The representation of the experience of life through picture, song and story has been as important to human beings as the struggle for their physical survival on earth. All peoples at all times have felt the need to express their responses to their particular life situations, and these responses have survived as the historical, cultural and literary legacy of our past. And people at all times have also always engaged with this legacy, comparing it with their own contemporary experiences, relating and redefining, thereby leaving their own creations for posterity to engage with. In the short but evocative novel Byadhakanda, translated as The Book of the Hunter (2002), one can see Mahasweta Devi engaging with the question of literary representation itself. In the Preface to this novel, she speaks of her literary debt to the sixteenth century Bengali poet Mukundaram Chakravarthy, whose epic poem
Abhayamangal contains a description of the Shabar tribes. Mahasweta regards this as probably one of the first instances where tribal life has been represented by a mainstream author with insight and sympathy. By representing the Shabars in his epic, Mukundaram has “somewhat lightened the burden of mainstream society’s sins”, feels Mahasweta Devi. (Preface The Book of the Hunter viii)

One segment of the epic, titled “Granthopathir Bibaran” (“An Account of the Origin of the Book”), particularly fascinated her as it dealt with the very question of representation through the practice of writing: who does the writing, what does he/she write about, what form does that representation take? In choosing a subject for literary creation, what are the factors that might motivate a writer? These are some of the basic issues that she tackles in the novel. As for Mukundaram Chakravarthy, for Mahasweta Devi too, acquired knowledge and one’s own direct life experiences form the twin spouts of the fountain head of creativity. In the introduction to the novel she goes on to say how she wrote The Book of the Hunter by interweaving three sources- Mukundaram’s epic, her own first-hand experience from her activist work with the Shabar tribes and the Shabars’ own writings about themselves in her journal Bortika. (vi-ix) This classic novel provides a clue to Mahasweta Devi’s fiction, both in terms of narrative technique as well as thematic content.
The Book of the Hunter deftly interweaves the stories of Mukundaram’s life with that of the Shabars, as they co-existed in a village society of rural Bengal in the sixteenth century. In the give and take of mundane day-to-day village life, Mukunda comes across new areas of experience that he hadn’t encountered in his world of learning and scholarship. He gradually overcomes his prejudices and received notions about the tribals and comes to understand their right to be seen as “civilized” human beings. His conversations with Kalya give him insights into their distinct tribal identity, and he comes to know of their great cultural heritage through their oral lore of myth and legend imparted to him by Tejota. He sees with his own eyes the degradation and humiliation the Shabars face in their unequal struggle with the more dominant groups in the village society and the tragic repercussions of the loss of their traditional forest lands and their cultural traditions.

Mukunda himself cannot ignore for long the insistent voice of his own tradition, which prompts him to record this slice of life that he has lived through. The novel ends with Mukunda recording the story of the Shabars, as well as their oral lore and mythology that was imparted to him by Tejota. Ironically, it is the Brahmin scholar Mukunda and not her own son Kalya whom Tejota sees fit to impart the secret knowledge of the tribe. Thus the story of the tribal is anchored in the larger traditions of story telling that existed in that society. By becoming a part of the
epic poem *Abhayamangal*, the story of the Shabars is preserved in the grand narrative tradition itself, keeping alive the possibility of subversion.

It is not by accident that Mahasweta Devi chose to base her novel on Mukundaram’s epic. Apart from the fact that she identifies with Mukundaram as a writer who chose to write of the tribals, she is also invoking the great traditions of writing that exist in India figuring the tribal subject. Mukundaram’s *Abhayamangal* belongs to the genre of the “mangalakavya”, which were narratives of the “panchali” tradition and held pride of place in the medieval literature of Bengal. Literary historians note that the “mangalakavyas” were probably attempts at ‘elevating’ or incorporating indigenous deities into the Hindu pantheon. However, their significance lies in their narrative features as well as in their narrativization of the socio-cultural and religious practices of the unempowered, subaltern social groups like the peasants, lower classes and castes, the tribals, women, other religious groups. They are perceived as non-canonical counter narratives that subverted the

---

2 Among the many narrative traditions in medieval Bengal, the *panchali* form in the *payar* metre was the most popular. They were narrations of various themes accompanied by performances, puppet (*panchalika*) dances and reading of scrolls. *Mangalakavyas* are considered to be “the direct descendants of pre-Aryan and proto-australoid ethnic strata” (Bandhopadhyay 40) and were unique contributions to the recognition and revival of many non-Aryan and anti-brahminical socio-cultural and religious traditions of the times. They were long narrative poems, written and narrated in celebration of local village deities, usually goddesses. The most famous of the *mangalkavyas*, the *Manasamangal* celebrates the snake-goddess, Manasa, while the *Chandimangal* or *Abhyamangal* celebrates the forest goddess of the tribals, “Chandi” or “Abhaya”. View Asit Bandhopadhyay 21-69 and Sudhipta Kaviraj 503- 566.
privileged social, religious and narrative structures of the day through the choice of the deity worshipped, the characters, the story, the literary and aesthetic techniques used and the implied audience. “The mangalakavya tradition, therefore, shifts the narrative world to a different social universe; the life of lower-caste society is brought into the sacred sphere of literature”, notes Kaviraj. (518)

Commentators have noted that Bengal has at all times had such a tradition of dissent literature right from pre-medieval times to the present times. The genres of socially committed realistic narratives that have had an almost unbroken run in Bengali literature are also a reflection of this trend. Although Mahasweta departs radically from mainstream Bengali literature both in terms of style and subject, her writing harks back to many of the non-canonical narrative practices, especially the oral narratives of the tribal and folk streams, in her efforts to represent subaltern life, history and culture. The structure of this novel also provides the key to Mahasweta’s narrative style. She places the narrative of the tribal amidst the myriad narratives that make up the story of Indian civilization. As Radha Chakravarthy observes, there is a

3 Kaviraj observes that “Bengal as a region had a long and continuous history of religious heterodoxy in which one anti-Brahinical movement followed another.” (529) The Charya songs that upheld the Buddhist tradition, the mangalakavyas that celebrated the cults of the lesser goddesses, the Vaishnava padavalis, the mystic singing of the Bauls and the later lyrics of the Bhakti movements- all reflect anti-hegemonic narrative positions. The trend of social realism in later fiction writers too has continued to portray the life of the less privileged.
“literariness” to her fictional writing that points to her sharp awareness of the discursive practices that govern social structures. (Introduction In the Name of the Mother ix)

Even as she presents the empirical facts of the material realities of the tribals’ life, she shows them engaging with the discursive structures of society as well as that of their own cultural traditions, both of which circumscribe their existence. Her works thus become heavily layered narratives that foreground the tribal’s narrative from among the myriad discourses of India’s history, culture and literature. In The Book of the Hunter, when Mukunda, the Sanskrit scholar declares, “That’s not what we call knowledge, Kalachand,” the villager replies, “Around here we respect Tejota a great deal” (47). By upholding Tejota’s wisdom, and making her the central character on a par with Mukunda, Mahasweta allows a space for the erased knowledge and culture of the tribals to be articulated along with the dominant knowledge systems. Thus, Beniwal and Vandana note, she contests the “…ideological, economic and political edifice which silences the voice of the subaltern, invisibilizes them and declares their narratives to be unworthy of record and transmission” (“Subaltern Historiography and Literary Aesthetics” The Quest 31). The Book of The Hunter also marks the earliest point in historical time that Mahasweta returns to in order to recover tribal history from its silent and marginalized presence in the discourses of
Indian history and literature. This is, of course, apart from her engagements with the various references made to tribes in texts such as the epics, the Puranas, Ithihasas and so on.

As Mahasweta repeatedly avers, it is history, or rather the omissions and commissions involved in the writing of India’s “official” history that engaged her interest at the outset. She hears the resounding silences in historical discourse on the subject of the tribal and takes it upon herself to fill those silences with the tales of the tribals of India. Her engagement with history determines both the content and the form of her creative writing. History is not just a reference point in her weaving of the tale, it is the tale itself and the telling of the tale too. In an interview with Gayatri Spivak, Mahasweta speaks of India’s tribal history as a continuum that runs parallel to the “official” discourse of Indian history, although never entering it directly. “Tribal history is not seen as a continuity in Indian historiography…Yet it is still continuing, the tribals are still being evicted from their land...” (“Telling History”, Chotti Munda x) She compares tribal history to a full and flowing river which is not without a destination, but which is largely unnoticed and forgotten in India because it is “unwritten history” (xi). In her writing, both fiction and non-fiction, she has mainly tried to re-inscribe this erased history into the mainstream of Indian historical discourse. From the 1960s onwards, her involvement has been such that that there is no
area of tribal life that she has not experienced first hand. By accessing and researching historical records, collecting and recording oral narratives, and documenting the material details of contemporary tribal life, Mahasweta has brought to light the hidden world of the tribals in India. From the story of one of the most ancient of India’s forest tribes, the hunting-gathering Shabars, in *The Book of the Hunter* to that of the poor Nagesia tribals in modern day Madhya Pradesh in “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha”, Mahasweta traces the journey of the tribal from a life of independence, autonomy and ethnic pride to their present deprived, marginalized and graceless existence.

Mahasweta’s innovative use of the genre of the “historical novel” has led to considerable critical interest and debate in literary circles. History manifests itself in her works in more than one dimension. The most important factor is the contextualization of the historical moment, both in its spatial and temporal dimensions. In all her fictional works dealing with the tribal subject, she paints a wide canvas, but without ever losing sight of the specific time and the local context. Each of her works deals with the issues of specific tribes, seeking to recreate a specific socio-historic milieu through a deft interweaving of history, fiction and folklore, bringing alive a particular time and space. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, she recreates the history of the Munda tribe in the context of the tribal revolt (the “Ulgulan”) led by Birsa.
Munda against the British colonial regime during the nineteenth century. *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* traces a century’s history of the Munda tribes of Chotanagpur from pre-colonial times to the present day through the life and times of the central character Chotti Munda, set against the backdrop of India’s nationalist movement, peasant revolts and related class struggles of the said period. *The Book of the Hunter* recreates the history of the Shabar tribes as they lived in the sixteenth century, but with resonances into their contemporary context, while “Draupadi” deals with the resistance of a woman of the Santhal tribe, articulated within the context of the Naxalite movement in West Bengal in the 1970s.

Her narratives usually begin by establishing the context with the minimum of description, and anchoring it firmly in the specific region and time-frame of history. The following passage is an example: “The place is on the Gomo-Daltonganj line. Trains stopped at this station once upon a time...The billboard says ‘Kuruda Outstation, Abandoned’...” (“The Hunt” IM 1) Every event in the character’s life is thus historicized, as in this passage from *Chotti Munda*, “All this happened in 1915. When Chotti was fifteen.” (9) Tribal life and history are thus contextualized within the larger socio-political-historic situation in India. The individual subaltern characters too are rooted within the specific context, and are not developed further in their individual dimensions. Even their emotional, psychological and moral dimensions
are articulated only in conjunction with the specific context of their tribe. As Anjum Katyal observes, there is no attempt to “decontextualize” the characters out of proportion to their role in their community. (7) She foregoes the usual methods of character delineation, that is, of the descriptive narration of the physical, emotional or psychological states of the characters. Instead, she favours a technique whereby the character is established through interaction with other characters through the elements of plot and dialogue, and is given minimal descriptive space, as in this passage in the short story “Kunti and the Nishadin”:

She stared at the sight of someone’s shadow.

The elderly Nishadin.

Kunti raised astonished eyes. Why was this dark-skinned woman carved of black stone standing so close to her? Searching her eyes?

No confession of sins today?

You… you…

I’ve heard you out day after day, waiting to see if you will confess your gravest sin. (39).

The characters are thus saved from becoming hazy figures or mere character types by the power and poignancy of their portrayal, and the linking of their identity to that of their tribe. Thus the story of her
characters is inseparable from the story of their tribe as they seek to re-inscribe their history and tribal identity into their contemporary situation.

Her characters very often assume mythical proportions as their history becomes the history of their tribe. The historical figure of Birsa Munda of *Aranyer Adhikar* takes on mythical dimensions as he is echoed in the characters of Dhani Munda, and again in Chotti Munda in *Agnigarbha* and in *Chotti Mnda and his Arrow*. In *The Book of the Hunter*, the Shabar couple Kalya and Phuli are named after their mythical ancestors, and they themselves become part of the myth as they play out their roles in the tragic contemporary history of their tribe. When the spirit of the ancestors visits Bikhia’s hut as the Pterodactyl, he eventually becomes inseparable from its presence and its message. Thus myth and history coalesce in Mahasweta’s narratives as she articulates both the unrecorded tribal past and its engagements with the contemporary reality of the tribal characters.

Characters from the other side of the tribal/non-tribal divide also appear in her novels in their historical capacities. Kings, soldiers and priests from the pre-colonial period, as well as colonial officials, feudal lords, administrators, and the common people appear in her works along with the tribal characters. Contemporary history is recorded through the figures of the Tribal Welfare Officer, the BDO, the SDO, the wily and
self-serving politician, pompous beaurocrats, rapacious middlemen, the committed social worker, the scholarly anthropologist, the conscientious journalist, and so on as they interact with the marginalized tribals in modern India. Characters such as the landlords Parmanand Misra and Lachman Singh, police officers like Senanayak and others represent the attitudes that non-tribal people harbour towards the tribals. Thus each of her works narrativizes tribal history and culture with all its specificities of region, tribe, gender, class and language, placed in continuous dialogue with the larger social and historical context.

History also takes the form of documentary realism in her fiction. Her activist work and journalistic reportage form an integral part of her narrative, both in terms of content and style. The everyday details of the material realities of tribal life are recorded with absolute accuracy and unromantic realism in her fiction. This includes the statistical details of food production, details of labour and wages, their access to resources like food and water, problems related to education and employment, the damage to their habitat and environment, etc. Katyal observes:

There is the materiality of the text, its relentless desentimentalization, the reiterated message that considerations of the stomach are primary, beyond censure, outweighing emotion or socio-religious convention, and the
driving force behind all action. No romantic clichés are permitted to stand, nor idealized notions of village life. (7)

The economic, political, social and cultural aspects of their lives are documented in realistic detail, and dynamically conveyed through the action and dialogue of the characters, who adopt different dialects and registers, according to their specific locations in the historical framework of the narrative. But this understated, matter-of-fact style sans any rhetorical flourishes has a power of its own, revealing the devastating truth of tribal reality in modern India, as in this passage from “Pterodactyl”:

He manages his kodo-grain himself. One goes to fetch wood, one pastures the goats of the village neighbors or of distant households, one minds the younger kids, and even cooks. The parents can go to Bhalpura to look for work….

You can’t do family planning in a poor area. A poor household needs many children. (139)

Mahasweta thus makes historical documentation part of the text itself, adopting an unconventional narrative technique that incorporates different discourses within its fluid structure. Excerpts from journalistic reports, sociological/anthropological treatises, historical and official archival documents and letters- all these make up her narratives, giving them a historical validity that the fictional framework cannot falsify. The
passages that parody sociological and anthropological academic discourse on the tribal subject interrogate the role of such discourses in turning the “tribal” into an exotic species to be “preserved” and “studied” as inanimate, pre-historic objects. She radically engages with those practices of history and anthropology that “showcase” tribal culture through such discourses, while turning a blind eye to the actual socio-economic and political reasons for their marginalization. Stories like “Draupadi” and “Behind the Bodice” are also examples of this. Her journalistic and activist experience impinges organically on her narratives in the passages of compressed information about the ground realities of the situation at hand. In these sections she employs a powerfully direct style of presentation, with thinly veiled attempts at political reportage adding to the realistic effect. She moves from one discourse to another and from one story to another, in a quick and often jarring way, never privileging one voice alone, as illustrated in the previous chapters.

Undoubtedly the most important aspect of Mahasweta’s engagement with history is her embracing of the hitherto neglected and marginalized realm of the oral discourse of folk and tribal cultures. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, her rejection of official and academic historiography and literary discourse in favour of the unchartered realm of orality has been one of the most committed and
conscious acts of her personal and literary life. Sitakant Mahapatra has observed that the oral forms of folk and tribal culture had never been considered as legitimate or valuable sources of history in the academic study of tribes, but was treated as mere sociological/ethnographic data. They were also not considered as “literature” in any artistic sense of the term, but as cultural forms holding only curiosity value. (Beyond the Word 61-62) Except for collections of tribal poetry, myth and folk tales by Verrier Elwin, Shamrao Hivale, W. G. Archer and others, there are very few extant collections of folk literature in the anthropological studies of the tribes in India in the colonial and early post-independence periods. (Nair MRP 4-10, 43-45) As Ayyappa Panikker remarks, “Uncodified, uncollected, unpublished yet, the tribal narrative in India is perhaps the richest, yet untapped, resource of the Indian narrative imagination.” (Indian Narratology 120)

As in all societies, in tribal societies too, language, whether spoken or written, in its attendant artistic usages has been an expression of its cultural codes and an index of the civilization that produced it. Through stupendous and courageous personal effort, Mahasweta has traversed the length and breadth of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in her lifetime, witnessing subaltern life, participating in it and recording it in all its dynamic potential with truth and deep humanity. Mahasweta’s insight into tribal life and culture has led her to believe that the history
and culture of India’s tribes is ensconced in their oral traditions. “I am convinced that the local elements, the vast wealth of locally written and oral folk material are not only rich in language and thought, but are also important historical elements,” she declares (‘Untapped Resources’ Seminar 16). Her effort has been to collect the unwritten wealth of the oral discourses of the folk and tribal streams of Indian culture, and to insert it as authentic historical and cultural material into her narratives. Mahasweta observes, “These people do not find anyone writing about them, and they do not have script. They compose the stream of events into song… making their history” (“Telling History” Chotti Munda xi). This living folk history in the form of song, story, myth, legend and all forms of gossip and hearsay that script local histories of the unofficial version is incorporated into her narratives in their dialectal originality, and forms part of the tribals’ discourse foregrounded in them. She uses these traditions in her fiction in the sense that they functioned originally in tribal societies, ie, as a means of expression of the tribals’ everyday reality, their ethnic and cultural identity, and their history.

History, in all these four dimensions, forms the substratum upon which Mahasweta builds up her fictional narratives on tribals, giving them a historical validity and an aesthetic value that is both rare and compelling. Her narratives thus seek to fill the silent lacunae that appear in the mainstream discourses of Indian history and culture.
with these “alternative histories” of the subaltern peoples in their own living idiom. They also resonate against the received versions of “official” history in her narratives, thereby exposing the façade of the projected plurality of Indian historiography, which was in fact, a monologic, hegemonic discourse. Beniwal and Vandana feel that amongst “…the projected multiplicity of voices in mainstream history, she inserts and activates the voice of the marginalized to expose the speciousness of its projections.” (“Subaltern Historiography and Literary Aesthetics” The Quest 31) By also interrogating the ways in which historical events are interpreted, she exposes the methodological tools of knowledge generation too, thereby problematizing it. Sujatha Vijayaraghavan observes that modern writers like Mahasweta “… use fictional spaces of literature to retrieve huge and real parts of our nation which history and our consciousness have refused to acknowledge down the ages” (29).

Mahasweta’s fiction reveals a serious and sensitive attention to the issue of representing the tribal with truth and responsibility within the framework and literary conventions of the novel form. In order to do this, she rejects the conventional narrative tools of realistic fiction in her own tradition, and adopts an innovative and informed use of historical material, as well as the narrative resources indigenous to the tribals. In using the untapped wealth of oral tribal discourse, Mahasweta has not
only found in it a source of valuable and credible historical material, but also an idiom suitable for the representation of tribal reality. The voice of the tribal is slowly but surely foregrounded among the various other voices that make up the narrative. In “Pterodactyl”, Mahasweta reminds us that the tribal past cannot be differentiated into legend and history, and wonders where the “boundary between history and story” can be marked. “If we can get so much history out of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, what is the problem with Shankar’s nostalgia?” she asks. (IM 146) The aesthetics and idiom of orality play a sustained and organic role in Mahasweta’s articulation of tribal identity in the larger context of the Indian nation. In using the tribal idiom to express the tribes’ ethnic and existential ethos as well as their contemporary material reality, Mahasweta has restored to it its original function and value in tribal societies.

In his famous comparative study on oral and literary cultures, *Orality and Literacy*, Walter J. Ong observed that the characteristic features of oral poetic expression in early societies result from the particular needs of “orality” as opposed to “literacy” or the culture of writing. (36-57) Tribal cultures in India that are predominantly oral in expression show many of these features. One of the most important features is that tribal art cannot be viewed apart from its context. Ong describes it as being “empathic and participatory” and “situational”
rather than abstract and objectively distanced. For the tribals, their artistic expression arises out of their immediate context and its frames and images are organically connected to their life situation and environment. This insight seems to be the primary organizational principle in Mahasweta’s fiction too. She pictures the tribal in their immediate historical, political and environmental context, which necessitated their interactions with other groups in society and with the state. Rather than adopt the heavily descriptive mode of the third person narration, she establishes the context with minimum description and sets up an interplay of dialogues in which the characters, tribal and non-tribal, speak for themselves in their own idioms.

Although rooted in the immediate environment, the tribal mode of expression is also highly symbolic, arising out of a worldview in which everything is interconnected. So even mundane everyday events become part of their songs and tales, mingling with myth and legend, all held together through memory and imagination. In a passage from *Chotti Munda*, Bharat, a young Munda and Chotti Munda discuss their poverty, the complicity between the government and the dikus, and the changes that are imminent in the lure of the Mission in colonial India. They also imagine that their God “Haramdeo” must be aware of all these changes in their lives and must be allowing these terrible things to happen to them. (109-110) The tribals’ oral expressions—through speech,
songs, tales, myths - contain their knowledge systems, religious beliefs and philosophical responses to their living conditions and environment. They also reflect their understanding of their material and cultural reality in its contemporary and historical framework.

G.N. Devy observes in his introduction to a collection of tribal poetry:

They accept a worldview in which nature, man and God are intimately linked, and they believe in the human ability to spell and interpret truth. They live more by intuition than by reason, they consider the space around them more sacred than secular, and their sense of time is more personal than objective…It admits fusion between various planes of existence and levels of time in a natural and implicit way.

(Painted Words x)

Ong observes that the simple, repetitive structures and conventions of oral poetry and song was the result of the need to ensure that their knowledge, their culture, their present and their past would be “retained and retrieved” through their songs and tales. They also incorporated contemporary events and the recent changes in their lives, which were added on to the rendition, thus linking past and present and ensuring historical continuity. (34) Thus their artistic expression shows a play of imagination and memory whereby every event is turned into song and tale, mingling history and myth, the present and the past, the
particular and the universal. Mahasweta weaves this insight into her narrative in word and spirit. When Birsa hears the song of the Munda brotherhood, he wonders who wrote it, “No one can say that. This song was written by time. Time gave it a voice.” (Aranyathinte Adhikaram 205) He realizes that it represents their unwritten and unrecorded, but undeniably real history and, inspired by it, he leads his fellow Mundas to the rebellion against the British, thus adding his own contemporary history to the history of his tribe. In the novel Chotti Munda, Mahasweta speaks of the relevance of this oral tradition: “Yes all’s a story in Chotti Mundas’ life. Munda language has no script. So they turn significant events into story, and hold them as saying, as song. That’s their history as well.” (23) When Chotti kills a boar and saves the Daroga’s life, that event is also woven into Munda legend as song:

Ye picked a blade of grass  
Grass became spear  
Ye pierced t’boar  
He died right away  
And Daroga?  
He said, Go ye brave man,  
Join all games  
I was punished in this way  
Cos I banned yer play. (104)

For the tribal, song and story become a way of making sense of their reality with reference to their immediate surroundings as well as their mythical and historical past. As Mahapatra observes, tribal songs are a part of a complex of communal activity involving social and
religious celebration, which includes song, dance, myth and ritual. 
(Unending Rhythms 13) It is thus their way of holding on to whatever is 
left of their unique ethnic and cultural identity in the unequal 
interactions with more powerful groups in the state and society. When 
he hears the song cited above, Chotti says to his wife, “A blade o’ grass 
turns inta spear, but if I don’ plough Tirath Lala’s field, I’ve nothin’ ta 
eat.” (Chotti Munda 104) He realizes that the tribals need to remember 
and celebrate anything that reiterates their unique identity (here, Chotti’s 
skill in archery). But he is also acutely conscious of the vast gap 
between his status as a poor peasant in society and as a mythical hero in 
his tribe’s oral traditions. Mahasweta consistently highlights this gap 
between discourse and action, holding up to scrutiny the tendency in 
mainstream social and discursive practice to “showcase” tribal cultural 
forms while ignoring their material reality.

Critics note that oral art had a fluid and flexible framework 
which allowed it to be traditional and innovative at the same time. As 
each song is sung again, and stories are repeated on different occasions, 
past events are repeated and new events are added, so that the new 
generation is acquainted with the knowledge, culture and history of the 
tribe and in their turn can add on to it their own experiences and 
insights. In the tribal ethos story and song thus often lead to myth-
making. (Devy Painted Words i-xi, Mahapatra Beyond the Word 2-17
and Ong 37-45) Verrier Elwin remarks that for the tribal, their mythology “is the central powerhouse of the life and energy of the tribe”. They connect the past of the tribe with their present life and make “the unintelligible real”. (The Baiga 305-306) Tribal myths are codified systems of knowledge that usually contain the tribe’s conceptions about the creation of the world, the origin of the tribes and their traditional occupations, their social structure, and their position in relation to other tribes and societies. When in a crisis, the tribal people, as all other human beings, fall back upon their collective unconsciousness in the form of myth and religious belief to interpret the situation. Mahasweta’s insight into the tribal mind has given her a deep and sensitive understanding of the relevance and function of myth in tribal life and she has used it as a powerful and often subversive narrative tool in her fiction. In her narratives, tribal characters recall these myths and very often subvert them in their encounters with the hegemonic structures of society. When the tribals realize that they are being treated as subaltern citizens in a society that functions according to different social and ethical codes, they access their mythical status to reiterate their unique ethnic identity.

In Chotti Munda, the historical figures of Birsa Munda and Dhani Minda are woven into their mythology through the songs. They become part of Chotti’s story and in time Chotti too becomes part of that
myth. “Draupadi” offers a layered narration where the raping of the tribal woman echoes against the disrobing scene in the Mahabharata. In The Book of the Hunter, Kalya’s heart-rending attempt to recover his racial and cultural identity and pride through a re-enactment of the ancestral myth of the hunt ends in tragedy. In “The Hunt”, however, the tribal woman Mary Oraon successfully re-enacts the myth of “Jani Parab”, subverting the stereotyped gender role prescribed to her, and thereby resisting a dominant and violent patriarchy. In these narratives, the historical and the mythical narrative coalesce yet again in the concrete realization of the tribals’ disadvantaged situation in modern India. (Nair Littcrit 116, 111-119) As their old traditions and ways of life undergo the inevitable changes, they are forced to rewrite and re-enact their own traditions. Thus Mahasweta’s deliberate insertion of the tribals’ own cultural idiom in her narratives, restores to it its living function in tribal society and achieves the dual purpose of political and cultural resistance on behalf of the tribal people she represents.

Mahasweta’s use of a flexible, loosely looped style of narration, bearing close resemblance to the rambling mode of story-telling, becomes another important feature of her style, whereby she juxtaposes different “stories” arising out of a single context. Every event in the plot is treated as a different “version”, just another “telling” and not a final fact, often inserted into the narrative as gossip and hearsay. Thus she is
able to reveal the constructed nature of “truth”, which becomes particularly significant in her endeavor to represent the socio-political reasons for the marginalization of the tribals. Beniwal and Vandana observe that by juxtaposing these voices and “cutting across them simultaneously, she showcases the ambivalence and heterogeneity- the babble- that should constitute the narrative core of any history/story,” (“Subaltern Historiography and Literary Aesthetics” The Quest 31) This pattern can be observed in all her fictional works, where the tribal’s version of his/her tale is slowly foregrounded amidst the general melee of the versions of the tale by the different characters. In a section of “Pterodactyl,” for example, the anthropological discourse on tribals is juxtaposed with the tribal boy Shankar’s own lament about his tribe’s history, heightening the ironical effect of listening to two versions of the same story simultaneously. (IM 114-115, 118-120) The stories of the visitation of the tribal ancestor in Pirtha again resound loudly throughout the narrative, against the pointed silence of the tribal Bikhia, in which resides the whole story of the tribal’s own unique, inexpressible experience. In Chotti Munda, various versions of the events in Birsa, Dhani and Chotti’s lives are narrated through different characters and engage dialectically with the tribal’s own version of these events. Thus she inserts the tribal narrative into the hegemonic social and discursive
In Mahasweta’s fiction, the discourse of history, along with the resources of story, myth, folktale (written and unwritten), and contemporary events, make up the weave of her tales, spun together through a mode of narration that can best be described as “dialogic” in the Bakhtinian manner. The apparently random throwing together of different voices and discourses in her texts in fact reveals a method in its madness- a careful, if unconventional, narrative organization that reveals the hand of the author. The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism as a distinctive feature of life and literature, particularly the genre of the novel, is pertinent in a discussion of Mahasweta’s narrative technique. Michel Holquist notes that dialogism for Bakhtin was “a certain multiplicity in human perception that came about as a result of two or more bodies occupying simultaneous but separate space.” (20) Bakhtin perceived literature as a social activity and as a particular kind of discourse that used language in a dialogic way, as all meaning was always relative. For Bakhtin, literature, and the genre of the novel in particular, was “a means of ordering, schematizing the chaos of experience in a way that does not reduce, but preserves the variety and endlessness of experience” (22). Bakhtin defines the novel and its stylistics thus:
The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized... The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the different individual voices that flourish under such conditions. ... this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization- that is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. ("Discourse in the Novel" Norton Anthology 1192-3)

Mahasweta’s novels display all these features of Bakhtinian “novelness”. She rejects the linear, monologic and descriptive mode of narration traditionally associated with the sociological/anthropological discourse and historic and realistic novels that depict patterns of social life. Instead, she favours a loose, flexible narrative that incorporates different discourses, dialects and socio-linguistic registers drawn from various sources and which have an immediate bearing to the situation of the tribal. Her unconventional and daring experiments with language form the basis of her mode of narration. Foregoing a standardized, “literary” language, she adopts the living idiom of the characters, both
tribal and non-tribal. The folk and tribal idiom takes the form of songs, sayings and folk tales besides dialogue. In the original Bengali, she has used what Bakhtin called “the living utterance” - all the variations of dialect and register, along with smatterings of English and Hindi appear in her texts, recreating the polygot situation of most of India’s community life. (1202). Vishwanathan highlights the relevance of this aspect of Mahasweta’s art:

For a modern writer committed to the tribal, one must maintain the polyphony of the word. One must be historian, storyteller, writer, playwright, mythologist, poet, archivist, novelist to renew the polyphony of forms the word goes through. (“Listening to the Pterodactyl” Indigeneity: Culture and Representation 7)

Her characteristic method is of contextualizing the narrative moment in its historical time and space, much like the Bakhtinian idea of the “chronotope”. (Introduction An Anthology 32) Once the context is established and the scene is set, the different stakeholders in the drama enter and a dynamic dialogue gradually unfolds. Her unique vision is thus translated into her fictional narrative through what Malini Bhattacharya calls “her particular kind of dialogic talent, a technique of placing the tribal voice in dynamic dialogue with these other discourses of Indian history and culture. (1003)
Mahasweta’s fiction opens up to the reader the whole gamut of the socio-historic and political conditions and ideologies that resulted in the marginalization and oppression of the tribals of India through her use of the different discourses relevant to the situation. A rich mosaic of different registers is thus created, which subverts a monolithic view of events past and present. Bakhtin defines “heteroglossia” as precisely this condition where a subject is surrounded by a myriad of responses from which specific discourses are selected, suitable to the particular situation. The voices of the tribal and non-tribal characters in all their variations echo and ricochet against each other in Mahasweta’s narratives, creating a polyphonic text that upsets any attempt at privileging a particular point of view, not even that of the tribal. This in fact endows her narratives with a centrifugal force that enhances their deconstructive potential to unearth the tribal voice from the cacophony of voices that threaten to drown the rhetoric on India’s glorious history and civilization.

The author’s hand is also revealed in the direct and indirect comments and observations that punctuate the narrative. Her trenchant criticism of the nation’s treatment of its tribal people is revealed in the heavy irony and black humour that appears in the tone of the narratives as a whole, (examples of which are cited in the foregoing chapters), resisting popular representations of a romantic, timeless and idyllic
tribal world. The reader, therefore is never lulled into a complacent reading, but is kept on her/his toes, creating a reading experience that is challenging to say the least. Her own role as both insider and outsider in the tribal world has been scrutinized by critics and the public and she has held up well in this scrutiny. Although her physical, intellectual and moral involvement in the tribal cause has been total, and unquestionably sincere, she has been careful in maintaining a balance in her capacity as writer/narrator of the tribal. Mahasweta seems to be very conscious of her own position as a non-tribal activist/writer and looses no opportunity to problematize her own position vis-a-vis the text. She achieves this mainly by two means- through her technique of dialogization, which is already elaborated, and secondly, through the figure of the socially conscious citizen/ journalist/ research scholar, who is often used to explore the possibility of a true representation of the tribal.

Characters like Mukundaram, Puran, Upin and Kali Santra are such figures. If Mukunda manages to write the story of the Shabars into his epic in the sixteenth century, in modern times, Upin’s story and pictures wreaks havoc on Gangor’s life. Puran is unable to even read the message in the pterodactyl’s eyes, and wonders whether anything he can say will help the tribal out of his disadvantaged position. He tells Harisharan, “There is no communication-point between us and the pterodactyl. We belong to two worlds and there is no communication
point.” Puran realizes that only “love beyond reason” can help bridge this almost unbridgeable gap between the nation and its first inhabitants. (“Pterodactyl” IM 196-197) Mahasweta seems to be pointing to the ultimate failure of discourse itself, if not taken forward into attendant action with human caring. According to Vishwanathan, the silence of the pterodactyl reminds the reader of this:

Between the silence and the story, stands the translation as an act of prayer, a plea to modernity to understand what it cannot touch … or at least learn to touch gently. There is none of the arrogance of the anthropologist as hero. The heroism if it exists belongs to the Other. This much Mahasweta Devi reminds us. (“Listening to the Pterodactyl” Indigeneity: Culture and Representation 11)

G.N.Devy points out that the cultural marginalization that accompanied the political and social marginalization of the tribes in history resulted in the loss of their languages and oral traditions of discourse, leaving them in a state of cultural amnesia. (The Nomad Called Thief 70-122) This has also meant that for many years, the tribal people had no means by which to represent themselves on their own, and have been represented in different ways through alien languages and discourses. Many of these representations, while being well meaning and sympathetic to the tribal cause, are now regarded as having denied
the tribals themselves a voice, by “speaking for” them. It is in this context that the works of Mahasweta Devi can be fully appreciated.

The privileging of the discipline of history and science as representing “fact” over that of literature as “fiction” has been theoretically challenged from the mid-twentieth century onwards, by theoreticians like Hayden White, Clifford Geertz, Michel Foucault and Edward Said. In *Tropics of Discourse* and *Metahistory* Hayden White has examined the language used in historical discourse, and has pointed out that they are no different from literary or “fictional” texts. White observes that the techniques and strategies of fiction- emplotment, selection of events, characterization, descriptive strategies, ideological positioning, variation of tone and point of view, use of rhetorical tropes, metaphor, metonymy, irony - are used consistently in history writing as the historian converts facts and events into an ordered discourse. *(Tropics of Discourse 82-84)* He urged the reader to treat historical writings as “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found*” and have their “counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” *(84).*

In the introduction to an influential anthology of theoretical essays on ethnography titled *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Practice of Ethnography,* James Clifford observes that the ideology of ethnography that had always claimed “transparency of representation
and immediacy of experience” has now “crumbled” and that no scientific writing, however “factual” was above the “historical and linguistic process” (2). The essays in the collection call our attention to “the historical predicament of ethnography, the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not representation of cultures”. (2) So the representation of cultures through historical or ethnographic writing is fraught with the possibilities of ideological loading, laying false its claim to “truth” and authenticity. The monologic, descriptive narrative style adopted in such writings privileges the point of view of the ethnographer rather than the people being represented. From the post-colonial point of view this is now seen as the ideological force behind the marginalization of non-European races and their cultures.

In an important and interesting study on the different kinds of narratives-from governmental records, histories, sociological and anthropological treatises to fictional works- written by non-tribals on the tribals of India, Dr. Kumkum Yadav observes that the author’s attitude towards his/her subject, here the tribals, is determined as much by the form as the subject matter of the narrative, that she describes as “perception and methodology” (Narratives on Tribals in India 3). She also observes that realistic novels about tribal life in India generally show three approaches:
i. Those that are a kind of ‘literary anthropology’, incorporating dense detail, forming an observation and evaluation of tribal life. Most of the regional Indian novels on tribal life mentioned in the Introduction belong to this category.

ii. Those that privilege the romantic and mythical image of the tribal as the “noble savage”. Such novels serve to establish an idealized tribal society as the “other” of mainstream society. European and American fiction that portray “native cultures” in a colonial background are in this mode.

iii. Those that prefer the “mutual evaluatory mode” – that embody a dynamic, participatory dialogue between cultures, show a humanistic commitment to the cause of the tribals and uncover the socio-political-historical factors behind their marginalization.

(20-22)

Mahasweta’s fiction without doubt can be said to belong to the third category. She eschews the first two modes that call for a univocal, and therefore ideologically loaded, narrative voice in favour of a narrative that is multivocal and dialogic, incorporating many perspectives on tribal life. By adopting such a “participatory” mode of narration, she minimizes what Yadav calls the “bias and the personal factor” involved when a non-tribal writer sets out to represent the tribal world. (53) Yadav notes that fictional works that portray the various
aspects of tribal life in India should be read in relation to “… important nonfiction writing that carry information and socio-cultural, historical and anthropological detail about the tribal community in India” (14). Mahasweta’s narrative mode is appropriated suitably towards her vision of the tribal situation in India, in the past and the present. Rather than viewing tribal history as a timeless, seamless, pre-historic past, she envisions them in their specific historical and social milieu, sharing space, power and resources with other groups, which is dramatized through the multiplicity of discourses and registers. Sujatha Vijayaraghavan observes that Mahasweta’s fictional and non-fictional forms of writing in her narratives:

… are interdependent and have to be read as one unbroken text holding a compelling dialogue on political and social discourses by the power of their truth, though not by the power of official sanction and therefore capable of destabilizing prevailing discourses. (31-32)

She says that Mahasweta’s particular style has created “a third literary space” between fiction and non-fiction, that can be seen as part of the larger discourse on tribals in India, thereby becoming “…wholly meaningful, collapsing institutional definitions of genre and emancipating differences of textuality” (32). Her style thus challenges both the creation and reception of the fictional category, stretching its
traditional boundaries by creating a viable mix of many discourses and genres.

It is also worth noting that her aesthetic achievement does not in any way diminish her moral purpose and her commitment towards the people she represents in her writing. Beniwal and Vandana rightly observe that “her constituency is the subaltern” and that her achievement as a writer lies in the fact of her “being empathetically one with the situation”, thus bridging the gap between “fiction and ideology”. (“Writing the Subaltern” *New Quest* 86-87) When read as part of the larger discourse on the tribals in India, Mahasweta’s works offer a unique perspective on the subject that blends the truth, power and vision of history, of fiction and of the tribal narratives of myth and memory.

The Malayalam writer Anand once observed that Mahasweta Devi was a writer who belonged to the best of the Indian traditions of “sahitya” in her fictional engagement with the complex relationships of human beings in society and her innovative use of the literary traditions available to her. Anand makes a distinction between the idea of “literature” which focuses on the individual creating a work of art through the medium of words, and that of “sahitya” which emphasizes the role of literature as a social activity. (109) The etymology of the word *sahitya* is traced to the Sanskrit word *sahit* which roughly means “to be of the same will/wish” or even “the joining together of various
Mahasweta’s brave and innovative effort in representing the tribal through her fiction serves to emphasize the role of literature as a means of representing the multi-layered nature of complex societies, which has always been the source of the endurance and vitality of the varied literary traditions of India. Mahasweta’s fiction represents the cause that she has espoused—of making the tribal’s story heard and their dignity restored. Her works resurrect tribal history from its silent grave below the edifice of India’s official history and inserts the silenced voice of the tribals alongside the more powerful discursive and social structures, thereby opening up their possibilities for cultural and political resistance. G. N. Devy, her friend and close associate, recalls:

Mahasweta brought to those poor and harassed people a boundless compassion, which they instantly understood, though they could neither speak her language, nor she theirs. She has a strange ability to communicate with the silenced, her best speech reserved for those whom no one has spoken.

(“The Adivasi Mahasweta” Freeing the Spirit 173)