Introduction
Chapter 1

Introduction

I have always believed that real history is made by ordinary people. The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used, and yet do not accept defeat. For me, the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly noble, suffering human beings. Why should I look for my raw material elsewhere, once I have started knowing them? Sometimes it seems to me that my writing is really their doing.

-Mahasweta Devi (qtd. in wikipedia)

Pain is perhaps the most abiding condition of man’s being and the virtue that lends true potency to a work of literature is awareness of the pain that corrodes human heart. The empathy or the compassion for the fellow human being’s suffering is the true litmus test for both the artist and the literature that one produces. It is this quality that marks the great scriptures of the world. It is this that makes the works of Mahasweta Devi soulful and human and gives them the status of classics.

Armed with the pen as a mighty missile, Mahasweta Devi’s writings in Bengali—both fictional and otherwise—deeply rooted in history, provide vivid portrayals of the underclass. Her characters are robust even in their sufferings and of course, in their resistances. Mahasweta Devi’s vibrant voice, vision and the various issues that she has raised in her works highlight the manifold sufferings of the disenfranchised and the dispossessed. The flow of her thoughts on the pain, anxiety, anger and depression of these marginalised explores the unplumbed depths of human experience—the core of life.
One of the chief objectives of reading literature is its satisfaction of our desire to know more about man in his relation to society. A litterateur, it may be said, is in search of a unity in the diversity of life and civilisation. He, therefore, cannot turn his back on the social realities of his time, but should carve man’s image in his art with his social awareness and insight into life. “Art is not created in vacuum; it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important, because articulate part” (Wilbur S. Scott 123). Hence a work of art’s relations to society are vitally important, and the investigation of these relationships will organise and deepen one’s aesthetic response to it.

As the Russian novelist, Count Leo Tolstoy held, art has to be fundamentally purposive. The great dramatist, George Bernard Shaw firmly asserted that for art’s sake alone he would never face the toil of writing a single sentence. In the opinion of Bhabani Bhattacharya, one of the major Indian novelists, all writing should have a social purpose. He declared that a novel must place before the reader something from the society’s point of view. Art is not necessarily for art’s sake. Purposeless art and literature does not appear to him a sound judgement.

Mahatma Gandhi too was not in sympathy with the view that art or literature is absolutely autonomous. He once remarked that life must immensely exceed all the arts put together. Mulk Raj Anand, the great humanist, also abhorred the doctrine of art for art’s sake. Social injustice and the innumerable attendant evils that make up the social set up around him motivated him to write and give expression to the humanist in him. He affirms that a work of art results from the reflection in the mind of the artist of all the aspects of his experience. So it is fundamentally related to life. The artist improves on it, or rather intensifies it through ‘creative myth’ so as to change
the life in the deeper centres of other people’s experience and thus represents an integral vision of what life could be like. Anand is inclined to stress the need for, what he calls, a truly humanist art commensurate with the needs of the age and insists that the writer should help “educate humanity to recognise the fundamental principles of human living and exercise vigilance in regard to the real enemies of freedom and socialism” (qtd. in Sharma 102).

Therefore, a creative artist can (and should) play a vital role in destroying the spurious elements of contemporary civilisation or in reconstructing the future society. An attempt on a creative artist’s part to shirk this responsibility amounts to a betrayal of common humanity to which he is committed as an individual born to live in community with other individuals.

Societies always remain divided on racial, communal and linguistic lines. No nation is an exception to racial, political and social problems. In the western countries the Black are victimised and in India casteism has kept people eternally divided for eons. Jotiba Phule (1827-1890), the founder of the Satyashodhak Samaj (a non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra), a social reformer and revolutionary used the term ‘Dalit’ to describe the outcastes and untouchables as the oppressed and broken victims of the Indian caste-ridden society. In India there are approximately two hundred and forty million Dalits. This means that nearly twenty five per cent of the total population is Dalits. It also means that in a democratic country, where everybody is supposed to have equal rights and opportunities, one out of four persons is condemned to be an untouchable.

The condition of women among the outcastes is still worse, since they are in double jeopardy—being victims of casteism and sexism. Over the centuries, social reformers had waged valiant wars against this obnoxious social system but with little
success. As Sri Aurobindo observes, "...increasing tendency to deny the highest benefits of common life and culture to the sudra and the woman brought down the Indian society to the level of Western conquerors" (103-104). But from the twentieth century onwards a new awakening has taken place. Internationalisation of politics and human rights and the promotion of humanism as the panacea for social maladies have radically changed the thinking of the newly literate masses.

The suppressed voices of the marginalised and the submerged classes are beginning to be proliferated around the world as an iconoclastic clarion call against the reinforcement of the hegemonic cultural imprints. These subjugated and subordinated voices merge to question the established cannons of the authority and to assert their presence, identity and question for recognition. Not to be left behind, Indian writers too have launched a social crusade against the politico-socio-economic exploitations in the name of casteism.

In the post-independent era, the fact of being independent and having its own identity spurred the Indian writing in English. It provided the writers with self-confidence and broadened their vision and sharpened their self-examining faculty. M.K. Naik observes, "As a total result of these developments, important grains were registered especially in fiction, poetry and criticism. Fiction, already well-established, grew in both variety and stature" (192).

The conventional social realism in Indian fiction in English established by Mulk Raj Anand, went on flourishing during the fifties and early sixties of the twentieth century through the novelists like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Kushwant Singh, Sudin Ghosh, G.V. Desani and Anantanarayanan, though with natural individual variation, enlivened the trend of experimental novel oriented by Raja Rao in his *Kanthapura*. 
Though Indian fiction in English generally remained male-dominated for quite sometime, the post-independent era evinces creative release of feminine sensibility. It marks the glorious beginning of the literary emancipation of women. Dr. A.V. Krishna Rao writes, “In the development of the Indo-Anglian Novel the feminine sensibility has achieved imaginative self sufficiency which merits recognition in spite of its relatively late manifestation” (13).

There is a long line of women writers both of power and bulk. It includes Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Bharati Mukerji, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy. They all have contributed to the development of Indian novel in English by their inclusion of new themes and thereby given to it a new awareness of female world. Their works show a happy blending of the feeling and the form, the matter and the manner. They never present their themes in dry and monotonous way and they weave their themes in the threads of poetic craftsmanship. As Prasad opines, Indian women writers through their excellent work are no longer flowers of the pot for only decoration, rather they are fragrant flowers of the open garden diffusing aroma to all corners, braving the storms and rains.

These women writers explore the various social evils and maladies continuously ruining the lives of the marginalised. They also portray a very deep analysis of the sufferings and persecutions of the miserable women living in a society of cruel and conservative patriarchal domination. Apart from feminism and gender discrimination, they have also dealt with the other burning issues of political, economical and social situations which ruin the lives of the underprivileged. Their works mirror the exact realistic picture of the contemporary world where innocence is suffocating in the blood-dimmed tide of corruption.
Jyotirmoyee Devi, Giribala Devi, Sita Devi, Shanta Devi, Shoilabala Ghoshajaya, Punyalata chakravarty, Aparajita Devi are some of the well-known contemporary Bengali women writers of Mahasweta Devi. Among them all, Jyotirmoyee Devi, a feminist novelist, stands out in particular for the very modern quality of her writing. She critiques the overemphasis on chastity and tabooed social contacts among Hindus that led to their abandoning the women abducted and raped during the communal riots. The dowry system, injustice to widows, society’s attitude to prostitution and the denial of equal rights to women at home—social issues like these come up again and again in her works. Mahasweta Devi registers her admiration for Jyotirmoyee Devi by saying, “I expect a lot from literature; I expect a writer to make me think, and get me interested in the subject of his or her writing. Jyotirmoyee Devi fulfils these expectations .... As a person she shared many of my own attitudes and beliefs” (qtd. in The Book Review, Sep. 1998: 32).

Among these women writers, Mahasweta Devi’s contribution to Indian literature is important both in significance and volume. Her prolific pen makes her one of the most widely translated Indian writers working in an indigenous language today. “Now recognised 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). Mahasweta Devi recreates a span of history, imbuing her narration with trenchant satire against government and city people and soul-stirring poignancy for the peasants, tribals and student idealists.

With her novels, short stories and plays being translated regularly into English, Mahasweta Devi has become popular among the readers both in India and abroad and what ensures her a place in the history of modern Indian literature is her bringing a passionate commitment and a sense of history to her exposure of injustice
and exploitation. She makes use of her creative energy to give an artistic expression to the harsh realities of poverty and politico-socio and economical exploitation in the modern society, sharing the platform with Black women writers from around the globe who have been struggling against racism, exploitation, gender oppression and other human rights violations.

The tribals and the Scheduled Castes who belong to the bottom of India’s caste hierarchy, along with other depressed communities remain the focal point of Mahasweta Devi’s writing. Whether it is a struggle for political power or more immediate problems like demands for land, a higher share of crop, minimum wages, roads, schools, drinking water or for sheer human dignity, these remain the hallmark of her works—especially the little known, little lauded struggles which are part of everyday life and do not necessarily find a place in history books or the mainstream media.

With her intimate knowledge of what happens at the ground level, Mahasweta Devi depicts their life with brutal accuracy, savagely exposing the mechanics of exploitation and oppression by the dominant sections of the society. As Dr. Nelson Mandela remarked once, “writers should help us think what has hitherto been unthinkable, affirming in all their particularity the universality of human experience” (qtd. in Surya 9), Mahasweta Devi steps out of her class and gender and bridges social chasms with authentic perceptions, without recourse to the shaky scaffolding of any ideologies or philosophies.

American writer Toni Cade Bambara speaks of her writing as “participating in the struggle of celebrating the tradition of resistance” (qtd. in Singh 140). The same can be said about the writings of Mahasweta Devi. Her powerful creative work brought her literary recognition in the form of Sahitya Akademy Award in 1979. She
was honoured with the Padmashree Award in 1986 for her activist work among the dispossessed tribal communities. In 1996 she was felicitated with Bharatiya Jnanpith, the highest literary award. Dr. Nelson Mandela presented her the Magasaysay Award (considered to be the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize) for Journalism, Literature and Creative Communication at Dhaka in 1997. In electing Mahasweta Devi to receive this award, the board of trustees recognises her compassionate crusade through art and activism to claim for tribal peoples a just and honourable place in India's national life. (qtd. in www.rmaf.org.ph/Citation/CitationDeviMah.htm-9k).

The proudest feather on her cap is the Padma Vibushan Award, the second highest civilian award from the Government of India that was conferred on her in 2006.

At the centre of a half-century of tumultuous change, the lifetime of Mahasweta Devi has spanned the British period, Independence and sixty years of postcolonial turmoil. In 1926 Mahasweta Devi was born in Dhaka into a well known culturally distinguished family. It may be that her heritage drove her towards idealism and success. Her father, Manish Ghatak, was a leading novelist and poet; her mother, Dharitri Devi, was a writer and social worker; her paternal uncle was the talented film maker Ritwik Ghatak and her maternal uncle Sachin Chaudhuri was the founder-editor of The Economic and Political Weekly.

Mahasweta Devi grew up at a time when the national movement was at its peak. The horrible famine of 1943 had called for student involvement in relief work and Mahasweta Devi just out of school volunteered. In 1946 she graduated from Santiniketan and it was a time of upheaval and change. The peasant movement in Tebhaga was at its height, and even as she graduated, the Calcutta communal riots were taking place. As one might expect, Mahasweta Devi had close ties with cultural and political organisations in Bengal at that time.
Mahasweta Devi has over a hundred books to her credit, including novels, plays, collections of short stories and children’s books. Although Mahasweta Devi’s dramatic output is comparatively less, it deserves critical attention, since her arrival on the literary scene as a dramatist dismantles the belief that drama has been one of the male bastions. Some of the finest dramatic versions of Mahasweta Devi’s stories have come from small towns far from Calcutta and are being much appreciated by audiences closer to the experiences in which Mahasweta Devi’s works are rooted. For some time the literary establishment of Bengal marginalised Mahasweta Devi as a mere writer of historic fiction. The period from 1956 to 1974 is of great importance to understand Mahasweta Devi’s creative career. It points to various levels existing simultaneously and finding creative expression.


Though much of Mahasweta Devi’s writing in the late seventies focused on tribal people and the untouchable castes, her work also dealt with the agrarian
movement of the late sixties. This movement had begun in the Naxalbari region in North Bengal and had quickly spread into other parts of India. Students and young intellectuals in Calcutta and elsewhere set aside their studies to move deep into the rural areas and support the uprising, which had as its target landlords as well as the State that aided their exploitative enterprises. The movement was violently suppressed, and by the mid-seventies many of the activists were in jail. The best known novel to portray these troubled and exciting times is, Mahasweta Devi's *Hajar Churashir Ma* (Mother of 1084), 1974 and it has been translated into English and several Indian languages.

During the phase between 1966-75 Mahasweta Devi wrote a few powerful short stories. It was a period of transition in the life of Mahasweta Devi. She was, it would seem in hindsight, driven by a terrible restlessness, preparing for major changes in her life and career, both in terms of creative writings and her other activities.

Mahasweta Devi began her next creative-writing phase with a series of novels depicting the struggles of the people against exploitation, starting with *Aranyer Adhikar* (Right to the Forest), 1978, Sahitya Akademy awarded novel, a landmark in her literary career. This novel, based like many of her other writings on extensive research, is about the 'ulgulan' (Great Tumult) of the Munda tribals, which took place between 1895 and 1900 in the forest regions just south of Ranchi. Under the leadership of Birsa Munda (1874–1900), the Munda tribals attacked the local British authorities, the missionaries, and the Indian landowners. It portrays poignantly the intrusion of non-tribals into the tribal heartland of Singbhum in Bihar under the British administration, the ruthless exploitation of the tribals, the disintegration of
their agrarian and social order, and their militant struggle against the intruders under Birsa’s leadership, a century ago.

The distinctive style, now associated with Mahasweta Devi’s mature work, in which different registers and dialects of Bengali jostle each other in a text crowded with echoes and voices rarely heard in mainstream literature, first appeared in this book which the critic Manabendra Bandhyopadhyay has called “savage, fecund and irresistible... an experiment in the novel form as an extension of the epic genre” (qtd. in Tharu and Lalitha 235). Hajar Churashir Ma and Aranyar Adhikar chartered the terrain that Mahasweta Devi would explore in future years and established her status as a talented writer who dared to write about explosive issues.

In Mahasweta Devi’s novels Agnigarbha (The Womb of Fire) 1979, and Chotti Munda O Tar Teer (Chotti Munda and his Arrow) 1980, the fate of the tribals is seen to be inextricably tangled with the lot of the untouchable castes, making all the sections of the poorer classes one whole mass of oppressed humanity. Rural India appears in these novels for the first time in its complete reality. In her foreword to Agnigarbha, Mahasweta Devi says:

> Life is not mathematics, and the human being is not created for the sake of politics. I believe that the aim of every political party should be to strengthen the claims of man to live according to his rights. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere politics. (qtd. in Chakraborty 169)

Agnigarbha is a scorching commentary on the days of repression and police action against the Naxalites. The theme received a peripheral treatment in Hajar Churashir Ma where a sentimental account of a mother’s grief forms the main content. Mahasweta Devi seems to have travelled for ages through fire to come to the
point of Agnigarbha where deep rage and suffering seem to have cleansed vision and given a new glistening edge to her social criticism. Purged of sentimentality Agnigarbha shows the very nature of organised repression and cruelty, and ends with a suggestion that like a mythical demon, rebellion is born anew every time it is destroyed.

The wide sweep of the important novel Chotti Munda O Tar Teer ranges over decades in the life of Chotti—the central character—in which India moves from colonial rule to independence and then to the unrest of the 1970s. It probes and uncovers the complex web of social and economic exchange based on power relations. This novel is also remarkable for the manner in which it touches on vital issues that have, in subsequent decades, grown into matters of urgent social concern. It raises questions about the place of tribal on the map of national identity, land rights and human rights, the ‘museumization’ of ‘ethnic’ cultures, and the justification of violent resistance as the last resort of a desperate people amongst others.

As Karl Marx has rightly pointed out that history is a graveyard of the elites, in the history of the rise of national resistance to imperialism there are some chapters which seem to have been written in a low key. “Most of these relate to the role of indigenous subalterns who continually challenged the consolidation of territorial imperialism at the grassroots level and organised frequent protests against the growing exploitation of peasants and villagers” (Kaul 33). The peasant leader Titu Mir led a revolt against the British in Bengal in 1830–31, in the course of which he was killed. This hotheaded, headstrong young man, a natural leader, found himself defending the rural poor against the exploitation of the landlords and the British, at the cost of his own life. It was an event which celebrated the power and potential of the subalterns.

In her novel Titu Mir, (translated into English by Rimi B. Chatterjee, 2000),
Mahasweta Devi has chosen to write about individuals who have been nurtured and matured by sharing the sufferings of their community as well as by experiencing exploitation and injustice at first hand. In this warmly told historical adventure tale, Mahasweta Devi brings history alive in the person of a charismatic hero, all the time, embedding him in the larger socio-economic situation of the time.

As in Titu Mir in her other novel Byad Khand (The Book of the Hunters), 1994, also, Mahasweta Devi interweaves several strands from fiction, fact, folklore and history. It is enriched by her lifetime working with and for the tribals. In the preface to this novel, she sets out her goal for writing such a work:

The encroachment of towns and non-divasis upon their territory, adivasis abandoning their lands and going away, the heartless destruction of forests, the search of the forest children for a forest home, and the profound ignorance of mainstream people about adivasi society these are all truths about our own time. (viii)

Mahasweta Devi has edited and translated Jim Corbett's works and has also written a delightful piece of historical fiction for children Nei Nagan Sai Raja (A King of Nowhere Country), 1995. Gradually she drifted towards a literature of protest, getting more and more involved with the plight of the tribals. She has recorded, “My life had changed course. So have my priorities...whenever I can find time, I need data, statistics, government gazetteers, human right laws and laws about tribals” (Wordsmith 1996).

Mahasweta Devi presents the rare combination of an activist and a writer. The plight of the tribals and of the bonded labourers in the southern districts of Bihar has moved a number of other writers, but nobody has ever plunged so completely into the tribal experience like Mahasweta Devi. More specifically from 1980-81 several
dimensions of Mahasweta Devi started coming to the fore, almost simultaneously, setting her completely apart from her contemporaries. It was a new phase in her life, a phase of expanding horizons and activities, almost a period of liberation from the narrow, insular confines of her urban middle-class existence and environment, many norms of which she found oppressive and unacceptable. In order to have a whole-hearted immersion in her mission as a social activist, she even took voluntary retirement from her profession as a college professor.

She was a roving reporter for the Bengali daily Jugantar (End of an Era) in 1982-83 and worked as a weekly columnist for the Bengali daily Bortoman in the late eighties. Though she had been travelling in the tribal areas of Bihar and the countryside of West Bengal for years even before this, it was from this period that she felt strongly a desperate urge to communicate to a wider audience about what was happening to the people in the name of development, and their struggle for survival.

It was as if she felt she had so much to say and do, in such a short time, that fiction was not an adequate enough medium for her. In 1980 she initiated the bonded labour organisation in Palamau, and is now connected with several other tribal and Harijan grassroot-level organisation. She is an activist as well as a writer, and even as a writer she is an activist, for she contributes to little magazines, district papers and journals usually disregarded by the established writers. She tries, she says, to keep a close link with rural Bengal through the district newspapers. She writes on a wide range of topics—the deprivation among and discrimination against tribals and the rural poor; police atrocities; official crimes of omission and commission; struggles of the poor for survival, identity and dignity; and the need for more effective monitoring of government programmes so that they reach their target groups, organisations of the rural poor.
Mahasweta Devi has recently been spearheading the movement against the industrial policy of the government of West Bengal, the state of her domicile. Specifically, she has stridently criticised confiscation of large tracts of fertile agricultural land from farmers by the government and ceding the land to industrial houses at throwaway prices. Her lead resulted in a number of intellectuals, artists, writers and theatre workers join in protesting the controversial policy and particularly its implementation in Singur and Nandigram. Mahasweta Devi has not only participated and led protest movements of tribals and other members of the underclass but is continually involved in the engendering of a consciousness of their rights. For this purpose, she has used, among other things Bortika (Torch) a Bengali quarterly journal she has been publishing from 1980. This quarterly serves as a forum where small peasants, agricultural labourers, tribals and other marginalised and lowly sections of the society also can give an outlet to their grievances, experiences and views.

Mahasweta Devi's analytical articles and newspaper reportage in English and Bengali published over two decades in journals such as The Economic and Political Weekly and The Frontier and newspapers such as Business Standard, Aaj Kal and Bartaman are compiled and published as a collection in Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi, 2000. These pieces are serious socio-economic and systematic analyses of the roots of exploitation of the marginalised tribal and non-tribal underclass, particularly in Eastern India. They are addressed primarily to those interested in microanalysis of the subculture of destitution in our highly skewed society, especially in the rural areas. They are fact-packed and analytically rigorous. "Here is the larger Marxian frame of the study of history and society not so much with a view to 'understanding' but of 'changing' it" (Jagannathan 11).
Creative writing is only one side of Mahasweta Devi. There are several other dimensions to her personality: activities and priorities which are distinct but closely interrelated. She cannot be branded by any one conventional label such as writer, social activist, reporter, editor or organiser of people's groups at the grass-root level: each is a true, but partial description of her. So much so that they are practically inseparable and, for an understanding of the one, the totality needs to be taken into account.

As a writer, Mahasweta Devi is on record as saying that her commitment involves documenting the past and the continuing struggles of the people in their historical perspective. Here is a writer who truly writes what she knows. Her vocation is not divorced from her writing. All the multiple facets of her personality, considered together, sharply distinguish her from her contemporaries, not just in her home state of West Bengal, but in the rest of the country too. Her creed clearly is a single word—'action', when a writer turns into an activist the result is bound to affect her output. Social activism and a committed political agenda, it is often said, do not make for good creative writing. But in the case of Mahasweta Devi it has been a case of creative renewal.

For Mahasweta Devi, there has never been a conflict of interest as far as the two are concerned. She confesses:

All work—my active work, my creative writing, any journal editing, are journalistic writing....All these are inter-supplementary....
Throughout my books, I see history...people's history....Being close to indigenous people does not mean that I cannot write about them. (qtd. in Sharma 161)
Mahasweta Devi has managed to suture the split between her activitism and her creative writing, so that, her work as an activist, journalist, editor and creative writer complement one another.

Mahasweta Devi is a tireless traveller in the 'other India' that rarely enters the consciousness of the rest of India. Her literary work is merely a by-product of the 'participatory experience' of a social anthropologist in all but name. In some ways, she can even be called the originator of the hybrid book in Bengali literature that mixes history, myth, melodrama and fiction with documentary reality. It is precisely for this reason that the elite Bengali literary establishment was somewhat baffled in the beginning, unable to consign her in an appropriate slot and slow in recognising her remarkable contribution to Indian literature in English translation.

Mahasweta Devi's recognition outside India, at least in the initial stage, was due largely to the publication of the English translation of her works in the United States of America. The earliest of such an effort was taken by Kalpana Bardhan whose Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories that contained six of Mahasweta Devi’s stories, came out from the University of California Press, Berkley in 1990. After that, Mahasweta Devi’s many works in Bengali have been translated into English by good translators like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Samik Bandopadhya, Anjum Katyal, Maitreya Ghatak, Ipshita Chanda, Paramita Banerjee, Rimi B. Chatterjee, Sagaree Sengupta, Sarmistha Dutta and others. However, Mahasweta Devi’s works have begun to attain high visibility only after Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translated her stories and built theoretical assumptions around them in her works In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics, 1988, and Imaginary Maps: Three Stories, 1995. Sujit Mukherjee, therefore,
acknowledges Gayatri Spivak as the ‘Dwarapalika’ (female door-keeper) of Mahasweta Devi in the West.

Having worked among the tribals for the greater part of her life, this octogenarian is in a position to articulate the concerns of the dispossessed in the manner of a concerned insider, rather than that of a condescending outsider. Contrary to the representation of tribals in the writings of colonial writer Kipling or in contemporary Indian novelist Arun Joshi as foreign, alien, primitive and ‘other’, Mahasweta Devi offers an insider’s perspective where the ‘other’ is the non-tribal, often ignorant of the tribals and their world, insensitive and exploitative.

In order to highlight Mahasweta Devi’s spirited crusade against the social injustice meted out to the politically weak, territorially isolated, economically marginalised, culturally stigmatised and socially subalternised, the researcher has chosen the following translated works of Mahasweta Devi: two novellas “Douloti the Bountiful” (translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and included in her Imaginary Maps: Three Stories, 1993) and Rudali (translated by Anjum Katyal, 1997); four plays “Mother of 1084”, “Aajir”, “Bayen” and “Water” (all the four translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay and included in the anthology Five Plays, 1999) and four short stories “Dhouli” (translated by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta and included in the short story collection Outcast, 2002), “Draupadi”, “Breast-Giver” and “Behind the Bodice” (all the three translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and published as Breast Stories, 2002). As A.K. Ramanujan, a distinguished poet and translator, observes that a translator hopes not only to translate a text, but hopes to translate a non-native reader into a native one, all the translators of the above-mentioned works have taken enormous pains to situate these works for the non-native readers.
In the critical analysis of these select works, the arrangement is not chronological but it follows its own internal logic, linked by a common thematic thread documenting the physical and the psychological struggles and the counteractions of the less privileged. Though the present study is confined to a few select works of Mahasweta Devi, it is considered that all these works enjoy both representative quality and thematic unity facilitating a concerted approach to substantiate the chosen topic.

Taken together, these select works deal with a range of issues relating to the deprivation, degradation of life, exploitation and struggles of the labouring poor, the underprivileged, the landless and small peasants, bonded labourers and prostitutes. These victims modelled on real life heroes and heroines and their actions in situations where the inexhaustible human spirit is pitted against the oppressive ontological social reality suggest the need or possibility of action to change. Survival through struggle is the central message in all these works. They illustrate Mahasweta Devi's firm belief that every writer should have a social conscience and the writers are answerable to people.

The present study substantiates that the situations depicted in these select works are unbearably grim. They are not sugar-coated moments but a journey through an inferno. They are a devastating indictment of the social system that allows such injustice to perpetrate. With a missionary zeal, Mahasweta Devi pleads in them for amelioration of the lot of the have-nots. A trip into the world of this less known and the least represented will definitely shock and sensitize the readers of this research work who may be hitherto complacent about the socio-politico and economic injustices and that is the ardent aim of the researcher. As the celebrated litterateur Kamala Das declares, “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. Write about her. Make a cult out of her" (qtd. in Sharma 163), a humble attempt is made by the researcher to make a cult out of Mahasweta Devi. Behind every activity, there lurks a latent theory. The critical theories or approaches which underscore this research activity are sociological, feministic and psychological.

Out of the ten works discussed in this study, eight are 'gynocentric' which invariably provide testimony to the cruel fact that to be a woman in this society is a curse. They are all standing examples of what Simone de Beauvoir has aptly said, "Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him. She is not regarded as an autonomous being….He is the subject, he is the absolute—she is the other" (16). Mahasweta Devi sincerely believes that "a responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take a stand in defense of the exploited" (qtd. in Ramadevi 139). As she happens to consider women as one group among the exploited and under subjugation, her writings provide scope for viewing her work from the feminist angle. Almost all these female protagonists, with a few exceptions are triply burdened and disadvantaged—socially marginalised as low castes, sexually exploited as women and economically underprivileged. Possibly no other social group has been subjected to such an unedifying spectacle of human debasement and depravity as these women.

Mahasweta Devi declared in an interview, "I am a woman and I am writing, but I am not writing of women alone. What I am writing...is about class exploitation" (The Wordsmiths 1996). Though what she says is true and in spite of the fact that she objects to the tag as a feminist, the portrayal of her women characters in these select works confirms a personalised and idealised concept of feminism.
Basically a feminist is one who is awakened and conscious about women’s life and problem and feminist consciousness posits and refers to reality, regarding women’s socio-sexual existence. Many writers and critics have viewed feminism from different perspectives but what unites them all is a shared view of oppression and marginalisation and more a concern for women and is meant to establish a new identify for women, to understand the female predicament. So feminist literature is a canonical text which portrays the sufferings of women, insists on the need for protecting their rights and suggests means of emancipation. Unanimously it demands for a woman a fair share in the balanced human dream and pleads for a humanistic equilibrium in man-woman relationship. So if feminists are those who are united by a belief that unequal and inferior social status of women is unjust and needs to be changed and justice requires freedom and equality for women, then without any doubt Mahasweta Devi is a staunch feminist.

The feminist critic Elaine Showalter in her book *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Writers from Bronte to Lessing* points out three phases in the evolution of women writers: i) the feminine phase from the year 1840 to 1880, a phase of imitation when women writers looked up to their male models and internalised the male values as their own, ii) the feminist phase between 1880 and 1920, when they expressed their anger and protest against the oppression of women, and iii) the female phase which started in the 1920s and was revitalised in the 1960s where women writers are free from the fetters of imitation and anger and turn inward to discover their inner strength. Mahasweta Devi may be said to belong to Showalter’s second and third phases for she has vehemently revolted against the treatment meted out for women and at the same time points out the vitality and determination of her sex in her literary works.
Radha Chakravarty in her recently published book *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers: Rethinking Subjectivity*, 2009, examines the works of Mahasweta Devi, along with five other major writers across countries and cultures—Toni Morrison, Doris Lessing, Anita Desai, Margaret Atwood and Buchi Emecheta. She takes a fresh look at Mahasweta Devi’s concept of feminism, positing it squarely in our times:

The book takes as its pivot Judith Butler’s pertinent query: “How can it be, that the subject, taken to be the condition for and instrument of agency, is at the same time, the effect of subordination as the deprivation of agency?” The aim is to envisage a future where women’s empowerment automatically leads to emancipatory changes in the larger social structures.

(Kumar 5)

Radha Chakravarty argues in this book that Mahasweta Devi like the other five novelists discussed in the book may not be a flag-bearer of the feminist movement but her stories are fully inclusive of the political dimensions of literature and its consequences. According to her Mahasweta Devi sees female empowerment as a means to a larger end, the progress of society in general. So while gender is not an isolated issue, it is the primary mode of oppression suffered by women even as it is the source of their potential emancipation.

The image of woman can be viewed from two angles: what she is (i.e. biologically) and what she has to be (i.e. socially constructed). A woman cannot escape from the fact that she is a woman because society has constructed a rigid model role for her and has labelled her variously. It becomes the task of a feminist writer to erase these unrealistic labels and portray the true self of woman; she should
join hands with others in changing the traditional images of women, explode the model role assigned by the patriarchal society, and facilitate redefinition of the female. It is in this process of subverting the female image that Mahasweta Devi has displayed her activities as a feminist writer. As Ruthven states, “a literary text should provide role models and instil a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are self-actualising, whose identities are not dependent on men” (13), Mahasweta Devi has endowed her women characters with the potential to live.

The eternal question posed by the writings and experiences of women writers can very well be summed up in the words of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber:

The woman artist enters the caverns of her own mind and finds there the scattered leaves not only of her own power but the tradition that might have generated that power. The body of her precursor’s art, and thus the body of her own art, lies in pieces around her, dismembered, disremembered, disintegrated. How can she remember it, and become a member of it, join it, integrate it, and in doing so achieve her own integrity, her own selfhood? (98)

The answer is revealed in Mahasweta Devi’s select works where the readers are made to think and rethink the decisions taken by the women characters. The ability to construct a new image of women against the background of the constraints of these women is what makes Mahasweta Devi’s writings feminist in nature. If the refusal to be crushed, the attempt to fight and voice protest against male chauvinism is the core of feminism, then many of Mahasweta Devi’s female creations convincingly illustrate the feministic traits. Determined and integrated to society and self, for a writer like Mahasweta Devi, feminism is not just another literary movement. It is a
conviction and a pledge undertaken in order to write without fear, with authenticity and sincerity, thereby achieving aesthetic excellence and freedom. At the same time, Mahasweta Devi may also be called a womanist, since “a womanist does not turn her back upon...men...” (Guerin 233).

The cartographies of these struggling bodies and minds of Mahasweta Devi’s creations are close to the position of a subaltern because they are all depressed and dislocated and have been condemned to be mute and marginalised in the genealogical hierarchy. They are within the ambivalent situation of ‘remembering’ and forgetting their history, being forced to be a subject of an alien history and alien memory. But in capturing the voices of the voiceless, the colossal underclass, Mahasweta Devi succeeds in bringing about a ‘silent revolution’ she has been witness to, and indeed been instrumental in bringing about as a social-activist. She declares, “I’ve always found that the poor of India may be mostly illiterate but they are no fools. Perhaps now they realize that keeping them in eternal poverty is very much a part of the design” (qtd. in Bail 8).

Regarding the sufferings of the subalterns, James C. Scott makes a very significant contribution by innovating the terms ‘public transcripts’ and ‘hidden transcripts’ in his project of making the feeble voices of the powerless audible. He says, “Public transcripts would be the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate, and hidden transcripts would be the discourse that takes place ‘off-stage’, beyond direct observation by power holders” (Scott 4).

Hidden transcripts may be read as a powerful weapon of defiance and resistance of the dominant discourse of power. Scott understands that the hidden transcript is clear-sightedly critical of existing relations of dominations and therefore inevitably comes into conflict with theories of ideology and hegemony. “One could
interpret hidden transcripts as a subtler strategy of the powerless, to appropriate the dominant agencies of domination, because by avoiding direct confrontation with the dominant discourse, they are able to preserve and accumulate their strength for a more effective resistance” (Bhattacharjee 54). Hence either through ‘public’ or ‘hidden transcripts Mahasweta Devi’s creations make their faint whispers audible. Mahasweta Devi enables these subalterns to resort to ‘strategic essentialism’, to borrow the concept of Gayatri Spivak, a sort of temporary solidarity, an ‘essentialist’ position in order to be able to act.

Mahasweta Devi thinks that the innumerable social evils are an off-shoot of the present social system and she desires a radical transformation of it. Thus she differs from those writers who have revelled in pleasing the upper and middle classes by weaving narcissistic fantasies in the name of literature. According to Mahasweta Devi:

> Bengali literature has indulged in a denial of reality and has been plagued by an atrophy of conscience. What can be more surprising than that writers living in a country bedevilled with so many problems-social injustice, communal discord and evil customs-should fail to find material for their work in their own country and people. (Introduction Bashai Tudu xviii)

Mahasweta Devi’s powerful works have helped many issues come into public view. They are born out of Mahasweta Devi’s impatience and rage. She explodes:

> Even after independence I have not seen our people attaining true independence in anything—in food, water, land, loan or bonded labour. A pure, white and sunlike rage against the system that has made this independence impossible is the inspiration behind all my
work. I believe that all parties, right or left, have failed to keep their promises to the common people. I have no hopes of this conviction being shaken during my life time. Thus I have written only about humanity to the best of my ability so that I do not have to feel ashamed to face myself. (Introduction Agnigarbha vii)

David McCutchion comments, “Those who contend that literature must reflect life have been so vocal in our own time that even the word ‘documentary’ has lost much of its stigma, and ‘the ivory tower’ has become a lonely place” (qtd. in Rao 41). Excelled in docu-fiction form, Mahasweta Devi lifts her pen to write incisively on burning issues and prick the collective conscience. For this activist-writer, pen has never been an ornament indicative of a writer’s exalted mind. It has always been a flaming sword, poised to challenge darkness and untruth, and defend those who have no voice. Mahasweta Devi’s writing on social themes is different from that of others because she weaves the people’s own voices, their songs, stories and speech into facts that she has meticulously researched through personal contact with them.

Reading Mahasweta Devi’s work is thus an unnerving experience, for it is not the kind of writing which reviews one’s relationship with the magic of the written word. It is a writing which uses itself to go beyond itself, even beyond its own agenda. Thus it invariably transports the reader to a burning core, where an exploited tribal or a degraded untouchable or an inconsolable mother has existed. Finally the reader cannot help but ask himself, whether he inhabits the same universe as them. The most uncomfortable fact about all these narratives is that they are all taken from our contemporary history and so there is no wishing them away. They give us reality, Indian reality, our utterly intolerable reality.
When Mahasweta Devi was questioned about the harsh, often shocking content of many of her stories to urban middle-class sensibilities, she retorted:

Urban society is ignorant about rural life, and therefore perceives the grim facts as sensationalism. In Kalahandi they are selling their children. You have not seen it, but it is real. I cannot help it, it happens to be a fact that my readership is middle-class. If they do not know about these things what can I do about it?

(qtd. in Katyal 29)

Experience and factual detail is the ground on which her fiction is inscribed. She shows an awareness of a possible ‘audience’—a literate, urban readership—in her agenda of desentimentalisation, of a very deliberate stripping away of any romanticised view of the rural people, their lives and situation. Mahasweta Devi thus replaces the normative urban perception of the ‘eternal’ Indian village as unchanging, peaceful, nourished by tradition—a version of the romance of the pastoral—with her insider knowledge and subalternised perception of power structures and the corrupt ways of socially and economically dominant classes.

The present study is divided into five chapters including this introductory chapter. At the beginning of each of the main chapters that follow this introductory chapter, the chosen concept is explained in terms of human rights violation in general which is followed by a thorough investigation of the select works of Mahasweta Devi to exemplify her conceptualisation of the same. Wherever required, cross-references are made to the works of other writers citing parallels in situations, events and characters. At the end of each chapter, a brief summing up of the arguments of the respective chapter is presented and the need for the analysis of the subject to be dealt with in the next chapter is stressed.
The second chapter “Repression” assesses how Mahasweta Devi in her plays “Water” and “Aajir” and in her novella Rudali documents the pathetic struggles of the fringe dwellers outside the upper caste milieu and the societal and state violations of human rights. The theme taken from contemporary life exposes the corrupt ethos of modern society and the atrocities perpetrated on the untouchables. In all these works, Mahasweta Devi advocates class solidarity as the strongest weapon against exploitation.

The third chapter as its title being “Injury”, showcases violence against women in a few stories of Mahasweta Devi having women as the protagonists. “Douloti the Bountiful”, “Dhouli”, “Draupadi”, “Breast-Giver” and “Behind the Bodice”, the first one a novella and the other four short stories, which are discussed in this chapter, proclaim louder that in this male-centred society, a woman appears essentially to the male just as a sexual commodity, sex—absolute sex and she is reduced to be the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. It is also argued in this chapter how in all these stories the feminine mind is “explored, experienced and understood in all its vicissitudes, multiplicities, contradictions and complexities” (Parikh 41).

The fourth chapter entitled “Insight” documents the mental trauma of two sensitive mothers, the protagonists of the plays, “Mother of 1084” and “Bayen”. In both these plays, Mahasweta Devi addresses larger issues pertaining to societal double standards with their economic and political underpinnings through motherhood.

The concluding fifth chapter briefly recapitulates the findings of this study as presented in the previous chapters. It also highlights some possible areas for further research.