new realization. In this process of self-identification lies the intensity of Mahasweta Devi's life philosophy, earned through dedication and the bloody footprints of many paths. In the novel's report, under the influence of ideology and values, Mahasweta Devi creates an alternative space. She brings the rural setting and the suffering of the oppressed people into focus in her novel *The Right to the Forest*. The indigenous rebellion for food, clothing, and shelter had been happening in our India for a long time, and Mahasweta Devi vividly brings this backdrop to the center of her novel. The name "Chhota Nagpur" is derived from the names of two Munda brothers. The Mundas keep track of time by the full moon. In explaining events from many years ago, Mahasweta Devi brings the Munda language into the novel. The forest was the life of the Mundas; their play and recreation were within the forest. But over time, people from the city slowly began to occupy the land by force, moving into the villages of the Santhals. And perhaps these were the "Dikus" (outsiders). The Dikus exploited and deprived the Munda women in various ways. Gradually, the simple life of the Mundas was infiltrated by merchants, landlords, British officers, trains, guns, droughts, famines, etc. The very poor Munda people did not even get rice to eat. They were kept oppressed and deprived. The Dikus came and gradually took possession of their land, cattle, oxen, homes, and everything. Mahasweta Devi always believed in a classless society. She always wanted the gradual upliftment of the lower classes. Therefore, in creating the character of Birsa, Mahasweta Devi very consciously presents the imagery of their exploitation and suffering to the reader. She repeatedly mentions that there is no end to the Ulgulan (rebellion). That is, as long as there is exploitation in this world, Birsa Mundas, as the

representatives of the oppressed people, will continue their struggle. No matter how much we try to exploit and rule over the rural setting, a protest will gradually emerge from there over time. Where there is oppression, where there is persecution, there will be resistance. Mahasweta Devi repeatedly brings out the rural protest in her novel for this reason. *The Right to the Forest* begins with intense tension. On June 9, 1900, at around 8 a.m., Birsa vomits blood and falls unconscious – in the novel *The Right to the Forest*, on one hand, we have the history of Birsa Munda's struggle, and on the other hand, the history of taking away the right to the forest. The forest, which had embraced the Mundas like a mother, was gradually being taken away for the development of the city people. Even today, we see that rural spaces are repeatedly attacked for urban development. Rural areas were always viewed with contempt. Educated city people always looked down upon the rural people. They repeatedly hated them, and this image of contempt and hatred is consciously brought to the forefront by Mahasweta Devi in the novel, making us constantly aware. She has created two contrasting spaces of light and darkness for us to decide which side we are on as readers. Mahasweta Devi wanted to write the history of the self-awareness of the Mundas under the leadership of the revolutionary Birsa. The Mundas, who were victims of immature politics, had lost their socio-economic status. Slowly, the Mundas were moving towards a darker abyss. Mahasweta Devi consciously tried to develop consciousness among the people of the rural setting. In both *The Right to the Forest* and *Chhoti Munda and His Arrow*, the connecting character is Dhani Munda. It was from Dhani Munda that Chhoti Munda learned how to shoot an arrow. In the novel's account, we read: "Everything in Chhoti Munda's life is like a story. Like other stories of Munda life, this epic tale too. How the world was created, how the world was burned in the Sengelda fire, how two men and women lived, how a new world was created – these are the eternal stories in Munda life. The new epic of Munda life was created twenty years ago, something Chhoti did not know. Dhani tells him. The bond that grows between them makes Chhoti part of the epic, and as a result, his final destiny becomes as grand and hopeful as the heroes of the epic."⁵

From *Hazar Churashir Ma* to *Aranyer Adhikar*, Mahasweta Devi attempted to establish the rights of common people through her novels. She tried to liberate people from the disgrace of colonial oppression, and conveyed revolutionary messages to the rural masses. In this way, Mahasweta Devi presented a transformative consciousness to the readers. The *Dikus* (outsiders) may eat rice, but the reality was that Birsa Munda did not only fight to protect the sanctity of the forest; he also fought against the *Dikus*. The *Dikus* repeatedly displaced them from their land, and while the *Dikus* enjoyed hot rice, the Mundas only faced neglect. A Munda girl lit a fire in the jungle to cook rice, and just the smoke from the fire made the British police arrest her. Driven by the desire for a handful of rice, Birsa Munda got caught in the trap of the *Dikus*. Birsa wanted the rights to the forest, wanted to protect the sacred land, and this is why he called for the *Ulgulaan* (revolt). Birsa Munda fought against the *Dikus* his whole life.

Although Birsa died on June 9th after vomiting blood, the Mundas still refused to identify his death. They believed Birsa was their god and that he would return. After enduring oppression and defeat for many years, the Munda community's self-confidence was at its lowest. Birsa fought his entire life to restore their rights and taught them the motivation to live and fight. Everyone, even the *Dom* (a low caste) in the jail where Birsa was kept, considered him a god. Birsa Munda became a symbol of hope for oppressed people, particularly indigenous tribal communities, who felt unity with him and believed he would bring a new dawn into their lives. The *Dikus* sought to punish the entire Munda society through Birsa. Without any trial, they detained 482 Mundas in jail for days. After years of accumulating evidence, they couldn't succeed. During imprisonment, the British government's mockery led to Birsa's death. But after his death, the Ranchi Jail Superintendent had to be cautious because the Mundas, in their collective unity, could not easily accept this injustice.

When the news of Birsa's death spread in local papers such as *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, *The Hindu Poetry*, and *The Bengali*, the people became furious. Birsa's life story was treated like a political prisoner's. He was physically tortured in jail, chained at his feet and waist. The British wanted to blame his death on cholera, but it was clear that he died as a result of the brutal treatment. Birsa Munda had comforted his people by telling them that he would return and that they would rebuild the earth anew. His battle for the forest was symbolic of the larger fight for rights and identity. Mahasweta Devi, in *Aranyer Adhikar*, presents Birsa Munda's narrative as a chronicle of the larger Munda rebellion that had been brewing even before his birth. Critics believe that the rebellion began as early as the Battle of Plassey. The Munda rebellion started in 1789 when the Munda people, oppressed by landlords, began resisting in the Chotanagpur region. The British sent Lieutenant Cooper to suppress the rebellion, but he initially failed. The collector from Ramgarh later intervened with a large force but could not completely quell the rebellion. Though the Mundas temporarily withdrew, their resentment towards the British and landlords grew.

Mahasweta Devi's deep understanding of the history of the indigenous tribal movements and their struggles enabled her to craft a powerful narrative. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, she weaves together Birsa Munda's life with the broader struggles of the Santal community. She also acknowledges the debt she owes to Dr. Suresh Singh and his book *The Dust Storm and the Hanging Mist* in shaping her own narrative. The Mundas and the Santals had been repeatedly displaced from their land due to the greed of outsiders, the *Dikus*. Their struggle for land and identity was marked by continuous oppression and suffering. Their rights to the forest were consistently denied. Mahasweta Devi's writing, imbued with deep empathy, makes *Aranyer Adhikar* a poignant reflection on this history. The *Dikus* repeatedly seized land from the indigenous tribes, often through violence and force. By the late 19th century, their oppression led to the *Ulgulaan* (rebellion) led by Birsa Munda. The revolution, which flared up between 1895 and 1901, was an expression of the frustration and anger of the Mundas and the Santals. Mahasweta Devi's novel captures this moment of awakening for the Munda community, using Birsa Munda as the central figure to inspire a collective uprising. Through her writing, Mahasweta Devi brings the struggles of oppressed people, especially the indigenous communities, to the forefront. She highlights the centuries of exploitation they endured, painting a stark picture of their plight and the leadership of Birsa Munda in their struggle for existence. The novel is a tribute to their resilience and their fight for justice, a fight against the forces of colonialism, exploitation, and oppression.

In conclusion, Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyaer Adhikar* (The Rights of the Forest) is not just a narrative about the struggles of the Munda community, but a powerful reflection on the broader issues of oppression, exploitation, and the loss of identity faced by indigenous people. Through the story of Birsa Munda, Devi illustrates the deep connection between the Munda people and their land, and how that bond was systematically undermined by colonial and post-colonial forces. The novel emphasizes the importance of resistance and self-empowerment in the face of systemic exploitation, portraying Birsa Munda as a symbol of revolt against both the oppressive landlords and the British colonial regime.

The story also underscores how the Munda people, despite centuries of subjugation, found strength in their collective identity and in the leadership of figures like Birsa Munda. Mahasweta Devi's writing is a poignant reminder of the continuous struggle faced by marginalized communities, especially indigenous groups, whose rights to their land and culture have been historically denied. Through her vivid portrayal of Birsa's struggle, Devi challenges the reader to reflect on the enduring legacies of colonialism and the ongoing fight for social justice, highlighting the necessity of standing up against exploitation in all its forms. The novel's focus on land rights, cultural identity, and revolutionary resistance makes it an essential part of the discourse on indigenous rights in India and beyond.

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