Conclusion:

Ongoing Journey

"The real genesis is not at the beginning, but at the end."

— Ernst Bloch

The Principle of Hope
CONCLUSION:

ON GOING JOURNEY

In the Indian literary scene, Mahashweta Devi stands out prominently as a writer and an activist. She has sensitized the Indian conscience with her writings and activism. She shows how effective the written medium can be. Some years back, Salman Rushdie, the Indian born English writer, had made rather a controversial remark that the best writing in India might be taking place in English language rather than in other regional languages of this country. But the study of Mahashweta Devi’s works makes one sure of the baselessness of Rushdie’s remark. She is a writer with a difference; a rare coexistence of various human potentialities in a single human being. Whatever she writes or whatever she does, it carries the stamp of her determination, commitment, clarity of purpose and the vast experience, deeply rooted in the ‘soil’. Regarding this the well-known critic, Malini Bhattacharya says, “There are few writers of her stature today in whose career creative writing and activism have been so closely intertwined.” (EPW, 10 May 1997-1003)\(^1\)

There have been innumerable writers in India, beginning with Kumaran Asan, Sharat Chandra Chatterji up to Chinnappa Bharati, who have been writing about the oppressed and the exploited. They expose the vested interests and their evil designs in their writings. Mahashweta Devi stands out not only as a writer but also as a ‘fighter’. She won’t rest until the task at hand is taken to its logical conclusion. She not only writes about various tribal movements and depicts the sad plight of the weaker sections of the society but also actively involves with them. This involvement of Mahashweta Devi makes her qualitatively different from other writers. Hence, she eludes the general perception of a writer. In the opinion of Govind Nihalani, a noted director and an artist:

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“She does not stop with merely shedding tears over the plight of the tribal community. She goes beyond that to explore, to implant the seeds of protest and struggle. In this sense her works are available—I do not think any other writer in our country has dealt with such themes, with such depth, such literary style and substance.” (Rediff Special, 1996)

The translation of her works into various Indian and foreign languages and her participation in several international literary and cultural events have made a popular author both in India and abroad. This is an example of how a writer being totally ‘regional’ can become an ‘Indian’ writer and also can gain universal acceptance. She shows how the ‘dream’ of our forefathers, the freedom fighters to establish a free and prosperous nation has met with a tragic failure and how the neo-colonialism continues to prevail. She not only fights against the neo-colonial forces but also prompts others to follow the suit.

Writing is neither a profession nor merely a hobby for Mahashweta Devi. It is a mission of her life that has evolved out of her obsession with her duty towards society. There is a set of agenda before her eyes as a writer. First of all, her fascination for history and urge for documentation are the two impulses that drive her to take up the literary activity. In the works like The Queen of Jhansi (1956), Aranyer Adhikar (1976) and Titu Mir (2000) her fascination for history finds its fulfilment and she successfully puts forth her perception of history. The way she brings the lost pages of history to the living present makes the reading of these works more interesting. The amount of hard work and research she puts into the making of these works are only a match to her fascination. Her urge for documentation of the tribal history, their culture, their tradition, the exploitation and the oppression of these ancient population by the mainstream people and various other findings of Mahashweta Devi on the tribals have found fullest expression

An important feature of the tribal psyche, that Mahashweta Devi finds out, is their invincible spirit - the spirit to resist, to protest and to survive. It is this spirit that enabled them to survive to this day in spite of centuries of exploitation, oppression and onslaught. At the same time she exposes the network of exploitation of these people by the mainstream society including the landlords, the Government authorities, the police, the elected representatives and the Government contractors. She firmly believes that the mainstream society has to take and learn many things from the tribals – their sense of community, social behaviour, their concern for environment, their intimacy with nature, their patience and truthfulness. They are the models for the so called civilized people. With these works Mahashweta Devi feels the satisfaction of having revived the sense of tribal pride.

She pursues with all seriousness the issue of bonded labour, exploitation of the landless labourers, share croppers and the low caste people by the landlords, money lenders, brick kiln owners and the Government contractors. These exploiting agencies, who are abetted by the police and the officials, are all-pervasive in Mahashweta Devi's works.

who stand as symbols of the feudal values like cruelty, exploitation, oppression and inhuman philosophy making mockery of hard earned India’s freedom and democracy. The mental agony and the inhuman experiences that are associated with the bonded labour system is very effectively brought out in the play *Aajir* (1976). Mahashweta Devi firmly believes that the land is the root cause of all these problems. The equal distribution of land to the landless is the only solution.

The prevailing state of affairs enables the exploiters to abuse the girls from the poor low-caste and tribal communities. The parents of these girls are forced to give them away for the paltry sum that they owe to the moneylenders. How these exploiters manipulate the entire system to get these girls to make them prostitutes and to throw them away as beggars at the end is dealt with in detail in *Rudali* (1997), *Dhoulati the Bountiful* (1993), *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* (1981), *Bedanabala Her Life Her Times* (1996) and the stories in the collection *Wrong Number* (2005). Dhoulati is the worst victim of this vicious circle of exploitation.

The issue of prostitution and kept women comes up in many of her works. She has a soft corner for the prostitutes, as they are the helpless victims of the cruel system that prevails in the society. Instead, she is very harsh towards those who are responsible for their miseries. She minces no words to criticize the society that looks down upon the prostitutes but treats the gentlemen who visit the brothels for new tastes and new flavours with unsullied dignity and respect. The landlords, who keep low caste women, are respected but the kept women and their children are derided. In *Rudali* (1997), *Dhoulati the Bountiful* (1993), *Bedanabala Her Life Her Times* (1996) and *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* (1981), this issue is debated in detail.
The issue of exploitation of women bothers her much. In the works like *Rudali* (1997), *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* (1981), *Dhoulati the Bountiful* (1993), *Bedanabala* (2005) and the story collection like *In the Name of Mother* (2004), *Wrong Number* (2005), *Outcast* (2002), *The Witch* (1998), *Breast Stories* (1997) this issue is dealt in detail. Mahashweta Devi says that she writes as a writer but not as a woman and looks at the class, not at the gender problem. The women as a whole are the victims of discrimination in her world. The poor low caste women are discriminated both for their class and their gender. But the upper caste women are the victims of gender discrimination. The upper caste privilege is the monopoly of the men. The women have nothing to be proud of their caste. For the upper caste Rajputs, the women are only dispensable commodities meant for their use. Their women do not have the sense of belonging. They are jealous of each other and quarrel among themselves. But unlike their upper cast counterparts, the low caste women get all helps and moral supports from the men folk. They stand firmly behind their women through thick and thin. Bikhni and Sanichari in *Rudali* (1997) get all support from Dulan and others. All the low caste men stand behind Lachima in *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* (1981).

The rise of Naxal movement and various issues related to it are discussed in *Mother of 1084* (1974) and in the stories collected under the title *Bait* (2004). The police repression against the Naxal movement in West Bengal, particularly in Calcutta, is the central idea of these works of Mahashweta Devi. The traumatic state of anxiety that the mothers of young boys in West Bengal had to undergo during the anti-naxalite persecution campaign that the police launched in the 1970s is brought out effectively and very touchingly in *Mother of 1084* (1974). Mahashweta Devi utilizes the opportunity to expose the moral corruption, hypocrisy and selfishness of the urban middle class population.
In *Bashai Tudu* (1978) and "Draupadi" (1976), apart from focusing on the naxal activities in rural Bengal, Mahashweta Devi exposes the landlord-police nexus causing innumerable miseries to the sharecroppers and landless labourers. The practice of witch killing that blatantly violates the human rights and all the moral and ethical values, come under the close scrutiny of Mahashweta Devi. The story "Witch" and the play "Bayen" (1971) deal with this issue in vivid manner. She shows how the women, particularly the low caste women become the easy victims of this practice in a society ridden with blind belief and ignorance. At the same time the treatment of the widows and the caste, class and gender arrogance of the privileged segments of the society are exposed in the stories like "Statue", "Dhouli", "Shanichari", "Chinta" and "The Fairytale of Rajabhasha".

Mahashweta Devi engages with certain issues like untouchability and casteism with all their complexities. She does not simplify the matter like upper caste versus lower caste or Brahmins versus others, as many writers and thinkers do. Instead, she shows how in this complex hierarchical system each caste is considered inferior or superior to the other. In her article "Untouchability in West Bengal" she refers to the incident of the barber, Rajen Pramanik refusing to ‘defile’ his hands by touching Unnati Das, a local cobbler. This way of looking at the complex system of casteism resembles what Mulk Raj Anand does in his *Untouchable* (1935).

Mahashweta Devi’s concern over the environmental degradation causing periodical drought and flood is conveyed in the stories like "Seeds", "Little Ones", in the play *Water* (1977) and in many of her activist writings. The mindless felling of trees by the contractors, floating away all the rules and regulations in rural areas, is pointed to be main
reason. The careless deforestation drive by the woodcutters in active connivance of the officials and the politicians in the name of development and industrialization has been causing untold miseries to the poor tribals and the low caste people. This anti-environment activity has changed the geo-physical feature of rural India by further complicating the life of the poor whose very existence is already threatened.

The cruelty and inhumanity that lie behind the practice of Romtha is exposed in the novella of the same title. The anxiety and the psychological turmoil of the person who is branded Romtha, is brought out in a touching manner. The following excruciating question that Sharan who is branded Romtha, poses, “You want to trap me like an animal? All of you live your precious lives! Why kill only the Romtha? Why trap him like a beast? Is this body not human too?” (Devi, Romtha 68) is the question that Mahashweta Devi puts before the heartless humanity.

Mahashweta Devi reflects on the futility, inhumanity and waste of war in the stories in After Kurukshetra (2005), keeping the Kurukshetra battle of the epic Mahabharata at the background. She tries to look at the Epic War, especially the aftermath of war, from the eyes of women, particularly who are marginalized and dispossessed. The rapid growth of cities at the cost of the poor and helpless village population is a symptom of social malady for Mahashweta Devi. The question that Titu Mir asks, “How people in cities manage to put away tons of food without doing any physical work?” (Devi, Titu Mir 30) reflects on the ever increasing urban-rural divide. The city that makes village girls whores and village farmers beggars, prompts Mahashweta Devi to ask, “Does the city have a soul?” (Romtha 62) The growing heartlessness of the urban middleclass is treated with great contempt in the play Urvashi and Johnny (1977).
She uses myth and fables in the novella *Pterodactyl Puran Sahay and Pirtha* (1993) in order to show how the antiquity and the glorious past of the tribal world, which is being derided as barbaric by the so called civilized. She also makes use of mythical and epic characters like Harishchandra, Bhagirathi, Draupadi and Yashoda to convey contemporary state of affairs in the Indian life. She makes an ironical use of these characters in the present settings. It is evident in her plays *Bayen* (1976) and *Water* (1982) and in the stories like "Breast Giver" and "Draupadi". In her journalistic writings, Mahashweta Devi covers almost all the issues related to the tribals, untouchables, landless labourers and other marginalized, from tribal movements and organizations to superstition, casteism and communalism.

Through her writings Mahashweta Devi brings home the fact that the true knowledge does not come from the book learning but it is imbibed from the close association with nature and life. Ganesh, a Bagti by caste and Kala Chand, a labourer in *The Book of the Hunter* (1994) display a profound knowledge of many things though they have never set their eyes on a school. Maghai Dome, an untouchable and the protagonist of the play *Water* (1982), is a water diviner. The intimacy with nature and life not only makes them intelligent but also human. In the world of Mahashweta Devi’s novels, basic human qualities are found only among the downtrodden people.

The readers of Mahashweta Devi in translation are not able to flavor the linguistic richness that she has brought to the Bengali language. Only the native speakers can experience her linguistic experimentation. Use of language in her works, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak finds out, is, “Putting together a prose that is a collage of literary Bengali, street Bengali, bureaucratic Bengali, tribal Bengali, and the languages of the tribals.” *(In Other World, 180)*
One of the translators of Mahashweta Devi’s works, Radha Chakravarty opines that her linguistic virtuosity, poses a problem for the translators. Her use of tribal words and phrases helps the readers to go back to the tribal world but translation of those words into other languages is a difficult task. The stylistic and tonal variations are bound to miss in English translation. She further says:

“In Mahashweta’s fiction, chaste and colloquial Bengali jostle with tribal dialect, snatches of song and doggerel, erudite allusion, Hindi phrases and English terminology. Instead of seamless texture, her writing acquires a dynamic disruptiveness that reinforces the thematics of separation and struggle. Dissonance represents the irreducibility of difference.” *(In the Name, XIII)*

Mahashweta Devi herself admits that her experiences with language which is brutal lethal at times *(Bitter Soil X)* is featured in the stories like ”Seeds”, ”Little Ones” and ”Salt.” Reading of Mahashweta Devi is an experience as well as an exercise at a time. What Ganesh N. Devy observes about her Verrier Elwin Lecture of March 1998, at Baroda, holds good even to her writings. He observes:

“The term ‘spell-bound’ is inadequate to capture the effect she had on her audience. The utter simplicity, the sincerity and her direct style, defeating all grammar, had completely shattered the audience. Here was a no-pretence, no-rhetoric, no-nonsense person, whose compassion and clarity were an invitation for action. Perhaps Mahatma Gandhi alone, among great Indians, spoke like her.” *(Seminar, Aug 2004, P.22)*

Though certain important linguistic and stylistic features of Mahashweta Devi are missing in translations, the tone of irony which is an important trait of her writings is retained in English versions too. Her attack on the landlords and moneylenders is a frequent phenomenon in her writings. She utilizes every opportunity for the purpose, which is sometimes bitterly ironic.
In *Rudali* (1997), she writes:

"There may be litigations and illwill between the *maliks*, but they have certain things in common. Except for salt, kerosene and postcards, they don't need to buy anything. They have elephants, horses, livestock, illegitimate children, kept women, venereal disease and a philosophy that he who owns the gun owns the land."(73)

She uses irony to bring home the condition of the poor people too. In the story "The Saga of Kaga Boga" she tells, "True, Malandi was landless and lived below the poverty line, but he was an expert in the manufacture of India's most plentiful product. He had gifted his motherland no less than eleven children."(21)

Though, the noted critic, Malini Bhattacharya feels, "Mahashweta's forte is the long story rather than the novel," *(EPW, 10 May 97-1003)* our reading of her works shows the fact that she is at ease with her pen whatever may be the form. The variety, richness and vastness of her 'world' is immensely amazing. The more we try to understand her, the more she eludes from us. Hence, Ganesh N. Devy rightly says:

"I have often wondered about the source of her strength, the literary influences that had shaped her powerful style of writing, the political philosophies that have gone into the making of her ideology... I am often amazed how some one like her, stated to be a middle-class housewife, has managed to transcend so many prisons to become what she is. What is the source of her remarkable memory, the frightening economy of her words, that great simplicity, which having distributed life between the necessary and unnecessary, shuns all that is unnecessary? Is she an adivasi taken to literature, or a writer drawn to the adivasis? Do I know Mahashweta Devi? Perhaps, perhaps not." *(Seminar, Aug 2004, P 24)*

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Thus, Mahashweta Devi has been waging a relentless war against all the exploiting agencies for the last fifty years, fully exposing the prevailing Neo-Colonial situation in the country. She is still tireless and unflinching at the age of eighty-four and displays, as Resil B. Mojares, her biographer, finds, "A tremendous surge for living." (Biography 4)\(^3\) We wish her live full hundred years and beyond. The pen which has been her sole weapon in her fight all these years has given her the satisfaction of having done the duty as a writer. But she has no illusion about what she has achieved so far. She is very much aware of the enormity of the problem and gravity of the situation and desires to continue her efforts till her last. In her foreword to *Bashai Tudu* (1978), she writes:

"There is little prospect of any significant change in these things, at least in my lifetime. Hence, I have to go on writing to the best of my ability in defence of the dispossessed and the disinherited, so that I may never have reason to feel ashamed to face myself. For all writers are accountable to their own generation and have to answer for themselves."(XX-XXI)\(^4\)

Mahashweta Devi began as a Leftist. She had an ideological inclination for the Leftist political view during her formative years, though she had never been the member of the Left Party at any point of time. But the long track of her struggle vis-a-vis the harsh realities of life has brought her to realize the futility of all ideological constraints. Now, she has reached a stage far beyond 'all the narrow domestic walls' from where she visualizes a full blooming humanity on the ground of unpretentious reality. With all her struggles and protests at her back, Mahashweta Devi's only intention, as she tells in her speech after receiving the Magsaysay Award, is to realize the reality outside and to realize herself in the process. She says:

"I will have a sense of fulfilment if more and more young writers
take to unbeaten tracks. My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness. A curtain that separates the mainstream society from the poor and the deprived. But, then why my India alone? Can’t one say the same for so many countries and societies today? As the century comes to an end, it is important that we all make attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and see our own true faces in the process.” (Biography 5)

Thus, a passage through the works of Maheshweta Devi is a new experience altogether. It reveals her multi-dimensional personality as a writer, activist, fighter and above all as a humanist. Her ongoing mission of fighting for the marginalized and the underdog with the pen as her sole weapon is really amazing. She has a sense of satisfaction of what she has achieved, at the same time, she is aware of the stupendous task ahead. Her human concern, incessant fighting and the saga of her long drawn battle with the agents of exploitation and oppression are really eye opening. The hard realities of life in the Post-Independent India are placed bare before us. Based on all these findings we can, undoubtedly, conclude that Maheshweta Devi is a unique writer and a great activist of our time.
END NOTES

2. Govind Nihalani, in *Rediff Special* (After Mahashweta Devi won the Magsaysay Award), 1996.
15. B. Mojares 5.