APPENDIX

INTERVIEW WITH MAHASHWETA DEVI

(Conducted on 08-07-07 at 10.30 a.m. at her residence in Kolkata. Sri. G. Kumarappa, Asst. Library & Information Officer, National Library, Kolkata and my friend, Prof. B.M. Niranjana Murthy accompanied me)

1.Q. Let me begin this interview. Madam, when did you actually start writing?

Mahashweta Devi: My first book came out in 1956. That was the biography of the Rani of Jhansi. It was written after a thorough preparation. I went to Jhansi, I went to Gwalior and also I researched, I read extensively in the National Library about the background of those times. I went through whatever was published. So I have been writing. As far as I can remember, I had an interest in writing from my childhood. I was in Shantinikethan in my childhood from 1936 to 1938 when Ravindranath Tagore was alive. There, we were encouraged to write and whatever we wrote, we would read out before the monthly Sabhas, the listeners would judge, things like that. From the time my first book came out, writing was the only thing I can do and I write because I do not know anything else. Of course, in course of time, I have taught English in a college for 18 years. But I left it because I was too busy in... What I have done extensively is the newspaper column writing. I wrote for Juganthar, I wrote for
Basumati. For many years I wrote for Varthaman and now I am writing extensively for Bengali Statesman and Dainik Statesman. So writing is the only thing I can do. And I also consider myself very fortunate because Complete Works of Mahashweta Devi is coming out in several big, fat volumes. They contain all the stories, novels, children stories, newspaper writings, whatever I have written. Nineteen fat volumes have come out and more will. So writing is the only thing I can do, that is why I write.

2. Q. You have been writing, fighting and living for the oppressed and the marginalized. What actually made you to take up this cause?

Mahashweta Devi: I was not made that way... perhaps I was made that way also. My parents were very supportive. They never tried to stop me from doing anything. I did whatever I wanted to do. At that time, there was only one Communist Party, not two parties. When we were young, of course, we were very much impressed by this... It went on and on. Then my husband, Bijan was a Communist, a member of the Communist Party of India. These things were there. But even without that perhaps I would not have become anything else. As I was writing, I have been extensively going about also. It started with Palamau. I went there, I found the bonded labour system. We started the first Bonded Labour Movement in Palamau. Bahut Sal Ke Bath. You know, people interested me. And because I wrote Birsa Munda story which received Akademi Award, the tribals all over were very happy. I am very happy to tell you in this context that Ramdayal Munda of Ranchi University has arranged to publish Birsa Munda's life story. It has not come out in English. In Hindi you have Jangal Ke Davedar. In Bengali it is Aranyer Adhikar. It has come out in Mundari language. Mr. Kumarappa, who is here, has done it into Kannada.
3.Q. What do you feel after almost five decades of your writing and fighting against exploitation, oppression and the prevailing evils in the society? Do you think the justice is given to the people concerned?

Mahashweta Devi: I have concentrated for so many years on the Denotified Tribes of India. In Karnataka there are not many. Of course, there is a very bad thing in Karnataka. Somewhere in Karnataka, in forest base, the tribals are evicted. I read it in some newspapers or some reports. All over India it is the same thing. The tribals are not getting justice. The Denotified tribes are those whom the British Government had branded as criminals in 1871. All over India there were more than 200 such tribes. They were treated as born criminals. The police were killing them. The neighbouring people in the society were also killing them. You know, many non-tribals, who were also very rich, would engage these tribals in criminal activities and they would be killed and punished. It was a great injustice done to these people. In 1952, the Government of India declared that these tribals were no longer notified. They were denotified. All these tribals who were about two crores all over India, no education for them, no profession, nothing. They said, "You are denotified so you have become denotified." But situation remained the same.

In West Bengal there are three such tribes. They are smaller communities. The Lodha Community of Midinipur and the Sabar Community of Purulia were very cruelly abused, killed and what not. So, first I worked for this. I went to Baroda to deliver The Verrier Elwin Memorial Lecture in 1993. I went there at the invitation of Dr. Ganesh Narayan Devy. He is well known in Mahale. He has a beautiful Tribal Academy there. I told him that it is not enough to work for the tribals alone. We have to work very seriously for the denotified tribes. So, first we brought out, as an organization. The Denotified and Nomadic Tribes' Right Action
Group [DNTRAG] and we started moving very seriously from 1998 onwards for four years. It included myself, Ganesh, Lakshman Gayakwad of Maharashtra and many others. Whenever there were such killings we used to travel and go there, study the problem and would report to the Doora Darshan, to the Human Rights Commission. In many cases solutions were given. When a man was killed, his wife and family got compensation, land and things like that.

But then I realized and told Ganesh that to run all over India at this age is not possible, not possible to you also. So different organizations in different zones came up and now they are there. But I think it very important, perhaps, the most important work in my life. So that is continuing I do not work for the tribals alone. Just now, the West Bengal Government is purchasing land from the cultivators to change it into . . . . we don’t know what. We are fighting against that. We are forming public opinion. So this work goes on, goes on and on. It is an on going programme.

4.Q. What was the response of the Government and the people when you took up the cause of the tribals and the oppressed? Was it positive? Could you get positive result?

Mahashweta Devi: Definitely. Why not? Keeping thousands of years of injustice in mind, I am trying through my writings and works to get people organized, so that they demand justice from the system and the system gives it. I am fighting to make the system accountable not only to tribals but also to us and to every one. That has never been done.

5.Q. Did you face any opposition from the Government and the society when you wrote Hazar Chourasir Ma?

Mahashweta Devi: No, no, not at all. Hazar Chourashir Ma was written within
two-three days. That was a Puja time. I would have to write because I lived by writing. Writing is the only way to earn, to pay my house rent. This flat is Rs.6,000 a month, my medicines Rs.3,000 a month. So writing has been way of income generation all these years. It is true that Naxal boys were being killed all over Calcutta. So one day a few boys came to me and told me, “Our boys are getting killed all over Calcutta. When shall you write about them?” Out of that came Hazar Churashir Ma. That was written very quickly and it came out in the Puja Journal, Prasad. You see, my first book Rani of Jhansi was serially published in this. But I did not write for Ananda Bazar Patrika again. I wrote for other magazines which people read broadly like cine magazines, popular magazines, things like that. Hazar Chourasir Ma was published in Prasad. That year it was treated with so much sensation that Prasad had to reprint it. Then this book was smuggled into the jails all over West Bengal because the Naxal boys were in jails. When they came out in 1977, all of them straight took to my house. It was so because they thought that I was their great friend. If you ask the Government or the police try to stop my mouth, no, they didn’t. If they did, they would be taught a lesson.

6.Q. Your fiction, The Mother of 1084 is said to be very popular in France. What must be the reason for that?

Mahashweta Devi: Because I have written about a mother who does not know that her son protested against the system. When I say system, I mean political and everything. Think of India. Think of the Naxalite Movement, think of so many rebellions, uprisings and revolutions all over India, you will understand. Whenever people protest against a system, they are branded Naxalites. You will have to know it. Very recently, Kolkata police had put on the Internet that I’m closely connected with the Naxalites and the Maoists. For that, I telephoned the Commissioner of Police. Prasan Mukherjee and asked, “What is this? What are you doing?
Withdraw it.” Many telephoned me out of pity for me. One woman took an extensive interview in English. If they bring it out and put it on the Internet, my explanation will be there.

7.Q. If you could get justice through your non violent-struggles, is it essential to follow the violent method? When the youth of the country start wielding AK-47 supplied from across the border, then where is the place for non-violent struggle?

Mahashweta Devi: I’m not a great advocate or a knowledgeable person about this. But I’ll tell you plainly. People say they have become naxalites. Now they say, they have become Maoists. If Government never does anything for the people, if they keep them like this, what else the helpless, desperate people do? In West Bengal, when Amlashol was happening, when tribals died of starvation, so many tribal labourers died of starvation in tea gardens in North Bengal as the gardens were closed and they were not earning anything. They used to gather the fruits, roots and things like that. But the Government is cutting down all the forests and selling those places to the Indian investors like Ambanis. Ambanis and Tatas may be Indians by birth. But they are the people who are just trying to create a Global Market. And this is all under the policy of Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

8.Q. The people of Karnataka were not used to Naxalism. In recent days they are frequently reading the news of clashes between the police and the Naxals and also about some deaths in certain parts of the state. What does it suggest?

Mahashweta Devi: There will be such reactions. There is nothing to worry. It will come everywhere . . . It will be everywhere. Not only that . . . Understand this. If the Government does not do anything for the people, if there is so strong and harsh brutality everywhere, then outsiders will come. At one time they become impatient and come back with weapons.
9. Q. What do you say about the violence that the Naxals indulge in?

Mahashweta Devi: Violence? The Government kills people. In Karnataka the forest Officers have got control of all the forest. Is that not violence? Is there a place where there is no violence? Government is violent. Police is violent. System is violent. Society is ridden with violence. Why blame the Naxals alone? So much negligence on the part of the Government to allow people to become violent. That’s all. It started with Telangana uprising. What is Telangana? Telangana was a big, very big land holding of P.V. Narasimha Rao . . . . what did not happen there? Because of so much exploitation . . . . In Tamil Nadu . . . I was very grateful to Mr. Krishnamurthy. He has translated those books into Bengali . . . fantastic . . . the bonded labour system . . . this . . . that . . . what not? In Bengal also . . . There is nothing which does not happen in Bengal. Bengal is not politically very advanced. The C.M. is listening to what the Tatas and the Ambanis are telling. What he is doing even an autocratic Government won’t do.

10. Q. You have changed your own stories and fictions into plays. What is the reason behind?

Mahashweta Devi: I’m not a regular playwright, I wrote five plays from my stories like **Jal**, **The Mother of 1084** and others. It pleased me as I had a reference. People like Badal Sarkar and others received them. They said that they could easily adapt these plays to the stage. But they did not proceed I just changed them into plays because I thought these stories were easy to convert into plays.

I married twice. My first husband Bijan Bhattacharya was one of the founders of *Indian People’s Theatre Association*. His drama *Navanna or New Rice* became very famous. It created a great movement in Bombay, Calcutta, other places in Bengal. K.A. Abbas’s *Gartikikal* mainly based on *Navanna*. 379
11.Q. Except the journalistic writings, all your literary works have been written in Bengali. Why do you prefer Bengali though you are equally proficient in English?

Mahashweta Devi: Bengali is my mother tongue. I feel at home with Bengali. I write primarily in Bengali and it is my great good fortune that all that I have written in Bengali have come out in several Indian languages like Hindi, Malayalam, Kannada and many other languages all over India. Recently one book from Rajasthan came. Rajasthani language is not strictly the standard Hindi language. They have also published Jungal Ki Daavedar.

12.Q. In which literary form do you feel at ease?

Mahashweta Devi: I am essentially a person of prose. I do not write poems. I did some but very little. I am more interested in Loka Kathas, the peoples stories, their rhymes, songs things like that. But I am strictly a person of prose. Prose is my favourite form.

13.Q. Did you ever try to write poetry?

Mahashweta Devi: Everyone does. Perhaps I wrote some... some, when I was studying in class seven or eight, very infantile. I have written only a little.

14.Q. You said in one of your interviews that 16th Century poet Mukund Ram and his Kavi Kankan Chandi had influenced you in your adolescent years. Who else influenced you?

Mahashweta Devi: Not in my adolescent years. I started reading extensively after my first book was written. I have this natural bent for reading classics, particularly the Bengali classics. Sixteenth Century was very important, I think not only in Bengal but all over India. Yesterday I was discussing it with somebody. Generally, I talk to people who do not understand these things. We hear a lot about European Renaissance. But in India too it happened. Chaitanya
did it in Bengal. I just tell the names like Nanak, Kabir, Tukaram, Eknath, Mirabhai. There must be such names in Karnataka also. They were all responsible for Renaissance in India. That was, you know, freedom from the slavery of thought. Everywhere, especially in Bengal, the Dalits opted for Vaishnavism. All those persons in different corner of India preached that one need not go to a temple, one need not go to a Masjid, to nothing. You stand under the open sky and submit your puja to yourself. There by you’re liberated. I think that is the Renaissance thought.

15. Q. Has any contemporary Bengali writer ever joined you in your struggle?

Mahashweta Devi: Which struggle you mean? Now I am writing extensively against the land acquisition by the West Bengal Government for industrial purposes. Some are writing. Some are supporting but I have never needed such support. My readers want me to write. Whenever I write for newspaper columns, people from districts, people from rural places always telephone me. That is enough.

16. Q. In an interview you have said, "The tragedy of Indian writing is that it is full of profundity and Indians do not know how to laugh at themselves". How do you look at your writings in the light of this statement?

Mahashweta Devi: I think there is plenty. There is plenty where I believe in savage brutality, jeering or taunting at. I find this so pretentious to write poem on storms, monsoons, rivers and floods. I think seriously about the people who live there. I am going through Bengali proverbs. I would like to see how much knowledge they hold and how fantastic they are, how they study people and understand. Yes, I stand by it. That’s all.

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17. Q. You started with historical novel in the beginning. You wrote *Aranyer Adhikar*. Did you find any problem in transforming the historical characters into fictional characters?

Mahashweta Devi: No... No... I treated them as characters. My first book was the *Rani of Jhansi*. But it was not a novel. It was a biography. First I studied all the available materials in English and Marathi. Then I went to Jhansi and those places connected with the Queen leaving my son who was only six years old with his father. I collected the local folklores, ballads and songs. So in reconstructing the *Rani* I did not have any difficulty. About *Aranyer Adhikar*,... writing the story of Birsa Munda... no difficulty. No... Basic things remain the same, no? Hunger, exploitation, forest and so on.

18. Q. Your character of *Droupadi* appears both in the story named after her and also in the novella *Agnigarbha*. Is it a real human being or just a fiction?

Mahashweta Devi: Yes. In my mind, she comes out as a person and while you people read the story you get it as a character. I definitely used the name Droupadi. It has come out *After Kurukshetra*. It is published recently. I am very much interested in History and I don’t believe in the printed history alone. Between the two printed line, there a blank space. I believe in it. I think history of the people is in that blank space which I always try to search.

19. Q. You have participated in many international events. How far these opportunities helped you to put across your ideas and experiences to other parts of the world.

Mahashweta Devi: That I would not know. Some of my books are translated into English, French, German, Japanese and so on. For me it is much more important that my writings are being translated and published in Indian languages. I have to reach India first. I am very fortunate that so many of my books have been translated into many Indian languages. Once
some writers from Sri Lanka had come. There was a session and then I came to know that in Sri Lanka also some of my books have been translated. I do not have the copies of those books but I just came to know.

20.Q. In the story *Five Women* you refer to – Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vitasta and Vipasha who were the wives of the farmers who participated and died in the Kurukshetra battle. But Dr. Ambedkar, in his book *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (1946), opines that battle in ancient times were fought only by the soldiers and the people belonging to other walks of life were never disturbed. How do you justify your view?

Mahashweta Devi: You see so many foot soldiers. Arjuna and Karna, the legendary heroes never faced each other in open battle. These foot soldiers had to be there. Who were these foot soldiers? In this Mahabharata *yuddha*, if it ever happened, all these people from all over India assisted either Dhuryodhana or Yudhistira. Kurukshetra, legendarily or with peoples’ memory, is today’s Haryana and amongst them widow remarriage is still in practice. I am very much interested in history. For me, history is written between the two printed lines, in the blank space – the blank space is the peoples’ version of history – *lokavritta* – I go and search for it. I go to the places and try to find it. What happens here, happens there also. It must have happened in ancient times.

21.Q. In another story *Kunti* and *Nishadin*, referring to Kunti you write that “Life outside rajavritta had not touched her at all.” How can this be justified against the background of her twelve years stay in the forest and one year *ajnata vasa*, which is totally away from Rajavritta.

Mahashweta Devi: It may be totally away from rajavritta. But when Dhritarashtra, Gandhari
and Kunti went to aranya, even that was arranged by the rajavritta sitting in Indraprastha or somewhere. In her life, she has never talked and interacted with these persons though she has been seeing them all the time. Then this Nishadin saw Kunti confessing everyday. The only crime Kunti had committed was when she abandoned Karna. That is why she was asking forgiveness from the mother earth. She was confessing her crimes. Then this Nishadin says, “You confess so many crimes. Do you remember the five sons who were burnt in Varanavrita? Those were Dushads or tribals. So it was a lac house and they were deliberately burnt so that Kunti and her five sons could live. That was done in cold head with much calculation. That was the greatest crime. So even today, rajavritta and lokavritta remain separated.

22.Q. You wanted to write an autobiography. Is it materialized?

Mahashweta Devi: At one time I started to write it. It was being extensive... too many memories... But now I am writing it in brief, in a concise form for my editor. It includes my life, my work, my stories, my writings and all these things. I am writing it. I have started it, but it will be first published by my editor Ajay Gupta.

23.Q. You always fight for tribal ‘identity’ and tribal ‘culture’. The tribals are being converted into other religions. How do you visualize this conversion? Is it not going to effect their ‘tribal identity’ and ‘culture’?

Mahashweta Devi: ‘Tribal identity’ and ‘tribal culture’ have never been respected by the mainstream from the ancient times till date. To me the tribals are much more civilized than the mainstream. Amongst them the widow remarriage is almost compulsory and there is no dowry system. If a father dies, his daughter also inherits whatever he has. Of course, they do not have much property. They are not Ambanis or Tatas. So they inherit whatever little they have.
Any way, I find them much more civilized. For the first time, there is no differentiation between the male child and the female one. No difference is there. As far as religious conversion is concerned, the identity of the tribals remains the same. People go and convert them. You will be surprised to know, when Gujarat riots were happening, in the heart of West Bengal under the Marxist Government, B.J.P went to Malda town and converted some tribals to Hinduism. They were called Hindus or they are called Christians or they are called something else. But for them it does not matter. They remain tribals. Whoever does it, does it for the election interest, for their propaganda interest.

24.Q. As you have said so many times, you are interested in history. But you took some epic characters like in Jashoda, Droupadi and so on, to express hard realities. What is the reason behind it?

Mahashweta Devi: Readers also should exercise some brain in order to understand it. Jashoda assumes significance because she nurtured Krishna, Droupadi had five husbands. I went to the Himachals and there I came across a Gujarath tribe who traditionally graze sheep all over Himachal. You will be interested to know, amongst them all the women belonged to Droupadi gotra. That time, when I was in Simla, I talked to the patrakars of those regions. Some of them belonged to such places. They admitted that it is their custom. There was a time when the men would have to go to distant places upto Tibet in order to earn. But who stayed with whom? The women belonged to Droupadi gotra. They married more than one brothers. I have seen such a family. The woman who married the eldest brother, technically remains the wife of the eldest brother in life. But she has, I think, three or four other husbands. They are also married and have different wives. So, whatever is there, has a root not only in history but also in reality. Therefore, there is nothing fantastic about Droupadi. Coming to epic, you
know, Kunti's story is written. But nowhere the personal story of Nishadi is written. So I go to the blank space about which nothing is written, just like in the case of history. If you read *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* very thoroughly, between the lines, then we find that nothing is written which did not happen before or which is not happening.

25.Q. In most of your works you are of the opinion that the upper caste people like Thakurs and Brahmins are responsible for the prevailing oppressive caste system. But recently, when there was the Tsunami in Tamil Nadu coast, some newspapers reported that some fishermen did not allow the Harijans into a refugee camp. What do you say about it?

Mahashweta Devi: This is terrible wherever it happens. Perhaps it happened in Tamil Nadu. The caste system is very bad there. Why don’t you protest against it? What all these writers, thinkers and all these people are doing? In your state also . . . terrible caste system. Why don’t you protest against it?

You see, India is not an independent country. What happened four thousands years ago, is happening still now . . . . It is happening even now. It is full of this caste system and this and that. It is terrible to think that Mahatma Gandhi was born in this country . . . . terrible . . . . So, whatever is happening, has happened four thousand years ago. During the Veda's time, the eldest girl of the house was not allowed to marry. They were forced to stay unmarried . . . . *Vittakumari* . . . . because their father would get plenty of land and cattle from the King. She would have to take care of these things. So she was not allowed to marry. So what did not happen before? Against women. This caste system . . . . this *Varna* division, things like that.
26. Q. What do you say about the present state of affair in West Bengal under the Left Front Rule?

Mahashweta Devi: The Left Front Government in West Bengal is a total failure. It is bad in everything.

27. Q. Is West Bengal politically a sensitive state?

Mahashweta Devi: Not at all, not at all. West Bengal has no . . . . no sense actually. The tribals are ill-treated as in any other state. They criticize Bihar too much. But nothing happens in Bihar which does not happen in West Bengal.

28. Q. Usually you keep yourself away from the electoral politics, but you contested for Kendra Sahitya Akademi in 2003. How do you justify it?

Mahashweta Devi: I contested that time because I was asked by my friends. I will not mention their names. I was told that the entire thing was very B.J.P oriented _ Hindu Nationalism. In 2002, during the Gujarat riots I had been to Gujarat. Quite a few times I wrote extensively. I have tried to help the people as much as I can. So I hate this Hindu fundamentalism, kya Muslim fundamentalism, kya Christian fundamentalism, whatever. I’m against fundamentalism. But that time it became a cause because they said I had to contest for . . . . I was traveling to Baroda in a plane. I sat, opened the newspaper and saw this man, I have forgotten his name, given a statement that now Sahitya Akademi is trying to bring the Communists. He referred to me as a Communist and this and that. So I went to Delhi and phoned the writers who were supporting me. I told them, “Yes I’ll contest.” I was contesting for the Presidentship and M.K. Vasudevan Nair of Kerala for vice-Presidencieship. Of course we lost. Of that I am very proud because had I been elected, my life would have been absolutely destroyed. I cannot stand it.
29.Q. What do you say about the growing intolerance among the intellectuals and the writers?

Mahashweta Devi: I have nothing to say. I only know what I can do. I have always believed one should do what one can do. I believe in this. I'm writing in the newspaper columns not to get anything. I care for nothing. What can they give? This Magsaysay Award? This Jnanapeet? This Padmavibhushan? no. People and their cause that all matters to me.

30.Q. What are you doing, I mean, writing these days? Do your age and health permit you to do all you intend to do?

Mahashweta Devi: I don't think I'm very much aged. I'm only running 82. Since I have decided to live 18 years more . . . so I think it is all right. I'm doing what I can. That's all.

Complete your Thesis at the earliest. I wish you all the best.

Thank you, Madam, for the opportunity and your good wishes.