Chapter V
Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi has become popular among the readers both in India and abroad through her novels and short stories which are translated into English. Her place in the history of modern Indian literature is secure because she has brought an ardent dedication and a sense of history to her revelation of discrimination and exploitation. Mahasweta Devi was shocked with the middle-class apprehensions of the contemporary writers and so she has made use of her creative energy to give an imaginative expression to the unsympathetic realities of exploitation, poverty and death in the modern society.

The present study employing the post-colonial concepts of ‘oppression and exploitation’, ‘suffering’ and ‘resistance’ is an analysis of select works of Mahasweta Devi. The first chapter deals with oppression and exploitation in the selected works. Bikhni and her daughter Mary were oppressed by their masters who wanted to treat them as their personal possession. Douloti, Draupadi, Sanichari and other women characters were ruthlessly oppressed and were sexually abused by the patriarchal consumerist system. The policies of the local, provincial and national governments too turned to be oppressive and unaccommodating to these individuals. Draupadi and the protagonists in “Behind the Bodice” and “Breast giver” are oppressed and exploited to such an extent that their physical condition collapsed. Similarly, in *Mother of 1084* Sujata’s agony of not knowing her own son was unendurable and she tried to come out of the oppressive forces of her life.

All the women characters presented in the selected works suffered economically or physically or socially; it is not only their bodies that were abused; their physical and
psychological suffering traumatized them and they either wanted to put an end to their suffering or come away from the oppressive forces that had been suffocating them.

Characters like Sujata, Draupadi and Douloti underwent physical and mental suffering as they were sacrificed at the altar of male interests. Characters like Dhouli, Gangor, Josmina and Shanichari suffered sexual abuse due to class and caste discrimination. The women suffered as they were exploited under different masters or conditions.

Though these female characters were portrayed as victims of class-ridden and male-dominated society, they were not pictured as sad swans of suffering. The downtrodden women finally emerged as survivors. Women like Sujata and Draupadi were able to muster courage and question the power structure which oppressed them. Mary Oraon was able to resist the system because she knew that if she submitted, she would not only lose her security but would also stake everything that belonged to her; hence she sought her protection by killing the contractor who posed a threat to whatever she valued —her life, honour and love.

The death of Douloti as her corpse covered the India map would have made everyone ponder about the conditions of India and about ‘real independence’; thereby Douloti had displayed her voiceless remonstration. Gangor, Jasodha, Josmina and the women who suffered due to poverty tried whatever was within their power to resist and overcome their poor condition. Sanichari, who started her life as a very ordinary, humble, apprehensive woman grew to be a bold woman and her fortitude combined with her indomitable spirit emboldened and empowered her to question the power structure and negotiate with the rich without caring for what the society would say. Sujata’s journey led to her discovery and empowered her to break away from the bonds that bound her with the traditional patriarchal society.
When they were not able to show their resistance openly, characters like Douloti showed their reluctance to accept what was forced on them at least in the beginning. Josmina resorted to suicide when she found that she could not have recourse to any means or rely on anyone for her safety. Though her action could not be justified, it could be taken as her way of showing her resistance against the inhuman system. What all these women sought was only an honorable place for them to live a decent, dignified and ‘human’ life.

Mahasweta Devi, as a responsible writer takes a stand in defense of the exploited. She tries to expose the darker areas of life where the harassment of the innocent continues as forceful as before through her characters. She took extra care to expose the tribals’ desire for betterment and modernity. It was due to the awareness created by activists like her that the tribals also learnt to express their desires for a better way of life. The tribals are keen to be educated, to be allowed the right to use modern medicine, to have basic facilities like water, food and shelter. They wanted their dignity and humanity to be given back to them. Though Mahasweta Devi is one of the few writers who have focused their attention on the tribals, very few of them have written about them with her knowledge and compassion. Her language is simple, direct and brings out her message clearly.

Mahasweta Devi has been able to do so because she has been visiting areas of Jharkhand like Singhbhum, Ranchi, Palamau, and Chaibasa and spent time with tribal people who lived for years as bonded labourers and wandering groups. They have no access to education or health facilities and are living amidst the unsatisfactory resources of gradually reducing forests. Mahasweta Devi tirelessly works to improve the conditions of the tribals. She has used her literary work with great efficiency to express her concern for the tribals. Her deep intimacy with the Santhal, Kheria and Lodha tribes are echoed in her writings.
Through her stories, novels, articles, essays and reports, one can learn how the tribal people suffer to gain the facilities and rights which are taken for granted in the mainstream society.

Even now some of the tribes about whom Mahasweta Devi has written resist the stigma ‘criminals’ attached to them under the British administration. Even in the post-independent period, the villagers and the local administration treated them with distrust. Young men who belonged to these tribes were surrounded by the police for any crime committed in their locality, on simple distrust. The tireless activist Mahasweta Devi has been fighting on behalf of the de-notified tribes of India, through her writing and her direct involvement with their organizations.

The efficacy of Mahasweta Devi’s advocacy has crossed the British period, Independence, and sixty years of postcolonial chaos and social change at the core of a half-century of turbulent change. Her writing has motivated two generations of writers and journalists, and filmmakers have given a new life to Indian literature by translating her plays into films.

In Bangla Literature, the voice of Mahasweta Devi reverberates with the possibility of building a new kind of responsibility for the cultural worker in a world that is in progress by now. The troubles of the tribals and the bonded labourers in the southern districts of West Bengal have stirred other writers; but none of them have involved themselves enthusiastically in tribal experience like Mahasweta Devi. She has the ability to record the oral histories of the tribal communities before they disappear totally.

Mahasweta Devi stresses the need for official identification of tribal languages and upholds measures like the need for awarding tribal literary works by organizations like Sahitya Academy and rendering financial support from other cultural departments. She
formed the Adim Jati Aikya Parishad (Tribal Unity Forum) in 1986. Since Mahasweta Devi believed that journalistic contact is essential to publicize the cause of the tribals, she wrote for *Frontier* (Calcutta based) and *Economic and Political Weekly* (national circulation). Mahasweta Devi’s works highlight her deep responsibility towards the making of the modern history of India. Sympathy and kindness join together with various literary devices like the use of myths and an extensive historic imagination resulting in a passion that gives her work a sharpness that is incomparable in contemporary Bangla fiction.

Most of the tribals that Mahaweta Devi has portrayed in her works are non-literates. The spoken mode of these tribal people is an additional aspect to a complex negotiation that the text endures throughout the process of translation. Quite a lot of her stories are translated into English and are gaining national and international recognition.

In majority of cultures, women in society are dependent on men. With the changing times, the position of women has also changed. Women started voicing their protest against the violence meted out to them and have managed to survive with dignity. They also form themselves into groups demanding their rights. A great change took place in the life of women all over the world in the 20th and 21st centuries. People realize that women’s thoughts, feelings, inspirations and values should be given due importance to enable their effective participation in all walks of life.

Women’s participation in all kinds of works and their efficiency earn them the place they deserve. Women Liberation Movements claim equality and emancipation for women. The emancipation of women can be attained only when they are given enough and equal opportunities like men so that they too could engage themselves in profitable employment.
Many steps are taken by the government not only for the empowerment of women but also for the upliftment of the downtrodden.

The basis for human advancement is education. But the tribal women portrayed by Mahasweta Devi do not get the right to use it. Women work inside the house and are disregarded and unrewarded. Women are exploited and oppressed to a great extent. The condition of the educated Sujata of Mother of 1084 is no better and in many households patriarchy prevails even now.

Recognizing the role of education in the upliftment of the downtrodden, steps are taken to give them education. The education of women and the downtrodden is given importance since education would help in their social and occupational mobility. Women should have their right, the essential knowledge and the possessions to standardize their reproductive capacity. But, women cannot achieve equality without economic independence. So, actions should be taken to give them suitable employment opportunities and to develop their economic status and the specification of the necessary communications should be treated as an important and vital part of national and international development policies. A particular percentage of seats are reserved in educational institutions for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in addition to free tuition and text-book aid with the idea that such positive steps would help a child rise above his background. The tribes and the downtrodden should be made aware of all such rights and privileges available to them.

Mahasweta Devi is taking all possible steps to uplift them through her interaction with them, creating awareness among them and educating them.

Despite the government’s efforts, dowry deaths, sexual violence and harassment of women have not been completely wiped out. Likewise, increased incidence of armed
conflicts and rebellion has meant more problems for women by way of destitute homes, broken homes, poverty, sexual abuse and extreme mental agony. Moreover, due to the New Economic Policy and the Structural Adjustment Programmes, women are marginalized not only economically but also politically and socially. Women have to fight dreadfully for their survival.

The mainstream of women who belong to the poorest and most helpless groups in society, homeless women in the world’s great cities, aboriginal-women, women who belong to socially disadvantaged groups like the SCs and STs in India, tribal minority women, women in colonist communities, women who are criminalized because of their gender fall victims to human rights violations. The major issue in this technical society world over is woman’s right to peace, development and equality. The growth of nationalist, successionist and ethnic conflicts which jeopardize all regions of the world with violence and bloodshed increase the plight of women. Opponent groups implement the same methods of oppression and terror in quest of their aims. In all regions of the world, women are killed, raped, ill-treated or taken as captives by armed opponent groups. Despite moves to establish equality for woman on the legislative and political front, discrimination continues to be an international reality.

Even in these advanced and modern times, there are some instances where women are exploited by men. A female physiotherapy student was beaten and gang raped in New Delhi on 16th December 2012. She died after thirteen days though she was taken to Singapore for emergency treatment. She boarded a bus with a male companion after watching a film in South Delhi in the early evening, thinking that it was a public bus. But the bus was driven as an unauthorized “joyride”. Only five men were the other passengers and they were the bus
driver’s friends. All the six men, including the driver, were accused in connection with the sexual assault on her and were consequently arrested.

In another case, a 15 year old tribal girl was gang raped by three youths including a minor in Chhattishgarh. The police have arrested all the four accused. The tribal girl worked as a domestic help in the neighbourhood. The incident occurred when she was returning from a house at around 6 o’clock in the evening and the four youths pounced on her dragging her to an isolated place where they repeatedly raped her.

In yet another incident, a married tribal woman was gang-raped in Odisha. She was sexually assaulted when she went to a river bank along with her husband. The woman came to help her brother who was undergoing treatment in the district headquarters hospital. Among the six men, two were hospital workers. They attacked her husband, and raped her one after another in the presence of her husband. All the six accused were arrested.

Three tribal women and a minor girl who worked at a construction site of Narmada canal were ostensibly gang-raped by seven unidentified men, at Viramgam near Ahmedabad. The tribal women were sleeping inside their temporary plastic tents near the construction site which was located about a kilometer away from Hansalpur village. The men came to the spot and woke up the sleeping persons and separated the men from women. They held the men and children captive and scared them. They raped the three women and a minor girl one by one some distance away from the tents. Then they escaped with Rs. 30,000 - Rs. 50,000 cash and valuables and silver jewellery worth Rs. 20,000. According to police, there are a number of gangs working in the district, who, after stealing from the people, also rape the women so that they will not contact the police.
Thus selected groups of women are mainly exposed to human rights violation. Women who belong to marginalized groups are in double threat. Already victims of discrimination, these women become victims of gender violence also. Discrimination is a fatal disease. More girl-children and women die every day due to gender-based discrimination and violence than due to other types of human rights abuse. More than a million infant girls die every year because they are born female, according to the reports of UNICEF. Every Year, because of discrimination, millions of women are wounded, beaten to death, burnt alive, deprived of their legal rights, and bought and sold in an unappreciated but international trade as slaves for domestic or for sexual purposes. Women are at a risk of series of violent abuses by private organizations and individuals because of their gender. Discrimination, bonded-labour and other such vices are dealt in Mahasweta Devi’s works as she wants to lash out at the society which still keeps them so even after decades of independence.

Apart from laws and legislations, the violence against women can be confronted through attitudinal change which has to take place in the family, in the society particularly in the community of women. The attitudinal change and positive action against violence by every single individual only would help in stimulating the snoozing structures of the government and society towards more tangible steps and action.

The United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts: “All Human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Woman’s freedom, dignity and equality are steadily negotiated by law and custom whereas woman’s rights should be recognized as human rights. One must understand gender-based exploitation as human right abuse. Human rights must start at home. The most apt way to solve the problems of women
is to change the position of woman in society and to make her equally responsible for the welfare of the society and the social order. As human rights are women’s rights also, efforts should be taken to make women aware of their rights and ways to attain them.

Rekha Rastogi brings out yet another aspect of the exploitation of women in “Women and Human Rights”:

The abuse of women by their male partners is among the most common and dangerous forms of gender-based violence. Its victims exceed those of the most brutal dictatorships. As a result of the global mobilization of women, and international attention to certain ongoing atrocities, both official and private violence against women have begun to be recognized as a human rights concern (133).

A cornerstone laid for human rights for women is the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination (CEDAW) that had been implemented by the General Assembly in 1979. India has approved the CEDAW.

Domestic violence is not sexually biased. Women occasionally fight back in heterosexual relationships and men are injured or killed in extraordinary cases. Frequent domestic violence is devastatingly instigated by men and imposed on women. Domestic violence against women is universal and structural. It is a means of patriarchal control of women which is built on male superiority and female inferiority, sex-stereotyped roles and expectations, and economic, social and political predominance of men and dependency of women. There are many treaties devoted particularly to women and problems concerned about women’s discrimination. Even the CEDAW convention exposes the marginalization of women.
Women, particularly, the downtrodden and the tribal women should be taught to solve their own problems. One main objective of gender justice is formation of a truthful, democratic and equal society which is necessary and needful for women empowerment. But, men should also change their attitudes towards women and understand their problems. There is reservation of seats in panchayats and municipalities for women and an additional law has been introduced in parliament for reservation. Since the basic problem lies in the attitude of the society which is highly prejudiced against women, all these laws and amendments become powerless.

One has to understand the fact that unless there is a change in the basic social attitude, it will not be possible to strengthen the concept of women empowerment in India. To end the discrimination against women and empower women in all phases of life, many laws and amendments have been made. The status of women in India has undergone colossal change. Women have decorated high offices in India including that of the President, Prime minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha and Leader of the Opposition. The majority of countries in the world have neglected to give liberty and representation to women in political life. India ranks 105th in the world for female representation in politics, with only 60 women lawmakers in the 543-member Lok Sabha and in Rajya Sabha 24 women MPs out of a total of 240 members.

Over a million women have actively entered political life in India through the Panchayat Raj institutions. Even though the percentage of women has increased greatly in numerous stages of political activity, the number of women in power and decision-making position is negligent. Indian women still need handsome representation in Indian Parliament. From the result of the 15th Lok Sabha elections, there are 13 more women MPs than the last House and 10 more than the previous best of 49 in the 13th Lok Sabha. With this small move
towards increasing representation of women members in Parliament, the representation of women members has crossed 10% for the first time in Indian history. On the whole, women fill about 10 percent of all top political positions in India. It is a tardy progression towards the target spoken of as 50 percent.

The altitude of political participation among women in any society acts as a dependable indicator of the health of its equality. Hence, in India, there is 33% reservation for women in local bodies but in some states it has surpassed that number with women winning general seats, like West Bengal (over 40%) and Kerala (over 35%). This obviously signifies that women can prove their mettle in the political arena if they are given a chance. At present there are over 10 lakh women in the panchayats and other elected local bodies in India. Efforts to set up reservations for women in the Indian Parliament have met with resistance and lack of confidence among the male MPs, who fear that it may reduce their power.

It is essential to empower women by making sure of their participation in decision-making bodies at all levels so that they can fight against discrimination. Since women are united in their fight for equality, social justice and democratic rights, these views are expressed all over the world by women despite colour, religion or group. To accomplish gender equality India continuously researches and experiments with different kinds and modes of organizations and structures. There is no doubt that modernization and westernization have really indicated liberation for the normal woman. Today upliftment of women in India is a scorching issue which could become a reality only if suitable laws are made and implemented for developing women’s status and assuring them of their basic rights.
New procedures are needed to protect women and girl children in addition to improving the existing methods. It is a well-known fact that the voluntary organizations have initiated and continued the movement to resist violence against women in many regions in India. In quite a few urban areas and cities in the country, women cells under the name “Crimes against Women Cell” in Delhi and All-Women Police Stations have been established as a special device to deal with violence against women. In all the urban areas such Cells or Police Stations must be established.

Gandhi was a strong supporter of women’s emancipation during his time and he created an extensive amount of literature about them. He was far ahead of his time to understand the nature of women’s predicaments. Gandhi had a distinctive thought and understanding about women and felt that a woman is also a person in her own right. He asserted that a woman has as much right to shape her own destiny as a man in planning her life. Gandhi’s point on women’s issues was based on two basic ideas- equality between the sexes and differentiation of their social roles. Gandhi had an open-minded approach towards women.

In the Gandhian context, woman has to comprehend her own capability and inner strength. Woman must realize her enormous capacities for gender justice rise up and shine in all fields. Woman’s moral fight against injustice can be strengthened only by her inner strength or soul force. The Satyagraha techniques would help to eliminate all types of gender discrimination and social depression. Gandhi’s idea that woman should learn Satyagraha is quoted by Renu Kumari Singh: “If she learns Satyagraha, she can be perfectly independent and self-supporting. She will not have to feel dependent upon one. This does not mean that
she shall not take any help from others. She will certainly. But if such help be not forthcoming, she will not feel destitute.” (21)

Indeed, Satyagraha is one of the most effective processes by which individual woman and women as group can have an effect on the male-dominated, unfair society. Satyagraha is very useful to stop immediate gender discrimination while Sarvodaya toils for the total upliftment of women through social change. The idea of Sarvodaya can be elucidated as “awakening of one and all.” In addition to the awakening of everyone, it also refers to the awakening of the total human spirit and personality. Sarvodaya exists for survival and development of all. It is a right instruction in which women’s freedom gets its fullest representation as a result of which equality, justice and creativity would flourish and prosper.

Renu Kumari Singh quotes Henry Kissinger’s views on human rights in the article “Empowerment of Women”: “Basic Human Rights must be presumed and cherished and defend- ed if peace and prosperity are to be more than hollow technical achievements. Human rights are the very essence of a meaningful life and human dignity is the ultimate purpose of government.”(19)


> Human rights are a powerful discourse, and to represent current policies and practices of ecological devastation as human rights violations can add a sense of urgency and moral imperative to one of the most fundamental problems facing the human race in this century. Another important extension of the idea of human rights, beyond the narrow conventional civil and political framing, is the extension of human rights from the public sphere to the domestic
sphere. Civil and political rights are essentially about the right to participate freely in public civil society: the right to vote, the right to speak freely, the right to free association, and so on. These rights protect the people who choose to be involved in such civil and political action. But for many people, human rights and human rights abuse are more personal and private (10).

The experience of women concerning human rights exploitation is basically in the private sphere: rape, domestic violence, and subjugation within the family. The same is relevant to the rights of children, the rights of older people, and the rights of people with disabilities. Since human rights of these groups are not protected and only the human rights in the public sphere are considered, women’s movements have expressed disapproval on traditional formulations of human rights, entirely in the public sphere, because it is involved mainly with the human rights of men, without any regard to the human rights of women. Mahasweta Devi is undoubtedly one of the foremost writers, who take such challenging tasks to the government. Through her works she fights for a dignified place for the depressed, discriminated and the downtrodden.

The power of the written word is revealed in the writings of Mahasweta Devi who is a great champion of women and human rights. Mahasweta Devi’s novels, short stories and plays present a black humour that develops from social activism and a keen sense of Indian history. She portrays acutely the inner lives of the tribal communities and landless labourers by means of powerful dialogues in the region’s local dialects through her writings. She is also a creator of excellent and powerful women characters. Her writings are identified for giving voice to the “voiceless section of the Indian society.” Her writings will undoubtedly overcome the barriers of time and live in people’s minds for years to come.