Chapter IV

Articulating Indian History
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The chapter covers the issues of Indian history that occur in the fiction of Mahasweta Devi. There are a few titles, by Mahasweta Devi, consisting of the issue but *Aranyer Adhikar*, *Bedanabala* and *The Queen of Jhansi* are specially preferred under the given chapter.

History is always a matter of debate and controversy the validity of which is questioned many a time nearly everywhere in the world. T. S. Eliot (1985) says:

*After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now*

*History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors*

*And issues; deceives with whispering ambitions,*

*Guides us by vanities. Think now*

*She gives when our attention is distracted,*

*And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions*

*That the giving famishes the craving.* (1607)
Indian history has remained to date an entity under a cloud. It has served so far an area of of contention. Having mentioned this, it is of great note that Indian history has its own legacy of glorious past. P. S. Sadar, a historian, claims that *Indus Valley Civilisation* is the *first* civilisation of mankind, a fact the foreign historians have concealed most often (1).

Vincent A. Smith (2011) makes the following statement on the subcontinent history:

The earliest written records—those of Egypt and Mesopotamia—take us back no more than 5000 years, and the oral traditions of India begin nearly two millennia later. Indeed, the first unquestioned historical records of the sub-continent are not earlier than the end of the sixth century B. C., when north-western India became a province of the Achaemenid empire. (22)

The historian adds further that the Indus civilisation dates from about 2055 to 1500 B. C. (28), the wikiapedia differs on this (16.06.2013), however, giving the period between 3300 and 1300 B. C. As there has been great vissicitude since the ancient history of India, the country has some synchronic times that make her by far proud. There are some historical figures of India that have made priceless contributions to its development and civilisation. There are some artists that take a cognizance of such contributors in their works of art. Mahasweta Devi is such an artist that is
engaged on the pursuit of connecting history with literature. Once she declared in Pune that she is always fascinated by history.

Mahasweta Devi has produced about four full-length accounts bearing historicity. Apart from the above three titles included in the chapter, Titu Mir is the fourth one telling history of Wahabi Movement. Aranyer Adhikar and Bedanabala are the texts that spotlight the subaltern characters—Birsas and Kamalas respectively, the move absent in most of the creative artists from the established background. This is what makes Mahasweta a radically distinct phenomenon.

Aranyer Adhikar (The Occupation of Forest), sometimes mentioned AA herein, is a novel by Mahasweta Devi that not only established her identity as a pro-subaltern writer but also as a mainstream Bengali activist-writer. The story of the novel centres on the character of Birsa, the youth who revolted against the feudal system and the British that seconded the system. Mahasweta Devi suggests to her reader to go through the fabric of the coeval happenings:

The name and rebellion of Birsa Munda are memorable and meaningful from many perspectives of India’s freedom struggle. Given the social and economic backdrop of the country upon which the struggle emerged, it was not a mere rebellion against a foreign government and the exploitation it carried out, one cannot so opine.
It was also a rebellion against the then feudal social system; overlooking this overall historical reference, one would not perceive Birsa Munda and his fight realistically. (Foreword, n. p.)

She further states that the book *Dust Storm and Hanging Mist* by Suresh Singh is the basic source of the novel. The novel was initially published in instalments in ‘Betar Jagat’ in 1975.

Spivak (1998) has also commented on the novel from the viewpoint of the language it has used:

….It [Aranyer Adhikar] is a meticulously researched historical novel about the Munda Insurrection of 1899-1900. Here Mahasweta begins putting together a prose that is a collage of literary Bengali, street Bengali, bureaucratic Bengali, tribal Bengali, and the languages of the tribals. (247-8)

Spivak (1987) also says:

In Aranyer Adhikar (1977) the prose is beginning to bend into full-fledged ‘historical fiction’, history imagined into fiction. The division between fact (historical event) and fiction (literary event) is operative in all those moves. Indeed, her repeated claim to legitimacy is that she researches thoroughly everything she represents in fiction. (92)

This means that the language and a combination of facts and fiction make the text an interesting reading. There is another book on Birsa Munda that
produces a full account of his biography and rebellion. What the author, K. S. Singh (2002) says is vital in relation to the novel:

When about forty years ago I wrote the story of this man and his movement—in fact I had used Birsa Munda as a metaphor to tell the story of his people’s struggle—little had I realized that it would have such a far-reaching impact on subaltern studies and in tribal politics.

(Flap verso)

Generally it is found in the books of history that the first rebellion against the British took place in 1857. It is but a half-truth because the tribals have had a legacy of revolt (16.06.2013) prior to it by about a hundred years but not many people are familiar with it as regards the Indian context. To clarify the point, one could go for Santhal Revolt of 1771 led by a Santhal called Tilka Manjhi. There are other revolts undertaken by the tribals that anticipate the Mutiny of 1857. To mention a few: Bhumij Revolt 1779; Chero Revolt 1800; Oraons Revolt 1807; Tamar Munda Revolt 1813; Hos Revolt 1820; Kol Revolt 1832; and the great Santhal Revolt of 1855. As Birsa had the inheritance of rising against injustice, naturally his Ulgulan was to be a milestone in Indian history. Aranyer Adhikar is all about Birsa Munda’s battle against the feudal lords of his area and the British that support the lords. Proselytizing also forms a major component of the plot of the novel. The story begins the following way:
Birsa Munda dies on 9 June 1900 at Ranchi jail at 8:00 am. He dies of vomiting blood. Mahasweta Devi writes it that five Mudas were paid Rs 500/- to disclose the whereabouts of Birsa. Paddy happens to be Birsa’s supreme dream. Birsa falls asleep and the girl who is his companion cooks rice. The steam goes up and Birsa is caught. The Deputy Commissioner’s plan of Rs 500/- works successfully. Forest has been the passion of Birsa. The right to forest concerns the forests of Chhota Nagpur, Palamu, Singhbhoom and Chakradharpur. The initial scene takes place at the gaol wherein the gaoler is Anderson. He is a heartless person. There is Barrister Jacob who always fights in the interest of the Mudas. Anderson is afraid of his morals. Amulya Babu is another character that keeps a lot of sympathy with the Mudas and other prisoners. Anderson feels that it is unfair for Amulya who, being a Christian, supports the non-Christians. Birsa’s person is so very famous that the people have produced a lot of stories and legends in his name. The gaoler wants to finish off the funeral without anybody’s notice, in particular without any Munda’s notice lest the story of his death spread at the wind’s speed.

The postmortem report of Birsa is indeterminate. There is no poison found inside him. Cholera is shown as a cause but Birsa has never been let to have any contact with the outside world. There is not a single drop of water he consumed from outside. There are about 470 prisoners closely attached to Birsa. They always hear the noise of Birsa’s fetters. Birsa is
just 25 at his death (AA 17). Barrister Jacob plays intimidation for the gaoler. A scavenger, Shibban is asked to perform the last rites upon Birsa’s body in the total darkness without anybody’s knowing it. Actually Birsa disliked white people, white skin. The basic demand of Birsa has been right-to-forest, the locations being Chhota Nagpur, Palamu, Singhbhoom, Chakradharpur, etc. It is a matter of hereditary right. The Deputy Commissioner, looking at the dead body of Birsa, comments:

There is a lot of vigour in the body of the chap. He is lingering since the 30th of May. Before that he had been closed in the alienated dungeon without interrogation since February. For many days before that he had been running scampered through caves, woods and thickets. May he know what he received to eat and drink. Yet the body does not break down. At least now should he die. Otherwise, ‘Birsa is the real God’ would be strengthened. [They] would say, had it been not for God, he would have died of late. (Aranyer Adhikar 3)

Birsa dies at nine in the morning. Gaoler Anderson has a watch in his hands. Everytime he checks up the vein of Birsa, the weak vein. Even in his severe suffering the manacles of Birsa are not removed. Bharmi, Gaya, Sushrasm, Donka, Ramai and Gopi have been some of the patent Munda companions of Birsa. After having written a report of death of Birsa, Anderson cleans his hands with eu de cologne. However, despite having a
bath with a scented soap, he could not get rid of the odour of Birsa’s blood.

This brings to one’s memory Macbeth (2010):

Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh! (Act V, Sc. I, 2175)

The Mundas of the gaol disown the body of Birsa as per the latter’s directive. To avoid the rumours, Anderson wants to eliminate the body. Shiban Mehtar performs the last rites upon Birsa’s body. Amulya Babu happens to be a classmate of Birsa in the German Mission of Chaibasa. Sunara Munda dies a merciful death; most of the Mundas in fact do so. Their bodies carry the puss-filled wounds caused by the bullets. The scavenger is surprised to think how a non-Munda can perform the final rites.

The Mundas suffer the problem of communication—they can never clear their side, cannot convince the judge of their innocence: lack of linguistic skill functions to be a big handicap on them. The refrain—there is no end to rebellion, there is no death to God—has been found through the novel. The blood of the Mundas is black mixed with starvation, poverty and exploitation. The Mundas always heavily believe in the rumours, miracles and the impossible. For example, Bharmi spreads Birsa’s message:

And should I not give in this clay body, you would not survive. Do not let courage lose. Don’t think that I deceived you, left you to the wind.
All the weapons are put into your hands: taught you everything.

Applying them protect yourselves. (16-17)

Birsa, the youngest of all, has had no land of his own, no bullocks, cows, and abode—nothing. The only asset he owns is a flute and a bow. Initially he resides at Anand Pandey’s. He sings hymns to God. In Chotti Munda and His Arrow, Birsa is presented an atheist but in AA a theist which means there is a contradictory delineation of the hero. Mahasweta Devi represents the story of the Mundas through a mythical narration. The story reads: Thus came the two brothers—Chhutiya Haram and Nagu. It was the month of ‘Savana’. The river of Domdagara flooded so much so that both its banks were covered up. There, on the bank of the same river, they situated the town of Chhutiya. Following the names of the two brothers, the area came to be called ‘Chhotanagpur’.

Though the ancestors of Birsa, says Dhani, situated Chotanagpur, it came under somebody else’s rule—the Dikus having robbed the Mundas of their land and propety and turned them into the bonded labour. In a way, Mahashweta Devi presents a spirit of region putting Biharis virtually on an unfair side and the Bengalis on a fair one. Showing pathos of the Mundas, she says:

The life of the ones like Dhani had been so. There penetrated in their life moneylenders, landlords, missionaries, court affairs, consolidated
roads, railways, bayonette, gun, oppressive summers, famines, brokers, bonded-labour… (21)

Dhani Munda has already killed Jagdish Sahu for his exploitation. In every place the moneylenders dislocated the Mundas. Whenever there is a case to be contested by a Munda at a law-court, he is bound to lose all his possession and belongings. Because the judge, a British, could not follow Mundari and the intermediator bilingual’s statement is held final.

Birsa was born to Sugana and Karmi, having two brothers, Komta and Kanu—and two sisters: Daskir and Champa (19). Born on Thursday, he was named after Birsa. As the poverty haunts the tribals, Sugana has a thought of conversion in his mind. He believes that the people from the mission have mercy upon the tribals and educate their children. Mahasweta Devi lashes out at the Christian mission and conversion. There recur anti-conversion and anti-Christian elements in the novel. The Christians are sort of inveighed against in the story. Barrister Jacob and Amulya Babu receive reverence whereas the Christian missionaries invectives, irony and sardonic attitude. In the writer’s opinion, the tribals suffer double-trouble: they are between the devil (Dikus) and the deep blue sea (the mission).

When nine, Birsa starts suffering severe burns of poverty. Dhani Munda pursues him, most of the time, to ruffle Birsa’s mentality. Birsa sees dreams of fetching all the comforts of life to the feet of his mother.
Birsa’s mother begs him not to reason with Dhani as she takes him for an insane. Birsa says to his mother about Dhani—

**God of where, he might know only. Says that the god Munda is to be born. The God is to return the Khutkatri villages to the Mundas. On his coming, the Dikus would not stay here. Then salt in the earthen pot, crude oil in the lamp / pan. The Munda would remain a king.**

(30)

Birsa is so good at music that his playing notes on the flute brings close the deer, rabbits and all the wild life. This enlivens the story of *Orpheus*. The Mundas have no houses of their own. Jaipal Naga runs a missionary school at which Birsa is supposed to educate. The purpose is that he would turn out a missionary and move from place to place relating to people the story of Jesus. Mahasweta Devi parodies the Christian education system. The tribals do not seem to have assumed a serious educational tone. Mahasweta Devi uses a myth to bring to light the ‘genesis’ of the Mundas. She says: It happened a long ago. The earth hadn’t been cruel then. Everything came under the careful governance of Haram. That youth and the young woman had slept into the hole of a crab (20). During those times Haram sent water to the earth and quenched the fire on it. Initially he produced the watery beings. Later he called on the fish and told them: ‘Go get the earth on the sea bottom. I have to create the life on earth.’ The fish collected earth in their mouth but on the surface level; the wave of the sea would take away
the earth. Finally a turtle came up. It brought out earth from its intestine along with the excreta. Out of it Haram prepared everything. A son was born to the couple. The baby was almost to die. However, Haram ordered the couple: ‘Draw a Sudoku on the door. Looking it up, the disease would run away. Be prepared for my worship. Start worship victimizing a white hen.’ Consequently the son recovered. This is the story of genesis of the Munda race which looks to be based on a massive superstitious scale.

Birsa starts educating at Naga Munda’s school. Afterwards he moves to the house of his maternal aunt. As a result he has to leave his school. At home of his aunt Birsa is supposed to tend three cows and seven goats. His uncle says:

There is a thing however. I cannot have an educating Munda boy in my sight. Tend the cattle and fill in your stomach. Go dance in the sphere of dance. When a Munda attempts being a Diku educating himself, he is certain to be doomed (42).

The above is an example of how the Mundas have been negative on education. It is difficult to understand if they are really so. When the Mundas do not find anything to eat and wear, they turn out timid and weak like Sugana, Birsa’s father, says Mahasweta Devi. They fear chanting and magical acts a lot but Birsa has no such fear. His aunt has no offspring of her own. Moreover, she says that Birsa has the first privilege to be her own son and the rest later. When in Chalkaad, Birsa experiences sorrow,
poverty, and starvation, etc. but he could undergo the living current of life there. Once when tending cattle on the field of his aunt, Birsa falls asleep and the cattle runs into the harvest of Ghasi Munda, the rival of his uncle. The uncle beats him up so hard that the incident dilutes heart of his aunt. She is so upset with her husband that she curses him a lot. Consequently Birsa makes a move to Bartoli, a place where Komta, his brother lives (21). Komta is a supposed son-in-law to Bhura Munda. His fiancée is not an active girl nor is she good-looking. She stammers while speaking and has been too slow at work. But since there is a strong hope of getting food regularly, Komta has to make a decision. Birsa wants him to keep his parents with him so that at least in their old age they could eat and live comfortably. Komta is loving and kind. He feels that he should bring his parents and brothers under the same roof and live happily. He has a desire to educate himself but owing to the wretched economic conditions it could not be possible for him. He wants Birsa to educate and turn out a missionary which could make a certain support to the family.

Lukas, a missionary, therefore takes Birsa to the German mission of Burju. At Burju, Rev. Putsking, the in-charge of the school, approves of Birsa’s admission. His condition is that Birsa should finish with his lower primary education. He says that the Munda boys are intelligent and have a desire for education yet owing to familial problems they leave out in the middle. Birsa mixes up with the new and beautiful life of education there.
Learning to read every new letter is like making a new feat for Birsa. He starts understanding English and it happens to be a special pleasure for him:

The day on which Birsa could read and understand the story, ‘The Foolish Fox and Bitter Grapes’ through English, Birsa wept happily (52).

It is like having accomplished a big bravery for Birsa. It is a new birth of him and he has proven his manliness. During two years Birsa finishes with his lower primary learning and is advised by Reverend Putsking:

There is no facility of further education with us. You go to Chaibasa.

Don’t leave education. I take your future time for prosperity. (52)

Sugana is so happy with Birsa’s achievement. He is the most educated Munda at Chaibasa (22). His father appeals to him to consult an officer to employ him as a gardener so that there is enough rice to eat at home. Birsa is not satisfied yet. He wants to go to Chaibasa for further education. Moreover, his father discourages him. He says—

What would you do educating more, my son? Having educated you won’t feel satisfaction with this family life. You would take the Munda boys for barbarians. The more you educate the more will you be unhappy, boy. I have no sorrow. On account of starvation, I have turned out a beggar, but will be happy for nothing. However you turn educated, nobody will call you a ‘babu’, nor make you honorary for
aught. Finally, you would become a miner like the boys at Khetan’s home. (53)

Chaibasa is located at a long distance from Chalkaad. Birsa seems to be a master boy, never a small one. The four boys are taken to Chaibasa by Sugana Munda, the year being 1886. The missionary there disapproves of Birsa’s admission. Birsa is not ready to go back. All the boys halt under a tree. The very next day Birsa gets admitted and the rest of the boys, Bamba, Abhiram, and Ishank have to move back. Birsa is given two shirts, two pairs of shorts, a couple of soaps and a towel. There he is helped to learn the basic manners by Amulya. Amulya is an orphan who teaches Birsa how to have a bath. He also knows Mundari, the tongue of the Mundas. Amulya wants to be a doctor. To Birsa, everyone that joins a service is a Diku. Therefore, he wants to be highly educated so that he could relinquish the land of his father from Khuntkatri via lawcourt. He also aspires to be a missionary to go narrating the story of Jesus to people. Furthermore, he has a desire to earn his mother a sack of salt and a lot of crude oil and kerosene.

Dhani Munda re-enters Birsa’s life. A few Mundas, the Sardars, come around the school with an application. They talk to Dr A. Nuttrat and ask him to regain them the land of Khuntkatri. The land is grabbed by the Dikus. Dr Nuttrat cannot help it and the Mundas wish to convert to the Catholic mission at Torpa thinking that Mr Livonson of the Mission of
Torpa has had a better understanding of their problems (23). Livonson advises them to fight against those that inflict injustices upon them. The government has captured some of the rebel Mundas. Dhani is so very upset with this. He says that not a single God comes to their rescue. And he meets Birsa and says to him:

*It would have been done by you, O Birsa. Your forefathers, the prehistoric men of the race situated Chotanagpur. You can be the god.* (60)

Dhani instigates Birsa saying that he should leave the mission as the officers there call the Mundas thieves and bandits— the barbarians mooning about naked. The people converted to German Mission and to that of the Catholics think that the officers of the missions and the government have been one and the same. All such discussions always fall upon the ears of Birsa. And Dhani’s quote above forms the crux of the matter for Birsa’s making the revolutionary. The Mundas think that neither the mission nor the government is going to look into the case of them. They also object to friendship of Birsa with Amulya. They insist that Birsa leave Amulya for the latter would certainly be a Diku. Birsa, however, is not ready to break his ties with Amulya. He prefers to sacrifice the company of the Mundas instead.

Dr Nuttrat persuades the students of his school to not listen to the rebel (Sardar) Mundas assuring them that the-loyal-to-mission would get
their land back. He fears his students for their proclivity towards the rebel Mundas and hence gets forty Mundas, that have gone to Livonson, arrested through the help of the government. The eight of the arrested die in the police custody which evaporates the faith of the Mundas in the government and mission. Barrister Jacob always attempts to abet the tribals for their cause. Therefore, the British take him as a blot on themselves. There is a scuffle between the tribals and missionaries during 1887-88. Father Nuttrat abuses at the rebel Mundas calling them ‘hooligans’, ‘thieves’ and ‘swindlers’. This affects Birsa quite deeply. He thinks that he had had a wrong kind of preoccupation that the heart of Dr Nuttrat is as clean as the white cloth donned by him. Now he changes his attitude. Since the Mundas are termed ‘thieves and swindlers’, the blood of his arteries gets a surge. He says to the boys:

These priests are dishonest people. Now they are calling the rebels thieves-swindlers. The rebel Mundas left out the mission. This is the rage consequent of it. (65)

Nuttrat is a bit terrified and says—

All the Mundas form the same substance. The come here begging. But they are an internal part of the rebel Mundas. All the Mundas are insincere. (65)

Birsa could not bear this. He retorts:
Retreat from what you said. The Mundas are inborn sincere. Had they been insincere, they would have subverted mission after mission.

(65)

This adds to the anger of Nuttrat and he drives Birsa out. The above discussions form the plot of the novel. Birsa has his eyes emitting fire. Amulya runs in to him and asks him to beg Nutrat’s pardon. He advises him to educate further so that he could, in his future life, bring about transformation of the tribals. However, the words of Amulya fall upon deaf ears of Birsa. He thus leaves out the mission.

Birsa goes to Bandgaon. There is a feudal, Jagmohan Singh. His clerk is Anand Pandey. Anand Pandey is supposed to have foresight. He teaches the stories of God and religion. Birsa goes to him and has the sacred thread worn around his body and also has sandal smeared upon at the hands of Pandey. He wears a wreath made up of basil beads round his neck and reads and gives an ear to Ramayana and Mahabharata. This all adds to importance of the Brahmin. Mahasweta Devi introduces Pandey on a respectable ground. Pandey brainwashes Birsa in the name of God. He knows that Haram happens to be his god yet Pandey convinces him of Krishna being the sole God. Again, in ‘Chotti Munda’, Mahasweta Devi’s reference to Birsa as an atheist proves herein otherwise. Birsa keeps sitting on the bank of a pond and plays his flute on the evenings.
There is a boy called Sunara. He sings Birsa a song. The song presents a rebellious tone. It adds further to Birsa’s rebellious temperament. The British government have passed a law of forest in the places like Palamu, Maanbhoom and Singhbhoom. A blower informs all the tribals of the law. Now the tribals are not to take their cattle and herd into the forest anymore henceforth (25). They are not to collect fuel, dry leaves and honey from it nor would they be allowed to hunt into the forest. Birsa is provoked and disturbed by this all. He thinks to himself:

Whatever is to be done be done out of thinking. Nobody else would think of it. If somebody else thinks, you meet him and if he leaves out, you would linger into the gaol. This is always practised. The motto which you confirmed of not to think of yourself, leads you to get beaten and die under the intoxication of liquor. Oh dear! Aren’t you wont to drinking liquor unrestrained! Our houses are set to fire; the forest is being snatched away from you. You get surged up, turn rebellious and after some time forget all under sway of liquor. (72)

Absolutely perturbed, Birsa returns to Bandgaon. Anand Pandey denies him a room over there. Birsa, sheer angry, says that it is because of Pandey’s earlier favour to him that the latter is safe or else he would have crushed him under a stone.

The non-tribals keep on informing the police should the tribals enter forest. They also receive some money for purveying the information. Birsa
unearths a dead body of a Munda and takes away a silver ring and brings home some rice for his parents. This occurrence is similar to Annabhau Sathe’s (1994) story. Realizing this, his mother kicks off the rice and smites her breast taking the act for a greater sin. Birsa is too much hurt by this. He leaves his hut in anguish. He enters a thick forest and has some voice speaking to him. The voice is enigmatic:

_Save me, Birsa. Purify me, sanctify me, make me blotless._ (76)

Birsa responds—

_I’ll do, do it; I’ll purify you, sanctify you. You are my genuine mother. You are the genuine mother of all Mundas. Only you provide use everything, walls to the houses, roofs on them, beetroots and fruits for hunger; rabbits, birds, deer, boars all you only give us mother!_ (76)

The quote above is an inner thought of Birsa which could be assessed psychoanalytically. Somewhere, however, the dialogues between Birsa and forest seem not only enigmatic but hyperbolic as well. The forest, mother of Birsa, asks him to be the ‘God’ to relinquish her from the clutches of the British and Dikus. And Birsa agrees forthwith with the forest. He says that he would become _The God of Land_ (Dharti Aba). Mahasweta Devi represents Birsa-as-God almost in the manner of exaggeration and superstition. He says to his own mother, Karmi—
Don’t call me Birsa, mother. I’m God, I am only God myself. I will not indulge in homely affairs. Will not play children upon my shoulder and body. This forest, hill, land all will I win back for everyone. These wanted the God, mother; I’ve come back turning the God. (80)

Soon afterwards the people hem in the hut of Sugana realizing that the God has entered his house. The Mundas could not find the God under the aegis of Jesus as it turned all the hollow tales of ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ for them. The people prepare a folksong in which they say that those that don’t believe Birsa would all die and only those believing him will survive and see the days of happiness. Birsa is supposed to make a new world. Birsa inspires his people to keep hygienic conditions around them and their households. He asks them to quarantine the diseased, boil water mixed with salt and not to eat stale food. All the Mundas leave the mission. As the hygienic conditions are inspired by Birsa the small pox evaporates from Chalkad. Birsa’s mother is convinced that her son is the real God:

Birsä, are you the real God? The small pox entered the village and was there any occasion on which it didn’t take away twenty-twenty five lives? (90)

Mahasweta Devi says that probably the life at mission and that under the influence of Vaishnavism, in particular, may have led Birsa to such cleanliness. There are a lot many people gathering around Birsa which is to
set a threat to the British Empire. The government is just under threat. Despite the fact that there is famine, the Mundas do not go to the mission to beg food. They do not borrow money from the moneylenders, therefore, the landlords and moneylenders fall in the clasp of worry. This all happens because of Birsa, it is his magic. The police come to him and ask him to stop uniting people this way. Birsa is overdeified here. He talks to the police. He says that ‘he is the God even more powerful than that found at the mission (27). The police arrest him.

The Mundas feel proud now being born the ones. Previously a sense of inferiority took them over but now they are proud. All the Mundas gather around the police station at Simla to fight for the cause of Birsa; they want him acquitted immediately. Amulya Babu tries to sympathize with Birsa but Birsa takes him, too, for a Diku. Amulya Babu recalls his time with Birsa at Chaibasa and is amazed to see a new Birsa, the very Birsa that is capable enough to reach the sun. Birsa believes that the king, landlords, Dikus, Rajputs and Brahmins are all in league with the government. Therefore, the government supports them. Actually Amulya Babu is a real friend of Birsa. The rebel mundas and other Mundas become part of the movement of Birsa. Mahasweta Devi sometimes uses digressions in her narration, e.g. her description of sister of Dhani (113) that seems to break off the tone of the story. The Mundas are industrious and self-respected to an extent. They work till the last drop of their blood but would not spread
hand before anybody for food. Moreover, when angry they can cleave their master alive. The landlords and moneylenders make them the bonded labourers. Birsa is sentenced hard labour for two years.

Again, the Mundas turn out the Christians. It seems difficult to understand the exact point of view of Mahasweta Devi as why she often represents the Mundas on both the sides when again advocating for their self-respect and loyalty. Parmi is a character that falls for Kanu, Birsa’s younger brother but she is betrothed to Birsa. Sali is another woman that is quite smart. She easily dodges the police. However, Mahasweta Devi gives a redundant narration to represent her person (125). For example, the description of Sali’s *naked* body is quite unnecessary. Sali is married to Donka, a man double of her age, a two-time widower. She always curses her father for such a marriage. She lives in Bartodi. Donka is proud to be a Munda. There are no rains for two years since the time Birsa is gaoled. Birsa has already promised the police of not arousing any rising. As soon as Birsa comes out of gaol, he is reminded of his word time and again. The starvation causes death of many Mundas which is a special issue of concern to Birsa and his people. The Mundas are also made to pay heavy tax and rent upon the land they cultivate. This adds to the already seething anger of the Mundas. They start thieving grain from the granary of the landlords (28). This representation of Mahasweta Devi poses a challenge to her own
statement: ‘The tribals are more civilized people.’ Birsa’s mother is unhappy to see his probable doom. She expresses her concern:

Yes Birsa, yes. You can understand the sorrow of the world and you don’t of the mother that exposed you to the very world, do you? You became the God. Okay! But the path you are to choose, if you tread upon it, the government would not let you alive. (136)

Birsa convinces his mother that he would bring all the land under the control of himself and she should not worry. Sali asks Birsa to relieve Parmi from his betrothal which he agrees to. She also donates her son to Birsa who names him after ‘Pariba’. The intention behind this is to make the boy his successor. Birsa calls a meeting at the house of Sali, Bortodi. He grooms the people for joining his movement but warns that they might suffer a lot. Birsa is now wholly determined that he does not have a second thought in proceeding in his movement. He convinces his people—

The forests belong to us. We would thrust into the forest and hills, set up our tents. They have guns but how many will shoot the guns? We are in thousands. (140)

Birsa sets up his plans to fight against the enemies. He plans to call meetings at night. He appoints the purveyors of information and the people to shelter the activists.
First of all, Birsa aims to take over the temple of Puri that once belonged to the tribes but now is prevented to them from entrance. He declares:

Now the light battle to be stopped. All the Mundas will start fighting together simultaneously all over. The name of this battle of ours ‘Ugulaan’ [Rebellion]. (141)

Hundreds of the Mundas have the same name upon their lips: ‘Ulgulan’. Palus Munda who, as a missionary priest, initially supported the police now undergoes a sense of transformation thinking that even the mission could not help the Mundas from starving. Mahasweta Devi spares no chance of criticizing the move of evangelism. It comes forth again if Mahasweta Devi is not in the attempt of metaphorizing Jesus through Birsa—

A great day this one is. My age has commenced… our days have come up dear people. I shall gain you your state back. In my reign all the land will belong to all. There would not be hedgerows round every field. All the people would cultivate land together. Whatever the crop, it would be shared by all. If someone picked up by himself to give someone else, even then under my reign no single Munda would monopolize. In my reign there should be no quarrels and battles. The religion [justice] would rule. As our forefathers ran the rule of religion so will be happening in my state. I will not run the rule with stick, batons and swords. (148)
Birsa wants to drive out the British, landlords and all the enemies from the country. Birsa makes an overstatement:

Victory will be ours. On that day you will swell with pride and waving hands, caressing moustaches will celebrate. Those that do not respect me will be no more. I will look after them who consider me.

(148)

The commissioner of Ranchi has already asked the blower to inform the people that Birsa has raised his head again to provoke the mundas. Bortodi is a place ten miles away from the police station and located in a complex forest. Birsa stops all the celebration of olden times. Karmi weeps for Birsa but she is not supposed to weep as being mother of the God. Sugana is proud of his son now and so is Karmi. Birsa was born in Bagwa but brought up in Chalkad. The first meeting of the rebellion finishes off at the house of Jagari Munda during the month of February at the foot of a mountain. One is made mindful of Robert Frost’s (1985) ‘The Road not Taken’ when Birsa says:

When you tread on the path of battle, many thorns, more of the sorrow. At a time the life may be left out, you may have to starve, may have to grapple in the gaol. But this is unavoidable now. (65)

While Jagari Munda cleaves a tree of Banana, Birsa makes a violent statement that they should cut the kings and officers alive now. Birsa is conscientious of a sense of inheritance. He says that the ancestors of the
Mundas had built up the first fortress at Navratan. When Amulya Babu meets the deputy Mukherjee, Mukherjee is reminded of his promise he had made, catching the sacred thread around his neck to rid the Mundas. Mukherjee’s generosity seems to be presented in an exaggerated form. Jagmohan Singh and the police are equally terrified by the way the things go for the Mundas. All the Mundas are sanguine that soon their rule would take place and the Dikus would run away. However, a blind Munda is unhappy to think that his sight would be no more to see the glorious times of the Mundas ahead. Birsa has succeeded so far from the perspective of removing the superstition from the life of Mundas. The Mundas want but the same rule the pre-historic tribals undertook.

The Mundas collect bows, axes and spears as the means of fight. They are thickly united. Birsa gives harsh scold to his elder brother, Komta when the latter breaks in the topic of his mother. Birsa wants to keep everybody’s head in its proper place, not upon the shoulder like does *Othello*, the *Shakespearean* (2009) character. Sailrakab is the hill place upon which Birsa stamps a white flag as the symbol of the Munda identity and the red one being symbolic of the atrocious Dikus. He asks the Mundas to seek shelter through the caves. The fire upon a hill is to be taken as the symbol of ‘Ulgulan’.

There are some Birsaites that are suspicious about participation of the non-Birsaites. However, Birsa Munda is confident of everybody’s
participation for he knows that every Munda is a victim of exploitation of
the Dikus and their evil policies. They, the Mundas, believe that they 1)
will not pay the landlords rent 2) should get the land without any tax 3)
claim the forest basically therefore want their privilege. The anti-
missionary agendum also persists with them:

The Mundas are the genuine owners of the land… And if this heaven
is to be captured, there should be the country under the aegis of the
Mundas. In that country, the sahibs, government servants and
missionaries should be no more. (183)

Birsa declares, in 1899, that the rebellion will be divided into two portions.
The first move: to terrify the Christians by setting fire on and hitting arrows
at them. The second: commencing battle using the implements. On the day
of Christmas, the Mundas hit arrows at German Mission. The people there
are left helpless. At times one finds there some negative remarks upon the
Mundas. For instance, the comments upon the dark colour of them and the
following remark take the reader by surprise—

From where do the Mundas that are poor, without means, luckless get
in this ease and status? Because they are inheritors of the ancient
culture? But they are without culture. They are wild and without
manners [...]. (191)

The statement inspires one to take a course to Achebe (17.06.2013) who
critically assesses Joseph Conrad. Singhbhoom faces the dangerous kind of
incidents at the hands of the Mundas. The missions are set on fire. The statement ‘Cut the black Christians off, cut the white Christians off’ (192) confirms the fact that the author is upset to an uncalculable degree with the Christians. The Christians find a dark presentation of themselves in the novel.

Birsa says that their enemies have money and weapons beyond limit but the Mundas’ keeping life at stake is what they particularly lack in. Gaya Munda kills two constables and the violence reaches at its peak. The government wants to crush the rebellion. Gaya is taken to gaol after a hard time as his wife also has fought for him practically. The Christians are represented as the main target of the Mundas. Commissioner Streatfield has been given the charge of looking into the affair. The Mundas gather on Sailrakab. There is besieging set by the police. The Munda women also actively participate in the fight thinking that death in such a fight means reaching heaven. Mahasweta Devi also leaves some scope for some kind of indoctrination. For example, she derives some stories like Bhakta Pralhad, etc. from Hindu mythology. Birsa disappears, without any clue, from the location. This mars the trademark of his bravery a little. The newspapers, ‘The Englishman’ and ‘The Statesman’ publish the news of the battle. About 400 Mundas are feared to have died. Barrister Jacob is always after searching the details of the Mundas. The author attacks Hoffman, a
Christian missionary, for his cruel approach towards Mundas. The account of S. K. Singh changes its course on Hoffman, however:

Hoffman personally did not harbour any bitter feelings against the rebels. He tried directly and indirectly to persuade some of the Mundas of the absolute futility of their hopes of overthrowing the government. He advanced money to some Mundas in the village of Simbua engaged in a suit against a Hindu. Samu Munda and other Birsaites accepted his money and decided to kill both Father Carbery and him. In Dolda he fed and clothed the wives and children of three men who in the first Birsa movement had been imprisoned for six months. (Singh 111)

The police and military are deployed in the circles of Ranchi and Singhbhum.

The government declares Rs. 500/- as award for the capture of Birsa, Rs100/- for Donka, Majhiya, Budha and Paran Pahan each. To make the Mundas starve and trouble their women is the strategy of the police. Mani Pahani takes Donka and Majhiya to the police and wins Rs. 20/- as award. She is a strategic traitor who buys rice for Birsa, Sali and Parmi. She warns Sali to chew the grains of rice instead of cooking it. The Mundas are very much troubled by the missionaries, landlords and the police. This brings up a forceful conversion.
Birsia is in the hiding along with the two women, Sali and Parmi at Rotota. The women are already instructed to not cook the rice lest there be the steam that would attract the police. However, as soon as parmi sees the rice, she could not resist the temptation of cooking it. The steam goes up and attracts Tamariya and other five Mudas that capture Birsia who is asleep. This puts an end to the rebellion of Birsia who has believed that there is no end to ‘Ulgulaan’. Sali runs away as per the command of Birsia. Sashibhushan Rai, Majhi Tamariya and some five Mudas have the claim to Rs. 500/- Birsia is shackled like the *Emperor Jones* by O’Neill (2009) and in the shackles does he die. On the ninth of June, it is declared that Birsia suffered loose stools three times overnight. He is declared to have died of Cholera at his 25.

The novel presents loyalty of the Mudas on the one hand and treachery on the other. Therefore, their claim to full civility comes in question for a while. A character like Suren Banarjee enjoys certain magnitude of dignity as: great, popular and weighty. The novel, historical as it is, has included the facts about Birsia’s life. His status as a prophet has been elaborated by the novelist. Likewise, his *Ulgulan* has been successfully presented by Mahasweta Devi. Birsia was probably the strongest and foremost voice of rebellion in the tribal history of India. The author ends the novel with the diary of Amulya Babu in the form of epilogue. Amulya is really benevolent a character that resigns from his
service for the cause of Birsa and his people. His character shares some traits of Cyril Fielding presented by E. M. Forster (2008).

**Bedanabala** is another work of fiction by Mahasweta Devi that disinters from the corpus of Indian history contribution of the subalterns to Indian freedom struggle. Indian history has ever remained subject to the pen of elite groups. This, otherwise, means that the subalterns are hardly given any exposure in the books of Indian history. To corroborate the statement, one could go for the battle of the *Sudras* (the subalterns) against the *Peshwas* (the elites) that was fought on the bank of Bhima, a river in Maharashtra. It seems quite incredible to learn that a batch of just five hundred untouchable soldiers trounced twenty eight thousand Peshwa soldiers within the duration of but twelve hours. Nevertheless the event does not find its reflection in the mere of the mainstream history. Pradip Singh Attri (01.01.2010) records his view:

> History of India is nothing but the fight/struggle between untouchables and so called upper castes. Historians those are [sic] ought to be rationalist, have always misled masses and never showed the true face of Indian history. Hence, this battle has also been lost into history and no reference is found in any history book.

(24.07.2011)

Attri calls it a battle of self-respect². Milind *Pandit* (2011) also says that ‘the fight was for the sake of establishment of equality. Unfortunately, the
general level history has not taken a note of this. This is the problem of our history’ (53). Mahasweta Devi makes a distinct exception in this regard. Her endeavour to bring the looked-down-upon class— to which the Bedanabalas belong, to the fore shows her intrepidity as well as social commitment.

*Bedanabala* is the first-person narration which starts at a brothel. Did’ma is the head of the place. The narrator’s mother is Kamala, named after Kamalini by Did’ma. She belonged to a zamindar family, forced into the sex work business. Did’ma buys infant girls to either make them the sex workers or sell them to the rich. The police inspector, daroga, has been hand in glove with Did’ma.

Did’ma owns a three-story house. There is Banwarilal-lawyer who is a regular at the brothel. With his help Did’ma invests money. She believes that a whore cannot get to heaven owing to her sins:

**You should be retire now.**

**Now look. This trade’s been in my family for generations. There are many conventions to be followed. Only scaly fish to enter the kitchen, taken my vows before the priest of last rites, sworn not to babu any more. Buried my money in the floors of temples, paid for slab after slab of marble. The footfalls of so many devotees. Oh, such a blessing to get even a fistful of that dust! Won’t go to heaven but won’t go to**
heaven but won’t go to hell either. I’ll look after my girls the best I can. (Bedanabala 4)

The expression implies that a sense of guilt haunts the Did’ma and no God turns up to relieve her of the pain of disrespect and dishonour of the people. The girls around pay Did’ma rent. Kamla is named after so for her looking like a flower in full bloom. There is a sex worker, Mani, who runs off and gets back. After getting back, she has been thrashed ruthlessly by Did’ma. She runs away again but to nobody’s avail. Once Mani, as a child of six, was kidnapped from Nabadwip (Bardola fair) and introduced to the brothel. Now she goes to the ghat and discovers her mother. When talking to her mother, the mother just disowns her for fear that her family would be ostracized and driven out of their village. Also, she fears that the other daughters of her may not get married. She insists that either Mani drown or her family into the Ganga. Mani thinks that the society thinks of her and other sex-workers as being ‘rotten at the core’ and calls them ‘kept women’. Out of absolute frustration, Mani jumps into the river but the fishermen save her. She undergoes a lot of inquisition. Did’ma is so upset with her. Finally she tells her that she (Mani) would find the customers hemming in as soon as she bleeds for the first time.

Did’ma tells Mani that the customers have their bodies full of filthy disease. And they think that having sex with the virgins they can find cure:
Ma, dearest. You know what those men are like don’t you? Don’t have to tell you. Every whoring house in every whoring house in every port and they have been there. Their bodies full of filthy disease. They want only fresh virgins, before they reach puberty. That cures their ills, they think. Don’t know about them but the girls rot and crumble soon after. Die. (16)

Here Mahasweta Devi attacks the male society that spoils even the whores. Theirs has been a pathetic situation. Did’ma does not have such a fate.

Kamla tells the lawyer that she used to read the *Patita Puran* and has stopped doing it since the ‘puran’ has interpreted women as the bundles of sin:

The *Patita Puran is hard to come by these days. My own copy is in tatters. There was a time when I’d read it, often. Now I do so no longer. All it does is convince[s] you that women are, since the moment of their births, no more than bundles of sin.* (17)

The lines clearly show the feminist consciousness in an unchaste woman. This is how Mahasweta Devi brings honour to her characters.

Did’ma has been fairly fluent at reading Bengali, addicted to reading. She reads many types of books like Kalidasa’s riddles or plays and novels being some of them. She is a practical-minded woman as well when it comes to money and estate. A brothel-keeper’s infatuation with books is something of value to think of.
Mahasweta Devi describes the overall environs at the brothel. For instance, there is a priest of the last rites who marries a prostitute to her profession— the first step into her new life. At the rite the prostitute vows to be obedient to each and every customer, no matter whoever he is. Generally the profession starts at 14 or 15 years of age but Did’ma, i.e. Kamini, protracts it to the woman’s 16 or 17. Soon the wind of ‘Swadeshi’ blows through the brothel. There is a mission, Nabya Hindu Mission, motivated by the spirit of nationalism. The aim of the mission is to reform ‘the bogus deviations of Hinduism’ and fight for the cause of nation. Swami Sadananda leads the mission involving each type of individual. More importantly, he entails the sex-workers for the cause. Kamini (Did’ma) regularly attends the mission, Kamala being with her. There is another brothel-keeper called Satyabhama who sells off her brothel and contributes the money to the mission. This is an attempt on Mahasweta Devi’s part to evince that even the sex-workers have been no less behind the civil congregation, although spurned and made rejects, when it comes to the national cause:

Soon after the Damodar flood occurred. The Nabya Hindu Mission took out processions, marched through the streets, singing, collecting rice-cloth-so-much-more and then rushed to the afflicted areas to help the victims. That was when a large part of funds was a contribution from a famous red-light area in Calcutta. (27)
At the mission, there is Boro-babu, the son of a zamindar of Bhagalpur, who comes and sneaks glances at Kamala. Soon they fall for each other. He is 30 and Kamala 17; he is twice married—one wife having died and the other having left him. Both the marriages were forcefully arranged. Kamini has founts of love, affection and affinity for Kamala, therefore, does not wish to force her into the profession. There are two reasons for that: Kamala looks so very beautiful and she is dead innocent. Her innocence could be discovered in the following lines:

*What’ll happen to me, Mani?*

*The same that’s happened to us. Born and bred in a whore’s house.*

*You’ll be a whore too. I’d rather die.*

*Death isn’t so easy, dear heart. Jumped into the river didn’t I? Soon as I hit the water filled my nose and mouth. Mashi says, whores have been and will be. Always. So? What does beauty matter. How does youth save your hide? You’ll have to take your clothes off all the same, no?* (36)

Always feeling Kamala’s innocence, Kamini does not perform the rite of profession for her and thinks of marrying her to a prince. Mani is so much upset with Kamini over this yet supports her. Kamala has already vowed to herself of not entering the profession at all and, in case forced, of hanging herself. Moreover, it is Kamla’s presence and accompaniment that brings about what Longinus (2007) calls a sense of the ‘sublime’, a total
transformation in Kamini. Kamala makes the beat of Kamini’s heart, the apple of her eye. She says:

It’s only after loving Kamal that I seek to atone for my sins. (28)

Kamini is determined to give up the trade after seeing Kamal get settled in life. She asks the son of zamindar if he could marry her Kamal. Boro-babu replies that he thinks that it is only Kamal that can make him lucky enough and make his world complete: ‘It’s rare good fortune to find a wife like her.’ Overwhelmed by the babu’s reply, Kamini warns him of the contingent fate she would have incurred:

If I’m still in the line I won’t ever darken my daughter’s door. I’d paid for her, wanted her to join the line. But as the day for that draws closer, my heart weakens, my will fails me. If you hadn’t asked for her hand . . . I’d have jumped into the river with her . . . (40)

Usually the women from the brothel die a suicidal death when falling for someone specific and after being used and thrown. Even Satyabhama’s own sister falls victim to such a circumstance. But this is not to happen to Kamal.

Balrambabu Balram Ray (Boro-babu) has been a convict in a bomb-explosion case and is sheltered at Kamini’s for two days which also shows Kamini’s commitment to the national cause. This she does as per the edict from Babathakur, i.e. Sadanand Maharaj. In fact Did’ma is moved by the
thought that the Maharaj and Balram trust her. This is something unusual to her sight.

‘Satyabhama-didi! Such a great man, the Maharaj himself, that babu-all of them trust us.

A noble deed, truly.’ (34)

Now Did’ma is totally determined to marry Kamal off and sign over her house in her name. She also wants to transfer all her deposits in Kamal’s name. Actually Kamini is so obsessed with Kamal. However, finally the deal pays off and Kamal gets married with Balram in a large boat and she remains like a queen not only of her husband’s heart but also of his palace. Now all the worries of Did’ma are over yet she is not allowed into the palace under the fear that the people around would make a fuss about it. Mani visits the mansion once in a while and Did’ma, learning through her about happy stance of Kamal— finds her solace beyond compare.

Balram advises Did’ma to sell her brothel for the sake of national cause. Moreover, she is feared to think of the 20-25 women she deployed in prostitution. She feels that it is not a bad deal to sell it off all but the mainstream society would not accept the women. She is also informed that she would be grandmother soon. Hearing this, Kamini’s pleasure knows no bounds. She thinks of acting the midwife but is made to realize that the times have all changed and the modernization has fetched in the machinery called the doctors, nurses and others to look after it. Kamini is a penitent
that undergoes the penance to a great extent for having run the profession of ‘sin.’

Bedanabala, the narrator, shares talks with Mani. She is so much engrossed with thinking of her mother’s past and beauty that easily sent the creation numb. Afterwards she, in a blurred way, comes to learn through Mani that her mother was a child descending from an aristocratic family—the zamindars—who was snatched away, in fact stolen, by certain gypsies that used to bribe either the child or the maids. All in all, it has been a heartrending affair for the parents, mother in particular. Kamal keenly wants a daughter that would certainly equal a hundred sons. This indirectly shows Mahasweta Devi’s leaning towards the female child, her consciousness about gender.

Kamal has been so beauteous that the talks about her pulchritude spread like wildfire. She has been stolen from an aristocratic family, the ancestry instrumental for her physical make-up. The Swadeshi activists accept donations from the prostitutes which is a fair sign of accounting for humanity. The prostitutes at Did’ma’s brothel think that being a householder happens to be the destination of a woman’s life. The marriage between Kamal and Balram Ray has been a success story, an ideal match where there is a life of peace, satisfaction, respect/reverence and natural affinity between the husband and wife. Every subject of the house has been amply pleased with the marriage. The house follows Vaishnavism. Balram
wants his daughter to be much more educated for he believes that ‘education is the way to bring up my girl, help her stand on her own two feet.’ He wants her match to be a ‘ghar-jamai, i. e. the live-in son-in-law.’ Bedanabala is but his-given name. It sounds old-fashioned yet Balram has his obscurantism behind that adoption.

There are many people visiting Balram’s house and discussing a lot with him, Kamal being no party to the conversation. Moreover, when Shankar and his fellow activist of Swadeshi come home, Kamal is all obvious over the matter. She realizes that sitting at home her husband gears up the movement of freedom struggle. She asks Shankar how his arm, he had once injured and sought refuge at Didma’s, has been, it is a staggering experience for him. But when Shankar attempts to censure Balram for his marrying Kamal, a woman from Brothel, Balram reproaches him in response:

The first to provide refuge was satyabhama. Then the mission. And then Kamini. We’ll take refuge, seek out shelter. Accept their tender ministrations. Gratefully use their donations to our cause. But when it suits us we’ll turn bhadrolok and through this sudden windfall of respectability, we’ll ask ‘You married her?’ (55)

His rebuke continues:

Prostitutes. Whores. Kept women. And who are they, who visit them? Who enter their rooms? Young men, from homes like yours and mine.
But they are innocent, isn’t that so? All the sin left behind to keep these women company? No Shankar. If this is so then it is best we go our separate ways. (55)

Balram’s severe reprimand effects transformation of Shankar and his friend. They both then bow to Kamlal’s feet.

Mahasweta Devi has denoted that if trusted and respected, the fallen women can play a radical role in turning any moral undertaking into big success. This is where she is so special.

Balram is a man of largesse, sublimity of heart. He is a feminist to the core and a champion of equality. Therefore, he says that ‘these women (prostitutes) will play a role in the struggle for our freedom’ and his statement is never disproved and is always authenticated. There has been a constant discussion over prostitution. Occasionally, even women are termed cruel for their buying and selling female infants. This provokes the conscious reader intellectually. For a while even the reader enters the meditation.

Balram Ray shares a taste for literature. When he learns that Tagore has received the Nobel Prize for literature, he is but ecstatic. He celebrates the occasion buying clothes for all the people at home. To him, Tagore ‘has placed a crown upon our brow.’ After some days, when Balram plans to take his family to the pilgrimages of Cuttack and Puri, they receive the news of Did’ma’s death. She dies of chest pain. Mani informs it to Balram
and his people how devoted Kamini went in her last days: regular visits and donations to the mission and paying visits to temples to pray for the safety of Balram, Kamal and Bedanabala. Mani cuts her hair to perform the fourth day rites on the banks of the Ganga itself. Finally, she is offered shelter at Kamal’s mansion under consonance between Balram and her. Kamal says that it is the society that inscribes the pathetic fate on the prostitutes who have to always keep at receiving end. The couple makes an appeal that right to education and free clinics would be a possible solution to the problems of the Kaminis and Manis.

Mahasweta Devi has so dexterously handled the issue of prostitution and that too unfailingly. She has brought about, or explored for that matter, the themes of women’s suffering, patriotism/nationalism and modernization. The novelette gives out a voice to protect ‘human rights’, the term mostly sought after at the juncture of time: ‘So I tell you today, each prostitute, each sex worker, has the right to light , to break free of the darkness’ (76). The novelette closes with the above note by Bedanabala, the first person narrator.

Structurally the novelette follows an effective method of narration. However, there is at times the technicality of connecting the space of time so far as the tenses are concerned; the same has been prevalent in almost every of Mahasweta Devi’s creative work. Mahasweta Devi has a unique ability, as a writer, of exploring the various themes. Bedanabala is such a
story that affords psychological healing and the therapeutic to sustain humanity.

**The Queen of Jhansi**

The Mutiny of 1857 has marked Indian history in many ways as far as its interpretations are concerned. In the general level books on history, the mutiny has been considered as a fight guided by the spirit of patriotism whereas there are some other books that challenge the issue of nationalism as the sole inspiration behind the mutiny. P. E. **Roberts** (2005) gives the following causes of the mutiny: 1. The pension of Nana Sahib was withdrawn. 2. The cartridges greased with the fat of cow and pig stirred the spirits of the Hindus and Muslims. 3. The Bengal army disliked service in Afghanistan (364). In addition, what Roberts says further generates a degree of latitude for making allowance for exactitude of truth:

- **Hindu mythology had been disparaged in a brilliant essay by Macaulay, at one time member of the Governor-General’s Council.**
- **Sati** and infanticide had been prohibited. European science, astronomy, and surgery were all opposed to the teaching of the Brahmans. [...] Recent laws had been passed that Hindu widows were free to marry a second time, and the change of religion should not debar the convert from inheriting property. (364)
The foregoing reasons, it seems, definitely carry some sense. Even Mahasweta Devi indirectly supports the aforementioned causes in *The Queen of Jhansi* which would be highlighted later.

*The Queen of Jhansi* is a fictional work of biography that speaks of life of the queen and uses fiction as an art of articulation of history. History has been Mahasweta Devi’s fascination:

I feel that history comes alive authentically through the oral tradition.

I have always been driven by a strong sense of history. (The Queen of Jhansi 321)

What Mahasweta Devi adds more is of special significance:

In all my writings I have tried to present the subaltern point of view.

(321)

Tackling the subject of the queen with Anjum Katyal and Sharmishtha Gupta, Mahasweta Devi says:

I chanced upon Savarkar’s book, ‘Eighteen Fifty Seven’, and the more I read about the Queen of Jhansi, the more I was haunted by her character. After returning to Calcutta I began giving private tuitions to earn a living, but an urge to know about the queen remained with me. (315)

As the book by Savarkar forms the basis of the biography, Mahasweta Devi attaches importance to the folk tradition which, to her, forms a genuine account of history. Reading the biography of the queen, one also comes to
feel as if it were a novel. It is a fine exploration of life of the Queen of Jhansi. The account of the Queen of Jhansi by Mahasweta Devi’s grandmother forms the nub of the text. To Mahasweta Devi, folk songs, rhymes, ballads, popular stories and sayings make the overall life of the Queen. Mahasweta Devi is not happy with the record of the British. Because, thinks Mahasweta Devi— it does not offer respectable account of the queen.

The biography entitled above has been divided into twenty five chapters by the writer. The first chapter deals with the physical background of the place, Jhansi. Mahasweta Devi believes that it is peremptory to be acquainted with the history of Bundelkhand. The Newalkars happen to be the line therein. The writer also says that in the ancient times Bundelkhand was part of the Chedi, Desharna and Vidarbha empires, with Orchha as its capital city. During the sixteenth century, Rudrapratap came to power. In course of time his grandson Virsingha Dev received Barauni as a jagir, i.e. grant of land. He defeated the army of Akbar and went to Datia. Afterwards, Akbar sent a campaign against Virsingha Dev and in a battle on the border of Orchha Virsingha triumphed. Thus he became the king of Orchha and erected three forts— one at Datia, the other at Dhamauni and the last at Jhansi. The last fort was built on the purpose of contending with lions and elephants. This way the place of Jhansi came into being (3-5).
Chatrasal, the son of Champat Rao, another grandson of Rudrapratap became the king of Bundelkhand and adopted Peshwa Bajirao I as his son and handed him Kalpi, Etah, Hridaynagar, Jalaun, Gursarai, Jhansi, Sirauj, Gunah and Sagar as a share under inheritance. The Peshwa appointed Raghunath Newalkar as the Subedar (Governor of a province) of Jhansi. Newalkar developed Jhansi so well that it became a self-sufficient place to a great extent. The writer says that the Peshwa established a centre for scholarly research and a library inside the palace of Jhansi (13). She particularly stresses the books of Sanskrit and Bhagvyad Gita time and again in relation to presentation of the culture of Jhansi, the purpose being unclear (13). There are other factors too like signifying the water of Ganga, sacred thread ceremony, etc. that appear as highlighting the Brahminical legacy and superiority (13). Shivrao Bhau was a younger brother of Raghunath Newalkar to whom Gangadhar Rao was born in 1813. In 1817, Peshwa Bajirao II agreed to let the East India Company have complete authority over Bundelkhand (15). Ramchandra Rao, another son of Raghunath Hari Newalkar from his first wife, ascended the throne in 1821 and cooperated with the British government in suppressing the thugs and donated the government rupees 70000 (seventy thousand) during the Burmese war in 1824 (15).

In fact, Mahasweta Devi denounces the Sindhis and other Marathas labelling them the treacherous since they cooperated with the British and had
loyalty to them. Moreover, it is of note that the above incidents involving Ramchandra Rao escape her opprobrium; though they appear before the Mutiny of 1857, they share the similar kind of loyalty towards the British. Mahasweta Devi does not clarify the thugs that were suppressed. Also, it is not clear as why *Peshwa II* left Maharashtra for Bundelkhand. Maharashtrian history has something bona fide to tell about him— that he was simply vanquished by a mere batch of 500 soldiers under *Siddhanak Mahar* as already noted above. Consequently, the Peshwa had to run away to seek shelter and Bundelkhand was probably the place of sojourn for him. He lived on a stipend from the British, in Bithur.

Chapter 3 of the text speaks of the military skills of a certain Brahmin, Krishnaji Tambe who, it is declared further, acted the commander of the northern Maratha camp in the Third Panipat Battle of 1761. The Queen of Jhansi was born to his grandson Moropant Rao on 21 November 1835 in the Assi Ghat House. Originally named Mankarna, the Queen of Jhansi lost her mother so early. While describing the stance of house of Moropant, Mahasweta Devi puts a lot of emphasis on how the house particularly committed itself to totems of Hinduism:

*There were images of the goddess Mahalakshmi, and the gods Ganesh and Vishnu, in the corner of the house.* (22)

When shown the horoscope of the Queen of Jhansi, Tatia Dikhit predicted that she, becoming a queen, would bestow immortal fame on her husband’s
clan (25). Thus the marriage between the Queen and Gangadhar Rao took place the description of which is given by the writer in an almost grandiose fashion (26-7). Laxmibai was just seven while her husband twenty nine at the time of their wedding.

While describing marital life of the Queen, Mahasweta Devi seems to be magnifying it. For example, she narrates that Gangadhar Rao gave the Queen ample opportunities to learn and in the library of the royal palace the Queen got engrossed to see the abundance of books:

* A pocket edition of the Bhagavadgita was her favourite and she concentrated on studying it. (30)

It seems difficult to deduce if the woman could find any opportunity to learn then and if a seven-year girl could really concentrate on a book making it her favourite. Again, the description of the kitchen in regard with the Queen does not seem up to the mark (31). Even the claim of Mahasweta Devi—‘Among the Brahmans of Maharashtra, married women of good fortune enjoyed a special place of honour at religious functions’ (32), seems quite vulnerable given the circumstances of the time.

A son is born to the couple but when three, he passes away which leaves the couple in downright distress. Lord Dalhousise has already applied the law of the ‘doctrine of lapse’ which means that the ground of inheritance for an adopted son is dismissed. Soon Gangadhar Rao deteriorates in health and on his deathbed a boy is adopted to succeed the
throne. Gangadhar Rao writes a letter to Major Ellis concerning approval to the adopted son, Ananda, as his heir. The letter emphasizes his *loyalty* to the *generous* government (39-40). Another letter on the same theme has also been written to Malcolm and both the letters are forwarded to Malcolm by Ellis but in vain. Gangadhar Rao, an orthodox Brahman, passes away since accepts no medicines from the English doctors. The queen is thus left a widow at so young an age. Later, there is a lot of correspondence between the Queen and the British on a consistent basis. It, however, produces no positive result. *Ellis's* excessive sympathy with the Queen, says Mahasweta Devi, drew their relationship under perverse light. The Queen invariably tries to convince the British of the loyalty of her whole house. Her letter of 16-02-1854 to Dalhousie (57) represents the extreme loyalty of her house to the British. Ramchandra Rao and Bhikaji Nama are also represented (62) to have helped the British in suppressing the rebellion in Kunch district led by Minna Pandit of Parasha.

When realizing that no measure could work her way, the Queen gives out the historic utterance: ‘Meri Jhansi doongi nahi’ [I would not give up my Jhansi.] (68). Looking up the emphasis on the declaration, one could conclude that the fight of the Queen of Jhansi was related to the area of Jhansi rather than covering any other part of the country. It also gives a slight indication that the utterance is a bit far from patriotism.
Chapter 8 describes the routine of the Queen of Jhansi. While describing it, the writer says that the Queen ‘would eat and rest a little, and until three o’clock, write the name of Rama 1,100 times on tiny pieces of paper … She listened to recitations of puranas and devotional songs until eight in the evening’ (80). This looks to be part of cultural introjection. Also, details of the Queen of Jhansi given have been presented such a way that it seems as if the biographer has personally witnessed the Queen’s life. This is where Mahasweta Devi proves a special kind of biographer.

When Colvin, the governor of the North-western provinces, works out the accounts, it is found that the King of Jhansi still owes rupees 36000 from a past debt. The Queen protests it, to no avail, saying that since the British have taken over Jhansi, it is their responsibility to look after it. This basically arouses an intense feeling of rage in the Queen which paves the way of the mutiny. Mahasweta Devi records (81) the opinion of H Kaye and Malleson who write that the incident adds ‘salt to injury’. When elaborating on the exact reasons of the mutiny, Mahasweta Devi reveals it in the ninth chapter that the pivotal case was: ‘The issue of lard-smeared cartridges turned out to be the most insignificant of all the reasons chronicled by English historians for the uprising of 1857, yet indeed was a direct, cause’ (93). This is another point that indirectly justifies the case of P. E. Roberts as referred to earlier.
Apart from the above, ‘the blow the English dealt to the religious beliefs of Indians has been stressed upon as the cause of the rebellion’ (99), in the biography. Among other evil customs practised by the Indians was ‘sati’ (self-immolation by a living widow upon her husband’s funeral pyre) that was abolished by the British, the act having deeply hurt the orthodox soul of the Indians and taken by the latter as encroachment upon their religious rights:

After sati was abolished, wealthy zamindars like Radhakanta Deb got the message, although the general public did not. The loud clamour over British interference with Hindu traditions and customs raised by the feudal kings and priests in 1857 should be judged in this context. The English rulers had merely helped to indirectly awaken these feelings in their minds. That is why it was easy to incite the common people against the British. (100)

The people that are held responsible in effecting the rebellion, per the writer have been Ahmedullah, Wajid Ali Shah (the Nawab ousted from the throne of Ayodhya), Nana Saheb, Ajimullah, Tatia Topi, the Queen of Jhansi, Kunwar Singh and Feroz Shah (101). However, Tatia Topi does not acknowledge his previous connection with the Queen which douses the flame of the mutiny (102). Also, the weak leadership and lack of mutual communication is said to have brought the failure of the revolt.
When it comes to rebellion on part of Mangal Pandey, Mahasweta Devi describes an event that took place at Dum dum barracks in January 1857 (105). A low-caste Shudra soldier asked for a drink of water from a Brahmin’s pitcher. The Brahmin took it for ill-repute of himself. The Shudra soldier reminded him of the fact that they could bite at the cartridges made out of the fat of cow and hog but it pollutes them to give the Shudras water, the latter being but the humans themselves:

The last item to be mentioned is the Enfield Pritchett Rifle. The cartridge of this rifle is an inch long and one fourth of an inch wide at the base; it was actually smeared with fat that had to be torn out with one’s teeth before loading. This new rifle was introduced in 1857 and its range was 900 yards. A storm of protest greeted the use of these cartridges. At Dum dum barracks in January 1857, a low-caste Shudra soldier asked for a drink of water from a certain Brahman sepoy’s personal pitcher. The surprised Brahman wondered how his status could be maintained if he lent the Shudra his own pot to drink from. The Shudra wondered how those about to bite cartridges made out of cow and hog fat could still care about losing caste. This instigated heated discussions in the barracks. (104-5)

The incident enraged Mangal Pandey who shot at Sergeant Major Hughson to save his faith and caste. The forerunning examples forming background of the rising of 1857 lead one to the arena of personal interests rather than
nationalistic ones. It means that the national interest was yet to be looked to.

The British become particularly merciless towards the Indians when their own brethren are finished off by the Indians. Inside the fort of Orchha there are 65 English men, women, infants and children led by Skene. The fort being besieged, there happens the massacre of them. This proves to be the unforgettable trauma for the British who little care for the Indians thenceforth. This catches the Queen in a fix as she is held for the author of the tragedy. She does her level best to assure the British that she was not to blame for this all but all useless. Consequently the rebels, enraged over her positive opinion of the British, want to kill her. This means that she is found between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Another factor behind the rebellion is that the British shake out 3240 soldiers, in 1854, that are, as a result, subjected to incessant economic hardship. The participation of rebels includes the people from higher castes: Bundelas, Thankurs, Kachchis, Kon’s and Telis. The Queen also invites Afgan, Pathan and Makrani Muslims to join the force led by her. The account of the people comprises the elites and there is hardly any case of the untouchables (subalterns) of the time. She appoints Laxmanrao Bande the Prime Minister, Ramchandra Rao Deshmukh the Finance Minister, Nana Bhopatkar the Chief Justice, etc. There is Gopal Rao working as record keeper in the Jhansi Criminal Court under the British.
He, moreover, keeps the Commissioner of Jabalpur constantly informed of the queen’s activities. Though a treacherous person, Mahasweta Devi does not get as harsh on him as she does on the Sindhias. The writer says that the people of the Queen’s time kept strong allegiance to their own faith but did not hesitate, for example Hindus and Muslims, to join the Queen. The untouchables and other cast-off sections of society do not find a mention in the description which means that either they did not have a room or the historians turned a blind eye to them deliberately.

It is emphasized in the text that the surrounding Rajput states followed extreme loyalty to the British and were opposed to Jhansi. An especial mention is that among the Maratha states, the really powerful Gwalior and Indore were the British allies (137).

The twelfth chapter of the text emphatically states how Brahminical values are strictly maintained by the orthodox Brahmins. Their deities, Mahalakshmi, Vishu, Ganpati and Shiv are specifically worshipped. At the palace, various rituals are enacted. The author claims that the women dominated Jhansi leading an absolutely free life:

Women dominated Jhansi and nowhere else could women roam so freely. After their evening ablutions, women in pretty saris, flower garlands entwined in their hair, would visit the temples with offerings of copper and silver coins. (141)
It is interesting to note that the life for women was really enjoyable then or, given the time, one would come to doubt if what the author has narrated about women’s liberal life is true so far as the orthodox Indian context is concerned. In the palace of the Queen, Lalubhau Dhekre enjoys a position of supreme obeisance being the family priest. The purpose of the Queen’s worship is noted as a matter of penance for her not cutting hair after her husband’s demise.

Mahasweta Devi points out that the Queen used to invite the women from Maharashtra from the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya castes and did not keep any kind of communal discrimination:

At the Queen’s invitation, many Marathi women of the Brahman, Kshatriya, and vaishya castes came. She entertained them hospitably without any discrimination she had never believed in discriminating between high and low castes. (146)

Moreover, there is no reference to the excluded class, the untouchables or the Shudras in this respect. One more instance that goes in favour of the Brahmins has been available (152-3) in the text. During the Queen’s independent rule, so narrates the author, there were two prisoners held in Jhansi fort — Sadashiv Narayan and Malhari. The crime of Sadashiv is not explicit while that of the latter has been explained as being guilty of having stolen the jewellery of the theatre established by Gangadhar Rao.
Malhari is not in receipt of any sense of clemency whereas the former is as being part of the established family of the palace:

**Malhari has no loyalty to myself or to Jhansi. He betray all my friends, relatives and helpers one by one to the English at the first opportunity. For the good of many, he has to immediately pay with his life.** (213)

Whenever there is the fight between the British and Indian soldiers, the number of Indian soldiers goes a hundred times more than that of the British. Tatia Topi, a guerilla warrior, and Nanasaheb want the rule of Peshwas re-established; therefore, make an appeal to the people for the same. The author claims (174) that while the English were aided by the Sindhia of Gwalior, the Holkars of Indore, the Gaikwars of Baroda, Jangbahadur of Nepal, the Queen of Orchha, the Begum of Bhopal, the King of Panna and other puppets, so she calls them, the only person in whom the sepoys found their ideal was the Queen of Jhansi. What she speaks of the Sindhias later on is more shocking:

**What can Sindhia and Dinkar Rao do by themselves? They are not Christians, so how can they count on the Sahibs’ [British] help? I am Raosaheb Peshwa and you are nothing but a ten-rupee servant of an opium-addicted subedar! Once, the Sindhias used to carry our shoes. We were kind enough to give Gwalior to them as a reward. What is it to you if I take back my own territory?** (264)
The statement appears inclusive of glorification of the Peshwas and devaluation of the Sindhias and Christians. This would make a curious issue for a historical debate. Although Mahasweta Devi speaks of loyalty of the above rulers to the British, being extremely harsh upon them, she leaves out the Queen and her family for having maintained the similar kind of loyalty to the British.

When the British besiege the fort of Jhansi, the Queen escapes during the time of night. She is, therefore, rendered homeless and has to seek sojourn at Tatia Topi’s. The British ready themselves to face any attack on part of the Indians. There is a battle between the British troops and the Indian sepoys led by Gulam Ghaus Khan. The British take over the situation and crush down the Indian resistance. Lalabhau Dhekre is a Brahmin, the family priest of the Queen’s palace, whose religious orders the Queen follows without any hesitation. The British soldiers are led by Hugh Rose successfully. His military strategies have been absolutely commendable; the Indian strategies always fail. 1500 Indian soldiers are killed whereas there are only 20 killed on the British side. The defeat makes the Queen run away from Jhansi on the eve of first April 1857.

The incident and Tatia Topi’s defeat despite his deploying 20000 soldiers deeply hurt and discourage the Queen leaving her dejected and spiritless and she also turns amnesiac. The British raze down the fort of Jhansi. The event makes the roads slippery with blood. When describing
the gallantry of the Queen, Mahasweta Devi does not fail to delineate it with proofs yet when referring to cruelty of the British, she does not produce any proof (210; 219) of it which holds the reader in dubiety. For instance, she narrates, no proof offered, that the colonel says that he enjoyed very much chopping the Indians, burning villages and killing natives. Of course, one could not afford to connive at the bestialty of the British towards Indians.

After the defeat the Queen of Jhansi escapes again but her father is captured by the British and sentenced to death. Her mother has already left Jhansi under a speculation on death. The Queen escapes again for the third time. There are many bodies lingering for the lack of cremation; many of them decomposed. The British keep the people from performing funeral. There is an example of a Brahmin widow who wants to get performed the last rites of her son at the hands of Vishnubhatta, a Brahmin. The dead is cremated with the use of bed, almirah, doors and window frames of the widow’s house. Mahasweta Devi introduces an episode of Jhalkari Korin (224), the wife of Puran Korin and daughter of a Bundelkhandi farmer. She narrates that Jhalkari, dark and beautiful, was inspired by the Queen. When the Queen is conquered by the British, Jhalkari goes to Hugh Rose and claims: ‘I am Lakshmibai, the Queen of Jhansi’. She adds further that Jhalkari is never afraid of death.
Chapter 19 is an account that does not go beyond preservation of, it seems, Brahminical values. One does not find the common or subalterm names associated with the feats. The Queen is elected the Commander in Kalpi under whom the other leaders including Tatia Topi are to work. Tatia Topi withdraws all on a sudden which deals a big blow to the Queen. She becomes mortified. To her solace, there is the Nawab of Banda, a very brave and valiant warrior (237). It seems interesting a fact that a man with 9000 men behind him and a very brave-cum-valiant warrior himself could prepare to work under a lady supportless with Tatia Topi’s quitting at a crucial juncture of time. This shows his sincerity to the Queen. One would probably fail to have a clue to gather as to why the Nawab should not lead from the front.

Rao Saheb declares himself to be the chief of the group led by the Queen. This adds to the trouble of the Queen. Since the battle is lost to the British, the army under the Queen is left without any source. The rebellion is thus totally crushed in central India. Devoid of money, resources, soldiers, horses, cannons and war equipment, the Queen and her company plan to attack Gwalior and seize the soldiers, gunners, cavalry, forts, palaces, etc. to fight out the British again. Absolutely penitent over his deed, Tatia Topi re-joins the group. Mahasweta Devi takes a historical view of Gwalior calling it ‘a jewel on the bosom of India’ (257). Later she brings under light the person of Jayajirao Sindhia—she turns extravagantly
harsh on Jayajirao calling him the ‘dull-witted, vain and ill-educated’ giving reference of *The Times of India* (260). She emphatically says that Jayajirao was not only a misfit on the throne but also an ally of the British who ‘wanted to handover the Queen to the British’ (265).

In the opinion of the author, millions of Maharashtrians in the west and south revered the Peshwa as their rightful heir (270). At once, the Queen and her company take over Gwalior and prepare for the eventual battle against the British. Chapter 22 gives the final account of the Queen. While describing confrontation of the Queen with the British soldiers, the writer puts her emphasis on the pearl necklace of the Queen and her appeasement of the Brahmins by offering them food, etc. (274; 280). There is also an exaggeration of climate (281) when she states that the battle was fought under $125^0$ F, i.e. $51.66^0$ celsius (281). The Queen fights bravely and meets her doom in the end. The chapter does not seem to be describing the very bravery of the Queen as is found at length in general. The last chapter of the biography brings out the pathetic subsistence of the successor of the Queen.

The narrative style of the biography has been matchless to an extent. Moreover, the biographer seems to have recorded the life of the Queen subjectively to a large extent. Given the opinion of B. Prasad (1996), one could, therefore, conclude that the text sort of forms a kind of impure biography. Taking the point of view of Eliot (2002) and Arnold (2008)
each for granted, Mahasweta Devi seems to be a bit less of an *impersonal* and *disinterested* writer as far as the biography goes. Moreover, if the biography were seen as a work of historic fiction, then there is nothing wrong with either the author or the biography.

Generally the historiography, controlled by a people in India, has remained so far a matter of universality. In fact, Charles Larson (1995) says that ‘the concept of universality has been grossly misused’ when applied to non-western literature and ‘ignores the multiplicity of cultural experiences’ (63). The same appears to be a fact of the Indian hegemonic context—be it literature, culture or history. It also seems to transpire as if the subalterns have no history of heroic valour and enduring fortitude. It is even notable that the intellectual collective of India are leaned more towards Marxist theory of class which does not coincide with caste:

**Caste is a material reality with a material base [...]. Because of the separation of the economic and social levels under conditions of capitalist production, caste and class no longer coincide.** (Gail Omvedt 9-50)

Even Lamming’s (1995) opinion on history is estimable:

**I am using the term history, in an active sense. Not a succession of episodes which can easily be given some casual connection. What I mean by historical event is a creation of a situation which offers**
antagonistic oppositions and a challenge of survival that had to be met by all involved. (16)

Albeit such is the case of Indian history, Mahasweta Devi’s approach to it has been unparalleled for that matter. Placing the subalterns under the focal point of history is an absolutely singular gesture on her part. It is even remarkable that she exhumes the female characters of history that have remained unnoticed to people on a large scale. Her essay to bring to prominence the sex workers’ role in the independence movement of India merits every word of appreciation. The titles, Aranyer Adhikar, Bedanabala, The Queen of Jhansi and also Titu Mir reverberate through the auditors to be more reflective about history.

Notes
1. Mahasweta Devi said in Pune that ‘it is only the common [subaltern] people that often create history’.

2. Attri further says that it was a battle for self-respect, esteem and against the supremacy of Manusmriti. The battle is important in history, as everyone know[s] that after this battle rule of ‘Peshwa Rao’ ended.

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