Chapter IV
Plays of Mahashweta Devi:

_The Spirit Unchanged_

"We must all struggle for a world in which one’s cleanliness is not depended on another’s dirt, one’s health on another’s ill-health, and one’s welfare on another’s misery."

– Ngugi Wa Thiong’ O
CHAPTER IV

PLAYS OF MAHASHWETA DEVI:

The Spirit Unchanged

The Bengali drama and theatre are the result of Western impact. The performance of Sanskrit drama, which was very popular in the ancient times, disappeared from the practice during the Muslim Rule (1300 AD - 1800 AD). It was partly because the Muslim rulers did not like this art and hence did not patronize it. But the dramatic instinct of the people continued to exist in the form of the Yatra of Bengal, a form of rustic and a semi dramatic entertainment. The Yatra is a traditional open-air performance with miming and dancing. It was originally a musical performance without dialogue. The subject matter of the plays consisted of puranic stories of Gods and Goddesses. The Yatra was incapable of satisfying the taste of new generation of people who started taking interest in the European culture. Therefore the Bengali dramatists borrowed the modern dramatic art from the West in the 19th century. Later they incorporated the songs and music of the traditional Yatra form into it.

An English theater was built in Calcutta in 1756. Mainly the plays translated from English were performed there and usually they followed the tradition of the Elizbethan drama. A private theatre was also developed at Calcutta in 1831. Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73) wrote the first Bengali play Sarmistha (1858) and he is regarded as the father of Bengali drama. (Ghosh 150)

Dinabandhu Mitra, Girish Chandra Ghosh and Manomohan Vasu are the other writers who contributed profusely to the growth of Bengali drama during the nineteenth century. Dinabandhu Mitra’s play Niladarpan (1860) is very near to Maheshwetha Devi’s plays as far
as the theme is concerned. It is about the oppression of Bengali villagers by the English indigo planters.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) wrote nearly two dozen plays and playlets dealing with variety of themes like philosophy, mysticism, realism, nationalism, fantasy symbolism and so on. He invested his plays with his gift of lyricism and music.

After Tagore Bengali theatre witnesses a downward trend. The professional theatres, which aimed at making money by giving cheap entertainments, gained popularity. Some institutions - Girish Natya Parishad, Little Theatre group, Bahurupi and Ganapatya Sanga - tried their best to save Bengali theatre from the clutches of the professional actors and stage.

The winds of change started blowing over Bengali drama as a result of various events like the Second World War, partition of the country (1947), the problem of refugees from Bangladesh, the great famine of Bengal (1944) which killed millions of helpless rural people, the spread of Marxist ideology, the Naxalite movement etc. Dramatists started writing realistic dramas by using materials from the real life. Around this time, Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA 1942) was formed by a group of enthusiastic artists like Bijan Bhattacharya, K.A. Abbas, Dr. Bhaba, Anil de Silva, Ali Sardar Jefri, Dada Sharmalkar. They show how the class struggle of the contemporary society, communal conflicts and moral degradation lead to the collapse of all values.

Badal Sircar (b. 1925) the great dramatist in the post sixties, is very near to Maheshweta Devi in his depictions of the sufferings of the oppressed in urban and rural areas of West Bengal. Evam Indrajit (1963), Baki Ithas (1965), Pralap (1966) are the important plays
of Badal Sircar. According to E. Satyanarayana the influences of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter on Sircar’s plays are very strong. (13). The revival of rural folk theatre, social themes, street plays, the impact of Samuel Beckett are the important features of the modern Bengali plays.

Mahashweta Devi makes use of all the possible means to reach the people for whom she has been struggling hard. The dramatic art comes handy to her with which she can reach the large illiterate audience. Whatever the literary genre she takes up, her main concern is the victims of exploitation and oppression. The tribals, adivasis, untouchables, slum dwellers, beggars, prostitutes, bonded labourers and all the poor and helpless people attract her attention. Her aim is to communicate her message to these people in a form and language that suits well and which these people are familiar with. E. Satyanarayana who conducted the study of her plays opines that play-writing is not her forte (The Plays of Mahashweta Devi, 127), yet she takes up the task as it suits her purpose well. There are many play-wrights who have enriched the genre. It is a rare phenomenon where the writer dramatizes her own fictions and stories.

In the interview, appended at the end of this thesis, Mahashweta Devi frankly admits that she is not a regular playwright. She dramatized five of her own novels and stories as she felt that they could be easily converted. According to her, there was not any serious purpose behind this metamorphosis. It was a casual literary activity. Moreover, she was encouraged by the theatrical persons like Samik Bandyopadhyay who translated her plays into English. He found that ‘they had something special about them’. Even Badal Sarkar and others received them by saying that they could be adapted to the stage easily. But they did not proceed. She stopped writing plays when the theatre did not take them up. Her domestic environment
also had a great role in shaping her dramatic sensibility. Her husband, Bijan Bhattacharya (1915-1978) was himself a well known dramatist and was one of the founders of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA-1942). His play, *Navanna* (*New Rice* - 1945) became very popular in Bengal, Mumbay and other parts of the country. Moreover, she was influenced by her early association with *Gananatya*, a group that attempted to bring theatre to village in Bengal, to convey their social and political ideas in 1930s and 1940s.

All the five plays — *Mother of 1084* (1973), *Aajir* (1976), *Urvashi and Johny* (1977), *Bayen* (1976) and *Water* (1982) — are the outcome of her direct confrontation with the prevailing social system. They are translated and brought out in the form of anthology entitled *Five Plays* (1997) by Samik Bandyopadhyay. In *Mother of 1084* and *Urvashi and Johny* the setting is urban. She goes back to the rural setting in the remaining three plays. The playwright Mahashweta Devi, comments the renowned critic N. Venugopal, continues to express, "A profound concern for the human predicament and sincere hope for the better future of mankind. She takes every aspect of human suffering to the heart."(NIE 2)

Focussing on various age-old social evils that have shaken the Indian social milieu, she tries to find solution to each one of them. It is a part of her commitment and concern for the dispossessed like untouchables, tribals and the slum dwellers who are denied their share of living in independent India. The application of simple dramatic devices free from the burden of external trappings of the commercial theatres and the devise of single character playing different roles helped her to achieve greater dramatic economy.

Mahashweta Devi makes use of popular myths and legends with new interpretations, suitable to her dramatic vision. The mythological characters like Harishchandra, Kalu Dome
and Bhagirath are used very effectively for specific dramatic objective, Mahashweta Devi remarks, "To capture the continuities between the past and the present held together in the folk imagination, I bring legends, mythical figures and mythical happenings into a contemporary setting, and make an ironic use of them." *(Five Plays XII)*

All the major characters are the victims of the age-old conventionalities, the tools with which the feudal agents used to suppress them. Mahashweta Devi draws our attention to the indomitable spirit for freedom and life in them. The more they are oppressed their determination to live and survive becomes stronger in them. Infact, survival through struggle is the main message of her dramatic creation. The devices of irony and contrasts are very effectively exploited in her plays to produce singleness of effect and these are the main devices in all her plays. Moreover, her use of common man’s speech, their idioms and expressions bring realistic flavour to her works. Regarding her plays, the well-known critic Bandana Chakrabartty comments:

"Rooted in history and myth and blending songs and rituals as well as contemporary reality with socio-economic milieu Devi’s plays offer a view of India rarely seen in literature and help her in her working for her dream to fight for the tribals, downtrodden, underprivileged and write creatively if and whenever she finds the time." *(Contemporary Indian Drama 100)*

1. **MOTHER OF 1084 (1973)**

Here, the discussion is directed towards the dramatic significance of the work. The novel *Mother of 1084* was dramatized by Mahashweta Devi herself in 1972-73. This play is set against the backdrop of the climatic phase of the naxal movement, its annihilation and its aftermath, in the city of Calcutta during 1970-71. The focus is on the organized massacre of the naxalites by the hired assassins, in connivance with the police and the party in power. In this typical play of documentation of the contemporary life in Urban Bengal, Mahashweta Devi
seeks the roots of the 'revolutionary fervour' of the Urban rebels. She finds that they are discontent with the system that supports corruption and insensitivity, both in the domestic and the public sphere of life. This is not merely a documentation of the naxalite movement but also, as Samik Bandyopadhyay opines, "Concentrates on the reactions of a cross section of the survivors, both those who bear the scars and wounds of those horrible days, and those who had lived through the days of violence in stimulated insularity."

This is not merely an inhuman annihilation of Brati and his friends but also a tragedy of Brati's 'apolitical' mother, Sujata. This loving mother and sensitive wife, who is alienated in her own family, is the central character of the play. She finds refuge in her job in a bank. Her only hope was her younger son, Brati. Unlike her other children, Brati was a man of ideals. He joined the Naxal movement after being disillusioned with the prevailing system. Representing certain values and ideals, Brati remained an anti thesis to his father, brother and sisters who stood for the morally corrupt, self indulgent and exhibitionistic middle class. The tragic interest of the play lies in Sujata's failure to understand Brati and his activities.

Brati's death pushed Sujata into a deep grief. But the way Dibyanath, Brati's father tried to 'hush up' the incident, developed hatredness and anger in her for her husband and other children who stood behind the father. Sujata felt lonely and her grief remained personal until she met the mother of Brati's friend, Somu and Nandini, exactly two years after the death of her loving son, Brati.

Sujata's encounter with other victims of the oppressive system, whose kith and kin had also met with the same fate as that of Brati, helped her to discover Brati and to locate herself in the community of sufferers. This process of realization continued till the end of the play when she got rid of all prejudices and doubts regarding Brati's ideology. This process of
realization culminated in her outburst of anger towards her husband and others who represented the decadent values.

Artistic excellence is not Mahashweta Devi's area of interest (Dhawan 161). She claims that she is a failure in terms of style and technique and is not interested in stylistic virtuosity (Pankaj K. Singh 51). Contrary to her claim, this play shows her skill in the dramatic art. It is divided into twelve scenes and neatly structured into a beginning, middle and an end, corresponding with the breaking news of Brati’s death, Sujata’s discovery of Brati and her passionate outburst at the end. This dramatic version, in which Mahashweta Devi achieves greatest economy, has never been staged at any point of time.

Mahashweta Devi makes use of very simple stage devices and avoids all the superfluous theatrical properties. This gives her a greater freedom to present different situations more by suggestions than by scenic displays and thereby reducing mental burden of the audience. Just like in her stories, Mahashweta Devi moves the time scale backward and forward by presenting the past and the present in the alternative scenes. The change of a scene is suggested by darkening the stage partly. Besides, the use of ‘tape’ instead of soliloquy, ensures the smooth flow of action in the play. It enables the audience to read the minds of the characters.

The conflict in the play lies in the triangular relation among Brati, Sujata and Dibyanath with his other children. Brati was attracted by the Naxals who had been fighting against the oppressive system. He had a natural version for his father, brother and the sisters who stood for the corrupt and immoral values, in the society. Though he was aware of his father’s affairs with a typist in his office, he did not show his protest openly. He feared that his open protest would hurt his mother. She kept quiet about her loving son Brati. She thought that Brati was
innocent and was ignorant of the goings on around him. She was caught in a conflict within herself between a sympathetic mother and a silent protester against the immoralities of her husband. The death of Brati marked the beginning of the process of revelation of the realities to Sujata and the process went on till the end.

Dibyanath and his children stand for the so-called elite who put on the mask of culture and sophistication, indulging themselves in self love and self care. Their attempt to ‘hush up’ the incident of Brati’s death and the mask of detachment that they put on is only a pretext to cover up their misdeeds and to escape punishment.

One important feature of the play is that the characters evolve along the play. The characters realize each other better in the course of the play and it enables them to take clear ideological stand. Though Brati appears on the stage only twice as a living person, Sujata’s interaction with other characters reveal him better and that actually marks the progress of the play.

The sense of irony permeates the play. Though Brati is the only loving ‘soul’ of her life, Sujata fails to get insight into his activities. It is only with the help of others that she learns what he was really made of. Brati and his friends who are committed to the cause of the oppressed are considered a ‘cancerous growth on the body of democracy’ and are punished with ghastly death. The police officer, who is responsible for the horrible death of Brati, becomes a chief guest in a function at Brati’s home. The traitors like Anindya go scot-free. Brati and his values are anathema for his father, Dibyanath. So he tries to ‘hush up’ the incident of his death. But he feels no shame in womanizing and self-indulgence. What Sujata tells to her youngest daughter, Tuli focusses on the supreme irony of the situation. Sujata tells, “If Brati had been like Jyoti, or
a drunkard like Neepa’s husband, Amit, or a hardened fraud like Tony, or had run after the typists like his father, he’d have belonged to their camp.” *(Five Plays 9)*

Sujata remains ignorant of herself. Her lack of courage prevented her from revolting against the prevailing moral corruption and hypocrisy at home and outside, though she had a natural aversion towards them. Her meeting with Nandini, Brati’s beloved, emboldens her to take on the hostile environment. Nandini was a part of the armed struggle against the corrupt and oppressive system and lost her both the eyes in the course of struggle. She stands as a witness to the excesses committed by the police in the pretext of maintaining law and order. The angry young woman remains a symbol of unwavering faith in human dignity and moral strength. Her words to Sujata are eye-opening to all those hypocrites who masquerade themselves as the progressive lots at the cost of the tender human sentiments. She remarks, “Why do you demand loyalty by virtue of relationships? Why don’t you try to earn it by virtue of your integrity? You won’t be honest, won’t forge relationships, and then you put the whole blame on us.” *(Five Plays 21)*

These words of Nandini are very much applicable to Dibyanath and his children (except Brati) for whom hypocrisy and artificiality have been the way of life. Nandini is presented in contrast to Brati’s sisters who represent corrupt values. Somu’s father is presented in contrast to Dibyanath who tries to ‘hush up’ the incident. Somu’s father runs from pillar to post, desperately to rescue his son and his friends. The play also exposes the intellectuals and the writer’s who refuse to see ‘the writing on the wall.’ They worry much about what is going on in Bangladesh and have nothing to say about West Bengal. There is also a harsh criticism of “the programme of betrayal” by the men like Anindya. He acted as a friend of Brati and other
comrades, who were waging an armed struggle against the system, but helped the police and the hired goondas to kill them. Mahashweta Devi feels that such acts of betrayal and the complacency of the intellectuals have aggravated the human tragedy. The questions that Nandini raises are pertinent in this context. She asks:

"How can you be so smug and complacent? With so many young men killed, so many imprisoned, how can you wallow in your complacency? It's your 'all's right with the world, let's go on nicely' that frightens me most. How can you carry on with your pujas, concerts, cultural festivals, film festivals, poetry fests?"

(Five Plays 26)

By giving the number 1084 to Brati's dead body in the morgue, the police establishment has displayed its dehumanized state. Through the character of Brati, Mahashweta Devi tells us the fact that in a society which is full of Dibyanath, Anindyas and Sarojpals, a greater amount of struggle and higher sacrifice is essential to safeguard human values. Towards the end of the play, Sujata moves from the world of 'innocence' to the world of 'experience.' The realization of the facts enables her to shake off all the shackles and gives full expression to her long suppressed feelings. She raises a voice of universal protest against the heartless and the complacent society we live in. She bursts out:

"Why don't you speak? Speak, for heaven's sake, speak, speak, speak! How long will you endure it in silence? Where is the place where there's no killer, no bullets, no prison, no vans? ... where can you escape it all... in Calcutta, in West Bengal, from north to south, from east to west?" (Five Plays 31)

In the course of her shouting at the pleasure-seeking people, Sujata collapses on the stage. But as E. Satyanarayana opines, her search for Brati does not end with it. It continues as long as there is no positive change in the situation (The Plays of Mahashweta Devi, 45).
2. URVASHI AND JOHNNY (1977)

This was also a story before it was changed into the dramatic form by Mahashweta Devi herself. Set against the background of the emergency of 1975, this play focusses on the harsh realities of life of the people living on the streets of Calcutta. Though it has the emergency at the background, it acquires universal significance with its treatment of the common universal phenomenon of the suffering of the underdogs. This play comes as Mahashweta Devi’s protest against the complacency of the urban middle class who are insensitive and reluctant to the reality around them. This is also an attack on the writers who are equally indifferent to the sufferings of the poor and content themselves in weaving ‘fantastic’ stories on the dehumanized existence of the slum dwellers to ‘amuse’ the easy-going urban middle class readers. The intellectuals who should have become the beacon light of hope to the oppressed, have become stooges of the exploiting agencies and thereby indirectly contributing to the furtherance of the sufferings of the oppressed. Thus, it is critical of the pseudo-intelligentsia too.

As it is already mentioned, Mahashweta Devi is a writer with a ‘mission’ of releasing human beings from all kinds of oppression and exploitation. Here she makes us face vis-à-vis the dehumanized existence of the slum-dwellers in the city of Calcutta. Inhumanity of the ‘mainstream’ people towards this lot is her main concern. Most of her works reveal the fact that the more man is oppressed, the man’s spirit to survive becomes stronger.

The subhuman existence and the miserable life of Johnny, the protagonist of the play do not dampen his faith in life and human dignity. He makes all out effort to come out of the heart rending situation himself and dreams of taking the suffering humanity to the ‘heaven of freedom’. His aim is to attain happiness, but it eludes him. Yet he does not give up his hope.
He deliberately avoids anything sorrowful. He shakes with fear if anybody talks of his miseries. 

Being a happiness monger, he firmly believes that ‘happiness is the greatest jewel’ in one’s life. His one object is to seek ‘Kohinoors for everyone’. His urge for happiness had forced him to run away in his teens from his mentors.

Ventriloquism is an old art form in our civilization and it has its own role to play for the welfare of the society. Johnny somehow trains himself to be a ventriloquist. This art comes in handy to fulfil his long cherished desire to give happiness to the people and also to earn his livelihood. In the course of time, his obsession with Ventriloquism deepens and becomes infatuated with the marionette, the puppet. He was entertaining the people by producing voice sounds, so that they seemed to come from the puppet. But after sometime Johnny comes to know that he is infected with cancer in his throat and his darling Urvashi, the ‘talking doll’ becomes mute, as it has been his own voice. Not heeding to the advice of the doctor to stop Ventriloquism, Johnny continues his profession. He cannot give up it as it is the only opportunity for him to find his joy and love in others and to find relief from the regular struggles of life. Once he loses his voice, he becomes non-entity and insignificant. He ceases to be a champion of the underdogs. The play ends with Johnny struggling to present his final show.

Johnny is one among the millions of roofless, rootless people living on the pavements of major cities in India. Moreover, he is an orphan. His insatiable desire to be a happy and respectable human being differentiates him from others of his class. He embraces the profession of Ventriloquism for the fulfillment of his desire. But it does not help him to earn his daily bread. Instead, it turns to be another method of beggary which he does not like. Yet he continues with it as it becomes an effective medium for self-expression.
The play opens with Johnny addressing the audience directly. This resembles the opening of *Aajir* (1976), where Paatan too does the same thing. This device of direct address to the audience helps the dramatist to present the central conflict of the play and the predicament of the protagonist, well in advance, before the audience. As the curtain rises, we find Johnny on the stage in a typical outfit of the slum dwellers; baggy patched trousers, a coloured vest, a coloured handkerchief about his neck, a feathered cap on his head and shoes, speaking in a pidgin Hindi with a mix Bengali. The audience are made attentive to see the person on the stage, the type of whom they come across every now and then on the streets of Calcutta but without any concern and attention. They have taken these people for granted as an integral and inevitable part of the metropolis. But now, they cannot avoid Johnny as he is addressing them directly, introducing himself and presenting his inner conflict and the dream he is after.

Johnny, the orphan, who seeks happiness and freedom, unlike others of his class, is aware of the forces inimical to him in the society. They do not allow him to achieve his goals. Hence, he had run away when he was still young. He takes up the talking doll Urvashi and become Ventriloquist. He travelled through many places, from Jhansi to Bombay. In the meanwhile, Johnny becomes infatuated with the talking doll Urvashi so much that he cannot think of himself without Urvashi. He even says that he will starve if Urvashi stops singing and laughing.

Mahashweta Devi presents Johnny in contrast to the Urban Middle Class elites who are selfish, complacent and their personal enjoyments are placed above everything. Whereas, Johnny is absolutely human and unselfish who cannot bear the sufferings and indignities of the
poor. His yearning for happiness is the happiness of all. He risks his personal enjoyment for
the sake of others. He turns down the Aunt's offer of his marriage to one-eyed Moti and runs
away to Bombay to 'conquer happiness'. The elite, the system and the economy on which
they subsist cannot survive without the service of the poor slum dwellers. But they are looked
down upon as the dispensable lot and the hurdles on the path of progress. Nothing has been
done to improve their living conditions. The increasing skyscrapers in the cities like Calcutta
seem to be a mockery of the poor. Mahashweta Devi throws light on the miserable life of
these slum dwellers for whom the pavements are the only living places. The One-Eyed-Moti
says, "And these mosquitoes! you can't escape them, with twelve families clustering in the
slum, with a single wash room! They let their children shit right on the doorstep. A real hell,
what a hell!" *(Five Plays 65)*

They crave for happiness but it eludes them. All the means of happiness are beyond
their reach. They feel happy in the happiness of others. They cannot afford to go to movies,
but they get happiness on watching the sight of the queue in front of the talkies. They cannot
purchase sweets in the sweet stalls, but they find happiness by licking at the thrown away clay
cups. What Ramanna, the leper and the childhood friend of Johnny says, gives us more idea on
the dehumanized existence of the slum dwellers and the beggars. They live on the refuses and
garbage. The way they divide the area among themselves and quarrel over the litter heaps for
greater share, resembles the life of the stray dogs. It would certainly put the complacent
middle class and the votaries of civilization into shame. This is nothing but a mockery of
civilization and progress they boast of. Ramanna informs Johnny:

"Tonight the lame one's gang will fight with Magandas's gang for
their rights over the litter heap. These are bad days, Johnny.
When you see the beggars betraying their faith, that's a sign that the
times have come to a monstrous state. The city belongs to the beggars. It’s all been divided up — the lame one will pick up all the litter in the heap on the right, and Magandas has the right to the heap on the left. But trust Magandas the bastard, he sneaks into the lame one’s territory everyday. He hasn’t had a taste of the lame one’s guts. Tonight the lame one will fight for her rights.”

Thus, Mahashweta Devi exposes the metropolis which is mindless and heartless. Even in the middle of these serious deliberations, she does not forget to introduce the lighter experiences. In fact, the element of humour is an important point to be reckoned with in the play. The only mission of Johnny is to enlighten and entertain his fellow men and inculcate the sense of freedom and happiness in them. Hence, he does not miss any opportunity to amuse them. He compares himself and Urvashi with Laila Majnu, Heer-Ranjha and Shiereen-Farhad and says that the rich do not know anything about freedom. If beggar has a four anna bit in his pocket, he will be so happy that he will put Calcutta for auction. It makes the audience not only laugh but also think about the unfulfilled dreams of the poor. The authenticity of Urvashi, the talking doll is revealed only at the end of the play, adding dramatic suspense to it. Johnny’s infatuation with the doll shows the inability of men like Johnny to have a beloved and a family of their own. Mahashweta Devi successfully makes an experimentation of Ventriloquism here and develops an entire drama of human relation around the inanimate character, Urvashi.

The one-eyed Moti becomes a whore and a ‘slum owner’, after Johnny leaves her in a zeal to ‘conquer happiness’. He confesses that her life is absolutely devoid of happiness. The sense of guilt haunts him to the end. He would like to compensate his mistake by bringing ‘the birds of happiness’ from all over the world to all of them. This dilemma between the ‘individual self’ and the ‘societal self’ is an important aspect of the play. Like in
her stories and fictions, Mahashweta Devi here presents the contrastive coexistence of two
diametrically opposite worlds in the metropolis; the elite with complacency and selfishness and
the citizens of the sidewalk with all the human passions like love, hatredness, anger and pity.
Regarding this E. Satyanarayana makes a pertinent comment:

"Within the simple structure of the play, we notice a number of little contrasts and parallels which indicate that behind the apparent simplicity of structure there is a clarity of vision. And what makes a mature artist of Mahashweta Devi is her use of a situation to evoke another which is diametrically opposite to it."

As in other plays, here too Mahashweta Devi makes use of very simple structure and theatrical devices, but achieves maximum effect by a clever use of lighting effects, gestures and dialogues. The audience can easily read the minds of the characters without the help of the authorial intervention. The influence of the experimentations of Badal Sarkar and other’s is very much evident in her use inexpensive poor theatre. It suits the subject matter as well as the characters of the play. The luxuries of the commercial theatre would not help her objective of presenting the social realism through the medium of theatre. Moreover, the subhuman existence of the slum dwellers presented against a simple and artless setting can easily draw the attention of the mainstream population who otherwise are indifferent to them and to their plight.

The language used by the characters on the stage is in accordance with the realistic and the life-like atmosphere on the stage. The expressions like ‘bastard’, ‘motherfucker’ and so on look rude but it is the language of the ‘people on the sidewalks’. Moreover, Mahashweta Devi feels that the language of the common people and the tribals is very rich. She regrets that it is not exploited properly. Samik Bandyopadhyay opines that it is about the
Emergency of 1975 (*Five Plays* XIII). The cancer in Johnny's throat suggests the suppression of democratic rights. Johnny's state of mind on knowing the disease is suggestive of the shock, pain and helplessness the Indians underwent during those dark days of independent India.

The playwright very effectively suggests the soulless humanity with the device of masks that the characters put on. The play ends with Johnny making lip movements with great effort to utter 'I am not well, not well, not well, not well' suggesting the serious illness of the society we are living in.

3. AAJIR (1976)

In this play, Mahashweta Devi takes us to the rural world exposing another area of exploitation, i.e., the bonded labour system. While *Mother of 1084* (1973) deals with the history of the present, *Aajir* (1976) deals with history 'for all times'. This is a play about a slave called Paatan who is enslaved by an ancient bond and discovers too late that the bond had turned into dust years ago. Hence, he is a freeman which he himself does not know. It is a realistic picture of the rural India where the barbaric system of bonded labour has been practiced. Mahashweta Devi got the idea for this work from a slave bond executed by a slave who sold himself into slavery. This incident was reproduced in the family history of the Mustafis of Ulobimagar. ("Preface"; Shreshta Galpa, 1985)

In the stratified Indian society, the people who belonged to the lower rungs had been denied the right to property, education and the choice of occupation for many centuries. In order to survive, these helpless people had to depend upon the upper-caste landlords who enjoyed social, economic and political powers. Social oppressions, economic dependence and pressing poverty of these marginalized sections forced them to the barbaric bonded labour system.
Mahashweta Devi, who has the first-hand experience of the prevailing socio-economic and political situations in West Bengal and other neighboring states, has herself witnessed many such inhuman incidents which any civilized society should be ashamed of. One of such experiences has found an artistic expression in *Aajir* (1976). Having found that an authentic documentation of any such incident is the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation, Mahashweta Devi tries to document one of the instances of human rights violation. Here, an individual, being a descendant of a family of slaves, is put to innumerable tortures and reduced to the sub-human status after being denied of his natural right to live, to love and to marry.

Paatan, the protagonist in *Aajir* (1976), like Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935), lives in a society, which is a great hurdle in his path to freedom and equality. Unlike his predecessors, he denies to submit himself to the oppressive agencies of exploitation. Like Bakha, his every effort to free himself from the clutches of slavery is foiled by the perpetrators of this age-old inhuman practice. In this case of Paatan, the mistress of the landlord deceives him by hiding the fact about the actual condition of the bond that had turned to dust a long ago. She pretends to help him with the intention of getting her sensual pleasures satisfied. She induces him to elope with the lure of freedom.

The greatest irony in the play is, Paatan’s belief that there exists a bond with the master, enslaving him, that his forefathers had executed a few generations back. But in reality there exists no bond at all. Whatever was there had become dust long back. Only assumption reigns the situation. Paatan cannot believe the fact revealed by the Mistress regarding the non-existence of the bond. He suspects her to be telling lies. So he strangles her to death in his uncontrollable desire for freedom. Confirming the fact that there exists no bond, Maatang, the
Master says, “I haven’t seen it myself, my father hadn’t seen it, it had turned to dust long ago in this *gamchha* in which it had been once upon a time…” *(Five Plays 50)*. This confirmation ensures Paatan his freedom which he himself did not know. On knowing it he ecstatically raises his head and stretches his hands out in regal dignity.

The ignorance and illiteracy in rural West Bengal had driven the marginalized to the eternal servitude. *Aajir* (1976) presents a horrible picture of this real life situation. We find Paatan in a constant conflict with the society that denies him his human existence which he tirelessly craves. He remains unconcerned to all sorts of humiliations and oppressions that his master meted out to him because he was told that his forefather, Golak Kura had sold away himself and his descendants for three rupees. Continuous drought and famine had forced Golak Kura to put thumb impression on a bond which made him and his descendants slaves for ever to Raavan and his descendants. Paatan, being a descendant of Golak Kura, becomes a born slave who has no life, no wife, no son and no joy. They are permanently denied to him. The mistress, a luscious woman who craves for youth, promises him to steal away his Aajir’s bond from the master and give back to him. Her reference to the gypsies who sell ‘magic potions’ and her act of brushing against Paatan made him burn with craving.

Mahashweta Devi, in her works, frequently reminds us of how the natural and the man-made calamities impoverish the small land holders, landless labourers and the untouchables, giving an edge for the money lenders and the big land holders with their political clout, money and muscle power, to run a parallel Government at the village level. She criticises the system which has utterly failed to rein in the exploiting agencies and to provide every citizen the human rights as guaranteed in the constitution. In *Bashai Tudu* (1990), Mahashweta Devi writes, “The money lender’s book of account is like a python that can swallow its prey, but
cannot disgorge it. Once a plot of land had got into the book of accounts, there was never a chance of its coming out again.”(15)

There was a time when the practice of slavery was so deep rooted in the society that it had almost become a habit of the mind. The concept of freedom was totally absent from the idea of life. For the masters, who had benefited from the system, freedom to slaves was a most unwelcome concept. But the irony of the situation was that even the people who are at the receiving end did not bother about it. The whole process of enslavement is enacted in the beginning of the play. Paatan himself plays the role of Golak Kura. This dramatization reveals Mahashweta Devi’s mastery over dramatic art.

_Aajir_ (1976) is a realistic play and the stage devices are also employed accordingly. Mahashweta Devi deliberately avoids unnecessary scenic displays of the commercial theatre. Under the influence of Badal Sarcar and Beckett, she employs simple and natural theatrical devices that suit her subject matter well. This simple stage set up helps, as E. Satyanarayana writes, “To establish direct connection between the audience and the actors thereby focussing the attention of the former on the point she is trying to drive home through the latter.”(_The Plays of Devi_ 49)

The thrust of the dramatist is more on the subject under discussion than on the theatrical properties. As the curtain rises on a dark stage, we hear an invisible voice repeating the definition of the term _aajir_ three times. Aajir is a person who has sold himself to slavery for a paltry sum. This interpretation serves as an introduction to the story that ensues, whereas the repetition suggests the predicament of those who have been exploited, oppressed and marginalized for generation. The actors in the play appear in
double roles. One actor plays the role of both Golak Kura and Paatan and another actor of Raavan and Maatang. The role of Golak’s wife and Paatan’s Master’s wife are played by a single actress. This device serves to achieve theatrical economy and to establish a link between the past and the present. But it depends heavily on the imagination of the audience for the effective communication.

Bandana Chakrabarty in her *Contemporary Indian Drama* (2005, 92) opines that this dramatic device underlines the ‘commonality of humankind’. She refers to Samik Bandyopadhyay’s opinion that this device of a character in the present enacting a happening in the past is a metaphor for the continuous process of exploitation (Five Plays 93). The transformation of character is so simple that a mere statement, ‘please allow me to become my forefather’ suggests the change of character in time and place. What Anjum Katyal says about the harsh realities of life in *Rudali* (1997) is applicable to *Aajir* (1976) also. He says, “Oppression is hereditary, for both the exploiter and the exploited.” *(Rudali 5)*. Golak Kura, Paatan’s ancestor, who entered into an agreement of slavery for a paltry sum of rupees three, doomed his family to the life of aajirs. For Paatan, slavery is inherited. Normal human life is denied to him. His human feelings are crushed ruthlessly and he is treated like an animal. He receives mental and physical torture from the master on the regular basis. The master and the mistress, the successors to the act of hereditary oppression, get sadistic pleasure in Paatan’s torture. The master, Maatang says, “I’ll keep you tied in the courtyard and whipped with a new gaamchha. I’d love to see your blood flow. I’ll make my hands red with your blood and then go to sleep tonight.” *(Five Plays 47)*

Inspite of his robust body and animal strength, Paatan is made to submit meekly to his master, Maatang Shunri who is comparatively weak. Paatan gets tied to the post and whipped
constantly by the master. He is a cruel master and a professional womanizer. He receives constant nagging from his wife for his regular visit to Punnashashi, a prostitute and for his act of dancing before her 'without a stitch' on his back. Moreover, he has failed to satisfy the sexual hunger of his wife and give her a son. Therefore, she secretly longs for the company of the slave, as she finds in him the potency which her husband lacks.

Paatan has to bear all the tortures, humiliations and inhuman treatment because of his belief that the 'aajirs bond' exists. But the indomitable spirit of freedom in him does not let him yield to the circumstances. He constantly craves for a place where there is no master, mistress, villagers, aajir's bond and where the people do not dance in glee at the sight of an aajir's bond. But the supposed aajir's bond comes in the way. He knows that his fate is doomed as long as the bond exists. He is helplessly angry towards the 'bastard Golak Kura', his forefather who had signed the aajir's bond for a paltry sum of three rupees and left generations enslaved for life. At one point of time, Paatan wishes to marry only to please the souls of his dead ancestors who have been burning in hell as they are denied the offering of water from their descendents. But Paatan finds no escape. He is unable to free himself of the burden of the convention that has deprived him of all human joys. Having found no way to realize his dream of freedom, Paatan in a fit of anger cries out:

"Hey, you bastards haunting the cremation ground! Why are you so thirsty? weren't you born in the lap of famine, and didn't you die in its lap? Then how can you be thirsty? ... No, I won't marry, ever. I won't continue a family of aajir's. You bastard, Golak Kura: for a paltry three rupees you signed an aajir's bond and left generations enslaved for life. I'll bring your line to an end. If there's no death for aajir's bond, I will finish it off with my death." (Five Plays 48)"
The desperate Paatan would like to put an end to the *aajir*’s bond with his death. With that he would like to put an end to the continuing slavery. The element of irony runs throughout the play. The entire action of the play, that involves torture, agony desperation and craving for freedom, revolves around the supposed bond. But in reality there exists no bond at all. The Master beats and tortures Paatan only to hide the facts about his bondage. The Master, whom his wife calls ‘an old dotard’ and ‘a bloody eunuch’, visits the prostitute regularly. He failed to quench the sexual desire of his wife. The mistress, with the sensual fire burning within, craves for Paatan. But the long servitude and torturous experiences made Paatan to forget women and sex.

The mistress provokes Paatan to act and introduces him to a gipsy woman who deals with potions that may release him from the bondage. But when Paatan runs away with the gipsy woman, she lets loose her men on him with the fear of losing him forever. Her men drag him back and beat him brutally. The mistress craves for Paatan to get her sexual desire fulfilled which her husband has failed her. So she is not ready to lose him and behaves unusually creating confusion in Paatan. Later, she raises his hope once again with her sympathetic words and promises to set him free by stealing away the supposed bond from the chest. So he agrees to elope with her without bothering about the consequences. Paatan does not believe when the mistress tells him the fact that there is no *aajir*’s bond as the bond long turned to dust. The desperate Paatan becomes recklessly aggressive. He doubts conspiracy by the mistress and strangles her to death. In this regard E. Satyanarayana observes:

"Ironically enough, the mistress who rouses the animal desire latent in Paatan to quench her insatiable hunger for sex, falls prey to her own wicked designs. In a sense, this unethical act of hers is both — yet another form of exploitation and revolt against patriarchal system."

*(The Plays of Mahashweta Devi 62)*

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When the master confirms the facts regarding the non-existence of the bond, Paatan becomes more assertive and realizes his ignorance of the fact that he is a free man like everyone else in the world and the mistress, ‘the luscious woman’ was for him. But he did not know these things. This is the supreme irony of the situation with all its poignancy.

4. BAYEN (1976)

Written in 1971, Bayen was a story, which Mahashweta Devi adapted into play in 1976-77 along with Aajir. Like Aajir, set in rural Bengal, Bayen exposes another face of deep-rooted inhuman exploitative mechanism in rural India that reduces the human being to the level of an animal. This is another example of a ghastly violation of human rights. Mahashweta Devi here takes up the issue of the inhuman subjugation of a woman and her struggle for survival. Usually, Mahashweta Devi’s women characters do not yield to the exploiting forces in the society. Instead, they struggle hard and exhibit exemplary courage and moral strength in the face of adverse socio-economic milieu. They leave a lasting impact on the conscience of the society. As in Mother of 1084 (1973), the mother-child relation occupies a centre stage in Bayen (1976). The heartless society intrudes in to the sober and affectionate mother-child domain and the mother is separated from her family and the society after branding her a witch.

It is set against the background of the barbaric practice of witchcraft and witch-hunt that was practiced in Europe in Middle Ages and in India since many centuries. Here we have a touching story of a victim of a larger social forces that separate mother and son in a male dominated society.

Chandidasi Gangadasi, the protagonist of the play, is a gravedigger by profession. Her work is to bury the dead children and guard the grave at night. She was a descendant of the
illustrious Kalu Dome who was given all the cremation grounds of the world as a gift by the mythical King, Harishchandra whom Kalu Dome had given shelter when he lost his kingdom and became a beggar. Chandidasi Gangadasi married Malindar Gangadas who used to be at the burial ground and is now an attendant at the morgue. It is a permanent Government job. Chandidasi was very beautiful and was a ‘golden doll of a wife’ for Malindar. She carries out her duty as a mark of reverence to her forefathers. The affectionate motherly heart in her looks after the dead children she buries with utmost care.

Unlike Paatan in Aajir (1976), Chandidasi is not a slave. There is a sense of purpose in her acceptance of the job. She voluntarily accepts the job in the larger interest of the community. After the birth of her son Bhagirath, she attends to her duty at the graveyard, leaving her suckling child behind at home. She finds the image of her own child in the corpses of infants. Disappointed and disturbed by such experiences, Chandidasi would like to leave her profession which she has been performing very sincerely.

Contrary to her decision, Chandidasi accepts to perform the last rites of Tukni, the dead child of Shashi, Malindar’s brother-in-law. Chandidasi is motivated by the sense of duty. But the vested interests in the society, in the manifestation of Gourdas, felt marginalized with Chandidasi gaining prominence in the society with her sincere duty, family background and the attractive physical appearance. Waiting for an opportune moment to implicate her, the feudal elements pounce upon her accusing her that she is responsible for the death of children. Her tender feelings and motherly affections are misinterpreted as an act of a witch. They unexpectedly appear before her while she is performing her duty and brand her as a witch. She is mercilessly separated from her child, husband and the society. She is made to live alone in a hovel outside the village, on the weekly ration provided to her.
Chandidasi is not happy with goings-on in the society, particularly when the feudal elements throw stones at her. So she pleads her husband to take her away from the village. But he did not take her grievances seriously. The entire incident becomes more poignant with her husband, Malindar, helplessly siding with the inhuman feudal forces.

Inspite of repeated warnings not to visit his mother, Bhagirath visits her and learns the reality about her. The curiosity of the son to know more and more facts about the mother and the natural affection and care of the mother for the child is presented in a very touching manner. Bhagirath’s interactions with his mother enables her to reestablish relation with humanity. Later she dies in her attempt to avert a train accident which would have caused the loss of many lives. The play ends with Bhagirath boldly acknowledging the dead as his mother. Mahashweta Devi presents this act of acknowledgement as a protest and a revolt against the inhuman practices in the society. The open defiance of the established conduct enforced by the feudal system is the typical of Mahashweta Devi.

Like other plays, Bayen (1976) too is simple in its structure, technique and the dramatic devices. It is divided into four well-knit scenes in accordance with the development of the plot. The colourful devices of commercial theatre are absolutely absent in the play. Like Aajir, this play also consists of very simple device like a character on the stage performing an incident in the past, by changing roles right in the presence of the audience. This ensures the smooth flow of action from the present to the past and back to the present. This device helps the dramatist to present different dramatic situations and different scenes without any external artificial arrangements. A character narrating his own story and enacting an episode in the past, are example for Mahashweta Devi’s craftsmanship as a playwright. It helps her to achieve greater theatrical economy. The end of the scene is indicated by bringing the curtain down.
Bayen (1976) depicts the lopsided Indian society. The growth of science technology and the emergence of the fastest growing economy are giving a rosy 'India shining' picture. The simultaneous existence of ignorance and superstition, perpetuated by the inhuman and corrupt feudal system, which still prevails in rural India, pulling the country back to the middle ages. The violation of human rights and individual freedom is carried on by the privileged section of the society against the low caste untouchables, especially the women, in rural India. Ignorance, lack of education and the deprivation of political power among the weaker sections provided ample opportunities for the vested interests to thrive in the rural areas.

The act of discrimination and subordination has a long tradition. When Harishchandra became the king for the second time after a lot of suffering and miseries for sometime, he had offered gifts to all and sundry, even to those who had never cared to help him in his difficulties. The sadhus, sanyasis and Brahmins got the gift of cattle, land and gold. But Kalu Dome, who had given him shelter, got only the cremation grounds of the world, that too only after reminding Harishchandra of the help.

Chandidasi does not come into conflict with any issues till the birth of her son Bhagirath. She was even proud of what she was and what she had been doing. It is evident in her introduction to Malindar when they meet for the first time. She proudly says, “I'm Chandidasi Gangadasi ... D'you know my forebears? Kalu Dome's my forefather ... My father, the late Patitpaban Gangadas, I bury dead children and guard the graves ... I'm at the top of the Domes here.” (Five Plays 80)19

Chandidasi never tries to suppress her inner desires for the sake of freedom. She even decides to leave her profession for the sake of her child and to protect herself from the assaults
of the oppressive forces in the society. The dramatist projects her as an example for the society. The dramatist projects her as an example for the confrontation between the womanhood and the male domination on the one hand and the individual freedom and inhuman social oppression on the other. Chandidasi is endowed with a deep love for life and the great sympathy for the suffering people. Her love affair with Malindar reveals these essential human qualities. The tragedy of the whole incident is that the same qualities of her are misused by the oppressors to subjugate her. Chandidasi, who was ‘a golden doll of a wife with a body soft as butter’ and whom Malindar considered beautiful and graceful, was made to live alone in a hovel outside the village, on an insufficient ration given to her. Chandidasi shivering with half naked body and disheveled matted hair, expressing a dry, plaintive wail and begging for a fistful food after being branded as a witch, is an excruciating scene, a mockery of our civilization and the democracy.

There are many reasons for the feudal elements to envy Chandidasi. They are jealous of her attractive and graceful appearance, illustrious family background and her husband. He is the only person among his tribe to know how to sign and he has got a permanent job in the morgue. Moreover, he has a new hut and two bighas of land for sharecropping. All these things prompted the oppressive agencies to speed up their oppression. After being suspected of having an evil eye, there developed a kind of aversion in her towards her job. The vested interests hold her responsible for the death of children and even pelt stones at her. After the incident, she decides to leave her job and even pleads her husband to take her away, so that she can be happy with her child. But the irony is that the sense of duty prevails over her when a child of her relative is dead.

The element of irony is clearly visible in the character of Malindar. He is attracted by Chandidasi’s charming personality and her glorious family background. He is proud of what
she is doing and he cannot tolerate people speaking ill of her. He knows it well that people cannot keep the dead child in the house and she has been doing a very good job by burying them though the bastards do not recognize it. But he helplessly sides with the oppressors who brand her as a witch. He lacks the courage to take the vested interests head on. He remains a passive spectator of the painful suffering of his wife. Thus, Malindar’s inability to challenge the oppressive traditions that wreck his family and his compromise with the situation indirectly add to the woes of Chandi. It is painful to see the helpless Malindar turning a fatalist. He interprets the incident of branding Chandidasi a witch as, “Our bad luck, hers, yours and mine.” *(Five Plays 78)*

Like other women characters of Mahashweta Devi, Chandidasi too is more lively and integrated than her man counterpart. Her sense of duty, sympathy for others and love of freedom are far superior in her. Her tragedy lies in being a wife of an indifferent husband who does not stand by her at the time of need. He stands by her in the beginning and derides the insensitive men as ‘doomed fools’ and ‘ignorant idiots’. But he flinches at the critical hours.

Chandidasi does not yield to the pressure tactics of the oppressors easily. Her refusal to continue her job itself is a protest against them. She even threatens to jump before a running train with Bhagirath in her arms when Malindar too calls her a Bayen, she starts beating her head against the door. This aggression of chandi results from her sense of helplessness. When she turns intractable, Gourdas, the typical exploiter, conniving with Shashi the brother-in-law of Malindar, applies the tactics of flattery to trap Chandidasi. Gourdas appeals to her, “You’re a progeny of the great Kalu Dome. There’s none placed above you in our community ... I pray you, for a last time, please do the last rites for Tukni.” *(Five Plays 85)*
These words touch her sense of pity and concern and she decides to perform the funeral rites for Shashi’s child who is dead, by telling that it will be her last such performance. This human action turns to be a curse that threatens her very existence. The exploitation agencies use the same opportunity to trap her. It becomes impossible for her to escape as she is also an inseparable part of the vicious and the outmoded conventions. The way she was born and brought up would not give any chance to Chandidasi to possess enough intellectual capacity and the social and political clout to take the oppressive forces head-on. She is attacked on the accusation of being possessed by evil spirits. Her pleading innocence and cry for mercy have no takers. They fall on deaf ears. She is unaware of the widespread network of conspiracy, comprising all forces, bent on playing havoc on her. The tragedy becomes more touching when we see her husband joining hands with the conspirators. It is pathetic to see Chandidasi, who as the dramatist says, “Looks utterly exhausted and despondent, at the end of her tether, dragging her reluctant feet like some condemned ghost debarred entry into human society.” (*Five Plays* 75)

The crux of the matter is the inhumanity of a section of the society who force a fellow being to the level of an animal. The anger of the dramatist against the perpetrators of this heinous act is felt throughout the play. The way Chandidasi accepts whatever comes in her way is really wonderful. She has no ill will towards those who are responsible for her subhuman status. She tries to create for herself, through her power of imagination, what is denied to her in real life. One important message that Mahashweta Devi gives us is that the intention of the oppressors is bound to fail, because as E. Satyanarayana opines:

“The relationship between a mother and a son, which forms the core of Mahashweta Devi’s plays and stories, acquires a metaphysical dimension, as both the mother and son are engaged in the pursuit of fulfilment in each other’s martyrdom.” (*The Plays of Mahashweta Devi* 100)
Bhagirath makes frequent visits to the Bayen after knowing that she is his mother. He cannot resist the filial urge to meet her and to look at her, in spite of warnings from his stepmother and others. The death of Chandidasi the Bayen, in the course of her attempt to avert a train accident is an example of the human concern and sacrifice of the highest order. This character appears as an oasis in the desert of inhumanity. The assertive acknowledgement at the end by Bhagirath that Chandidasi is his mother and she is not a Bayen is in itself, like the supreme sacrifice of his mother, an act of protest against the inhuman superstitious and the uneven social order.

Thus, Mahashweta Devi tries to show that the spirit of human love cannot be oppressed by any force on the earth; the more it is oppressed, the more vigorously it expresses itself. It is also tried to expose the corrupt system, emphasizing on the urgency to put an end to it.

5. WATER (1982)

Mahashweta Devi adapted her story Jal into a play in 1982 and it was translated into English and published by Samik Bandyopadhyay in 1986. The change of form has not effected the theme. The battle over water rights remains the central idea. The play is an extension of Mahashweta Devi’s elongated war against the deep-rooted network of exploitation and oppression of the poor and the innocent folk in rural India.

This play, which Mahashweta Devi claims a ‘history of the present’ (Five Plays XI), exposes the unholy nexus between the vested interests and the people in power in the exploitation of the poor low caste people like Domes, Chamars and Chandals. It is a scathing attack on man’s inhumanity to man and the sheer indifference of the ruling class towards the plight of the suffering humanity in the rural world. It also exposes our high claims of freedom progress and the so-called welfare society.
Mahashweta Devi shows how we have miserably failed as a nation to free the downtrodden from the clutches of the feudal lords even after five decades of independence. It has almost become a tradition for the weak and the poor to suffer in the hands of the privileged. As she has been fighting all along against this injustice, here she tries to sensitize the most insensitive minds in the society. Set in rural Bengal, Water (1982) takes us through the process of transformation of the protagonist, Maghai Dome, an untouchable from a traditional water diviner to the position of a leader of the masses who defies all the conventionalities which only deprived him and his people of their human dignity.

Though Mahashweta Devi acknowledges the existence of various evils and increasing act of exploitation and oppression in the society, she senses the winds of change that has started blowing over rural India. As Chinnappa Bharathi, a Tamil Novelist in his The Awakening (1988) suggests, the feudal system is being challenged by the young generation among the poor. Their love for life and the spirit of freedom cannot be defeated and suppressed. When the water in the well is denied to them, they go for an alternative arrangement.

Maghai Dome, the protagonist of the play belongs to the untouchable Dome caste. He is a traditional water-diviner. The knowledge of which, he believed, has come down to him as an inheritance from earliest ancestor, ‘the chosen Priest of the nether Ganga’. All the wells in the locality including the public wells are dug with the help of his hereditary knowledge. The great irony is that his people strive hard to get each drop of water, as the untouchables are not allowed to draw water even from the public wells. It is the women who suffer most. They gather at the sandy bed of the Charsa river every evening and scrape holes in the sand with their bare hands. Water trickles into the holes in the night. They have to collect it before sunrise, otherwise the water evaporates. Maghai’s wife Phulmani pathetically wails:
“These two hands of mine are full of sores... all from scratching about the sands of the Charsa for water ... we die without water, our little ones go thirsty, our women dig at the sands of the river for a cupful of water. Who’d play such a cruel game with the water that we need to quench our thirst?” (Five Plays 103-104)

The village Charsa has derived its name from the river Charsa, which overflows during the monsoon and dries away during the summer. The untouchables are the most affected lot as the caste is the governing principle here. It is in their blood. It is told that there is no untouchability in the sub-division. But the Domes and Chandals are denied water because of their caste. Moreover, the Brahmins won’t send their children to the school with Domes and Chandals. The irony is that the Government intends to have Santosh Pujari, a Brahmin by caste, as the head of the village panchayat in this village of Domes and Chandals.

Santosh Pujari, whom E. Satyanarayana considers an ‘archetypal exploiter’, is the preserver of feudal values in the rural world (The Plays of Mahashweta Devi, 105). He is responsible for all the woes of the Domes and the Chandals in the entire Charsa sub-division. Santosh Pujari, ‘the Government’s favourite son-in-law’ is the landowner of landowners, the moneylender of moneylenders. Trading in the relief grants meant for the poor has been a hereditary business with him. He creates an artificial famine in the villages by denying what is due to them. He steals away the relief funds and the drugs meant for the poor villagers. The doctor sent to treat them visits only his house and the rest of the village goes without treatment. With no other source of livelihood, the poor villagers are forced to toil in his fields for whatever the little amount he fixes. There are twenty villages bound to him in debt forever and his house rises from height to height at the cost of the poor. The irony is that such a ‘real devil’ and ‘viciously evil’ person is the only educated ‘decent’ man available in the entire block for the Government to entrust with the funds for relief.
Dhura, the son of Maghai, stands for change. He strives hard to free his community from the clutches of the age-old feudal system. He is aware of all the underhand activities of Santosh Pujari and tries to make his people understand that he is responsible for their de-human existence. His only worry is his father, Maghai who continues to work for him. His proximity to the Naxalites is referred to in the beginning of the play. The Government agencies who are aware of this, harden their stand further towards these villagers at the behest of Santosh Pujari, their 'son-in-law'. With his inclination for change and resistance to exploitation, Dhura resembles Sadayan in Chinnappa Bharati's novel *The Awakening* (1988).

Jiten Maiti, the schoolteacher, is a staunch follower of Gandhian ideals and had participated in the Quit India Movement and experienced imprisonment. He lives with the poor untouchables and shares their joys and sorrows. Irked by this act of the teacher, Santosh Pujari tries to use the authorities against him. When he finds him difficult to deal with, he tries to bribe the teacher by proposing a sixty-forty deal. Being an idealist, the teacher does not yield to any pressures and dauntlessly continues his efforts to find solution to the water problem created by Santosh Pujari.

Out of his experience during his visit to the border village Kasunda, the teacher encourages the poor villagers to construct a barrage against the river Charsa, with a hope that it would solve their water problem forever. Inspired by the teacher and realizing his own significance as a water–diviner, Maghai develops resistance against oppression. The teacher's suggestion to build a dam across the river Charsa excites Maghai and he feels as if his 'blood in spate'. They construct a dam and expect to resolve the water issue forever. But this act of awakening is misinterpreted as an act of Naxalism by Santosh Pujari and he convinces the
authorities accordingly. As a result, the authorities break the dam, kill Maghai Dome and attack others.

The play, with well-knit structure, is divided into fourteen scenes. It is the longest of all the plays of Mahashweta Devi. As in her earlier plays, she uses simple dramatic devices, avoiding the use of unnecessary scenic displays. The bare stage, lighting effects and characters addressing the audience are the important features which she effectively uses to achieve maximum dramatic effect. The Brechtian device of using songs is very cleverly utilized here to convey the overcharged emotions like happiness and disappointment of the characters.

When water is denied to the poor untouchables, they try to steal water during nighttime. But Santosh Pujari, the landlord, lets his dogs loose on them. Disappointed with the non-availability of water all the poor women join in singing, praying their Gods for water. They sing:

"Give us water!
Water, water, water!
The sky drips with molten fire.
The land gasps for water.

Where, oh, where's water?
Life wrinkles up,
With all the water held captive by Santosh like a pack of whores.
There's none to care for us,
for our hearts breading.
Give us water!
water, water, water!" (Five Plays 106)²³

The teacher's proposal to construct a dam across the river Charsa electrifies the entire lot of untouchables. The construction of the dam is an exciting experience for these simple
people. They sing spontaneously imagining themselves as the army of monkeys building the 
bridge to Lanka under the Lord Rama. They chant:

“Hei Lanka, Hei Lanka,
we’re on the way to Lanka,
a boulder on our backs,
a boulder on the ground,
we’re building the bridge to Lanka.
Hei Lanka! Hei Lanka.” (Five Plays 135-136)

The success of Mahashweta Devi’s artistry lies in her capacity to use the ancient legends 
and myths, befitting the contemporary setting, with a new interpretation, to convey a specific 
message. Regarding this Mahashweta Devi writes:

“It is essential to revive existing myths and adapt them to the present 
times and, following the oral tradition, create new ones as well. While 
I find the existing mythologies, epics and puranas interesting, I 
use them with a new interpretation.” (Seminar July 1989, 17)

Mahashweta Devi not merely uses legends and myths as they are, but makes an ironic 
use of them in the contemporary situation. As in Bayen (1976) here too the reference is to the 
incident of the King Bhagirath bringing the holy Ganga down to the earth from Heaven. Maghai 
Dome claims to be the descendant of the ‘chosen Priest’ of the Goddess, neither Ganga, 
inherting his knowledge of the water divining. The greatest irony is that all the wells in Charsa 
area are dug with the help of Maghai’s divine knowledge but all the untouchables, including 
Maghai are not allowed to draw water from the wells. Though Maghai knows well that Santosh 
Pujari is responsible for all his misfortunes, he cannot deny his service to him. Whenever 
Santosh invites him to divine water resources, his sense of filial responsibility stimulates him to 
help the digging of wells. Meghai’s respect for his ancestors and tradition is grossly
misused by the feudal elements. Meghai's wife Phulamani and her son Dhura do not like his willing submission to Santosh who exploits him through and through.

Dhura and his father Maghai resemble Chinnappa Bharathi's characters Sadayan and his father Thiruman in his novel *The Awakening* (1988). Dhura like Sadayan represents change in the social order. They are vocal and men of ideals. Unlike their fathers, they do not mince words. They express anger and protest against injustice with all determination. They reject the doctrine of fatalism of their fathers. Dhura is fully aware of the happenings in the Charsa region and strives hard to bring justice to his fellow beings. His concern for them and anger for the corrupt and treacherous system brings him closer to the Naxalites. His conversation with Santosh Pujari reveals his character well. Phulmami, Maghai's wife, is an interesting character in the play. She is a loving mother and a typical traditional Indian wife with a great sensitivity, but very aggressive and outspoken. Her dauntless nature can be seen in her conversation with Santosh Pujari. She says:

"We'll draw from our Panchayat well, we'll not let your cattle be washed there ... you act like the Government's own son-in-law. ... Why do you die a thousand deaths before you'd hand over to us what's meant for us? ... Men trade in paddy, you trade in relief ... I've seen you as a kid. You can't scare me." *(Five Plays 104-105)*

Her anger and aggression are the outcome of her sense of insecurity, helplessness and long experienced horrors of poverty and oppression. Though she is critical of her husband's obedience to Santosh Pujari, she has a great respect for her husband. But her sense of individuality and discretion does not make her follow him blindly. She stands in contrast to the ideology and philosophy represented by the mainstream. The so called mainstream people are money centred, divisive and impractical. Her worldview, on the other hand is inclusive, individual
centred and practical. It is clear in her following words, “Our bodies are made for hard work. We need daughters-in-law, we need grand children, we need a house full of people. And it’s only then that there are all those working hands. And water’s easier to get.”("Five Plays 118-119") Thus, the character of Phulmani, as E. Satyanarayana opines:

“Symbolizes the protagonist’s other-self which struggles hard to free itself from the dead weight of the conventions thrust on him by the feudal society... a representative voice of the working class omen typical of Mahashweta Devi’s dramatic vision.”("The Plays of Mahashweta Devi 115")

Maghai’s relation with the river Charsa gives a metaphorical dimension to the play. He is a true child of nature. His deep love and commitment to nature is manifested in his treatment of the river. It is a beautiful girl for him. He flirts with her and takes refuge in her lap in the moments of distress. This character reveals the fact that the secret of nature is discernible only to the ardent lover of it. The great irony is that he fails to reap the fruits of his knowledge due to his own limitation, that indirectly increases the problem of his people.

The response of the two Government officers to Maghai’s traditional knowledge of water divining is an example of arrogance and the gross ignorance of the mainstream population. When they fail to find water, ultimately Maghai’s ‘knowledge’ comes to their rescue. But they consider his knowledge as ‘Mumbo-jumbo’ and unscientific. For them Maghai is only an ‘illiterate fool’. But the teacher, Jiten’s answer to them throws a new light on the rich traditional knowledge of the downtrodden. He replies:

“Our country’s exceptional, don’t you realize that? Knowledge and culture here have nothing to do with literacy as such. Some one like Maghai can have both knowledge and culture. They’d have a mind like a continent that no one has cared to explore.”("Five Plays 117")
Mahashweta Devi tells the same thing in one of her interviews to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Chotti Munda XI). She says that the tribal world is like a continent handed down to us and regrets that we never tried to explore it. As Henry Schwarz, the noted critic says:

"The suppression of Maghai’s knowledge and culture, considered inferior to text sanctioned knowledge, is vital to the operation of the system. Yet this oppression cannot be total; if it wiped him out entirely the system would no longer function. Thus, a dimension of unreality can be seen as the motor for the entire structure." (Sharp 2; 4)

Mahashweta Devi makes use of irony very effectively throughout the play. Maghai Dome’s knowledge of water divining and his struggle for every drop of water is the greatest irony. He lives right on the bank of the river Charsa which overflows during the monsoon but he did not know that it could be stored in a barrage for the summer, until the teacher suggests it. Maghai helping Santosh, though he knows his credibility, is another incident of irony. Santosh Pujari coming forward to build a temple while the people clamour for water is a mockery of the whole situation.

Mahashweta Devi is critical of the role of both the bureaucracy and the feudal lords in Independent India. In almost all of her works, the corrupt officials, by joining hands with the oppressors, contribute significantly to the perpetuation of crime against humanity. The official–politician nexus makes the situation more vicious. The following conversation between the SDO and Jiten tells a lot about the prevailing situation in Post-Independent India. Their talk goes like this:

“SDO : It’s no use, Laws are made because they have to be made. They’re never enforced. The laws have abolished agricultural debt, the system of bonded labour is banned. But what do you find in reality?

Jiten : Isn’t it your job to enforce the laws?”
SDO : The landowners and the moneylenders still lend money and live off the interest. They still extort forced labour from their debtors.

Jiten : What are you trying to say?

SDO : Me? Who the hell am I? I'm powerless. If I threaten a moneylender, the minister will jump on me. Do you think I don't know? There are millions of rupees lent out on interest in this district, multiplying continuously, but there are no papers." (Five Plays 129)33

The SDO's true colour is revealed when he becomes a party to the atrocities on the untouchables towards the end. His philosophy that the people should be kept just where they are and as they are, tells much about him.

Santosh Pujari is a known hypocrite, selfish and a ruthless exploiter who conspires against Jiten and Maghai. But he is aware of their moral superiority and feels the pricks of his conscience. He remorsefully utters, "What a sinner I am, what a great sinner, now I have to harm this learned man. It hurts me here. I grew up rocking in a cradle that Maghai made. He used to make wonderful bird-snares for me. Oh! what a shame!" (Five Plays 141)34

This paradox in the character of the hardcore exploiter makes the situation more complex. All the untouchables come together under the leadership of Maghai and construct a dam against the river Charsa, as a permanent solution to the water problem. According to E. Satyanarayana the construction of dam in itself is an act of protest and self-assertion against the exploiting feudal society (124). The emboldened villagers assert their rights and outrightly reject to succumb to the feudal hegemony. It enrages Santosh and perceives a threat to his existence. So he prevails upon the Government and the police to attack on them.

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The play ends with the dead body of Maghai swaying on the crest of the waves of Charsa. Santosh, for whom Maghai divined water, got him killed. The water diviner at last becomes one with the water. Thus, like in her other works, here too we find Mahashweta Devi's relentless indictment of the prevailing social values and her commitment and concern for the underdog.

In conclusion, the study of Mahashweta Devi's plays reveal us that the change in the form of her expression does not change her objective of fighting against exploitation and oppression. It is also clear that Maheshweta Devi is as serious with the plight of the urban and the rural poor, bounded labourers and the victims of the blind beliefs as with the plight of the tribal. The absence of her most frequented tribal theme in her plays is glaring. Her experimentation with ventriloquism and the way she develops the entire drama of human relation around the inanimate character Urvashi in Urvashi O Johnny is very interesting. The indomitable spirit of resistance and desire for deliverance among the victims like Sujata, Paatan, Johnny, Chandidasi and Maghai Dome certainly open our eyes.
END NOTES


3. Urmil Talwar, and Bandana Chakrabarty, ed., Contemporary Indian Drama—
Astride two Traditions (Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2005) 100.

4. Devi X.


12. Devi 50.


16. Devi, Five plays, 47.


20. Devi 78.
22. Devi 75.
23. Satyanarayana 100.
24. Devi 103-104.
25. Devi 106.
29. Devi 118-119.
30. Satyanarayana 115.
31. Devi 117.
32. Henry Schwarz, “Postcolonial Performance: Texts and Contexts of Mahashweta
    Devi,” Sharp, issue-2, University of Sussex, 4.
33. Devi 129.
34. Devi 141.