Preface

The tribal communities of India constitute 8.2% of the population, with more than four hundred tribes included in the schedule, and are the most deprived and marginalized groups in the nation today. They are heterogeneous groups marked by differences in ethnicity, language, cultural beliefs and practices, and regional location. Tribal Studies as a discipline is an area of research and activity that combines careful scholarship with a committed social consciousness, and attempts to study not only the past history and ethnography of the tribes of India, but also the changes that have come about in the social, economic and cultural aspects of tribal life over the years. The academic and non-academic writings on tribes cut across various disciplines like history, sociology, politics, literature and cultural studies, and forms a discourse that is pertinent to any representation of both the history and the contemporary status of the tribes of India.
There has been a long tradition of discourse in India related to the tribal people, dating from pre-colonial times, through the colonial period, to the contemporary era, which have largely determined their historical, political and social status in the Indian nation. It was during the colonial period that the academic study of the tribes of India was undertaken systematically. The socio-cultural and historical marginalization of the tribes that had begun in the pre-colonial periods was also strengthened through the colonial discourses on race and culture. Historical discourse has also been largely silent on the subject of tribal history, which now is being resurrected from these silent spaces.

Literature is another area of discourse that has sought to represent tribal life through various genres and languages. There are many works dealing with the “tribal theme” in both English and the regional languages of India. Mahasweta Devi’s novels and short stories that deal with tribal life are an important and incomparable contribution to the literary and cultural legacy of India’s tribal/non-tribal interface.

Mahasweta Devi is today acknowledged as a writer of international stature and the English translations of her literary works have been read in the larger context of postcolonial studies. Her works are an outcome of the three inter-twining concerns of her life- social activism, journalistic reportage and creative literature. Literature for Mahasweta Devi is an instrument of political, social and historical
justice, a stance that is reflected in her writings that combine moral power and integrity with aesthetic appeal. Her fictional works are mostly read as texts that seek to inscribe subaltern history and identity within the larger narrative of Indian history and culture, and of representing subaltern exploitation on the level of tribe, caste, class and gender in the context of the colonial and postcolonial Indian nation. She has concentrated mainly on the lives of these subaltern groups in the states of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

The thesis titled *The Discourse of Class, Ecology and Gender in the Selected fiction of Mahasweta Devi* proposes to examine Mahasweta Devi’s fictional works in English translation with a view to explore the organic relationship between her narrative style and some of her major thematic concerns, based on a selection of her novels and short stories that deal with the tribal subject. All her major novels and most of her celebrated short stories represent the tribals, and they stand out in her oeuvre as rare and significant works of art that have made an important contribution to the inscription of the lost socio-cultural history of the tribes in the discourse of Indian history, and to address the urgent issue of tribal autonomy and welfare in modern India. The thesis identifies three important thematic concerns in Mahasweta Devi’s fictional works on tribes, namely the issue of class exploitation, the concern with ecology and environmental degradation, and the focus on
gender. The quality and power of her fiction has been attributed to her distinctive narrative style that challenges the conventions of both the creation and reception of prose fiction. The thesis focuses on the way Mahasweta Devi attempts to represent the issue of tribal history and identity through a thematic focus and a narrative organization that places the tribal in dialogic engagement with other, more powerful groups in Indian society and the state, in specific socio-historical situations.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter titled “Introduction: Discourses on Tribals in India”, is divided into two sections. The first section introduces the main concerns of Tribal Studies as a discipline, defines the concept of discourse, and outlines some of the important discourses on tribals in India. The second section introduces Mahasweta Devi as a figure of national and international importance, both as a writer and as a social activist. Her position in the Bengali literary canon is established and the critical response to her writing is assessed. A brief survey of her major works and important themes is provided and her works that deal with the tribal theme are identified.

The second chapter, titled “The Tribal in the Saga of Class Exploitation”, examines the aspects of class exploitation represented in Mahasweta’s works, which chart the historical saga of the transformation of the autonomous tribal communities into the ranks of
the poor labouring classes of modern India. They dramatize the various hegemonic socio-political structures that led to the tribals’ dispossession of their traditional land rights and to their present marginalized status. Her narratives not only re-inscribe the tribals’ past and contemporary history, but also uphold the relevance of the subaltern’s resistance against the dominant authoritative and discursive structures of the nation that seek to erase their distinct tribal identity through the powerful shackles of class oppression.

The third chapter, titled “The Tribal and the Environment: The Ecological Paradigm” argues that the ecological history of India in relation to tribal life and history can be recovered from Mahasweta’s works. She identifies the fact of the forceful severing of the tribal’s links with his environment, brought about through the historical tribal-non-tribal interface, as the crucial reason for their marginalization. Mahasweta’s narratives also portray the role and function of nature in tribal life, and draw attention to the ecological paradigm embedded in their life patterns, that viewed all the elements of the universe as being inter-connected.

The fourth chapter, titled “Tribal Women and the Narrative of Gender” deals with Mahasweta Devi’s women-centered works that portray a range of injustices committed on tribal and other women of subaltern groups as they are exploited on the level of tribe, class and
gender. They also engage critically with the discursive structures of myth, history and contemporary reality, to identify sites of female resistance, which she then subverts in order to disrupt these hegemonic structures. Mahasweta also engages with the discourse of motherhood within the larger framework of tribal identity and articulates it as an ambivalent concept with the potential for both restriction and liberation.

The fifth chapter, titled “Narrating the Tribal: Discourses in Dialogue” examines the literary techniques used by Mahasweta Devi in her fiction in the light of both Indian and Western critical theories. Her writing style incorporates varied discourses drawn from the realms of academic writing, official records, statistical data, literary and cultural traditions, and the oral and folk idioms current in the period she is recreating. Her use of the oral tribal traditions forms the key to her foregrounding of the tribal’s voice in her narratives. These various discourses are woven together with an artistic imagination and aesthetic skill to produce complex and polyphonic fictional works that bring together many different perspectives on the tribal subject within one narrative.

The thesis concludes that Mahasweta Devi’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. Her works offer a representation of tribal history and contemporaneity that is firmly located in the socio-historic context, embodying a vision that is characterized by its stark realism, complex symbolism, and deep humanism. Her unique fictional technique combines historical fact and the narratives embedded in tribal myth and memory, to create works that offer new and alternative perspectives on the discourse on tribes in India.