

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: INDIA**

**Transcript of Mahasweta Devi  
Interviewer: Anjum Katyal**

**Location: Kolkata, West Bengal, India**

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**SPARROW**

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**Mahasweta Devi** is one of India's foremost writers. Her trenchant, powerful fiction has won her recognition in the form of the Sahitya Akademi (1979), Jnanpith (1996) and Ramon Magasaysay (1996) awards, amongst several other literary honours. She was also awarded the Padmasree in 1986, for her activist work among the dispossessed tribal communities. In 1980 she started editing a Bengali quarterly, *Bortika*, which she turned into a forum where marginalized people who had no voice elsewhere, could write about their lives and problems.

**Anjum Katyal** (the interviewer) is the editor of the theatre journal *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* brought out by the Seagull Foundation for the Arts, which has also published the entire works of Mahasweta Devi in English translation. She is also trained in Western music and performs regularly on stage.

## Mahasweta Devi Transcript

**Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi when one sees you now, you look like a very gentle and kind grandmotherly type. We all know you are very well established in the field of letters and of activism. What were you like as a little girl? I am talking about before adolescence. What are your memories of your childhood?**

Mahasweta Devi: Childhood was extremely happy. My family was very different and I was the first child. I was a girl. I was greatly welcomed by everyone. In our days, it was a very extended family. I mean, mother's aunts and father's aunts, things like that, and uncles, their uncles, my own uncles and aunts, this was there. But basically you see, my father and mother never stopped me from doing anything I liked... I learned to read very early. Before four, I was a fluent reader. (...)

*Anjum Katyal: Where were you living at that time?*

Mahasweta Devi: So many places because father was a government servant. He was being transferred from this place to that place. I think the happiest days were passed at Medinipur town. In those days, Medinipur was a small town. The officer's quarters were at the end of the town. You walk a little from my house, then you enter into big Sal forests<sup>1</sup> with Santhal<sup>2</sup> huts and villages. So plenty of freedom — whatever you want to read, you could read. No one would stop us. Father was a great collector of... he was very enthusiastic about music, paintings, sculptures. So I was introduced to these things at very early age. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, you were saying that in your family, you had a lot of freedom. No one ever stopped you from anything. Also that as a girl you were very welcome, even though you were the first-born and you were a girl. Do you think that this had something to do with the fact that yours was a highly unusual family culturally, politically?**

Mahasweta Devi: Generally, on mother's side, education was greatly encouraged and I have seen people, man — I mean, my maternal grandmother. Their mothers-in-law from that time you know education, library, newspaper reading all these things were encouraged. Also, our ancestral village, at least on my mother's side, was very patriotic. There was one Rajen Lahiri who worked with Bhagat Singh<sup>3</sup> and on Kakori conspiracy case,<sup>4</sup> he was hanged. Then Mohit Moitro, another

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<sup>1</sup> Sal Forest is a forest type dominated by a single plant species, commonly known as Sal tree (*Shorea robusta*). Sal forests are mainly distributed in the South and Southeast Asia, occurring along the base of Tropical Himalayas from Assam to Punjab, in the eastern districts of Central India, and on the Western Bengal Hills.

<sup>2</sup> Domed and thatched mud huts.

<sup>3</sup> Bhagat Singh: A freedom fighter from Punjab, North India, who became famous for his involvement in the Kakori conspiracy and was later hanged to death.

<sup>4</sup> Kakori Conspiracy Case: On August 9, 1925, during the national freedom movement, a few freedom fighters from Uttar Pradesh (North India) carried out a robbery on a Kakori bound train on the Lucknow Saharanpur railway line. This came to be known as the Kakori conspiracy.

cousin of my mother, he died in Andaman jails<sup>5</sup> because they were on hunger strike. They tried to force feed them, you know, pushing tubes inside their stomach. He died because of that. That day, I remember especially, it was 1937. I was in class seven. I had come to Medinipur from Shantiniketan<sup>6</sup>. But mother was still, but not speaking very much. Father was also very... I understood something has happened. Then I asked 'Who'. This I could guess that someone has died. My mother pushed the newspaper towards me. Then I read. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: The earlier childhood up to the age of ten, there was a point in which you were saying that the house that you remember most clearly was in Medinipur and it was right on the edge of the forest and the tribal settlements<sup>7</sup> were there. So was that then your first introduction to a culture that was different from yours, the tribals?**

Mahasweta Devi: Yes. You might...yes, you might link those days with my later interest but later interest was you know — then I jumped fully into it. At that time, what we found you know, that the Santhals, generally people were not very friendly to them. Santhals are not de-notified<sup>8</sup> tribes. Actually they are more sophisticated and very advanced — all the tribals are. Somehow, they would have to... police would slap cases on them and then they would have to go and report at the police station every evening. It was very difficult for them. And they worked on day-wage in the government quarters this house, that house. That also police insisted. If they worked there, they could keep better watch over them. Then my father asked them — two boys — father would ask them and they said, "We have to do it." Father went to the police station and said, "They work at my house. I refuse to allow them to come to the police station to report. Whatever report you want, you can take it from me. Come to my office and I will give it to you. And those boys will go home. Their home is quite far away in the jungles. So they were, you know, very close to us. And there was a boy. They would... he would clear some leaves and make whistle-like things and all of us very lustily would blow at it. They always encouraged me, patting my back. Yes "Hobe"<sup>9</sup> you will be able to do it. Medinipur was just fantastic. From childhood, father purchased a cycle for me so I would cycle anywhere. One day, cycling, cycling, in the meadow behind our house, there was a quite big — you know... what shall we call it. We call it in Bengali *pukoor*.

**Anjum Katyal: Pond.**

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<sup>5</sup> Freedom fighters involved in resistance to British rule were sent to Andaman jails or the "Kala Pani" with long sentences. Several died due to inhuman treatment and torture.

<sup>6</sup> Shantiniketan is a famous university town in West Bengal.

<sup>7</sup> Adivasis, or literally "original inhabitants," or tribal peoples comprise a substantial indigenous minority of the population of India. Tribal peoples are particularly numerous in the Indian states of Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, and in extreme northeastern states such as Mizoram. Officially recognized by the Indian government as "Scheduled Tribes" in the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India, they are often grouped together with scheduled castes in the category "Scheduled Castes and Tribes," which is eligible for certain affirmative action measures.

<sup>8</sup> Denotified tribes are the tribes that were originally listed under the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871, as "addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences." Once a tribe became "notified" as criminal, all its members were required to register with the local magistrate, failing which they would be charged with a crime under the Indian Penal Code. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1952 repealed the notification, i.e. 'de-notified' - the tribal communities. This act, was however replaced by a series of Habitual Offenders Acts, that asked police to investigate a suspect's criminal tendencies and whether his occupation is "conducive to settled way of life." The denotified tribes were reclassified as habitual offenders in 1959.

<sup>9</sup> Bengali for "it will happen" or "you can do it."

Mahasweta Devi: There was quite a big pond and it was far away so people would not come there generally. With the cycle, I fell into it and somehow I knew swimming so I came up (...) But mother said yes, she loves cycling, she fell and she knows swimming, she can come. She was never perturbed by anything, always encouraged.

**Anjum Katyal: So you think that as a child you had as much freedom as a boy in the family would have had?**

Mahasweta Devi: Yes, yes, fully.

**Anjum Katyal: Physically to run and play outdoors.**

Mahasweta Devi: Yes, yes, If a cycle was purchased for my brother, who was younger than me, one had to be purchased for me as well because father himself would do it, “She loves cycling, she enjoys it, let her do it.” Things like that, which is very good. And in the family also we have seen great grandmothers and grandmothers. My grandmother, maternal grandmother, she had her own library. And what is remarkable, they were in Dhaka<sup>10</sup>. Definitely in those days, it was a moffusi town. There my father was known as a Shodeshi (Swadeshi<sup>11</sup>) okil, (lawyer) that means the vakil (lawyer) who fought the cases of the Swadeshi — these people. So there was not much money but my maternal grandmother had a fantastic library and in the evening, my grandfather’s friends would come. People who fought such cases, who published magazines and she talked very competently with them. They would come to take guidance from grandma. Because grandma read so much, knew so much, and often she wrote on women’s issues. Jayshree was a very patriotic magazine published by the then Leela Nag and Renu Sen who became later Leela Rai and then they became, you know, they are known as Forward Block People<sup>12</sup>. Anyway, they were very patriotic. Their magazine Jayshree... often these two would be arrested and who is to run the magazine? It would come to our house and grandma, my mother, my aunt all of them would write and sell those magazines here and there. This I — we have seen, so much — we have seen them do, I have seen so much my mother do. So whatever I do now, it’s only natural. Had I not done it, it would be very unusual and rather betraying them. Because she always... the entire ambience was very different. During puja<sup>13</sup> time in our East Bengal village, big boats, on the big boats, they took, you know, saris and things for people to purchase. And they would take books. During puja time, the entire village, the women would purchase books. Sarat Chandra and

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<sup>10</sup> Dhaka is the capital and largest city of Bangladesh.

<sup>11</sup> The Swadeshi movement, part of the Indian independence movement, was a successful economic strategy to remove the British Empire from power and improve economic conditions in India through following principles of *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency). Strategies of the swadeshi movement involved boycotting British products and the revival of domestic-made products and production techniques. Swadeshi, as a strategy, was a key focus of Mahatma Gandhi who described it as the soul of *Swaraj* (self rule).

<sup>12</sup> Forward Bloc is a political party set up by Subhas Chandra Bose. He formed the party in 1939 as a radical faction within the framework of the Congress. He declared that the object behind the formation of the new party was 'to rally all radical and anti-imperialist progressive elements in the country on the basis of a minimum program representing the greatest common measure of agreement among radicals of all shades of opinion'. He, however, hoped that all radicals such as socialists, communists and Kisan Sabhais would respond to his call.

<sup>13</sup> Puja is the act of showing reverence to a god, a spirit, or another aspect of the divine through invocations, prayers, songs, and rituals.

other writers. Their books would go to the villages, remote villages. They purchased books. It was quite common, everyone would read books.

**Anjum Katyal: What about some of the magazines? Like you just mentioned *Jayshree*...**

Mahasweta Devi: Basumati was a very popular magazine where Mr. Thomas did all the paintings you know. His wife... and those were very popular. But Probashi was the magazine edited by Ramanand Chatterjee which was very unusual, published Tagore, published other things. On women's issues, Probashi was very, very strong. Any woman passing the secondary examination or becoming a graduate would be big news for Probashi. Women writers also wrote there. Sita Devi, Shanta Devi and other writers. They also wrote a lot. Then there was Bichitra. Bichitra was very, very... more on pure literature. But Bichitra is the magazine for which Bibhuti Bhushan Bannerjee wrote *Pather Panchali*. So since all of them were immersed in...all these books would come, we would read. *Parichay* — edited by Shudin Dutta. My father was also was a writer for *Parichay*. I remember one year in Shantiniketan — in Calcutta - father is not writing anything. And the editor Shudin Dutta is hammering him. Then Shudin Dutta told my mother, "You have to write something." So mother wrote a story. She wrote a story. And she wrote very well. She wrote especially on women's issues.

**Anjum Katyal: So that was published in *Parichay*?**

Mahasweta Devi: Yes, *Parichay*.

**Anjum Katyal: So did she write often?**

Mahasweta Devi: She wrote, but because father would promise...give some promise to three magazines and would not write anything, she had to write. She was forced to write. Wrote poems, wrote stories. That I become a writer was, you know... my mother felt very fulfilled; father also felt very fulfilled. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: So Mahaswetadi, you said that around the age of ten, you were sent off to Shantiniketan.**

Mahasweta Devi: Yes.

**Anjum Katyal: And that you were in the beginning very, very upset by this.**

Mahasweta Devi: Very upset.

**Anjum Katyal: Being sent away. But then you changed your mind after...**

Mahasweta Devi: When I reached Shantiniketan — going to Shantiniketan with father was quite an experience, because that was December and from Howrah<sup>14</sup> we travelled by train. Then father suddenly remembered sometime, long back, I wanted to have another ice-cream which he never

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<sup>14</sup> Howrah is an industrial city on the left bank of river Hooghly and is Calcutta's twin city. Howrah is also West Bengal's second largest city. The two cities are linked by the famous Howrah Bridge (Rabindra Setu).

allowed. And in those days, Calcutta was fantastic. He went there and purchased four ice-creams for me. Those were, you know — in those days they would go with those and Stop Me and Buy One. One *anna* in one those days, *anna, pais, rupiahs*<sup>15</sup>. That one *anna* was painted on the Stop Me and Buy One, *Happy Boy* ice cream. He bought four. I stared at it, because I was shedding tears like this (looks down). It was very shameful to cry before your parents, I felt. I ate all the four ice creams. Then I went to sleep. In the morning, I...we reached Shantiniketan; he took me to Stree Bhavan, the girls' hostel. And the superintendent came out and said, "Oh, this small girl. Her name is such a big one. Mahasweta? Which other name she has? I said Khukoo. And from that time, I became Khukoo for Shantiniketan. And very soon, you know, I was so absolutely immersed in Shantiniketan. Everything was very new to me. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: Can you tell us something about studying in Shantiniketan in those years? What was it like?**

Mahasweta Devi: Just three years ago, I wrote a book — *Amader Shantiniketan*. In that, many of the memories, I have brought back. First thing was '36, '37, '38, I was in Shantiniketa. That's five to seven. Tagore<sup>16</sup> was alive. And Shantiniketan was a small place. We could always go to Tagore without any... there was no, you know, no one saying not to come, things like that. Tagore's granddaughter, I mean Rathi Thakur's adopted daughter, Nandini... her nickname was Poope. Poope was also in the school, and after school hours whenever...

[Phone rings]

Mahasweta Devi: ... we found time, we went to *Uttarayan*<sup>17</sup>. That means Tagore's house. Tagore's daughter-in-law was a very affectionate, kind and saintly person. She would give us plenty to eat, to go to play around and things like that. (...) Plenty liberty there, plenty going out in the scorching sun... when rains came, we would run through the gravely, absolutely ocean wavy-like reddish-reddish from *khoai*<sup>18</sup>. We would run to Kopai river, they would push us into the river and ask us to swim. They would be with us. They would save us all right. That's how I learned to swim. Being thrown into river, turbulent rivers and then fighting with it. Shantiniketan was fantastic. And then Tagore's dance dramas, very famous — thus *Chitrangada*, *Shyama*, *Tasher Desh*, *Chandalika*<sup>19</sup>. When the rehearsals went on in the evenings where Tagore would sit for two or three hours without moving an inch and whenever he found, you know, something is wrong with the song or dancing he would just lift his finger and silently everyone would leave

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<sup>15</sup> Currency.

<sup>16</sup> Tagore is considered the greatest writer in modern Indian literature, Bengali poet, novelist, educator, and an early advocate of Independence for India. Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Two years later he was awarded a knighthood, but he surrendered it in 1919 as a protest against the Massacre of Amritsar, where British troops killed some 400 Indian demonstrators.

<sup>17</sup> Uttarayan (known as Makar Sakranti in other parts of India) is the day when the sun starts to travel northwards marking the decline of winter. The days become longer, the skies clearer and the breeze cooler. Although, Uttarayan is predominantly a Hindu festival marking the awakening of the gods from their deep slumber, history has it that India developed a rich tradition of kite flying due to the patronage of the Kings and Nawabs who found the sport both entertaining and a way of displaying their prowess.

<sup>18</sup> *Khoai*: The *khoai* in Shantiniketan is the term for the open area bordering the Vishwabharati land in and around Shantiniketan. It is reddish in colour because the earth there is reddish. It is softly undulating, sparsely vegetated land, like a huge open ground.

<sup>19</sup> Plays written by Tagore.



the room. (...) Happy, happy days Anjum, very happy days. So, in a way, without telling us anything, sense of duty, sense of all the time working, keep busy, find something fruitful to do. These were...

Anjum: Values

Mahasweta Devi: ...values of course. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: Now let's talk about your writing — start with the first story — or the first piece that you wrote.**

Mahasweta Devi: Well, after Shantiniketan, I came to Calcutta. I was admitted to class eight, 1939 it was. That same year, our English teacher, she was very good. Also plenty personality, who talked to us students much. Her elder brother used to edit a very good children's journal.

**Anjum Katyal: What were their names ?**

Mahasweta Devi: *Rang Mashal* it was named. And the leading poets and writers of that time they wrote for that magazine. I was — because father always made me subscriber to all the magazines, children's magazines, this, that — so...avid reader of *Rang Mashal*. Then Aparnadi comes and gives me one copy of Tagore's, his childhood memories...

**Anjum: *Chelebala***

Mahasweta Devi: *Amar Chelebala. Chelebalair ami beshi*. And then she asked me to write a review on that. I was horrified, I said, 'Review...', because review... I have read in class lessons and things like that. But who has heard of review, no one writing review and Tagore also ... But Aparnadi was very different. "I think I will get it within so many days. So you go and write it." I hadn't told my parents. That was printed then. Then I was even more horrified because I felt it was no good and ultimately they came to know — that was a first piece of writing. But when I went to Shantiniketan again for my B.A. courses — Sagormai Ghosh, *Desh* weekly, he edited. His house is also in Shantiniketan. He went many times and I was quite — supposed, to be a good student of Bengali. He asked me to write. I wrote a few pieces. But now I have forgotten about what or what was there but two three pieces came out in *Desh* and all the friends in the girls' hostel were electrified when a money order for 10 rupees came to Stree Bhavan. So all of us...

**Anjum Katyal: So when did you start feeling that you were a writer?**

Mahasweta Devi: I did not feel that way because I was — my husband<sup>20</sup> wouldn't have jobs, son was small. So many jobs I tried my hands at, like the time I wanted to try to export monkeys to America, nah?

**Anjum Katyal: I don't know about this.**

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<sup>20</sup> Her husband, Bijon Bhattacharya, was a playwright-actor-director in Bengali theatre and is considered one of the architects of the people's theatre movement.

Mahasweta Devi: You don't know? This is a very good story. Because in those days, communist families were persecuted a lot. My husband was not trying but everywhere such families were economically made to feel the crunch. We have been punished, you might say, for belonging to the communist ideals. Was it communist ideals? That also I do not know. Anyway, that was happening. One of my husband's friends came and told me, "Madam, would you like to export 15,000 monkeys to America?" Just like this. We live in Shan Bazaar and it's daytime after cooking and eating bhat<sup>21</sup> and dal<sup>22</sup>, he expects me to export 15,000 monkeys. It sounded very unreal. So I said, 'Of course I will do it.' I had no idea how things... Then I heard that in America, they make experiments on monkeys for medicines. That it should not be done, that idea, at that time, I had not gone to. I was not very old, so... He took me to New Market. Just behind New Market, there was this big patti (stretch) where these animal sellers were there. A bearded and very dignified-looking Muslim told us, "What? 15,000 monkeys?" He has to submit a tender and the equation was that me and Sadhon Babu will get one paise<sup>23</sup> eight for fifteen thousand paisas. Sixty-four paisas made a rupee. So it was fantastic. We would get something. I said, 'Where from you will get monkeys?' He said, "Why, from Madhya Pradesh<sup>24</sup>." Everything was so easy to him; so all those monkeys, he caught them, by train he sent them. From Bombay station, they put them in a ship and the American people would have to arrange for that. But then, what happened we do not know. Then my Mama<sup>25</sup>, Sachin Chandhuri, comes — who edited *Economic and Political Weekly*. He says, 'You see these Bengalis are so bad.' I said, "What happened bodo (elder) Mama?" He said, "Some madcaps in Calcutta, I hear there was a woman behind it." He doesn't suspect that it is his niece. So they were here and all those monkeys came and American ships they were stopped at the ports for something... so all those monkeys in

Bombay station were in a crate and there are big demonstrations by Jains<sup>26</sup> and other people. These monkeys will die of starvation. I think one or two died. Starvation, starvation — Bombay people were horrified. British time. No — after independence. So...they were fed all right. Ultimately, Bombay authorities had to take them to the Western ghats<sup>27</sup> and unleash them. And till date when I travel there anywhere in the remote corners of Maharashtra, whenever we come across a monkey, Lakshman Gaikwad or Ganesh Devi tells me "Ma, here is your... descendants of your monkeys." So that ended there.

**Anjum Katyal: What was your first real story that came out which was, you know, which you considered to be your creative writing or your first piece as a writer.**

Mahasweta Devi: You see, ...writing came very easy to me, and in trying to solve my eternal economic problem there was a very good readable weekly, *Sachitra Bharat*. My uncle's friend, Jishu Sengupta was connected with it. He told me, 'Can't you write small sketches for it?' At

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<sup>21</sup> Rice.

<sup>22</sup> Lentils.

<sup>23</sup> Currency.

<sup>24</sup> Central Indian state.

<sup>25</sup> Mother's brother.

<sup>26</sup> Jainism is a religion and philosophy originating in the prehistory of South Asia. Followers of Jainism are referred to as Jains.

<sup>27</sup> The Western Ghats comprise the mountain range that runs along the western coast of India, from the Vindhya-Satpura ranges in the north to the southern tip.

that time, I was working for Central Government<sup>28</sup> — for two years I worked, then I was sacked by them for marrying a communist but before that I would write but I couldn't use my name. I would take on the pen name of Sumitra Devi and talked about — a person who talked incessantly. That means I gave this name *Anabarato* — *Anabarato* means continuous. Very light reading but readers enjoyed it. But I was rather toying with it. And then we went to Bombay, Bijon<sup>29</sup> had to write some story, for K. A. Abbas<sup>30</sup> — it didn't materialise. So ultimately we left Bombay after one year when he wrote his film story on *Nagin*<sup>31</sup>. *Nagin's* story was horrible but it was a super hit of those times. This one year I utilised because I was in bodo (elder) Mama's house (Anjum: Sachin Chaudhuri) and with his card, I would go to Asiatic Society, sit and read and then come back. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: So how did your interest in the *Rani of Jhansi*<sup>32</sup> come about?**

Mahasweta Devi: No, just because I read the story. And then, this rang, you know, old some where, some where — yes I have read about her in childhood, in my grandma's library, in other books, other book reference to her. Rabindranath's elder brother referred to her all the time. Only that day, the Rani of Jhansi, she has proved her courage and resilience and things like that. Anyway, I read that book, I decided to write a biography. I had no — I had not come through the discipline of history or anything or research. I did not see my future — that my whole life I will go on researching into strange subjects. I came back and I came across the name of the Rani's nephew who was still living. Actually, when the Rani of Jhansi was married, she was eight years old. Her father also came with her and settled in Jhansi. And Rani of Jhansi's husband Gangadhar Rao — was about 30-32. Her father was also 30-32. So after coming here after her marriage, father also married another 8-year old girl<sup>33</sup>. And this stepmother and the Rani, they were you know, close childhood friends, things like that. So Rani's son, adopted son, different Damodar Rao, but her nephew Naveen Chintamani Pandey, I came across him, he was a member of the — one of the History Congress members. So that year, History Congress took place in

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<sup>28</sup> The Government of India, officially referred to as the Union Government, and commonly as Central Government, was established by the Constitution of India, and is the governing authority of a federal union of 28 states and 7 union territories, collectively called Republic of India. The legal system as applicable to the federal and individual state governments is based on the English Common and Statutory Law. There are two levels of government; Central and State.

<sup>29</sup> Her husband.

<sup>30</sup> A journalist and film critic.

<sup>31</sup> A successful horror film released in 1976. *Nagin* (The Female Snake) follows the bloody revenge of a female ichhadari (shape shifting) snake against a group of people who kill her mate.

<sup>32</sup> Lakshmibai, also known as the Rani of Jhansi. She died in 1858 fighting the British in what was the last major action in the Great Indian Rebellion which had started the year before. Today her name is commonplace throughout India, renowned as a leader of the Rebellion, but she was more than a martial leader. In her brief time she cast aside many conventions to unite peoples of all castes and religions in her cause. She put aside purdah, which she only observed with respect to the British, encouraged other women to do the same, and trained them to fight and support the main army; Lakshmibai was not the only Jhansi woman to die fighting the British. She cut across the social norms of the time, refusing to accept her fate 'as a woman.'

<sup>33</sup> Child marriage is practiced in some parts of India. It is worth noting that marriage and consummation of marriage may be separated by many years.

Ahmedabad<sup>34</sup>. (...) Then I had this mad idea, these days, people say this is the subaltern point. I did know anything about subaltern. Actually, when I first came across the word, I thought it is British time *ka* word. Subaltern Subedar hota hai na? (Subedar was a Subaltern isn't it?) I went to Jhansi, Gwalior, Kalpi [and] nearby places to collect as much as I can from the people's source. It was fantastic memories. Now. Sitting in the winter-time — it was December again, winter-time sitting in open meadow with all those woodcutters and others. We were sitting around a fire and they are singing songs. I can't remember just now, but it is written somewhere...

### **Anjum Katyal: Songs about the Rani of Jhansi?**

Mahasweta Devi: *Hanh,  
pathar, mithi se fauj banai Kaath se kator  
Pahad uthake ghoda banai  
Chali Gwalior*

(She made soldiers out of soil,  
A sword out of wood;  
She picked up mountains and made horses,  
And off she rode to Gwalior)

(...)

### **Anjum Katyal: And that was your first book.**

Mahasweta Devi: Yes, it was serialised for a weekly *Desh*; then it came out as a book. I was instantly known as a writer. Don't think there was no resistance. Plenty resistance.

### **Anjum Katyal: Of what kind?**

Mahasweta Devi: 'It is nothing, just romanticism, no truth in it.' Things like that. So many things I have forgotten, people, generally, I will not name them but established Bengali writers, you see, 'Her entry is through the back door with her father's influence.' How, I did not know. So, I had to listen to all these things. They made it a point, so I listened to them. There was one situation where direct confrontation with someone. He said, "I will see how you write, you will not be able to write." Then I was much younger then, Anjum. I told him, "But you will see I will survive by writing. I will live on writing alone. I will become a professional writer." They laughed. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: So do you now, when you think back, are there any particular kinds of writing or things that you prefer that influenced you. Like you know, you prefer a certain kind of style maybe, or certain kind of subject or is there something that you feel influenced you?**

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<sup>34</sup> Ahmedabad is the largest city in the state of Gujarat and the 7th largest city in India, with a population of more than 5.2 million (52 lakh) people.

Mahasweta Devi: That I have always acknowledged na? That 16<sup>th</sup> century poet Kabikankon Chondi, the writer, Mukundaram Chakraborty, he... he has been known as — big scholars like Sukumar Sen and others consider him the first Bengali novelist because his ballads on the hunters and the banias (traders /merchants)... That was very much renaissance time — that 16<sup>th</sup> century because all those Hindu gods and goddesses, they were their — traditional gods and goddesses, but the villagers who worshipped them is a people who sea-traded. They had to wor (worship), someone who would protect them from storms and things like that. Snakebite — so the snake goddess Monsha had to be. All these gods and goddesses — village deities lok vritta — the lok dev...devis came to be worshipped. That was a time when Brahminism<sup>35</sup> could not, you know, what shall I say, could not spread to all villages. In their daily, everyday life, they don't worship Durga<sup>36</sup>, or Lakshmi<sup>37</sup> or things like that. It's more like Monsha, like Bhasuli, like Sheetala like these gods and goddesses who are well-known household names who protect children, who do this, who do that, things like that. That was it...And historically, all over India, in England or Europe — liberal humanism renaissance, they call it. But in our country also, like Chaitanya, who declared that you need not go to a temple, you need not go to a mosque, sit in your house and worship the god and that's puja. Like Mirabai, Nana Tukaram, Kabir — that was the time, you know, these rigidities were going, people's point of view were taking place in religion and it was a movement — one kind of movement. Casteism was not too strong with the Vaishnavas<sup>38</sup> and these people. That period fascinated me. Also this writer, Mukundaram Chakraborty — everywhere I have acknowledged my debt to him. Fantastic, you know, Bengali writing. How he observed the people's lives. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, why don't you tell us about how you first began to visit the tribal areas and what prompted you to do it?**

Mahasweta Devi: An insertion in Sunday's *Statesman*. I came across this mention of this place Mckluskiegunge where one can go. I wrote a letter, then went there. Mckluskiegunge was at that time — Colonel Mckluskiegunge at some time was the Anglo Indian MP (Member of Parliament). Then for retired railway people — all over India, many Anglo Indians were employed, so they, originally the place name was Lapra. Lapra village or Mouja under which there were so many villages. They purchased land there. Each house with, you know, acres of

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<sup>35</sup> Brahminism: Hinduism characterized by magical and ritualistic practices performed by an elite priesthood.

<sup>36</sup> Durga is the incarnation of Devi or the Mother Goddess, a unified symbol of all divine forces. She manifested when evil forces threatened the existence of the Gods. To destroy these demons, all gods offered their radiance to her creation and each formed a part of Durga's body.

<sup>37</sup> Goddess Lakshmi means Good Luck to Hindus. The word 'Lakshmi' is derived from the Sanskrit word *Laksya*, meaning 'aim' or 'goal', and she is the goddess of wealth and prosperity, both material and spiritual. Lakshmi is the household goddess of most Hindu families, and a favorite of women. Although she is worshipped daily, the festive month of October is Lakshmi's special month. Lakshmi Puja is celebrated on the full moon night of Kojagari Purnima.

<sup>38</sup> Vaishnavism is one of the principal divisions of Hinduism. Its adherents worship Vishnu as the supreme God or one of his avatars and are principally monotheistic whilst also incorporating elements which could be described as panentheistic in nature. Bhaktas, or worshipers of Vishnu are called Vaishnavites, an English term that originated from *Vaishnava* in Sanskrit, which is the Vriddhi form of *Vishnu*). The Hare Krishna movement is a modern example of a Vaishnavite organisation. Vaishnavas believe that Vishnu-Narayana is the one supreme God (Parabrahman) and all other gods and creatures are subservient to Him. Shri Vaishnavas are numerous in all South Indian states, with Tamil Nadu having the main concentration. There are several million adherents in all. The community includes many brahmins, who are the leaders of the Shri Vaishnavas.

land like 15 acres, 18 acres, 21 acres, fruit garden, bungalows, cultivation ground. With their money, they settled there and their children, then they migrated to Australia, Canada, these places. They started renting out the houses. Anyway Mckluskiegunge was a very big place, very quiet and the best thing was after alighting from the bus, bus from Ranchi, bus from Dhanbad, you have to walk. In Mckluskiegunge there was no place for any conveyance or anything — we walked. I enjoyed it a lot. With the Anglo Indians, I became very friendly.

**Anjum Katyal: Which year was this?**

Mahasweta Devi: It was I think 1963 — 63 or '62. While we were moving around, I would leave after breakfast, walking, walking, end somewhere, plenty tribal huts. And all the hills and rivers were connected with so many legends you know. There was a legendary tiger which would come from the Neundra Hills and go into one of the abandoned bungalows, sleep there and then go back. (...) But the tribal people I found fantastic. They came under... there were some tribals who had been converted and were Christians — they lived separate but all of them were together because they were forest workers and did the same thing, not many households where they could work, they worked some... Delightful people. You remember my story *Hunt* — Mary I found there.

Anjum Katyal: Mary Oraon?

Mahasweta Devi: Mary Oraon, Mary Oraon

**Anjum Katyal: She was the child of an Anglo Indian and a tribal.**

Mahasweta Devi: Haah (yes).

Mahasweta Devi: Very fair skinned and she would not go to school. She would graze cows and buffaloes and very competent also.

**Anjum Katyal: And she was a real person.**

Mahasweta Devi: Real person. So many persons there in the stories are real persons. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: So Mahaswetadi, you discovered the tribals when you went to Mckluskiegunge but how did you get so pulled into their life and how did they become — their cause become — so important?**

Mahasweta Devi: You see, that way I have been to many places because you will find my writings like Dhoulis and others — on people who are not tribals also, but poor village people. I would go anywhere, you know. I had this madness in me. I would walk to their houses, be very well received. Sit with them, talk. Often sleep in their houses, then come. I just like, loved it. But at that time, I was not thinking of writing anything on them. You might say I went to learn from them, not to teach them anything. Because I found them absolutely scientific, absolutely sophisticated, behaviour and everything, very much.

**Anjum Katyal: Can you give an example of what you mean? Because most people's idea of tribals is the exact opposite. So when you say scientific and sophisticated, what do you mean?**

Mahasweta Devi: Very good, you see. Most of the tribals wouldn't use oils and things. They would you know, slow roasting over slow fires, steady, ongoing ground fire. That's very scientific. And I remember once eating venison — fantastic. It was in the morning, and Mckluskiegunge was a place where many kinds of bamboos grew. Natural bamboo forests, not the bamboos planted for, you know, economy, as we see elsewhere. Big, hollow, this bamboo, they chop the meat, put it there — first with adrak, mirchi, namak, lasun<sup>39</sup>, everything and seal both ends and put it in the slow fire, very slow fire and we left for the day. We went out here, there, here, there and then when we came back, meat was absolutely cooked, it was delicious. I have not eaten anything like it in my life. So you understand, how sophistication, civilization and true rules of what needed doing. I remember one child was burnt. His grandfather ran, chopped off the head of a fowl and poured the blood all over. He said this blood is also alive and it will cover the burn and very soon, new skin will grow. There should be scientific explanation for it. But actually, the child, when I saw her later, she was all right.

**Anjum Katyal: No scars.**

Mahasweta Devi: No scars. Nothing. And houses were immaculately clean. You could eat from the floor. Cleanliness was one of the prime conditions which everyone abided by and so keen to learn from everything. This I have seen in other tribes also like Vanshavar. They said, 'Why do you use glasses? Why do you have to have a lantern or a torchlight? Just learn to see, penetrate into the darkness and see because the stars also give light.' With such people I have walked in the evenings, never missing my...

**Anjum Katyal: So Mahaswetadi, over the years, you have done many different kinds of things. You have been a supplier of monkeys as you were telling us. You have also been a sales person, school teacher, roving reporter for *Jugantar*. So can you tell us a bit about these different phases and also the kind of writing that was linked to them in different times. (...)**

Mahasweta Devi: You see, as I told you, I was always over-energetic. In our days women just did not do so many things. But when I was in Ashutosh College studying intermediate, me and my friends, went and started block-printing saris. We started a job, regular. There was one Gujarati boy who would do it for us. It was in Bhawanipur. I have forgotten the name, was not very successful and also you couldn't invest much. Before that I was so enthusiastic, I wrote a letter, seeing an advertisement, to Dhaka. I still remember Dhaka, Urdu Road. They sent us a few packets of wash-soaps for dyeing clothes. Different colours, very lurid and gaudy colours they were — orange, blue, green, things like that. Chop into pieces, boil it, dump cloth, let it boil for so many times, then you take it up, wash with cold water. That way, I ruined many of my mother's, you know, bed sheets, this, that, curtains, even one of my saris. So after that I thought it's better if I sell it to my student, I mean, my colleagues. Because I was in a college, so, I used to purchase it, in those days taka, anna, paise — three annas per piece. And I sold it to them for

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<sup>39</sup> Ginger, chili, salt, garlic.

six annas per piece. But all the girls were enthusiastic. They purchased those soaps. And one day father came to know and I didn't dare, you know, writing my own name, so I wrote Kadambini Devi. Atrocious, very old time name. One day, the peon has entered the house and he is hollering, "Where is Kadambini Devi, Kadambini Devi?" Father is horrified. 'No Kadambini Devi lives here.' I said, "No, it's come for me." So when the transaction was finished, father said, "You were doing this thing all these days — means purchasing, having soaps brought from Dhaka this, that, this, that — this is not good. So, that was something, very bad, that experience also. But I had saved something like thirty rupees. And that 15<sup>th</sup> April, Bengali New Year's Day, I presented Rabindra Sangeet<sup>40</sup> records to my parents, storybooks for my brothers and sisters and things like that. But that was adventure. After my marriage, we were really in a fix. I was married in '47. Then I tried so many things you know, clothes dying powders because I, Bhawanipur area we lived — all the Sikhs<sup>41</sup> told us, "Why don't you get us this dyeing powders because we" — they were dyeing their turbans. So I will purchase from Bada Bazaar and sell it to them. They are very nice customers, they would give me lassi<sup>42</sup> and make me sit, take some rest, talk with them and if it was a lucky day I would eat some sarson ka saag<sup>43</sup> with roti<sup>44</sup> and this. So that phase also passed. My son was born in '48. After that, came the monkey-supplying business. Then, I joined this Central Government office from which I was thrown out for my husband being a communist, so it was all right. (...) I had to do something. So, that time, after that came the writing of *Rani of Jhansi*. And then, *Rani of Jhansi* was serious writing. But other writings, I was doing. Woh (those) stories, then light stories for *Sachitra Bharat*, this-that, this-that was going on. Then for one year, I joined a local school, Ramesh Mitra School for girls as an English teacher. Though I am very bad in English, I had English Honours in B.A. So that was done. But that was just a leave vacancy. After one year, I was sacked.

Anjum Katyal: Did you get any money for these light stories that you were writing?

Mahasweta Devi: Yes, yes, that was the only incentive. Fantastic in those days I used to get fifteen rupees per story from *Sachitra Bharat*. And fifteen rupees was oodles of money because you could purchase so many things. And I still remember from the first advance I received for, not *Jhansir Rani*, the next book, *Noti*, with that, I got four hundred rupees — I sat on the floor and wept; I never knew there is so much money in the world and with that I purchased bed clothes, curtains, this that, this that. Those were happy days.

**Anjum Katyal: And what about working with *Jugantar* as a reporter?**

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<sup>40</sup> Rabindra Sangeet refers to the 2000 odd songs (about 2230) and poetry written and composed by Bengali Nobel-laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore. These songs are regarded as cultural treasures of Bengal in both West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh, formerly East Bengal. The Rabindra Sangeets, which deal with varied themes are immensely popular with speakers of the language and form a foundation for the Bengali ethos that is comparable to, perhaps even greater than, that which Shakespeare had on the English-speaking world.

<sup>41</sup> Sikh—considered a subset of the Hindus, followers of the spiritual leader, Guru Nanak.

<sup>42</sup> Lassi is a traditional South Asian beverage, originally from Punjab, India/Pakistan, made by blending yogurt with water, salt, and spices until frothy. Lassis are enjoyed chilled as a hot-weather refreshment. Traditional lassi is salty and sometimes flavored with ground roasted cumin.

<sup>43</sup> A leafy vegetable dish with mustard green (sarson) and spinach.

<sup>44</sup> An Indian flat bread.



Mahasweta Devi: That came later because I was in... by '63 I had passed M.A. private and I got this job with at Bijoya Roy Jyotish College as an English... lecturer in English. By that time, I was quite established as a writer. (...) *Do Ana Khoi Mala* was written by that time. *Rongta* was written by that time. Short stories I had written plenty. And I remember I was also interested in crime. I wrote crime stories as well. (...) But by that time I had become immersed with local tribal life interest and I was going about searching for local eet bhatas — brick kilns — and immigrant labourers brought from Bihar — their exploitation... So when *Jugantar* offered me, I started writing occasionally. They said, 'No Mahasweta, you have to write regularly.' So just like that, I took leave from the office. I got — only that day I have given it to my editor Ajay — *Jugantar* issued me a visiting card that she is being appointed as a roving reporter for *Jugantar* with my photo and all. And then I was, by that time I had left my second husband. So I was absolutely free. So every morning, early morning, by the early morning train, I would go to the village and write. With that, I was creatively writing, I was doing this roving reporter things, but because of my close connection with village, village life, also writing about them — people — my life was, you know, widening like anything. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, let's talk about *Bortika*. The journal that you have been bringing out for so many years. It was started by your father as a literary journal and then you changed it. So can you talk about that?**

Mahasweta Devi: My father was... he was an eminent writer of those days. The... and he was very close to the young people. They requested him to take it over. They had, I think brought out one number. Then on behalf of a local club, this became their magazine, father started editing it and encouraged many writers who later became well-known like Syed Mustaba Siraz, like Phulakentu Babu, Phulakentu Singh and Abul Bashar — all of them have written for this magazine. He died in '79. Unluckily, I was not there at that time. I had just come to know, that I have been given, awarded the Sahitya Akademi prize<sup>45</sup>. And the day I left for Berhampore, that day he had died. So I went there with my other sisters after, you know, after cremation, everything — I had to be there, it is my good — somehow — luck to cremate my people.<sup>46</sup> The brothers, father, everyone. So anyway, after that I came to know that publisher of that magazine — a local man — a very good man. He was weeping, 'Dada, you are going. *Bortika* would stop.' He told him, "*Bortika* will not stop. Ask her to continue it." So that was a command to me. And I started, but the first number<sup>47</sup> we published — yesterday I showed them the very first number — to keep the continuity. The next number was very important — on my father — and I declared in the first number that I would change the orientation. Only villagers, or such people who never write their life stories — the novelists do, they will write their life stories and experiences — so it will come straight from the grassroots. No literacy means nothing to me. Class four onwards, whatever be their literacy, anyone who can write Bengali, will write for my magazine. And then I started, you know, with increasing popularity in the villages. There was a time when I had 800 subscribers from the tribal belt of Medinipur alone. Then it increased to 1,600 or 1,900, because increasingly, they started writing their life stories. And their name and everything has come out in print. That gave them a great, very big jolt. And I used to receive so many village subscribers. And then I started to, you know, make the writing more focussed — are you an agricultural

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<sup>45</sup> National award from India's academy of letters.

<sup>46</sup> Death practices include cremation; cremation is associated with good luck.

<sup>47</sup> Devi means the first issue.

labourer, then these are the points you should pursue. If you are a village school primary teacher, these are the points. Are you a rickshaw puller in a small town? ... So many categories are there. And plus, that not only village, rural Bengal started being documented, then I, the very first, one number was on tribal women, women but village tribal women, village Muslim women, like that.

**Anjum Katyal: Writing their own stories?**

Mahasweta Devi: Writing their own stories. (...) Do you remember about Chuni Kotal<sup>48</sup>, that Lodha<sup>49</sup> girl, who had to commit suicide?

**Anjum Katyal: She was the first woman of her tribe who got a B.A.**

Mahasweta Devi: Chuni Kotal was like a daughter to me. She would come to me all the time to Calcutta. Then she joined in Medinipur, that tribal girls, hostel and she was also a student of the Medinipur University. Vidyasagar University it is called. Chuni wrote her life story. She told me ‘No *didi*, I can’t do it! I said, “You can do it!” I said, “You can do it, you have to do it.” Chuni wrote her life story for the first and last time for *Bortika*. And after her death, everyone has borrowed from it. And whatever they have written, is based on *Bortika*. But Lodhas — you know, hunger for literacy was more in them. So, Lodhas on them, written by them, their life stories — school children writing poems and prose pieces, those numbers I have brought out Five numbers on the Lodhas alone, on the Santhals too, about the Munda tribals one, then others also. Then closed down factories, then life of cycle rickshaw pullers — on so many subjects. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: For *Bortika* was there any other particular incident you can remember where, maybe certain kind of information came into the journal from women, which helped with their lives.**

Mahasweta Devi: (...) Yes, Yes. My mother was a source of such stories, because she befriended — she was very nice and very severe also, very strict, with all the village women who after Bengal partition<sup>50</sup> came to work. She would take them. My mother was remarkable. She would take the local — the Harijan<sup>51</sup> children — who are not allowed in the tea shops. She was a short person and she went there. And her pallu (sari end) would be under her armpit, because it would slip, because she was, that way not very... So she would go to school and say, “These boys, I have come to admit these boys and girls.” That was never done before in Berhampur. Caste-dominated, these people were untouchables, because for Municipality, they were, you know,

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<sup>48</sup> Chuni Kotal was a Dalit Adivasi graduate student of anthropology at Vidyasagar University in West Bengal, India. As a result of continuous racist discrimination and insults from her upper caste Brahmin professors and university administrators, she committed suicide in 1991. Her death became the focal point of immense political and social controversy in the media in West Bengal, and eastern India, where the discourse is traditionally Brahmin-Baniya dominated.

<sup>49</sup> A tribal group in West Bengal.

<sup>50</sup> Partition—the partition of India into India and Pakistan, which was the fallout of independence from the British on August 15, 1947, the repercussions of which continue to manifest itself today in Hindu-Muslim violence; Pakistan celebrates independence day on August 14, and India, on August 15.

<sup>51</sup> Harijan was the polite form for *untouchable* coined by Mahatma Gandhi which means "Children of God" The term can also be attributed to Dalit castes of Pakistan called the "haris", who are a group of mud-hut builders. Many Dalits consider "Harijan" condescending, or otherwise feel obliged to discard the term 'Hari' - a Hindu divine name - in preference to the term 'Dalit.'

they carried shit on their heads. In those days, those were non-sanitary latrines. They said, “How to admit them?” Ma (Mother) said, “Government has started these schools, government pays you. Have they told you not to admit them? I am getting them admitted. I am the wife of the local income tax officer and I want to know. After seven days I will enquire and I will sort it myself. And I ask my husband to take the magistrate and visit the town and see what happens. Because husband and wife never cared for government jobs and they went, thus they were. And the horror of it was all of them, Jugal and others, their ma (mother) would come to — daierma<sup>52</sup> we would call them. She would come to clean our latrine. She would come with her four children. So it was our duty to give them bath, to feed them, then to make them sleep in time. For daierma there would be clothes — clean clothes, separate set of soap. So she would go and take bath, wash her clothes. Then in fresh, dry clothes, she would sit and have a big meal. And in the afternoon, after everything, when the sun went down, she would go home. So, she is the person, she said, “Ma, you have done so much.” Ma said, “I want also something from you.” “What?” “I want to take your children to school.” From that it started. And such a caste-ridden society, you know, everyone said ma is supposedly a Brahmin’s wife. She never cared. And after years Jugal passed matriculation, he became the Municipal Workers’ Union’s secretary. She (he) came to my mother and told “Granny, granny, we want to make her, bodo mashi (elder aunt) to be our president.” I said, “No, Ma, don’t tell them, ‘yes’, because I live in Calcutta, I come to see you and father, I cannot do it.” Ma said, “No, Khukoo, you have to do this.” Her words were supreme. By that time, she had gone blind and bas ho gaya (that was it) — I became President of the Berhampore Harijan Workers’ Union and as such demonstrated on the streets, went and fought the Municipality authorities, things like that. So many things happened. In my lifetime, I could never....

**Anjum Katyal: If anybody tries to write a novel about your life, it will be worse...**

Mahasweta Devi: It will be very difficult.

**Anjum Katyal: ...worse than magic realism.**

Mahasweta Devi: Yes, what did I not do?

(...)

**Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, in most of the stories that you have written, the characters, or the locations or the subject is about the most marginalized and dispossessed segments of our society, the most, the people who are leading the most suffering kinds of lives. And within that, there is also a strong collection of women’s stories, women’s issues, women characters. Now, how do you feel about this all? Because some people do think that you write more about women. Do you agree with that and how do you feel about the whole thing?**

Mahasweta Devi: (...) I try to write about the entire class. Class-wise they are exploited. Men, women, children, all. Women’s issues are marginalized. Women suffer more because they have a body. But also, women suffering peculiarly, it’s continuing for thousands of years. It starts from

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<sup>52</sup> Maid servant.

home, it starts outside, when she is an adolescent, when she is just growing up. Do you not read in the newspapers? A seven-year child is gang raped. Girls. Only yesterday I read that a girl-child was born and she was a new-born child, was left on the roads of Howrah, things like that. It's a continuous process. (...) You remember the story *Chinta*? *Chinta* had to pay such a price. She had to sell both her daughters. She had to pay such a price because she had after being widowed, she lived with another man. That's why. These things happen even in their society. Man goes and marries another girl, brings her home, nothing. In their society also. Their society is also very, very cruel against women. About the tribals, I will not say so. Tribal society is entirely different. Girl child is very welcome. No difference between a boy and a girl. The entire attitude is different, why different — it must be something which has been going on for thousands of years — they are carrying it in, they are carrying it in themselves. And this had to be written, that's why, I wrote. And also I have seen such women. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, can you tell us about your experiences with some of these very spirited personalities like Manda, for example, that you have written about.**

Mahasweta Devi: Manda Hiramanchanda that was the name later given by her admirers, admiring women. (...) Manda belonged to Kolhati tribe. About Kolhati tribe you should read this book, written by Kishore Shantabai Kale. She (He) has written about his mother who belonged to the Kolhati tribe. Also, he is the first person who has written about these eunuchs — very good writing. Belongs to the denotified tribe. So Manda was a girl, very spirited, very beautiful and as per custom in their society, the eldest girl was never married, but she was auctioned off. The highest bidder would take her, '*Chera Utarna*' (*Chuda Utarna*) — break the bangles — which means have sexual relations with her. So the first person who broke the glass bangles would give the father something like twenty thousand rupees — how much — as much as they could give. Her father, her brothers — they would live on her earning and after some days then she would again be auctioned off to another — the highest bidder. Manda was seething because she was, twice she did it and third time she got hold of a very long whip and she said yes, and this is done very ceremonially — the panchayat<sup>53</sup> — sarpanch<sup>54</sup> would be there, others would be there, the bidders also. So she said, who is the bidder? All the men were there. Also, her mother and others and Manda, as the bidder advanced to take her, draw her by hand, she brought out her whip and lashed at them, all of them, cut their skin, they were bleeding and howling. Manda just ran away. She went out and ran all the way — on the cycle, motorcycle — she knew how to... arrived, went to the centre where Lakshman Gaikwad, Maharashtra's undisputed leader of the denotified tribals... Gaikwad is a good writer also. His book, *Uchalya*, or *The Branded* got the Akademi prize<sup>55</sup>. So Lakshman's organisation gave her shelter. Then Lakshman Gaikwad came and came to [the village] and this village was seething, "What she has done? She cannot be forgiven. Let her come. If we can catch hold of her, we will, you know, peel her skin from her body and do

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<sup>53</sup> Panchayat refers to a council of elected members that makes decisions on issues key to a village's social, cultural and economic life: thus, a panchayat is a village's body of elected representatives. The council leader is named *sarpanch* (in Hindi), and each member is a panch. The panchayat acts as a conduit between the local government and the people.

<sup>54</sup> A sarpanch is the head of the village in India. The sarpanch is the focal point of contact between government officers and the village. It is an elected position. Recently there have been proposals to give sarpanches small judicial powers under Panchayati Raj.

<sup>55</sup> The Sangeet Natak Akademi Award is given by the Sangeet Natak Akademi - India's apex body for performing arts. It is the highest national recognition given to practicing artistes.

this and that, burn her alive in the acid.” Things like that. Lakshman came, Lakshman is a very great personality, very dominant, booming voice and everyone listened to him. He had hundreds of followers and everywhere — for making the denotified tribals aware everywhere, he had karyakarta, area workers. So came there and said, “He who touches this person, I will skin him alive, I am Lakshman Gaikwad. And how much money did you take?” he asked the father. Manda said this much — first time this much. ‘Give me the money.’ He took that money and told everyone — ‘Anyone tries to harm her, *panch ka koi meeting hua, kuch hua, tum dekhoge* (five-member jury if you have any meeting, just see). And she becomes the local karyakarta, you have to listen to her. And with that money, he went to the heart of Jamkheda and there Kolhati women who do this — their music and dance, this profession — this is their profession. They have to earn that way and give it to her malik, (owner) for the time being. So there...double-storeyed wooden structure — Manda lived upstairs, I went to that house. Downstairs is their stage. In Maharashtra, this is traditional Tamasha theatre and Manda’s whip was hanging there. The idea was that you come, purchase the tickets, see dance, listen to songs, see our dramas. Anyone trying to touch the girls, flay him. And she was given a Bullet, Bullet brand motorcycle and her famous whip, with that Manda, in salwar kameez<sup>56</sup>, goes everywhere.

**Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, listening to you talk, very often, what comes up is that you seem to be very comfortable with people’s approach towards religion, but at the same time, I know in many of your stories, you have really critiqued the way religion has exploited people in society. So what is your position on religion? I mean how do you feel about it?**

Mahasweta Devi: When, you see something, people... religion — I personally do not worship. But the maid who works for me, she does. That is all right because religion is something... in village life — there’s nothing else. It’s very important because in the old days there would be all over India, around religion, around such sabhas (gathering), there would be such melas (fair), people would come, get some solace. And very important was, from memory they would recite all old traditional [songs]. It’s very interesting, all over India in every state, in segments — especially where tribals are, this *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* has different versions. The vili version has come out. My good friend Bhagwanbhai has written it. This is due to Ganesh Devi’s... It is fantastic. The Shantanu, father of Bhishma, he was originally a maindak, a frog and he was going — cows trampled him — things like that. So all the stories were narrated there, it was in a way an institution for learning, and narrating and things like this. So what is so bad about religion? Because in a village they are narrating Mahabharata in the old style. But ask these Kolhati tribes, their version of Mahabharata will be different, living in the same village, extremely interesting source of traditional knowledge, oral tradition. Oral tradition I respect very much. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, you have often said that you feel that a writer has a duty almost to document her own time and to document the history that she’s part of.**

Mahasweta Devi: That’s what I believe.

Anjum Katyal: And so, can you talk a little bit about that?

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<sup>56</sup> Salwar kameez is the traditional dress worn by various peoples of South Asia. *Salwar* are loose trousers and the *kameez* is a long shirt.

Mahasweta Devi: Documenting my time and my history and I increasingly find that my history, when I say my history it becomes actually the very old, very permanent on-flowing history. Yes, I believe in that. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: And do you feel that there is a conscious difference between when you are writing your fiction, the way you write, the way your mind works or your concentration or whatever and the way you write your prose pieces for newspapers or....**

Mahasweta Devi: Absolutely different.

**Anjum Katyal: In what way?**

Mahasweta Devi: Absolutely different because when I am writing something creative, that is something else because in my mind I mull and mull over the subject, you know, it becomes very widespread. Then I narrow it down. It becomes like a hard nut — you can touch it. Then that, from that the story is born and it slowly expands.

**Anjum Katyal: You had said once that you wrote *Mother of 1084* in one night.**

Mahasweta Devi: *Hanh, 1084*, was written over two and a half days. *Breast Giver* — *Breast Giver* was written in one night, *Draupadi* was written in one night. (...) Anjum, I can't explain myself, I don't understand. I wrote so many pages, writing, writing, writing — at one time, there was frozen shoulder, and the doctor said, "You have to treat yourself more gently, you know. You can't punish your body like this." But if I didn't write, I would die. One felt so suffocated.

**Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, what is your relationship with the whole idea of feminism? I have heard you on the subject before. So do you consider yourself a feminist, do you like to be called a feminist?**

Mahasweta Devi: Might I answer it like this? You see, in my lifetime, I have not read Marx, Lenin or Mao Tse Tung — anyone. But from my writing, people bring out Mao, this is on the lines of Lenin and Marx. I have never read it. So if from my writings feminism oozes out, I can't do — I have nothing to do with it. But consciously I have told you time and again, that I write about the entire society. About women, of course women, men, children, all of them but about women, about such women about whom no one writes. A Dhoulis, a Mary Oraon, a Draupadi, who writes? *A Breast Giver, Chinta*. They are everywhere around the, around us, but we do not.... If, the question of feminism, more than feminism, what you know these days I can't attend any seminar on it because for years they have been fighting, women are abused. There are so many acts, so that women can get redress. But it's just not within their grasp. They cannot go. Where are they to go and make complaints when no thana (police station) ever will report a woman's complaint, things like that? And, so many cases of abuses. When I say women, I don't mean tribals alone. I don't leave the middle class and upper class alone — though abusement goes [on] there also. These days, where are the feminists? These days in the advertisements, women are again being shown as, their sole existence is "*Chula chaki-bartan-vartan*." There she is limited. She may be a doctor, or belonging to corporate sector or anything but ultimately

cooking vegetable *khana* for the entire family, she has to be a *bahu* or a that type of life-giving mother. And all the suffering women are shown forty years of age. We know forty is nothing. At forty, we might say, life is beginning. So, that is that. I believe in legal redress, I believe in bearing social responsibility. All the women who are holding seminars and things, I might go and ask them, I should I think, that what do you actually... “Have you ever tried to help any woman really in distress?” (...) What is reaching whom? After that comes feminism. What is feminism? In literature, feminism. This and that — I don’t know anything about it. I don’t know anything about the theories. Whatever I want to, I feel like, I write. There it ends there it begins and there it ends. It’s for the readers to judge it. (...)

**Anjum Katyal: Mahaswetadi, in the... around the time of the Nationalist Movement, there was a strong beginning of a women’s movement also. Women coming out of the home and taking part in the struggle. And again in the ’80s, there was resurgence of activism and with a lot of people coming forward and you know, pushing towards a strong women’s movement all over the country. Do you feel — How do you connect yourself to this tradition of struggle for women?**

Mahasweta Devi: (...) During the national freedom struggle for independence, long before that, women have been participants and they encouraged such travels, they came out, they broke all barriers and came out. One remembers clearly the Bengal Partition — in which Tagore and everyone, when Curzon<sup>57</sup> wanted to partition Bengal. Not only women came out, all the so-called ‘sex-workers’ — we call them today, might call them prostitutes, they are not ashamed of the word prostitute — all of them came out, supported, did so much that it was very, very encouraging. On Calcutta’s streets they are coming out and giving their money. They are burning those clothes brought from England, things like that. So that was participation. (...) So when there was not any woman’s struggle, women’s participation? There was all the time... and during Swadeshi Movement, during *Armoury Raid case*<sup>58</sup>, the poor people, they also... And how many of those terrorists — call them terrorists, call them... in those days they called them *Swadeshi* warriors. Many were housed at these poor people’s houses. The women took care of them. It’s a continuous street. That’s not the first time in 1980, women specially did not join any women’s struggle. 1980 — by that time I had become completely immersed in tribal work, fighting for them, injustice against denotified tribals known as criminal tribes. And I had my writing to do — other movements were here and there. I try to support it as much as I can. (...) If I can do something positively, that’s all right for me. For women, I have been trying for a safe shelter home. For all women in distress, they would be housed and with their children and then with NGO participation, government and non-government organisations supporting them. (...) Whatever I have been connected with, though it was not specially women’s movements, I think were, I have been connected with and I prefer to be... that is, of my own choice, people’s resistance. (...) *Bortika*’s first issue is this. *Bortika* believes that the real India lies in the agriculture and forest-based *Gram Bharat*, village India. About the village and villagers’ life. *Bortika* means writings... *Bortika* believes that the fittest writer would be the village people because their life is a ceaseless battle against hunger and exploitation. (...)

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<sup>57</sup> George Nathaniel Curzon, 1st Marquess Curzon of Kedleston, a British Conservative statesman who served as Viceroy of India.

<sup>58</sup> Chittagong armoury raid was an attempt to raid the armoury of police and auxiliary forces from the Chittagong armoury in Bangladesh, then a part of undivided British India, by revolutionary freedom fighters led by Surya Sen.

*Reads from Shanichari*

[Mahasweta Devi reads in Bengali from her story *Shanichari*]

When Shanichari was a girl of twelve, she went to the *haat* (market) in Tohri. And why not? After all, they enjoyed the train ride to Tohri, sitting on the floor of the compartment, chugging along, having a good time picking the lice from each other's hair. Shanichari had gone with her grandmother, her *eng-ajji* (grandmother). *Eng-ajji* (grandmother) knew all sorts of age-old tales and stories. She didn't often find a willing audience. The old woman could hardly hear but she loved telling stories.

After they got on the train, Shanichari settled her grandmother with her back against a wall. She said 'Thakuma, tell us that story about the foolish son-in-law. It'll pass the time.'

**'That one? All right.'**

'Go on, start.'

'The foolish son-in-law was on his way to his in-laws'. He walked and walked and walked. Suddenly — who's following him? Must be another man going the same way. Didn't realise it was his shadow. So the stupid man offered the shadow a pithey (sweet) and said, "Here, eat this." Shanichari collapsed with laughter at this point. What a fool! Offering food to his own shadow! But *eng-ajji* (grandmother) never managed to finish a story. She would fall asleep half-way.

*Reads from Draupadi*

[Mahasweta Devi reads in Bengali from her story *Draupadi*]

Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds.

What is this? He is about to bark.

Draupadi comes closer. Stands with hand on her hip, laughs and says, "The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?"

Where are her clothes?

**Won't put them on, sir. Tearing them.**

**Draupadi's black body come closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that *Senanayak*<sup>59</sup> simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes blood on her palm and says in a voice that is terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?**

She looks around and chooses the front of *Senanayak's* white shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, there isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, kounter<sup>60</sup> me — come on, kounter me —?

Draupadi pushes *Senanayak* with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time *Senanayak* is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.

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<sup>59</sup> *Senanayak*: police officer.

<sup>60</sup> *Kounter*: police encounters that are sometimes planned to eliminate some political prisoners.



*Writing: Reads from Breast Giver*

[Mahasweta Devi reads in Bengali from her story *Breast Giver*]

**Again injection and sleepy numbness. Pain, tremendous pain, the cancer is spreading at the expense of the human host. Gradually Jashoda's left breast bursts and becomes like the crater of a volcano. The smell of putrefaction makes approach difficult. Finally one night, Jashoda understood that her feet and hands were getting cold. She understood that death was coming. Jashoda couldn't open her eyes, but understood that some people were looking at her hand. A needle pricked her arm. Painful breathing inside. Has to be. Who is looking? Are these her own people? The people whom she suckled because she carried them, or those she suckled for a living? Jashoda thought, after all, she had suckled the world, could she then die alone? The doctor who sees her every day, the person who will cover her face with a sheet, will put her in a cart, will lower her at the burning ghat (crematorium), the untouchable who will put her in the furnace are all her milk-sons. One must become Jashoda if one suckles the world. One has to die friendless, with no one left to put a bit of water in the mouth. Yet someone was supposed to be there at the end. Who was it? It was who? Who was it?**

Reads from *Behind the Bodice*

[Mahasweta Devi reads in Bengali from her story *Behind the Bodice*]

Gangor breathes hard. Says in a voice ragged with anger, Don't you hear? Constantly playing it, singing it, setting boys on me ... behind the bodice...the bodice ... choli ke piche... choli ke piche...<sup>61</sup> No Gangor...You are a bastard too sir...you took photoks [photos] of my chest, eh? OK... I'll show...but I'll take everything from your pocket. In the silhouette cast by the hurricane lantern two shadows act violently. Gangor takes off her choli<sup>62</sup> and throws it at Upin. Look, look; look, straw — chaff, rags — look what's there. No breasts. Two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat. The two raging volcanic craters spew liquid lava at Upin — gang rape ...biting and tearing gang rape ...police ...a court case ...again a gang rape in the lockup ...Upin comes out, Gangor is still screaming, talking, kicking the corrugated tin walls with abandon. Upin runs. There is no non-issue behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it, Upin would have known if he had wanted to, could have known.

*Reads from Giribala*

[Mahasweta Devi reads in Bengali from her story *Giribala*]

Giribala's house is at Kandimohokumartal Sonagram. No one understood that Giri had a mind and life of her own. Our Giri was neither a beauty nor ugly, had two lively eyes, one would notice her because of those eyes. In their community even now the girl has to be given a pon (bride-price) — exactly char kuri taka (eighty rupees) and a heifer — these many things were

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<sup>61</sup> What's under the bodice?

<sup>62</sup> Bodice.

given to Giri's father. Then he (bridegroom) got married to her (Giri). I will not lie, her father too gave his daughter four bhoris (760gms) silver....

*Singing*

Mahasweta Devi sings a song in Bengali

“Since death is so near, why are you being divided and fighting it.

This will lead you to death.

My golden Bengal has turned into a cemetery,

Come let us walk together.

A Hindu and a Muslim,

All of them are lying there, they cannot harvest the new paddy.

**From door to door they are crying**

**Mother give a little rice water.”**

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