CHAPTER I

Introduction: Discourses on Tribals in India

Many early groups of human beings—of different races, speaking different languages and having distinct cultures—who have inhabited various parts of the world from the Paleolithic period onwards, now come under the label of “tribe”. The term “tribe”, derived from the Latin tribua, originally meant a political unit, and was later used to refer to social groups defined by the territory they occupied. Although there is no consensus on the definition of a tribe in anthropology, tribes are generally considered to be social groups “…bound together by kin and duty and associated with a particular territory. Members of a tribe share the social cohesion associated with the family, together with the sense of political autonomy of a nation” (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology 769). The current use of the term has evolved from the stages in the anthropological and sociological studies of the evolution of the social and political aspects of human societies.
Today the word “tribe” stands for numerous and varied communities scattered all over the globe, variously called “aboriginal people” or as “indigenous people” in the discourse of the UN and Human Rights. In India the word “tribe” is used to denote “original inhabitants” or in other words, “adivasis”. The native American tribes like the Sioux, Apache, Cherooke or Novajo, the Inuit and Metis of Canada, the Yupik or the Eskimos of Alaska, the Maoris of New Zealand, the Koorie, Murri, or Palawah of Australia, the Mundas, Santhals, Nagas, Khasis, Bhils, Oraons, Shabars, Kadars or Irulas of India, the Ainu of Japan, the groups of Bushmen and Pygmies of Africa- they are all described as “tribes” today. It is now an umbrella term that includes diverse groups of people who are believed to be the original inhabitants of whichever place they occupy and whose distinct historical, ethnic, cultural and linguistic attributes have survived into the present. However, it can be unequivocally stated that one feature shared by almost all tribal groups all over the world is that of a chequered history of conflict with other human societies, and the undeniable fact that their livelihood, language, culture and environment are now facing a serious threat of extinction under the overwhelming forces of political, economic and cultural globalization.

As every student of Indian history and culture will agree, India has been a vibrant and viable mix of races, languages, religions and
cultures since pre-historic times. The term “adivasi” or “original inhabitant” is usually used to describe today’s tribes, though it is now agreed that many of today’s Scheduled Tribes appeared in India at different historical periods. Hunter-gatherer and shifting-cultivator societies had flourished in India from the late Pleistocene onwards, to be later displaced by more advanced agricultural-pastoral societies from around 10000 BC. As more complex societies developed in later periods, it is believed that many of the tribes were incorporated into mainstream society mostly into the lower castes, as peasants and craftsmen, but those tribes that continued to occupy their traditional forest and agricultural lands retained their independence and autonomy, remaining outside the pale of caste society.

While the superiority of the later technologies in agriculture and trade ensured the growth of powerful urban centres, cities and kingdoms, it led to the effective marginalization of many earlier tribal communities who led isolated existences on the fringes of these societies. Unlike in other countries, this isolation was relative in India, since many large tribes (like the Bhils and Gonds) later established kingdoms or were incorporated into regional political systems. There was also an ongoing process of appropriation and assimilation in many aspects between Hindu and tribal communities, in material and cultural matters during the medieval period. But most marginal tribal groups
were generally considered to be different, uncivilised, backward, savage and ritually unclean.¹

This process of marginalization was accelerated during the British colonial period in Indian history. The political and economic interests of the British saw the large-scale exploitation of forests and land for resources like timber and mineral, and the tribals were robbed of their traditional habitats and means of livelihood. Many tribes retaliated with a series of revolts and movements, like famous Kol insurrection of 1831-32, the Hul revolt of the Santhals in 1855, the Ulgulan of the Mundas led by Birsa Munda in 1894-1900, and so on, which were ruthlessly suppressed. (Vidhyarthi and Rai 195-235; R.C.Verma 202) With the imposition of new administrative and legal measures by the British, the tribals lost their traditional lands and were forced to work as agricultural labourers under the exploitative zamindari system. The British also introduced the bonded labour system which compounded the exploitation, creating a new class of native exploiters in zamindars, middlemen, money-lenders and contractors. The tribals were effectively pushed into terrible poverty and debt, vulnerable to violent repression and exploitation that continued into the post-independence era.

¹ Different aspects of this history is discussed in Thapar Penguin History of Early India 37-97, Singh 39-49, Chaudhuri 19-34 in Chaudhuri et al and Gadgil and Guha 11-90.
The period after independence saw many well-meaning efforts from Indian governments to restore to the tribals and other disadvantaged groups their due place in the nation, through reservation benefits and other constitutional safeguards. According to the latest census, groups designated as “Scheduled Tribes” form 8.2% of the total population, with more than six hundred tribes being listed in the schedule. (Census Data 2001>>India at a glance>> Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Population. Govt. of India. Ministry of Home Affairs) The Constitution of India has made provisions for the protection of their rights to their traditional lands and cultural practices, and The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Tribes oversees the implementation of welfare schemes meant for their socio-economic development, and also looks into the complaints regarding social discrimination faced by these marginalized groups. (Majumdar and Kataria 707-708; R. C. Verma 1-7, 109-117) However, much of this rhetoric remains on paper and is never translated into action. A lethal combination of opportunistic politics, lopsided development and modernization plans, and misguided efforts at “integrating” the tribals into the so-called “mainstream”, have ensured that the tribals remain one of the poorest and most exploited and marginalized groups in the Indian nation.
Along with economic deprivation and landlessness, tribals have had to witness the slow but sure death of their distinctive cultural identity. Tribal cultures are predominantly oral and though there are more than ninety tribal languages in India, the majority of them do not have scripts. Although orality has been very much a part of India’s cultural traditions, the dominance of the written tradition and the introduction of printing in the nineteenth century effectively sealed the fate of many of the tribals’ languages and cultures. Unable to “write” themselves into the history of the nation, they have been mute witnesses to their contribution to India’s rich and varied heritage going unrecognized and unrewarded. Every Indian will agree that it is high time that the inheritors of this ancient land were given their due. It is with this intention that one approaches the field of “Tribal Studies”.

Anthropology, which literally means “the study of the human species”, was born as an academic discipline in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at the height of the imperialist project and was developed in order to study the different races and cultures of the world. Today’s use of the term tribe as “an ethnically, linguistically, culturally autonomous and self conscious unit” was originally a colonial concept. (Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology 281) The present association of the term with “primitivism” is largely a creation of colonial practices that sought to impose a different social and political order on
communities that were largely autonomous in nature. The political and economic agenda of the imperial project was supported and supplemented by the practice of colonial discourse that sought to construct an imperialized “other” in the colonized people, through scientific and sociological discourses of race. “Discourse” is a widely used term in disciplines like linguistics, the social sciences, cultural and literary studies today, and the study of discourse tries to understand the myriad processes by which human beings engage with language in order to represent their experiences of life.

According to its application in various disciplines, three main approaches to discourse studies are generally identified- the Formal or Linguistic approach, the Empirical or Sociological approach and the Critical approach. In a strictly linguistic sense, “discourse” is the name given to units of language that are longer than a single sentence, i.e., long stretches of utterances or dialogues that involve both a speaker and a listener in a particular social context. In its original Latin form ‘discurrer’ meant “running to and fro”, which probably led to its application in the field of communication with the connotation of “give and take” or “dialogue”. Based on its linguistic parameters, the term discourse, when used as a countable noun, means “a relatively discrete subset of a whole language, used for specific social or institutional purposes” as in “legal discourse”, “novelistic discourse” or “the
discourse of nationalism”. So in common usage discourse means a way of organizing thought into a text or treatise of some length and the word “discursive” has the sense of “textually or linguistically produced”. Thus discourses can be conversations, formal speeches, journalistic reports, academic texts, texts of the different genres of literature, forms of orature and so on.

The empirical or sociological approach works on the assumption that discourse means human conversation and uses texts of actual conversations, leading to studies of social organizations and relationships. This analytical method has been used effectively in disciplines like anthropology and feminist sociology to uncover the ways in which discourses are used to create subjectivities, for example, to define the woman or the tribal, and to construct and maintain hierarchies. It studies “language-use” and “language–in-use” and is concerned with understanding human language in its social context.

The critical approach to discourse focuses on the historical/political/social forces that determine and control the production of discourses and explores the power relations involved in the structures of society. Based on the philosophical assumption that the world and its forms can be known only through language, this critical notion of discourse found favour in various disciplines like philosophy, history, psychology, literature and culture studies. European discourse theorists
like Michel Foucault, Michel De Certeau, Louis Althusser, Hayden White and others have used the idea of discourse to critically engage with the ideologies that underlie different kinds of social institutions and knowledge disciplines. This approach is used widely in critical schools Post-Structuralism, New Historicism, Feminism, Postcolonialism and Culture Studies. (Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics 940-943; International Encyclopedia of Linguistics 356-358; Lindstorm 162-163; Mills Discourse).

The French philosopher, historian, and critic, Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984), contended that “discourses” or discursive practices are systems of thought comprising statements, ideas, attitudes, beliefs, practices and actions that construct the subjects and the worlds they speak of, as they come into being. He argued that man is a historically constructed entity who is brought into being through discourses. Due to the operations of power and allied historical factors, certain discourses were dominant at certain times, while certain others were marginalized and even obliterated. ‘Power-knowledge’ is the term Foucault uses to indicate the unholy nexus between the production of knowledge and the exercise of power. Edward Said (1935-2003) applied Foucault’s formulation of the link between power and knowledge to an analysis of the structures of domination and marginalization related to colonialism. Inaugurating the academic field of Postcolonial Studies, Said’s
*Orientalism* (1978), contended that the imperial West created the ‘Orient’ through discourse in order to facilitate and legitimize the political and economic goals of imperialism. He argued that this discourse, based on a theory of racial and cultural difference, gave credence to ideas of racial superiority of the white races over the black, leading to Eurocentric hegemony in economic, political and cultural practices and effecting the marginalization and obliteration of the indigenous cultures and knowledge systems in the Middle East, in India, Africa, and other colonized countries. (Ashcroft et al *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* and *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*; Hawley 186-190, 392-397; Loomba 20-57)

The term discourse has been used in this thesis with reference to the linguistic and critical approaches outlined above. There has been a long history of writing about the tribals in India from very early times in history to the present day. A non-tribal person interested in tribal studies can acquaint himself/herself with the tribals of India through the means of direct social interaction or through the various kinds of discourses on the subject of the tribal. The discourses on tribals can be located in the many various forms and genres of writing such as the ancient and medieval Indian narratives, academic writings of history, sociology and anthropology during the colonial and postcolonial periods, journalistic reports, the genres of fiction and film or even the forms of popular
culture. This can be viewed as a discourse with regard to the representation of the tribal people in India. Such discourses have largely shaped the attitudes of the mainstream non-tribal people towards the tribals, and have also created and sustained the hegemonic social structures that have led to their marginalization in history. These socio-historic factors can be recovered from these discourses, if read critically. The works of the writer under study are read against the background of the larger discourse on tribals in India, as they have a thematic and stylistic relation to this discourse.

The discourse on the “indigenous” inhabitants of India is usually traced to the time of the encounters of these early societies with the various peoples who made historical invasions and incursions into the Indian subcontinent, like the Aryans, the Afghans, Persians, the Mughals and finally the British. Texts like the Rig Veda, the Dharmashastras, Manusmrithi, the Puranas and the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, contain references to the people who inhabited India at the time of the arrival of the Aryan-speaking nomadic pastoralists who settled in Northern India, probably around the third and fourth centuries B.C. These early narratives encode the triumphant march of the new civilizations, over and above the “primitive” tribal cultures. Both the epics contain stories like those of Ekalavya, the burning of the wax house, the burning of the Khandava forest, the encounter between
Rama and Ravana, the battles between the “devas” and “asuras” etc., that provide ample evidence for the marginalization of tribal people, their means of life and their cultures. The tribes were generally referred to by names like *aranyakā* (“forest dweller”) and *dasyu* or *dasa*, and also by specific names like the Savaras, Kiratas, Nishadas, Konds, Pulindas, Bhils, Mundas, Oraons, Santhals and many more. (Thapar 37-97; Singh 39-49 and Chaudhury 9-19, 23-34 in Chaudhuri et al; Gadgil and Guha 11-90)

The historian Romila Thapar observes that it was with the coming of the Aryans that the indigenous inhabitants of India came to be regarded as “barbarians”. The Sanskrit word *mleccha* can be traced etymologically to Sumerian and Pali where it is used to refer to people who spoke an indistinct language. Later on in history it was extended to different castes, forest-dwelling tribes, foreigners and people of other languages and religions too. From this initial linguistic distinction, it was a short way to the cultural associations of difference, alienness, otherness and backwardness. The discourse was sustained through religious and secular texts in Sanskrit that created and legitimized the concept of Aryan superiority over indigenous inferiority in all aspects of race, culture, and language. The caste system and ideas of ritual status and purity compounded these hierarchies. The segregation of the people according to caste and ritual status was accompanied by demarcation of
geographical location too, and the today’s “tribal areas” were the
*mleccha deshas* of yesteryears. (*Ancient Indian Social History* 152-181)

Many of the pre-colonial sources mentioned earlier and the later
colonial discourses reveal the historical and socio-political reasons
behind the marginalization and exploitation of the tribals in India over
the centuries. Until very recently, most of the academic and popular
writing about India’s socio-political history took off from colonial
models written by the first generation of Orientalists or Indologists like
William Jones, James Mill, Nathaniel Halhead, Max Muller and others,
who were associated with the Asiatic Society of Bengal in the nineteenth
century. Most contemporary historians and sociologists echo Veena
Das’s observation that “…there was a somewhat uncritical acceptance of
the colonial texts as providing historical sources for the nature of Indian
society and culture” (6-7). It is now widely accepted that James Mill’s
*History of British India* (1817) inaugurated two trends that influenced
historiography in India till very recently: his periodization of Indian
history into three phases (the Hindu, the Muslim and the British periods)
and his model of ‘dynastic’ histories or ‘political’ histories that outlined
the rise and fall of kings, their dynasties and empires. This meant that
the common people of the country -the peasants, tribals, lower castes,
traders, artisans and women -were excluded from the pale of historical
representation. (Thapar Penguin History of Early India 1-36; Saumarez-Smith 99-114) However, the administrative documents and records of the colonial period are an important source of historical material that is now being used to recover the unwritten histories of the less dominant groups in the Indian polity, following the pioneering efforts of the Subaltern Studies group of historiographers, led by Ranajith Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Gayatri Spivak, and others.

Impelled by the current European discourses on race mentioned above, ethnic groups in India were also identified, classified and described, strengthening and legitimizing the already existing caste and class hierarchies and racial stereotypes. The disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology were also introduced in India (the department of Sociology was set up in the University of Bombay in 1921 and that of Anthropology in Calcutta in 1920) in order to facilitate administrative practices. Sir Herbert H. Risley’s Tribes and Castes of Bengal (1892) and The People of India (1908) became models for the description and analysis of the different races, castes and tribes of India. While the academic study of ‘caste’ and ‘community’ was traditionally vested with the sociologist, the study of ‘tribe’ was the privilege of the anthropologist. The first professional journal, Man in India, was started in 1921, and the Anthropological Survey of India was established in 1954, leading to the systematic “study” of the various tribal
communities of India. Such ethnographic writing produced “monographs” on particular tribes, or full length studies on the classification and description of tribes according to the geographical area of their distribution, racial and linguistic characteristics, traditional occupations and habitats, cultural and religious practices and the extent of their integration with mainstream societies.

Verrier Elwin, L. K. A. Iyer, S. C. Roy, G. S. Ghurye, among others, were the pioneering anthropologists of the pre-independence period, while N. K. Bose, D. N. Majumdar, Louis Dumont, M. N. Sreenivas, D. D. Kosambi, S. C. Dubey, Leela Dubey, Iravati Karve, L. P. Vidhyarthi and many others in independent India have made important and valuable studies on the various castes, communities and tribes of India. Today, the three main sources of literature on tribes are from the Archeological Survey of India, the University Departments of Sociology and Anthropology, and the Tribal Research Institutes. *(Oxford India Companion 1-37, 99-114, 373-409; Vidhyarthi and Rai 3-24)*

While accepting the documentary value of such historical and ethnographic discourse, its practitioners are now raising questions about the ideology encoded within its methodology. Anthropologists and historians like Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, James Clifford, Mary Douglas, Hayden White etc. question the claim of conventional
historical/anthropological writing as being representations of factual truth, drawing attention to the fact that these “sciences” are “in, not above, the historical and linguistic processes” (Clifford 2). The historian Hayden White argued that historical writing was also a linguistic activity like literature and “the very use of language itself implies or entails a specific posture before the world which is ethical, ideological or more generally, political” (129). He notes how historians use the tropes of rhetoric and the techniques of fiction writing, to select, order and “plot” the events in a historical narrative into an ordered discourse, seriously undermining its claims to truth. The famed sociologist Andre Breteille observes that conventional, “scholarly” ethnographic and sociological writing used “the model of natural science rather than humanistic scholarship”, though it dealt with very human subjects. (“Sociology and Social Anthropology” Oxford India Companion 45)

Ethnographic accounts developed during the colonial times, mainly modeled on those developed by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, were descriptive and analytical, incorporating dense detailing about the lives of the tribes. The classical position of the ethnographer was that of “Participant-Observer” who was usually a non-tribal person and whose ‘texts’ were constructed using parameters of discourse alien to the culture being represented. Contemporary critics now feel that
these forms of monologic, “realistic” discourses, when used to represent human subjects have tended to objectify, naturalize and thereby “museumize” human beings and cultures, especially when linked to power structures like those of colonialism. They have created, sustained and perpetrated the many prejudices and stereotypical notions about race and culture that have led to the marginalization and exploitation of non-European lands and peoples. The “univocity” of these texts have effectively “silenced” the voice of the subject being represented, especially in the case of politically, culturally and linguistically disadvantaged groups like the tribals by making them the silent subjects and objects of discourse. (Clifford 3-4) Contemporary anthropologists recognize the urgent need for a “multi-perspectival framework” for analysis in order to understand the perspective of the other, and to refrain from creating a fantasized other easily digestible for Western colonialist and scientific consumption” (Rapport and Overing 10).

Literature is increasingly being perceived as precisely such a kind of discourse that allows for the possibility of a multi-voiced, and therefore multi-perspectival approach to the representation of marginalized people and cultures, although it is weighed down under the label of “fiction”. The word “fiction” is derived from the Latin root *fingere* which had the primary sense of “something made or fashioned” or “invented” but with certain uses that implied a sense of falsehood as
in “making up”. The latter meaning has grown in popularity in popular and academic discourse, especially in its usage in contrast with “fact”. (OED 872) It is now increasingly being perceived that literature is also a discursive practice, shaped by the historical, political or social factors that determine both their themes, forms, production and reception. Literature mediates between reality and the imagination through the medium of language and ‘signs’. They become sites where the relations between society and the individual are embodied. Language and literary form become media through which the ideological structures that determine human relations can be recovered. Literary criticism devises theoretical strategies that allow us to read these ideological structures in literature. The analysis of literary texts has also been seminal to the uncovering of imperial and various other hegemonic structures of dominance. Various schools of literary criticism have analyzed literature in many ways- humanistic, aesthetic, subjective, psychological and sociological - but the dominant tendency has been to see literature in universal, essentialist terms.

India has arguably one of the richest and most varied traditions of story-telling in the world with literary traditions in different Indian languages extending 3500 years back. Its geographical variety and diverse history have ensured that every age and every region had its own cultural and literary traditions which are so rich and varied, as to be a
perennial source of narratives from the indefinite past down to the present day. Narratives in the form of song, lyric, epic, legend, myth, fable, fairy tale, history, drama, dance, and so on have been composed, sung, and/or written down and perpetrated through generations. Some of these traditions have dominated over others, while some have been marginalized and even wiped out, while all have influenced, enriched and complimented one and other. They form the bed rock of themes and narrative styles from which the varied literary forms of all regions spring up. And they were never intended or received as purely literature, but were the historical, philosophical, political, social, religious and cultural narratives of the land.

The *katha* (cognate with the English ‘quoth’) has come a long way in India from its primary oral beginnings. The oral and written modes of expression have co-existed in India for very long now. Scholars have identified the folk elements that have gone into the composition of all the “grand narratives” of India’s literary traditions, and point out that the exchange between the various folk streams and classical stream has worked both ways. In his study on the Indian narrative, Ayyappa Panikker notes that the rich and varied folk and tribal narrative traditions have run parallel to these grand narratives for centuries, although distant from the gaze of the majority of India’s population. The stories of the marginal, disempowered sections like
tribals, women or dalits have been recovered from the silences, the gaps and the liminal spaces of the grand narratives, and re-inscribed by later generations, the structural open-endedness of the narratives making this possible. (Indian Narratology 120) Such counter-narratives serve not only to re-inscribe the marginalized voices of the subaltern groups, but also to resist those hegemonies that prescribe the conditions for their marginality.

The novel as a literary form was imported to India during the colonial period and has been enriched by its native literary traditions. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that the novel was, from its beginnings, a form that was concerned “more with the precise location of historical man in the flux and flow of society”. The first novels in India were therefore historical novels, followed by novels reflecting the socio-political realities of the times, and still later came the psychological novels dealing with the individual’s state of mind. (29) The use of the fictional form as a vehicle for historical statement is neither new nor impossible in the genres of literature. “Historical fiction” as a genre has existed in the West and in India for many centuries in different forms. From the Puranas, Ithihasas and the epics in ancient India, to the historical novels in the regional languages initiated during the colonial period, history has been written and rewritten repeatedly in fictional form. The tribal –non-tribal interface has also been depicted in various
ways in different regional literary traditions in India as well as non-literary forms like painting and film. From the “mangalakavyas” of sixteenth century Bengal, to the modern novels in the regional languages and in English, there are innumerable examples of the ways in which the interaction between cultures has been negotiated through narrative. Gareth Griffiths, the postcolonial critic, believes that such forms of literature, whether written by the dominant or the subaltern group, need to be read and discussed, as they serve as “counter-narratives” that put forward “alter/native” views. He continues, “Strategies of recuperation and texts which insist on the importance of re-installing the ‘story’ of the indigenous cultures are, therefore, … crucial to their resistance”.

(“The Myth of Authenticity” De-scribing Empire 73-74)

Novels in the realistic tradition depicting tribal life can be found in almost all Indian languages, forming part of the discourse on tribals in India. Rahul Sankrityayan’s *Kinnar Desh Mein* (1948), Shaani’s *An Island of Sal* (1981) and Nirmal Varma’s *Raat Ka Reporter* (1989) in Hindi, Gopinath Mohanthy’s *Paraja* (1945) in Oriya, Arun Joshi’s *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) in English, P.Valsala’s *Nellu* (1978) and other novels, Vaikom Chandrashekharan Nair’s *Gothradaham* (1979) and K.J. Baby’s *Maveli Mantram* (1994) in Malayalam, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s *Iyarüngam* (1960) and
Mrityunjay (1979) in Assamese and Mahasweta Devi’s novels and short stories in Bengali, are some of the more celebrated among them.

II

“I am interested in history … not only past history, but history that is being made.” (“I am Interested in History” Kakatiya Journal 96) When Mahasweta Devi, the celebrated icon of contemporary Bengali literature and champion of India’s tribals makes this declaration, it does not remain as empty words on paper, but is translated into committed social activism, into serious journalism and into powerfully trenchant and evocative fictional works. In the Preface to her first full-length published book, a historical biography, The Queen of Jhansi (1956), Mahasweta Devi speaks of how she reached history through fairy tale. The tales she heard as a child from her grandmother about the valiant Queen of Jhansi who fought the British fired her imagination and led her to a search for historical accounts of the 1857 uprising. The paucity of material on the subject due to “unconscionable neglect” on the part of both the British and the Indian authorities, and the deliberate suppression of facts in the available records astounded and intrigued her. (Preface The Queen of Jhansi x)
It lead her onto a quest for other sources of history which she located in the “living history” found in the oral traditions of folk songs, ballads, rhymes and popular stories preserved in the folk memory of the local people of the Bundelkhand area. (xi) For Mahasweta Devi, this journey, leaving the confines and certainties of home and family to feel the pulse of the people, proved path-breaking in more ways than one. For one, it reshaped her life, in which ever since, the personal, the political and the literary have merged inseparably. Secondly, it began her lifelong concern with interrogating history to recover the “subaltern” perspective in historical, social and literary terms, and thirdly it led her to the recovery and revival of the oral and folk traditions of discourse that are the living history and culture of the common man of India. G. N. Devy believes that Mahasweta has “managed to transcend so many prisons to become what she is”. He wonders:

What is the source of her remarkable memory, the frightening economy of her words, that great simplicity, which, having distributed life between the necessary and the unnecessary, shuns all that is unnecessary? Is she an adivasi taken to literature, or a writer drawn to the adivasi? (“The Adivasi Mahasweta” Freeing the Spirit 176)

It is well nigh impossible to separate the three strands of Mahasweta Devi’s life – her social work among the tribals and other
disadvantaged groups in the states of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, her journalistic writings and her literary pursuits. These three concerns co-exist and coalesce in her life, informing and intersecting one another in an organic way, so that it is not possible to discuss her literary works without referring to the other two aspects. Born on January 14, 1926 in Dhaka to Manish Ghatak, a progressive writer and poet and Dharitri Devi, a social worker, Mahasweta grew up in an atmosphere where artistic pursuits and social activism went hand in hand. Rithwik Ghatak, the maverick film-maker was her uncle and Bijon Bhattacharya, progressive dramatist and political activist, was her husband. She acknowledges her debt to her family for their part in shaping her life and sensibilities. Her formative years saw tumultuous political and social upheavals like the Quit India Movement, the Bengal famine of 1943, the horrors of partition, the Tebhaga peasant movement led by the Communist Party in Bengal and the Naxalite movement in the 1970s, which shaped her political and social consciousness and led her to wield her pen as a flaming sword against social injustice.

In a writing career that began when she was a child, she has written prolifically on various themes and in different genres- short stories, novels, biographies, histories, children’s fiction, text books, translations and editions of Bengali writers, journalistic reporting, etc. Her novels and short stories have won India’s highest literary awards,
including the Sahithya Akademi award for *Aranyer Adhikar* in 1979 and the Jnanpith in 1996. She was conferred the Padma Bhushan in 1986 and won international recognition with the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1988 for her committed social work. Her literary works have been translated into English and other foreign and Indian languages including the tribal languages Santhali and Ho and she enjoys the status of a world writer today. Her innovative use of the linguistic and literary conventions of Bengali has helped redefine the contours of both the creation and the reception of fiction writing in India. She has ninety-four published titles of fiction to her credit, not counting the vast body of non-fiction writing related to her activist and journalistic work, which have appeared in various magazines and journals like *The Economic and Political Weekly, Yogana, Jugantar* and other national newspapers.

Literature in Bengali has always had a privileged position vis-à-vis other regional literatures in India and can boast of great writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Bhibutibhushan Bandhopadhyay, Saratchandra Chatterjee, Tarasankar Chatopadhyay, Ashapurna Devi, Swarnakumari Devi and many more who have enjoyed a national status. Their writings are marked by a great humanism and social commitment and have left an indelible mark on the map of Indian literature. The figure of Rabindranath Tagore in particular, with his great humanism, compassionate vision, progressive ideals, deep national consciousness
and experiments with the colloquial idiom, has influenced succeeding generations of writers. Bengal being one of the earliest states in India to come directly under the colonial influence, it was there that the first modern novels were produced, both in the regional language as well as in English. The works of Sharatchandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore usher in the era of socially committed realistic fiction in Bengali in the 1920s, with the focus on public issues with local and national importance. (Sen 20-46; Natarajan Handbook 46-47; “Literature-Bengali” Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature. Vol.3. 2346-2357) Though the influence of many of these writers can be seen in her works, Mahasweta Devi has charted a course that has set her apart from her contemporaries in terms of both thematic content and literary style. “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…” she declares. She castigates the writers of her generation for their lack of social awareness, accusing them of weaving “narcissistic fantasies in the name of literature” and declares that contemporary Bengali literature shows “a retraction from objectivity and an atrophy of conscience” (Introduction Five Plays viii-ix).

Esha Dey traces the history of women’s writing in Bengali to the role of women as the narrators of oral tales handed down through generations in the family. From the first woman “writer” Chandrabati
(c.1550), however, Bengal has seen a succession of great writers like Giribala Devi, Swarnakumari Devi, Ashapurna Devi, Jyothirmayi Devi, Nirupama Devi, Pratibha Basu and Lila Majumdar to the contemporary writers like Mahasweta Devi, Nabaneeta Dev Sen and others. She also notes that Swarnakumari Devi (1885-1932), Rabindranath Tagore’s niece, was the first woman writer to write on the theme of tribal oppression, in her novels *Mibar Raj* (1887) and *Bidroha* (1890). She provides a link from the earlier mangalakavya tradition that dealt with the theme of tribal assimilation to Mahasweta Devi’s preoccupation with the tribal problem. (83-84) Radha Chakravarthy notes that while the earlier women writers set their female characters in “apolitical social frameworks”, with the focus on the home and family, Mahasweta differs from the tradition of Bengali women’s writing in linking the issue of women’s oppression to the larger socio-economic-historical concerns of the country. (Introduction *In the Name of the Mother* ix). She has challenged the traditional notions of a woman writer’s persona as well as her choice of subject by her public avowal of social activism and its organic relation to her literature. According to Jasbir Jain, she is unique among women writers in India for the socio-historic scope of her fiction and her bold and innovative experiments with language, where she brings alive the idioms and dialects of the oral, tribal and folk traditions of the historic period she is recreating. (37)
Though a comprehensive assessment of Mahasweta Devi’s literary works is yet premature, many scholars and commentators have engaged with her rich and varied body of writing through translations, commentaries and critiques. Maitreya Ghatak, one of her translators and commentators divides her writing career into four ten-year periods (Introduction Dust on the Road viii-ix). The first decade, from 1956 to 1965 saw the publication of nineteen titles including three novels- 

_Jhansir Rani_ (1956), _Nati_ (1957), her first novel and _Amritasanchay_ (1963), tales of love and war based on the oral legends prevalent in the Bundelkhand area. The second decade, from 1966 to 1975 has nine titles including the path-breaking _Kavi Bandhyoghati Gayina Jivan o Mrithyu_ (1967) which depicts the struggles of a low caste boy to achieve human rights and _Andharmanik_ (1967), a novel about the Maratha invasion in Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century. _Hajar Chaurasi ki Maa_ (1973), her highly acclaimed story of the Naxal movement of the 1970s is narrated from the point of view of a bereaved mother. She wrote many short stories in both these periods (“Swaha” “Chinta”, “Bayen”) with rural and urban settings, which reflected some of the central themes of her work: social and historical events in their temporal and spatial settings; the moral degradation and corruption of the elite and moneyed classes in rural and urban India; the question of the human rights of the poor and downtrodden.
The third decade, from 1976 to 1985, was a period of great change in Mahasweta’s life in which she gets wholly involved in the issues related to tribals, bonded labourers and other dispossessed groups. Traveling widely in the districts of Palamu, Purulia, Medinipur, Singhbhum and Mayurbhanj, she mobilized and organized the people in their struggle for basic needs and human rights, and used her pen fearlessly to raise awareness among the authorities and the larger public through her journalistic writing and her fiction. There are twenty seven titles in this very fruitful period of her literary career in which she composed the works on which her reputation rests, including the Sahithya Akademi award winning *Aranyer Adhikar* (1979), depicting the life of the tribal hero Birsa Munda who fought the British to earn their rights to the forest. *Agnigarbha* (1978) deals with the story of the tribal hero Bashai Tudu with the background of the Naxal movement, while *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* (1980) depicts the life of the Munda tribe in a historical setting spanning the pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial periods of Indian history. *Titu Mir* (’85) dealt with the theme of rebellion with a Muslim hero. She also wrote important short stories like “Draupadi”, “Dhouli”, “Douloti”, “Shikar”, “Shishu”, “Sanichari” and many others during this period. In these works she explores the issues central to her life and her writing: the life of the tribal people and their struggles against the erosion of their livelihood, culture and
environment; the complicity of the state and society in exploitation, injustice and violence unleashed on the poor and marginalized classes in independent India; the need to preserve the living folk and oral traditions of culture against the onslaught of globalization; the problems of exploitation and violence related to women, and so on. Mahasweta also experiments with language and style during this period, making a departure from “literary Bengali” and adopting the idioms and dialects of the people she writes about. In 1980 she revived the journal *Bortika* that had been initiated by her father. It is now a forum where tribal people and other dispossessed people can express themselves and is seen as a pioneering effort towards an alternative literature in Bengali.

The next phase, from 1986 onwards, sees her totally involved in her social activism, producing only a few but significant titles like “Pterodactyl, Pirtha and Puran Sahay” (1986), and *Byadhkanda* (1990), translated as *The Book of the Hunter* (2002). Radha Chakravarthy observes that Mahasweta’s writing career can be divided into three decades according to her reception as a writer of local, national and global importance. (“Reading Mahasweta” *JSL* 65) In the seventies, she came into her own as a regional writer in opposition to the Bengali literary establishment with her radical choice of theme and innovative literary techniques. In the eighties, she gained national recognition as a writer crusading for the rights of the marginalized, especially that of the
tribals. The nineties saw her catapulted into the international arena as a committed and original writer from the “third world” whose works lend voice to the subaltern subjects silenced in history. Mahasweta gained international repute through the English translations of her works as much for her championship of people’s movements for human rights and dignity for which she has dedicated the whole of her life.

According to Sujit Mukherjee, “the making of Mahasweta’s English career” began in 1981 when Gayatri Chakravarthy Spivak translated her short story “Draupadi” in English and published it in *Critical Inquiry*. Spivak’s translations and commentaries of “Draupadi” and “The Breast Giver” (“Stanadayini”) approached Mahasweta’s writings from the perspectives of Feminism, Marxism and Deconstruction, against the background of Postcolonial studies initiated by the Subaltern Studies Conclave in the 1980s. She placed Mahasweta in the canon of postcolonial writing from the “third world” and has contributed substantially to her “visibility” in the academic circles of the “first world”. “Draupadi” was later republished by Thema, in the collection *Bashai Tudu* in collaboration with Samik Bandhopadhyay in 1986. Samik Bandhopadhyay also translated the dramatizations of five of her short stories as *Five Plays* (1986) with Mahasweta’s active collaboration and it was published by Seagull Books. Since then Seagull Books has taken over the publication of the English translations of her
works and today there are more than twenty five titles by different translators. Some of her important translators and commentators are: Gayatri Spivak, Samik Bandhopadhyay, Maitreya Ghatak, Anjum Katyal, Kalpana Bardhan, Radha Chakravarthy, Ipsita Chanda, Sumanta Banerjee, Mandira and Sagaree Sengupta, among others. Recent translations of her short stories published by Seagull have brought out the range of her fiction, with a wide selection of themes- poignant love stories, stories about the urban underworld and those that display with rare depth the effects of violence and death on the human psyche. These translations have revealed the range of her fiction and have given Mahasweta a pan-Indian and international readership.

The majority of the critical writing on Mahasweta’s works focus on the aspect of social commitment in her writing, viewing her mainly as a realistic writer who uses her fiction as another weapon in her crusade for human rights on behalf of the tribals, women and other marginalized people. Although Mahasweta has claimed that she is not a “feminist” writer, many of her stories and short novels engage with discourses of patriarchy that intersect the concerns of class exploitation to make the women in her works doubly marginalized. Gayatri Spivak’s readings of Mahasweta’s works in the light of Feminist and Marxist literary theories set in the broader context of postcolonial studies have largely influenced the trend of her reception as a writer. It has also led
to an ongoing debate within postcolonial literary studies about the “politics” involved in the translation and reception of such “third world” writers in the arena of world literature. In India, the critical discussions about her literary works is quite prolific, but remains scattered in various academic and popular journals, as definitive volumes of critical commentaries are still in the making.

This thesis proposes to examine Mahasweta Devi’s selected fictional works in English translation dealing with the tribal subject, with a view to explore the organic relationship between her narrative style and some of her major thematic concerns. All her major novels and celebrated short stories represent the tribal subject, and they stand out in her oeuvre as rare and significant works of art that have made an important contribution to the inscription of the lost socio-cultural history of the tribes to the discourse of Indian history and culture, and to address the urgent issue of tribal autonomy and welfare in modern India. “In India, the tribal is not our ancestor. He is our contemporary,” observes Shiv Vishwanathan in relation to Mahasweta’s works. (10) They live lives that witness constant and often humiliating struggles with society, the state and its machinery to maintain their tenuous hold on their history and their distinct ethnic and cultural identity. The thesis identifies three important thematic concerns in Mahasweta Devi’s fictional works on tribes, namely the issue of class exploitation, the
concern with ecology and environmental degradation, and the focus on gender. The distinctive quality and power of her fiction has been attributed to her distinctive narrative style that challenges the conventions of both the creation and reception of prose fiction. Though many of her critics and commentators have taken note of the defining nature of her literary style, enough critical attention has not been paid to that aspect of her fiction, although it has an organic relation to her work as a whole.

The thesis focuses on the way Mahasweta Devi attempts to represent the issue of tribal history, identity and contemporaneity through a thematic focus and a narrative organization that places the tribal’s discourse in dialogic engagement with other, more powerful discourses in Indian history, society and the state, in specific socio-historical situations. The works selected for the study include her major novels *Aranyer Adhikar*, (since an English translation of this novel is not yet available, the Malayalam translation by Leela Sarkar, published by NBS, Kottayam, is used here), *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* and *The Book of the Hunter*. The short stories taken up for study include “The Hunt”, “Douloti the Bountiful” and “Pterodactyl, Pirtha and Puran Sahay”, from *Imaginary Maps*, the short stories “Choli ke Peeche” and “Draupadi” from *Breast Stories*, “Seeds”, “The Witch”, “Salt” and “Shishu” from *Bitter Soil*, “The Fairytale of Rajabhasa” from *Outcast*,

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“Kunti and the Nishadin” and “Five Women” from *After Kurukshetra*, “Ma, From Dawn to Dusk” from *In the Name of the Mother*, and the novella “Operation?- Bashai Tudu” from *Bashai Tudu*, and “Arjun” which was reprinted in *The Wordsmiths* - all of which deal with various aspects of tribal life, culture and history, in relation to specific tribes.