SUMMING UP

Mahasweta Devi’s fictional works are categorized by her publishers under various headings like ‘Fiction’, ‘Cultural History’, ‘Gender Studies’ and ‘Radical Fiction’. Her non-fictional works that have appeared in various newspapers, journals and magazines have been collected and published under the titles of ‘Development Studies’, ‘Tribal Studies’, ‘Social History’, ‘Journalism’, and so on. This variety in categorization is perhaps a pointer to the wide spectrum of Mahasweta’s areas of interest and activity and the importance of her contribution to India’s cultural and literary heritage. The volume and variety of her literary output is a measure of the multi-dimensional concerns of her life. She is crusading social activist, keen journalist and outstanding creative writer rolled into one, a potent and volatile force who has awakened the conscience of her country towards its less privileged citizens. It is perhaps her social activism, especially her
championing of the tribal cause, that has won her respect and fame both within and outside India, and her journalistic and literary works are seen as an offshoot of this involvement. Having witnessed and documented subaltern life in the North-East, Central and Western India from the 1950s onwards, she has worked tirelessly and fearlessly, using every available means towards the recognition and rehabilitation of tribal history and identity, and the urgent need to address the issue of tribal welfare.

Although she has worked for and written about all classes of India’s poor and marginalized peoples—the dalits, peasants, bonded and migrant labourers, women, the urban and rural poor, the middle class—the cause which is closest to her heart is that of the tribals, who are today probably the most marginalized of all of India’s disadvantaged people. The wide historical sweep of her vision permits Mahasweta to resurrect and rewrite tribal history that has been submerged under the grand edifice of Indian history. In Mahasweta’s conception, the tribal world in India does not exist in an isolated, insular and a-historical space that has survived unchanged into the present. Tribal history and identity has been forged, in her conception, in their historical interface with various other peoples in the Indian subcontinent. The tribal groups in her narratives are specifically located in the socio-historic context where the hierarchically organized groups in Indian society and the state vie with
each other for their share of land, resources and power. This spatio-temporal contextualization of the tribal world in a specific socio-historic milieu allows her to uncover the workings of the hegemonic structures of society and the state that have led to the political, social and cultural marginalization of India’s tribal population, even within the framework of the novelistic genre.

Mahasweta’s fictional representations of tribal life show a depth, power and nuanced complexity that can be attributed broadly to two factors, one related to the thematic conception and the second to the narrative technique of her works. In thematic conception and execution, her vision of the tribal situation differs drastically from the run of the mill “tribal novels” as well as from the historical/anthropological/sociological ethnographic discourses on tribals. A reader looking for romantic pictures of idyllic tribal villages of pre-history, for innocent ‘savages’ following exotic cultural practices, or for simplistic solutions to their present crisis will be disappointed in Mahasweta. For what you get is none of this, but a vision and representation of tribal history and contemporaneity that places the tribal squarely in the context of India’s socio-political history, in narratives that are as untypical as they are complex, and as realistic as they are deeply sympathetic.

Her works range from the representations of the history of the Shabar tribes of the sixteenth century, the history of tribal insurgency
during the colonial periods, to the condition of the tribal people in today’s India. The analysis in the foregoing chapters establish that she has traced the journey of the Indian tribes from their independent, autonomous lives in their traditional forest and agricultural lands to their contemporary deprived lives as labourers in the fields, cities and industrial belts of post-independence India. It was a journey that saw the tribals lose everything - their traditional lands and ways of life, their freedom, dignity and honour, their intimate bonds with their environment, their languages and culture - all that gave them their unique historical and ethnic identity as one of the earliest inhabitants of this ancient land, whose civilization formed the basis of much of what is today hailed as “Indian” culture.

It is this journey that Mahasweta in her works represent in all its socio-historic specificity and detail, in a style that uses the techniques of fiction to combine historical fact and the narratives embedded in tribal myth and memory, with deep human concern and commitment to the tribal cause. The careful reader is inexorably drawn towards Mahasweta Devi’s works by the burning fire of her activist zeal and the human predicament portrayed in her fiction, but having once entered her fictional world, one is caught in the complex weave of her narrative fabric. Her unique fictional technique is a key factor that gives her representations of tribal life their distinctive quality and power in
conception, execution and reception, a feature that is rare among fiction writers today. Her narratives incorporate varied discourses from the realms of academic writing, official records and journalistic data, tribal and non-tribal literary and cultural discourses. The thesis attempted to highlight that these various discourses are woven together with an artistic imagination and aesthetic skill to produce complex and polyphonic fictional narratives that bring together many different perspectives on the tribal subject within its space. Her use of the oral folk and tribal discourses and idioms current in the period she is recreating functions in foregrounding of the tribals’ voice in her narratives. It also serves to insert the tribals’ cultural forms and their history into the hegemonic historical and cultural narratives of the nation, thereby effecting a political as well as cultural resistance on the behalf of the subalterns.

Her fictional works thus participate in the general discourse—the academic, literary and official—on the tribal situation of India, its past and present. In the process she interrogates its meaning and relevance to the present marginalized condition of India’s tribals, not sparing her own efforts at literary representation. In the story “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha”, which she describes as the culmination of her tribal experience, she seems to suggest that such discourse could be meaningless unless supplemented by concrete action inspired by a deep
humanism and boundless love. She says that each tribe is “like a continent” which we never tried to “know” or “respect”, but instead we “destroyed”. She reminds us that “Our double task is to resist ‘development’ actively and to learn to love.” (“The Author in Conversation” IM xv-xvi). In recent interviews, she expresses a sense of impatience and frustration that even after so many years, the tribals of India continue to be disadvantaged and marginalized. And she continues to do what she can for their welfare, even though she is in her eighties. In a conversation with Pankaj Singh, she declares:

I am like a river. Not like a big river. Like a small one- I entered tribal life in the course of meandering…the tribals are the last word of my life. My restlessness is due to my concern for them, whether or not thet will be able to survive, whether they will be able to preserve their existence. (8-10)

Mahasweta has identified a complex of factors that have led to this state of affairs - the hierarchies of caste and community, the discursive structures of religion and culture that sanctified and legitimized these hierarchies in society, the power struggles for political supremacy and material prosperity among groups, and more recently, the complicity of the state in promoting the interests of the rich and the powerful at the cost of the tribals’ right to his traditional lands, cultures and environments.
Many of the issues that Mahasweta has raised in her writings on the tribal situation continue to be relevant in the public debates in India today. Tribal people still face societal and governmental opposition in issues related to land rights, militancy, class exploitation, environmental degradation and gender-related atrocities. The Chipko movement in the 1970s, the Narmada dam issue in the 1980s and ‘90s, and more recently the Chengara agitation in Kerala and the Nandigram agitation in West Bengal are reminders that the tribals of India still have to fight tooth and nail to hold on to their traditional lands, livelihoods and ecological habitats. Tribal areas continue to be targeted by the state and corporate developers for their resources of land, water, forest, ores and minerals, leaving them to bear the brunt of the material, ecological and cultural fall out of these lopsided “development” agendas. The women of the tribal belt in Attapadi in Kerala, the most literate state in India, continue to face sexual harassment. The linking of the Maoist insurgency with the tribal population of those areas also draws our attention to their vulnerability and disempowered condition in the modern Indian state. The recent newspaper reports on the atrocities and violence unleashed on tribal people remind us, like Mahasweta does, that it is not yet time to rest on our literary laurels, but to lend our hearts, hands and voices to the struggle of the subalterns of this country for a dignified and self-sufficient life.