Introduction:

*Turning and Turning in the Widening Gyre*

"He, who shows a way out of miseries, is the greatest friend of the mankind."

— Swami Vivekananda
INTRODUCTION:
Turning and Turning in the Widening Gyre

In this thesis, an attempt is made to study the writings of Mahasweta Devi, a renowned Bengali writer. It includes both her fictional and journalistic writings. Her works are studied keeping in view how she uses her writings as a weapon to fight against oppression, exploitation, injustice and discriminations of all sorts. In doing so, an effort is made to show how she has succeeded in her attempt to bring justice to the people in distress.

Literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it, which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. It enables the people of different times and places to understand a particular society at a particular point of time. A great work of art grows directly out of life. It is a child of the age. In reading it, we are brought into a large, close and fresh relations with life at large that in turn enriches our own life. Literature helps to build a cultured society. Literature and society are inter-dependent; one helps the other. The relation between the two is indivisible. The consideration of what all the major writers and thinkers say about art and literature further strengthens our belief in life-literature bond. For Aristotle, poetry is an art of imitation of reality. Plato considers: “The foundation of all good and lasting work in literature is entire sincerity to oneself, to one’s own experience of life, and to the truth of things as one is privileged to see it.” (Hudson 16)

John Milton finely said, “A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured upon purpose to a life beyond life.” (Hudson 15) For Mathew Arnold, it is “A criticism of life.” (Hudson 14) According to a French epigram, “Art is life seen through a temperament.” (Hudson 15) What George Eliot said of art in general is specially true

1
of the art of literature. "It is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot." (Hudson 18)

Literature, which is a product of society, helps to build and shape a society. The writings of social relevance being an important feature of the modern age, the writers who write about the life around them have a more chance of being listened to. The lack of social concern is considered a sign of literary decadence in an individual or an age. It is believed that no vital work in literature is possible without sincerity to life around and without authentic representation of the joys and sorrows of the time. The scholarship of a writer, his creative power and the range of experience cannot rescue the work of art if it fails in its social responsibility. The modern age demands a faithful documentation of one's own experiences. The value of literature lies in the measure of its authenticity and proximity to life. Almost all the major writers of different periods have displayed their social concerns, apart from their artistic exuberance. But for Oscar Wilde and a few others art had a different purpose. They held the 'Art for Arts Sake' theory in 19th century and tried to produce works of art far removed from the realities of ordinary life. They could produce works that were artistically superb and ornately decorative in style, but they lacked in human touch and emotional depth. Such attempts remained 'experiments' and have not come to be called 'experiences'.

Literature in general, in one or the other way, has the social significance. Most of the modern literary theories - Feminism, Post-Modemism, Post-Colonialism, Counter Culture, New Criticism - are basically social in nature. The discourse on Life-Literature nexus takes a new dimension with the emergence of the Marxist Theory. The Marxists stress on the idea of 'Commitment' in literature. For them a writer is committed to the society he lives in. He should
consciously and effectively draw the attention of the readers towards injustice, exploitation, inequality and oppression in the society through his writings. The Marxists provide a rational and critical dimension to their representations in literature. They assign great importance to the 'historical context' and situate their themes in the midst of the 'significant' developments of their time. There are a number of such committed writers who have left a lasting mark on our life. Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), Sholokov, Lu Xun (1881-1936), Subrahmanya Bharati (1882-1921), Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004), Chinua Achebe (b. 1930), Wole Soyinka (b. 1934), Chinnappa Bharati (b. 1935), Ngugi Wa Thiong’O (b. 1938) and others belong to this category of writers.

Man does not simply succumb to the inimical forces around him. He resists them with whatever the means at his command. When the countries of the Western Europe and North America sought socio-economic control and politico-cultural domination over their erstwhile colonies, some writers took up their pens to protest that external aggression. It was a part of their organized national liberation struggles and movements. As a result, there emerged a particular category of literature called 'Resistance Literature' in Africa, Latin America, Middle East and elsewhere. Nicolas Guillen (1902-1989) from Cuba, Edward Dom (1929-1999) from Latin America, Kanafani (1936-1972) from Palestine, Ngugi Wa Thiong’O (b. 1938) from Kenya, Chinua Achebe (b. 1935) and Wole Soyinka (b. 1934) from Nigeria and Hugo Blanco (b. 1940) from Peru and others form the galaxy of writers of 'Resistance Literature'. Now, it is a fertile field of study.

Coming to India, we see the caste-system, the class and uneven gender relations that have led to inequality, exploitation and oppression of one section by the other. Almost all the major Indian writers have reacted seriously about this prevailing situation in our society. In the past, the writers in India were left in a strange situation of fighting a two-pronged battle; one against the prevailing social evils and the other against the perpetrators of colonialism. The fight
against the problems created by prevailing socio-economic situation has continued even after
the colonial masters left us. Thus, we have a body of literature that protests and criticizes
inequality, exploitation and oppression that continue to exist amidst us. The intention is to
establish a just and fair society.

Kumaran Asan (1873-1924), Sarat Chandra (1874-1938), Premchand (1880-1936),
Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay (1898-1971), V.S.Kandekar (1898-1976), Nazrul Islam (1899-
1976), Kuvempu (1904-1994), Shivaram Karanth (1902-1997), Adya Rangacharya (1904-
1984), Chinnappa Bharati (b. 1935), the women writers like Gundipati Venkatachalam, Triveni
(1928-63), K. Saraswati Amma, Vibhavari Shirurkar and many others have tried to bring
about a positive change in the Indian society with their writings. In the Post-Emergency India
there emerged a body of literature called ‘Dalit Literature’ for the same reasons. Many Dalits
all over the country, under the influence of activities of Mahatma Jyothibha Pule (1827-90),
Dr. Ambedkar (1891-1956) and Periyar (1879-1973), started claiming social justice in their
writings. They protested the practice of untouchability, exploitation and oppression based on
the consideration of caste. The writers like Baburao Bagul, Annabhau Sathe, Keshav Meshram,
Bhama, Devanur Mahadev and others used literature as a weapon against social injustice.

The element of protest and fight against evils in the society are not new to
Bengali literature. The intellectuals from Bengal were the first to receive the
modern progressive ideas from the West. The Renaissance entered India through Bengal. The
noted Bengali writers like Rajaram Mohun Roy, Bankim Chandra, Madusudan Dutt, Tagore,
Sarat Chandra, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Anupama Devi, Giribala Devi and the
contemporary writers like Profulla Roy, Bani Basu, Chanakya Sen and others have raised their
voice against the prevailing evils in the Indian society. Through their writings, they show how
one can fight not only for freedom but also fight against age-old customs and traditions that are
inimical to the social harmony and happiness. The sense of protest and criticism, the Indian critic H.A. Singh says:

"Usually springs up from an extreme sensitiveness to the disparity between ideals and practices... They fight a fierce battle with the cruel systems that deny life to others and rise in revolt against the exploiters and a hostile social environment that belittles the exploited." (11)

What Mulk Raj Anand says is very pertinent in the context of discourse on life-literature bond. He says:

"Any book or novel has to deal with the time – the situation of the time, about the human situation, political situation, social situation of the time. This was the reason why even a non-committed writer like R.K. Narayan had to do the novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* ... No one can evade the consequences of the time. No committed, sincere writer of Africa, Asia and Latin America can afford to remain non-political, apolitical." (Lingaraj Gandhi 145)

Let us review the literary background of West Bengal from the early days to the present and place Maheshweta Devi in the hierarchy.

**LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE OF WEST BENGAL**: West Bengal, one of the constituent states of the Republic of India, is situated in the northeast of the country. It is surrounded by the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan and Sikkim in the north, by Nepal in the northeast, by Bihar and Jharkhand in the west, by Orissa in the southwest, by Bangaldesh and the state of Assam in the east and by the Bay of Bengal in the south.

The State is divided into nineteen districts and it spreads over 88,752 Sq.Km. The population of the state is 80,221,171 (2001 Census).
The state is named West Bengal after the partition of the country in 1947. Earlier to that it was called Bengal. The English word 'Bengal' is a corrupted form of Bangala (often contracted as Bangla). The Sanskrit version of the word is Banga (or vanga). 'Banga' or 'Bangal' have been the names of this part of the country since fifteenth century (Ghosh 4).

Bengali, the language of the state is a member of the Indo-European family of languages. This language, like Assamese, originated from one of the Prakrits called Magadhi Apabhramsa (Ghosh 29).

Bengali language, literature and culture pass through three important stages before they enter into the modern age. The three stages are; the Gaur Period, Nadiya Period and the Calcutta period.

THE GOUR PERIOD (AD 1000 TO AD 1500): The two divisions – Pundra (north central Bengal) and Rarh (West Bengal) came jointly to be known as Gour. Now this comes under Bangla Desh. This was the center of Bengal's political and cultural life since tenth century AD. During this period Bengali language and literature were still in the primitive condition. The language was heavily Prakritic and literature was religious. Jaya Deva's Geeta Govinda (12th C), Kritivasa's Ramayana, (1380) Baru Chandidasas Sri Krishna Kirttan (1480) are some of the examples.

The impact of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Bhagavata on life and literature is an important feature of the age. Vaishnavism under the able teacher Chaitanya (1486-1534) made a deep impact on the life of the people during this period.

Translations of The Ramayana, The Mahabharata and The Bhagavata were the common practices. Mangal or Vijaya Kavya, the emergence of Manasa (Snake deity)
Chandi and Dharma (Buddhist deities) cults were the other features of this time. The influence of Buddhism was also present to a considerable extent. The charya, a collection of short songs by Buddhist teachers (siddhasharyas) of the sahajiya cult, is a part of the literary endeavour during this period.

NADIYAPERIOD (AD 1500-1800 AD): In the beginning of the sixteenth century the center of literary and cultural activities of Bengal was shifted to Nadia, which is one of the districts at present and is situated to the north of Kolkata. Bengali establishes itself as a standard literary language and volumes of literature is produced during this period. The legends like chand sadagar, Dhanapathi and kalaketu assume importance in literature. So far, literature had been monopolized by Gods and Goddeses. For the first time literature started taking real human beings for its subject. Biography, the new genre, comes into existence. Biographies on the life of Chaitanya (1486-1534), the great vaisnava saint, became very popular.

The growth of manasa poems (manasa fables), chandi fables, Dharma literature and Nath literature (Nath cult is the admixture of Shaivism and Buddhism) is another feature of this period. Durga puja, the greatest religious festival of Bengal came into prominence.

Mukandram Chakravartti’s Chandi mangal and Bharat-chandra Ray’s Vidya sundar are some of the important works of the period. This period witnessed the fall of the Moghal Empire and the emergence of the East India company. Nathaniel Brassey Holne, an English Scholar, wrote Grammar of Bengali Language (1778). The Government press, that was established at Hooghly during this period, plays an important role in the growth of Bengali language and literature.
CALCUTTA PERIOD (NINETEENTH CENTURY): The center of literary and cultural activities of Bengal gradually shifted itself to Calcutta in the later part of the eighteenth century. It was a small obscure village when the East India Company acquired it in 1670. During next one hundred years this tiny village grew into a major city of India. Warren Hastings, the first Governor General of India (1772-1784) made it a center of revenue administration and a seat of Supreme Court of Justice. By 1800 AD, Calcutta became a political, literary and cultural Center of Bengal.

Fort William College and the Baptist Mission Press were established in 1800 AD. William Carey (1761-1834), a teacher from Fort William College, wrote Bengali grammar and an English-Bengali dictionary. The Missionaries from Srirampur started *Samachar Darpan* (1818), a weekly newspaper. This helped the growth of Bengali journalism in the following years. The impact of English is an important feature of Bengali literature during this period. The advent of the Western learning to Bengal is compared with the advent of Renaissance to Europe in fifteenth century. (Ghosh 114)*

The introduction of English education (1835) is another important event of this time. Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) plays an important role in the implementation of Macaulay’s famous *Minute* (1835). Raja Rammohan Roy enriched Bengali prose and literature of thought. He wrote Bengali grammar as well as devotional songs. His English writings are published under the title, *The English works of Raja Rammohan Roy* (6 Vols, 1945-51). His famous “Letter on English Education” (1825) is an important document that could very well be called the manifesto of the Indian Renaissance (Naik 16)*. The Bengali periodical *Sambad Kaumudi* (1821) was started by him. He is called the morning star of the Indian renaissance (Naik 14)*.
because of his invaluable contribution to the growth of Bengali literature and culture in particular and that of India in general.

Aksay Kumar Dutt (1820-86), Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar (1820-91), Madusudan Dutt (1824-73) are some of the important writers who made Bengali literature rich. Dinabandhu Mitra, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94) and Sajiv Chandra Chattopadhyay are the other Bengali writers who helped the growth of Bengali literature during this period. The mixture of the native and the foreign elements is the main feature of the period (Ghosh 166).

TWENTIETH CENTURY: Nationalism is an important feature of the period. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) dominated the literary scene of Bengal during the first part of twentieth century. His contributions to literature include; over one thousand poems, two dozen plays and playlets, eight novels, eight volumes of short stories, and a mass of prose on literary, social, religious, political and other topics. His English translations, paintings, lectures in Asia, Europe and America make his contribution more voluminous. Tagore presents a case of literary bilingualism which is perhaps without a parallel in literary history (Naik 58). He wrote in Bengali and creatively translated most of them into English. He translated his works with such a remarkable success that his very first effort (Gitanjali 1912) won him Noble Prize for literature in 1913.

Tagore is compared to a huge tall banyan tree that gave shelter to a number of intellectual birds (Asit Kumar 372). Akshaikumar Maitra, Ramaprasad Chanda, Nikhil Nath Ray, Ajit Kumar Chokrabarty, Sunith Kumar Chattopadhyay are the other writers who made the Bengali literature rich during this period.
POST TAGORE PERIOD: Partition of the country on religious basis, dispute between landless farm labourers and land lords, between labourers and the industrialists, the spread of Marxist ideology, Naxalbari movement (1967) and corruption at different levels of political system are the important features of this period.

Earlier it was the middleclass Bengalis who nurtured Bengali literature and culture. But this class becomes fragmented due to various social, political and economic disasters that are mentioned above. Due to the circumstances, a new generation of writers emerged and they tried to tread a new track that would take them away from Tagore. They tried to outgrow the influence of Tagore.


Bijan Battacharya, Digin Bandyopadhyay, Tulsi Lahiri, Salil Sen, Utpal Datta, Badal Sircar, Ratan Ghosh, Manoj Mitra and others enriched Bengali play. But Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay says that these playwrights were preoccupied with the shortlived realistic problems in their plays. Hence they failed to produce universal appeal. (Modern Bengali Literature, 364)

The writers like Gopal Halder, Subodh Ghosh and Samaresh Basu are associated with the literary journal Paricaye which propagates Marxist ideology. Naturally, these writers express same ideology in their works.
Bimal Mitra, Ramapada Chaudhury, Bhusan Mazumdar and Pratap Chandra Chanda are other notable writers of fiction.

Modern Bengali short story is closely connected with the movement of short stories round the world. Bengali short story, in particular, has surpassed all other regional short stories of India in quality and variety (Asit Kumar 369). Sunil Gangopadhyay, Atindra Bandopadhyay, Samaresh Mazumdar and others have already proved their excellent performances as storywriters. The women writers like Ashapurna Devi, Pratibha Basu, Kavita Sinha and Maheshweta Devi are also responsible to take Bengali short story to greater heights.

The light personal essay known as Ramya Racana (delightful writing) is also gaining popularity in Bengali language. Regarding Bengali literature after the glorious days of Tagore, Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay says:

"In place of one towering personality, a gigantic literary talent we have the bustling, jostling crowd of innumerable mediocre talents thronging in the temple of literature. How far these mediocrities can fill the void created by the deaths of Bankim Chandra and Rabindra Nath will be determined by posterity. Time is the ultimate judge". (Bengali Literature 372)

Maheshweta Devi has certainly filled the void created by those towering personalities. Her works have been translated to other Indian and foreign languages. The tremendous response they get from the readers is the proof of their worth.

Her name is almost synonymous with struggle, protest against exploitation, suffering and commitments. She is a unique personality; a rare co-existence of various human potentialities.
She is a novelist, story-teller, playwright, essayist, columnist, magazine editor and above all a socio-cultural activist for whom writing is a pious and noble vocation. She has been tirelessly working for the tribals, bonded labourers, sharecroppers and other marginalized communities for the last five decades. The harsh realities of life have found their fullest artistic expression in her writings. She shows how all the noble ideals and the dreams of our freedom fighters have been shattered into pieces in the sixty years of independence. The great champion of freedom, Nelson Mandela says, “She holds a mirror to the conditions of the world as we enter the new millennium” (Mojares 11). Maheshweta Devi finds out various maladies from which post-independent India is suffering and gives a shock treatment to each one of them. She is not only a writer but also an activist. She stands out prominently in her sphere of activity. She is angry that all the fruits of our freedom are being enjoyed by a few at the cost of the large sections of our society. Her experiences show that the mere change of guards make no difference for them. She vows to take head-on all those agencies who have turned our hard earned freedom and democracy to a ridiculous status.

Almost all the writings and activities of Mahashweta Devi are set against the background of the Post-Independent Indian scenario. Born in Pre-Independent India, she has been a witness to various developments that have taken place before and after independence. The lofty ideals, high hopes and the dreams that inspired our forefathers to fight an elongated battle for freedom seem to have been forgotten after independence. They expected that independence would remedy the maladies that infected our life. Unfortunately, the things have been moving in the opposite direction. The transfer of power did not transform the human life at the grassroot level. The implementation of land reforms would have solved many problems. But it has not been done. As a result the landlords, moneylenders and their cohorts continued to thrive at the
cost of the landless labourers, sharecroppers, bonded labourers and other poor sections. Exploitation, oppression, inequality and crime continued to increase. The successive Governments have failed to establish a just society. The agents of exploitation and perpetrators of crimes are left unpunished. The conditions of the tribals and the other marginalized sections have become worse. They have been displaced from their places for one or the other reasons, without proper rehabilitation programmes. The girls from the poor, low-caste families are either sold to the brothels or forced to join them, without finding any other means of livelihood. All the schemes and programmes of the Government have failed to get proper implementation. India has occupied a place in the community of the most corrupt nations. The displaced poor have been migrating to the cities and become a part of the ever-growing slums. The life in the slums has turned to be more horrible and hellish.

The vote bank politics of the party leaders, the use of money and muscle power in the democratic institutions have been undermining the sanctity of our democracy. The more and more disgruntled elements are joining the armed insurgencies and thereby increasing the violence and bloodshed in the country. Sometimes the horror unleashed by the police is more horrendous.

Even after sixty years of independence, the large sections of our society are deprived of the basic amenities of life and the atrocities on the weaker sections have been going on unabated. Mahashweta Devi takes up all these issues in her writings. She does not deny the progress made in different walks of life. But she holds the view that all our achievements and progress have no meaning unless they reach the common citizens of this country. She condemns and fights against the continuation of the neo-colonial situation in the garb of democracy, freedom and justice.
All her activities and writings have been veering around one theme of ‘fight against exploitation’: exploitation of all hues and colours. She takes up this cause and makes it a ‘mission’ of her life. She is virtually waging a war on the exploiting agencies like landlords, money lenders, corrupt officials, politicians, cruel police, brick kiln owners, their agents and cohorts, government contractors and so on. Her pen is the only weapon she fights with. None of them can escape the sharp and caustic criticism, ridicule, chastisement and castigation of her pen. Her emphasis is always on the ‘social conscience’ of the writer. She is ‘obsessed’ with a sense of duty towards society. She does not like those writers who content themselves with weaving ‘narcissistic fantasies’ in the name of literature. She compares such writers to Nero who was fiddling when Rome was burning. For her the intellectuals and the writers are equally responsible, along with the politicians, for the sorry state of affairs in independent India. She asks a surprising question: “What can be more surprising than that writers living in a country bedevilled with so many problems - social injustice, communal discord and evil customs - should fail to find material for their work in their own country and people?” *(Bashai Tudu, XVIII)*

Thus, Mahashweta Devi’s range of activity is wider. She wants a total change: change in outlook, and change in the system. The Dalit writers have been fighting for the Dalit cause and the feminist writers have been seeking justice for the women. The writers like Bankim Chandra, Tagore, Premchand, Subrahmanya Bharti, Kuvempu, Kuvamath and others believed in the possibility of social justice within the existing social order. Mahashweta Devi, on the other hand, has been struggling for the total liberation of the oppressed. She not only fights against the evils in the society but also against the system that is responsible for them. She questions the propriety of continuing the system that has deprived the millions of people of
their rights. In this sense she comes very close to Ngugi who differentiated between two opposing aesthetics in literature. "The aesthetic of oppression and exploitation and of acquiescence with imperialism; and that of human struggle for total liberation."(Harlow 132) Mahashweta Devi as a writer and an activist falls into the second category whose only vision of the country is, as she says, to see, "There are no class divisions, where water for drinking and irrigation is assured, there are enough employment opportunities and where there is food for all. All sections of people should equally share the wealth of the country."(Devi, India Empowered) Indulgence in the aestheticism of art and getting lost in the theorization of literature in the academic confinement are alien to Mahashweta Devi. All her writings, as she claims, are based on her real life experiences. She says, she has "Never studied any theory, only life."(Singh 84) She further adds:

"I have never had the capacity nor the urge to create art for art's sake. Since I haven't ever learnt to do anything more useful, I have gone on writing. I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium for protest against injustice and exploitation."

(Devi, Five Plays XII)

Mahasweta Devi always prioritizes her urgent human themes over form and technique. It does not mean that she is indifferent to the latter. She is always moved or inspired by the human aspect of any event rather than the aesthetic considerations. Therefore one may tend to treat her as merely a chronicler of social realities. But the close reading of her fictions and stories establish that this is unjustified. Infact, she transcends the boundaries of material concerns and highlights the value of universal consciousness of exploitation and the inbuilt strength to protest against it. This explains why Jaidev, one of the leading literary and cultural critics, valued Mahasweta Devi as, "Among the most important writers in contemporary India because
as a creative writer she amply reveals the blending of intellect with conscience, of aesthetics with social activism.” (Singh 16)²⁴

Tribal life and culture is one of the major areas of Mahasweta Devi’s interest. Her noble anger is always against those who are responsible for displacement of the tribals from the forestland, which traditionally belongs to them. Her inclination for tribal society grew as she went deep into their history and culture which she considers is very rich and far superior to the mainstream culture. She regrets that such a compelling theme had not been documented properly and their contribution to history and culture has not been recognized. She took up the task as the tribals themselves were not in a position to do it. She declares, “I went there for remission of my sins. As people go to pilgrimage, I went to the tribals... I went to them in a natural process, like the flow of a river. I went there to learn, not to teach them.” (Indian Literature, 168)²⁵ Her sympathy is always with the notified tribes who were considered born criminals by the British Government. Even after they were denotified, the independent India has not treated them differently. For Mahasweta Devi the idea of ‘independence’, ‘democracy’ and ‘Post Colonialism’ have no meaning unless they come down to the experience of the marginalized section of the society. The mere change of guard at the helm of affair makes no difference for this section. Even after six decades of independence, a large section of population remains deprived of all the minimum living facilities. She observes:

“I see my countrymen without food, water and land, and reeling under debts and bonded labour. An anger, luminous and burning like the sun, directed against a system that cannot free my people from these inhuman constraints is the only source of inspiration for all my writing.” (Bashai Tudu XX)²⁶
SOCIO POLITICAL SCENERIO: The socio-political scenario of West Bengal in the post-independence period is the background of Maheshweta Dev's writings. A glance at the scenario would certainly help us to understand her works better.

The political scenario of West Bengal is different from that of other states in the country. The Congress party was in power continuously from 1947 to 1967. The Left Front came to power in 1967 for the first time, but it did not last long. The government was dissolved in 1969. The United Front Government came to power in 1970. The alliance among the partners of the Government broke down and the UF lost power. The Assembly was dissolved and the President's rule was imposed. In 1972 Congress party came to power once again. In 1977 elections that were held after the Emergency, the Left Front came to power with a clean majority and it has been ruling the state since then. Politics in West Bengal has long been associated with the Left and radical movements. The *anushilan* and *jugantar* movements in the '20s, the nationalist movement under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose in the '30s, the *tebhaga* movement of share croppers in the '40s laid the foundation for a steady growth of a political shift to the Left in the '50s and '60s. The absence of land reform, the exploitation of the landless labourers by the land lords and industrialists, the utter indifference of the Government officials and the elected representatives to the plight of the poor labourers provided a fertile ground for the growth of the Left radical ideology in the state.

Maoist inspired liberation struggle erupted in the small village of Naxalbari and adjoining areas in 1967. This village is in the northern part of the state adjoining Bangladesh. A band of political extremists took up areas with the aim of forcibly securing land for the landless farm labourers. This movement soon reached Calcutta where it could attract more and more students.
and youth. As a result the city of Calcutta had to witness series of violent encounters till 1971.

In 1970 the hostility between East and West Pakistan flamed into an armed struggle. A guerrilla style insurgency was organized by the freedom fighters of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in alliance with the Naxalites of West Bengal. In 1971, when the struggle reached a crucial point, Government of India deployed its armed forces and waged a war against West Pakistan and won the battle. Taking advantage of the general atmosphere of jubilation, the Government cracked down with exceptional severity on the Naxalites as well as on the political rivals. The Govt. forces destroyed the rebellious sections by killing about 1500 party workers and above 20,000 cadres from both rural and urban areas (Lieten 90).²⁷

In 1967, the peasant rebellion in Naxalbari led to the emergence of indigenous agrarian leadership from the lower classes including the tribal cultivators (Franda 153).²⁸ This incident sparked off a number of Naxalbaris in different parts of the country.

In West Bengal seventy percent of people live in villages. It includes the tribals and the low caste people. Maheshweta Devi concentrates on the problems of these people in her works. Therefore it is essential to have a look at the condition of these people in the state.

There are about 645 scheduled tribes in India. Forty of these tribes live in West Bengal. These tribal communities together represent about 5.5 percent (4406794) of the total population of the state (2001 Census). There are 59 Scheduled castes in the state. They together constitute twenty three percent (18452555) of the total population (2001 Census).

The term ‘tribe’ commonly signifies a group of people speaking a common language,
observing uniform rules of social organization and working together for common purpose. Other typical characteristics of tribe include a common name, a relatively uniform cultures, or a way of life, and a tradition of common descent (The New Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol-X P 115).

These Tribes are sometimes called aboriginals because of their being the earliest inhabitants of this country. They not only belong to different stages of the culture but also vary from area to area with regard to size of the population, racial types, socio economic organization etc. (Thakur, Vol.1, P. 99). The tribals, who are called the children of the forests, are originally forest dwellers. (Dutt 89) They were living by hunting, fishing or gathering. But the forest resources are dwindling very fast due to the fast growing population, industrialization and various developmental projects. Therefore the tribals are displaced from their original settlements and are forced to take agriculture along with their traditional hunting and fishing for their livelihood. There are a few tribes who still continue to live in the thick of the forests and remain wild like onges and jarawas of Andaman.

Among forty tribal groups of West Bengal, most significant tribes are Santhals, Garo, Parharia and Kora tribes. Their culture, religion, costumes and tradition have enriched the culture and tradition of West Bengal. They are proud of their colourfull culture and language but they speak Bengali language too. They have their own tribal occasions and festivals. The fairs and festivals are enjoyed with great merriment. Durga puja is one of the major festivals of Hindus in West Bengal. This festival is celebrated by the tribal groups also with much gaiety. Some other festivals like Makar Sankranti, Kali puja, Holi are also celebrated by them.
Apart from their traditional hunting, fishing and agriculture, many of them are engaged in other occupations like carpentry, weaving, pottery and so on. Some of them are famous for their proficiency in art and crafts.

When they are displaced from their original settlements, they find it very difficult to manage themselves. They are forced to become farm labourers, bonded slaves and industrial labourers. They become easy target of exploitation by the land lords. The tribals are very sensitive. Whenever their rights are violated and their tribal pride is hurt, they have expressed organized resistance. The *Tirka Majhis* Rebellion (1780-85), The *Santhal* Rebellion (1855-57) and *Birsa Munda* Rebellion (1895-1900) are some of the tribal movements to be noted. When these tribes became violent and resisted Government interventions in their rights, the Government used violent means to suppress them. The British Raj declared some of the tribes of India as criminal tribes under the Criminal Tribes Act 1871. They were called notified tribes. After Independence, Govt. of India de-notified them (1952) but they still suffer from social stigma and ostracism. India has over 200 tribes and communities comprising 60 million people who fall under the category of de-notified and nomadic tribes (*NIE*, 21 Sep. 2008, P 8)

Mahashweta Devi writes on the tribal communities like Mundas, Santhals, Oraon and so on, but her main concern is for the de-notified tribes. She has written some articles on them and established some organizations for their welfare (Chapter V). In West Bengal there are two de-notified tribes: *Lodhas* who live in East Medinipur district (84966) and *Kherias* (*Sabars*) who live in Puralia (10,000).
Mundas

Munda people are one of the indigenous groups of the Indian sub-continent. They are found across Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Chhatisgarh, Orissa and Assam states of India, and some parts of Bangladesh. Their language is Mundari, which belongs to the Munda subgroup of the Austro-Asiatic language family. As per the 2001 census there are two million Munda people. The term Munda given to this community designates the name of the leader of the tribal community. The Munda call themselves Hodoko which means “Human Beings”. Though nothing much exists in contemporary history, oral stories, myths, ballads and songs provide some minimal information here and there. The Munda People have been living in the same region/place for quite a long time, considering it their home from birth to death. However, many of their folk ballads and songs or festivals display traits alien to Chotanagpur region. Social arrangement is very simple. The caste system that we find in Hinduism is alien to the Mundas. Buried ancestors are memorialized as ‘Guardian’ spirit of the Gotr or family symbolized by the burial stone sasangdiri which means “yellow stone” or “turmeric stone”. Once in everyone’s life all members of the family are required to visit memorial stone to pay their respects. This practice is forbidden to Christianized Munda tribals. These memorial stones are buried in an erect position at the place of gotr concerned.

Since ancient times the Munda people spread through all surrounding areas, including the Chotanagpur region. In early times group having same surname or gotr (who sought their lineage from a single ancestor), settled in an area-specific fashion. Each gotr is identified with a specific region, though now in general the people are free to settle where they wish, and have settled all over Jharkhand. Endogamous marriage is normal with the exception of marriage to members of the Santhal, Ho, Kharia and Oraon (Kurukh) communities. However, the current
population is better educated and members sometimes abandon Munda tradition to marry a non tribal. Harsh punishments such as Jaat nikala (Caste Banishment) may be pronounced by community chieftains in such cases. Marriage is forbidden between persons belonging to the same gotr. A marriage between a bride and bridegroom of the same gotr is considered immoral, and such a relation is socially undesirable. The Santhal, Ho and Kharia communities are considered blood-brother tribals, marriage with them is common. However, marriage with an Oraon is acceptable only due to special relationship, the “Uncle-Nephew” relation. The reasons for this relationship are surrounded by many myths and remain lost in antiquity. Mostly Munda people follow Sarna (way of worship of the Munda and Santhal tribe). Basically, they believe in the supernatural spirit called the Singbonga. However nearly one-fourth of them have adopted Christianity. The surname of a Munda defines their identity i.e., which Gotr they belong to. Many surnames are common among other tribes with minute variations however rare surnames are often found. Surname or Gotr are based on natural elements, trees, animals, birds or any nature related object which are often found in Chotanagpur region. Though how or why they took such names for their lineage (gotr) is a mystery. Surnames or gotr among Munda people are - Topno (A kind of tree ant), Barla (has two meaning 1-Potter, 2- A species of Fig tree), Aind (A kind of rare river eel fish), Kerketta (A rare bird) [This surname is common among Oraons too], Guria, Sanga, Kandulna, Bage [another name for same gotr may be Kula], Lugun, Surin, Buri/Bur, Demta, Mundu, Jojo, Honhaga (literal translation means young-brother), Kongari (A rare bird), Horo (Tortoise). There are also group of Munda families who are called ‘Sing’ Munda. The counting system is apparently Decimal, with higher numbers created by combining words from these in required order like “Twelve” - Gel-bariya [ten-two]. Fifty is Bar-hissi-geleya (Twice twenty ten). [www.wikipedia.com]³²
Birsa Munda (1875-1900), lead a late 19th century independence movement during British colonial rule in India. (discussed in detail in Chapter I). Jaipal Singh (1903-1970), a politician and a sportsman who captained the Indian hockey team to get gold in the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam, the renowned scholar Ramdayal Munda and Karia Munda, who is the Deputy Speaker of Lok Sabha are the notable Mundas. Jesuit Father John-Baptist Hoffmann (1857-1928) spent his life studying the language, customs, religion and life of the Mundas. He published the first Munda grammar in 1903.

Santhals

Santhal tribe is found mainly in the Indian states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa and Bihar. Santhals, also called Satars, are among the most backward of the ethnic groups of India's neighbouring country Nepal. This tribal community dwells in the Jhapa, Sunsari and Morang districts (Nepal). A significant minority of Santhals is also there in Bangladesh. The people of this community also address themselves as Hor. These people love to reside in the fringes of rivers and forests. They possess their own unique culture and religion and are mainly animists. Fishing and hunting are among their most favourite occupations. Thakurji is their ancestral deity and Maranhuru is their paternal guardian deity. Arrows and bow are the traditional weapons of the Santhals and the most favoured meat of these people is pork. A majority of the Santhals have engaged themselves in labor and farming. The origin of this tribal community goes back to the age of the Pre Aryans. The Santhalis were well-known fighters in the time of the British rule in India. People of this community waged war against Lord Cornwallis' Permanent Settlement Act (1793) in the year 1855. The Permanent Settlement Act (1793) was a grand contract between the East India Company and the landholders of Bengal. Under this act the landholders and Zamindars were admitted as the absolute owners of landed property.
During the later parts of 1850, one of the tribal heroes named Sidhu was able to gather about ten thousand Santhals in order to run a parallel government against the British. The first Santhal leader was Baba Tilka Majhi who raised weapons in the year 1789 against the British. Santhals belong to the Mundari group of Austro-Asiatic linguistic family and they may be economically classified as plain agricultural type. The Jhapa district in Nepal has the highest population of Santhals and Morang district has slightly less. The population of Santhals as per the 2001 Census was 42,689. The southern region of the state of Bihar is known as Santhal Praganas due to the Santhal tribe’s density in this area. These tribes have multiplied from proto-Australoid origin. It is also believed that they had come from the Districts of Santha and that is why they are called as ‘Santan’ or men of Santha state. The Munda-Santal of northeastern India and Nepal comprise of nine different, but very closely related people groups. These Santhals are politically distributed throughout Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal. A majority of the tribes live in the hilly regions of Chota Nagpur Plateau (Jharkhand), while others live in the plains. Apart from this, the Santhals have scattered themselves all over India as industrial and agricultural laborers. [www.wikipedia.com]^{33}

The Santhali language is part of the Austro-Asiatic family, distantly related to Vietnamese. Santhals did not have a written language until the twentieth century and for this reason the script of the Santhalis is developed recently. A distinct script was required to accommodate the Santhali language, combining features of both the Indic and Roman scripts. The modern Olchiki script of the Santhalis was devised in the year 1925 by Pandit Raghunath Murmu. Pandit Murmu wrote more than 150 books addressing a wide range of subjects. (Chapter V). The day-to-day life of the Santhals encircle around the area of the forests in which they live. The Santhalis fulfill their basic requirements from plants and trees in the forests. They also engage
themselves in fishing, haunting and cultivation in order to sustain their livelihood. People of this tribal community have the unique skills in constructing musical equipments, baskets and mats from plants and this quality is passed safely from a generation to other. Santhals do not possess any temple and they worship no idols. These tribes follow the religion called Sorna. They give respect to the spirits and ghosts like Lakchera, Kal Sing, Beudarang, etc. Santhals have village priests called the Shaman Ujhwa and Naiki. The common practice among the Santhalis is animal sacrifice to Gods in order to appease the Goddesses and Gods. Dancing is very much loved by the Santhalis. It is the most prominent component of the Santhals' festivals and fairs. After a day long work, Santhals take rest by enjoying very light music along with dance. The women of this tribal community dress themselves with a white saree with red borders and they dance in the sequence of a line. The Santhals play music very well. They use number of musical instruments. The Santhal tribes generally celebrate the Karam festival which comes every year in September and October. This festival is celebrated to please the God to bless them with more wealth and decrease their enemies. Some of the other major festivals observed by the Santhals include Baba Bonga, Sahrai, Maghe, Ero, Namah and Asaria. Santhals also enjoy the haunting festival known as Disum Sendra on Baishakhi Purnima. The priests of the Santhals are Murmu and Murdi are the businessmen, and the Hemram are judges and Kisku are the rulers. The Soren among the Santhals are soldiers and Tudu are musicians. [Thakur, 48]

Lodhas

Lodhas are a tribal people living mainly in the forest covered Midnapur district of West Bengal, Mayurbhanj district of Orissa and Singbhum district of Jharkhand. The Lodhas are one of the primitive tribes in India. As per 2001 census, Lodhas numbered 84,966 and formed
1.9 percent of the schedule tribe population of West Bengal. They have a literacy rate of 34.8 percent. Their number in Orissa is about five thousand.

Lodhas are primarily forest dwellers living on various forest products and hunting of wild animals. They do not stay in one place and practice nomadic culture. They were leading a peaceful and contented life till the British rule in India. During the British rule pressure on land increased due to increase in population, industrialization and urbanization. At that juncture, the forest contractors with the help of some agricultural communities and the government officials destroyed the forest for various purposes and pushed the Lodhas, a comparatively weaker tribe, inside the forest. But in the course of time, their population increased and they found it very difficult to meet their livelihood within the limited forest resources. This displacement of their economic and socio-cultural life brought about a great change in their lifestyle. These people rebelled against the injustice caused by the British and the strong agricultural communities. But they were ruthlessly suppressed by the British. It is probable that finding no other alternative mode of life, they resorted to the path of criminality and plunder. The British government notified them as a criminal tribe along with other 200 tribes in the country in 1972. The stigma of criminality is so deeply rooted on this community that they are cut off from rest of the community in the society. The Indian government has denotified them in 1952. But the stigma of criminal tribe is still haunting them. Till today they are living like a degenerated race who require economic, social, moral and educational rehabilitation. Even today the public and the police suspect them to be the born criminals. They still live undernourished, half-fed and living such a life that people do not believe in the existence of such a community in this age of Information Technology. Mahashweta Devi throws light on the miserable condition in which these people live in her articles written to various papers and journals (Chapter V). The tragic
The Kharia are a tribal people living in Jharkhand and Orissa states. The population of Kharia people were around 300,000 as per the 2001 census.

The Kharia comprise three tribes, the Dudh Kharia, Dheiki Kharia, and Hill Kharia. The first two speak an Austro-Asiatic language, but the Hill Kharia have switched to an Indo-Aryan language, Kharia Thar. There has not been any language development efforts made for Kharia Thar.

The Hill Kharia live in different states of India. In Orissa, the Hill Kharia are mainly found in Jashipur and Karanjia Blocks of Mayurbhanj district. A few villages are also found in Morada block. In Jharkhand, they are concentrated in East Singhbhum, Gumla, Simdega districts. Though widely found in this district, Musabani, Dumaria and Chakulia Blocks are the blocks where they live in large numbers. And in West Bengal, they are in West Midnapur, Bankura and Purulia districts. The majority are in Purulia.

The Hill Kharia are also called Pahari (meaning “Hill”) Kharia, Savara/Sabar, Kheria, Erenga, or Pahar. Outsiders call them Kharia but they call themselves as Sabar. They are called “Pahari (Hill) Kharia” because they live in the midst of forest and depend upon forest produces.

There are several gotras (clans) among the Hill Kharia such as Golgo, Bhunia, Sandi, Gidi. Golgo seems to be dominant one.
Sabars

The Sabar people (also Shabar and Saora) are one of the scheduled tribes in India who live mainly in Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal. During the British Raj they were classed as one of the criminal tribes under Criminal Tribes Act 1871, and still suffer from social stigma and ostracism in modern times. In some parts of East Singhbhum district mainly in Musabani, they are known as Kariya. Noted writer and activist Mahasweta Devi is known for working with these forest tribals. This reclusive tribe, is found primarily in East Singhbhum district in Jharkhand and in Midnapore District of West Bengal. The traditionally forest-dwelling tribes are not used to agriculture, and rely on the forests for their livelihood. In recent years, with the spread of the Naxalite rebellion in the area, the police often restrict their access to the forest.

Oraon

The Oraon or Kurukh tribe, also spelled Uraon, Oran, or Oram, inhabits various states across central and eastern India as well as Bangladesh. Oraons are speakers of Dravidian languages. They are much closer to native non-tribal Indian populations than other tribes. Traditionally, Oraons depended on the forest and farms for their ritual and economic livelihood, but in recent times they have become mainly settled agriculturalists. Small numbers of Oraons have immigrated to the northeastern part of India, where they are mainly employed in tea estates. A number of educated Oraons have settled down in metros like Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and many other cities of India including Patna, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Hyderabad, Allahabad, and Lucknow. Some have even settled abroad in the US and Europe. Today a large number of Oraons live in Jharkhand, Orissa and parts of Chhattisgarh, Bihar, West Bengal. During the colonial era, the Tana Bhagats, led by their Tana saint Turia Bhagat, protested
against the imperialists by not paying the *chaukidari* tax. The Kurukh or Oraons are the people best known in many parts of India as tribal of Chotanagpur. ‘Oraon’ appears to have been assigned to them as a nickname, possibly with reference to their many migrations and proneness to roam. The Oraons were for many generations settled on the Rohatas and adjoining hills and in the Patna District, and that they were driven from that place by Muhammadans. A large number of Oraons today are Christians; being oppressed by the Hindus they were lured into Christianity. A few are Muhammadans as well and intermarry with general Muslim population. The Oraon language, *Kurukh*, belongs to the Dravidian language, and is most closely related to Brahui and Malto (Paharia). *Kurukh* language is being taught in Ranchi University in Jharkhand. A Kurukh Literary Society have been formed after the first *Kurukh* Conference held in Ranchi in October, 2006. The Oraon people have a rich range of folk songs, dances and tales, as well as traditional musical instruments. Both men and women participate in dance, which are performed at social events and festivals. A sizable numbers of Oraon have been settled down in North Bihar and in Nepal. Many have settled down in the lower part of Bhutan (Samchi district). Kartik Oraon, who was a highly educated Oraon, an Indian Congress leader and former state communication minister of India, Albert Ekka, the Paramveer Chakra awardee and the former Captain of the Indian Hockey Team are all Oraons. The Oraon people have a rich and vast range of folk songs, dances and tales, as well as traditional musical instruments. Their songs and music changes according to season and festivals. Both men and women participate in dance, which are performed at social events and festivals. The Oraon who have adopted Christianity write their title along with their name. Majority of Oraon who have converted into Christianity write their title as *Kerketta, Xalxo, Xaxa, Xess, Tirkey, Toppo, Tigga, Kujur, Mintz, Ekka Barla, Barwa* etc. with their name. However, those who follow Tana Bhagat principle or *Sarna Dharma* write Bhagat in place of *gotra*. Oraon prefer to
many a oraon only. However, Christian Oraon often marry other caste and community (Munda, Kharia, Santal) due to influence of Christianity. However, Sarna Oraon prefer marriage with a oraon only with full traditional fashion. [www.wikipedia.com]

Cultural aspects of Tribal Life

The tribal population in India belong to various stages of cultural development. Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) in his book, *The Aboriginals* (Bombay, 1943) divides the tribes into four classes according to their stages of cultural development. The purest of tribal groups comprising about two or three millions have been placed in the first class. These Highlanders do not merely exist. Like so many villagers, they really live. Their religion in characteristic and alive, their tribal organisation is unimpaired, their artistic and choreographic traditions are unbroken, their mythology still utilizes the healthy organisation of tribal life. Geographical considerations have largely protected them from the debating contact of the plains. The Second category of tribes, according to Elwin's classification has been experiencing contact with the plains and consequently has been undergoing change. This group, though retaining their tribal mode of living exhibits the following characteristics in contrast to the first group: (i) instead of communal life, this group live village life which has become individualistic. Their communal life and traditions, are only preserved through their village dormitories; (ii) in contrast to the class-I Tribe, the members of those of class-II do not share things with one another; (iii) cultivation has ceased to be a way of life for them; (iv) the members of these tribes are contaminated by the life outside. They come in contact with the groups living on the periphery, who live a more complex, viz., civilized life (v) the members of these tribes are less simple and less honest than the members of the tribes belonging to class-I.

The tribes who belong to the third category constitute the largest section of the total
tribal population, about four-fifth of it. Members of this class of tribal groups are in a peculiar state of transition. They are tribal in name but have become ‘backward Hindus’ constituting a sizeable section of the lower rung of Hindu society; one section is described as Christian. These tribes have been appreciably affected by external contacts. They have been exposed to the influence of economic and socio-cultural forces of Hindu society. They have been also subjected to missionary influences.

The tribals of fourth category according to Elwin consist of the old aristocracy of the country represented today by great Bhil and Naga chieftains, the Good Rajes, a few Bishevar and Bhaiya landlords, Karku noblemen, wealthy Santal and Uraon and some highly cultured Mundas. They retain the old tribal names and their clan and totem rule and observe elements of tribal religion though they generally adopt the full Hindu faith and live in modern and even European style. According to Elwin, tribals of this class have won the battle of culture contacts. It means that they have acquired aristocratic traditions, economic stability, affluence, outside encouragement, ascertain arrogance and self-confidence characteristics alike of ancient families and modern enterprise.

Though tribal culture differs from tribe to tribe. The Sauria Paharia observe many a ritual which mark important stages in the agricultural calendar. During the latter half of the months of Bhado (August-September), on getting the maize crop from the field, villagers worship in the Jaber-than. The whole village contributes for a he-goat and one or two chickens. These are sacrificed to the villages deities by a Kotwar (priest). Only after observing this ritual can they eat maize. It is similar to Nabanna observed by Hindus after harvest paddy. Suria Paharia is the Sailani Puja in honour of Kando Gosai in the month of Magh (December-January-February) or Chait (March-April). The God is taken out from his abode and sacrifices are
offered to him. It is also similar to Debothan in Hindus. Every sixth year, the villagers offer a buffalo to this deity, the ritual being known as Karra Puja.

Festivals connected with hunting are observed among the Hill Kharia and the Oraon. The Phagun or the spring festival among the Hill Kharia consists of two parts: one is the ceremonial hunting expedition and the other is the ceremonial concretion of the first fruits, the first flowers and the edible leaves and other products of the season. Before the performance of this ceremony, no fruits of the new season may be eaten. All the adults male population of a Hill Kharia settlement join in a ceremonial hunting expedition. In the evening, when the party returns, the hunters are entertained to a feast cooked by women. The game is divided between different Kharia families of the settlement in proportion to the number of members in each family and the whole night is spent in singing, dancing and merry-making. The morning following, the villagers worship at the seat of the village deity. The expenses of the worship and the sacrifices are met by contributions made by the entire village community.

Each of the Chhotanagpur tribes has a series of festivals. For the Oraon the first festival is Sarhul which is celebrated in the month of Chait (March-April). It is festival of the spring and is celebrated at the time when the Sal tree blossoms. Until the celebration of this rite, no Oraon of the village may gather, or eat or use the new fruits, flowers and edible leaves of the seasons. The Sarhul festival is so important that its date is fixed by the Village Panchayat and its ceremonies extend over several days. All the villagers take part and go in procession to the sacred grove of the village where the village deities are worshiped. The Pahan and his assistant officiate at the rites and the leader of the youths dormitory has important duties to perform on this occasion. The expenses of such communal festivals are large but all the villagers contribute in cash and kind. Singing and dancing continue at the village Akhara for several days.
The next important festival is the *Karma* which is celebrated by tribals and non-tribal with equal enthusiasm in the month of September. A branch of *Karam* tree is planted and offerings are made to it. The day as well as the receding night are spent in fasting but in the evening everyone meets and spends the night in dancing and singing round the *Karam* sapling brought from nearby jungle. People in the village on this occasion, give themselves up completely to merry-making.

The Santhal and the Kharia hold village festivals on the occasion of the sowing of rice, The Hindus have similar festival or first transplantation of paddy seedlings by the head of the family. The Ho also publicly worship the village deity Desauli and his consort before sowing rice. The Oraon and he Santhal observe the *Harari* or festival of green rice plants in the month of Asarh (July) after the rice, millet and cotton seeds have been sown in the field. There can be no transplantation of seedlings, till this ceremony has been performed. The village elders fix a day for its celebration and fowls for sacrifice are collected from the villagers. On the day of *Harari* festival, the *Pahan* (priest) and his assistant offer sacrifices and make offerings to the village deities on behalf of the village community.

The *Kadleta* or *Kadlota* festival is celebrated by the Munda in Asarh (July), just before the transplantation of rice seedlings and on this occasion sacrifices are offered to the village deities in the sacred grove in the presence of the assembled villagers. Among the Oraon this festival is celebrated one month later.

The *Kharihan Puja* is celebrated among the Munda, Oraon and Kharia just after the harvest. This ceremony is intended to ward off the evil eye from heaps of harvested grain. The ritual is performed by village priest on behalf of the village community.
The Chief festival of the Santhal called Soharai is celebrated after the rice harvesting in December-January. This festival lasts for five days and ritual includes the sacrifice of fowls to the village by the Naak. The gods of the cattle-shed are also worshipped at this village festival and so are the ancestral spirits. During the five days of the Soharai festival, the Santhal indulge themselves in dancing, eating, drinking, singing and sexual license.

Among the Ho, the chief festival is the Maghe Parab. It is celebrated in December-January and also extended for five days. The Deuri (priest) performs all the rituals. All the offerings are sacrificial. Animals are contributed by the villagers. Each Ho village fixes a different date for the celebration of Maghe Parab so that guests from other village may arrive. This festival, which is an occasion for dancing and singing provides opportunities for young men and women of different villages to come together and seek amorous adventures.

In some villages influenced by Hindu contact some Hindu festivals are also celebrated with great spirit. Somewhere the Phagu festival coincides with the ‘Holi’ festival of the Hindus. Besides the Hindus of the village, the tribals sprinkle coloured water over their friends and neighbours. In the evening a gola dance is organised in the Akhara (ground) in which persons of different communities participate, some as dancers and others as spectators. Similarly Dasahra festival is celebrated by all the communities. Recently the Munda have come to join the Ramanavmi festival.

More than the tribes as a whole or even the exogamous clan, the village is animated by a spirit of ready co-operation, the service of the gods and it is through such constant co-operation that it assumes a certain mystic unity. Most of the deities worshipped during the seasonal rites are the gods of the village territory rather than gods of its individual inhabitants.
and it is probably on account of this that they can be worshipped through the traditional ma-chinery operated by hereditary priests and headman, who again act not in their individual capacity but as representative of the village community. The tribal concept of pleasure-their pre-occupation with pleasure activities such singing, dancing drinking, story telling etc. realized through cycles of festivals and their happy-go-lucky spontaneous nature sharply contrast than with their non-tribal counterparts. The tribal concept of pleasure is an invaluable possession of tribals. It is responsible for their optimistic nature, extraordinary zest for life and their freedom for psychosis and neurosis. It constitutes their main source of strength which serves as a cushion to absorb the suffering and frustration arising from poverty and exploitation.

Most of the tribals in India have rich tradition of oral literature. Many of the songs of tribal communities of India as well as their folk-tales have been published by anthropologists. Sarat Chandra Roy, who was one of the earliest among them presented a number of Mundari songs, along with their English translations, in his book entitled *The Mudas and their Country* in 1912. [Thakur, 24]

**Religious aspects of Tribal Life**

Tribal religion in India seems to have a common feature, that all beings are endowed with a living spirit. Animals, plants, rivers, mountains are exception to this rule. The dead who have apparently left us are yet with us, and it is through remembrance of offerings that we have to renew our relationship with them on due occasions. The dead are again reborn in the shape of offspring in the present generation. The span of man’s comradeship is thus, extended to encompass all that he sees around him, as well as those whom he loved and has apparently lost. All these are common with Hindu religion.
What is significant in the tribal religion is that whole world, peoples by spirits thus, rendered holy. In the forests where some of the more isolated communities live, a few trees are never touched or cut for they represent the primal grove.

If the spirits dwell everywhere and in all are at peace with them, men enjoy freedom from illness and a long life. If anyone falls ill, the general belief is that some relationship has been violated, when, by means of trances or particular magical ceremonies men or women skilled in the art decide what should be done by sufferers. And when this is done, health is once more believed to be restored.

It is true that these tribes are poor, devoid of formal education, and oppressed by fears which arise out of lack of modern knowledge.

After independence, when tribes, listed in a schedule under the Constitution, have gained access to certain statutory benefits, a new movement has started among even the westernized converts to Christianity to re-discover and re-affirm their tribal identity and separateness from those who are not included in the schedule. There is nothing wrong in such endeavour. But while describing the religions of the tribal communities in India, we have to indicate not only the character of their indigenous faiths and practices, but also the many-sided changes to which they have been subject through the contact and influence of their more prosperous neighbours. Sometimes they have been attracted towards westernism through the devoted help of western missionaries. And now a new trend has begun among them of new unification between Christian and non-Christian or “animist”, so that there “tribal” identity may be reaffirmed. [Thakur, 24]
Civic aspects of Tribal Life

Among all tribes of India, especially Bihar, the village is a well-defined political and administrative unit. The unit and solidarity of the village emerge most clearly in relation to government. Whether it is a large permanent settlement among the Santhal, Munda, Oraon, or Ho or a small frequently shifted settlement as among the Hill Kharia or Suria Paharia, it is governed by an administrative mechanism which not only regulates life within the village, but orders the villagers' relations with the world outside.

This mechanism functions through its officers who are known by different designations among the various tribes under review. In the simpler societies the ordering of the social, political and ritual relations of the village are in the hands of one man. But in the more complex societies, we find a differentiation of function and authority vested in two headmen each with its own field of interest and prescribed duties.

In Hill Kharia villages, there is only one village headman who combines in his person the social as well as religious leadership of the village. He maintains peace and order within his settlement.

Nowadays we find only the headman called the Manjhi. He is responsible for all secular affairs. The Manjhi is generally elected by the villagers and is often the most influential man of the village. The Manjhi is responsible to the divisional headman called the Sardar.

Among the Oraon and the Munda, the differentiation of functions is more pronounced that among the Sautia Paharia. The Secular headman known among the Oraon, as Mahto and among the Munda as Munda. Previously the religious headman or the Pahao was the
head of the village and performed both secular and religious duties. His assistant was the
*Mahto* among the Oraon and *Munda* among the Munda.

In most Oraon villages, the *Mahto* is elected once every three years by villagers
assembled at the Akhara. The *Mahto* is the representative of the village. In some villages, the
post of the *Mahto* is hereditary. Everywhere the *Mahto* enjoys rent free service land during
the tenure of his office. The *Mahto* settles all disputes over the amount of rent due to landlord.

Among the Senthal, as among the other tribes, headmanship is an indigenous institution.
The Santhal headman is known as *Manjhi*. The *Manjhi* is the head of the village people. All
the people will have to follow his lead. In ordering and inviting, in calling and restraining, at the
name giving, at the initiating festivals, at religious instruction and worship.

Traditionally the *Manjhi* is elected by the entire village community. He is the
representative of the village in both internal and external matters. Sometimes the officially
recognised *Manjhi* is a non-Santhal and then villagers elect an official called *Haud-i-Manjhi*
who is responsible for social matters in the village life while official duties are left to the
Government nominee. The *Manjhi* is considered so important that in certain villages deceased
*Manjhis* are worshipped at a shrine called *Majhithan*.

The local usage the headman is variously known as *Manjhi*, *Pradhan* or *Musagir*,
but these terms are now used synonymously. The appointment of the *Manjhi* now lies with the
Deputy Commissioner, who must satisfy himself that his nominee will be acceptable to the
villagers.

The first and foremost duty of the *Manjhi* is the collection and punctual payment of the
village revenue to the Government. The duty of keeping irrigation works in repair, maintaining village roads, boundary marks, camping and grazing grounds is the joint responsibility of the Manjhi and the villagers.

Thus we see that the different tribes with their villages of varying size and character are administered by a number of officers each with clearly prescribed duties. The corporate unity of the tribal village is maintained and strengthened by the existence of village officers who not only organize village affairs on a community basis and assist Government in the collection of revenue and in the maintenance of law and order at the village level, but also acts as liaison between the authorities and the people in the village. Tribal custom has endowed these functionaries with influence and authority and even where they have not been grafted on the present administrative machinery, their influence and prestige often exceeds that of the officially recognised head of the village. [Thakur]

Economic aspects of Tribal Life

It is almost obvious that "the tribal communities in India is extremely backward and poverty stricken. It is because a number of communities have continued in the pastoral shifting cultivation stage of economy even till today. As the pressure of population further grew agriculture advanced, the forest receded into the back-ground. With longer land-mass coming under settled cultivation, it was possible to grow a variety of crops in different fields. But, inspite of all, the economic condition of the tribal people cannot be said to be much improved.

Tribal economy is intimately connected with the forests and their economy. The forest regions are, generally, inhabited by the tribal communities who are at one of the earlier stages of economic development compared to other communities in the country. These regions,
therefore, are comparatively underdeveloped though they have rich natural resources.

As the population engaged in collection of minor forest produce is believed to be essentially tribal and dependent mostly on agriculture for major part of its income, the low level of agricultural income makes it furthermore dependent upon the forest produce.

Tribal economy is intimately connected with forest because their way of living is forest based. The relationship has been recognised but has not been articulated in terms of clear policies and programmes. The tribal economy and the forest economy, therefore, have tended to drift apart with adverse implications to both. In some cases forest have suffered tremendous loss, while in others the tribal economy has been shattered. In spite of these, tribal economy, in general, is characterised by the close relation between the economy and the habitat. Not being powerful enough to modify the surroundings, the tribal learn to adapt themselves to it. Primitive society has tried to work out some kind of adjustment between material needs and the potentialities of the environment. This is nowhere more clearly evident than in the adjustment of the tribalness and effort to the forest that we set them. The tribal dependence on forest for food, fuel, house building materials, agricultural implements and minor produce for barter and market exchange also is considerable.

Tribals are partially nomadic and partially settled one. Nomadics dependence on forest is vital. They maintain their little material needs through minor forest products. Semi-settled and semi-nomadic tribe utilises inside forest semi-open land for their shifting or settled cultivation, but the settled tribals who settle generally near the forest utilises minor forest products and they are agricultural also. Besides this they have traditional undeveloped animal husbandry and poultry farms. If land is owned by the community, then animal husbandry is personal, even in
the case of nomadic or semi-nomadic tribal.

Minor forest products which are used by tribal are forest leaves, fire-wood, *mahua* flower, *sabai* grass, fruits, flowers and other ingredients, for self-consumption and also for barter and exchange, *Karujia*, for only exchange, Non-edible and edible *mabua* seed for self-consumption and sale purposes. Besides this there are two rare minor product which are most closely related with the tribal economy. They play and will also play increasing dominant role in future. They are lac and silk cocoons. Lac is a rare forest product by some insect. It is grown on forest trees. Lac is a versatile industrial intermediate goods, a unique natural resin. Besides inner consumption it is an exportable goods also.

Collection of local produce is carried out through *haats, mandis, melas* etc. which are held over more than 500 centres within the tribal region of Bihar. State regulation of market is confined to looking after law, and order and the collection of auction prices. Only Ranchi town has a regulated market. A sizeable number of markets are controlled by local bodies as well.

The tribal region of Bihar exports agricultural commodities, forest produce, minerals, iron and steel, engineering goods, some manufactured articles and transports equipments. Its import consists of food grain, vegetable, oil, sugar, manufactured and processed consumers, goods, and raw materials such as coal, steel alloys, etc.

The tribal region of Bihar is extremely backward with large proportion of the population depending upon backward agriculture and for subsidiary employment on forest produce. The organised sector in industries though well developed in areas of the tribal region of Bihar and
using modem techniques is not integrated with the economy of the region and provides employment to only a small section of local work force. The Industrial sector uses local fuels and mineral resources, but their location in the region does not seem to have affected the economy of the region and provides employment to only a small section of local work force. The industrial sector uses local fuels and mineral resources, but their location in the region does not seem to have affected the economy of the local people in any significant way. As a result, the bulk of population remains unemployed and underemployed with low incomes and dependent on backward agriculture and forest produce. To improve the economic condition of the tribal people, development of agriculture and social forestry need to get the topmost priority. The development of industries is also required which utilize the local produce as Sabai grass, cocoons, wood, leafs, etc. and thereby, increase-employment as well as the demand of the forest produce. Such, a development strategy instead of creating pockets of highly sophisticated industries, will be integrated with the principal resources and sector of the tribal economy and hence will be more effective in raising the standard of living of the tribal population. [Joshi, 55]–3

The Caste System in India

The system of caste is a typical Indian social phenomenon. Although social inequality based on race, colour, region, language and religion exists in different parts of the world, the caste system that prevails in India is a unique one. It is unique in a sense that it is a long existing social institution and has been a centre of various movements, struggles, reformations and the constitutional provisions. The issue of caste is rooted so deep in the Indian psyche that no other issue has attracted the Indian mind over the centuries as the system of caste did.
Use of the term ‘caste’ to characterize social organization among the Hindus dates to the middle of the 16th century. *Casta* (from Latin *castus*, ‘chaste’) in the sense of purity of breed was employed by Portuguese observers to describe the division of Hindu society in western and south western India into socially ranked occupational categories. [New Encyclopedia]  

There is no universally accepted theory about the origin of the caste system in India. The antiquity of this system can be traced back to *Rigveda Samhita* (8-35.16.7; 1.10.8.7). There is a reference to four categories like the *Brahmins* (priests), the *Kshatriyas* (rulers and warriors), the *Vaishyas* (businessmen) and the *Sudras* (artisans and labourers) [Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism]. According to *Bhagavad Gita* these categories are based on *Varnas* and the *Varnas* are decided on the basis of *Guna* and *Karma* [the Geeta, V.13]. Actually the present day caste system is the perverted form of the *Varna* system that existed in ancient time.

The *Varna* system was non-hereditary and mobility from one varna to another was possible. “The son of Shudra can attain the rank of Brahmin, the son of Brahmin can attain the rank of Shudra. Even so with him who is born of a Vaishya or a Kshatriya.” [Manu Smriti X:65] whereas the caste system is endogamous, hereditary and there is a rigidity regarding the mobility from one caste to another.

The caste system is very complicated and rigid. It is characterized by social stratification and social restrictions. It involves thousands of endogamous hereditary groups known as *Jatis* or castes. Within a *Jati* there exists exogamous groups known as *gotras*, the lineage or clan. Some groups like tribals and nomads were considered contagious and untouchables. They
were excluded from the main society and were called Antyajas. They were relegated to carrying out very menial and polluting works related to bodily decay and dirt. They were considered either lowest among the Sudras or outside the Varna system altogether. Each caste is part of a socially based system of interdependence with other groups involving occupational specialization and is linked in complex ways with the networks that spread throughout the country. Many castes are traditionally associated with different occupations such as high ranking Brahmins, middle ranking farmers and artisan groups such as potters, barbers and carpenters and very low ranking ‘untouchables’ like leather workers, butchers and latrine cleaners. There is some correlation between ritual rank on the caste hierarchy and economic prosperity. Members of higher ranking castes tend, on the whole, to be more prosperous than the members of the lower ranking castes. Many lower caste people tend to be poor and socially disadvantaged.

Features of caste system

1. **Hereditary**: The membership of a caste is determined by birth. This caste is hereditary in nature. A person is born in any one of the castes. If parents belong to two different castes, the children are associated with the caste of the father.

2. **Hierarchy**: It refers to the stratification or gradation of the entire society into different levels. All the castes are ranked from higher to lower positions according to their purity and impurity of occupations. Some works are considered pure and some are considered impure. It is like a ladder where the ‘pure’ caste is ranked on the top and ‘impure’ is ranked at the bottom. The occupation of teaching and performance of rituals are considered to be the purest occupation. The Brahmins who are associated with the occupation are
placed at the top and the sweepers are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy.

3. **Endogamy**: The members of a particular caste have to marry within their own caste. Inter-caste marriages are prohibited.

4. **Restrictions on sharing of food**: The caste system imposes restrictions on sharing of food and drink among the members of different castes and subcastes. The members of the higher castes do not take any food or drink from the members of the lower castes. However, the low caste can take everything from the higher castes.

5. **The sense of purity and pollution**: This discrimination is based on the deeds, occupations, language, dress and food habits of the people. For example, the consumption of liquor and non-vegetarian food and working in the occupations like leather craft, disposal of dead animals and garbages are supposed to be impure.

6. **Occupational association**: Each caste is associated with specific occupation. The **brahmins** are associated with priesthood and teaching. **Vaishyas** are associated with trade and commerce and the **Chamars** are associated with leather work and so on. Just like caste, occupations are also hereditary and hence cannot be changed.

7. **Distinction in custom, dress and speech**: Each caste has a distinctive style of life. The customs, dress habits and the manner of their speech differ from each other. The members of higher castes use literary and bookish language, whereas the low caste people use the colloquial language.

8. **Social and religious restrictions**: Religious rituals are invariably the work of the Brahmans. The members of lower caste are debarred from doing any such rituals and
from entering into the temples.

9. **Problem resolving mechanism**: Each caste has its own system to resolve the differences and disputes among its members. The *Caste Panchayats* consist of the senior members of the caste at the village and higher levels.

**Caste and class**

Class differences are based on socio-economic criteria. Unlike caste, class is non-hereditary in nature and mobility is allowed. It allows both exogamy and endogamy. But the caste system is based on myths and rituals and there is little scope for mobility. There are only three major classes – upper, middle and lower classes. But there are innumerable castes.

**Changes in the caste system**

Contrary to the popular image of its changelessness and rigidity, the caste system has been undergoing a lot of change. The speed of change has been exhilarated after independence. Several processes like Sanskritization, westernization, modernization, industrialization, democratic decentralization have brought in various changes. Several movements (discussed later), reformations and constitutional provisions have also played a significant role in bringing change in this social system.

i) **Sanskritization**: This refers to the possibility of any low caste assuming the status of a high caste. In this process, a low caste needs to adapt to the behaviour pattern, style of life and culture of a high caste. The untouchables are not allowed to sanskritize their status. Only middle castes, having touchable status and better economic condition, can claim the higher status. But it is very lengthy and can take place only at the group level. The Jatavs of Agra who were Chamars by caste had claimed the Kshatriya
status in 1940s. Their claim was not acceded since they were untouchables. But this unsuccessful sanskritization led to politicization and upward mobility of the Jatvas.

**ii) Westernization**: This refers to the impact of the Europeans on the living style, education, dress habits and the attitude of the native people. The higher castes who had exposed first to the English education were the first to westernize themselves. Later on, the lower castes also adapted to this process. This process added a certain amount of flexibility to the rigid caste system, particularly in urban areas.

**iii) Modernization**: This is a process of exposing one self to the modern values like scientific outlook, rational attitude, sense of liberty, equality, human rights, perfection, specialization, high social mobility and so on. Exposure to these modern values has made a deep impact on the caste system. It has become more flexible, particularly in urban areas.

**iv) Industrialization and Urbanization**: Industrialization has led to the emergence of industrial towns and cities. In such centres people from different castes, creeds, languages and cultural backgrounds live. They move freely in public places like buses, trains, parks, restaurants, hotels, schools and hospitals. It would not be possible to follow the rules of castes strictly in urban centres.

**v) Democracy**: This modern political system has given equal opportunity to all the people irrespective of their social or economic status. The reservation for the lower castes in employment and at different levels of democratic system has enabled them to empower themselves.
vi) **Politics**: The universal adult franchise has provided freedom for all the people to participate in the process of electioneering. Therefore the castes attract different political parties and the political parties try to convert these castes into vote banks. The lower castes who never had any opportunity to express themselves, today express their feelings through elections and power lobby. Dalits are not only asserting their identities but also are occupying higher positions in corridors of power.

vii) **Economy**: The system of caste and the economic system had a close link in India. The higher castes were the owners of the landed property and the lower castes used to provide services to them. The relationship between the land owners and the landless labourers used to be hereditary. The same relationship used to be transferred to the offspring of both the owners and the labourers. this was the root cause for various socio-economic problems like bonded labour, share cropping and so on. The introduction of market economy and land reforms have changed the system to a considerable extent. However, it continues to prevail in some parts of rural India.

Thus the caste system has undergone many changes due to the above mentioned reasons. This system is assuming new socio-economic dimensions, particularly in urban centres. Still the caste is a dominant factor in marital relations. However, some people are opting inter-caste and inter-religious marriages.

**Untouchability**

Untouchability, as it has been practiced since many centuries, is definitely a blot on the Hindu society. It is a direct product of the caste system. At the outset, it is the inability of the upper caste people to touch a human being of a certain caste or a sub caste. At the deeper
level, it is the attitude of a certain section of the society that is related to a deeper psychological process of thought and belief, translated into various physical acts and practices.

The practice of untouchability is prompted by the spirit of social aggression and belief in the sense of purity and pollution. Those people who were previously known as untouchables, depressed classes and Harijans, are called Dalits today. It applies to the members of those castes who have borne the stigma of untouchability because of the extreme impurity and pollution connected with their traditional occupations. They are sweepers, cleaners and leather tanners.

Dalits were 'outcastes' who fall outside the traditional four-fold caste divisions consisting of the hereditary Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. They were considered impure. Therefore, they were physically and socially excluded and isolated from the rest of the society. They were not permitted to take water from the public wells. Chandalas were treated as outcastes. Not only the touch but even the sight of them was considered impure. The rate of interest was also graded according to the caste of the debtor. The Untouchables had to pay the highest rate of interest. Fines and penalties were also higher for them. They were not allowed to enter the places of worship and were denied the right of participation in religious activities. They could not offer sacrifices and read the sacred texts.

The terms "Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes" (SC/ST) are the official terms used in Indian government documents to identify former untouchables. As per the Census 2001, there are 1208 notified scheduled castes in the country with 16,66,35,700 population which constitute 16.2% of the total population. Uttar Pradesh (35,148,377) has the largest population followed by West Bengal (18,452,555) and Bihar (13,048,600)
Types of untouchability and discriminations

In the name of untouchability the Dalits were subjected to innumerable discriminations at the hands of the dominant castes. Some of them are -

- Prohibited from eating with other caste members.
- Prohibited from marrying other caste members.
- Separate glasses for Dalits in village tea stalls.
- Discriminatory seating arrangements and separate utensils in restaurants.
- Segregation in seating and food arrangements in village functions and festivals.
- Prohibited from entering into village temples.
- Prohibited from wearing sandals or holding umbrellas in front of dominant caste members.
- Devadasi system - the ritualized temple prostitution of Dalit women.
- Prohibited from entering dominant caste homes.
- Prohibited from riding a bicycle inside the village.
- Prohibited from using common village path.
- Separate burial grounds.
- No access to village’s common/public properties and resources (wells, ponds, temples, etc.)
- Segregation (separate seating area) of Dalit children in schools.
- Prohibited from contesting in elections and exercising their right to vote.
- Forced to vote or not to vote for certain candidates during the elections.
- Prohibiting from hoisting the national flag during Independence or Republic days.
- Sub-standard wages.
• Bonded Labor.
• Face social boycotts by dominant castes for refusing to perform their "duties".

Reformations

The untouchability and caste discriminations that prevailed in Indian society have been challenged by various personalities and institutions at different stages of history. The emergence of Buddhism in the 5th century B.C. was in part a response to the increasing stratification of the Hindu society. The followers of Buddhism enjoyed equality irrespective of any class or creed. Buddha also insisted on the use of Pali language (a degenerated form of Sanskrit) in religious discourses. But Buddhism could not be sustained in this country though Indian traders and rulers carried Buddhism all over Asia. It became increasingly brahminized and gradually absorbed back into Hindu culture.

Islam which came to India in the 12th century could get a large number of low caste Hindus (sometimes forcefully) to its fold with the promise of equality. Later with the arrival of the Europeans Indian society had to undergo a lot of change as the low caste people were converted to the new religion in a large scale. All these developments over the centuries and the interactions with the West made many Indian thinkers to introspect. As a result many movements were started to reform the Hindu society. Brahmo Samaj (1828), Arya Samaj (1875), Jyotiba Pule's Movement and Ramakrishna Mission are important among them. They tried to make Hinduism free from the heinous evils like untouchability, Sati, illiteracy and so on.

Later we find a wide based movement against this social evil by Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956).
Mahatma Gandhiji

Mahatma Gandhiji was not only a political leader but also a social reformer. He had launched a war against untouchability with every means at his disposal. He had used the word *Asprashya* for the untouchables in the Gujarathi journal “Navajivan”. The correspondents complained against it and suggested him to use the word *Harijan* which means ‘the man of God’. Gandhiji said, “I consider untouchability to be a heinous crime against humanity. It is not a sign of self restraint, but an arrogant assumption of superiority”. [Young India]

Gandhiji’s historic fast of September 20-26, 1932 in the Yarvada jail near Puna was a great onslaught on untouchability. As a part of their divide-and-conquer tactic, the British were planning to establish a separate electorate for the untouchables. In his statement of protest Gandhiji declared, “We do not want on our register and on our census untouchables classified as a separate class... I would rather see the death of Hinduism rather than untouchability living. I will bargain away the rights of the Harijans for the kingdom of the whole world. I cannot possibly tolerate what is in store for Hinduism if there are two divisions set up in every village”. He continued to say, “What I want, what I am living for and what I should delight in dying for, is the eradication of untouchability root and branch”. [Linda de Hoyos]

Later, on November 7, 1933 Gandhiji began the ‘Harijan tour’. During next nine months Gandhiji and his wife Kasturbai travelled 12504 miles beginning from his headquarters at Wardha and ending at the holiest of the Hindu pilgrimage centres, Varanasi. The purpose of the tour was to wake up the Hindu spirit against untouchability, to lead untouchables into the temples wherever possible and to raise funds for the cause of the untouchables. He used to address thousands of people each day. His words were so effective that wherever he went the
women contributed their jewelry, children their penny-pieces and the businessmen their profits. Even in the state of Bihar where the people were just hit by earthquake, he could raise funds on a large scale. Gandhiji’s relentless fight against untouchability went on inspite of the organized resistance from some orthodox Hindus. He swept, he cleaned latrines and walked from place to place in bare foot.

As a result of his struggle, a wind of change started blowing over the Hindu society. The eradication of untouchability was thereby incorporated as a fundamental principle of the Congress party’s fight for independence. Hindus began to open the doors of temples for untouchables.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956)

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar played a very significant role in the upliftment of the suppressed classes. His war against the caste system, untouchability and other social discriminations is a landmark in the modern Indian history. He is the first great revolutionary leader who rose for the first time from among the oppressed people during last two thousand years of their slavery. He started not only a war against Hindu social order but also strived hard to bring about a mental revolution unprecedented in the history of Hinduism, to purify and revolutionalize Hinduism, to revitalize Hindu society and to save it from decadence and degradation. Being born in the untouchable Mahar caste he had to undergo bitter and inhuman experiences. He was a victim of social discrimination since his childhood. The condition did not change even after getting higher education and doctoral degrees from the American and the British universities. Later he made it a mission of his life to fight for the rights of the Untouchables and the Depressed Classes. He fought against untouchability:
a) through his writings and speeches.

b) through various organizations and movements.

c) Through the constitutional provisions.

a) Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a renowned scholar and a prolific writer. He wrote number of books and articles and started papers where he expressed his views on the problem of untouchability and the caste system in a vehement manner. His writings go a long way in his fight against untouchability. His writings are:

1. *Cast in India* (1919) – an article.
6. *Thoughts on Pakistan* (1940)
7. *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah* (1943)
8. *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables* (1945)
9. *Who were the Shudras ?* (1946)
10. *The Untouchables* (1948)
11. *Buddha and Karl Marx* (1951)
13. *Revolution and Counter Revolution in India* (1951)
b) Apart from writing books, articles and publishing papers, Ambedkar started various organizations and organized various movements for the upliftment of the Untouchables. He attended various conferences and meetings all over the country and created awareness among the people about the problem of untouchability and the caste system.

1) Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha (1924): Ambedkar founded it in Bombay with the intention of promoting the spread of education and culture among the Depressed Classes and to advance and improve their economic condition.

2) Organized a movement over the Chowdar Tank issue and the issue of temple entry at Mahad in Maharashtra in 1924 (the upper caste Hindus did not allow the untouchables to use water from the tank and enter the Veereshwar temple at Mahad).

3) Organized a strike by the textile workers in Bombay against the practice of caste discriminations that was practiced in the mills (1924).

4) Attended Ratnagiri District Conference of the Depressed Classes at Chiplum (1929).

5) He supported the Poona Satyagraha (1930) by the Depressed Class leaders of Poona to establish their right of worshipping the deity in the famous Parvati temple in Poona.

6) Organized the Temple Entry Movement at Nasik (1930).

7) He presided over the Depressed Classes Congress at Nagpur (1930).

8) Attended Round Table Conference at London (1930-1931).
9) War with Gandhi over the issue of separate electorate for the untouchables.


11) Addressed the Maharashtra Untouchable Youths' Conference (1936).

12) Addressed the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal at Lahore (1936).

13) Addressed the Sikh Mission's conference (1936).


15) Presided over Sholapur District conference of the Depressed Classes (1937).

16) Presided over a conference of the Depressed Classes at Kankavli (Konkan District) in 1938.

17) Addressed the All India Depressed Classes conference at Nagpur. (1942)

18) Addressed the conference of the Scheduled Castes Federation at Mammad (1945).


20) Founded Peoples Education Society at Bombay (1946).

21) President of Bombay Municipal Kamgar Sangh.

c) Apart from organizing various movements, conferences and meetings against untouchability, Ambedkar made the best use of his positions in the corridors of power.

1) Ambedkar was nominated to the Bombay Legislative Council in 1927. He used every opportunity in the Bombay Legislative Council for the upliftment of the Depressed Classes.

2) Ambedkar submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission demanding joint electorates with reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes.

3) He was made the member of the Constituent Assembly in 1946. He was also
made the Chairman of the Draft Committee of the Constitution. Due to his continuous efforts constituent assembly declared on April 29, 1947 to the world “Untouchability in any form is abolished and the imposition of any disability on that account shall be an offence”. On November 29, 1948 Constituent Assembly adopted Article 11 declaring abolition of Untouchability. Ambedkar submitted the Draft Constitution to the Constituent Assembly on November 4, 1948. After independence he was made the Union Minister for Law (1948-1951). After resigning from the Union Cabinet, he functioned as a leader of the opposition.

Thus, Ambedkar made all out efforts to bring a new lease of life to the untouchables and other depressed sections of the Indian society. He used all his positions, power and experiences toward this single goal of establishing a society based on equality and human dignity. Though he was able to achieve success to some extent, could not materialize his dream completely. He had to face a lot of resistance and opposition from the vested interests at every level. Disappointed by the non-cooperation by some sections of the society in his effort to reform Hinduism, he had declared in a conference at Yeola in 1935 that he would not die a Hindu. His struggle against untouchability and the caste discrimination reached its culmination in his conversion to Buddhism along with lakhs of his followers in 1956.

Ambedkar has expressed his views on religion, caste system, untouchability and other issues on different occasions. Addressing the conference of the Mahar community at Dadar, Bombay on 30 and 31 May, 1936 he said:

“Religion is for man and not man for religion... the religion that does not recognize you as human beings, or give you water to drink, or allow you to enter temples is not worthy
to be called a religion. The religion that forbids you to receive education and comes in the way of your material advancement is not worthy of the appellation ‘religion’ ... The religion that does not teach its followers to show humanity in dealing with its co-religionists is nothing but a display of force. The religion that asks its adherents to suffer the touch of animals but not the touch of human beings is not a religion but a mockery”.

[Keer, 275]

In an article in “Mook Nayak” in 1920 Ambedkar stated, “Swaraj wherein there were no fundamental rights guaranteed for the depressed classes, would not be a swaraj to them. It would be a new slavery to them.” [Keer, 42]

In one of his articles, published in the fortnightly Marathi paper “Bahishkrit Bharat” on April 3, 1927, Ambedkar urged the depressed classes to act in as forcible a way as to let the caste Hindus know that to observe untouchability was a risk, as dangerous as to bear live coals on their tongues.

Addressing thousands of women from the depressed classes at Mahad, Maharashtra on November 27, 1927 Ambedkar advised them:

“Never regard yourself as untouchables. Live a clean life. Dress yourselves like the touchable ladies. Never mind if your dress is full of patches, but see that it is clean... Attend more to the cultivation of the mind and the spirit of self help... But do not feed in any case your spouse and sons if they are drunkards. Send your children to schools. Education is as necessary for females as it is for males. If you know how to read and write, there would be much progress. As you are, so
your children will be. Mould their lives in a virtuous way, for sons should be such as would make a mark in this world”.

[Keer, 104]

He called upon the Depressed Classes to cleanse their evil habits and improve their bad ways of living. They should live in such a manner as to be fit for respect and friendship. During his visit to London in order to attend the Round Table Conference in 1930, he wrote articles to the foreign journals, issued statements to the foreign press and addressed various meetings with the intention of drawing the attention of the world for the cause of the untouchables in India. His participation in the Round Table Conference certainly helped for the emergence of the Depressed Classes in the political picture of India, and more important was the brilliant and moving exposition of their insufferable conditions by him before the world. He firmly believed that if the untouchables made progress in the economic, educational and political fields, temple entry would follow automatically. Their salvation lies in their social elevation and political empowerment. He says, “The untouchability has ruined the untouchables, the Hindus and ultimately the nation as well” [Keer, 92]. He believed that the outcaste is a byproduct of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of caste system. Therefore he strived hard to destroy the caste system and to reconstruct the Indian social order. He worked to the last breath of his life for the improvement of the lives of the untouchables.

Both the Central and State Governments have taken several measures to protect their life, property and culture and to protect them from the exploitation by the landlords and money lenders. The Government has passed many laws to this effect and has introduced various projects for their welfare. The following are some of them:-
3) Scheduled Casts and Schedule Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989
5) Reservation in jobs guaranteed in the article 335 and 16(4) of the Indian Constitution.
6) Article 339 of the Constitution empowers the President to appoint a commission for the welfare of the Scheduled Tribes.
8) Modified Draft National Policy for relocation and rehabilitation.
9) Tribal Development Agencies have been established.
10) Various education facilities provided under National policy on education – 1986.

There are many regulations:-
1) The Debt Bondage Abolition Regulation 1946 (AP)
2) Money Lenders Regulation 1950 (Orissa)
3) Scheduled Areas (Allotment and Transfer of Land) Regulation, 1954 (MP)
4) Immovable Property (ST) Regulation 1965 (Orissa)

Various projects have been introduced.
1) Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP),
2) Jawahar Rozgar Yojna
3) Integrated Tribal Development Programme (ITDP)
4) Rural Employment Guarantee Programme,

5) Integrated Child Development Schemes.

**The Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989**

The Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA) is a tacit acknowledgement by the Indian government that caste relations are defined by violence, both incidental and systemic. In 1989, the Government of India passed the Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA), which clarified specific crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (the Dalits) as “atrocities,” and created strategies and punishments to counter these acts. The purpose of the Act was to curb and punish violence against Dalits. Firstly, it clarified what the atrocities were: both particular incidents of harm and humiliation, such as the forced consumption of noxious substances, and systemic violence still faced by many Dalits, especially in rural areas. Such systemic violence includes forced labor, denial of access to water and other public amenities, and sexual abuse of Dalit women. Secondly, the Act created Special Courts to try cases registered under the POA. Thirdly, the Act called on states with high levels of caste violence (said to be “atrocity-prone”) to appoint qualified officers to monitor and maintain law and order. The POA gave legal redress to Dalits, but only two states have created separate Special Courts in accordance with the law. In practice the Act has suffered from a near-complete failure in implementation. Policemen have displayed a consistent unwillingness to register offenses under the act. This reluctance stems partially from ignorance and also from peer protection.

There are many more facilities provided by the Central and the State Governments to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Mahashweta Devi does not deny this fact. But
in her writings she tries to show how these rules, regulations, plans and projects fail to reach
the people they are meant for. As a result, the problems of these people continue to exist.

**Prevalence of Untouchability Practices and Discrimination**

Inspite of various movements, reforms and constitutional provisions the condition of
the untouchables at the village level continued to be miserable. The following information clearly
demonstrates that the inhuman and illegal practice of untouchability is still commonplace in
contemporary India.

In as many as 38% of government schools, Dalit children are made to sit separately
while eating. In 20 percent schools, Dalits children are not even permitted to drink water from
the same source.

A shocking 27.6% of Dalits were prevented from entering police stations and 25.7%
from entering ration shops. 33% of public health workers refused to visit Dalit homes, and
23.5% of Dalits still do not get letters delivered in their homes. Segregated seating for Dalits
was found in 30.8% of self-help groups and cooperatives, and 29.6% of panchayat offices. In
14.4% of villages, Dalits were not permitted even to enter the panchayat building. In 12% of
villages surveyed, Dalits were denied access to polling booths, or forced to form a separate
line.

In 48.4% of surveyed villages, Dalits were denied access to common water sources.
In 35.8%, Dalits were denied entry into village shops. They had to wait at some distance from
the shop, the shopkeepers kept the goods they bought on the ground, and accepted their
money similarly without direct contact. In teashops, again in about one-third of the villages,
Dalits were denied seating and had to use separate cups.

In as many as 73% of the villages, Dalits were not permitted to enter non-Dalit homes, and in 70% of villages non-Dalits would not eat together with Dalits.

In more than 47% villages, bans operated on wedding processions on public (arrogated as upper-caste) roads. In 10 to 20% of villages, Dalits were not allowed even to wear clean, bright or fashionable clothes or sunglasses. They could not ride their bicycles, unfurl their umbrellas, wear sandals on public roads, smoke or even stand without head bowed.

Restrictions on temple entry by Dalits average as high as 64%, ranging from 47% in UP to 94% in Karnataka. In 48.9% of the surveyed villages, Dalits were barred from access to cremation grounds.

In 25% of the villages, Dalits were paid lower wages than other workers. They were also subjected to much longer working hours, delayed wages, verbal and even physical abuse, not just in ‘feudal’ states like Bihar but also notably in Punjab. In 37% of the villages, Dalit workers were paid wages from a distance, to avoid physical contact.

In 35% of villages, Dalit producers were barred from selling their produce in local markets. Instead they were forced to sell in the anonymity of distant urban markets where caste identities blur, imposing additional burdens of costs and time, and reducing their profit margin and competitiveness. [www.wikipedia.com]²²

Mahashweta Devi says, “Postcolonial India has seen the abolition of princely regimes but has ironically multiplied the number of unofficial, uncrowned princes”(Singh 32)²². Apart
from the tribal and the marginalized, all those who belong to the bottom of India’s caste hierarchy remain the focal point of her writing. With her intimate knowledge of what happens at the ground level, she depicts their life with brutal accuracy, savagely exposing the mechanics of exploitation and oppression by the dominant sections of the society with the active connivance of the politicians, the police and the administration. She exposes the process through which the resources meant for the development of the poor evaporate even before they ‘trickle down’ to them. She also shows how the system has a vested interest in keeping the poor in abject poverty virtually turning them into the status of beggars deprived of their very birth right. The genuine concern for the oppressed takes her far beyond all the narrow political and ideological considerations. In the preface to *Bashai Tudu* (1978) she writes:

“I will not avail to look for any definite politics in my writing. Sensitive persons committed to the cause of the exploited and the persecuted stand at the centre of my works ... Life is not arithmetic, and man is not made for the game of politics. I believe that it should be the object of every kind of politics to fulfil man’s craving to live with all his rights intact. I do not believe that any politics confined to promoting a party’s interests can replace the present social system. . . All parties, those to the Left and those to the Right alike, have failed to keep their promises to the common people.” *(Devi XX)*

Mahaswetha Devi’s inclination for history in general and the tribal history in particular can be felt while going through her works and this aspect will be taken up for discussion in detail in the following chapter. Her sincere documentation of tribal history and
culture laid the foundation for her literary creativity. Her works are the recreation of the past and documentation of the present. She deviates from the mainstream historical research and tries to read the ‘empty space’ between the two written lines. She admits, “The folk material and the common people’s version of events are assets to literature. In using them - and I do not use them as decoration - I have found my salvation.”(Seminar, 16)55

The deep sense of deprivation and alienation which lead to violent eruptions at different historical stages by the tribal population is the main area of interest for Mahaswetha Devi. Her empirical research into oral history as it lives in the cultures and memories of tribal communities is the first of its kind. She regrets that the present day rulers, like their predecessors (the British colonialists), did nothing concrete to protect and preserve the tribal culture from the outside onslaughts.

In her work *Tribal Activism* (1998), Shachi Arya, a scholar from Rajasthan, rightly points out:

“Mahaswetha Devi with her pen has profoundly and tenderly portrayed the great saga of the history of India’s sylvan culture along with the misery and destitution, victories and defeats, immense patience, indomitable spirit and the aesthetic contours and specifics of the tribals. The tribals, their history and their life have become an integral part of her life. Her love for these, and intense anger against their exploitation has made her world-view distinguished and lent a humanistic aura to her activism.”(67)56

Mahaswetha Devi’s association with various tribal organizations and various other organizations related to other oppressed people, her activist writings in various journals and periodicals, the editing of *Bortika (The Torch)* the Bengali quarterly and such activities will be
discussed in detail in the ensuing chapters. All these activities go a long way in her ‘mission’ of seeking justice for the deprived people. With her commitment to the cause of the society, by reducing the void between ideology and life, between words and deeds and by providing an outlet to the suppressed voices, she has once again proved that pen can achieve what a sward cannot. She has shown the world that literature not only mirrors life but also hammers it and shapes it. She is one of a few writers who used her literary creativity as a weapon against wide ranging forces of exploitation and oppression. The well-known critic E. Satyanarayana aptly comments:

“What ensures her a place in the history of modern Indian literature is her bringing a passionate commitment and a sense of history to her exposure of injustice and exploitation. Disgusted with the middle-class concerns of contemporary writers, Mahaswetha Devi made use of her creative energy to give an artistic expression to the harsh realities of poverty, exploitation and death in the modern society.”(Dhawan 185)

* * *

Mahaswetha Devi was born on 14th January 1926 at Dhaka in a middle class culturally rich Bengali family. Her father Manish Chandra Ghathak (1908-1979) was also a creative writer, translator and a social worker. Most of her uncles and aunts were prominent artists, journalists, actors and filmmakers. After attending Eden Montessori School in Dhaka for some time, she came over to West Bengal and went to school at Midnapore and Calcutta. She had her high school and B.A Honors degree from Tagor’s Shantiniketan. Her family settled down in West Bengal after the partition of India in 1947. Thus, as Resil B. Mojares, the biographer of Mahashweta Devi, finds out, she grew up in the midst of large family and
intellectually stimulating atmosphere where every one read and read and read and there was no bar on her reading. She was exposed to various Western and Indian classics at the very young age.

At the age of 21 in 1947, Mahaswetha Devi married Bijjan Bhattacharya, a playwright and one of the founding members of the Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA-1942). He was also a member of Communist Party of India. He was known for his play Navanna (New Rice-1945) which is said to have laid the foundation for the progressive writing in Bengali. They had a male child, Nabarun, who would become a poet, actor and a novelist later on. It was a time when Mahaswetha's life was passing through a turbulent phase. The Communists and their sympathizers were under strict scrutiny of the Government. Being a communist, Bijjan could not get any job. In the fifties it was hard to find job to any one connected with communist families. Mahaswetha Devi had to struggle hard to support and sustain the family. She sold dye powders and even became involved in a friend's failed venture to supply thousands of monkeys to research laboratories in the United States. She also worked as a teacher in Puddupukur Girls' school (1948-49) and did private tutoring. Later, she got an employment as an Upper Division Clerk in the regional office of the Deputy Accountant General of Post and Telegraph (1949-50). But she had to lose the job, on being accused of a Communist.

Consequent upon her termination she had no option but to resume giving private tuitions and began to channelise her energies to writing. She started writing for Sachitra Bharat, a Bengali Weekly under the pen name 'Sumitra Devi', producing light fictions for children. She came to be recognized as a writer of importance by 1952-53. But the publication of her first
serious work, *Jhansi ki Rani* (1956) ensured her a place of pride among Bengali writers. It was quickly followed by other works. *Nati* (1957) *Madhurey Madhur* (1958), *Etotuku Asha* (1959), *Yamuna ki tir* (1958) and *Premtara* (1959). Though she was writing, impelled by the need to earn money for the family, her early works display her natural appetite for chronicling social realities that would mark her body of fictions.

Mahaswetha Devi’s marriage with Bijjon broke down in 1962. As a result, she divorced him leaving her 14-year-old son with his father. After undergoing a terrible spell of depression for some time, she once again married another gentleman, Asit Gupta, who too was a writer. The year 1976 marked the end of this relationship. She considered the second marriage as one of the biggest blunders of her life. But she had a wholehearted expression for Bijjon Bhattacharya, she says:

“I had to struggle along with Bijjon in those poverty-stricken days. I am grateful to Bijjon — should I have not married him, I would not have had the experience of this other side of life. I would never have learned that there is no end of struggle. Coming from an affluent, liberal, humanitarian, educated family, I could not have chosen voluntarily a life, full of struggles.” (*Indian Literature* 170)

In 1963 she got her Master’s degree in English from the Calcutta University and joined Bijoygarh Jyothish Roy College as a lecturer in 1964 and worked there till she resigned in 1984. She began to focus her energy on the creative writings, activism and activist writings. Her visit to Palamau, a remote and the most backward district of Bihar, which she calls ‘a
mirror of tribal India', was a landmark that brought a turning point in her life. This is reflected in her novels like *Kavi Bandyoghoti Gayiner Jivan O Mrithyu* (The Life and Death of Poet Banyoghoti Gayin, 1966), *Andha Ramanik* (Jewel in Darkness 1966). She came to occupy a prime place in the Hindi heartland with the publication of *Hazar Chowrashir Ma* (1974) (Mother of 1084), *Agnigarbha* (1978), *Bish-Ekush* (1986), *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* (1981), *Aranyer Adhikar* (1976), *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (1979), *Breast Stories* and innumerable other works started seeing light of day year after year which brought her both name and fame. About fifty novels, more than a hundred stories, essays and journalistic writings came out of her ‘mighty pen’ and made Mahasweta Devi a ‘unique’ personality both inside and outside the country. Her works have been translated into Hindi, Assamee, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Panjabi, Gujarathi, the tribal languages like Ho and Santhali, the foreign languages like Italian, Japanese, Spanish, French and English.

She had been contributing regularly to *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Frontier*, *Business Standard*, *Seminar* and she was in touch with Bengali newspapers – *Jugantar*, *Dainik Basumati*, *Bartaman*, *Aajkal*. In 1980, she started editing a Bengali quarterly *Bortika* (Torch). She took charge of this obscure literary periodical after the death of her father and she gave it an entirely different shape. The agricultural labourers, small peasants, tribal groups, rickshaw pullers and the workers in unorganized sectors, who usually remain invisible even to the scholars of subaltern studies, started entering the pages of *Bortika*, the first significant effort in alternative literature in Bengali.

Every contribution of Mahasweta Devi has not gone without being awarded or recognized. There is a long list of awards and honours that came her way during the last fifty
years – Sahitya Akademi Award for *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977) in 1979, Padmashri in 1986 for her service to the tribals, the Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay Bhuwanmohini and Jagattarini Gold Medals of Calcutta University, Amrita Puraskar, Magsaysay Award (1996), Jnanpith (1996), Honorary Doctorate from Ravindra Bharathi University, Calcutta (1996), Indira Gandhi National Integration Award (2005), Padmabhushan Award (2006).

She has utilized everything that has come in the form of awards and honours for the welfare of the poor and the helpless. She has founded some organizations and is actively associated with many such grassroot organizations as a part of her activism. She has founded *Paschim Banga Keria Sabar Kalyan Samiti* with the help of other activists in 1983 and *Adim Jaati Aikya Parishad* (1986), a forum of thirty-eight tribal groups of West Bengal, was started by her. She instituted Shabara Mela in 1990. She has been associated with Behrampur Municipal Sweepers' Association and many other organizations of the Lodha Sabar denotified tribes, Mundas, Scheduled Castes, Bonded Labourers and other oppressed people.

Mahasweta Devi had the privilege of Guest lecturing at several Universities in France, Germany, Britain and United States of America and represented India in several International events like *Summit on the Advancement of the Rural Women in the Third World* held in Geneva, (1992) *Indo-French Cultural Exchange Programme* (2003), Inauguration of *Frankfort Book Fair* (2006) and so on.

Mahasweta Devi is a writer and an activist with a difference. She leaves a lasting impact on whatever she does. Her uniqueness as a writer and activist is that, as the renowned
scholar Shachi Arya puts it, “She lives what she writes, and writes what she lives – a rare synthesis of word and action.”(66)\(^9\)

She does not remain a distant observer. But lives with the people she writes about, participates in their struggles and gives voice to their lives in her writings. Ganesh N. Devy writes, “Her best speech is reserved for those to whom no one has spoken”(23)\(^6\) and she could win their trust and they call her didi (elder sister) with great affection. She in turn, calls them ‘her own’ people. Mahasweta Devi is virtually living upto what Premchand had expected of a writer to be a torchbearer leading the society. She remains a hope for the hopeless, a voice for the voiceless and the help for the helpless. She has become ‘one-person resource centre’ for the people in distress who throng her seeking her help, mostly from remote rural areas. She gives her patient listening to their countless problems and gives suitable advice. She is always accessible to them. She brings their grievances to the attention of the persons concerned. Every year she writes several hundred letters to the Government and to the dailies and periodicals documenting abuses and excesses by the police, landlords and politicians. The people in power are not comfortable with her who is not afraid of taking sides without taking the line of any political party. Yet, at personal level she is able to evoke a prompt response, if not always action, from the authorities at all levels, including ministers. Shachi Arya observes:

“What is heartening is the fact that neither age nor her frail body, nor partial handicap that she is a woman, deters Mahasweta from waging a relentless battle for a better India. She has certainly added a new and bright dimension to the concept of literature activism
and also offered inspiration to those who clamour for an exploitation-free society where respect for human dignity is the key-phrase.”(71)  

The octogenarian Mahasweta Devi who tells that she is just 84 and would like to live another sixteen years, is leading a humble life in a rented apartment at the Golf Green area in the city of Kolkata, reacting in her own way to all the incidents and issues like Shantinikethan, Singur, Nandigram, Tabasi Mallik, SEZ and so on. What she tells in her inaugural speech of Frankfort Book Fair in Germany in 2006, throws light on the objectives before her. She remarks:

“I claim elsewhere to have always written about the ‘culture of the downtrodden’. How tall or short or true or false is this claim? The more I think and write and think some more, the harder it gets to arrive at a definition. I hesitate, I falter, I cling to the belief that for any culture as old and ancient as ours to have survived over time and in time, there could only be one basic common and acceptable core thought: humaneness. To accept each other’s right to be human with dignity. This then is my fight. My dream. In my life and in my literature.” I hesitate, I falter, I cling to the belief that for any culture as old and ancient as ours to have survived over time and in time, there could only be one basic common and acceptable core thought: humaneness. To accept each other’s right to be human with dignity. This then is my fight. My dream. In my life and in my literature.”(Devi 12)
END NOTES


3. Hudson, 14.


5. Hudson, 18.


9. Ghosh 114


11. Naik 14

12. Ghosh 166

13. Naik 58


15. Bandyopadhyay 364

16. Bandyopadhyay 369

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40. Thakur, 24

41. Thakur, 17

42. Thakur, 20


49. Keer, 42

50. Keer, 104

51. Keer, 20
52. *Who are Dalits? What is Untouchability?* http://www.ncdhr.org.in/ncdhr/general-info.misc.pages/wadwill

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54. Devi, *Bashai Tudu*, XX.


59. Arya 66.


61. Arya 71.