

Writer in Context

MAHASWETA DEVI

WRITER, ACTIVIST, VISIONARY

Edited by
Radha Chakravarty



MAHASWETA DEVI

Mahasweta Devi occupies a singular position in the history of modern Indian literature and world literature. This book engages with Devi's works as a writer-activist who critically explored subaltern subjectivities, the limits of history, and the harsh social realities of post-independence India.

The volume showcases Devi's oeuvre and versatility through samples of her writing—in translation from the original Bengali—including *Jhansir Rani*, *Hajar Churashir Ma*, and *Bayen*, among others. It also looks at the use of language, symbolism, mythic elements, and heteroglossia in Devi's exploration of heterogeneous themes such as exploitation, violence, women's subjectivities, depredation of the environment, and failures of the nation state. The book analyses translations and adaptations of her work, debates surrounding her activism, politics, and critical reception to give readers an overview of the writer's life, influences, achievements, and legacy. It highlights the multiple concerns in her writings and argues that the aesthetic aspects of Mahasweta Devi's work form an essential part of her politics.

Part of the *Writer in Context* series, this book will be useful to scholars and researchers of Indian literature, Bengali literature, English literature, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, global south studies, and translation studies.

Radha Chakravarty is a writer, critic, and translator. She has co-edited *The Essential Tagore*, nominated Book of the Year 2011 by Martha Nussbaum. She is the author of *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers* and *Novelist Tagore: Gender and Modernity in Selected Texts*. Her Tagore translations include *Gora*, *Chokher Bali*, *Boyhood Days*, *Farewell Song: Shesher Kabita*, *Four Chapters*, and *The Land of Cards: Stories, Poems and Plays for Children*. Other works in translation are Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Kapalkundala*, Mahasweta Devi's *Our Santiniketan* and *In the Name of the Mother* (nominated for the Crossword Translation Award, 2004), *Vermillion Clouds: Stories by Bengali Women*, and *Crossings: Stories from Bangladesh and India*. She has edited *Shades of Difference: Selected Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* and *Bodyscapes: Stories by South Asian Women* and co-edited *Writing Feminism: South Asian Voices* and *Writing Freedom: South Asian Voices*. Her poems have appeared in numerous books and journals. She has contributed to *Pandemic: A Worldwide Community Poem*, nominated for the Pushcart Prize 2020. Her forthcoming books include *The Tagore Phenomenon* and translations of Kazi Nazrul Islam's essays. She was Professor of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies at Dr B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi, India.

WRITER IN CONTEXT

Series Editor: Sukrita Paul Kumar, *critic, poet, and academic*;
Chandana Dutta, *academic, translator, and editor*

The Writer in Context Series has been conceptualised to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of Indian writers from different languages. This is in light of the fact that Indian literature in English translation is being read and even taught extensively across the world with more and more scholars engaging in research. Each volume of the Series presents an author from the post-Independence, multilingual, Indian literature from within her/his socio-literary tradition. Every volume has been designed to showcase the writer's oeuvre along with her/his cultural context, literary tradition, critical reception, and contemporary resonance. The Series, it is hoped, will serve as a significant creative and critical resource to address a glaring gap in knowledge regarding the context and tradition of Indian writing in different languages.

Sukrita Paul Kumar and Chandana Dutta are steering the project as Series Editors with Vandana R. Singh as the Managing Editor.

So far, twelve volumes have been planned covering writers from different parts and traditions of India. The intent is to facilitate a better understanding of Indian writers and their writings for the serious academic, the curious researcher as well as the keen lay reader.

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MAHASWETA DEVI

Writer, Activist, Visionary

Edited by Radha Chakravarty

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/Writer-In-Context/book-series/WIC

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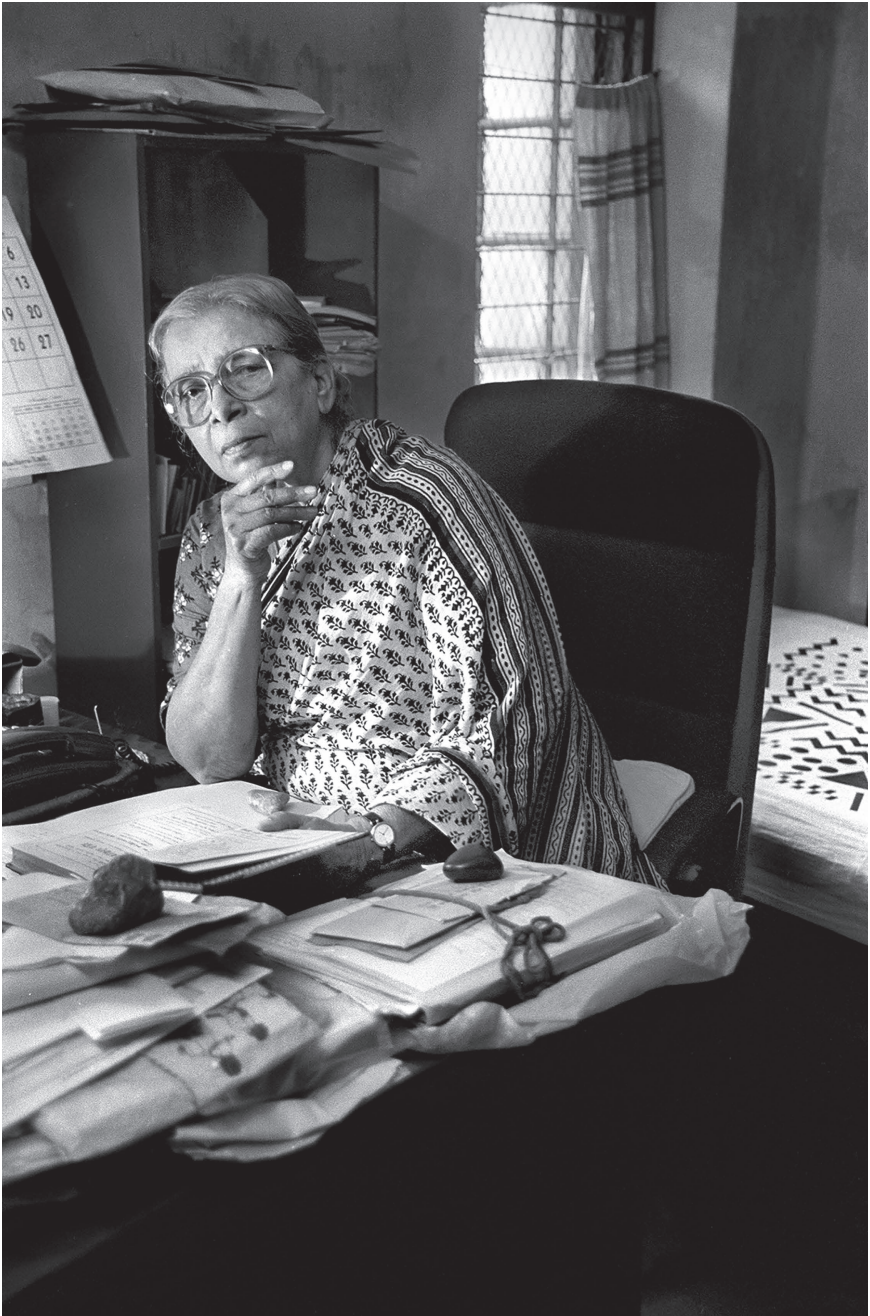
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To my grandmother Protima Mullik, whose love for books
I inherited



Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016).

Source: Raghu Rai.



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CONTENTS

<i>List of Photographs</i>	xiv
<i>Preface to the Series</i>	xv
<i>Preface</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xviii
Introduction: The Searing Vision of Mahasweta Devi	1
RADHA CHAKRAVARTY	
SECTION 1	
Spectrum: The Writer's Oeuvre	19
1 Fictionalised Biography: <i>The Queen of Jhansi</i>	21
MAHASWETA DEVI	
TRANSLATED BY SAGAREE AND MANDIRA SENGUPTA	
2 Novel: <i>Mother of 1084</i>	24
MAHASWETA DEVI	
TRANSLATED BY SAMIK BANDYOPADHYAY	
3 Short Story: <i>Giribala</i>	27
MAHASWETA DEVI	
TRANSLATED BY RADHA CHAKRAVARTY	
4 Drama: <i>Bayen</i>	33
MAHASWETA DEVI	
TRANSLATED BY SAMIK BANDYOPADHYAY	

CONTENTS

5 Children's Literature: Nyadosh, the Incredible Cow	43
MAHASWETA DEVI	
TRANSLATED BY PARAMITA BANERJEE	
6 Literary Criticism: <i>Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay</i>	47
MAHASWETA DEVI	
 SECTION 2	
Kaleidoscope: Critical Reception	55
7 Novelist Mahasweta Devi: The Critical Tradition	57
ARUP KUMAR DAS	
TRANSLATED BY NANDINI GUHA	
8 Mahasweta Devi: In Search of a Rare Uniqueness	67
DIPENDU CHAKRABARTI	
TRANSLATED BY NANDINI GUHA	
9 <i>Hajar Churashir Ma</i>, Mahasweta, and the Next Phase of the Bangla Novel	75
DILIP KUMAR BASU	
TRANSLATED BY NANDINI GUHA	
10 Mahasweta Devi: Forests and Nature	80
PARTHA PRATIM BANDYOPADHYAY	
TRANSLATED BY RADHA CHAKRAVARTY	
11 Mahasweta Devi's Writings: An Evaluation	85
SUJIT MUKHERJEE	
12 Reading "Pterodactyl"	91
GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK	
13 <i>Douloti</i> as a National Allegory	103
JAIDEV	
14 Re-ordering the Maternal: Histories of Violence in Mahasweta Devi, Toni Morrison, and Amrita Pritam	110
SHREEREKHA SUBRAMANIAN	

CONTENTS

15	The Politics of Positionality: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Samik Bandyopadhyay as Translators of Mahasweta Devi	120
	SHREYA CHAKRAVORTY	
16	Reconsidering ‘Fictionalised Biographies’: Mahasweta Devi’s <i>Queen of Jhansi</i> and Mamoni Raisom Goswami’s <i>The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar</i>	129
	ARUNABH KONWAR	
17	Writing for the Stage: The Plays of Mahasweta Devi	137
	ANJUM KATYAL	
18	Sahitya as Kinesis: Performative Potential in Stage and Screen Adaptations of Mahasweta Devi’s Works	146
	BENIL BISWAS	
SECTION 3		
	Ablaze With Rage: The Writer as Activist	157
19	Tribal Language and Literature: The Need for Recognition	159
	MAHASWETA DEVI TRANSLATED BY MAITREYA GHATAK	
20	Eucalyptus: Why?	164
	MAHASWETA DEVI	
21	‘Palamau Is a Mirror of India’	168
	MAHASWETA DEVI TRANSLATED BY IPSHITA CHANDA	
22	The Adivasi Mahasweta	170
	GANESH N. DEVY	
23	Haunted Landscapes: Mahasweta Devi and the Anthropocene	177
	MARY LOUISA CAPPELLI	

SECTION 4	
Personal Glimpses: A Life in Words	185
24 Our Santiniketan	187
MAHASWETA DEVI	
TRANSLATED BY RADHA CHAKRAVARTY	
25 Talking Writing: Conversations With Mahasweta Devi	189
NAVEEN KISHORE	
26 ‘To Find Me, Read My Work’: Dialogues With Mahasweta Devi	196
RADHA CHAKRAVARTY	
27 Family Reminiscences	202
<i>I I Am Truly Amazed</i>	202
SOMA MUKHOPADHYAY	
TRANSLATED BY NANDINI GUHA	
<i>II Baba, Ma, Our Home</i>	206
SOMA MUKHOPADHYAY	
TRANSLATED BY NANDINI GUHA	
<i>III The Didi I Have Known</i>	209
SARI LAHIRI	
TRANSLATED BY NANDINI GUHA	
<i>IV My Mother</i>	211
NABARUN BHATTACHARYA	
TRANSLATED BY NANDINI GUHA	
<i>V Mahasweta Devi: The ‘Mashi’ Who Wrote Fearlessly About Caste, Class, and Patriarchy</i>	214
INA PURI	
28 Shobor Mother Mahasweta Devi	217
RANJIT KUMAR DAS (LODHA)	
TRANSLATED BY NANDINI GUHA	
29 Small Big Things	220
ANAND (P. SACHIDANANDAN)	

CONTENTS

30 Mahasweta Devi: A Legend Who Lived on Her Own Terms	224
ANITA AGNIHOTRI	
TRANSLATED BY NANDINI GUHA	
 31 'Every Dream Has the Right to Live'	 229
DAKXIN BAJRANGE	
 <i>Mahasweta Devi: A Bio-Chronology</i>	 233
<i>Mahasweta Devi: Selected Bibliography</i>	241
<i>List of Contributors</i>	247
<i>Index</i>	252

PHOTOGRAPHS

	Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016)	vi
	From the manuscript of <i>Ek Jibonei</i>	vii
1.1	<i>The Queen of Jhansi</i> book cover	20
1.2	<i>Five Plays</i> book cover	42
2.1	Mahasweta Devi	55
2.2	<i>In the Name of the Mother</i> book cover	119
2.3	Scene from the play “1084 ki Maa,” directed by Santanu Bose, NSD	156
3.1	Mahasweta Devi: The activist	157
3.2	Mahasweta Devi and the tribal universe	162
3.3	Mahasweta Devi with Ganesh N. Devy	176
3.4	Mahasweta Devi: In tune with the landscape	184
4.1	Mahasweta Devi with her sisters	185
4.2	Mahasweta Devi with Radha Chakravarty in Dhaka, Bangladesh	200
4.3	Mahasweta Devi as a child with her parents and sister Mitul	208
4.4	From the Bengali film “Mahananda,” inspired by Mahasweta Devi’s life and work	232
5.1	Mahasweta (extreme L) with her father Manish Ghatak and sisters (L to R) Sari, Konchi, and Soma	234

PREFACE TO THE SERIES

The conceptualisation and making of the *Writer in Context* series must in itself be seen in the context of a historical evolution of literary studies in English in India. It was as late as the mid-1980s of the 20th century, decades after the independence of India, that the angst to redefine English literary studies in the universities manifested itself in thoughtful discussions amongst scholars. In 1986 the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o published his well-known book *Decolonizing the Mind* that had a widespread appeal among the academia and people in general who were struggling to shed their deep-set colonial hangover. Soon after, English departments of the Indian universities and the Centres of South Asian Studies abroad began to incorporate Indian literatures in translation into their syllabi. This encouraged more translations of Indian literatures into English, even though translation studies never picked up as a popular academic discipline. Other than the translations of a few critical texts from Indian languages, the creation of appropriate critical material for an understanding of the comprehensive context of the writers remained minimal. There still remains an impending need to place Indian writers within the context of their own literary as well as sociocultural linguistic traditions. Each language in India has a well-developed tradition of creative writing, and the writings of each writer require to be understood from within that tradition even if she/he may be writing against the tide. Readers, translators, editors, and publishers ought to be able to acknowledge and identify these writings from within their own intimate contexts. Familiarity with the oeuvre of the writers, with their times as well as the knowledge of their critical reception by the discerning readers of their own language, facilitate an understanding of certain otherwise inaccessible nuances of their creative writings. Apart from getting an insight into the distinctive nature of the specific writer, this would also add to the sense of the fascinating diversity in Indian literatures.

Each volume in this series is designed to provide a few extracts from the creative and other prose writings by the author in focus, followed by the English translations of selected critical essays on the author's works. For better insights into the writer's art and craft, self-reflexive essays and

articles by the author about the creative process and her/his comments on the writerly environment are also included. Much of this material may be available as scattered correspondence, conversations, notes, and essays that lie untranslated and locked – as it were – in different *bhashas*. A discreet selection of such material has also been included in each of the volumes in this series.

In the making of this series, there has been an ongoing exchange of ideas amongst the editors of different volumes. It is indeed intriguing that while the writers selected belong to more or less the same times, the contexts vary; and, even when literary conventions maybe similar in some languages, the author stands out as unique. At times the context itself creates the writer but many a time the writer creates her/his own context. The enquiry into the dialectic between the writer and the context lends a significant dimension to the volume. While the distinctive nature of each volume is dictated by the uniqueness of the author, all the volumes in the series conform to the shared concept of presenting an author from within the literary context of her/his language and culture.

It is hoped that the Writer in Context series will make it easier for the scholar to, first, examine the creative interventions of the writer in her/his own language and then help study the author in relation to the others, thus mapping the literary currents and cross-currents in the subcontinent. The series presents fiction writers from different Indian languages of the post-Independence era in their specific contexts, through critical material in translation and in the English original. This generation of ‘modern’ writers, whether in Malayalam or Urdu, Assamese or Hindi, or for that matter in any other Indian language, evolved with a heightened consciousness of change and resurgence fanned by modernism, postmodernism, progressivism, and other literary trends and fashions, while rooted in tradition. Highly protective of their autonomy as writers, they were freely experimental in form, content, and even the use of language. The volumes as a whole offer a vision of the strands of divergence as well as confluence in Indian literature.

The Writer in Context series would be a substantial intervention, we believe, in making the Indian writers more critically accessible and the scholarship on Indian literature more meaningful. While the series would be a creative attempt at contextualising Indian writers, these volumes will facilitate the study of the diverse and multilingual Indian literature. The intent is to present Indian writers and their writings from within their socio-literary context to the serious academic, the curious researcher as well as the keen lay reader.

Sukrita Paul Kumar and Chandana Dutta
Series Editors

PREFACE

This was a book waiting to be born. For almost three decades, as I read, taught, researched, translated, and wrote about Mahasweta Devi, I felt a nagging dissatisfaction with the way her works are received in institutional academia. My own translations, critical writings, and pedagogical engagements with her oeuvre attempted to counter the common stereotypical perceptions of Mahasweta Devi, but in public discourse, some troubling disjunctions between local, national, and international responses to her work continued to persist. Then, in the midst of the pandemic, during a casual conversation with Sukrita Paul Kumar, it emerged that the *Writer in Context* Series was in the making. The concept was exciting, and I accepted the invitation to take up the volume on Mahasweta Devi, delighted at this opportunity to work with my friends of many years Sukrita and Chandana Dutta (who is also my former publisher).

That was the beginning of an exciting collective journey involving the series editors, other volume editors, critics, translators, publishers, cultural personalities, activists, and the author's family and close associates, among others. Working on the book, I realised afresh how important it is for the world to re-read Mahasweta Devi's works today. The process brought me into contact with Mahasweta enthusiasts from Bengal, the rest of India, and beyond. I was bowled over by people's generosity when it came to gathering information, materials, and ideas. The profusion of sources was overwhelming, given her prolific output, as well as the fact that so many people had engaged with her work in different languages and fields of activity. Choosing what to include in the volume was therefore very difficult and left me feeling that prospective readers of this book will get to see only the tip of the iceberg. One hopes that highlighting Mahasweta's versatility and bringing the Bengali and pan-Indian critical reception of her works into the domain of English academia will inspire new insights and open up fresh avenues for scholarly research and pedagogy.

I remain grateful to Sukrita, Chandana, and all my fellow travellers who have made this journey worthwhile.

Radha Chakravarty

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Despite all our efforts, certain permissions could not be formalised as the individuals concerned either could not be contacted or did not respond in time. Ranjit Kumar Das (Lodha) was unreachable.

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INTRODUCTION

The Searing Vision of Mahasweta Devi

Radha Chakravarty

Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) is best known to the English-speaking world at large as a fiery writer-activist who dedicated her life to the struggle for the rights of the downtrodden, particularly the indigenous people of India. In her own words, a ‘luminous anger’ impels her writing, which she regards as inseparable from her activism. Her representations of the marginalised figure of the ‘subaltern,’ especially as mediated through the translations and critical writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, have become legendary. While there is a degree of truth in the perception of Mahasweta Devi as the voice of the silenced subaltern, a deeper and more wide-ranging study indicates that this widely held view is true only up to a point. It is the aim of the present volume, in consonance with the overall objectives of the *Writer in Context Series*, to present a more rounded, multidimensional image of Mahasweta Devi.

Unpacking the partial truths that underlie the stereotypical image of Mahasweta Devi, we find that her representations of different forms of marginality bring together the aesthetic and the political in ways that demand a more nuanced reading, recognising that her creative writings need to be read as literature, and not only as forms of social documentation or ‘witnessing’. This interrogation of the stereotype opens up the possibility of re-reading Mahasweta Devi’s life and work in newer, more unsettling ways. Her creative writings in particular emerge as ambivalent texts, simultaneously imbued with radical potential and a continued reliance on traditional forms of signification. Mahasweta herself insists on the historical basis for her creative writings, but in her literary works, social realism is offset by a visionary quality that enables the imagining of transformative possibilities. The contents of this volume testify to the different, sometimes contradictory dimensions of her multifaceted genius.

Readers outside Bengal tend to have a limited, formulaic view of Mahasweta Devi, on the basis of the tiny fraction of her work available in English translation. She was actually an extraordinarily prolific and versatile writer who wrote in many genres, including fiction, biography, drama, children’s literature, memoirs, travel writing, and literary criticism. She also edited a

journal, translated from English to Bengali, published criticism in English, wrote letters and prefaces, created textbooks for children, edited several anthologies, and produced a considerable corpus of journalistic and activist writings. The total extent of her output is still not fully documented. It is time for readers outside Bengal to recognise Mahasweta's extraordinary versatility, enabling a reappraisal of her achievement and legacy.

A wide gulf separates the Bengali reception of Mahasweta Devi's work and her image in the world outside.¹ While scholars in English departments in India and abroad access the translations and criticism available in English, they remain largely unaware of Mahasweta's tangled relationship with the literary establishment in Bengal. The debates, controversies, adulation, and antagonism that she has inspired in Bengal over the decades of her long career go largely unnoticed by academics across India and in the international literary sphere. Hence, there are multiple stereotypes of Mahasweta Devi, conjured up by her different audiences and separated by different geographies, histories, and literary contexts. This book aims to look beyond these local, national, and global stereotypes to capture something of the extraordinary versatility and complexity of this literary phenomenon. The public Mahasweta is a contested figure, claimed by varied discourses. Behind the blazing public persona, though, lurks a private Mahasweta, as strong as she is vulnerable, intimately known to some, but unknown to the vast majority of her readers. This volume will also uncover some significant discrepancies and contradictions between Mahasweta's public image and private personality.

Born on 14 January 1926 into a distinguished family in the erstwhile East Bengal (now Bangladesh), Mahasweta Devi spent her early years surrounded by illustrious personalities like her father, poet Manish Ghatak; her mother, the writer and social worker Dharitri Devi; and her uncles, the sculptor Sankho Chowdhury and renowned film-maker Ritwik Ghatak. Reading came naturally to her, as she was surrounded by women who loved books. At the age of 10, she was sent to boarding school at Santiniketan, where her encounter with Tagore and his world became a shaping influence in her life. After completing her schooling in Kolkata, she returned to Santiniketan for her Bachelor's degree in English Honours. Subsequently, she would do her Masters in English Literature from Calcutta University. This was a period of great political turmoil, marked by the Second World War, the Quit India Movement (1942), the Great Bengal Famine (1942–44), and the Calcutta riots of 1946. In 1947 came Independence and, with it, the Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Mahasweta vividly remembers the turbulence of the times and assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. These upheavals drew her out of her cocooned middle-class existence. As a college student, she took up relief work, distributing food and collecting dead bodies from the street.

Mahasweta's marriage in 1946 to Bijon Bhattacharya, the renowned dramatist associated with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), aroused her political consciousness, and she became a committed Marxist. Their son Nabarun Bhattacharya would grow up to be a famous writer himself. During their marriage, they faced financial hardships, especially as their Communist leanings made it difficult to find employment. Mahasweta had to augment the family income by doing odd jobs. At one point, she even sold soap and powdered dyes. She also started writing, under the pseudonym Sumitra Devi. Most of these early writings were unremarkable, written in a conventional romantic vein. In 1954, Mahasweta travelled to Jhansi and Bundelkhand to collect material for her path-breaking work *Jhansir Rani* (*The Queen of Jhansi*) published in 1956, which brilliantly combined historical research with elements of myth and folklore. The book drew instant critical acclaim. The writer Mahasweta Devi was born.

After the break-up of her first marriage in 1962, Mahasweta left her teenaged son Nabarun with his father. Later, she married Asit Gupta, but that marriage, too, did not last and ended in 1975. She suffered from bouts of depression. Twice, she tried to take her own life. In 1963, she received her master's degree in English from Calcutta University and joined Bijoygarh Jyotish Roy College as a lecturer from 1964 to 1984. It was also in the late 1960s and early 1970s that Mahasweta Devi shot to fame with works like "Bayen," *Hajar Churashir Ma*, *Aranyer Adhikar*, *Agnigarbha*, and *Operation? Bashai Tudu*, shaking up the literary establishment with the radical force of her writings. She wrote in a variety of literary genres, translated texts into Bengali, and published biographies of her father and Lu Xun, as well as stories and textbooks for children. By the 1980s, translations of her works into Indian languages had established her as a major Indian writer, beyond the local context in Bengal. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's English translations also brought her an international audience. As her fame spread, a plethora of awards came her way, including the Jnanpith Award, the Ramon Magsaysay Award, and the Sahitya Akademi Award. The Bengali critical circle, with whom she always had a troubled relationship, now lauded her achievements. She was awarded the French Legion of Honour, shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and nominated for the Nobel Prize.

All this while, she was also campaigning tirelessly for the cause of the marginalised people, especially the tribal communities. A turning point had come in 1965, when she visited Palamau and realised the plight of the landless and dispossessed, under the yoke of bonded labour and discriminatory laws. What followed was a lifetime of commitment to the struggle for the rights of the dispossessed, which took her to far corners of the country and made her a voice to be reckoned with. To the tribal people, she became 'Marangdai,' a sort of mother figure.

Her intensely political consciousness notwithstanding, Devi's worldview did not remain confined to the tenets of any single party or ideology. Despite her avowed faith in Marxism, she did not formally join the Communist Party and was outspoken in her critique of what she saw as the shortcomings of the Left government in Bengal. She changed her allegiance to the Trinamool Congress (TMC) for their promise of change during the Nandigram protests, but later she faulted their leadership too, for failing to tolerate criticism from civil society. Rather than any formal affiliation to parties, her political consciousness manifested itself through her activism, impelled by an innate urge to intervene against diverse forms of injustice.

In her later years, Mahasweta Devi's memory began to falter, and her health declined. She died on 28 July 2016 in Kolkata and was accorded a state funeral. A sea of people accompanied her hearse to the cremation site, and tributes poured in from all over the world. Today, Mahasweta Devi is remembered as a distinctive voice in Bengali literature and a writer of international repute. Her writings have been translated into many languages, adapted for stage and screen, and included in university syllabuses in India and abroad. Yet in many respects, to most readers, she still remains – to use her own phrase about the tribals she supported – an undiscovered 'continent' (Devi 1995: xxi).

Ablaze With Rage: The Writer as Activist

Mahasweta Devi is as renowned for her activism as for her literary achievement. She regards these as twin aspects of the same vocation, because writing itself becomes a form of resistance. Her life and circumstances explain her passionate radical spirit. Her family included several unconventional cultural personalities, and her education at Santiniketan sensitised her to values of inclusiveness, self-reliance, freedom of thought and expression, social responsibility, and environmental issues. There, she also caught something of the spirit of the freedom struggle. Through her marriage to Bijon Bhattacharya, she grew familiar with IPTA and the ideology of Left. Later, she was associated with different radical movements in Bengal, Manipur, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Rajasthan.

While Mahasweta's crusade for the rights of the marginalised marks her out as an extraordinarily committed writer, it has also raised questions about the politics of voice and silencing. Spivak's iconic essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) has aroused heated debates about the question of representation: does speaking for the silenced empower the dispossessed, or indirectly amount to a continued silencing, by not giving them a voice of their own? When considering this question, it is important not to compartmentalise Mahasweta's activism and creative writing. Her literary works represent the subaltern through fictional characters, but as an activist she engages directly with the problems of the dispossessed, and as editor of the

journal *Bortika*, she also enables the indigenous people to speak and write in their own voices.

The multiple axes of radicalism in Mahasweta Devi's practice intersect in layered, complex, and sometimes conflicting ways. In fact, it is reductive to categorise her activism under any single ideological label. The aim of the entire section on activism in this book is to enable a nuanced appraisal of the intricacies of her social vision to highlight the interconnectedness of her multiple concerns.

Perhaps the best-known aspect of Mahasweta Devi's activism is her campaign for the rights of the indigenous people, especially the denotified tribes. She emerged as a figure of inspiration for the indigenous communities, who named her 'Marangdai,' claiming her as their own. She fought for separate statehood for Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, so that the tribal communities there could gain autonomy. She worked with Ganesh N. Devy at the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre at Vadodara, campaigning for the recognition of tribal languages. Sometimes, she walked long distances on foot to meet the people from remote villages. With Dakxin Bajrange, she set up the Budhan theatre in Ahmedabad, to assist the Chhara community, labelled a 'criminal tribe' since 1871, to use performance as a form of self-expression, and to deal with the stigma. In 1980, she formed the Palamau Zila Bandhua Samiti, India's first bonded labour liberation organisation. In 1986, she founded the Adim Jaati Aikya Parishad (Ancient Tribes Union) to foster cooperation among 38 West Bengali tribal groups.

In her fiction, plays, essays, and articles, Mahasweta describes tribal life as an 'undiscovered continent' that needs to be explored and understood. Her activist writings, many of which are collected in *Dust on the Road* edited by Maitreya Ghatak (1997), include multiple expressions of her concern for the tribal communities. *Operation? Bashai Tudu*, *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, "The Hunt," and "Draupadi" are iconic works of fiction dealing with the plight of the indigenous people. She also edited the journal *Bortika*, where people from deprived communities could write their own stories.

Mahasweta Devi also attacks the inequalities caused by class hierarchies, exposing the forces of exploitation that oppress the rural and urban poor. She describes herself as a Marxist, and despite her own privileged background, castigates the complacency and elitism of bourgeois society. *Mother of 1084*, "The Hunt," and "Jamunaboti's Mother" are examples of such writing. Her writings also expose the links between local and nationwide power structures and the broader transnational forces that continue to subjugate and exploit the Global South.

Although she disavows any link with the feminist movement, Mahasweta Devi's writings show a powerful concern for the plight of women in a patriarchal society. In narratives such as "Draupadi," "Giribala," "Breast Giver," "Bayen," "Rudali," and "The Hunt," multiple forms of oppression are shown to intersect in the constructions of female subjectivity. "The

Story of Chuni Kotal,” an activist essay, highlights the multiple forms of marginalisation suffered by the tribal woman, who emerges as the ultimate figure of subalternity.

Caste prejudices and inequalities also feature prominently in many of Mahasweta Devi’s writings. Activist writings like the essay “The Chains of Untouchability” condemn caste-based discrimination. *Kobi Bandyoghoti Gayener Jibon o Mrityu* (1967) presents the struggle of a young man from a low caste to achieve acceptance as a poet in 15th-century Bengal. In texts such as *The Glory of Sri Ganesha*, “Kunti and the Nishadin,” “Saanjh Sakaler Ma,” and “Bayen,” caste issues intersect with gender in a sharp critique of discriminatory social practices.

Devi’s writings strike an urgent cautionary note about the destruction of the environment in the name of ‘development.’ In “Arjun,” “Salt,” “A Countryside Slowly Dying,” and “Eucalyptus: Why?” we see her passionate desire for harmony between nature and the human world, an ideal she had first imbibed in her early days at Santiniketan. Today, critics such as Spivak, Jennifer Wenzel, and Mary Louisa Cappelli connect her writings with the contemporary discourse of planetarity and the Anthropocene.

Mahasweta also remains a vocal critic of the ways in which she feels the emergent nation state has failed to live up to the people’s dream of independent India.

After thirty-one years of Independence, I find my people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness, and bonded labour. . . . All the parties . . . have failed to keep their commitment to the common people. . . . Hence, I go on writing . . . about the people.²

She writes against communalism, caste prejudice, and superstition. According to Alaknanda Bagchi, Mahasweta’s writings

pry open the closures of the national discourse, compelling the forces in power to ‘remember’ what they would rather ‘forget.’ As the disparate discourses of nationalism(s) collide with and interrupt each other, interstitial spaces are formed in which the nation is (re)inscribed in a way that disrupts the essentialist discourse of the nation-state.

(Bagchi 1996: 48)

The Writer in Action

Mahasweta Devi’s unconventional, experimental approach to language and writing signals a remarkable aesthetic awareness that goes hand in hand with her powerful political consciousness. In “Ami/Amar Lekha” (“Me/My

Writing”), published in *Desh Sahitya Sankhya*, she speaks of the writing process:

I don’t use apparent/visible experience directly in literature. To write, I have to delve into maps, documents, archives and history. Experience, subject matter, message, language, prose style, all these have to undergo constant processing. Only then do they become aestheticised. Then I write.

(Devi 1983; 91. Translation mine)

She insists:

Because every text requires this aesthetic process, words, language and style also demand constant effort and analysis. My interest in vocabulary, syntax and its evolution through usage, and such other matters, goes back a long way . . . In our times, in our urban lives, local words are daily becoming more and more scarce. Hence I find words even from the dictionary, and use them. The words that attract me, I note down somewhere, to use when required.

(ibid)

Local vocabularies become central to the style and subject of Mahasweta’s writing: ‘Since I remain immersed in indigenous myths, oral legends, local beliefs and religious convictions, I find purely indigenous words very potent and expressive’ (ibid).

Oral traditions fascinate her. She campaigned for the recognition of tribal languages and also translated and edited volumes on Indian folklore. In her own writings, she includes elements from the oral traditions, as in the snatches of local lore in *Jhansir Rani* (*The Queen of Jhansi*) or the lines from an untranslated Santhal song in “Draupadi.”

Heteroglossia, the use of language as an indicator of social hierarchies in multivocal, polyphonic texts, functions as a potent literary feature in her writings. Alongside, many of her texts incorporate multilingual elements, as if to indicate the heterogeneities inherent in the cultures of South Asia.³ About her own unorthodox, eclectic approach to writing, Mahasweta says:

I borrow from everywhere – from oral traditions, proverbs, folk customs, rituals, whatever. I watch Shah Rukh Khan films and all my major books have been written with a transistor playing Vividh Bharati. A tree you put in good soil will thrive, but you’ll also find some which feed on absolute rubbish and survive somehow. I’m like that. I take from the nitty gritty of life. I believe in documentation – facts, statistics and data talk much more than what you think about events. I incorporate all this in my fiction.⁴

Mahasweta's relationship with modernism remains a fraught question. She had scathing things to say about the quietism of her Bengali literary contemporaries who were immersed in aesthetic experiments while turning a blind eye to social realities. All the same, her writings deploy special linguistic, textual, and aesthetic strategies that can be compared to the practices of other writers who were experimenting with new approaches. In fact, with her exposure to a wide, eclectic selection of Bengali and English books in childhood and her subsequent evolution into a student and teacher of English literature, Mahasweta Devi was conversant with multiple modernist literary histories. Although she rarely speaks of her engagement with Western literatures, it is not improbable that her reading influenced her own writing practices, even if she was not consciously drawing on such sources. Modern writers from Western Anglophone traditions, such as Kafka and Beckett, use 'irrealism' to go beyond the limits of realist conventions, even within a sequential, rational narrative (Löwy 2007). Sourit Bhattacharya detects a version of such 'critical irrealism' in Mahasweta Devi's texts, such as *Mother of 1084* and *Operation? Bashai Tudu*, where the quest narrative deploys non-linear time, dreams, dialogues, memory, and supernatural elements, destabilising the normative realism, in order to offer a powerful critique of the repression of dissent and the marginalisation of the rural and urban underclasses by the postcolonial Indian state. Here, he argues, the interventionist potential of irrealism can be extended to postcolonial rural scenarios, rather than the Western metropolitan context, to assert the existence of heterogeneous modernities (Bhattacharya 2020: 98). This paradigm is described by Benita Parry as 'peripheral realism,' which juxtaposes 'the mundane and the fantastic, the recognizable and the improbable' (Parry 2009: 39). Minoli Salgado argues that the 'surface realism' of Mahasweta's texts is 'destabilized by mythic and satiric configurations' (2000: 131). We see this in Mahasweta's use of myth in her constructions of contemporary history in texts like "Draupadi," "Breast Giver," and "Kunti and the Nishadin" (see also Partha Pratim Bandyopadhyay, in this volume). "Draupadi," for instance, rewrites the disrobing scene in *Mahabharata*, signalling 'simultaneously a deliberate refusal of a shared sign-system (the meanings assigned to nakedness, and rape: shame, fear, loss) and an ironic deployment of the same semiotics to create disconcerting counter-effects of shame, confusion and terror in the enemy' (Sunder Rajan 1999: 352–353).

These aspects of Mahasweta's aesthetic can be read in relation to modernist tendencies in the works of writers in other Indian languages during the second half of the 20th century. The struggle for independence and the Partition affected the literary scene in modern India, forcing writers to look beyond social realism for other forms of expression commensurate with altered realities. The socio-historical context produced ruptured sensibilities, a loneliness produced perhaps by the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family, and a certain philosophical angst about existence and