

**MA SEMESTER II**  
**LITERATURE AND GENDER**  
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## MAHASWETA DEVI'S DRAUPADI

### MAHASWETA DEVI (1926-2016)

Mahasweta Devi was an eminent Bengali writer, novelist and social activist who fought for the rights of the rural oppressed and *adivasi* communities of India. Born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 1926, she belonged to a family of intellectuals and social workers. Her father, Manish Ghatak, was a well-known poet and novelist and her mother was a social worker and writer. Mahasweta Devi graduated from the University of Calcutta and this was followed by an MA degree in English from the Visva Bharti University. In 1964, Devi began teaching at the Bijoygarh College, Calcutta meant for elite female students. During this period, she worked as a journalist and a creative writer.

In the late seventies, Mahasweta Devi worked with landless labourers of eastern India forming a close bond with them. She travelled widely, living with and building a close bond with them and contributed articles to several leading newspapers and journals, drawing on her first-hand experience. In 1980, she started editing a Bengali quarterly, *Bortika*, which she turned into “a forum where poor peasants, agricultural labourers, tribals, factory workers, rickshaw pullers and all those who have no voice elsewhere could write about their lives and problems.” Her commitment towards documenting the plight of the dispossessed is seen in her observation:

The Naxalite movement between the late sixties and early seventies, with its urban phase climaxing in 1970-71, was the first major event after I had become a writer that I felt an urge and an obligation to document. [...] A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take a stand in defence of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him [...] (Devi, quoted in Bandyopadhyay viii).

Devi wrote over 100 novels and over 20 collections of short stories, non-fiction and collections of her “fiery, crusading and relentless” journalism primarily written in Bengali but often translated into other languages. Published in 1956, her first novel, *Jhansir Rani* is a re-telling of the rebellion of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi through oral accounts and regional folk tales. Besides fiction, her activist prose written between 1981 and 1992 were collected in *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi* (1997). This volume included most of her articles in English from journals and newspapers and several Bengali pieces in translation and editorials from *Bortika*.

Her powerful fiction won her recognition in the form of the Sahitya Akademi (1979), Jnanpith (1996) and Ramon Magsaysay (1996) awards, the title of Officier del Ordre Des Arts Et Des Lettres (2003) and the Nonino Prize (2005) amongst several other literary honours. She was also awarded the Padmashri in 1986 for her activist work among dispossessed tribal communities.

### DRAUPADI

Please find a link below to download the text (from *Critical Inquiry*) if the book *Breast Stories* is not available.

<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/448160>

*[Students are advised to read the 'Translator's Foreword' by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak]*

Mahasweta Devi's story 'Draupadi' was first published in 1978 in Bengali in her collection, *Agnigarbha*. The English translation- by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak- came out in the *Critical Inquiry* journal in 1981 and later in her collection *Breast Stories* in 1997. The backdrop to the story is the Naxalbari movement of West Bengal which started off as an armed revolt of landless peasantry and tribal people against landlords and money lenders. Besides exploring the dialectical tension between of the exploited tribals and the Nation-state represented by the figure of Senanayak, the narrative also throws up significant issues of gender oppression, marginality, masculinity, female subjectivity, language, and identity.

Set against the politically charged atmosphere of West Bengal in 1971, the story is centred around a young adivasi woman Dopdi Mejhen and her husband Dulna Majhi who support the Naxalite rebels referred to as "gentlemen revolutionaries" as informer-activists. Dopdi and Dulna are wanted in connection with the killing of Surja Sahu, the upper caste landlord of Bankuli village for his atrocities against the tribals. Dulna is hunted down in the forest under 'Operation Forest Jharkhani', and Dopdi, who carries a prize money on her head is eventually apprehended. Torture and rape follow when she refuses to disclose the names of her accomplices to Senanayak, the army chief and 'a specialist in combat and extreme left politics.'

The next day she is brought before Senanayak bloodied in body but indomitable in spirit. She laughs at Senanayak refusing to clothe herself and challenges male authority and power. Thus, she emerges as an agent through a dramatic re-articulation of her identity. For the first time, Senanayak with all his theoretical knowledge of the tribals, even about information storage in their brain cells, fails to comprehend her moves and is "afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid (402). In other words, by refusing to be the object of a male narrative, Dopdi asserts herself as 'subject' and emphasizes on the truth of her own presence- she constructs a meaning which Senanayak simply cannot understand.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan(1999) points out that Dopdi does not let her nakedness shame her, her torture intimidate her, or her rape diminish her (352). Her act of defiance, she states, is a deliberate refusal of a shared sign-system (the meanings assigned to nakedness and

rape: shame, fear, loss) and an ironic use of the same semiotics to create disconcerting counter-effects of shame, confusion and terror in the enemy (352-3). Thus, by refusing to share the sign system, she also becomes unpredictable. According to Gayatri C Spivak, “Dopdi is what the Draupadi who is written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text of male power could not be”, although her final assertion in her essay “Can the Subaltern speak?” is that the subaltern cannot speak which denies the gendered subaltern the ability to represent herself and achieve voice agency. However, contrary to the voicelessness of Spivak’s subaltern, Dopdi creates a counter-narrative by using her body and sexuality as the locus of resistance.

## **SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT**

### **THE NAXALBARI MOVEMENT**

In May 1967, Naxalbari, an almost obscure spot in the northern part of West Bengal, suddenly attracted widespread attention, both national and international, with a successful armed peasant uprising led by a small group of Communist Party of India (Marxist) leaders who decided to break away and launch their own armed struggle against big landowners. These leaders were Charu Mazumdar, Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal. Their aim was to seize lands from the big zamindars and re-distribute the same among the tilling farmers and landless labourers.

After Independence, the zamindari system was abolished as part of agrarian reform but redistribution of land was not undertaken due to protest by some groups. Incomplete agrarian reforms was one of the major causes of the Naxal movement. Extreme poverty, exploitation of landless tillers - often from Dalit and tribal communities - and denial of social justice by the administration resulted in extreme discontent among the masses and left wing leaders. Meanwhile, attempts were made to improve agriculture, which led to better returns from farms.

The abolition of zamindari as well as improved agricultural practices produced many neo-rich farmers, who were unwilling to share their profit with the tillers and labourers who worked hard in their fields. As the landowners prospered, the landless continued to struggle for survival. In many areas that mainly depended on agriculture, the poverty rates were reportedly as high as over 95 per cent. Discontent simmered. Naxalbari was the expression of the acute economic disparity and social injustice.

in her 'Translator's Foreword', Spivak commented on the socio-political setting of Draupadi as follows:

In the spring of 1967, there was a successful peasant rebellion in the Naxalbari area of the Northern part of West Bengal. According to Marcus Franda, "unlike most other areas of West Bengal, where peasant movements are led almost solely by middle-class leadership from Calcutta, Naxalbari has spawned an indigenous agrarian reform leadership led by the lower classes" including tribal cultivators. This peculiar coalition of peasant and intellectual sparked off a number of Naxalbaris all over India. The target of these movements was the long-established oppression of the landless peasantry and itinerant farm worker, sustained through an unofficial government-landlord collusion that too easily circumvented the law(385)... writers like Marcuse and Sartre (had) seemingly dominated the minds of young people throughout the world in the 1960s(386)

In 1970, the hostility between east and West Pakistan assumed the form of an armed struggle. Rejoicing at the defeat of North Pakistan, India managed to suppress naxalites and destroyed the rebellious group of rural tribals. The year 1971 therefore is the point of reference in the story.

#### REWRITING OF THE MAHABHARATA MYTH

Read the 'Translator's Preface' (387-388) by Spivak to see how Mahasweta Devi creates tribal Draupadi as a counter-representation of epic/mythical/classical character from *Mahabharata*. This feminist response to the myth of Draupadi, the icon of womanhood in Hindu mythology, deconstructs the representation of women, cultures, images, stereotypes and archetypes.

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*Note: To read more on Mahasweta Devi, please read Anjum Katyal's 2014 interview of Mahasweta Devi as a part of SPARROW Global Feminism project on the following page ]*

[For all queries, questions, discussions, please drop in a request at [msingh02@rediffmail.com](mailto:msingh02@rediffmail.com)]



The Right to Dream: Mahasweta Devi  
(January 14, 1926-July 28, 2016)

Everyone knows the facts about her life. That she worked for the rights of tribals of West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh. That she is remembered for her *Draupati*, *Stanadhayini*, *Hajar Chaurashir Mau*, *Rudali* and *Aranyer Adhikar*. That many literary awards came her way like the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Jnanpith Award, Ramon Magsaysay Award Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan—the most distinguished awards were given to her. SPARROW has made a long film on her life and her work. But it is what she spoke in her Jaipur Literary Festival address in 2013 that keeps resounding in one's ears. She concluded her address with these words:

"...I've been thinking about this for a long time. The only way to counter globalisation, just a plot of land in some central place, keep it covered in grass, let there be a single tree, even a wild tree. Let your son's tricycle lie there. Let some poor child come and play, let a bird come and use the tree. Small things. Small dreams. After all, you have your own small dreams, don't you?

I claim elsewhere to have always written about the 'culture of the downtrodden'. How tall or short or true or false is this claim? The more I think and write and think some more, the harder it gets to arrive at a definition. I hesitate. I falter. I cling to the belief that for any culture as old and ancient as ours to have survived over time and in time there could only be one basic common and acceptable core thought: humaneness. To accept each other's right to be human with dignity.

People do not have eyes to see. All my life I have been seeing small people and their small dreams. I feel as if they wanted to lock up all the dreams, but somehow some dreams have escaped. A jailbreak of dreams. ...As I have been saying for years, repeatedly, the right to dream should be the first fundamental right. The right to dream. This then is my fight. My dream. In my life and in my literature."

How can one say 'Rest in Peace' to such a person? She would want to know where and how. And she would tell us not to rest either and continue to dream.

## Mahasweta Devi

I.O

Excerpts from Anjum Katyal's dialogue with Mahasweta Devi at her residence in Kolkata on 23rd March, 2014 as a part of SPARROW Global Feminisms project

### *On her Childhood, Family and Shantiniketan Days*

Anjum Katyal [AK]: The earlier childhood up to the age of ten, there was a point in which you were saying that the house that you remember most clearly was Medinipur and it was right on the edge of the forest and the tribal settlements were there. So was that then your first introduction to a culture that was different from yours, the tribals?

Mahasweta Devi [MD]: Yes. You might. Yes, you might link those days with my later interest but later interest was you know — then I jumped fully into it. At that time, what we found you know, that the Santhals, generally people were not very friendly to them. Santhals are not denotified tribes. Actually they are more sophisticated and very advanced — all the tribals are. Somehow, they would have to... police would slap cases on them and then they would have to go and report at the police station every evening. It was very difficult for them. And they worked on day-wage in the government quarters this house, that house. That also police insisted. If they worked there, they could keep better watch over them. Then my father asked them — two boys — father would ask them and they said, "We have to do it." Father went to the police station and said, "They work at my house. I refuse to allow them to come to the police station to report. Whatever report you want, you can take it from me. Come to my office and I will give it to you. And those boys will go home. Their home is quite faraway in the jungles. So they were, you know, very close to us. And there was a boy. They would... he would clear some leaves and make whistle-like things and all of us very lustily would blow at it. They always encouraged me, patting my back. Yes "Hobe" you will be able to do it. Medinipur was just fantastic. From childhood, father purchased a cycle for me so I would cycle anywhere. One day, cycling, cycling, in the meadow behind our house, there was a quite big — you know... what shall we call it. We call in Bengali *pukoo*.

AK: Pond.

MD: There was quite a big pond and it was far away so people would not come there generally. With the cycle, I fell into it and somehow I knew swimming so I came up... But mother said yes, she loves cycling, she fell and she knows swimming, she came. She was never perturbed by anything, always encouraged.

AK: So you think that as a child you had as much freedom as a boy in the family would have had?

MD: Yes, yes, fully.

AK: Physically to run and play outdoors.

MD: Yes, yes. If a cycle was purchased for my brother, who was younger than me, one had to be purchased for me as well because father himself would do it. "She loves cycling, she enjoys it, let her do it." Things like that, which is very good. In the family also we have seen great grandmothers and grandmothers. My grandmother, maternal grandmother, she had her own library. And what is remarkable, they were in Dhaka. Definitely in those days, it was a ruffian town. There my father was known as a *Swadeshi* (Swadeshi) *ekil* (lawyer) that means the *vakil* (lawyer) who fought the cases of the Swadeshi—these people. So there was not much money but my maternal grandmother had a fantastic library and in the evening, my grandfather's friends would come. People who fought such cases, who published magazines and she talked very competently with them. They would come to take guidance from grandma. Because grandma read so much, knew so much, and often she wrote on women's issues. *Jayshree* was a very patriotic magazine published by the then Leela Nag and Renu Sen who became later Leela Rai and then they became, you know, they are known as Forward Block people. Anyway, they were very patriotic. Their magazine *Jayshree*... often these two would be arrested and who is to run the magazine? It would come to our house and grandma, my mother, my aunt all of them would write and sell those magazines here and there. This I—we have seen, so much—we have seen them do, I have seen my mother do so much. So whatever I do now, it's only natural. Had I not done it, it would be very unusual and rather betraying them. Because she always... the entire ambience was very different. During puja time in our East Bengal village, big boats, on the big boats, they took, you know, saris and things for people to purchase. And they would take books. During puja time, the entire village, the women would purchase books. Sarat Chandra and other writers. Their books would go to the villages, remote villages. They purchased books. It was quite common, everyone would read books.

AK: What about some of the magazines?

MD: *Banumat* was a very popular magazine where Mr. Thomas did all the paintings you know. His wife... and those were very popular. But *Probashi* was the magazine edited by Ramanand Chatterjee which was very unusual, published Tagore, published other things. On women's issues, *Probashi* was very, very strong. Any woman passing the secondary examination or becoming a graduate would be big news for *Probashi*. Women writers also wrote there. Sita Devi, Shanta Devi and other writers. They also wrote a lot. Then there was *Bichitra*. *Bichitra* was very, very... more on pure literature. But *Bichitra* is the magazine for which Bibhuti Bhushan Bannerjee wrote *Pather Panchali*. So since all of them were immersed in all these... books would



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come, we would read. *Parichay*— edited by Shudin Dutta. My father also was a writer for *Parichay*. I remember one year in Shantiniketan—in Calcutta, father is not writing anything. And the editor Shudin Dutta is hammering him. Then Shudin Dutta told my mother, "You have to write something." So mother wrote a story. She wrote a story. And she wrote very well. She wrote especially on women's issues....

AK: So Mahasweta, you said that around the age of ten, you were sent off to Shantiniketan.  
MD: Yes.

AK: And that you were in the beginning very, very upset by this.  
MD: Very upset.

AK: Being sent away. But then you changed your mind after...

MD: When I reached Shantiniketan—going to Shantiniketan with father was quite an experience, because that was December and from Howrah we travelled by train. Then father suddenly remembered sometime, long back, I [had] wanted to have another ice-cream which he never allowed. And in those days, Calcutta was fantastic. He went there and purchased four ice-creams for me. Those were, you know—those days they would go with those and Stop Me and Buy One. One *anna* in one those days, *anna*, *pais*, *rupiahs*. That one *anna* was painted on the Stop Me and Buy One. Happy Boy ice-cream. He bought four. I stared at it, because I was shedding tears like this (looks down). It was very shameful to cry before your parents, I felt. I ate all the four ice-creams. Then I went to sleep. In the morning, I reached Shantiniketan; he took me to Stree Bhavan, the girls' hostel. And the superintendent came out and said, "Oh, this small girl. Her name is such a big one. Mahasweta? Which other name she has? I said Khukoo. And from that time, I became Khukoo for Shantiniketan. And very soon, you know, I was so absolutely immersed in Shantiniketan. Everything was very new to me....

AK: Can you tell us something about studying in Shantiniketan in those years? What was it like?

MD: Just three years ago, I wrote a book—*Amader Shantiniketan*. In that, many of the memories, I have brought back. First thing was '36, '37, '38. I was in Shantiniketan, that's five to seven, Tagore was alive. And Shantiniketan was a small place. We could always go to Tagore without any... there was no, you know, no one saying not to come, things like that. Tagore's granddaughter, Rathi Thakur's adopted daughter, Nandini... her nickname was Poope. Poope was also in the school, and after school hours whenever...

Phone rings

MD: ... we found time, we went to *Uttarayan*. That means Tagore's house. Tagore's daughter-in-law was a very affectionate, kind and saintly person. She would give us

plenty to eat, to go to play around and things like that.... Plenty liberty there, plenty going out in the scorching sun... when rains came, we would run through the gravelly, absolutely ocean wavy-like reddish-reddish from *khoai*. We would run to Kopai river, they would push us into the river and ask us to swim. They would be with us. They would save us all right. That's how I learned to swim. Being thrown into river, turbulent rivers and then fighting with it. Shantiniketan was fantastic. And then Tagore's dance dramas, very famous—thus *Chitrangada*, *Shyama*, *Tasher Desh*, *Chandalika*. When the rehearsals went on in the evenings where Tagore would sit for two or three hours without moving an inch and whenever he found, you know, something is wrong with the song or dancing he would just lift his finger and silently everyone would leave the room... Happy, happy days Anjum, very happy days. So, in a way, without telling us anything, sense of duty, sense of all the time working, keep busy, find something fruitful to do. These were....

AK: Values

MD: ...values of course....

### First Book and Life as a Writer

AK: What was your first real story that came out which was, you know, which you considered creative writing or your first piece as a writer.

MD: You see, ... writing came very easy to me, and in trying to solve my eternal economic problem there was a very good readable weekly, *Sachitra Bharat*. My uncle's friend, Jahu Sengupta was connected with it. He told me, 'Can't you write small sketches for it?' At that time, I was working for Central Government—for two years I worked, then I was sacked by them for marrying a communist but before that I would write but I couldn't use my name. I would take on the pen name of Sumitra Devi and talked about—a person who talked incessantly. That means I gave this name *Anaharate*—*Anaharate* means continuous. Very light reading but readers enjoyed it. But I was rather toying with it. And then we went to Bombay, Bijon had to write some story, for K A Abbas—it didn't materialise. So ultimately we left Bombay after one year when he wrote his film story on *Nagin*. *Nagin*'s story was horrible but it was a super hit of those times. This one year I utilised because I was in budo (elder) Mama's house (Anjum: Sachin Chaudhuri) and with his card, I would go to Asiatic Society, sit and read and then come back....

AK: So how did your interest in the *Rani of Jhansi* come about?

MD: No, just because I read the story. And then, this rang, you know, old some where, some where—yes I have read about her in childhood, in my grandma's library, in other books, other book reference to her. Rabindranath's elder brother referred to her all the time. Only that day, the

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Rani of Jhansi, she has proved her courage and resilience and things like that. Anyway, I read that book, I decided to write a biography. I had no—I had not come through the discipline of history or anything or research. I did not see my future—that whole life I will go on researching into strange subjects. I came back and I came across the name of the Rani's nephew who was still living. Actually, when the Rani of Jhansi was married, she was eight years old. Her father also came with her and settled in Jhansi. And Rani of Jhansi's husband Gangadhar Rao— was about 30-32. Her father was also 30-32. So after coming here after her marriage, father also married another 8-year old girl. And this stepmother and the Rani, they were you know, close childhood friends, things like that. So Rani's son, adopted son, different Damodar Rao, but her nephew Naveen Chintamani Pandey, I came across him, he was a member of the— one of the History Congress members. So that year, History Congress took place in Ahmedabad.... Then I had this mad idea, these days, people say this is the subaltern point. I did know anything about subaltern. Actually, when I first came across the word, I thought it is British time ka word. *Subaltern Sabedar hota hai na?* (Subedar was a Sabaltern isn't it?) I went to Jhansi, Gwalior, Kalpi [and] nearby places to collect as much as I can from the people's source. It was fantastic memories. Now, sitting in the winter-time—it was December again, winter-time sitting in open meadow with all those woodcutters and others. We were sitting around a fire and they are singing songs. I can't remember just now, but it is written somewhere...

AK: Songs about the Rani of Jhansi?

MD: *Hanh, pathar, mithi se fauj banai*  
*Kaath se kator*  
*Pahad utthake ghoda banai*  
*Chali Gwalior.*

(She made soldiers out of soil,  
A sword out of wood;  
She picked up mountains and made horses,  
And off she rode to Gwalior)

AK: And that was your first book.

MD: Yes, it was serialised for weekly *Desh*; then it came out as a book. I was instantly known as a writer. Don't think there was no resistance. Plenty resistance.

AK: Of what kind?

MD: 'It is nothing, just romanticism, no truth in it.' Things like that. So many things I have forgotten, people, generally, I will not name them but established Bengali writers, you see, 'Her entry is through the back door with her father's influence.' How, I did not know. So, I had to listen to all these things. They made it a point, so I listened to them. There was one situation where direct confrontation with someone. He said, "I will see how you write, you will not be able to write." Then I was much younger then, Anjum. I

told him, "But you will see I will survive by writing. I will live on writing alone. I will become a professional writer." They laughed....

### *Tribals in Her Life and Writing*

AK: Mahasweta, why don't you tell us about how you first began to visit the tribal areas and what prompted you to do it?

MD: An insertion in Sunday's *Statesman*. I came across this mention of this place Mckluskiegunge where one can go. I wrote a letter, then went there. Mckluskiegunge was at that time—Colonel Mckluskie at some time was the Anglo Indian MP (Member of Parliament). Then for retired railway people—all over India, many Anglo Indians were employed, so they, originally the place name was Lapra. Lapra village or Mouja under which there were so many villages. They purchased land there. Each house with, you know, acres of land like 15 acres, 18 acres, 21 acres, fruit garden, bungalows, cultivation ground. With their money, they settled there and their children, then they migrated to Australia, Canada, these places. They started renting out the houses. Anyway Mckluskiegunge was a very big place, very quiet and the best thing was after alighting from the bus, bus from Ranchi, bus from Dhanbad, you have to walk. In Mckluskiegunge there was no place for any conveyance or anything—we walked. I enjoyed it a lot. With the Anglo Indians, I became very friendly.

AK: Which year was this?

MD: It was I think 1963—63 or '62. While we were moving around, I would leave after breakfast, walking, walking, end somewhere, plenty tribal huts. And all the hills and rivers were connected with so many legends you know. There was a legendary tiger which would come from the Neundra Hills and go into one of the abandoned bungalows, sleep there and then go back.... But the tribal people I found fantastic. They came under... there were some tribals who had been converted and were Christians—they lived separate but all of them were together because they were forest workers and did the same thing, not many households where they could work, they worked some... Delightful people. You remember my story *Hunt*—Mary I found there.

AK: Mary Orson?

MD: Mary Orson, Mary Orson.

AK: She was the child of an Anglo Indian and a tribal.

MD: *Hahn* (yes)... Very fair skinned and she would not go to school. She would graze cows and buffaloes and very competent also.

AK: And she was a real person.

MD: Real person. So many persons there in the stories are real persons....

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AK: So Mahasweta, you discovered the tribals when you went to Mckluskiegunge but how did you get so pulled into their life and how did they become—their cause become—so important?

MD: You see, that way I have been to many places because you will find my writings like Dhoulai and others—on people who are not tribals also, but poor village people. I would go anywhere, you know. I had this madness in me. I would walk to their houses, be very well received. Sit with them, talk. Often sleep in their houses, then come. I just like, loved it. But at that time, I was not thinking of writing anything on them. You might say I went to learn from them, not to teach them anything. Because I found them absolutely scientific, absolutely sophisticated, behaviour and everything, very much.

AK: Can you give an example of what you mean? Because most people's idea of tribals is the exact opposite. So when you say scientific and sophisticated, what do you mean?

MD: Very good, you see. Most of the tribals wouldn't use oils and things. They would you know, slow roasting over slow fires, steady, ongoing ground fire. That's very scientific. And I remember once eating venison—fantastic. It was in the morning, and Mckluskiegunge was a place where many kinds of bamboos grew. Natural bamboo forests, not the bamboos planted for, you know, economy, as we see elsewhere. Big, hollow, this bamboo, they chop the meat, put it there—first with *adrak*, *mirchi*, *namak*, *lasan* (ginger, chilli, salt, garlic), everything and seal both ends and put it in the slow fire, very slow fire and we left for the day. We went out here, there, here, there and then when we came back, meat was absolutely cooked, it was delicious. I have not eaten anything like it in my life. So you understand, how sophistication, civilization and true rules of what needed doing. I remember one child was burnt. His grandfather ran, chopped off the head of a fowl and poured the blood all over. He said this blood is also alive and it will cover the burn and very soon, new skin will grow. There should be scientific explanation for it. But actually, the child, when I saw her later, she was all right.

AK: No scars.

MD: No scars. Nothing. And houses were immaculately clean. You could eat from the floor. Cleanliness was one of the prime conditions which everyone abided by and so keen to learn from everything. This I have seen in other tribes also like Vanshavara. They said, 'Why do you use glasses? Why do you have to have a lantern or a torchlight? Just learn to see, penetrate into the darkness and see because the stars also give light.' With such people I have walked in the evenings, never missing my...

### *Bortika and Associated Memories*

AK: Mahasweta, let's talk about *Bortika*. The journal that you have been bringing out for so many years. It was

started by your father as a literary journal and then you changed it. So can you talk about that?

MD: My father was... he was an eminent writer of those days. The... and he was very close to the young people. They requested him to take it over. They had, I think brought out one number. Then on behalf of a local club, this became their magazine, father started editing it and encouraged many writers who later became well-known like Syed Mustaba Siraz, like Phulakentu Babu, Phulakentu Singh and Abul Bashir—all of them have written for this magazine. He died in '79. Unluckily, I was not there at that time. I had just come to know, that I have been given, awarded Sahitya Akademi prize. And the day I left for Berhampore, that day he had died. So I went there with my other sisters after, you know, after cremation, everything—I had to be there, it is my good somehow luck to cremate my people. The brothers, father, everyone. So anyway, after that I came to know that publisher of this magazine—a local man—a very good man. He was weeping, 'Dada, you are going. *Bortika* would stop.' He told him, '*Bortika* will not stop. Ask her to continue it.' So that was a command to me. And I started, but the first number we published—yesterday I showed them the very first number—to keep the continuity. The next number was very important—on my father—and I declared in the first number that I would change the orientation. Only villagers, or such people who never write their life stories—the novelists do, they will write their life stories and experiences—so it will come straight from the grassroots. No literacy means nothing to me. Class four onwards, whatever be their literacy, anyone who can write Bengali, will write for my magazine. And then I started, you know, with increasing popularity in the villages. There was a time when I had eight hundred subscribers from the tribal belt of Medinipur alone. Then it increased to 1,600 or 1,900, because increasingly, they started writing their life stories. And their name and everything has come out in print. That gave them a great, very big jolt. And I used to receive so many village subscribers. And then I started to, you know, make the writing more focussed—are you an agricultural labourer, then these are the points you should pursue. If you are a village school primary teacher, these are the points. Are you a rickshaw puller in a small town? ... So many categories are there. And plus, that not only village, rural Bengal started being documented, then I, the very first, one number was on tribal women, women but village tribal women, village Muslim women, like that.

AK: Writing their own stories?

MD: Writing their own stories.... Do you remember about Chuni Kotal, that Lodha girl, who had to commit suicide?

AK: She was the first woman of her tribe who got a BA.  
MD: Chuni Kotal was like a daughter to me. She would come to me all the time to Calcutta. Then she joined in Medinipur, that tribal girls, hostel and she was also a student of the Medinipur University, Vidyasagar University

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it is called. Chuni wrote her life story. She told me 'No *didi*, I can't do it! I said, "You can do it!" I said, "You can do it, you have to do it." Chuni wrote her life story for the first and last time for *Bortika*. And after her death, everyone has borrowed from it. And whatever they have written, is based on *Bortika*. But Lodhas—you know, hunger for literacy was more in them. So, Lodhas on them, written by them, their life stories—school children writing poems and prose pieces, those numbers I have brought out. Five numbers on the Lodhas alone, on the Santhals too, about the Munda tribals one, then others also. Then closed down factories, then life of cycle rickshaw pullers—on so many subjects...

AK: For *Bortika* was there any other particular incident you can remember where, maybe certain kind of information came into the journal from women, which helped with their lives.

MD: ... Yes, Yes. My mother was a source of such stories, because she befriended—she was very nice and very severe also, very strict, with all the village women who after Bengal partition came to work. She would take them. My mother was remarkable. She would take the local—the Harijan children—ho are not allowed in the tea shops. She was a short person and she went there. And her *pattu* (*sari* end) would be under her armpit, because it would slip, because she was, that way not very... So she would go to school and say, "These boys, I have come to admit these boys and girls." That was never done before in Berhampur. Caste-dominated, these people were untouchables, because for Municipality, they were, you know, they carried shit on their heads. In those days, those were non-sanitary latrines. They said, "How to admit them?" *Ma* (Mother) said, "Government has started these schools, government pays you. Have they told you not to admit them? I am getting them admitted. I am the wife of the local income tax officer and I want to know. After seven days I will enquire and I will sort it [out] myself. And I ask my husband to take the magistrate and visit the town and see what happens. Because husband and wife never cared for government jobs and they went, thus they were. And the horror of it was all of them, Jugal and others, their *ma* (mother) would come to—*dairma* we would call them. She would come to clean our latrine. She would come with her four children. So it was our duty to give them bath, to feed them, then to make them sleep in time. For *dairma* there would be clothes—clean clothes, separate set of soap. So she would go and take bath, wash her clothes. Then in fresh, dry clothes, she would sit and have a big meal. And in the afternoon, after everything, when the sun went down, she would go home. So, she is the person, she said, "Ma, you have done so much." *Ma* said, "I want also something from you." "What?" "I want to take your children to school." From that it started. And such a caste-ridden society, you know, everyone said *ma* is supposedly a Brahmin's wife. She never cared. And after years Jugal passed matriculation, he became the Municipal Workers'

Union's secretary. She (he) came to my mother and told "Granny, granny, we want to make her, *boho mashi* (elder aunt) to be our president." I said, "No, *Ma*, don't tell them, 'yes, because I live in Calcutta, I come to see you and father, I cannot do it." *Ma* said, "No, Khukoo, you have to do this." Her words were supreme. By that time, she had gone blind and *bas ho gaya* (that was it)—I became President of the Berhampur Harijan Workers' Union and as such demonstrated on the streets, went and fought the Municipality authorities, things like that. So many things happened. In my lifetime, I could never....

AK: If anybody tries to write a novel about your life, it will be worse...

MD: It will be very difficult.

AK: ...worse than magic realism.

MD: Yes, what did I not do?...

### Women in Her Stories

AK: Mahasweta, in most of the stories that you have written, the characters, or the locations or the subject is about the most marginalised and dispossessed segments of our society, the most, the people who are leading the most suffering kinds of lives. And within that, there is also a strong collection of women's stories, women's issues, women characters. Now, how do you feel about this all? Because some people do think that you write more about women. Do you agree with that and how do you feel about the whole thing?

MD: ... I try to write about the entire class. Class-wise they are exploited. Men, women, children, all. Women's issues are marginalized. Women suffer more because they have a body. But also, women suffering peculiarly, it's continuing for thousands of years. It starts from home, it starts outside, when she is an adolescent, when she is just growing up. Do you not read in the newspapers? A seven-year child is gang raped. Girls. Only yesterday I read that a girl-child was born and she was a new-born child, was left on the roads of Howrah, things like that. It's a continuous process. ... You remember the story *Chinta*? *Chinta* had to pay such a price. She had to sell both her daughters. She had to pay such a price because she had after being widowed, she lived with another man. That's why. These things happen even in their society. Man goes and marries another girl, brings her home, nothing. In their society also. Their society is also very, very cruel against women. About the tribals, I will not say so. Tribal society is entirely different. Girl child is very welcome. No difference between a boy and a girl. The entire attitude is different, why different—it must be something which has been going on for thousands of years—they are carrying it in, they are carrying it in themselves. And this had to be written, that's why, I wrote. And also I have seen such women....

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AK: Mahasweta, can you tell us about your experiences with some of these very spirited personalities like Manda, for example, that you have written about.

MD: Manda Hirananchanda that was the name later given by her admirers, admiring women... Manda belonged to Kolhati tribe. About Kolhati tribe you should read this book, written by Kishore Shantabai Kale. She (He) has written about his mother who belonged to the Kolhati tribe. Also, he is the first person who has written about these eunuchs—very good writing. Belongs to the denotified tribe. So Manda was a girl, very spirited, very beautiful and as per custom in their society, the eldest girl was never married, but she was auctioned off. The highest bidder would take her, 'Chera Utarna' (Chuda Utarna)—break the bangles—which means have sexual relations with her. So the first person who broke the glass bangles would give the father something like twenty thousand rupees—how much—as much as they could give. Her father, her brothers—they would live on her earning and after some days then she would again be auctioned off to another—the highest bidder. Manda was seething because she was, twice she did it and third time she got hold of a very long whip and she said yes, and this is done very ceremonially—the panchayat—sarpanch would be there, others would be there, the bidders also. So she said, who is the bidder? All the men were there. Also, her mother and others and Marida, as the bidder advanced to take her, draw her by hand, she brought out her whip and lashed at them, all of them, cut their skin, they were bleeding and howling. Manda just ran away. She went out and ran all the way—on the cycle, motorcycle—she knew how to [ride a bike] ... arrived, went to the centre where Lakshman Gaikwad, Maharashtra's undisputed leader of the denotified tribals... Gaikwad is a good writer also. His book, *Uchalya*, or *The Braided* got the Akademi prize. So Lakshman's organisation gave her shelter. Then Lakshman Gaikwad came and came to [the village] and this village was seething, "What she has done? She cannot be forgiven. Let her come. If we can catch hold of her, we will, you know, peel her skin from her body and do this and that, burn her alive in the acid." Things like that. Lakshman came, Lakshman is a very great personality, very dominant, booming voice and everyone listened to him. He had hundreds of followers and everywhere—for making the denotified tribals aware everywhere, he had *karyakarta*, area workers. So came there and said, "He who touches this person, I will skin him alive, I am Lakshman Gaikwad. And how much money did you take?" he asked the father. Manda said this much—first time this much. 'Give me the money' He took that money and told everyone—'Anyone tries to harm her, *panch ka kot meeting hua, kuch hua, tum dekhoge* (five-member jury if you have any meeting, just see). And she becomes the local *karyakarta*, you have to listen to her. And with that money, he went to the heart of Jamkheda and there Kolhati women who do this—their music and dance, this profession—this is their profession. They have to earn that way and give it to her

*malik*, (owner) for the time being. So they are double-storeyed wooden structure—Manda lived upstairs, I went to that house. Dowstairs is their stage. In Maharashtra, this is traditional Tamasha theatre and Manda's whip was hanging there. The idea was that you come, purchase the tickets, see dance, listen to songs, see our dramas. Anyone trying to touch the girls, flay him. And she was having her Bullet, Bullet brand motorcycle and her famous whip, with that Manda, in salwar kameez, goes everywhere...

### Documenting History

AK: Mahasweta, you have often said that you feel that a writer has a duty almost to document her own time and to document history that she's part of.

MD: That's what I believe.

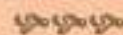
AK: And so, can you talk a little bit about that?

MD: Documenting my time and my history and I increasingly find that my history, when I say my history it becomes actually the very old, very permanent on flowing history. Yes, I believe in that...

*(Transcribed from the film on Mahasweta Devi produced by SPARROW as part of the Global Feminisms project done in collaboration with the University of Michigan.)*



SPARROW congratulates Jerry Pinto, one of our trustees, on being awarded the Sahitya Akademi Puraskar 2016, in English, for his novel, *Em and the Big Hoem*.



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