Chapter I

Major Works of Mahashweta Devi:

The Present of the Past

"The novel was a weapon, not in the crude sense of being a political pamphlet, but in the period of its birth and first healthy growth. It was the weapon by which the best, most imaginative representatives of the bourgeoisie examined the new man and woman and the society in which they live."

— Ralph Fox

The Novel And The People
CHAPTER - I

MAJOR WORKS OF MAHASHWETA DEVI:

The Present of the Past

Mahashweta Devi, who writes mainly in her mother tongue, Bengali, has written over 175 books, of which a considerable number till date remain unpublished. The most significant part of her published works that include novels, novellas, collections of short stories, journalistic writings and plays, have been brought out in English. Since, this thesis is confined only to those works of Mahashweta Devi that are available in English, an attempt is made in this chapter to analyse her major works which include her historical writings and fictional works. The historical writings are taken up for discussion in Part -I of this chapter and fictional works are analysed in Part - II.

PART -- I

HISTORICAL WRITINGS

‘History’ has been haunting the creative imagination of man from the ancient times to the present. Almost all the major writers have tried their best to bring back the historical experiences to the contemporary situation. The Indian concept of history and the literary historical writings have been taking their shape vis-à-vis the European concept for the last two centuries. The impact of the colonial rule was a dominant factor in shaping the Indian concept of history. The Indian mind is dominated by the mythic structure and their ‘mythical imagination’ is sustained by a perception of the past or the racial memory. Whereas, the ‘historical imagination’ of the Europeans is supported by facts and evidences (Das 94). The pushing and pulling between these two concepts are evident in the Colonial and the Post-Colonial Indian context. What really distinguished the Indian historical literature
was the conscious attempt to reconstruct the past according to the contemporary needs under
the compulsion of the colonial rule. The sudden exposure to the European concept created
tension within the Indian psyche which manifested itself very clearly in historical fictions and
plays.

The rise of historical fictions and plays in Indian languages was almost simultaneous
with that of the writings of Indian history itself. The findings of many eminent Indian historians
on Buddha, Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, Akbar, Aurangzeb, Shivaji and others fascinated
the Indian imagination. The contribution of Indian regional languages to historical researches is
very significant. Their emphasis upon the indigenous historical sources and archival materials
clearly distinguishes them from the English historical researches. Bengali and Marathi languages
pioneered the work of historical research among the regional languages.

Like Bengali scholars, the Bengali writers too showed greater interest in history since
nineteenth century. Their search for Bengali heroes was coincided with their interest in histories
of other regions of the country, particularly those of Rajasthan and Maharashtra. Rakhaldas
Bandyopadyay's novels like Sasanka (1914), Dharmapala (1915), Lufta Mayukh and
Hariprasad Shastri's Bener Meye (1917) are the worth mentioning works based on history.
Even Tagore wrote several essays related to history in the magazine Atihasik Citra. Unlike
historians who believe in facts and events, the writers concern is with the human problems and
the emotional tensions of the persons.

'History' for a common man is nothing but the story of countries and civilizations and
rulers. It is also considered a record of wars and victories, growth and decline of empires and
emperors. That the power and sovereignty regulate the creation of 'history' is a common
factor. When history becomes a ‘tool’ in the hands of the rich and the powerful, naturally the 
poor and the weak are ‘marginalized’. They are left at the receiving end. But the insatiable 
desire to exist and to move on among the ‘marginalized’ always tries to express itself. That is 
how the writers from the Third World, started creating stories based on their world and 
civilizations which remained ‘dark’ and unknown to the outer world until recently. This is a 
natural reaction and resistance to the oppression and domination of the Western world over 
other nations, cultures and civilizations.

Likewise, ‘history’ is a dominant factor in the works of Mahashweta Devi. For her, 
‘history’ is not merely a record of incidents in the past that are dead and gone. But it is like a 
river flowing from the past to the future through the living present. It is not only the record of 
the rise and fall of the empires and the battles waged by the Kings and Monarchs but also the 
struggles of the common people, particularly the tribals and the marginalized for their rights and 
existence, which remained unknown to and covered from the outer view. Mahashweta Devi 
says:

“When you say history, I think the history of Indian movement has 
not been written till date. The role played by the peasant and tribal 
movements, tribal revolutions has not been recognized. See 
Birsa’s movement, Sidhu-Knha’s movement and so many other’s which 
preceded these.”(Arya 196)

Mahashweta Devi, through her fictional narratives and stories, tries to establish two 
important facts: continuity of the unbroken tribal history and the importance of the oral tradition 
in writing history. “History fascinates me” (Sharma 171) says Mahashweta Devi. Out of her 
‘fascination’, she goes for an in-depth study of various historical data, statistics, government 
gazetteers and various laws regarding tribals and human rights. Her long association with the
tribal life has revealed her their hunger for knowing their past, their suffering and their roots.
The simple tribals used to wonder at Mahashweta Devi’s deep knowledge of their history.
Regarding this she comments, “I know the knowledge of their history fills them with ethnic and racial pride.” (Arya 196)

It was a pity that in independent India, no serious attempts were made to document the tribal theme which is very interesting and compelling. The tribals were unable to document their own life. Hence, Mahashweta Devi filled that vacuum by taking up the task of documentation and compilation. Her historical writings include *The Queen of Jhansi* (1956), *Aranyer Adhikar* (1976), *Titu Mir* (2000), *Nati* (1957), *Andhar Manik* (1966), *Vibek Biday Pola, Kabi Bandyoghati Gainer Jiban O Mrityu* (1966). *The Queen of Jhansi* (1956) and *Aranyer Adhikar* (*Birsa Munda*) (1976) are two early works of Mahashweta Devi where she successfully projects her ‘perception’ of history. The last four are not available in English version. *Aranyer Adhikar* is available in Kannada translation. The first three works are analysed in this thesis. The *Queen of Jhansi* and *Aranyer Adhikar* are discussed in Part I, whereas *Titu Mir* is analysed in the following chapter.

**THE QUEEN OF JHANSI (1956)**

Apart from various personalities and incidents, Queen of Jhansi and the 1857 uprising which Savarkar hailed as the *First War of Independence*, became recurring features in Indian literature. The Queen of Jhansi reappears from the past not only as a symbol of pride and patriotism but also as the power represented by women coinciding with Gandhi’s call to women to participate in the freedom movement. The Malayali poem "Lakshmi Bayi Satakam" (1908), the Gujarati Novel *Jhansi Ni Rani* (1921) by Krishna Prasad L. Bhatt, the Marathi poem "Jhansici Samgramadwata Rani Lakshmi" (1925), the Bengali play *Jhansir Rani* (1942) by
Manilal Bandyopadhay, the Hindi Novel *Jhansi Ki Rani* (1948) by Vrindavanlal Varma which was later dramatized in 1956 and a moving poem "Jhansi Rani" (1953) by Vishwanatha Satyanarayana show the fascination of the Indian writers for the Queen. Subhas Chandra Bose had raised the "Rani Jhansi Brigade" as a part of his Indian National Army. The image of Lakshmi Bai is frequently associated with the image of the warrior Goddess, Durga.

Against this background *The Queen of Jhansi* by Mahashweta Devi, who has her own perspective of history to project, assumes significance. It is the first full-length book of Mahashweta Devi. It was first published serially in the magazine *Desh* and later as a book in 1956. Her chance reading of Savarkar’s book *Eighteen Fifty Seven* (1907) kindled a great curiosity in her about this unique Queen of the Indian history. This maiden work of Mahashweta Devi ensured her a prominent place among the Bengali writers. Her aim of writing about the Queen of Jhansi and Birsa Munda, as she opines is “to provide popular access to (then) neglected chapters of Indian history.” (Devi, *The Book*, X)⁴

The motivation for writing this remarkable work that ‘came from within’ was so strong and compelling in Mahashweta Devi that a lot of field work, documentation, compilation and labourious research went into the making of this work. This is how she compiled the materials:

“I visited all the places the Rani had been to and collected plenty of oral material. I discovered that the oral tradition is a very valuable source of history. What struck me about my subject was her youth. She had led an uprising in central India – it was really a people’s uprising. She was non-communal. Her closest soldiers were Pathans and Afghans. I thought that was a very striking fact.” (Sharma 166-167)⁵
It was a formative period of Mahashweta Devi's writing career. The pull of the Queen was so strong in her she had written 400 pages on the Queen with the help of data she collected from the books in various libraries. But she was not happy with that. So she tore all the 400 pages and walked out through various places of central India associated with the Queen, leaving her four-year-old child behind at home. She met number of people and visited places in Bundelkhand, Jhansi, Gwalior, Ahmadabad and Bombay. She met certain people who, to her surprise, believed that the Queen was still living and had number of legends in the form of tales and songs, the documentation of which provided her a rich source. At the same time she also met various prominent historians like G.C. Thambe, Praful Gupta, Suren Sen, R.C. Majumdar and others without whose help this work would not have been possible.

She says, “Those who usurped the throne also controlled the pen” (Devi, Queen, XI)⁶ All the vital records regarding 1857 uprising were systematically destroyed and distorted by the British and no important monument in the name of the Queen is left. Mahashweta Devi observes:

“However, the truth of history does not get lost so easily. I found evidence in folk songs, rhymes, ballads, and in various popular stories, of how local people viewed the rebellion in the places where it happened. There are many locals in Jhansi, who, to this day, deny that the Queen died. The Queen is still alive today through local ballads and sayings. Villagers regularly recall the Queen’s story with reverence” (Devi, Queen, X)⁷

The Queen of Jhansi (1956) is referred to by many as a novel but Mahashweta Devi outrightly denies this proposition. It is undoubtedly a historical biography where the different facets of Lakshmi Bai are revealed as a real person of flesh and blood—a little girl, a little bride, a youthful widow, a loving mother, a fun loving friend and at last as a sword
wielding warrior with a superb battle craft. One important aspect that strikes our attention on reading this work is Mahashweta Devi's outright rejection of the 'perception' of the English historians regarding the 1857 uprising. For them, it was just a mutiny of sepoys and an isolated event against the colonial empire. Mahashweta Devi challenges their claim by saying: "If their version was right, why did they not leave all the documents, records, deeds and reference files here? Why is there no evidence or witness of this event available when it is possible to look up for facts of much earlier times?" (Devi, Queen, 77)

Moreover, the men and women of different castes and creeds, farmers and ordinary citizens and even the Muslim Fakirs and Hindu ascetics participated in the war on their own. The agricultural populace, with no formal military training, managed to harass the mighty English army for three days on their march to Rathgarh. This participation of the cross sections of the Indian population in the war disproves the claim that it was just a Sepoyee Mutiny.

Mahashweta Devi tries to prove that the 1857 uprising is not a 'unique' and an 'isolated' event by citing the example of various revolts that broke out between 1757 and 1857 among the ordinary farmers in the Eastern India. The rebellion at Bareilly in 1816, Kol Revolt of 1831-32, Faraiji rebellion in Barasat under Titu Mir in 1831, Faridpur rebellion of 1847 led by Dudu Mian, the Mopla uprisings of 1849, 1851-52, 1855 and the Santhal revolt of 1855-56 prove that the 1857 revolt was not an 'isolated' event but it was a continuation and the culmination of the prolonged struggle of the native population against the injustice meted out to them by the colonial rulers. Mahashweta Devi rejects the assumption that the blow the English dealt to the religious sentiments of the Indians was the only major cause of the rebellion. She refers to the many sided onslaughts of the British on the natives that actually sparked off the revolt. The
English in general, since beginning, had a profound disrespect for India and Indians. They never trusted the native population. The Indians had to bear discrimination both in the military and the civil services. All the important and strategic positions were held by the British officials and discriminated the Indian employees in salary, promotion and other benefits. An attempt by a Provincial Governor to appoint an Indian as his secretary was opposed by the civil service officials with their mass resignation. The Indian employees were given very severe and torturous punishments even for silly reasons. The system of justice too was discriminatory and partisan. The poor Indians knew for certain that they would never find justice because the laws invariably protected the English, no matter what crimes they committed.

The un-interrupted economic exploitation made the British to prosper at the cost of the poor natives as Mahashweta Devi writes, “They pick up treasures from the banks of the Ganges and deposit them by the Thames.” (Devi, *Queen*, 62). The missionaries continued to propagate against the native religion, education, culture and the society, even in the rural areas. All these discriminations, injustice, humiliations, exploitations, utter disregard, disgraceful racism and the false propaganda had led to “the build up of a huge flammable house of a myriad agitated hearts.” (Devi, *Queen*, 74). The incident of cartridges and the selective implementation of the Doctrine of Lapse, at last, struck the spark and led to the inevitable. Mahashweta Devi exposes the English pride of treating women well. The cruelty of the British and their utter disregard for human rights are revealed in the work. The indiscriminate slaughter of thousands of men, women and children on the streets of Jhansi by the British soldiers, the plundering and looting of Jhansi for three consecutive days and turning this most prosperous city of Bundelkhand into a ‘cremation ground’ is one example of the cruelty of the British rule in India. April 1858 saw at least ten to eleven thousand people got killed in Jhansi. Everyday thousands of men and
boys from age 12 to 50 were arrested and made to stand in the vast courtyard of the royal palace where their heads were chopped off. The four-storey mansion of the royal palace was burnt to ashes and the English soldiers were strutting around like messengers from hell amidst the flaming havoc and the wails of the dying. She adds: “Death was flying from house to house with mercurial speed, not a single man was spared. The streets began to run with blood.” (Devi, Queen, 177)\textsuperscript{11}. It is further described:

> “Women panicked in fear of losing their chastity and were compelled to plunge into the great wells of the palace with their babies in their arms ... the ladies jumped into the tank, shrieking in distress. Countless women lost their lives in this manner.” (Devi, Queen, 188)\textsuperscript{12}

Thus, the ‘game of looting and killing’ went on all over north and central India for two whole years. For the each English dead, thousand Indians had been killed.

Mahashweta Devi provides a detailed information about the extraordinary courage and bravery displayed by the Indians during this ‘first conscious uprising against the English’. A strong resistance was put up by the people at every stage. The military dispatch of Hugh Rose, the Commander of the British forces, tells a lot about the bravery of the Indian soldiers. He writes, “They were half-burnt. Their clothes in flames, they rushed out, hacking at their assailants with their swords in both hands, till they were shot or bayoneted, struggling, even when dying on the ground, to strike again.” (Devi, Queen, 176)\textsuperscript{13}

An important feature of the war as pointed out by Mahashweta Devi is the voluntary participation of the cross sections like Hindus, Muslims, men, women, farmers and the soldiers. The women had fought shoulder to shoulder with men to the surprise of the British. Mahashweta Devi feels, “We can be rightfully proud that hundred years ago an Indian woman pioneered this glorious tradition.” (Devi, Queen, 107)\textsuperscript{14}. The people of lower-castes, higher castes, Pathans,
Afghans and Makrani Muslims took part in the war with great enthusiasm and “soldiers were born in every home.” (Devi, Queen, 107)

The vivid and a lively picture of Lakshmi Bai that emerges along the course of the 1857 war is very colourful. A detailed description of her as a child, as a young bride, a youthful widow, a loving mother, an intimate friend and a brave and inspiring warrior with a superb battle craft is presented throughout. Starting with her historic utterance, “Meri Jhansi doongi nahin— I will not give up my Jhansi,” (Devi, Queen, 57) till her death in the battle at Gwalior, she had to play a wonderful role of a statesman and a patriotic brave military leader. Her equestrian skills, battle craft and self-respect are appropriately stressed. When Tatia Topi deserted the Queen and other compatriots during the crucial battle at Kutch, only the Queen’s presence of mind and her excellent military tactics saved the remaining Indian fighters. Her presence was a great inspiration for the Indian soldiers. Even the enemy soldiers marvelled at her sword fighting skills in the battle at Gwalior and they mistook her to be a skilful young male warrior as she was in the military uniform. The force of her character that captured the hearts and minds of the people, the successful spy network built by her and the novel method of sending messages through chapattis and lotus petals make Lakshmi Bai a unique Queen in Indian history. Hence, there is no exaggeration in what Hugh Rose in his account of the war had written, “Although a lady, she was the bravest and best military leader of the rebels. A man among the mutineers.” (Devi, Queen, 247)

Mahashweta Devi reflects minutely on her habits like reading the Gita before sleep and sleeping in the candlelight. The Queen’s unpretentious tastes for food, her inclination for jewellery and variety of dresses and blue colour, her taste for books, music and fine arts are also stressed upon in the biography. Here, the concern of Mahashweta Devi is not the war but the human
face of the Queen. Her love for the country, kindness towards her subordinates, affection for the soldiers and her horse sarangi, her aversion to the foreigners and her concern for her dependants have been brought out very effectively in this work. She had established a wartime hospital in the palace to treat the wounded soldiers and had preserved the palace library which her late husband had built. The last words of the Queen to her associates help one to ‘get into the skin’ of the Queen, she says, “Be as loyal to Anand as you have been to me. Pay my troops their salary out of my remaining jewellery and money. Make sure the foreigners don’t get hold of my body after my death.”(Devi, Queen, 243)

Reference to the family lineage of Lakshmi Bai and Gangadhar Rao, the various correspondence between the Queen and different English officials and the reference to different folk songs and legends show the amount of research Mahashweta Devi had undertaken for the purpose.

Thus, Mahashweta Devi has successfully presented the subaltern point of view in this historical biography. Her view is that it is not the scholars or the so-called historians whose opinions are to be taken into account in order to understand a historical incident. But, to evaluate a war in history, one has to take into account the views of the people who pay for that war. While describing the role played by the soldiers as well as the common people, she asks:

“What is history? What is history made up of? If history is about people, then I would say that the history created on the roads of Jhansi that day is unparalleled. On the cobbled streets and alleys between the closely packed houses, every one from young boys to Pathan, Afghan, Bundela and Maratha soldiers fought to the end as the ground became slippery with blood. Children cried in horror when they saw the terrible sight. Bricks and other debris fell into the streets from the
burning houses. The history that was made that day by thousands of Indians is the real history of India. (Devi, *Queen*, 177)

Queen of Jhansi, as portrayed by Mahashweta Devi – an amazing woman from India’s lost days – emerges out of the belief of the uneducated poor farming men and women. Mahashweta Devi, who has always been driven by a strong sense of history, believes that history comes alive authentically through oral tradition. The image of the unique Queen which we see in this biography is an expression of what India felt in those times of history.

Mahashweta Devi clearly points out that the lack of proper planning on the part of the Indians, the lack of worthy leadership, the disunity and dissent among the leaders, are responsible for the failure of the whole war efforts. The lesson that Indians have to learn from the war is that the wars cannot be won by the mere physical might and patriotic spirit, but that knowledge of military tactics and proper prior planning are absolutely indispensable.

Thus, the daughter of an ordinary Indian, Lakshmi Bai, had to face a series of unexpected turn of events after joining the royal family of Jhansi. She had to play various roles simultaneously within a limited time, but dealt everything calmly, bravely and posed a formidable challenge to the mighty British at the crucial moment of Indian history.

With her love, generosity and exemplary traits of character, she could win the hearts of her people and in turn, managed to transmit something of her high ideals to her compatriots. Under her leadership the uprising against the British was transformed into a genuine struggle for freedom. Though worthy memorial is not raised to the memory of this widowed Queen who died fighting at the age of twenty three (1835–1858), she has occupied a permanent place in the hearts of the people, haunting their imagination age after age.
ARANYER ADHIKAR - 1976 (The Rights of the Forest)

It is one of the most important works of Mahashweta Devi which received Central Sahitya Academy Award in 1979. Here, she deals with the great tribal movement and revolt of 1895-1900 in and around Ranchi under the leadership of the legendary Birsa Munda, the great fighter who died at the young age of twenty-five fighting against the foreigners. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls it, “A meticulously researched historical novel about the Munda Insurrection of 1899-1900” (Spivak 180). Mahashweta Devi recalls the circumstances that led to the writing of this work:

“When I understood that feeling for the tribals and writing about them was not enough, I started living with them. Tried to solve the problem by seeing everything from his or her point of view. That is how my book about Birsa Munda (Aranyer Adhikar) came to be written.” (Devi, Imaginary, V)

Mahashweta Devi’s long association with the tribal life, her genuine concern for them, her ‘fascination’ for history and urgent need for documentation led to the publication of this historical novel. Though this novel is not yet available in English translation, is made available in Kannada by G. Kumarappa, with the title, Kadina Davedara (2001).

The publication of this historical novel, which Malini Bhattacharya calls, “The first major statement on the tribal cause,” made the tribals feel that it has done justice to them for the first time. The significance of this novel lies not only in being a historical novel, throwing light on the past movements of the tribals but also in the author’s serious efforts to understand the traditions, social customs and religious practices of the tribal community. One important tribal aspect that strikes the readers in this novel is the indomitable and the irrepressible tribal spirit that hits back at the oppressors in spite of the centuries of exploitation, illiteracy, poverty,
emaciation, deprivation and dispossession. Fighting against exploitation being a mission of Mahashweta Devi, she uses her literary work as a means to protest and fight effectively. The noted critic R.K. Dhawan observes, “Literature, from now on becomes, for Mahashweta Devi, only a weapon, a weapon with which she wants to fight along side the oppressed communities for achieving liberation from slavery and oppression.”(166)

Mahashweta Devi feels that all those, who are writers and a part of this present living society, should commit themselves to shoulder the entire historic responsibility. The society would not excuse those who do not do so. This novel with Birsa Munda at the centre, is the result of her social and historic responsibility. Mahashweta Devi in her "Foreword" to the novel expresses her gratitude to K. Suresh Singh by saying, “Without his work Dust Storm and Hanging Mist (1966), it would not have been possible to write this novel.” (Devi, Kadina, Foreword) The historical records on Birsa Munda, the rich oral traditions, the songs of the tribals around Ranchi and Chotanagapur celebrating their hero-god Birsa Munda, coupled with Mahashweta Devi's intimate knowledge of the traditions and life of the Mundas, provided a basis of reality to this historical novel.

Birsa Munda (1875-1900), who has found a place in the Central Hall of the Indian Parliament, after whom many institutions are named and many statues are put up, whose life is a myth and a source of courage, endurance, honesty and strength for the Munda people, was born to the Munda parents—Sugana Munda and Karami. It was a poor family, wandering from place to place, dispossessed and deprived. He was born on Thursday. Hence, was named Birsa. As a child Birsa was not conspicuous. He developed a close intimacy with the natural surrounding and got knowledge of his ancestry through his parents and his maternal uncle Dhani. The only difference which one could notice in him was his desire for education which
took him to different places like Ayubhatu, Khatangu, Chalkad and Chaibasha. During this time he came into contact with the Christian Missionaries and was converted into Christianity and re-christened Birsa Dawood. He joined the German Missionary School and acquired some knowledge of English and the etiquette of the educated and the refined. He got some education on hygiene and sanitation. In the school, he came into contact with Amulya Babu who later played an important role in his life.

At an young age, Birsa cherished some innocuous and simple desires. He learnt reading and writing, and worked in the office and helped his father to get his land back. He would buy bag full of salt and tin full of oil for his mother. Birsa’s stay at Chaibasha for about five years was very crucial in his life. The influence of Christianity on him during this time went a long way in shaping the organizational, propagational and prophetic aspect of his new Birsait religion which he would propagate at a later stage. In the mean time, Birsa Munda came under the influence of the Sardar Movement. Inspite of the incessant appeal by Father Nottrett not to lose faith in the Kingdom of Heaven and to trust the mission, good number of converted Christians deserted him under the influence of the Sardars. That development made the missionaries unhappy and the year 1887-88 witnessed a hostile conflict between the two. Father Nottrett enraged Birsa by calling Sardars ‘thugs and cheats’. The remark did hurt the Munda Pride in Birsa which ultimately forced him to leave the mission. This was a turning point in the life of Birsa. He could realize that the government and the missionaries were the same. The failure of the Sardar Movement supported this belief.

By this time, Birsa came to know, through Bharami, Daso and Matari, the untold miseries meted out to the Mundas by the government and the intruders. The blood of Naga and Chuttia (his ancestors) that was flowing in him became restive and vocal. The picture of the deprived
and the dispossessed Mudas moved before his eyes. Dhani’s information about the tribal struggles in the past against the oppressors rang in his ears. Birsa was forced to take an epoch making decision. He responded to the call of the ‘mother forest’ and finally, he cleared himself of his future course of action. After a long churning and tumult within, he assumed the position of God–Birsa God, the Father of the Earth and a new Munda Kingdom would be a reality where all would be equal and free.

The nature too acknowledged it with thunderstorm and a heavy rain. He gave the call of Ulgulan (the great revolt), which later became a dictum of the Birsa Movement – ‘Ulgulan has no end, God has no death’. It became a war cry of the Mundas. When the entire Munda community was battered and emaciated and desperately in search of a prop that could rescue them, Birsa’s transformation came as a ray of hope. He was treated as God – Father of the Earth - embodiment of the soil and the earth.

Birsa was very much aware of the failure of the Sardar Movement, which was merely a ‘movement of writing applications without any concrete shape’. Hence, he decided to make it a people’s movement. He specified everything. The government, the Dikus (exploiters) and the Missionaries were the enemies to fight against. He did not promise any Kingdom of Heaven. Instead, he showed a ‘path of death and blood’. The religion he propagated did not ‘exclude’ but was ‘all-inclusive’. It was actually what the Munda people wanted. Emergence of Birsa Munda as the Godhead of the Mundas and the strategies he applied to take the movement even to the nook and corner of the Munda world created ripples among those whom he recognized as their enemies. They could not make out what Birsa was up to.

Birsa had to overcome the hurdle of superstitions on his way to become ‘God’. He
had to fight with this enemy within the community. His experience with the Missionaries made him cope with the cholera epidemic which was superstitiously considered incurable. His act of curing the epidemic became a miracle for the simple Mundas and it further strengthened their faith in ‘Birsa God’. This was not enough for Birsa to face the landlord - moneylender; Government-Mission alliance. He had to keep the Mundas united by instilling tribal pride in them. He had to cut all the shackles with which they were bound. In order to make his movement broad based he conducted mass contacts, through novel means of communications - leaves and arrows. Dhani, the infallible archer was left in charge of preparing poisonous arrows. Birsa saw that no Munda laboured in the tea farms and bound lands. They did not give Khajna, did not borrow money and wheat. They did not go to the Missionaries to be converted. These changes among the Mundas made the enemies to apprehend that something was ‘brewing’ and it prompted the authorities to arrest Birsa Munda without any provocation by him. The Commissioner of Ranchi tried, with the help of Dr. Rogers, to prove that Birsa was mad, expecting that all his followers would be alienated from him. But Dr. Rogers refused to help. Instead, he appreciated Birsa’s act of instilling tribal pride and self-confidence among the Mundas. At last, the Government, after a lot of manipulations, succeeded in getting Birsa awarded with two years of rigorous imprisonment. Absence of Birsa for two years was utilized by Mundas for the preparation of the decisive battle. They went back to the Missionaries en masse for two years as a survival tactic. The attempt of the British to project Birsa as an ordinary, uneducated thug failed utterly. The more they tried to do so the stronger the faith in him grew.

Birsa was released from the jail after taking assurance from him that he would not violate the law. But an uninterrupted oppression of the Mundas, the hunger, poverty and
suffering made Birsa rethink about the assurance he had given to the Commissioner, Struttfield. He could not remain a mute spectator to the sorry state of his people. He planned the future course of action in consultation with the experienced fellow tribesmen. He prepared for a quick and a decisive battle by recruiting new cadres. He gave them training in fighting. He used the veterans of Sardar Movement in the preparation of weapons. He maintained regular mass contact and stored food. Vigilance network was developed. He raised a war cry Ulgan (the great revolt), among the Mundas. It became an inspiring slogan later on. The strategy he applied displayed the caliber of a great warrior in him. The call of Ulgan was so effective that it reached every corner of the Munda world. Even those who had not seen Birsa Munda, became the followers of ‘Birsa God’. The picture of the future he put before them, where equality, collective ownership, exploitation-free life prevailed, electrified them and made them to re-dedicate to the cause. The journey he undertook to the ancient Munda temples enabled him to blend religion with revolution, to spread the message of Ulgan further and to instill racial glory among the tribals. He decentralized and democratized the entire movement.

Individuals were given freedom to act according to the circumstances and each Birsait home was converted into a strong fort of fighting forces. More and more people were becoming Birsait as the days went on. He repeatedly reminded them of the path they had to tread, which would be thorny, bloody and suffering that might even lead to the jail and starvation. The enemies, on the other hand, made out every thing and waited for a ripe time to crack down on the movement. The worry of the Government was its inability to trace the whereabouts of the ‘Birsa God’.

Birsa Munda was aware of the fact that the arrows and bows of the Mundas were not a match to the sophisticated rifles and guns of the enemies. But he was also aware that it was
not always the superiority of the weapons that would bring victory. Victory and defeat are not
the only criteria of the success of a war. The Mundas believed that the presence of ‘Birsa God’
would transform any impossible task into a possible one. The great achievement of Birsa was
as Mahashweta Devi says, “He had brought all the Mundas together and had taught them to
die.”(Devi, Kadina 195) For the Mundas, under the ‘Birsa God’, death seemed to be more
pleasant than living. Thus, the iron was hot and 24 December 1899 was fixed as the day to act
upon. As a result of the individual discretion given to the Mundas, the battle broke out at
different places and at different times as stipulated. The Birsaits attacked on the Kunti police
station. Two police constables were killed at Etkedi and the final offensive, the only incident in
which Birsa directly involved, was conducted at Sail Rakab. But the large number of the police
force and the indiscriminate firing caused an unexpected scale of casualty on Birsa’s side and
left them in chaos. Many were injured but Birsa escaped from the place and remained a
fugitive till he was arrested finally at the Sentra forest. The death toll of the Mundas was not
made clear. Though it was about 400 as per the press report and 700 as per the police
intelligence report, it remained 20 as per the Government record.

For the sake of five hundred rupees, Shashi Bhushan Rahi and Mazi Tumaria deserted
him and helped the police to arrest him. Birsa had warned Parami, a fellow female warrior not
to kindle fire and went asleep, as he was tired too much. But Parami was tempted to kindle fire
to cook rice which Birsa liked most. The smoke of the fire gave a clue to the enemies regarding
the whereabouts of Birsa and they arrested him. Thus ended Birsa’s struggle. He was taken to
the Ranchi jail where he was kept in a solitary cell like an ordinary prisoner – hands cuffed,
trunk and legs in heavy chains, no light, no air. At last he became weak and emaciated. He
used to walk inside the cell dragging the heavy chains, the sound of which gave a sense of
assurance and inspiration to other Mundas in the jail. He wanted to give a wide Munda country to his people but everything ended with his imprisonment. He became weak, fell unconscious, vomiting blood and at last died in a doubtful manner on June 9, 1900. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak expresses her wonder and awe at the last moments of Birsa’s life:

"Birsa - Twenty five, a twenty-five-year old boy of such courage, dying in jail, that last stuff, you know, vomiting blood, making that sound, and dying suddenly. That fills me with anguish,... We hear of death in custody, and that is an intolerable thing. But when I think of Birsa in his twenties, with that kind of courage and imagination and leadership, dying that way in jail, that fills me with anguish." (Devi, Chotti XXI) 26

Thus, Mahaswheta Devi brings Birsa Munda back to life by focusing on his extraordinary courage, intelligence and commitment. The way he took the British Government head on, the strategies he planned and followed, the way he changed the superstitious, traditionally ritualistic and orthodox Mundas into a pragmatic and self respecting force are really awe inspiring. Myth and religion, which are main features of the Mundas, underwent a transformation with the acceptance of Godhead of Birsa. Here we find a primitive society in the process of change. Apart from Birsa, the portrayal of the character of Sali and Amulya Babu are significant. Sali, the wife of Donka, was an important woman activist whom Birsa wanted to marry once. She rendered an invaluable service to the Birsa Movement in a clandestine manner.

Being a true Birsaít, Sali looked after the food and safety of the activists and provided relevant day-to-day informations to the concerned, without giving any scope for the authorities to doubt. She acted as if she was against the ‘Birsa God’ but handled many responsibilities at great risk with unflinching faith in him. R.K. Dhawan observes:
“The soft, touching love-relation between Sali and Birsa runs through the blood-spattered novel like a crystal spring. It is as though all the confusion, bloodshed, and hypocrisy do not really have any real power over these people. They keep their hearts free and clear and innocent, and thus, only know how to love.”(168)"
were kept in prison for more than five months without any enquiry and even without registering any case against them. Some of them died before any case was filed against them. The language used in the judiciary was alien to the Mundas. Hence, were kept always in ignorance. It demanded surety from the Mundas which they could not afford to pay. That was a system where defeat and punishment to the Mundas was ensured. The argument between the Barrister Jacob and the magistrate, as recorded in Amulya Babu's diary, is a blot on the system of justice in the modern civilized world. The success of the novel, as Mahasweta Devi tells:

"The tribals think it has done justice to the tribals of India for the first time. The day Birsa was killed, Martyrs Day, is now observed by them with massive attendance, oaths and pledges, songs and dances. They understand the necessity of reviving and maintaining their culture." (Devi, *Imaginary*, V)²⁸

Thus, the novel brings home the fact that the revolutions might have been suppressed and the revolutionaries might have been killed but the spirit behind it remains, 'Birsa is killed but not defeated'. This novel, which is described as: "Savage, fecund, irresistible" (Sharma 162)²⁹ by the critic Manabendra Bandhopadhyay, led to a tremendous upsurge among the tribals. This work of Mahashweta Devi adds a new and a meaningful chapter to the history of Indian freedom movement and to the history of revolutions. Shachi Arya, the noted scholar, observes: "Birsa's glorious life and more glorious death, his insatiable thirst for freedom, his preparedness to sacrifice his life, and bright optimism that the fight would go on, constitute a chapter of our independence struggle that would do any Indian proud." (98)³⁰
PART II

FICTIONAL NARRATIVES

The change of literary form does not change the theme and purpose of Mahashweta Devi. Her recurring theme and the motivating force of life invariably would be fight against exploitation—exploitation of the tribals, women, landless labourers and the poor. The world of her novels is structured wholly on the distinctive binary oppositions—the opposition between the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed, simple innocence and cultural opportunism. Here she raises her voice against the corruption and the cruel 'system that has the capacity to contaminate even the child in the womb'.

MOTHER OF 1084 (Hajar Churashir Ma, 1974)

By the time Mother of 1084 was published in the mid 70s, Mahashweta Devi’s reputation as a novelist was already well established. The publication of Jhansi Ki Rani (1956) and Swaha had already ensured her a place of pride among the Bengali writers. But the publication of Mother of 1084 (Hajar Churashir Ma, 1974) pushed her acclaim even beyond the Bengali horizon. She acquired the image and aura of an Indian writer of eminence, rather than a popular regional one. This is the only novel of Mahashweta Devi to be imminently published in English and Hindi translations. When it was rendered later into an award winning film by master director Govind Nihalani, it created ripples in the entire Hindi world. About the circumstances which led to the creation of this novel, Mahashweta Devi herself writes:

“I was writing lots of stories on the naxal movements from the rural point of view. Around that time, I was approached by the urban activists. Since I was writing nothing with the focus on the city — whatever was happening in Calcutta, all around us. I was in the thick of the things and it compelled me to write this novel. I do not rate it very high although it is very popular.”(Arya 187-188)
All her early novels up to *Mother of 1084* (1974) remain, according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “within the excessively sentimental idiom of the Bengali novel of the last twenty odd years.” (180)\(^1\) This novel, as Mahashweta Devi remarks, “is about an apolitical mother, but as much about generation-gap: the older generations unable to understand the new generation and the same affecting even familial relationships.” (Arya 188)\(^3\)

Mahashweta Devi wrote the first version of *Mother of 1084* in September 1973 for the October issue of the periodical, *Prasad*. A revised and enlarged version of it was published as a book in early 1974.

The central idea of this novel is the police repression of the Naxalite movement in West Bengal, particularly in Calcutta. In this very significant work, she deals not only with the Naxal movement which witnessed the massacre of thousands of bright young boys and girls, but it also raises certain basic humanitarian questions that usually die down in the din of action warranted by political exigencies. Once such movement is crushed, everything may appear to be normal and quiet which is deceptive. Though unnoticed and unperceived, the impacts of such movements are bound to remain at the emotional level with personal, familial and social dimensions.

In this novel, we find a full expression of the ‘Mahashweta Devi canon’ which includes, in particular, the conflict between the oppressed and the oppressors, the exploited and the exploiters, the innocent and the opportunist. Still Mahashweta Devi has not moved on to her brand theme of depressed tribal characters in rural setting. She sets this novel in the metropolis (Kolkata), focusing on the elite, comprising of the
upper-middle class: their hollowness and insensitivity, their sophistication devoid of humanism, their blindness to whatever is happening around them.

Sujata, the mother, as the title of the novel suggests, is the central character. She belongs to an upper-middle class family and is an apolitical person. She stands between two classes of people representing two extreme values. Dibyanath, her husband, Jyoti the elder son, Neepa and Tuli, the daughters, Jyoti's wife Bini and the in-laws represent the class that accepts the life of affluence and follow the values of the opportunist sect. This is a class, as Mahashweta Devi writes, “wanted to be like each other and never wanted to be themselves and that is what passed for fashion” (Mother, 105). For them the naked body caused no embarrassment, but natural emotions did. This is a class, which is shown to be hollow, selfish, deprived and rotten to the core.

The police used to give numbers to the naxalites who were killed in the encounters. ‘1084’ is the number given to Brati, the younger son of Sujata, who was killed. He was the only person in the family with whom she shared the human love. Though Brati was born in a family of an upper-middle class, he gradually distances himself from it and becomes a part of the class represented by Somu, Bijit, Partha and Nandini. This is the class of people who did not “remain content with writing slogans on the wall, but committed themselves to the slogans.” (Devi, Mother, 17). They have rejected the society of spineless, opportunist time servers masquerading as artists, writers and intellectuals. They represent the class that had come to place 'absolute faith in the cult of faithlessness'. They are the people who are committed themselves to fight against the corrupt and the contaminated system. The whole thing becomes tragic as the nation and the state refused to acknowledge their existence, their passion, their indomitable faith and all that they have stood for.
The irony is that the system which is inhuman, the society which is lifeless and the class which is corrupted to the core, considers these committed youth as ‘misguided’ lot and a ‘cancerous growth on the body of democracy’. These ‘faithless’ young men could be killed by anybody. One does not need any special sanction from the law.

Sujata, the mother of Brati, was a bank employee with an aristocratic bearing and well accented English. She had a shadowy existence since her marriage to Dibyanath, a Chartered Accountant. She remains subservient, silent and faithful. Dibyanath and his mother dominated her home. Dibyanath, a profligate and a womanizer, brought up his first son and the daughters according to his cherished ideals. Brati, the youngest child in the family, grows out of the cultural milieu that is the forte of his family and he becomes a part of the Naxalite movement.

Sujata, with her upper-middle class background and apolitical attitude, remains submissive and introvert, showing signs of non-conformism and revolt only on two occasions. Once she refused to be a mother for the fifth time and later she rejected the proposal to leave her job. She remains unaware of the social forces at work to the extent that she does not even understand her son Brati. Sujata feels that the values her husband stands for is ‘shiftless, rootless and lifeless’ and it becomes very difficult for her to cope with. Hence, she finds herself in a solitary cell though she lived with her husband and children, and worked with all the colleagues in the bank. Brati is the only person she loved and is loved by in the family. She had taken all the care to protect him from the ‘absurd disciplining and arbitrary indulgence’ that prevailed in the family which prompted Dibyanath to call Brati a ‘milksop’ and a ‘mother’s boy’ and they belonged to the ‘other camp’ within the family domain.

Meanwhile, Brati, a stubborn, sensitive and an intelligent boy who gets scholarship in
the school and dreams of settling in life one day with his mother, finds himself a misfit to the prevailing values at home under the ‘bossism’ of his father. He gradually developed a propensity to the youth who had been fighting during that ‘Decade of Liberation’ against the society ruled by the profit-mad businessmen and selfish leaders. The Naxalite Movement prevailed in 1960s in West Bengal. This transition in him was reflected in his behaviour at home. He was fast growing into an impregnable stranger even for Sujata. She was yet to know that Brati belonged to the ranks of the doomed. She loved him but never knew him. Dibyanath alleges that Sujata has taught him to be his enemy. Infact, Brati never treated Dibyanath as his enemy. Instead, he considered the values he represents and the class that nurtures those values as his enemy.

Dibyanath had brought up his elder son according to his ideals and the daughters were to follow the suit. Everybody seemed settled and everything seemed well organized. He had a plan to send the youngest son abroad for higher studies. His only worry was that his son Brati had strayed away from the path determined for the members of his family. The news of Brati’s death on the telephone creates ripples in the family which is otherwise ‘neat, clean, nice and calm’. After getting the message of Brati’s death, Dibyanath did not feel the urge to see his dead son. The first thing that struck him was that it would be unwise to keep the car waiting before the morgue at Kantapukur, where the dead body was kept. He made all out effort to pull so many strings in order to hush up the news as he felt that the death of his son was ‘scandalous’ and a ‘blight on the beautifully organized household’. As a result, Brati’s name did not appear anywhere. After being successful in his mission of ‘string pulling’ and ‘wiping out’ Brati, Dibyanath became complacent and behaved as if nothing had happened.

But Sujata could never do that. She was shocked by the incident. The conduct of the
members of her family made her to get disillusioned with her class. In her own quiet way, Sujata moved out of her ‘solitary cell’ to know what had made her son Brati to associate himself with a class of young men and women who would fight for the cause of the downtrodden. It had nothing in common with their social set up. Unconsciously demolishing the class barriers, Sujata goes to meet Somu’s mother who is also suffering from the loss of her son. Bereavement acts as a bridge between the two. Sujata felt that Brati had not, after all, abandoned her to the desolation. He had bound her to the similar souls and had given her a ‘new family’. She comes face to face with a mother who is suffering much more than she is and realizes how dirty and inferior her world is as compared to the poverty ridden world of Somu’s mother. She is appalled to know the social ostracism the family members of the liquidated naxals are subjected to.

On meeting Nandini, Brati’s comrade and love, she gets acquainted with the real face and character of the naxalites – their intelligence, their courage, humanism, suffering, the noble anger and various forces at work against them. The vista of the society in which she is living gets itself revealed to her – the inhuman system, the contaminated society, the ‘programme of betrayal’, complacency of the ‘conscience keepers’ and so on. After meeting Samu’s mother and Nandini, the essential face of the reality starts emerging before Sujata and the façade hither to mistaken as reality starts crumbling down.

Towards the end, we are taken to the engagement party of Brati’s sister, Tuli. Significantly, the day fixed for the party is the birthday of the dead son Brati whose memory is wiped out by the nasty merry-making of the family. The incident exposes the hypocrisy and shallowness of the upper-middle class who get fascinated in gossiping, wining and dining.
Sujata, who returns after meeting Nandini, is a different person. She is changed thoroughly. Her husband and children fail to understand her. They call her ‘unnatural person’ and a ‘spoil joy’. Now she is a reawakened person. She is all out to show them how mean, brutish and heartless they are. Sujata, a ‘lost soul’, moves about in that humid atmosphere in her white cotton sari which is a symbol of innocence and purity. As a fitting climax, the novel ends with her death. Sumanta Banerjee, one of Mahashweta Devi’s translators writes:

"Mother of 1984 (1974) is a lasting testimony to Mahashweta Devi’s acute and sensitive understanding of the traumatic state of anxiety that the mothers of the young boys in the state of West Bengal had to undergo in those terrifying days of the anti-Naxalite persecution campaign that the police launched in the 1970s."(XX-XXI)

Mahashweta Devi exposes and chastises everybody who is responsible for the criminalization of the Naxal movement that envisaged a society, which is more free, human and just. Brati, Somu, Bijit, Partha and Lattu were among those hundreds and thousands of educated young men who had to pay a very costly price for their commitment to the ‘cause’. The passion of a belief had blinded the reality. They had not realized that the system against which they fought was so rotten and corrupt that it did not spare even the child in the womb. Mahashweta Devi is very harsh towards the society, which treated them as criminals and hunted them like wild animals. Her anger is expressed in the following lines:

"The killers in the society, those who adulterated food, drugs and baby food had every right to live. The leaders who led the people to face the guns of the police and found for themselves the safest shelters under police protection, had every right to live. But Brati was a worse criminal than them. Because he had lost faith in this society ruled by profit-mad businessmen and leaders blinded by self-interest .... He was sentenced to death ... Everybody had unlimited
democratic right to kill these young men. To kill them one did not need any special sanction from the law or the courts of justice. They could be killed anytime anywhere for any audience present." (Devi, *Mother* 19)

Dibyanath is an archetypal patriarch, an embodiment of the hypocrisy and hollowness of the upper-middle class. He considers his profligacy and open affairs with many women as a mark of his virility and brings up his children, except Brati, on the same line. He treats his wife as a child and uses her like a 'door mat'. The human touch is absolutely absent in his personality. Regarding this Mahashweta Devi comments:

"Dibyanath never came with her, never accompanied her when it was time. He slept in a room on the second floor lest the cries of the newborn disturbed his sleep. He would never come down to ask about the children when they were ill. But he noticed Sujata, he had to be sure that Sujata was fit enough to bear a child again." (Mother 3)

He places his position and security above Brati's death. These people, as a class, are so inhuman that they do not grieve Brati's murder fearing that it would identify themselves with him. They utterly fail to understand his 'cause' and the whole thing is viewed with undeserved repugnance. Their only anxiety is to see that Brati's name does not appear in the newspapers. This having been achieved, they feel secure in the belief that their social status and well-being is saved from criminal molestation. With this they throw Brati into the 'dark and deep labyrinths of oblivion' and find salvation in gossiping, wining and dining. So much for the human relationships among the upper-middle class people. Mahashweta Devi shows the depth of their moral bankruptcy and rottenness in their act of inviting Saroj Pal, the police officer, who is a man behind Brati's death, as a chief guest to the party. The reaction of Sujata to this act of her husband is what Mahashweta Devi tries to establish in this work. R.K. Dhwan observes:
“Some thing snaps inside Sujata after seeing Saroj Pal. The diseased appendix she has been carrying all along, bursts inside her. The diseased appendix becomes a powerful symbol of the cancer within the society. Sujata, who bears the burden of a collective guilt and becomes a scapegoat, has to die while the rest are in the midst of a revel.”(165)"

There is a pointed and a poignant contrast drawn between Dibyanath and the father of Brati’s friend Somu, the poor refugee gentleman. When the hooligans tried to instigate them with their taunting words, Somu’s father restrained him and wanted to die first and later ran to the police station in a vain bid to stop the killing. In the similar manner, Nandini, with her commitment, suffering, human love and optimism, stands as a striking contrast to the spoilt sisters of Brati.

Mahashweta Devi is very harsh at the complacency and apathy of the writers and intellectuals towards the prevailing conditions in the society. She ironically calls them ‘the radical citizens of India’s most conscious and legendary city’. When thousands of young boys and girls whom she calls ‘gems of society’, are languishing in jails and equal number of them are being gruesomely murdered on the streets of Calcutta, these ‘honoured members’ of the society worry about what is going on in Vietnam and Bangladesh. They are happy that the fairs dedicated to the poet Tagore can take place unaffected. Thus, Mahashweta Devi focuses on the naxalite movement that prevailed during 1960s against the background of the rotten society, bankrupt intellectuals, cruelty of the system, hypocrisy of the middle class, ‘programme of betrayal’ by the posing friends, commitment and humanity of the naxals, helpless and suffering mothers like Sujata.

**CHOTTI MUNDA AND HIS ARROW (1980)**

First published by Bichitra in 1980, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* appeared in English
form in 2002, translated and introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. At a very crucial period of her life, Mahashweta Devi came into a close contact with various tribal movements. The first forest movement in Singhbhum, the death of nineteen tribals in the Gua firing and the forest movement to protect sal trees under the slogan 'Saguana hatao sal bachao' had left a deep imprint on her mind. In the meanwhile, she came into contact with Laro Jonko, a dauntless, fantastic woman warrior of the tribals. All these experiences were exciting and long lasting. As she claims, “Out of this feeling of exhilaration came Chotti Munda.” (Devi, Chotti XVII)⁴⁰

During her travels through tribal areas, Mahashweta Devi happened to see an old archer taking some young archers, probably his students, to an arrow competition in a Mela—a fair. She was entranced by the fantastic archery competition where an old Munda was brought as a judge. Activist writer Mahashweta Devi, for whom documenting the aspirations and myths of the tribals had been life’s mission, was in a mood of great urgency to document her experiences. She recalls:

“I had such a great asthirata, a restlessness, an udheg, an anxiety. It struck me then. I have to write about the tribals … Somehow, I have to document this period which I have experienced because it is going away, it is vanishing.”(Chotti, XII-XIII)⁴¹

As a result Chotti Munda and His Arrow became a reality. Mahashweta Devi, who asserts that, Chotti is her best beloved book, articulates tribal history with colonial and postcolonial history in this outstanding novel.

The wide sweep of this important novel encompasses many layers. It ranges over decades in the life of Chotti—the central character—in which India moves from colonial rule to independence and then to the unrest of 1970s. It probes and uncovers the complex web of social and economic exchange based on power relations.
Various changes—both wanted and unwanted—that were brought into the daily lives of the marginalized rural community at different stages are documented here. This novel also exposes administration—criminal—moneylender nexus in the post-independent India. Of course, it celebrates the central character, Chotti, who is a legendary archer, a wise, gentle and a farsighted leader, an inspiration and a role model to the younger generation. In this epic novel, Mahashweta Devi tells the story of the Munda tribals, tracing back from the days of the Ulgulan (1895-1900), young Birsa’s legendary uprising, through the Indian freedom movement to the post emergency period, encompassing a time range of nearly eighty years. Hence, this most outstanding and the best beloved novel of Mahashweta Devi becomes relevant for three reasons: for its documentation of the tribal life, the attitude of the mainstream people and the time range it covers.

The novel raises a number of fundamental and pertinent questions which demand immediate attention to make the independence and the democracy a meaningful reality. One important question is in relation to the treatment of the tribal historicity by the ‘mainstream’ historians. The answer to the question only confirms that the ‘leading lights’ were oblivious not only of the tribals but also of their historic protests against the British rule. Tribal history is not seen as a continuity in Indian historiography. It is evident in the fact that the tribals were not included and involved in the ‘mainstream’ struggle. Mahashweta Devi points out:

“The August movement did not even touch the life of Chotti’s community. It was as if that was the Dikus’ struggle for liberation. Dikus never thought of the adivasis as Indian. They did not draw them into the liberation struggle. In war and independence, the life of Chotti and his cohorts remained unchanged. They stand at a distance and watch it all.”(Chotti, 121-122)42
But she asserts that there is a continuity in tribal history. What Chotti Munda or her other stories and books depict is a continuing struggle. The struggle moves along *Tirka Majhis Rebellion* (1780-85), *Santhanl Rebellion* (1855-57), *Birsa Munda Rebellion* (1786-85) and of course, continued in Chotti Munda. But their history is not in the written form. They are in the oral traditions. Māhashweta Devi simply documents their history, which is like a big flowing river. The question of tribal history becomes relevant in view of the fact that the ‘mainstream’ struggle was for independence from the foreign rule, whereas the tribal struggle was two-pronged. It was for the liberation from the foreign rule as well as from the native oppressors and exploiters and thus, an advancement on the ‘mainstream’ struggle. Dhani (maternal uncle of Birsa Munda) who hands over the ‘magic arrow’ to Chotti, is a direct link between Birsa Munda and Chotti Munda and in turn makes the novel a bridge between the past and the present. The arrow is a symbol of continuity here.

Setting of the novel is in tribal regions of Jharkhand. Chotti Munda, as the title of the novel suggests, is an unfailing archer. It was his heartfelt desire to be ‘a master archer’. He acquired the knowledge of archery from Dhani who was ‘worshiped and feared’. Chotti practices archery as per the advice of Dhani who tells, “Howsomever, food or no food, shoot an arrer every day. Skill runs off without practice (sic)”(Devi, *Chotti* 15). An aura of legend grows around him and his arrow. His success without break at the archery competitions are responsible for making him outstanding. He achieves almost super human skill in archery through his determination and patient endeavour. For the simple tribals it is enough to invest him with an aura of myth. The *Dikus*, police employees and other non-tribals and exploiters — more out of fear than admiration — contribute to some extent to the growth of legends around Chotti.
Each of his actions, though spontaneous, instinctive and innocent, becomes a story. Everything becomes a story in Chotti's life and makes him more mythical. His politeness, honesty, wisdom and fearless dignity make him a natural leader of his community and in the eyes of the non-tribals 'a not to be taken lightly' person.

This novel deals with another important question which is related to tribal norms of life – their truthfulness, patience and innocence – which are wrongly perceived by the non-tribals, out of sheer prejudice and ignorance. Mahashweta Devi considers the tribals as the embodiment of patience, tolerance and forgiveness. They undergo unbearable suffering because, as the narrator feels, "They have a very ancient civilization. They can do it, we cannot. We get angry, lose our tempers, become beasts, they do not. When they do it, one must understand their extreme desperation." (Devi, *Chotti* XXII)

The tribal people are very sensitive. They may undergo suffering, tolerate hunger and work in empty stomach but won’t hear ‘crazy’ words. Chotti and Chhagan protest strongly when they are called ‘sonuva bitch’ (sic). They are not disturbed for silly reasons and are not afraid to face the bare truth. Patience and calm are in their blood. Archery is something which is very close to their heart. They participate in archery competition without fail. But, to the surprise of the *Daroga* (Sub Inspector), there has never been a quarrel between the winners and the losers. They never shoot unless there is a great need. Chotti, the master archer, has never raised his arrow to kill anyone. The elders and the women are much revered among these adivasis. In Chotti’s society father and mother have equal respect. The words like ‘money lender’ and ‘interest’ are thoroughly despicable to the Mundas.
In this regard Mahashweta Devi writes, “A Munda borrows but doesn’t lend, does not suck his brothers’ blood by money lending.” (Chotti, 32)45

They are peace-loving people of a happy disposition. ‘Chotti is not a man to commit crimes’. Cheating and thieving are not known to them. Even if they kill at an extreme circumstances, they go to the police station and confess it. They never try to run away even in the face of gallows. Dhani Munda knew that he’d die of police bullet if he went to Jejur. Yet he went there. Dukhia murders the manager for giving him an inhuman treatment. He would have easily run away and escaped punishment. But he embraces gallows voluntarily to remain right with himself. Birsa, Chotti’s father hangs himself feeling humiliated on being addressed as Mahajan (money lender and an usurer) by Baijnath. Being unable to appreciate Mundas’ cultural aversion to this epithet, Baijnath uses it as a mark of respect. This ethos is incomprehensible to the ‘mainstream’ people who remain alien to conviction, values and traditions. But the irony is that these tribals are despised as uncivilized, backward and foolish. This novel pertinently stresses the need for the non-tribals to reorient their perception of these ancient population and disburse justice to them keeping their cultural tradition in view.

Mahashweta Devi raises a very significant issue related to the living condition of the tribals which has remained unchanged even after all these years of independence. Still they remain in the islands of slavery in the vast ocean of independence. Centuries of exploitation, oppression and battering had left the tribals and the marginalized communities ‘broken backed’ and are thrown at the mercy of moneylenders and landlords who are called Dhikus (non-tribals). Adivasis and the untouchables are easily trapped in debt. If they once put their thumbprint on paper, they would give bonded labour for generations. The Dhikus consider taking bonded labour from adivasi and untouchable as their natural right. Some good but helpless officers
in the government are aware of this extremely vicious business and know that if these moneylenders and landlords are not ceaseless exploiters, we would have seen peaceful tribal villages.

Forest and land play a very significant role in tribal life. To possess land is a dream a tribal is born with. The landlords would now and then give them patches of uncultivable land. The deal is always oral. Nothing is in black and white. Once they make it bear fruit with their hearts' blood, the landlords claim it back. Harmu, the son of Chotti, had to go to jail over this issue. For tribals, land is an emotional issue. It symbolizes life for them. The process of transformation of land excites them and they get aesthetic pleasure from the 'smiling' earth. But for the Dhikus (non-tribals), land is a property which brings money and it is a means of exploitation. Of course, there are laws to eliminate bonded labour and for the implementation of minimum wages. But here they never find the light of day. The landlords, moneylenders and landed farmers are the 'pillars' of the Government. It is they who control the vote and give campaign funds. Hence, they can afford to flout the laws, exploit the dispossessed and go scot-free. In spite of living on the land for generations, no Munda has anything to call his own.

One has never seen a Munda growing wealthy. A shirt on a Munda's body, shoes on his feet, umbrella on his head and a metal plate to eat is a crime in the eyes of the Dhikus. If they find fault in one, the whole village is penalized. They break their homes by letting elephants on them. In this context, Mahashweta Devi writes, “They carry on the imperial tradition of the Tughlak dynasty inherent in the pre-British king—landowners.”(Chotti, 195)"6

Deprivation is a main trait of the tribal life. Inspite of the existence of the law regarding universal education, it does not help the tribal community. The teachers discourage the adivasi children from going to school and encourage them to herd cows, as if education is meant only
for the upper-caste people. Of course, it is a well-known fact that education or no education the jobs will not come their way. The change of regime at the national level makes no difference at the level of the down trodden. When Independence came, it was not reflected in the tribal region. The historical change that overtaken the country left the tribals untouched by it. The change was just an 'old wine in a new bottle' sort of a thing for them.

The novel throws light on the wonderful skill of adaptability of the exploiters to any political changes, keeping out their means of exploitation unscathed. Centuries of suffering has taught the Mundas a lesson of survival. They have developed their own method of resistance against exploitation. Helped, to some extent by the aura of myth around Chotti Munda and his magic arrow, the Mundas had gained a little strength to negotiate with the Dikus regarding their wages. Though they are hunters by profession, they started working in the farms and brick kilns and some took up the construction works, necessitated by the circumstances. But the emergence of a new political culture in the seventies, which culminated in the declaration of Emergency, resulted in the nightmarish experiences for the tribals and the marginal communities. This new political phenomenon witnessed the simultaneous emergence of toughs, thugs, musclemen, murderers as activists of the ruling party under the garb of youth organizations. These activists, backed by moneylenders, industrialists, contractors and politicians, unleashed innumerable miseries and horrors on these marginalized people who are always a soft target for these hoodlums.

Romeo and Pahlwan, along with their companions, go on collecting cuts from the wages of these tribals. When it was protested by them under the leadership of Chotti Munda, these youth league members started sexual harassment on the tribal women and physical assault of
the tribal men. Their houses were burnt and they were fired at with the guns. The tribals retaliated and caused physical injuries to these goons. Undeterred by the injuries inflicted by the tribals, these criminals continued their terror tactics against these tribals and the marginalized. It enraged these patient and the simple people and forced them to take some extreme measures which resulted in the ‘assassination’ of these two ‘great heroes’.

One cannot say that the Government is totally indifferent to the cause of the tribals. It had sent number of study teams and collected number of ‘reports’ regarding the state of affairs of the tribal community. Based on them, the Government has enacted number of laws like Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act (1976), Minimum Wages Act (1948), etc and introduced several tribal welfare schemes and appointed Tribal Development Officers. But the laws remain only on papers and never find implementation. The welfare schemes are extremely limited and unrealistic and do no good to the tribals. Government’s schemes and laws are based on the ‘studies’ conducted by the theorist like Dr. Amlesh Khurana. His studies are far removed from the harsh realities of life. He fails to find reasons for the ‘out-of-joint mind set’ of the tribals and cannot assess their ‘belly’s worry’, ‘bond work’, ‘debt’s lash’ and the vicious circle of moneylenders - landlords - contractor troika. Of course, the failure of the Government officials and the police to control the criminals masquerading as political activists is also responsible for the failure of various Government schemes and Acts.

Mahashweta Devi raises another important question relating to our concept of national economy and development programmes which have no room for the tribals and the subaltern. These programmes have created a new class of contractors who would become industrialists, ultimately leading to the formation of landlord – industrialist – contractor troika. They use
tribals only as the stepping-stones for their success. Under the new dispensation these marginalized may get slightly better wages than earlier. Yet, it is only one-tenth of what they are entitled to. The officials are aware of this vicious troika who do not let peace to prevail in the tribal villages. Mahashweta Devi is very bitter and satirical in criticizing this concept of development and economy which is handicapped by keeping a very significant mass outside its periphery.

Another very important question that this novel poses before us is the question of democracy and justice. Our concept of crime and punishment is very confusing to the tribals and the marginalized communities. They never understand what the administration considers a punishable crime. They express wonder as: “Manager rides t’ palquin, wears shoes, chews his betel leaf e’en after killin’ us. An’ Dukhia hangs if he kills manager.” (Devi, *Chotti* 89). Dhikus (non tribals) buy the whole earth and make all the tribal folk their bonded labourers, which is within the framework of justice. If the Adivasis take two and a half bighas of stony land, it becomes unjust. They are harassed for this crime. Chotti himself had seen a fugitive boy, who was unarmed and avoiding the police who were after him, was killed by the police. He did nothing actually. The police ‘thought’ that he was a Naxalite. Ultimately, it was informed that the boy threw bombs at the police and therefore they had to kill the boy. Hence, Chotti says, “What ye see is not true. What they said is true.” (235). The police killed the boy in front of everyone but told a different story. In 1971, in Baranagar, about two hoodlums killed about two hundred and fifty Naxal boys. The police did not do anything. Everything was ‘hushed up’. The adivasis, harijans and other untouchables knew that no one would come even if all of them were killed in a single go. But the whole administration would stand behind a landed farmer if he was in trouble. In some villages of Singbhum, in
1969 police arrested four hundred people, committed every bestiality on women in public view, burnt their houses and killed many of them just to save a landed farmer's face. The police found no fault if a moneylender or a landlord killed a debtor or a labourer. But a debtor or a labourer could not escape the police action if he said a word against the 'bosses'. The irony of justice is very much evident in the following words of Chotti:

"T' law's already there, lord! And yet Motia and Pahan died! Did anyone go to je-hell (sic), was anyone punished? Harmu did nothin' and went to je-hell. No lord! As long as Diku has t' power to make t' law work, so long will Diku watch Diku's rights."(304)

Romeo and Pahlwan masquerading as 'activists' of youth organization, commit all sorts of crimes on the vulnerable adivasis. They assault them, kill them and burn their villages. They harass their women, collect 'cut', from their wages. This is not 'un expected'. If the Adivasis kill them it becomes a most 'unexpected' event which invites immediate action by the police. The narrator comments, "The Romeos kill, they're not killed. This is the rule. Under all regimes."(Devi, Chotti 358). As a reaction to the death of Romeo and Pahlwan, the SDO (Sub-Divisional Officer) planned to punish all the villagers. Therefore, it is not strange if a Munda says, "Since I'm born Munda, a hard life is me birthright."(Devi, Chotti 180). It is how they had accepted their tragic fate with helpless resignation. Whatever is going on in this country is nothing but a sheer mockery of justice and democracy. This harsh reality enrages Mahashweta Devi and prompts her to say, "This is your bloody glorious India."(Chotti 57).

The root cause of this sorry state, according to Mahashweta Devi, is the failure to implement the land reform and the continuation of the feudal land system that had nurtured feudal values which are, by nature, anti-poor and anti-women. It is actually the landowners
who are ruling this country. The questions that haunt a reader after reading this novel are: How long this condition should be allowed to continue? Can this go on in a civilized world? What kind of democracy is being practiced here? and so on. The answer to these questions may not be visible in the near future but Mahashweta Devi’s weapon continues to fight against the prevailing injustice.

As Mahashweta Devi says, the long experience of untold sufferings and humiliations have made these people suspicious of the outsiders. They do not easily reveal themselves to the outside world. Only a ‘perfect outsider – insider’ like Mahashweta Devi can make us understand why these things happen. They might not have understood the administration’s version of crime and justice but they understood that Chotti’s arrow had a magic spell and could withstand any harm. It is a childlike innocence. The question is, what are we going to gain by destroying this innocence in the name of ‘democracy’, ‘development’ and ‘justice’?

The tribals may be uneducated, illiterate and even ignorant but they do not lack in human values. When the nephew of the Daroga was chased by a boar, Chotti saved him by killing the animal. Once a train was about to hit Tirathnath. Chotti Munda rescued him by miraculously pulling his leg hard. These simple people display wonderful common sense in abundance on various occasions, particularly in their negotiation for wages, bonded labour and in keeping unity of all the downtrodden.

One significant change that draws our attention in the novel is the transformation that the administration, the police and the Dikus undergo as a result of a continuous tribal struggles. It is evident that they take utmost caution while dealing with the tribals; more out of fear of Chotti’s magic arrow than their genuine concern for them. Chotti’s continuous success in the
archery competitions and the innumerable stories around his legendary arrow have made them realize that, "A bow and arrow in Chotti’s hand. Not a simple thing." (Devi, Chotti 334)³³

Even some innocuous, unplanned coincidences are attributed to the magical power of Chotti’s arrow. They credit his infallibility in archery at the time of trouble and danger. Still more worrisome matter for them is that other tribal communities and the marginalized – Dushad, Ganju, Chamar, Dhobi – were well organized under him. Hence, the exploiters had no courage to take any action that would enrage the jungle folk. They knew that this innocent people did not understand indirect exploitation and hence, it went on uninterrupted. Tribals under Chotti Munda could negotiate with the Dhikus regarding wages, could refuse to be the bonded labourers and even could possess patches of land. But the extremities of the Emergency forced them to take a rare decision.

Thus, the significance of the novel lies, at one level, in the adventure of Chotti Munda and his magic arrow and at another level, in the touching description of how the age-old tribal culture - which is at once simple, rich and innocent - is being destroyed. The novel stresses on the right of the tribals to live with dignity in Independent India. It is also a tale of all the dispossessed. Chotti stands as a ‘wish fulfillment’ of all the dispossessed of all the time of all the places. This becomes clear in Chotti’s final emblematic desperation, “Then he waits, unarmed. As he waits he mingles with all time and becomes river, folklore, eternal. What only the human can be.”(363)⁴⁴

The novel ends with a note of optimism. The tribal spirit is indomitable. It cannot be crushed. It cannot be bulldozed. Romeo and Pahlwan were the two notorious hooligans belonging to the youth league who had long terrorized the village folk. When their patience runs out, the tribals kill both of them. The SDO arranged a fair and an archery competition to punish their
killers and forced all the villagers to gather at the fair. The police planned to arrest the best archer as the two died by the poisoned arrows which could have been sped only by a best one. Chotti Munda confessed that he was the culprit and challenged the SDO to punish him. He proved the infallibility of his aim by shooting a target. When the SDO went to punish Chotti, thousands of Adivasis warned him: “Chotti on one side, SDO on the other, and in-between a thousand bows upraised in space. And a warning announced in many upraised hands.” (Devi, Chotti 364)

The language of the novel is direct, simple and effective. As Uma Mahadevan Dasa Gupta observes: “Mahashwetaji’s sentences that are as straight flying as Chotti’s arrow hitting the target.” (16). Regarding this Prema Nanda Kumar says: “In Spivak’s translation, the prose retains its vivid musicality and the sense of flow. The narration is spirited and imaginative as it moves from story to story in Chotti’s life, ebbing and flowing with a rhythm of its own, like a great musical composition.” (16). The language of the novel is in tune with the subject in hand. The vernacular is appropriate to the theme and characters in the novel. Regarding this, R.K. Dhawan points out:

“All the callousness and oppression cannot cancel human dignity. In the world of Mahashweta Devi’s novels, basic human qualities are found only among the downtrodden people. In Chotti’s character we find a supreme example of the innate strength and dignity of man transcending the circumstances of his birth, upbringing and education.” (171)

THE GLORY OF SRI SRI GANESH (1981)

*The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* is considered one of the most important works of Mahashweta Devi. This falls very much within the Mahashweta Devi canon of writing; the
exploitation of and the oppression on the landless low-caste people by the upper-caste landlords. In this multi-layered narrative, she takes us into the socio-economic uneasiness of Post-Independent India. She leaves us vis-a-vis various burning but unresolved issues that persist in rural India even many years after Independence; issue of agrarian land relations, inter-caste violence, rural development, position of women and the issue of law and order.

The land ownership and caste are intricately related in rural India. Being landless and being born low-caste is almost inevitable. Mahashweta Devi makes everything clear and vivid in an ironical, humorous, cryptic but direct style. She uses her razor-sharp weapon to subvert the prevailing feudal system which remains a blot on democracy and a mockery of independence.

The subversion and irony starts with the title itself. The use of double prefix ‘Sri Sri’ is significant. The novel reveals the fact that neither Ganesh, the central character, is ‘Sri Sri’ nor there is any ‘glory’ in him except the vainglory of himself and his cohorts in pulling their village, Barha, back to the Middle Ages. Taking us along a saga of innumerable barbarities and untold cruelties unleashed by the upper-caste Rajputs on the low-caste and the women folk, the novel takes us to a point where a ray of hope is visible. The fact is that the wind of change has started blowing over Barha, an imaginary village. Modernity, principles of democracy, provisions of constitution and human values peep into their village, inspite of all out efforts by the landlords – the uneducated beasts – to prevent their entry. The cracks are visible on the Barha fort of feudal empire. The adage, ‘unity is strength’, is proved true here by the deprived sections of the society. The common cause of suffering has brought all the low-castes together and are merged into a strong sea of armed people which, certainly is going to wash away all the illegalities, immoralities and inhumanities from Barha village.
The novel starts with the birth of Tritirnayan, a 'single toothed child', the last child to the third wife of Medininarayan, who was a bodyguard to the Zamindar (Raja) of Nawagarh (Mahasamund district, Chattisgarh). Medininarayan already had five female children from three wives. But he was anxiously longing for a male child and his happiness knows no bound on the birth of Tritirnayan. He was named so as he was born after the pilgrimage to three places. The striking features of the newborn were single sharp tooth, a chump of moles between the cheek and the ear, unnaturally elongated big toes. These unusual physical features were given divine interpretation. It was thought that the boy had a part of Ganesh in him. Hence, he was nicknamed Ganesh and an aura of exaggeration was built around him. He was considered a unique son and a 'Devangshi'. According to Deota, a Brahmin this child would be remembered for his achievements. He would raise the honour of the Gods and Brahmins. The name of the family would shine even more brilliantly. Those who cared for and served the child would prosper. He who wished him ill will would be cursed. The birth of Ganesh made Medini Singh's house a holy place like Varanasi. His sense of satisfaction was that he got what he wanted all his life.

One important thing that was ignored in the din of initiating Ganesh to a new order of divinity was that the mother ascended to heaven on the birth of this unique son. Medini Singh's hatred for his wives and the female children went up after the birth of Ganesh. Two elderly wives, Badki and Majlhi were sent back to their in-laws after a lot of fuss. Medini Singh took all the measures to see that no evil shadows of his wives and daughters would fall on the devangshi (Ganesh). Lachhima, a low-caste woman and her grand mother Gulal were left in charge of Ganesh's upbringing and Medini Singh's household. All the five daughters of Medini
Singh got married and were sent to their respective in-laws, never to look back at their parental house.

Medini Singh was a typical Rajput in his hatred for the women folk, in his cruelty towards the low-caste and in his desire for extra marital relations. He took utmost care to bring up his son on the same line. That is why he had set up a school at home. He taught him the way to keep the low-caste people in their place firmly under his feet and the way the gun is operated. Medini Singh’s empire of corn, paddy, maize, rabi crop, molasses, milk, cream was looked after by Gulal and his insatiable sexual desire was fulfilled by Lachhima. He had bought Lachhima in exchange for three bighas of land and made her his concubine.

It had been a common practice of the Rajput landlords to keep a low-caste woman in addition to ritually wedded wife or wives at home. The fate of such kept women would be in the hands of the landlords. They would be kicked out after sexual exploitation, slavery and harassment. Once they became old and helpless, they were left with bullocks and buffaloes. Similar fate awaited for Mori under Barkandas Singh, for Ganga under Nathu Singh, for Lachhima under Medini Singh and later for Rukmani under Sri Sri Ganesh.

Lachhima, who was very clever, tried to escape from the vicious clutches of Medini Singh by marrying Mohar Karan, a low-caste boy. But Medini Singh spoiled her efforts by registering a false complaint against the boy and by forcing him to leave the place. Later, Lachhima accepted her fate with helpless resignation and concentrated all her energy on setting everything right at the domestic arena of the landlord. Both Gulal and Lachhima poured their life’s blood into it.
In the meanwhile, Sri Sri Ganesh had started displaying his true colour. The garb of divinity gradually wearied away. He used to express an unearthly fascination and satisfaction on his face on looking at the bhangis who slaughtered pigs by ramming them with a burning rod. He used to get sadistic satisfaction and would get into a trance at once from such incidents. The father used to thrash the field hands with his nagra shoes just to make his 'rare' son laugh. He was chubby and healthy. At the age of eight, he would pick up and throw any ten year old. At twelve Ganesh looked sixteen, with an ugly smile on his face. In the meanwhile, it was decided that Ganesh would marry Nathu Singh’s daughter.

Medini Singh, who was selfish and power-drunk, effortlessly destroyed the simple joys and desires of people like Mohor, Lachhima and Dhanpatiya. The Bhangis began to sing a song, describing all the scandals and misdeeds of Medini Singh. He fell ill after listening to the song. The song raised his blood pressure and his blood vessel burst in his brain leading to the paralysis of the left side. Later, he died just after the arrival of the daughter-in-law. Hence, naturally, Sri Sri Ganesh, the chota malik, became the malik.

The new malik, Ganesh, proved to be a tough master. He imposed a strict discipline on everybody who came under his control. Though younger than many, he was a bulky man. In the absence of his father, his influence started growing among his Rajput community. He brought Gajamoti Singh who committed a musalmani sin on to the right path. He rushed to Tohri to arrange cholera injections for the low-caste. Taking advantage of the arrival of the bahu and the death of Medini Singh, Lachhima planned to settle down on the three bighas of land given by the malik. She got consent from the new malik to marry Haroa and started a new life with him.
The *bangis* who usually sang the song of exploitation and oppression by the landlords and all their misconducts, started singing songs appreciating Sri Sri Ganesh. All these developments made Ganesh a leading person of the Rajput community in Barha. Ganesh sincerely followed the path shown by his father and rather improved upon it. He grew into a typical Rajput landlord and proved to be more cruel and despotic than his father. He destroyed whatever he touched. Things would go from bad to worse. He turned to be a ‘mini Hitler’. Harassment of the low-caste and the oppression against women were pursued with more vigour under the new *malik*. He gave a false complaint against Mangalal, a *bhangi* for his alleged act of skinning a dead cow and was arrested by the police. Ganesh burnt down the *bhangi* settlement though they did not compose any song about the *malik* and his scandals. He unleashed terror over the low-caste only to create fear among them and to send them a message that he could kill or save them. Their death or survival depended on his whim. In the meanwhile, Pallavi Shah, the daughter of Tejlal Shah of Bombay who would become a minister in the central Government later, joined the Gandhi Mission and would serve the lowest of the low in the society. She felt herself impure on being betrayed by a friend at Bombay. After seeing the miserable *bhangi* settlements, Pallavi felt that those caricature of humanity alone could restore her to purity. Ganesh’s "divine eye" fell on her and told the *bhangis* to bring her to his place. Pallavi turned down the immoral proposal with sheer indifference. Being enraged by the refusal of Pallavi, Ganesh burnt down the entire *bhangi* settlement and made them homeless. Later, Pallavi had to leave the place accepting defeat in the face of centuries-old terror.

As a true son of Medini Singh, Ganesh was not happy with his wife Putli. His hatred for her reached its height after she gave birth to a female child. Wife beating and torturing
became a routine activity. Putli would be bruised on her head and all over the body. Life had become hell for her. The torturing was so severe that it did hurt Mishir and forced him to go away from Ganesh’s house. Mishir was kept as a tutor to Ganesh by Medini Singh. Ganesh’s sensual Rajput blood longed for a keep. Rukmani, daughter of Ganga, the kept woman of Nathu Singh, became a victim.

Rukmani, whose marriage with Kamu Ahir was already proposed, was sent to Ganesh’s house against her wishes, for Putli’s comfort. As one could expect, Rukmani became pregnant. Ganesh used to call an unmarried girl’s son a Kaanim (illegitimate). Rukmani did not want to be a mother of the Malik’s Kaanim son. Hence, she committed suicide. It happened all the time but no one had dared to take an extreme step which Rukmani had taken. Rukmani’s suicide triggered a series of unexpected events in and around Barha. The Rajput Malik’s were stunned by this unexpected turn of events. Not in life, but in death, Rukmani proved her strength.

The low-caste people like Bhangis, Ganjus, Dushads and Dhobis were tortured, harassed, their settlements had been burnt, their women folk were spoiled. They received everything helplessly. They got a rare chance to unite themselves in the tragic death of Rukmani. Helped by the Gandhi Mission and the Harijan Kalyan Sangh, the low-caste found an alternative source of livelihood. They got permission from the Government to collect firewood from the forest and to sell them on a condition that they should not cut the living trees and should not set fire to the forest. The Bhangis had already stopped cleaning the latrines of the Rajputs.

On the other hand, the series of events, like Pallavi episode, Mishir’s exit from Ganesh’s house and Rukmani’s suicide made Ganesh’s position low among the Rajputs. Though they reiterated Rajput unity time and again, they remained discorded to the end due to arrogance.
and bestiality of Sri Sri Ganesh. Their clout among the official class started dwindling. Other Rajputs distanced themselves from him towards the end and Ganesh remained isolated.

The act of the low-caste and the help given to them by the Gandhi Mission and Harijan Kalyan Sangh angered Ganesh. He decided to evict the low-caste and to bring in new subjects. He would teach a lesson to the SDO (Sub-Divisional Officer) and kill Abhay Mahato of Harijan Sangh and Acchuts. Haroa, who came to know the evil designs of Ganesh, informed in detail to the SDO and the SDO gave a stern warning to Ganesh. Suspecting Haroa to be an informer, Ganesh’s long cherished cruelty, barbarity, anger and beastly hunger for blood, turned towards the poor Haroa and killed him by firing at him. In the meanwhile, Ganesh’s left shoulder had been severely wounded by Haroa. This incident and the force exerted by the Harijan Sangh, made it inevitable for the SDO to take action on Ganesh. The unlicensed gun of Ganesh was seized.

After this incident Ganesh became a wounded beast; vengeful and cunning. He became restless and desperate like a mad dog. He would waste no time to take revenge against the low-caste. All those low-caste people, who knew his nature well, expected that he would set the forest on fire in order to punish them. That is why they were on guard. As expected, Ganesh moved towards the forest like a beast, like a hulking primordial beast, with a tin of kerosene, a rag and matches in his hand. After being chased by the people on guard, Ganesh sneaked into Lachhima’s house begging for help, knowing well that Lachhima would be punished if she helped him. He made an unimaginable suggestion that she should go to his house and he would marry her after throwing away his wife Putli. Lachhima, whose calm was not disturbed even when Haroa was murdered in her presence, became violent after listening to the unusual
proposal. Something exploded inside her. Her leashed bitterness and anger of life time against Medini and Ganesh is liberated when Ganesh begs her to save his life and makes some uncalled for proposition.

Brandishing Haroa's sickle in her hand Lachhima said: "Only I could have saved you then. Today, I shall save you again. But not, Ganesh Singh, in the way you want me to. Today, I shall do it my way." (Devi, The Glory). She screamed like an angry kite into the night and called all those who were after Ganesh. The angry screaming mob of low-caste people came from all the directions and merged into 'a sea of armed people' with whom Lachhima too became one. Voices raised and surged around the house in mighty waves suggesting the fall of the feudal empire and the emergence of the people power in Barha.

The novel leaves the readers vis-à-vis two important issues; the issue of landownership and caste relation on the one hand and the issue of gender on the other. Nine tenths of the land in the village was under the control of nine upper-caste Rajput families. The Bhangis, Hajams, Dhobis, Dushads, Ganjus and other 'dispensable' groups (poor untouchable classes), who form the majority, are left at the mercy of the maliks. They are easily trapped into the vicious circle of sharecropping–loan–bond–interest, leaving them nowhere, at last. In order to survive they have to sharecrop or serve the maliks.

Whatever the maliks say go in the village. Landlessness and belonging to low-caste is as directly linked as landownership and being born upper-caste. The striking thing is the oppression of the low-caste people. They are unnecessarily harassed through false complaints and are tortured and humiliated. Their women folks are spoiled and thrown out. The feudal law of the Middle Ages still prevails in Barha village. Law, order and Government are far from
The issue of gender, which Mahashweta Devi pursues vehemently, finds a place of prominence here. The upper-caste privilege is the monopoly of the men. The women have nothing to be proud of their caste. For the upper-caste Rajputs, women were only dispensable commodities meant for their use. Men could do whatever they wanted. They could marry any number of wives and give any kind of torture to them. Female child was an anathema. There is a reference to the cruel practice of burying girl children in the ground. Mother of a female child is considered to be a sin. The men deride and belittle whatever women do. The women volunteers from the Gandhi Mission were also detested by them. They believed that only fallen women would do that kind of work. Women as a class were at the receiving end here as in *Rudali* (1997), an important novella by Mahashweta Devi. Birth in upper-caste did not change their prospect. The only thing they were taught was to bear every thing mutely. They do not challenge and protest. Here Mahashweta Devi shows the clear demarcations in the positions held by the women folks in two different sections of the society. The low-caste women are the victims of class as well as gender discriminations. But unlike their upper-caste counterparts, they get all the helps and moral supports from the men folk. Their men stand behind their women firmly through thick and thin. They do not ditch their women in the middle. Mohor Karan wanted to marry Lachhima though he knew that she was kept by Medini Singh. Haroa married her and lived with her happily. Ganga and Mori were not abandoned by their men, though they were the kept women of Nathu Sing and Barkandaj Singh. The striking
feature of these low-caste women is their survival tactics, adaptability and readiness to take
risk which the upper-caste women lack. They will live under a tree, eat what they get. If they
do not get anything, they will die.

Rukmani's suicide is a crucial incident in the whole of the novel. It triggers off series of
incidents, leading ultimately to the fall of the upper-caste feudal heads and rise of people's
power. Rukmani's suicide is a form of protest, an extreme step which a low-caste woman
can take against the centuries old oppression. Rukmani showed her strength in death. The
low-caste women are mortgaged and made kept women by the Rajput landlords. They will let
them go only when they are sucked dry and become useless as an old cow. Ganga and Mori
who were meted out with similar treatment by the maliks decided to tread a more destitute
path. They would like to go to Tohri (a market town in Ranchi district) and live on begging. It
is also a form of protest which these people can show. Regarding this the author finds out:

"These two one-time mistresses of Barkandaj and Nathu, father and
son, who had dedicated their lives and youth to the service of their
Maliks, became the symbols of all such low-caste mistresses of all
malik-mahajans as they took to the streets. In rags, with bundles
under their arms, stained aluminium bowls in their hands, Ganga with
a walking stick."(Devi, The Glory 126-127)

One important point that drives the reader's attention in the novel is the community
feeling and human values among the down trodden. They are carried away by the sense of
class rather than the feeling of caste. When Haroa was killed by Ganesh, all the low-caste
people realized that he had died for them but no one knew what his caste was. Though
Lachhima, loved him, married and lived happily with him says, "He never told me his caste,
and I never asked him." (Devi, *The Glory* 148)². It is the class concern and the human feeling that bring them together. As R.K. Dhawan writes, "In the world of Mahashweta Devi’s novels, basic human qualities are found only among the downtrodden people." (171)²

When Rukmani committed suicide all the low-caste people rally behind the dead body. They took that opportunity to demoralize the upper-caste Rajputs. When Ganga and Mori left Barha to go to Tohri, all their people walked with them some of the way and Bigulal suggested them to take the forest path which would be cooler. Ranka and Bigulal could negotiate with the Government officials on behalf of the downtrodden because of their trust in each other, unlike their upper-caste counterparts. Of course, the role of the Gandhi Mission and Harijan Kalyan Sangh went a long way in their empowerment.

Mishir, the Brahmin tutor is the only exception here who expresses some human concern for the women and the downtrodden. The actions of the Government officials are more prompted by the legalities and administrative conveniences than the human concerns. One message the novel gives us is that too much of enthusiasm like that of Pallavi’s will do more harm than helping the downtrodden. The empowerment should start from within, not from without. Thus, *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* (1981) shows the life of the underdogs — the Lachhimas, the Rukmanis, the Mohors and the Haroas — as a contrast to the lives of their all-powerful overlords — the Medinis and Ganeshes.

**THE BOOK OF THE HUNTER** (1994)

It is an important work of fiction by Mahashweta Devi, is based on Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarti’s epic poem, *Abhayamangal*, better known as *Chandimangal*. Mukundaram Chakrabarti is regarded as the greatest Medieval poet (16th century) of Bengal.
Writing about men and women, not gods and goddesses, he documented the socio-economic upheavals in the hunting tribe of Shabars in Ararha at that point of time. In a section of that epic called "Byadhkhanda" (The Book of the Hunter) the life of the Shabars, who live in forest is described.

The present novel is a part of Mahashweta Devi’s innumerable projects and efforts to infuse the tribals with ethnic and racial pride and make the mainstream people understand them better. All the works of Mahashweta Devi on the tribal community are based on her first-hand experiences, coupled with their rich tradition of oral lore. But Shabars who make a smaller and a mere marginalised community and who were notified as criminals by the British in 1871, have lost their rich oral traditions in the process of being uprooted. Hence, Mukundaram Chakrabarti’s epic poem, Abhayamangal provided a strong base for the present work of Mahashweta Devi, which she acknowledges whole-heartedly.

The stigma of ‘notified tribe’ looms large over the Shabar community even many years after being denotified (1952). The circumstances leading to the so-called suicide of Chuni Kotal, the first Lodha woman graduate, whom Mahashweta Devi patronized and the mysterious death of her Adivasi assistant, Budhan Shabar, are examples for it. Mahaswheta Devi had written many articles on them in Economics and Political Weekly. They will be discussed in detail in the chapter entitled, Activist Writings of Mahashweta Devi.

In this novel, Mahaswheta Devi explores the cultural values of the Shabars and how they cope with the slow erosion of their way of life as more and more forestland gets cleared to make way for settlements. She uses the lives of two couples, the Brahman Mukundaram
and his wife, and the young Shabars, Phuli and Kalya, to capture the contrasting socio-cultural norms of rural Bengali society of the time.

It is through Mukunda and his wife, Mahashweta Devi brings out how they are ignorant and prejudiced about Shabars, the hunter tribe. The contrasting norms of rural society regarding the institution of marriage, husband-wife relation, concept of 'King', sense of justice, food system, the idea of wealth, concept of knowledge, the manner of celebrations, the mode of address etc are brought out clearly in the novel.

Shabars believe that the whole Shabar clan descended from *Kalketu* and *Phullora* who were created by the Goddess by pressing a stone into a lump of clay. Later they became the King and the Queen by virtue of Kalketu hunting a golden monitor lizard on *Durgashtami*, the eighth day of *Durga Puja*. Their goddess is Abhayachandi who is every thing for them. One thing a Shabar child learns from birth is that a certain Brahman youth had stolen Abhayachandi and that was the beginning of bad times for the Shabars. Therefore, they do not trust the Brahmans and even don't tread on the shadow of a Brahman. Mukunda does not know that the Shabars don't have reverence for the Brahmans. (The *Kalketu* legend assumed importance in Bengali literature since Nadiya period (1500-1800 AD).

Phuli held her husband’s hand in public and laughed loudly as she walked with her arms around his waist and, on top of that, she addressed him as *tui*. This made Mukunda imagine her to be a ‘shameless’ woman. But these people did not know the meaning of the word ‘shame’. They were the ‘forest’s progeny’. They were like the vine wrapped around a sal tree. Nothing is shameful in it.

The Shabars abide by their ancient social edicts. They had their own customs and their
own yardstick of morality, that are basically different from that of the mainstream people. The problem lies in the mainstream arrogance and their ignorance of this basic difference. Both men and women among the Shabars toil for their daily victuals. They marry whoever they want. The boy’s father has to give presents and only then will the girls father give his daughter away in marriage. The presentation consists of the deer skins and the wild boars. It takes a lot of begging and pleading for Shabars to get a wife. They build separate huts after marriage. When the husband and wife quarrel, the husband thrashes his wife. She in turn strikes a blow or two and it may even come to pass that they would leave each other. Then both the man and the woman can re-marry. A widow can marry her late husband’s younger brother or any other man. They believe that these customs are laid down by the Goddess Abhaya and they honour it absolutely. It is not the sort of society in which the wife has to take it all lying down.

Kalya, when he was eight, dragged away six-year-old Phuli and took her his wife. He used to beat his wife on the regular basis but was massaging her limbs afterwards. The two of them would die if they could not set their eyes on each other. If Phuli’s foot was struck by a stone, Kalya’s foot would smart with pain. The Shabar men hunt and collect the animal hides, claws, ivory etc. But they are not allowed to sell them. That is the job for women.

Danko Shabar, the headman of the community had made some amendments to the wedding rules keeping in mind the Kaliyuga trend peeping into the community. While forests keep receding, killing of deers, tigers and boars to meet the demands of the bride’s father they would invite Ma’s curse. Therefore, none of the brides’ fathers should try to make profit out of wedding. They should not demand more than four or five tiger skins or deer hides and one deer or wild boar. They should have them all wed the same day under the same canopy. The feast must be for the whole community. The hunted animals would be cooked at once and
would trade their hides for rice.

Abhayachandi was their Goddess. They believed that she was the creator, nurturer and protector of all living beings on land and water. To disobey her law was the greatest sin. She had given puja work, books, granary and cowshed for the Brahmans and the jungle for Shabars to live upon. They are the children of the jungle. They hunt animals and birds, sell feathers and meat, get rice and oil in the market. They were supposed to strictly follow the ethics of hunting, the violation of which would be a great sin.

Megha Shabar, the son-in-law of Danko Shabar, had committed a ‘great great sin’ by killing a pregnant deer. Hence, Danko denied him the knowledge which he would have given to him otherwise. Killing of a deer during the mating period too was a sin. The deer would go in search of a doe, they marry and would have fawns. Therefore killing of them during the mating period is prohibited. Needless killing, violence and destruction are not encouraged.

The hunters are not supposed to proceed further when they see Abhaya’s fortress in the forest. It suggests that the Ma does not want that animal to be killed. A hunter who returns after killing a king elephant would be greeted by the dancing women. When Kalya goes to hunt the king elephant, Phuli wraps herself in a sari three times around her body and put a vermillion mark in the parting of her hair and keeps praying at home. Shabars, who consider themselves the children of the forest, live wherever there is forest. To the surprise of the mainstream people, they don’t acknowledge the existence of Kings anywhere and do not pay taxes either. They believe what their ancient legend says, obey their own king and take care of justice themselves within their community. They fight against the enemies who attack Ararha but will not work in the King’s army. The Shabar always carried a weapon in his hand and his life revolved around his wife and children.
The Shabars believe that their Goddess, Abhayachandi, placed herself at a temple in the deep forest where no one else but a Shabar is allowed to go. Elephants as big as mountains and huge pythons keep watch over it. Abhaya, the fearless Goddess gives them a boon of fearlessness.

Danko Shabar, the head of the community and his daughter, Tejota are the storehouse of 'knowledge'. They could give medical treatment both to human beings and animals. When the King's elephant went mad, Tejota gave her a treatment. Longevity is the hallmark of this community. Danko and Tejota are all alive even to this day. Mukunda's pregnant wife felt fine after Tejota sent her an amulet. Even the King invited the Shabars to perform puja to the earth and consecrate the cardinal directions while building a temple or digging a pond. They were weather experts too. They could predict about rain and harvest. Pregnancy and childbirth were not a problem in Ararha as long as Tejota, Gopali and Nadiya were there. They could foretell the gender of the child even long before the birth. Their treatment was so effective that 'there was not much for the deliverer to deliver'. Their wisdom would be imparted only to the right persons at the right time. Donka and Tejota knew every thing and they were the guiding spirits of the Shabars.

But Mukunda, the Brahman Priest well versed in Sanskrit books, hesitates to recognize the knowledge of the Shabars. He firmly believes that knowledge comes only from the formal system of learning. Mukunda, who is also a farming householder, is amazed to know that the Shabars do not know poverty. There is no sign of suffering on their faces. They live on hunting and bring nothing except for rice, cloth, salt, pepper and oil. Both men and women celebrate many festivals and holidays, dancing and playing. They toil hard and are perfectly
Mahasweta Devi tries to bring home the fact that the true knowledge does not come from the book learning but through a close association with nature and life. Ganesh, a Bagti by caste and Kalachand, a field hand display a profound knowledge of many things, though they have never set their eyes on a school. The way they cope with the slow erosion of their life, as more and more forestland gets cleared to make way for cities and towns, is very interesting. They wonderfully adapt themselves to the changed circumstances by amending the constitution of their community.

When the town advances, the Shabars go away by picking up their shovels, axes, bows and arrows as per the directions of Danko and there will be a new Shabar settlement somewhere. Inspite of their cautious efforts to keep themselves off the cities, they could not escape the corrupt influences of the city. For instance, only Tejota, Gopali and Niday were the expert midwives among the Shabars. Their presence would keep the fear of childbirth away. But others were not coming forward to learn midwifery under the ‘foul’ influence of the city. There was a time when Shabars used to live aloof from others. They never used to deal with other communities. But now they are forced to live with all kinds of people. They sell and others buy. There is no stopping of the time from changing.

Mahasweta Devi reflects on the hunter tribe which is in the process of change due to the receding forests and the advancing cities. At the same time, she shows how the attitude of the mainstream society towards this surviving forest tribe too is undergoing change. Mukunda’s journey from Daminya to Arorha is a journey from ignorance to knowledge. Interactions with the life and the cultural values of the Shabar tribe dispelled his deep-rooted
upper-caste ego and prejudices and revealed him the existence of ‘the Shiva’ behind these children of the forest. The sense of freedom these women enjoy, their discipline in every walk of life, their ‘storehouse of knowledge’ passed on to the generations, their natural and artless life opened his eyes who otherwise considered himself far superior. He takes this to be a suitable subject for his proposed epic. Thus, at last he got a subject matter for his long awaited epic, after knowing amazing things about this ‘wonderful piece’ of mankind. According to Mahashweta Devi, by writing his Byadhkanda, Mukundaram somewhat lightened the burden of mainstream society’s sin. What the author writes in the Preface to the novel clarifies her purpose behind writing this novel. She writes:

“In this novel, I undertook for the first time to seek out the tribal identity of the Shabars. Whatever I have written about byadh (hunter) or Shabar life, every detail will certainly be corroborated by the Shabars themselves – the day they are no longer driven from place to place, cruelly oppressed, and insulted. My mistakes will be corrected then and they are the ones who will provide the corrections. Such is my goal, but I do not know whether I will accomplish it. This is, however, a beginning. The encroachment of towns and non-adiwas upon their territory, adivasis abandoning their lands and going away, the heartless destruction of forests, the search of the forest children for a forest home and the profound ignorance of mainstream people about adivasi society – these are all truths about our own time.”(VIII)

Thus, in this chapter we have seen how Mahashweta Devi successfully projects her views on writing history. She takes up various issues like moral corruption and hypocrisy of the middle class, police excesses, exploitation of the poor helpless people by the land lords.
We have also seen how she takes up the task of documentation of tribal history, their revolts, their culture and their conflicts with their oppressors. The unbreakable continuity in the tribal history is revealed to us. Mahashweta Devi clearly shows us how the sense of justice and equality have become futile exercises in the post-independence context.
END NOTES


3. Arya 190.


5. Sharma, 166-167.


7. Devi X.

8. Devi 77.


10. Devi 74.

11. Devi 177.

12. Devi 188.


15. Devi 107.


17. Devi 247.

19. Devi 177.


27. Dhawan 168.


29. Sharma 162

30. Arya 98.

31. Arya 187-188.


33. Arya 188.


35. Devi 17.


38. Devi 3.

39. Dhawan 165.

40. Devi, *Chotti Munda*, XVII.

41. Devi XII-XIII.

42. Devi 121-122.

43. Devi 15.

44. Devi XXII.

45. Devi 32.

46. Devi 195.

47. Devi 89.


49. Devi 304.

50. Devi 358.

51. Devi 180.

52. Devi 57.

53. Devi 334.

54. Devi 363.

55. Devi 364.


58. Dhawan 171.
59. Devi 164.
60. Devi 126-127.
61. Devi 148.
62. Dhawan 171.
63. Devi VIII.