Chapter V

Activist Writings of Mahashweta Devi:

A Saga of Struggle

"Commando who never fired a gun. His weapon was a ball point pen and his arena newspaper pages and he hurt the enemy more than a column of commandos."

— Gassan Kanafani’s Obituary in The Daily Star, an English Newspaper, Beirut
CHAPTER – V

ACTIVIST WRITINGS OF MAHASHWETA DEVI:
A SAGA OF STRUGGLE

Creative writing is only one side of Mahashweta Devi as a literary person. There are several other dimensions to her personality, which are closely interrelated. For understanding of one dimension, it is essential to take into account the other facets too. Regarding it, Maitreya Ghatak aptly remarks:

“She cannot be branded by anyone conventional label such as writer, social activist, reporter, editor or organizer of peoples’ groups at the grassroots level: each is a true, but partial description of her. All these facets of her personality, considered together, sharply distinguish her from her contemporaries, not just in her home state of West Bengal, but in the rest of the country too” (Dust VIII)

The year 1980-81 marks a new phase in Mahashweta Devi’s life. Many new dimensions of her personality started coming to the fore since then. She had already travelled widely in rural and tribal areas of West Bengal and neighbouring states and had about fifty literary works to her credit by that time. She felt that fiction, through which she could reach only a limited number of readers, was not an adequate enough medium for her in proportion to the magnitude of the oppression and exploitation and the gravity of the situation. The genuine concerns in her for the victims of all sorts of exploitation generated a desperate urge in her to communicate to the wider range of audience about what was happening to the poor and the helpless in the name of development and their desperate struggle for survival. Journalism came in handy to her to expose the oppressive elements that are left scot-free even after 50 years of independence. She started writing for newspapers and journals covering labourers, non-payment of minimum wages, environment and ecology, unorganized rural poor, superstition, casteism, communalism,
police atrocities, administration – moneylenders nexus, literacy, education, irrigation, basic amenities, apathy of the official machinery towards the poor, the struggle of the poor for survival, identity and dignity, the exploitation of the women, particularly the tribal and low-caste women and so on.

Mahashweta Devi worked in various capacities in the field of journalism; as a reporter, as a columnist and as an editor. In 1982, she took leave for her teaching profession to work as a roving reporter to the Bengali newspaper *Jugantar*. Later she resigned from her teaching job in 1984 and joined another Bengali daily, *Dainik Basumati*. After one year she joined *Bartaman* for which she wrote weekly columns till 1991. Since then, she has been contributing regularly to another Bengali newspaper, *Aajkal*. Vivid and direct analysis of various issues in all these Bengali newspapers along these years made Mahashweta Devi a household name in West Bengal. Regarding her emergence as a journalist, Malini Bhattacharya opines:

“Though Mahashweta Devi started to send in reports of her experiences in the Tribal areas of Bihar and West Bengal to *Economic and Political Weekly* and other journals and papers from 1981, her training as an activist journalist had begun in 1950s when she travelled widely in Madyapradesh by herself trying to retrace historical memories in order to write a biography of the Rani of Jhansi.”

(*EPW* : 10 May 97, 1003)²

Mahashweta Devi’s father was editing a Bengali literary quarterly called *Bortika* (torch), till his death in 1979. It was an obscure literary periodical then. Once she took charge, she gave altogether a different shape to it. She provided opportunities to the small peasants, agricultural labourers, tribals, factory workers, rickshaw pullers and others to write about their life and problems. Readers were provided with a chance to face vis-à-vis the problems of all sorts of victims. *Bortika* is a unique experiment in the history
of Indian journalism. It covered wide range of topics and became a forum for all sorts of
victims and sufferers to express themselves freely and communicate directly to the readers.
Henry Schwarz, a noted critic, considered Bortica as, "A living archive of everyday life in
Bengal, publishing utterances of the people that would rarely be described as literature."
(Sharp 2, 2002). Thus, with this novel venture of Mahashweta Devi, the harsh realities of the
life of the marginalized, that was ‘light years away’ from the urban middle class and even from
the scholars of subaltern studies, found the light of day through Bortica.

During the same period, she had been contributing every now and then to the national
level English journals like, Economic and Political Weekly, Business Standard, Sunday and
Frontier, covering a wide range of subjects. The vast experiences she gained in the course of
her journalistic endeavour, provided a solid material for her creative writings. All the major
issues and incidents, she had covered in her activist writings, have their reflections in her fictions,
stories and plays. Talking about the inter-dependability of her various activities. Mahashweta
Devi comments:

"It is not new for my literature to spring from a fight for the rights
of these oppressed and downtrodden people. The tribal revolt against
the British at the turn of the century formed the backbone of Aranyer
Adhikar (1976) ... My social activism is the driving force of all my
literary activities, be it literature, newspaper columns or the journal I
edit, with writing by members of different tribes. The life of the bonded
labour provided me with a character like Dopdi, perhaps their stories
also impart a narrative immediacy to my language."(Times of India 1
Jan 2000, p.14)

Maitreya Ghatak, a social researcher and one of the close associates of
Mahashweta Devi feels that her activist writings cannot be fully understood in
isolation from her total range of activities (*Dust on the Road* XVIII). They are all related to each other like the various issues she takes up in her activist writings. Her activist writings are the outcome of the prevailing socio-political milieu that has infected the life in general during the Post-Independent Indian context and that needs an immediate treatment. The articles are eye opening and ‘sensitize’ the readers regarding the harsh realities of life. They are touching, moving and sometimes shocking and based on her own experiences, facts and thorough research. Hence, they remain important document for all those who would like to know the real picture of Post-Independent India, laying on the threshold of the new millennium. Expression of a deep concern for human miseries and sufferings, anger for all those who are responsible for them, in a simple artless but direct language add a new dimension to the field of journalism.

Maitreya Ghatak has collected Mahashweta Devi’s activist writings, from 1981 to 1992 under the title, *Dust On The Road* (1997). Different articles are grouped under different headings, based on the issues they deal with. In this chapter, an attempt is made to analyse those articles accordingly.

I. “THE BONDED LABOUR”

The inhuman practice of bonded labour system draws the attention of Mahashweta Devi. She has written four articles on the issue at different times, to three different journals. In these articles, she tries to educate the readers on the plight of the bonded labourers in India by focusing on the prevailing conditions in the Palamau district of undivided Bihar. This ‘most backward districts of a very backward state’ haunts Mahashweta Devi most and goes deep into the making of her activism, activist writings and also the creative writings.
Mr. Rasil B. Mojares opines that a turning point came in her life with her visit to Palamau in 1965, which she calls ‘a mirror of India’. He observes:

"Moving from place to place on foot, she witnessed the savage impact on indigenous society of absentee landlordism, a despoiled environment, debt bondage and state neglect. Subsequently, she observed the same dismal conditions in other tribal districts in India. There was no education, no health care, no roads, no income. Exploitation and neglect had reduced people to a subhuman existence. Devi had, for long, been dimly aware of the presence of tribal people, but it was the Palamau experience that brought her face to face with the misery of a people largely excluded from official, mainstream history."(Biography)

Bonded labour system had been practiced in India since many generations. Under the system, a man borrows some money – it might be for food, a death in the family, hunger, sickness, a daughter’s marriage and so on. The borrower then puts his thumb impression on a piece of paper and thus, becomes a debt-bonded. From then on he will work for the moneylender for an extremely low wage till the debt is repaid with interest. In reality, however, the debt is never repaid for the ‘wages are absurdly low and the rate of interest astronomically high’. The process of debt repayment thus, continues for generations. Inter-generational bondage is a common feature of the system.

Being declared as a bonded labour district, Palamau has a very high incidence of bonded labour and equally high concentration of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population. In this predominantly rural district, the entire stretch of fertile land was possessed by the upper-caste landowners. Forest was a main source of livelihood for the landless but it succumbed to the avarice of the timber contractors. In the absence of any major industry to depend upon, the
working population has left with no option but to be a bandhua or the bonded labourer. As Mahashweta Devi writes, “The poor of Palamau have no choice. Between death by slow starvation and bondage, they will choose the latter” (Dust 26). Palamau, with poor economic background and medieval social structure, became an epicenter of this cruel and inhuman practice.

Mahashweta Devi says that in India ‘Acts are for enactment and not for implementation’. The belated act of the Government banishing the bonded labour system also as expected, met with administrative snags at every stage of its implementation. The total management of the situation was so precarious that all the bonded labourers were not liberated and those liberated had already started relapsing into their previous status. Under such circumstances, some social workers, Government and Non-Governmental organizations have been trying their best to educate them, to instill courage and confidence in them and to give them legal aids. Against this background Mahashweta Devi writes these four articles.

(i) “Back To Bondage”

In this article, written for The Business Standard (27, May 1981) Mahashweta Devi recounts her visit to Semra, the revenue village in Palamau district, in 1981. This visit becomes meaningful as she was accompanied by Rameshwaram, a social activist and a freelance journalist, who knew ‘real Palamau’ and the people of Palamau knew and trusted him well. Hence, her interactions with the bonded labourers and others became far easier. Mahadeb Topo, Shravan Kumar and Shashi, the photographer were the other members of the team. Semra village came to the lime light in 1976, when a camp for the freed bonded labourers was conducted in collaboration with the National Labour Institute Delhi, the Union and State Labour Ministers and the District Administration.
Semra was a Brahmin-dominated village. As per the Government report, 43, out of 84 bonded labourers were liberated (Dust on the Road III). They met a barber boy whose grandfather, Raghunandan Hajam had possessed twelve acres of fertile land, which the late Rameshwar Pande, the father of Ayodhya Pande took away by implicating him in a legal matter. Moreover, his three militant sons died in a mysterious circumstances, vomiting blood, after attending a puja at the Brahmin’s house. The boy, Raghunandan feels that the curse of the Gods had fallen on his family.

They happened to come across another person, Mangru, a young man of thirty, who was freed from the bondage and as a part of rehabilitation exercise, was given 80 decimals of barren, rocky land, far away from the village. At the same time, he was pressurized to relapse into the bondage. His refusal enraged the landlord, Ayodhya Pande, who intum tied him up, beat and crushed his face repeatedly with shoes. Mangru vomited blood and prayed for water. The landlord’s son, Ramaballav urinated on his face. It was shocking to see the broken gums and teeth in his twisted mouth. They also came to know the account of the ‘man-eater’, Jogikhura known as J.P, a high-up official of Bihar state, who looted, plundered and let loose a reign of terror while his son and nephew involved in killing and raping. Surprisingly, he remained a big Government officer and later an elected member of the legislative council of the state. These stories gave them the true picture of ‘real Palamau’. They found a lot of discrepancy between the ground reality and the official claims regarding the rehabilitation and liberation of bonded labourers. The entire exercise by the Government appeared to be a sham. The shocking fact that came to their notice was that all the identified bonded labourers were not liberated and those who were liberated, were back in bondage. The land given to them was insufficient, barren, rocky and away from their dwelling places. Some of them were given better pieces of land, but it was only on record. In reality, landlords cultivated all the cultivable pieces of land.
The landlords, who were also ‘Mukhias’ and ‘Sarpanchs’, acted as the real spoilers. They sabotaged the entire process of rehabilitation. Irony of the situation was that the Government distributed the relief materials through the landowners who were also the owners of the bonded labourers. As a result, they got no relief materials, no employment, no food, no water. They remained at the mercy of their Maliks as before.

The freed labourers could neither get works for wages nor cultivate their land. Hence, they had to sell all their relief materials to the landlords in order to survive. Some of them felt, safer to enter debt bondage. Those who were freed once became a laughing stock and their plight became worse than the bonded ones. Mahashweta Devi is very angry over the cruel joke that had been played on the bonded labourers in Semra.

An important point in the article is the reference to different types of bonded labour system – *Dharumaru, Charwaha and Harwaha* – that were in vogue in Palamau district; one was worse than the other. Ramashwaram, who was a great source of information on the ‘real Palamau’, gets a due appreciation by Mahashweta Devi. He could win the trust of the people of that area with his sincere endeavour to empower the most unfortunate section of the Palamau society.

He walked through the district of Palamau for collecting data and he knew every corner of the area. People too were aware of the fact that he was not a person who would belie the trust that they had reposed in him.

(ii) "The Slaves Of Palamau" (Sunday, 3-9 July 1983),

Mahashweta Devi writes about the successful organization of a meeting of the bonded labourers in Daltonganj by the joint effort of Rameshwaram and the
1 May of 1983 was a memorable day for the bonded labourers of Palamau. Perhaps for the first time in their life, the harijans, tribals, the poor and other exploited sections of the society entered the local town hall named after Mahatma Gandhi, at Daltonganj. The most interesting feature of the meeting was the participation of the people who had been living in subhuman conditions. They themselves managed everything. They addressed the gathering, conducted the sessions, displayed great courage with clarity of thought. They were given opportunity to express their experiences without any fear or hesitation. As they went on talking themselves, the horror and misery that lie behind the bondage became clear to the outer world. Some shocking revelation were made regarding the intergenerational slavery for the paltry sum of Rs.12, 35 or so. Some of them were slaves for 40 years just for the debt of Rs.10. The horrible feature of the system was that the slavery was bequeathed to the next generation. Mohammed Kasim’s father had been a slave for 45 years and his son continued to be a slave for 32 years. They slaved totally for 77 years for the debt of Rs.10. In the similar manner, Gora Mian and his father slaved for 48 years for the debt of 18 kg of rice. There were such 32 slaves under Taramoni, who bequeathed the ownership to his son Pitambar Lallu.
Like slavery, the ownership too was inter-generational. Inspite of so many years of slavery, the owners did not release them so easily. They used to demand huge amount of money for their release. The life of the bonded labourers had remained subhuman. They had no proper wages, freedom, food, drinking water, schools for children, health centers and ration shops. Though this inhuman system was banished many years back, the number of persons coming under its orbit had been on the surge. But the official figure remained contrary, which merely exposed the absurdity of the official version.

The Government had introduced the Rs.4000 package for the release of each bonded labourer. But the irony is that the package was implemented through the Sarpanchs who were also the owners of the bonded labourers. They were hostile to their rehabilitation exercise. Hence, Mahashweta Devi in this article suggests to visit Palamau all those who are under the false impression that the zamindari system is no more. Infact, it had such a horrendous existence that an eight-year-old child became a bonded labourer in a village, Kachan. But the May Day of 1983, celebrated at Daltonganj had achieved a miracle. It was a tremendous success. The bonded labourers had taken heart. With a little help and some guidance, they would be able to assert their rights and fight unitedly and courageously for their liberation.

(iii) "Palamau In Bondage: Forever?" (EPW, 21 April 84)

Mahashweta Devi continues to write about the plight of the bonded labourers of Palamau district. She documents the attempt of various activists and organizations to educate and empower them. The role of Palamau Bandhua Mukti Morcha (PBMM) is specifically appreciated, as it plays a pivotal role in empowering the helpless bonded labourers as well as the non-bonded labourers of the region. The Morcha was affiliated to a Delhi based organization, Chaired by Swami Agnivesh who had been fighting hard for the brick kiln and stone quarry
workers of Haryana, Punjab and Faridabad. The successful conduct of the May Day in 1983 showed the world that the most down trodden of the poor of India were capable and intelligent enough to shoulder responsibilities and above all, were ‘desperate for a life of dignity’. Though the meeting (Choupal) did not get very wide media coverage, the stir of consciousness among the bandhuas had attracted attention.

‘The almighty Deputy Commissioner’ whom they had met for the first time was, unlike others, very sympathetic and responsive. He frankly admitted the failure of the district administration in dealing with the bandhua problem. He accepted Mahashweta Devi’s suggestion to take the help of Amalendu Roy of the District Science Centre of Purulia and the Palamau Bandhua Mukti Morcha (PBMM) for conducting identification and rehabilitation schemes effectively. Such officers, naturally, used to become the object of the wrath of the ‘worthy’ landlords. The DC was transferred. Undeterred by any external developments, the District Morcha continued the work of making lists of bandhuas, following the set guidelines.

Mahashweta Devi regrets that the Government which spends crores of rupees on family planning schemes, did nothing to educate the people regarding the Act that had abolished the bonded labour system (1976). They remained ignorant of the law. The landlords, who knew it well, tried to extract more benefit out of it by demanding a substantial amount for their release. Considering the enormity of the problem, the Morcha was too small to tackle it. But emboldened by the ‘stir of the consciousness’ among the bandhuas, the Morcha decided to convene a National seminar on bonded labour.

The three-day seminar was held at Pancheribandh village near Daltonganj in 1984. Bandhuas attended in thousands. The highlight of the seminar was the nightmarish experiences
narrated by the children who had worked as bonded child labourers in the carpet factories of Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh. The Palamau police had promptly rescued the boys but Mahashweta Devi regrets that neither Pannalal, the owner of the factory nor Nathuni Thakur, the barber who lured the children away to Mirzapur, had been brought to justice. The incident made it clear to the outsiders about the curse of being born in Palamau in a poor man’s house. It was revealed that there had been an alarming rise in the number of bandhuas, year after year. As it is already mentioned, the poor labourers of Palamau had left with no option but to go into the bondage for their survival. Irony was that, even the non-bandhuas would like to become bandhuas so that they would be liberated one day and get Government’s help which was inaccessible to them as non-bandhuas. Even though the Government had granted the land to the Harijans, they could not get the possession of the land as the block Karamachari used to demand Rs.200 from each person, which was not possible for them to pay. The upper-caste landlords would manipulate the situation for their benefit.

Amidst this sorry state of affairs, the Morcha became successful in encouraging the labourers to fight the cunning bond-masters. They gained enough courage to attend the Morcha activities, braving the wily and vengeful masters. It was a great achievement of the ‘Morcha’. The speakers in the seminar gave very useful suggestions regarding recognition, liberation and rehabilitation programme of the bonded labourers and were successful in drawing the attention of the outer world towards this system of slavery.

(iv) "Report From Palamau" (EPW, 5 May 1984)

Mahashweta Devi is very much interested in a report prepared by a dedicated group of active social workers who had been working among the bonded labourers of Palamau for some time. She does not divulge their names on their request for anonymity. She values the
report much as it is based on the actual experience of the committed social workers and she feels that the report is of great help to all those who would care for the tragic fate of the Palamau bandhuas. This kind of groundwork at the grass root level will certainly help the town-based organizations fighting against the inhuman system.

The report divides the issues into two. One is directly related and the other is indirectly related. The direct issues are related with the liberation and rehabilitation of the bonded labourers. They stress upon the involvement of both the district administration and the Morcha members in these works to make them fair and transparent. They also suggest to include the provisions for irrigation and drinking water in the Government’s scheme for the rehabilitation. The indirectly related issues are more vital and are related with the problem of bondage and its causes. Poverty was considered the main reason for bondage and the lack of irrigation, lack of employment, lack of marketing, low wages, corruption and wrong forest polices were considered the main causes of poverty.

The group suggested the Government to take the following measures.

1. Development of agricultural pattern
2. Development of irrigation
3. Employment surety
4. Enforcement of money lending laws
5. Fixation of fair rates for forest produce
6. Plantation of trees that would help rural economy
7. Enforcement of minimum wages

Unless a concerted effort is made to alleviate abject poverty, the proper implementation
of the Bonded Labour Abolition Act would not be possible. Out of 36 children taken to Mirzapur for child labour, 26 had gone with the consent of their parents who were miserably poor. The parents were too poor to feed children but they did not want to see them die of hunger. The bonded labour would at least give them food and life. So they give their consent. Along with poverty alleviation programme, the Government has to take urgent measures to improve education and to liberate it from corruption. It is equally necessary to instill the sense of unity, courage and sense of economy among the poor through mass movement. The villagers were happy with the activities of the Morcha. The greatest achievement of the poor at Palamau was the realization of the fact that they must work unitedly to change their own lives. Mahashweta Devi's play *Ajir* (1976) is written against the background of this inhuman system. This further corroborates the opinion that her creative writing is an extension of her activism.

II. CONTRACT LABOUR

There are two articles related to the problem of contract labour. In the first article, entitled "Contract Labour or Bonded Labour" (*EPW*, 6 June 1981), Mahashweta Devi draws our attention to the plight of the labourers in the districts of Ranchi, Singbhum and other parts of undivided Bihar, who were liberated from bondage. Here we find a factual and a touching account of how the deep rooted apathy of the Government, abject poverty and the well-knit network of the exploiters force the helpless poor labourers to fall into the traps of the landlords and the brick kiln owners. Some cited examples of exploitation of men, women and children by the brick-kiln owners focus on the gravity of the problem and the cruelty of the system, which is a worst kind of bondage.

The bonded labour system was formally abolished in November 1975. But no sincere effort was made by the Government towards the rehabilitation of the liberated bonded labourers.
The land given to them was uncultivable. It was, in fact, owned by the masters, though the ownership papers were in the name of the labourers freed from bondage. There was no water either for irrigation or for drinking. Though Palamau was poverty stricken and labour-surplus district, outside labourers were brought in by the Government agencies for various works. The life of the ex-bonded labourers was in acute distress. Forsaken by the Government and the society, they were left with no option but to enter into the debt-bondage in order to stay alive. Being the case, it was not difficult for the agents of different masters to lure them away to far away places with promises of good jobs.

Mahashweta Devi refers to one of her friends, Purnendu Mazoomdar, whom she calls ‘a class by himself’ and ‘the tribals true friend’ (*Dust on the Road* 31). He had been working a lot for the welfare of the tribal people with utmost dedication in the districts of Ranchi and Singbhum. She also refers to Laru Jonko, a remarkable Ho woman and the president of the Mahila Samiti of Chiriburu, in Singbhum district. They succeeded in tracing several adivasis who were missing from different villages of the district. She recounts various instances of missing and tracing of a number of Adivasi women and children. It reflects on the tragedy and the helplessness of the poor and also the deep-rooted network of exploitation.

The brick kiln owners of West Bengal were mostly from north Bihar. They did not recruit the labourers directly. The entire process was manipulated very tactfully with the help of the recruiting women who were called *sardars*. The *sardars* were one time concubines of the kiln owners. They got corrupted with the close association of the owners. They got despised by their own folk and became virtual outcasts. The *sardars* used to act like agents. They lured the poor young girls with tales of good jobs near the magic city of Calcutta. Sometimes they were helped by the sub-agents in their task. Mahashweta Devi refers to female *Sardars* like
Sona Jonko and Nandi Jamuda and the male Sardars like Dibru Lohar and Madru Angari who had supplied large number of young unmarried girls.

They had to work in a very unhealthy working conditions and had to live in jhopris (hovels) that were worse than pig-holes, without any sanitation, water and other basic amenities. The magic city of Calcutta disillusioned them soon. They were getting only Rs.15 as wages against the promised Rs.25 - Rs.35.

'Paupers they came and paupers they went'. The most hellish experience that the young girls had to undergo was that they were being forced to sleep with the owners. They were kept under the strict surveillance of the sardars and the musclemen of the owners. They were treated like slaves and denied minimum wages, medical facilities, leave and the right to form a union. There were no registers for attendance and payments, no identity cards. Many such girls never returned to their places. Yet the number of labourers joining brick-kiln was going up every year. Even the helpless parents who knew everything used to remain mute spectators. Mahashweta Devi, ironically writes: "Bihar, to me, is the true mirror of India. Bihar has everything in plenty. Even bonded and contract labourers."

Poverty, caused by the Governmental apathy, was the main reason for the prevailing state of affairs. Only towns and industries used to get electricity and other facilities. In Chotanagpur only 2 percent land was irrigated. Government collected tax regularly. In turn, it gave nothing. There were primary schools but people remained illiterate because many teachers did not attend their works. They had their own business. The villagers had made the following song on such truant teachers:
"Rando, Rando, come to school!
Mata, Mata, Where are you?
Rando and Mata and the other boys
Graze the cow, tend the goat.
The Masterji sits in his shop"[8]([Dust 36])

There were some primary health units but there were no doctors and medicines. In some places there were only compounders. In some places, people had to go to distant places for treatments, as they had no facilities in their health centres. As a result, infant and child mortality was high. Any complaint by the people would not be of any use. Illiterate and ignorant villagers practiced witch hunting. The poor innocent women were the victims. Inspite of thousands of crores spent on ‘tribal development’, they remained in ‘primeval darkness’.

In spite of the ban, the cutting of fruit-bearing trees and leasing of forests to the contractors went on uninhibited. The tribals used to collect bidi leaves and sold them for livelihood. But the Government had leased out the plucking right to the contractors who appointed the tribals for the work on incredibly low wages. Being traditional basket weavers, they used to collect bamboo from the forest easily. But the new forest policy and the mindless deforestation by the contractors had made their life miserable. All these things made the people of this area desperate and they took to violence. The demand for a separate Jharkhand state was set against this background. The two case studies — one relating to Amar Ekka, a Christian Munda and the other to Sura Pai, a Raotia boy from Buruchanda — which Mahashweta Devi cites towards the end of the article, show the intensity of the problem and the vulnerability of the tribals and the non-tribal poor in some part of Bihar and it simply shows how ‘expendable’ they were!
In the second article, entitled “An Eastside Story: Construction Labourers in West Bengal” (EPW, 16-23 April 83), Mahashweta Devi tries to show the world how the hapless labourers were exploited by the contractors in the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass (EMB), a gigantic Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) project. The reason for the concern was that it was a much publicized Government project. The way in which the contractors treated the labourers and exploited their helplessness shows that their condition was not better than bonded labourers. It was a new manifestation of the bonded labour system.

The Eastern Metropolitan Bypass (EMB) was a mega project which needed thousands of labourers for different works. The contractors cleverly manipulated the whole system for their profit with the help of a well established network. They appointed agents who were called dafadars who in turn appointed their sub-agents called Khatadars. It was the Khatadars who recruited and handled the labourers. The labourers did not have any connection with either the dafadars or the contractors. They were wooed with the promises of high wages, plentiful food and just eight hours of work. But in reality, they got only Rs.3.5-4 as wages without any arrears and were forced to do twelve hours of backbreaking work under the scorching sun. They had to live in a wretched condition. The hutments were too low with intolerable heat inside. Nothing was in writing. Hence, they had nothing to depend upon but the mercy of the babus. The babus would refuse to pay the wages to the desperate and disillusioned labourers who wished to go back to their homes. Even the sick persons would be forced to work. Those who demanded justice would be left in the mercy of the toughs who used to torture them mercilessly. Feared for their lives, the labourers would flee the places with their meager belongings and without any money with them.
Mahashweta Devi cites the example of the boy Ajit Adgiri who did not get a single paisa for 44 days’ work. She visited the work site of the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass on 6 April, 1983 where a teenage son of Thaleshwar, a Munda, was working and was treated in an inhuman manner along with other workers. Another example she gives is that of another contractor, Saktipada Sahu, working for the Kolaghat Thermal Power Project, cheated thousands of rupees to the labourers. An appeal had been submitted to that effect to the State Labour Directorate with the signatures and thumb impressions of the labourers.

Thus, Mahashweta Devi tells us with examples, how the ‘almighty’ contractors mint money in independent India and how ‘shamelessly’ they cheat the hapless labourers. It is not an exaggeration when she writes, “India is truly mortgaged to the contractors.” *(Dust 43)*. All these instances show that the bonded labour system was not restricted to the agricultural and unorganized sectors in West Bengal alone. It was present in different names in different sectors and in different places. The plight of the labourers working in construction sectors and in brick-kiln was worse than that of the bonded labourers. Once again, as Mahashweta Devi repeatedly points out, the object poverty, failure of the Local Panchayats, the Governmental apathy and all-pervasive corruption are responsible for the prevailing state of affairs.

The questions she poses at the end of the article show her concern for the suffering labourers and the need for urgent remedial measures. She questions: “Where is the machinery to enforce labour protection laws? ... What are the guardians of liberty doing? Let the contractors make their packets. But why deprive the poor of meager amounts?” *(Dust 45)*
III. REACTIONARY FORCES AND INDUSTRIALIZATION

Singbhum of erstwhile Bihar state was an ‘unfathomable mass of untold miseries’. This place was besieged by various reactionary forces like Christian Missionaries, militant Hindu organizations and by the big industrial houses like Roro Asbestos and Jhikpani cement factory. The tribals and the poor non-tribals remained helpless spectators as the callous brutality of the ‘big-ones’ went on unabated. The ‘assemblage of reactionary forces’ in Singbhum had led to the communal tension which, otherwise, had a peaceful social coexistence. On the other hand, the rich business houses like Roro Asbestos Cement Mines and the Jhikpani Cement Factory posed a great health hazards to the human beings and other living things, apart from economic exploitation and illegal acquisition of the forming land. The reactionary forces were hell bent on breaking the tribal solidarity and the big industrialists, who enjoyed great ‘immunity’ were totally blind to human miseries. Tribals and their interests were at stake. Any resistance by them would be met with dire consequences and they would be ‘taught a lesson’. The poor men and women were lured away to Punjab and West Bengal to work under rich farmers and brickfield owners. Mahashweta Devi tries to expose what was going on in Singbhum and the surrounding areas in the name of religion and industrialization. Angered by the gross negligence of the human concern in Singbhum, she expressed her strong protests through three articles she had written to EPW.

(i) "Witch Sabbath at Singbhum" (EPW, 3 October 81)

Mahashweta Devi writes about the communal tension that brewed in Ranchi, Jamshedpur, Chakradharpur and Chaibasa due to the activities of the Christian Missionaries and the militant Hindu organizations. She also writes about the problems posed by the big industrial houses. She writes in detail about the problem related to the cement factories. She based her article on the reports of her correspondents who prefer to remain anonymous.
The article begins with a reference to the incident of shooting down of eleven tribals by the Bihar Military Police (BMP), on 8 September, 1980. This incident took place in a small and picturesque town of Gua in Singbhum. When the tribals had assembled at Gua under the flag of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, the BMP fired 60 to 70 rounds at them, killing 11. It was only an official claim. In reality, the death toll was far more than the official claim. The things had become so strange in Singbhum that it needed a lot of time, tenacity and toughness even to unearth the names of the officially dead. The people were disappointed as nobody cared the death of their children. They were lured away to distant places and made slaves but nobody bothered. There was an undeclared war of revenge against the villagers. They were forced to accept absurd work terms for their survival.

Apart from the police atrocities and the oppression by the administration, Singbhum had become a playground for many reactionary forces. The Christian Missionaries were quite active in this region since many decades. Their conversion drive was on without any substantial resistance. The Hindu organizations appeared on the scene in the 70s which naturally led to the collision of interests that surfaced in the form of communal riots. The Hindu organizations like Deendayal Institute & RSS, had started their activities in the tribal regions of Ranchi, Jamsedpur, Chakradharpur and Chaibasa. BJP, the political party backed by these organizations, had also made its presence felt in the region. Communal frenzy engulfed the political, social and moral sanity of the people. These places became witness to many communal riots. The Hindu organizations celebrated Ramnavami festival and often conducted meetings. The RSS imparted martial training to it cadres. It had a better chance than the missionaries, since lathi and sword exercises tend to attract the tribals more. Various eminent religious personalities and men like Nanaji Deshmukh used to visit those places, addressed the meetings, calling the tribals to stop the act of conversion by the Christian Missionaries.
The Christian Missionaries too were doing all out efforts to maintain their influence over the tribal population. They helped and financed the celebration of the birth anniversary of the tribal rebel leader Birsa Munda in 1980, at Chaibasa. It brought in the rift between the converted tribals and the others. In the meanwhile the emergence of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) on the scene gave a new impetus to the tribal movement. Regarding this state of affairs Mahashweta Devi writes:

"Converting Singbhum into fertile ground for communalism, the activists are aiming to break tribal solidarity. The ultimate aim is not a Hindu-Muslim riot but a riot between the Christian and non-Christian tribals. When that is achieved, the witches will have fulfilled their mission." (Dust 52)

The assemblage of reactionary forces was possible in Singbhum as it was rich in forests and was a ‘labour-recruitment centre’. Singbhum was very necessary, as Mahashweta Devi ironically points out, for “India’s pancharangi programme of wealth for the wealthy and poverty for the poor.” (Dust 54)

While the tribal psyche was being battered by the reactionary forces, presence of the big industrial houses only added pain to injuries. The industries like Roro Asbestos and the Jhikpani cement factory remained totally blind to human misery. The invaluable asbestos that Singbhum possessed had become a curse on the part of the labourers and the people living in the surrounding areas. The labourers who work in the mines on miserable low wages and without any protective measures, were always in the danger of exposure to asbestos which causes asbestosis a scarring of lungs, leading to death. It is an incurable disease. Many advanced countries had imposed ban on mining and manufacturing of asbestos. The asbestos–dust released into the air by the crusher–plant posed a great health hazard to the villagers in the...
surrounding areas. Between January and August of 1981, thirty people died of asbestosis. The issue was raised in the parliament, but nothing was done.

In the similar manner, the inhalation of silica dust in the Jhikpani cement mines caused silicosis, another incurable disease among the labourers and the people living in the surrounding areas. Thus, the poor Singbhum was in siege from all sides by the inimical forces. The precarious tribal existence in Singbhum is symbolically compared to a cowherd lost in the jungle, in the following song:

“In the east, the tiger prowls
In the south, the black bear growls
In the west, the wild wolf howls
In the north, the serpent’s jowls
So the little boy he waits and waits
To be eaten by the tiger
To be crushed to death by the bear
To be torn to shreds by the wolves
To be swallowed by the snake.” (Dust 54)

(ii) "A Countryside Slowly Dying" (EPW, 5 March 1983)

Mahashweta Devi draws our attention to the distress caused by the ACC factory of Jhikpani and the abandoned mines in and around Singbhum. The meeting or Sammelan of the tribals of Rajenka and other villages gave an opportunity to her to visit Singbhum. This visit revealed her the health hazards and miseries caused by the ACC factory of Jhikpani. ACC had 19 cement factories in India and Jhikpani was the oldest. Rajenka village, where the Sammelan was held, was one of the worst sufferers.

Cement dust carried by the wind was ruining crops and vegetation. The fields laid barren and grey under the layers of accumulated cement dust. The trees wore a ghost-like
look. The listless leaves were hanging, heavy with cement dust. The air was hazy with grey dust. The cement dust fell relentlessly upon everyone and everything in the surrounding area of ten miles radius. The human beings and cattle, who inhaled the cement dust, died of tuberculosis caused by the silicosis. The life there was an instance of savage indifference. A proper exhaust system would have controlled the dust menace. But the factory owners, whose only intention was to accumulate wealth, the health of the humans and animals was the least of their concerns. They ignored all the rules and regulations with great contempt. Cement factories are common all over the world, but as Mahashweta Devi writes, "Health and cultivation hazards caused by cement dust were uniquely Indian." (Dust 62)4

Another factor that came to her notice was that the ACC plant was usurping the lands of the villagers in an arbitrary manner. Acquiring tribal land is illegal but they used to acquire it under the cover of law. Sometimes they acquired forcibly. In most of the cases, promised work and compensation were not fulfilled. Thus, the land grabbing by the factory went on, obviously in an illegal manner.

One more instance of illegality was found. It was regarding the abandoned mines. As per the regulations, the abandoned mines should be completely filled up or be kept securely fenced. But they were kept open as a mark of arrogance, callousness and sheer indifference of the mine owners. Hence, those abandoned mines were filled with rainwater, leaving the surrounding fields dry. The labourers who were vocal and protested the illegal and inhuman acts of the factory owners were discharged from the work. All these experiences in Singbhum convinced Mahashweta Devi that the factory owners were too powerful to abide by the law. They could terrorize and kill the ordinary people in Singbhum as the law was on their side.
Towards the end of the article, Mahashweta Devi refers to her visit to Serengsi Ghati where the Ho people had fought and defeated the British in the 19th century. The simple and artless Ho people record everything in their minds but not on papers. They do not commemorate the events and persons in the way the mainstream people do. Contrary to Jhikpani, Serengsi Ghati was rich with forest trees and medicinal plants. As a matter of pleasant surprise, the administration had sunk tube wells from which the Ho women were pumping water. Mahashweta Devi concludes the article with the suggestion that the salvation of Singbhum was in the 'continuous and consistent movement' by the people of Singbhum. But the question was who had to lead? Who had to bell the cat?

(iii) “Eucalyptus: Why?” (EPW, 6 August 1983)

Mahashweta Devi expresses a great concern for the mindless destruction of natural forests and the plantation of eucalyptus trees in Palamau, Singbhum, Bankura, Purulia and Medinipur districts. The natural forests in these areas consist of a wide variety of trees like sal, palas, Mahua, toon, bhendi, tamarind, jackfruit and so on. These forests justify the term ‘social forestry’ for they sustain the neighbouring rural society. The trees provide food, fuel, medicine, lac, gum, seed, leaf and other means of livelihood. They not only help life to flourish, but also retain the soil moisture. The natural forests contribute to the conservation of the fertility of the soil by avoiding the soil erosion. Thus, they help human beings, wild life and environment. Their social and economic relevance to the immediate society is immeasurable. As Mahashweta Devi rightly points out, “The forest is meant for society and society is sustained by the forest.”(Dust 66)15. Such rich forests were destroyed for planting eucalyptus trees.

Eucalyptus is a myrtaceous genus of trees which was introduced to India in 1840s from Australia. As it is not a safe tree to play with, other countries in the world did not go for
this tree. But, unfortunately in India it had almost replaced the rich natural forests in many parts of the country. Mahashweta Devi expresses a strong word of protest to this senseless and unscientific act of replacing the natural forests with eucalyptus plantations. It is grown mainly for matchboxes, rayon, furniture and medicine. It helps only the big capitalists who can only invest on them. It is not useful to the poor, common men in any way. It is ecologically unfriendly and economically not beneficial to the poor.

Moreover, water consumption of a eucalyptus tree is equal to that of 10 sal trees. Hence, it can be grown only in marshy land but not in the dry soil. The experience has shown that the eucalyptus trees bring down the water level, tube wells go dry, cause soil erosion, flood and make the land barren, which is a cause of great concern. They do not allow other plants to grow and make the plantation devoid of undergrowth. The slim trunks and narrow leaves cannot resist the hot wind blowing from the plains which would effect the glacier badly. These findings are based on the surveys and practical experiences. Hence, Mahashweta Devi feels, “If any tree in India needed uprooting, it was eucalyptus.” *(Dust 67)*

She reiterates the fact that eucalyptus do not bring benefit to the tribals and the poor. They help only the rich contractors and the big capitalists. It is regrettable that we have been ‘sacrificing our Himalayas, our monsoons, our agriculture, our people’. It is a result of the nonsensical forest policy of the Government. Mahashweta Devi feels that an anti-eucalyptus movement on a national scale is the only answer.

**IV. LAND AND EMPLOYMENT**

In the three articles that come under this section, Mahashweta Devi writes about the problems that the tribals face regarding their land. Ironically, they become aliens in their own land. Despite the existence of the strict law prohibiting the non-tribals acquiring the tribal land,
the process of land alienation had assumed an alarming proportion. The political parties, institutions, police and the officials who should have protected the tribal interests, helped 'the land sharks' to manipulate the law for their convenience. The people with money and influence find it easy to deceive the helpless poor. Their plea for help goes without yielding any positive result. The educated tribal youth who register their names in employment exchanges never receive the call. Corruption and manipulation of laws by the mainstream people deprive the tribal youth of their opportunities.

Palamau, which was rich in forest resources and sustained the tribals and the poor with food and fuel since time immemorial, has been turned into a vast crematorium. The mindless deforestation and unscientific projects that prevail there is responsible for it. The outsiders who come to the tribal areas do everything to destroy the rich flora and fauna with the active connivance of the officials and the politicians. The laws regarding the forest, the land, the employment and the recruitment are systematically violated. Mahashweta Devi protests all these developments that are detrimental to the tribal existence.

(i) "Land Alienation Among Tribals in West Bengal"

(Bortika, October-December 1989)

Mahashweta Devi writes how the tribals in various districts of West Bengal had to struggle hard to hold possession of their land. She shows with specific details how the owners of brick-kilns, tea gardens and other rich people managed to possess the tribal land in violation of all the existing laws. She is highly critical of the administration, the political parties and the rich who covertly help the 'land sharks' to acquire the tribal lands. As per the law, a tribal can sell his land only to another tribesman. Sale or transfer of land to the non-tribals is illegal. It can be done only with the written permission of the district and sub-division level SC and ST
Welfare Officers who have been empowered to act as Revenue Officers. Any violation of these provisions would make the transaction illegal. The Government has undertaken these measures to protect the tribal interests. The good intention of the Government is beyond doubt. But the problem lies in implementation.

The minister concerned says that the notification to the effect of empowering the SC and ST Welfare Officers has been sent to the officials concerned. But in reality, the officials are either not aware of the notification or they are evasive about it. The result is that the tribal interest is at jeopardy. The existing land laws failed to rein in the 'land sharks' and outside businessmen from acquiring tribal land for brick making business. In one such incident, an Upapradhan of the village Panchayat and the residents opposed it and tried to draw the attention by writing letters, starting from the District Magistrate to the Prime Minister of the country but to no avail. The Pradhan and the police promptly helped the brick-kiln owners. They got access to the tribal land by purchasing in some fictitious tribal names or in the name of some people who did not exist at all. In some cases, they impersonated as tribals. They are helped in this act by the politicians, officers and the police. The police implicate the tribals in false lawsuits.

The exploiting agencies cleverly and tactfully adapt themselves to the political changes. The jotedars and rich peasants who were with the Congress Party, started switching sides after 1982 elections when the Left Front came to power. It became easy for them to evict the sharecroppers with the backing of the administration and the political power. Thereby they sidelined in the party those who had been fighting for the rights of the tribals and the sharecroppers.
Party politics had sown the seeds of bitter conflict and violence at the grass root level among the tribals. Those who did not belong to the ruling party were vulnerable to the political vendetta. They did not get any protection. Mahashweta Devi cites the example of Pasupati Murmu, a tribal peasant from Medinipur district. An acre of land belonged to him was forcefully taken over and distributed among the landless tribals by the local Panchayat. When he objected, he was mercilessly beaten up and was killed and his family was forced to leave the place.

The exploiting agencies could easily cheat the ignorant tribals, even the educated among them, through fraudulent means. They could not seek legal redress as it involves the 'labyrinth of unending civil suits'. The tribals who belonged to the oral tradition were totally strangers to the mainstream ways of keeping the land records and papers. If some of them kept records properly, faced numerous problems in getting their copies from the offices concerned. But the 'land sharks' could easily get them and manipulate them with the help of the revenue officials. Mahashweta Devi cites the experience of Agnu’s father, an Oraon. He was a regular tenant of 32.99 acres of land since Pre-Independence days and had all the papers intact. But when zamindari was abolished in 1954, it was suddenly discovered that his name was no longer in the records and the land was shown to be in the name of Shiva, the family deity. Agnu’s family had to fight a prolonged legal battle, that extended to next generation to get justice. Agnu who had joined the BSF was sacked from the job in the process of his fight for justice. The attempt of his family to get justice from the officials and the ministers failed.

Though the acquisition and conversion of tribal land into tea gardens was declared illegal, the owners of the Nagpur tea garden could acquire and convert 450 acres of tribal land into a tea garden in North Bengal. These instances show that the system that existed for providing legal aid to the poor people in the state was a farce. The entire system was
hand-in-glove' with the land grabbers. The worst culprits were the personnel of the Land Revenue Department. The repressive action of the police against the Gorkhaland Movement in Terai region of North Bengal also contributed to the eviction of tribals.

Mahashweta Devi suggests to the Government to take measures to make the tribals aware of the laws that exist for protecting their rights, through the mass media. She also suggests the formation of the legal aid cells that would seek justice for the tribals. She opines that the responsible sections of the mainstream should come forward in support of the tribal cause. If the beginning is not made in the right direction, the tribal existence would be in jeopardy. She predicts, "By the time the country reaches the 21st century, most of the tribals who have land today will be landless. If that happens, the smaller tribal groups would be completely wiped off the map of the country." (Dust 80)

(ii) "The Call Never Comes" (EPW, 9 July 1983)

Mahashweta Devi deals with the problem of the educated unemployed tribals and SC candidates in different parts of West Bengal. It is also referred to the corruption, delay and lethargy in the employment exchanges, causing frustration and resentment among the tribals. Bimala Hari, a poor Harijan woman of Kancharapara in Nadia district of West Bengal, was the victim of such a sorry state of affair in employment exchanges. She got her name registered at the Kalyani Employment Exchange in 1977. But the call did not come. Being frustrated after waiting for four years, Bimala Hari committed suicide. The incident of Bimala Hari is only a tip of an iceberg. The facts and figures that Mahashweta Devi collects reveal the enormity and gravity of the problem. She mentions that 45 harijans had got their names registered at the Kalyani, Barrackpur and Naihati exchanges and had been waiting since 1978. This was the situation in the areas which are situated near Calcutta and had a large concentration of industries,
where the prospect of employment was fairly better. In Purulia, a backward district and a home of many tribal communities like Kherias, Birhors, Paharias and Santhals, is a most neglected district in West Bengal. About 55 names, mostly tribals had registered their names in the employment exchange there and had been waiting for the call since 1975.

Medinipur district is politically more alive, Kharagpur, the major railway town that boasts of the premier institute like IIT, comes under this district. South-West Medinipur has a large tribal population. It is the place of Santhals, Mundas, Bhumijas, Lodhas, Doms, Mahalis, Hos and others. Compelled by poverty, they hire out their children as cattle grazers. Due to the efforts of the state Government, some of their children are able to get education. About 177 of such names had been registered in different employment exchanges of the district in 1975. Since then they have been waiting for the call.

In Murshidabad, where Santhal population is fairly high and a sizeable of which have already embraced Christianity, has the list of 109 names registered, including some girls. Santhals are the largest tribe in West Bengal and the percentage of literacy is fairly high among them. But some of them had been waiting for the call since 1974. Majority of these people cannot complete Higher Secondary course. If they go for higher education, it is usually in arts subjects. Hence, it would not be difficult to get SC, ST candidates for clerkship in banks and Government offices. If the employing agency wants SC or ST doctors, engineers and technicians, it would not be possible to get. Thus, the declared reservation policy would not benefit them much. Inspite of the existence of the ST employment cell and various tribal organizations to reach the tribal candidate in time, they never receive calls. ‘The call never comes’ even to the eligible candidates. They can get the call only if they bribe the persons concerned. Non SC and ST candidates easily manage to get caste or tribe certificates and avail themselves of the quota jobs.
This continuous deprivation of opportunities naturally makes the educated tribals ultimately lose interest in education and suffer from resentment and the sense of injustice. But the 'glib explanation' — 'suitable tribal candidate not found' — is given by the persons concerned as a cover up. The educated tribals find themselves in a dilemma as they neither get suitable jobs nor are accepted as common labourers on daily wages. Thus, the school education has become a hindrance instead of being a benefit. Mahashweta Devi concludes the article by the following warning: "It is dangerous for any government to give them education and then keep them unemployed for years. It leads first to frustration, then to anger and widens the gulf between them and us further." (Dust 86) 

(iii) "Palamau, a Vast Crematorium" (Business Standard, 20 May 1981)

Mahashweta Devi reflects on her experiences during one of her visits to Ranchi and Palamau. Both these places have undergone a lot of change compared to her previous experiences. Scarcity of water and electricity, soaring prices, increasing mosquito menace are the unpleasant experiences that she got in Ranchi. She writes about three important observations that she had made regarding Ranchi. She came to know that the industrialists, middlemen, touts and forest contractors rule the roost in Ranchi. Battening on their wealth, Ranchi had become a fast growing monster. Contracts for supplying bichi, a rock with iron ingredients used in coal washaries were given to non-tribal and non-harijan contractors in the name of tribals and harijans who remained labourers.

Another observation she makes is about the reaction of the intellectuals in West Bengal towards the educated tribals. Decades of exposure to the general education scheme made many tribals of Ranchi and elsewhere doctors, engineers, officials and educationists. At the same time they preserved their culture and tradition too. Their education did not teach them to
discard their culture. But the intellectuals considered that their education had cut them off their roots. Mahashweta Devi is very critical of the Bengali intellectuals whose knowledge of the tribals is derived from books and magazines and who expect the tribals to remain half-clad, starving and illiterate.

She refers to the discrimination meted out to Birsa Munda, the great freedom fighter, by the poets, artists and the historians. They get inspiration from Shivaji, Rana Pratap and such Kingly heroes but not from Baba Tilka Majhi, Sidhu, Kanhu or Birsa (tribal warriors). She says that she was shocked to see the statue of the captive Birsa standing with his hands tied. She questions if the statues of Bhagat Singh or Khudiram are also put in chains. She is critical of the way in which the statue is maintained. The poor and shabby maintenance is an insult to this great tribal hero, the leader of the people.

Then Mahashweta Devi refers to her experiences at Palamau. A sea-change was visible in Palamau during her second visit. In the place of rich forest, the vast stretch of scorched barren land welcome her. The forest development works that was introduced after independence actually sealed the fate of Palamau. The ‘land hungry’ outsiders usurped all the cultivable land, evicting the original tenants and turning them into bonded labourers. Palamau with 40,000 bonded labourers had the distinction of being a bonded labour district.

The life in Palamau was resembling the Dark Ages. Apart from the oppression and exploitation by the landlords, the mindless deforestation by the forest contractors in connivance with the Forest Directorate, turned the entire area into ‘a vast crematorium’. ‘The truncated trunks looked like Hell’s sentinels’. The rich forest resources of Palamau made the outsiders rich. Their palaceous skyscrapers were raising their heads in the middle of increasing number
of bonded labourers. The indiscriminate cutting of trees had left the ever-flowing rivers dry. The proposed river-dam projects would provide the outsiders with water and electricity. The hundreds of villages that would be drowned in the project would not get any compensation as were shown as barren and uninhabited areas in records.

Birlas, who had many bauxite mines in Palamau, acquired thousands of acres of cultivable land. But their aluminium factory that provides employment to thousands was set up outside Palamau.

Mahashweta Devi does not forget to appreciate Dr. Bireshwar Prasad Kesari who accompanied her during her visit to Palamau. He was associated with the Kshetriya Adim Jati Bhasa Snathakottara Bibhaga of Ranchi University. He had published the first comprehensive history of Chotanagpur. Due to his efforts, tribal languages were getting introduced at post-graduate level in Ranchi University. His knowledge of Palamau at grass root level, his concern and compassion for the poor, drew him to the fold of Jharkhand Movement.

V. DISCRIMINATION: POLITICAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Two of Mahashweta Devi’s articles that are related to this topic, deal with two important issues; various dimensions of Jharkhand Movement and the need for recognizing tribal language and literature. These articles reveal Mahashweta Devi’s thorough knowledge of the tribal world – their culture, language and various issues confronting them. Her opinions are based on her experiences at grass root level and real facts and figures. She is critical of those who are highly educated and well informed but do not know that Santhals and Mundas are two different tribes.
Mahashweta Devi touches upon a political issue which is interrelated with tribal exploitation and administrative failures. She defends the Jharkhand Movement for separate state and denies the charge that it was a separatist movement. She takes anti-Jharkhand Movement camp into task and strongly objects their attempt to brand the movement as secessionist. She writes that the movement had not grown out of, nor stood upon thin air, it was a result of a long history of deprivation and exploitation of the tribals.

Alienation from their own land, exploitation by the rich, perpetuation of slavery under the bonded labour system, luring of tribal women into flesh trade, constant assault on their culture—all these bitter and suffocating experiences had enraged the tribal community and had been making all out efforts to retain their traditional rights over forests and land; beginning with the rebellion of Tilka Majhi (1780-85) to Ūlgulan of Birsa Munda (1895-1900). Jharkhand Movement was just an extension of the expression of their protest against the long inflicted injustice. Moreover, it was more wide spread.

The massacre of tribals in the hospital at Gua in Singbhum by the Bihar Military Police (BMP) in 1980, justifies the Jharkhand Movement. This incident is just one example of mindless oppression of the tribal community. It is needed to go deep into root of the movement in order to understand the movement in its totality. Mahashweta Devi is highly critical of the biased and irresponsible opinions of the vested interests about the Jharkhand Movement. She outrightly rejects the statement that it is a separatist movement. Several such states have been formed since independence but the fear of secession had not been raised then. Hence, she questions the sincerity behind the selective objection to the demand of a separate state, which is more genuine compared to other cases.
Jharkhand region is rich in natural resources. But the inhabitants of this area were deprived of its benefits. All the resources were taken out by the outsiders, pushing the native population further down to the poverty line. They had become aliens in their own land. The poor, helpless tribals were trapped into the debt-bondage. The landlords, the forest contractors, the police, judiciary and the administration were hand-in-hand in exploiting these people. There were laws to protect their interests, but in reality they were of no use. Injustice and exploitation were the hard realities of their life. The sense of insecurity and hurtful experiences that were embedded in their race memory could not be understood by the non-tribals. They felt that the redressal of those injustice was possible only in a separate state. Mahashweta Devi feels that the opposition to the movement came from those who intended to perpetuate those injustice.

Then she denies the charge that the Jharkhand state was meant only for the tribals. She refers to the charter of demands that shows that it was applicable to the people in general and the Jharkhand did not want to remain isolated from the mainstream. Some of the demands might look like tribal centred, but she shows the genuineness of those demands. For instance, the demand regarding the ‘organizer-teacher’ was nothing but just. The tribal teachers who had been working on temporary basis in the unrecognized schools for nine years were thrown out and non-tribal were appointed after the schools got recognition. Mahashweta Devi questions the propriety of recruiting non-tribal teachers in tribal majority areas where eligible tribal teachers were available.

Mahashweta Devi justifies the demand for the public holiday for Jharkhand festivals. The Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and Hindus have holidays for their festivals. So it is not wrong if the tribals demand public holiday for their festivals too. She also justifies their demand for explanation for returning crores of rupees meant for tribal development unutilized. She feels that such things would not have happened if the officers concerned were tribals.
Towards the end of the article, Mahashweta Devi regrets that even the highly educated people were not properly informed of the tribals. Their knowledge of the tribals was derived from the films and plays. She concludes the article by calling upon the people to analyse the situation and understand why the demand for Jharkhand was raised, instead of objecting and charging against it.

(ii) “Tribal Language And Literature: The Need For Recognition” (Aajkal, 11 August 1987)

Mahashweta Devi reflects on two important issues related to the tribal community at large. The first one is about the contribution of the tribals to the freedom struggle and the second one is about their contribution to the world of literature. She regrets that the invaluable contributions made by the tribal community is not recognized by the mainstream India. She says that the paths of the tribals and the mainstream run parallel. Her belief is that the country is paying a heavy price for our ignorance and the negligence of the tribals.

Several anti-imperialist struggles of the tribals took place all over India, particularly in Eastern India. But they find no mention in books of history. Non-tribal India has not acknowledged their glorious struggles as part of the freedom movement, Mahashweta Devi refers to a young Santhal woman who wanted to know why only the story of Khudiram Bose was found in their text books but no mention was made of the tribals who laid down lives for the country. Except Kanuram Savar and Locchu Savar, all the other tribals who participated in 1942 movement and were imprisoned, did not get the freedom fighters pension.

Mahashweta Devi’s contention is that history should be rewritten. The indebtedness of the mainstream India to the tribals during the British rule and even pre-British days should be acknowledged. They have preserved the history of their struggle in the form of songs, dances
and folktales. Some of them have already disappeared. She insists that something should be done to document at least what still exists. Instead of spending unnecessarily on the Government sponsored extravaganzas of freedom anniversaries, a programme should be taken up to publish books in all the Indian languages as well as in local tribal languages about the participation of the tribals in the freedom movement.

Mahashweta Devi goes on to say that there is no dearth of creativity among the tribals. She refers to Sadhu Ram Chand Murmu, a well-known poet of the Santhali language, who tried to enlighten his people through his poems and plays. Even today, the Santhals, despite many constraints, write and publish in their own language. But it is found that there is declining use of their own languages in many other tribal communities. Therefore, she calls upon to do something for the promotion of their literature and creativity. There are several state sponsored literary awards in West Bengal but none in the name of the tribal art, literature and language. She urges, therefore, to declare a literary award of Rs. 10,000 at the state level every year. It should go to a work in Bengali or a tribal language on any aspect of the tribal life. She also calls upon the Sahitya Academy to declare an award for literary work in a tribal language. She urges the Government to provide publication support to those who write or publish in any tribal language. She regrets that there are many tribal linguistic groups which are relatively larger in size than Sindhi and Kashmiri. Yet they have not been recognized. She insists on recognizing those languages immediately and says that just recognition is not enough. It should be followed by a literary award in that language.

Mahashweta Devi concludes by urging the mainstream India to stop playing ‘the deadly game’ with the crores of tribals and to respect and recognize the contributions of the tribals
whom she considers: “Forai the bedrock of the people of this country and laid the foundation of Indian civilization.” *(Dust 109)*

VI. LODHAS AND KHERIAS OF WEST BENGAL

Mahashweta Devi focuses on the conditions of two minority tribes – Lodhas and Kherias – in West Bengal. She writes how the Lodhas who are found in Medinipur district and the Kherias who are found in Purulia, have been leading a hunted and persecuted existence for decades and are fighting a ‘lost battle’ for survival. Once notified as criminals by the British, Lodhas and Kherias have been the first suspects whenever something unpleasant happens. She shows the plight of Lodhas who are still striving hard to free themselves from the ambitious game plans of the ‘controllers’ and ‘operators’, whereas the Kherias have come out of the ‘game plans’ and are able to help themselves. They are comparatively better organized and are getting the due benefits of various projects and programmes meant for them. They have made it possible for themselves which has still remained impossible for the Lodhas. The story of Chuni Kotal reflects on the cruel and inhuman system against which the girl Chuni Kotal fought a lonely battle, only to lose at the end.

(i) "Lodhas Of West Bengal" *(EPW, 28 May, 1983)*

Mahashweta Devi writes about the Lodhas, one of the minority tribes in West Bengal, who have been fighting a lost battle for survival. Living mainly in the forest areas of Medinipur district of West Bengal, the Lodhas trace their lineage to the mythical hunter king, Kalketu and his tribal wife Fullara. They live in mixed villages but the Lodha dwellings were generally found in separate *mohallas or tolis*. They liked to live amidst their own people. According to their belief, the great Jagannath of Puri was once worshipped by a Lodha. The ‘wily’ Brahmins stole Jagannath from the Lodhas. Hence, they do not respect the Brahmins. They believe that
the God Jagannath takes the form of an evil demon, Gyan, who enters the inside of a Lodha and sucks his life-blood. But Mahashweta Devi observes, “This Gyan is a social reality today. A Lodha’s life is under constant threat, hidden and open.” (Dust 116)

The British had once branded this tribe ‘criminal’ (1872). Though they are denotified in 1952, the treatment given to them has not been changed. It has become a customary for the police to harass and to arrest the Lodhas whenever there is a theft or dacoity. It is well known to the police and the administration that the Lodhas are only the tools. The real brains behind the criminal acts are the upper-class village worthies. Only a few Lodhas are employed in the ‘thriving crime industry’. The receivers of the stolen goods, who are the real culprits, are left untouched. But the Lodhas as a whole are hunted and persecuted. Thefts multiply and Lodhas are killed. Lodha-killing is a regular feature in West Bengal. Mahashweta Devi refers to the incidents of 34 Lodha-killing in West Bengal between 1979-82. No parties protested, no enquiry had been conducted about the incidents. This only proves that Lodhas are ‘expendable’ in the state.

Various incidents that took place in the state of West Bengal are cited to show how the poor Lodhas become easy targets of the police, the administration and the society at large. When a Lodha girl was raped in 1982 in Lakhiason village, the culprit was just fined and was allowed to go free, though he refused to marry the girl. But the irony was that the Lodhas were penalized for protesting that discrimination. On June 30, 1985, the houses belonging to Lodhas in Saro village were burnt and possessions looted for a theft at a nearby village. Radhanath Savara, a retired army man, who was helping his people to settle their disputes, was arrested and persecuted in 1985 for no crime. On 17 June, 1985, the police from Binpur police station arrested Hekim Savara and his sons on a fabricated charge of murdering his nephew, Madhu.
Savara, who had actually committed suicide. When a minister’s car was attacked by some miscreants in Jhargram sub-division, 13 Lodhas were arrested.

Even after being allies and supporters of the ‘Bhadralok rulers’ (Communist Party), their condition has not been improved. Mahashweta Devi denies the charge that Lodhas are criminals. Murders and robberies take place even in other district of West Bengal where there are no Lodhas. If they are criminals, they would not have remained the poorest of the poor. Ironically enough, the receivers of stolen goods, who are the real culprits, enjoy social and legal immunity. Whereas, the helpless Lodhas are persecuted, maimed, blinded, crippled and even killed without analyzing the problems objectively. The upper-class village worthies manipulate the things in such a way as to create discord among the tribals. They sow the seeds of hatredness among them. The other tribals like Santhals and the Khoras attack the Lodhas on the behest of the rich landowners.

The Government has introduced many projects and programmes for their upliftment. But they never reach them and no one cares to implement them. When a family of 6 has to survive on Rs.60 a month, it is quite natural that Lodha child will be hired out as a cow grazer or a goat herd instead of sending to school. Even if they go to school, the teachers, who are mostly from the upper castes, hate them, taunt them, treat them cruelly and discourage them from continuing their education. Though qualified tribal teachers are available in plenty, only non-tribal candidates are appointed in the primary schools. The school going Lodha children do not get the books, garments, slates and food that they are supposed to. The conditions of the tribal hostels are miserable. The dwellings are in ruins. It has become difficult for the Lodha children to pursue their studies. The Government’s apathy has made them hate each other. A sense of despair and a shadow of doom haunt the Lodha existence. They feel that
there is no use in sending their children to school, as they will not be considered even for the posts of forest guards.

Mahashweta Devi feels that as long as non-tribals are assigned with the task of tribal upliftment, their upliftment remains a remote reality. Small budget projects would be more useful to a minority tribe. It is a folly to go in for big projects. Better to let Lodhas speak and work for themselves. They must be allowed to participate actively in the schemes meant for them. Their first requirement is love and trust. Mahashweta Devi urges to, “Trust him with responsibilities, and let him work for his own development.” *(Dust 129)*. More than the help of the non-tribals, the Lodhas need the help of their more advanced brethren.

(ii) "The Kherias Of West Bengal" *(EPW, 7 September 1985)*

Another minority tribe, the Kherias of Purulia, draws Mahashweta Devi’s concern. This small tribe, that comprises of 10,000 Kherias, is more primitive than the Lodhas. They are also haunted by the curse of being a ‘criminal tribe’. Like Lodhas, Kherias too were notified as criminals by the British and denotified later by the Government of India. The denotification on the part of the Government did not make much difference for the society. They were also treated inhumanly like the Lodhas. They were held responsible for all the criminal activities in the surrounding areas. Majority of them are found in Purulia. They live in a ‘toli’ at a distance from other people in the villages. Like Lodhas, they too had struggled hard to come out of the stigma of the criminal brand.

The dawn of change was witnessed by the Kherias in November 1983 with the birth of *Kheria—Savara Kalyan Samiti* at Maldi village of Purulia. Various persons who dedicated themselves to the cause of the Kherias supported this Samiti. Subodh Basuroy and Gopiballov
Singhdeo were important among them. A new Kheria story began with the District Science Centre of Amalendu Roy coming forward to help them. They encouraged the Kherias to dig wells, to cultivate vegetables and to plant trees. For the first time, the Kherias eked out a living from agriculture.

The joint endeavour of the Science Centre and the Kalyan Samiti could get financial support from the Rural Development Consortium and the Planning Commission. They jointly organized the science and technology programme for the Kherias. It generated nineteen training-cum-producing centres. Hundreds of Kheria men and women got training in handicrafts, got employment and earned thousands of rupees. The Centre had also been working on ITDP projects that included improvised agricultural implement training programme, distribution of seeds and fertilizers, exhibition of films and slides, mother and child care, etc. As a result, the Kherias, who were associated with denuding the forests, had started planting the saplings. The Samitis and Clubs could achieve what the Forest Department could not. All these activities of these organizations made the Kherias realize for the first time that they could help themselves. They refused to be exploited by the landholders and other exploiting agencies.

The proper utilization of funds by the persons concerned with the Kheria welfare spelled a threat to the money and power wielders. Thus, the Kherias could achieve what the Lodhas could not. It was possible because they did not leave their development to the mercy of the Tribal Welfare Department. They shouldered the responsibility of helping themselves and were helped by the District Science Centre of Amalendu Roy who had a real concern for the cause.

(iii) “The Story Of Chuni Kotal” (EPW, 29 August 1992)

The story of Chuni Kotal, a 27-year-old Lodha girl assumes significance, at a time
when the entire Lodha community was still reeling under the ‘stigma’ of being born criminals. That she was the first woman graduate from her tribe, itself tells a lot about the hardships and the challenges she had to face. Mahashweta Devi presents the tragic and a touching story of Chuni Kotal. She tells how she had to wage a lonely and a forlorn battle against the deep-rooted vested interests. She severely criticizes the circumstances that made the girl helpless victim of injustice, callousness of the University authorities and the West Bengal Government.

The de-notification of the Lodha tribe was only in letter but not in the spirit. There was no change in their life at the grass root level. The ‘controllers’ of the village life engaged them in all the criminal activities. The abominable existence of their life made it impossible for them to go to schools. College education was a remote possibility. Under such circumstances Chuni Kotal’s graduation made a big news.

From childhood, despite starvation and poverty, she doggedly pursued her study. After the completion of High School Examination she was appointed a Lodha Social Worker in 1983 at the Jhargram ITDP office. This gave her an opportunity to make an extensive survey of the Lodha villages. She worked hard and cycled 20-25 kms every day as a social worker. But she continued her study with a strong desire to show the rest of the world that she too can achieve something. As a result, she graduated in 1985 and was appointed a superintendent of Rani Shiromoni SC and ST Girls Hostel in Medinipur. The district SC and ST welfare officer was unsympathetic to her and made her work round the clock.

The ‘stigma’ of being a Lodha haunted her. Some of the hostel staff hated her for her origins. She felt suffocated in her job due to the hostile working condition and continuous harassment. Her request for better working condition and transfer to her original job fell on
deaf ears. The department remained brutally indifferent. Mahashweta Devi calls the SC, ST Department as the ‘hunters’ who treated Chuni as a ‘quarry’. With insatiable desire for study and knowledge, Chuni enrolled herself for M.Sc in Anthropology, at the local Vidyasagar University. The matter became worse for her with this endeavour. A male professor started abusing her for being a Lodha and questioned her right to study M.Sc, being a lowborn. He used to mark her absent though she was present. Hence, she was debarred from attending the examination on grounds of irregular attendance. The same professor awarded her low marks in the following year, causing the loss of two precious years for Chuni.

The District SC and ST Welfare Department and the Professors in the University were hell-bent on to spoil Chuni’s attempt to get Master degree, on the ground of her caste. After several complaints by her, the state Education Minister constituted an enquiry commission. In the meanwhile, due to the inner politics between two faculty members, a lady member started pressurizing Chuni to file a case against the offending male professor. The innocent girl Chuni felt more and more desperate and cornered. Finding no way out, she committed suicide at her husband’s one-room residence in Kharagpur, on 16 August, 1992. Various committees constituted to enquire into the matter submitted their reports many days after her death, but it was too late.

Thus, Mahashweta Devi tries to show the real face of West Bengal. Chuni’s death ripped off the mask that had covered it till then. This is what West Bengal truly is. ‘Justice delayed is justice denied’. Chuni’s incident is a big question mark on our Democracy, constitutional primacy and the system of Justice. It opens the eyes of every sensitive person towards hard realities of life. It is not merely the West Bengal that is exposed, but the country in general.
VII. THE RURAL POOR AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONS

The incident of the rural poor organizing themselves for their own upliftment gives a ray of hope to Mahashweta Devi who has been writing and propagating all along about them. She regrets about the fact that even after 5 decades of independence and so many plans, programmes, projects and Acts in the parliament, the rural mass remain poor. Nothing reaches the target beneficiary. She perceives the 'clever design' of the vested interests to keep the poor of India in eternal poverty, so that more projects and more plans can be thought of to guarantee the inflow of more money.

As the forests dwindled day after day, the forest centred tribals took to cultivation and remained exposed to the corrupt ways of the mainstream. Even after being denotified, they were treated as criminals and were denied their human rights. It was a precarious existence for them. The influential worthies who engaged them in criminal activities were enjoying immunity from punishment. All the vested interests like merchants, contractors, landlords, administrative machinery, political parties and the police were behind the continuation of the status quo. The well-meaning Government officers had no room in the system. The tribals and the poor had no role to play in the process of planning and implementation of projects meant for them.

Mahashweta Devi criticizes the indifference and ignorance of the persons in charge of the planning and execution. She calls upon the authorities concerned to involve the 'programme beneficiaries' in the process of the planning and execution of projects meant for them. She rightly points out, "The poor of India may lack literacy or formal education, but they are neither unintelligent nor unrealistic. They know the limit of their capabilities and are perfectly capable of saying just what would benefit them."(Dust 151)²
Unfortunately, their experiences and expertise had been constantly derided and decried. The apathy of the Government and the society had made them despair. They felt a threat to their very existence. All the culprits of the criminal activities continued to enjoy immunity. Whereas, the poor villagers and the tribal groups were constantly harassed and punished. Such a state of affair had forced these people to form their own organizations at the grass root levels. Those organizations or Samitis had been successfully doing what should have been done by the Government. Mahashweta Devi refers to various organizations that came into existence in 1980s. The Palamau Zilla Bandhua Mukti Morcha (1981), West Bengal Lodha–Savara Kalyan Samiti (1982), Kheria–Savara Kalyan Samiti (1983) and other Samitis and organizations gave them a sense of dignity and belongingness. They started feeling like human beings for the first time. Moreover, those Samitis had been doing an extraordinary job. Mahashweta Devi feels that the poverty at the grass root level could have been alleviated if those Samitis were taken seriously and were involved in the process.

The Bandhua Mukti Morcha collected detailed information systematically about those in bondage. They undertook the task of identifying the bonded labourers that would go a long way in their rehabilitation. The Lodha Kalyan Samiti showed that they would no longer live like animals after so many years of independence. The Kheria Kalyan Samiti, with the help of the District Science Centre, imparted to its people the skills of irrigation like digging wells, damming up small streams, cultivation of vegetables and wheat. With this, they gave a clear message that they would not tolerate being killed, maimed, hounded, exploited and used for other people's gain. But the non-tribals and the people in authority looked their organizations with suspicion and even considered them secessionists. Mahashweta Devi calls upon the people in charge of the projects and programmes to trust the people whom their programmes
She is of the opinion that development can only be ensured if people participate at every stage, from planning to implementation. Surveys have to be conducted, low-budget schemes formulated, with the idea of maximum utilization of available resources. She refers to the surveys conducted by The Palamau Samiti, the findings of Gomasta Prasad Soren and the information of Ranjan Dhar, which throw light on each and every aspect of the rural life. These findings show the huge difference between what is being done and what needs to be done.

She appeals the central Government to recognize these Samitis and to get them involved in development works meant for them, if they really want to help the poor. The members of the Samitis know what the people need, what they can handle and how to go about it. Money alone will not solve the problem. It will help only the corrupt officials and contractors. She urges the Government to entrust the task of conducting surveys, drawing up low-budget schemes and keeping of accounts to the Samitis. The Government should only sanction the necessary money. The research institutes like Cressida at Calcutta, should be encouraged and more and more audio-visual means should be used to effectively teach the villagers about health and hygienic practices. Along with modern science and technology, the storehouse of traditional knowledge should also be considered.

She feels that the entire problem lies in the treatment of the tribals as though they are not Indians. But she vehemently argues that the tribal question is a national question, as they
belong to this nation and their places are very much a part of India. Various organizations and the Samitis have helped them to regain their self-respect. The Government has also passed various Acts for their welfare. They will become useless if due publicity is not given. The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act (1976) could not achieve the desired success due to the lack of sufficient publicity. Mahashweta Devi refers to a bandhua from Palamau who asks, “You say that keeping a bandhua is illegal. But does my malik know this? If he does not know, how can I be liberated?” (Dust 163)\textsuperscript{14}. She regrets that the Government, which spends crores of rupees to publicize the family planning programmes, has virtually done nothing to publicize the Act meant for the liberation of the bonded labourers. She concludes by saying that we have not reached a point of no return, the poor of India are desperate. She says:

> "The grassroots organizations should be consulted about the requirements of the people concerned. Trust them in formulating schemes, help them with technical knowledge and, finally, convince the state government not to create obstacles in the implementation of the schemes ... My concern is to see them getting their meals, a roof overhead and working for their own development. If there is a fire, it is their huts that will burn. They must learn to put the fire out. When they begin, they move forward fast." (Dust 163)\textsuperscript{25}

\section*{VIII. SUPERSTITION, CASTEISM AND COMMUNALISM}

Mahashweta Devi tells how the tribals and the scheduled castes have come under the grips of 'antiquated beliefs' like witch cults and how the age-old practice of untouchability has lead to the ostracized existence of the scheduled castes. She refers to the rise of communalism and the death of the eradication of the witch cult among the tribal communities.

(i) “Witch Hunting in West Bengal: In Whose Interest?” (Bartika, June 1987)

Mahashweta Devi writes that the superstitious belief is a terrible age-old malady. It
existed even among the so-called mainstream society in India. But it is on the rise in the recent times. Belief in the supernatural, astrology, Godmen and soothsayer has turned into a big business, even among the Europeans. The faith in witch cult that used to exist in tribal society, seems to have acquired suddenly a shot in the arm. The tribals are losing whatever they had due to the overwhelming socio-economic changes. They are losing their land and culture. They are disturbed with the fear of losing their tribal identity. In such a dismal scenario, quite naturally, they have embraced the witch-cult, which they think belongs to them, with a new vigour, to preserve their identity.

Previously, the tribals used to cope with diseases and natural vagaries with the help of their indigenous knowledge of the medicinal herbs, which was the arsenal of ancient medicine. With the receding forests and no access to the modern medicine, the tribals have no other way but to seek the aid of witch-hunting. Moreover, the tribals are bereft of science, education and health care. When certain mysterious and inexplicable things occur, it is quite natural for them to consider it as a curse of the evil powers. Mahashweta Devi refers to innumerable incidents of witch hunting, where the persons, mostly women, considered to be possessed, are either beaten or expelled from the villages or beheaded. In majority of cases the aim is to mark some one as a ‘witch’ and then grab his or her land, cattle, money and even life. Greed and political hatred may also be the reasons. The witch doctors, who are called inguras are neither wise nor equal to the medicine men of the ancient times. They are a part of the vast network of exploitation.

In Mahashweta Devi’s view, witch hunting is an inhuman crime. The tribals need to be aware of these vested interests. The tribals, out of their ignorance believe that witch-hunting is a part of their tradition. As a result, the organizers of the movement against this evil practice
become the target of vicious attacks. This is nothing but a dark belief that has crippled the tribal society. Mahashweta Devi urges the West Bengal Government to declare *ingura* activity as illegal in the same way as it is done in Bihar, with a tough legislation. She does not forget to take cognizance of the praiseworthy role played by the police towards eradication of this cruel practice. She draws our attention to various incidents where killing of a number of innocent lives are prevented with the timely intervention by the police. There are also certain instances where the police refuse to take actions, which she feels, because of political interference. Apart from the strict legislation, the positive measures like spreading of scientific awareness through education, documentary films and lectures should also be taken up. The voluntary agencies, who are working against this practice should be provided with proper protection. It is strange that when the world is on the threshold of the new millennium, our minds are still imprisoned in age-old practices. In conclusion, Mahashweta Devi suggests:

"Age-old beliefs cannot vanish in a second. A lot of work has to be done for this. And when the beliefs go, the resultant vacuum should be filled in by education and health care for all. The social attitude to the status of women needs to be changed and an overall scientific outlook has to be developed. We must revive the bonds of love and amity, long lost, which we have replaced with hatred, greed and political violence." *(Dust 180)*

(ii) "Death Of a Crusador" *(Aajkal, 24 March 1996)*

This is Mahashweta Devi's tribute to Sarada Prasad Kisku, on receiving the news of his death. He was a distinguished poet in the Santhali language, lover of trees and a relentless fighter against the deadly superstitions that bogged down his community. He had also received the President's Medal as a teacher.

The brave man, committed to the cause of his community, Sarada Prasad had to
experience silently, the misfortunes and disappointments at his domestic life. His son-in-law, who was a teacher, was killed by a gang of political opponents, while he was teaching in a classroom. His daughter had to work as an agricultural labourer. His son, Dhurmal, who became a doctor, could not get appointed in the Government hospital. Above all, his right side had become paralyzed. Inspite of all these adversities, he started writing with his left hand and continued his struggle against the system. He gradually organized a group of activists for the cause. No personal risk was involved for those who spoke against the witch hunting living safely in Calcutta. But he had to face greater risks as he continued the movement against the evil practices by living in the midst of those who devoutly pursued it. He was staying in a village that was totally neglected in terms of basic civil facilities like water, road, power and medicine. Himself and volunteers had to receive threats of dire consequences and were even attacked physically. His house used to be stoned regularly and the trees in his garden chopped down. But this courageous man of self-respect remained unmoved and continued his battle. Once, when there was a grave danger to his life, Mahashweta Devi had to plunge into action to get him police protection from the Government.

Thus, with his concern for the social environment, love and passion for fellow beings, sense of commitment and a towering personality, Sarada Prasad Kisku is as Mahashweta Devi writes, “A full-statured man, in a world of midgets.” (Dust 185) 

(iii) "Beyond Communalism" (Frontier, 26 January 1991)

Mahashweta Devi expresses her serious concern over the increasing influence of fundamentalism on India’s political dispensation. She holds that V.P. Singh’s Government and its allies, who admitted the fundamentalists to the national politics, are responsible for the rise of fundamentalism in Indian politics. Only after that, she says, “The wheels of the ratha are on
a bloodpath, "(Dust 186) obviously, referring to L.K. Advani's Ratha Yatra from Somanath to Ayodhya (1990). She feels that fundamentalists divert the attention of the people from the real issues related to the poor and create 'havoc' in the country. She is content that the fundamentalism could not make inroads into West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, as people there are generally non-communal and there have always been genuine people's movements. The reason for the rise of fundamentalism is the failure to develop the sense of equality among the entire educationally and economically disadvantaged populace, irrespective of religion, caste or tribe.

At the same time, Mahashweta Devi says that fundamentalism is not new to the Post-Independent Indian politics. It was never non-communal. One can find a little contradiction in her opinion here. If it is the case, why should she feel that there is a business of communal trouble all of a sudden? Why should V.P. Singh's Government and his allies be blamed? As our experience goes, no political party in India has the right to claim itself 'secular'. The communal–secular divide is a political convenience in India, rather than the concern for the constitutional provisions. It is a part of electoral politics, rather than the ideological commitment. There is no meaning in blaming one party or one individual. There is a doubt about her another idea of 'genuine peoples' movement'. It is time to suspect if such a movement really exists in any part of the country.

She concludes by saying that there has been a strong cultural and religious harmony in rural West Bengal; the harmony that goes beyond all castes or creed, achieved through the weapons of culture and trust and not with the cudgels.
(iv) The Chains Of Untouchability (Business Standard, 20 May 1987)

Mahashweta Devi reflects on the severity of the untouchability that is being practiced in Daltonganj. It was her experience when she visited the domtoli, the dwellings of the scavengers, along with her host Rameshwaran. Their aversion to politicians, who go there for votes, was felt by the visitors. They were allowed into the domtoli only after confirming that they were not the politicians. The land allotted for them was usurped by the vested interests and the litigation was on. There were schools but Harijan children were not allowed there. It is really surprising to note that such things are going on in a state where the Left party is ruling the state. They were scavengers and used to get Rs.2 for the disposal of each dead animal from the streets. They were entitled to get Rs.227 per month, 15 days leave for a year and 3 months of maternity leave. But actually they got only Rs.100, 10 days leave and the maternity leave of one month. They never got the uniforms issued by the Municipality.

Riverbed was their latrine and river water their drinking water. The women were harassed, molested and even killed by the local goons. They were not allowed into the temples. Mahashweta Devi says that in Daltonganj ‘the untouchables were left untouched’. No parties and individuals worried about them. They could not fight for their rights and suffered everything silently. She concludes with the following words:

“We can take part in international affairs, our Aryabhattas and other satellites may reach outer space, but no one in India can raise the untouchables of the innumerable domtolis of Palamau to the status of free individuals... our untouchables have made us untouchables too, for we have allowed this curse of untouchability to flourish and stay.” (Dust 190)39

(v) “Untouchability In West Bengal” (Frontier, 12-26 October 1991)

Untouchability, the deep-rooted social evil that has totally shattered the Indian social
fabric, receives a harsh reprove from Mahashweta Devi. Our attention is drawn towards the practice of untouchability by the upper-castes and even by non-upper-castes against the cobblers or muchis in Jangipur of Murshidabad district.

The muchis (cobblers) not only make and repair shoes, they beat the drums during festive occasions and their women work as midwives. Mahashweta Devi is very critical of the 'muchi boycott' programme that had spread in and around Jangipur. The matter of great concern was that even other Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes happily joined hands in boycotting the Muchis. The local CPI (M) Panchayat too supported it. The Muchis had appealed to the DM, the SDO, the SP the Chief Minister and the other persons concerned. But no one cared to help them.

A barber, Rajen Pramanik, refused to 'defile' his hands by touching an 'unclean' muchi, Unnati Das. Unnati wanted to get his hair cut at the local barber's saloon. The problem of unemployment was horrendously complex there. The upper-caste students availed themselves the quota benefits meant for the muchis, by producing false certificates.

The muchis had been living under constant terror. They could not go to markets or shops as no one would sell them even a handful of rice. They were afraid to send their children to the school, fearing that they would be killed or harmed. The situation had reached such a stage that about forty Muchi families either had to leave the place or commit mass suicide. Interestingly, even the big newspapers remained mysteriously silent. Mahashweta Devi wonders that such a state of affair existed in West Bengal even after so many years of Left Front rule (since 1977). Moreover, the 'boycott programme' took place in the place where the village Panchayat was under the CPI (M) rule.
She concludes by saying that the Left ideology seems to have failed there. The caste oppressions are common in other states of the country. But West Bengal, which is considered to be a politically sensitive state, had become a mute witness to such a brutal caste oppression. She is of the opinion that the prevailing condition has developed a political apathy among the mass, which indirectly helped the emergence of BJP in this part of the country. Mahashweta Devi holds the Left Front Government responsible for the prevailing state of affairs in West Bengal and she takes the Government to task for its failure to prevent the growth of caste division.

IXATRIBUTE

“REMEMBERING ASOKE BOSE” (Bortika, July-September 1986)

It is Mahashweta Devi’s heart felt tribute to Asoke Bose, the excellent organizer, committed fighter and an architect of the Kakdwip Revolt (1949). She writes this article on his death in 1983, to commemorate his contribution to the cause of the peasants.

Born into a landlord family in Nadia district of West Bengal in 1920, Asoke Bose lost his mother at the age of two and was brought up by his grand mother Mrinalini Bose, a relative of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). The grand mother who was a well-read and patriotic woman, left a deep impression on Bose. His mother died very early and the father wanted him to take care of his property. But the son was made of a different stuff. The property and domestic welfare were not his priority. He had a natural inclination towards the down trodden. His love for the poor and literature did not come to the father’s notice. As a student, he came into contact with the CPI and involved himself in the underground activities and organized anti-landlord movement, which alerted his father, who got him a job in the Department of Post and Telegraph. There he got involved in Trade Union activities and later was transferred to
Patna. He left the job and increasingly got involved in party activities, which brought a friction with his father Asoke Bose and left home at last, as Mahashweta Devi says, for good.

Then started the turbulent chapter of his life. He mobilized 2000 peasants to harvest paddy in Haringhata in Nadia district. Later in 1948, he was sent to Sundarban-Kakdwip area to organize underground peasant movement, demanding two-third share for sharecroppers. He worked with many other activists like Rash Bihai Ghosh, Jatin Maity and others. The struggle was so severe and well planned that his name and his aliases would strike terror in the minds of the police, landlords and their allies. The most violent movement went on for two years. Later, the movement failed due to various reasons. Asoke Bose and 36 other activists had to face many cases of conspiracy and treason. As per the directions of the party, he went underground to evade arrest and capital punishment. In January 1952, he came over to Rajnandgaon of then Madyapradesh (now in Chhattisgad), with his wife and started living there in a bustee of textile workers. He continued to work for the Trade Union in a peaceful manner after changing his name as Prakash Roy. He was one among the 10 Kakdwip activists for whom a ‘Special Independence Day Pardon’ was granted by the then Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, on 15 August, 1962.

Asoke Bose lived in the same bustee and worked for the Trade Union upto his death in 1983. The movement he worked for had failed. But Mahashweta Devi declares:

“The struggles of that period, with all their achievements and shortcomings, continue to live in the minds of the people of the area. And there, we know, along with all his other comrades and associates, Asoke will live for ever ... failure can be more glorious than victory.”(Dust 211)

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She appreciates his simplicity, commitment to the cause, determination and the love for the people for whom he worked. The wish by an old woman—wherever he is, may he live long—suggests what Asoke Bose really was. Thus, Asoke Bose was a rare personality who worked for the poor labourers and lived in the same bustee where they lived. Therefore, Mahashweta Devi concludes with the following question: “About how many leaders, Leftist, Rightist or Centrist, can this be said today?”(Dust 211)

Thus, these journalistic writings of Mahashweta Devi reveal the restless struggle and her genuine concern for the down trodden and the helpless sections of the society. These articles go a long way in allaying various misconceptions of the people regarding different tribal issues like Jharkhand Movement. The horrible picture of life in the countryside got a vivid revelation through these writings. Mahashweta Devi does not rest with these deliberations. Instead, she pursues, more vigorously, the varied issues that have been haunting our society. During these days she is contributing to The Tehelka Dot Com dealing with the problem of the denotified tribes like the Lodhas and Kherias. At the same time, she has been extensively writing to The Bengali Statesman and Dainik Statesman on various issues that have been causing trouble to the poor and the weaker sections. The Statesman has published the collection of these articles in a book. But they are not available in English. Mahashweta Devi is disturbed by the tragic turn of events in West Bengal, particularly at Singur and Nandigram. The gruesome rape and murder of Tapasi Mallik at Nandigram by the political activists has shaken her conscience. The ongoing agitation against the SEZ (The Special Economic Zone) and the act of land acquisition by the West Bengal Government for non-agricultural purposes has met with a stiff resistance by the public. At present, she is writing extensively about all these burning issues.
END NOTES


7. Ghatak 34.


9. Ghatak 43.

10. Ghatak 45.


12. Ghatak 54.


15. Ghatak 66.


17. Ghatak 80.
18. Ghatak 86.
22. Ghatak 151.
23. Ghatak 151-152.
25. Ghatak 163.
27. Ghatak 185.
29. Ghatak 190.
30. Ghatak 211.
31. Ghatak 211.