

Obituary

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016)

Indranil Acharya¹

The little room at 37, Sreenathdham, Society was star-studded that evening. It was a session of self- introduction. When her turn came she introduced herself as a human being who continued to work for the betterment of the indigenous people. It was a simple yet profoundly reassuring statement. Truly, literature was secondary in the life of this nonagenarian artist. Myriad issues of tribal life engaged her attention. If a Sabar village was devoid of any tube well she would promptly post a letter to the PHE department. If a Lodha youth was denied bank loan on a flimsy ground she would immediately send a stinging note to the Manager. In fact, her everyday life was a relentless spate of charitable works for the benefit of poor Adivasis. Winner of Jnanpeeth and Magsayay awards, Mahasweta will be remembered as a great writer-cum-activist. On 14th January, 1926, she was born in Pabna (now Rajshahi) district of Bangladesh in a village named 'Natun Bharenga'. She breathed her last in Kolkata at the age of ninety on 28th July 2016. On the one hand, she was the author of two contemporary classics- 'Hazar Churasir Ma' and 'Aranyer Adhikar'. On the other, she was a pioneering figure in Singur-Nandigram movement. Even beyond the periphery of political movements she took up the cause of the socially downtrodden communities – Kurmis, Dusads and Bhangis of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.

In an interview with Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in 2009 Mahasweta said, "When I visited Sabars I got answer to all my questions. Everything written on adivasis can be found in the life of these Sabars." In fact, much before the advent of Subaltern Studies, Mahasweta wrote 'Kabi Bandyoghati Gnair Jiban o Mrityu' in 1966. 'Chhoti Munda o tar teer', another immortal creation, is a poignant commentary on Adivasi worldview. Such works have cemented her fame as an author of the subaltern reality in the Indian subcontinent.

Mahasweta's father Manish Ghatak (alias Jubanaswo) was an eminent author of Kallol era. Her uncle Ritwik Ghatak was a legend in film making. Her maternal uncle Sachin Choudhuri was the founder of Economic and Political Weekly. Even her mother's maternal nephew was the illustrious poet Amiya Chakraborty. Mahasweta studied at Shantiniketan since the fifth standard. Her teachers were Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Bej. Throughout her literary career she had been a tireless crusader against casteism and patriarchy. Her intense awareness of the subaltern life gave rise to classic narratives like 'Stanyadayini' and the unforgettable character of Jashoda. Dopdi Majhen, raped in police custody, turns out to be a modern version of Draupadi. In 1946 Mahasweta graduated from Visva Bharati and after her post graduation she taught at Bijoygarh Jyotish Roy College. In 1947 she was married to Bijan Bhattyacharya. Their only son,

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Nabarun was born in 1948. These years proved nightmarish to her whole existence. In 1962 she got divorce and tied the knot with Asit Gupta. In 1976 there was a second divorce. Her private life experienced many jolts during these tumultuous years. Writing was Mahasweta's lifelong passion and her great works like 'Jhansir Rani' could be produced after intensive field work in Agra and other historic places in the north. She used to embark on adventurous field work with a camera and a notebook.

Mahasweta was a habitual globetrotter. She formed an alliance with Laxmanrao Gaikwad and G.N. Devy to float a new organization named Denotified Tribes Rapid Action Group (DNT-RAG). They launched several protest campaigns and deputations for restoring the self-esteem of these erstwhile criminal tribes. Their movement paved the way for the constitution of DNT commission for looking into the miseries and grievances of these stigmatized tribes.

Mahasweta was perhaps the last member of a breed of versatile Bengali authors who had a penchant for politics in true sense of the term. However, her little cottage at Rajnowagarh, a remote Sabar hamlet in Purulia district, will bear testimony to a great soul suffering silently with the hapless multitude and dreaming of a new world order.