Between Community Activism & Creativity: Assessing the Politics of Subaltern Empowerment through Mahasweta Devi and Ananya Chatterjee

Somdatta Mandal

She dons many mantles. It is a well known fact that Mahasweta Devi, the Bengali novelist, short story writer, playwright, essayist, columnist, editor, and above all a socio-cultural activist, has relentlessly worked for decades highlighting the problems of the rural poor and the tribals. Right from her novel *Aranyer Adhikar* (Rights of the Forest, 1977) and anthologies such as her 1979 *Nairhite Megh* (Clouds in the Southwestern Sky) everyone acquainted with the nature of her activism and her writings is well aware that Mahasweta has lent voice to the tribals from West Bengal and Bihar in both fictional and non-fictional terms. She is a long-time champion for the political, social and economic advancement of these communities, whom she characterizes as “suffering spectators of the India that is traveling towards the twenty first century” (*Imaginary Maps*, xi). Her fiction has been variously categorized as “aesthetics of subversion”, “rhetoric of subversion”, “chronicles of the oppressed”, “literature of protest and/or resistance.” Like Dalit writing, she has focused on the invisibility of the ‘Other’. When she received the Magsaysay award in 1996, the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize, she was cited for her “compassionate crusade through art and activism to claim for tribal peoples a just and honorable place in India’s national life.” Donating the prize money from both the Jnanpith and Magsasay awards to tribal communities she continues to use her work to further the position of these groups in India.

My contention in this paper is that she is probably the only person who has blended real life and fiction in such a remarkable way that the two overlap and become inseparable. Also, in order to understand the creative writings of Mahasweta, her role as the messiah of the downtrodden, dispossessed and unheard of subalterns of Indian society, one has to read her non-fiction – as they blend, merge, coalesce, and juxtapose with her activist writings. This activism is central to Devi’s understanding of the role of a writer in society: “I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty towards society. Yet I don’t really know why I do these things. The sense of duty is an obsession. I must remain accountable to myself.” Through her fiction she has also lent voice the
doubly marginalized women of this community. The subject of her creative writing has remained the socially marginalized, the poor and the tribals, and their struggles. With her intimate knowledge of what happens at the ground level, she depicts their life with brutal accuracy, savagely exposing the mechanics of exploitation and oppression by a ruthless patriarchal society who relegate them as breast givers, as witches, as professional mourners and the like. They are also doubly exploited by the dominant sections of the society, who have the support of the state system – politicians, the police, and the administration; the processes through which resources meant for the development of the poor evaporate even before they ‘trickle down’ to the people for whom they are meant; how the system has a vested interest in keeping the poor in poverty, turning them into beggars for the very resources which should be theirs by right. Spivak’s translation of several of Mahasweta’s short stories along with the detail introduction that she offers to this volume speaks a lot on women and agency.

Born in 1926 into an upper caste family, it is a well-known fact that Mahasweta has been championing the cause of tribals in India and is one of India’s foremost writers. Her trenchant, powerful, satiric fiction has won her recognition in the form of several awards, amongst several other literary honors. Her writing has given Indian literature a new life and inspired two generations of writers, journalists and filmmakers. A celebrated writer and a tireless activist, she has led a battle on behalf of the Kheria Sabars, de-notified tribes of India – indigenous groups who were branded “natural criminals” by the British colonial state, who face discrimination to this day, despite being ‘de-notified.’ During the 1970s and 1980s, which was the most fruitful period of her life, she went on writing untiringly and producing stories after stories (sometimes even one each day) and at the same time turning her attention to the marginalized tribals and untouchable poor of eastern India, particularly Bihar and West Bengal. She traveled widely and regularly to Daltonunj, Palamau region of the then Bihar state, living with and building an intimate connection with them, wrote a series of articles against the oppression of the tribal people. She revealed to our ‘civilized society’ the terrible plight of bonded labourers, the shrewd exploitation of daily wage earners in the brick kilns (cf Eiter Pore Eit) and ‘other’ people who were marginalized in society from the very beginning – the untouchables, widows, dacoits, bonded laborers, the denotified tribals and the prisoners who languished
in jail even after their life time was over. The subject might change but the jurisdiction remains the same – namely, people who reside on the opposite pole of power. Thus, along with her fiction she simultaneously wrote reports, sent applications to the labour departments, pursued them, replied to their queries. So gradually her personal and her public life started blending with one another.

As mentioned earlier, Mahasweta is the best example of how much a person can stretch oneself, spread out and get entwined in the lives of different kinds of people. The result is that the fine line between fiction and non-fiction blur in her works to such an extent that it is difficult to ascertain what is fact and what is the product of her imagination. For her, writing fiction and writing non-fiction is one and the same thing. In the introduction to her novel, *Agnigarbha*, she stated that it was useless trying to locate politics in her writing because the main role of her writing was to write about the oppressed and tortured people and about people who look at them with compassion. The master in her story “Jal” (Water) is an honest and sympathetic Congressman. The labour unrest in “M.W. Vs Lakhind” is masterminded by the CPI according to their party policies. In “Operation Boshai Tudu” the character Kali Santra is a party cadre of the CPM and Basai Tudu himself even excels the Naxalite movement. Again, the protagonist in “Draupadi’ is a tribal Naxalite worker. All these characters are somehow related in their mentality and according to the writer they are not in opposition with one another.

Sometimes the novels become tools of her wish-fulfillment. Take the example of her novel *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. The wide sweep of this important novel encompasses many layers. It ranges over decades in the life of Chotti – the central character – in which India moves from colonial rule to independence and then to the unrest of the 1970s. It probes and uncovers the complex web of social and economic exchange based on power relations. It traces the changes, some forced, some welcome, in the daily lives of the marginalized rural community. And at its core, it celebrates Chotti, legendary archer, wise and farsighted leader, proud role model to his younger brethren. Written in 1980, this novel is also remarkable for the manner in which it touches on vital issues that have, in subsequent decades, grown into matters of urgent social concern. It
raises questions about the place of the tribal in the map of national identity, land rights and human rights, the ‘museumization of ‘ethnic’ cultures, and the justifications of violent resistant as the last resort of a desperate people amongst others. Or take another example, *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* which appeared in 1981 shortly after *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*. This novel shows the lives of the underdogs – the Lachhimas, the Rukmanis, the Mohors and the Haroas – as a contrast to the lives of their all-powerful overlords – the Medinis and Ganeshes. Lachima, whose leashed bitterness and anger of a lifetime against Medini and Ganesh is liberated at the end of the novel when Ganesh begs her to save his life, decides to save him, but in her own terms. The hope of liberation found in the earlier novel continues in this book. As Devi says, *Chotti Munda* talked of the dream of the dispossessed tribals uniting in struggle with the equally marginalised low caste communities, while this novel shows how ‘being landless and being born low caste is almost inevitably linked in India.’

To understand the serious implications of these novels, I suggest that one has to substantiate her ideas from the non-fiction that she was writing simultaneously during this time. These are her letters, applications, survey reports, field research -- scattered in the *Economic and Political Weekly, Frontier, Amrita Bazar Patrika, Jugantar, Dainik Statesman*, various other little magazines, -- a small section of which has been edited and published by her activist younger brother Maitreya Ghatak as *Dust on the Road*. One has to read “The Bonded Labour of Bihar” that she wrote with her friend Nirmal Ghosh which has been translated into Hindi as “Bihar Ke Bandhua Majdoor” but incidentally for some unknown reason has not yet been published in Bengali. Gayatri Spivak, who has translated two collections of Devi’s stories suggests that the interplay of activism and literary writing in Devi’s fiction can be of substantial interest to current academic discourse and practices. Spivak insists that Devi’s work suggests a model in which activism and writing can reflect upon each other, providing a necessary vision of internationality, and the possibility of constructing a new kind of responsibility for the cultural worker. (*Imaginary Maps*, xxvi).

In an interview given in 1998, in response to the question, “What would you like to do for the rest of your life?” Devi replied: “Fight for the tribals, downtrodden,
underprivileged and write creatively if and when I find the time” (Guha). This emphasis on devoting more energy to social activism than creative writing is the quintessence of her oeuvre. Believing art to be an effective medium of social change, she started editing a Bengali quarterly called Bortika (Torch) in 1980 which she turned into a forum where poor peasants, agricultural laborers, tribals, factory workers, rickshaw pullers and all these who have no voice elsewhere, could writer about their lives and problems. Bortika was an obscure literary periodical edited by her father Manish Ghatak from a district town but once she took charge she changed the journal beyond recognition. The topics covered in the journal are of a very wide range, from general socio-economic village surveys to surveys on problems of agricultural labourers, small peasants, tribal groups, rickshaw pullers, workers in the unorganized sector, to give a few examples. People from these backgrounds have been invited to write about their own situation, which they do in large numbers. Many of the Lodha and Kheria tribals of Medinipur and Purulia districts have written for this journal and for many of them this was the first time they had written for any publication. In 1982, ten years before she was driven by society to commit suicide, even Chuni Kotal, the first graduate in their tribal community, wrote for this journal. Thus Bortika provided a forum for a number of young middle class people, activists, even people working for the government, to write on a wide range of subjects that concern the common people. The editor only insisted that the contributions must be based on facts, figures, observations and even surveys – only those actually relevant to an understanding of a problem that affected the people, or those which provided some directions for change. She has no patience with abstract, theoretical and academic research which she considers of little relevance to the real-life situation. Without any background of formal research, she meticulously prepares detailed questionnaires and guides for surveys which are intelligible for her type of contributors and circulates them through her journal and her won remarkable network-cum-courier service. In this way, Bortika is the first significant effort in alternative literature in Bengali.

Here I want to digress a little and delve into the nature of this journal. A unique venture, it is neither a ‘project’ for Mahasweta, nor ‘funded’ by any source. Bortika limps ahead, barely managing to recover its costs from a few advertisements and its limited circulation. From time to time, special issues of Bortika have been published on tribal
groups of West Bengal, brick-kiln workers, the plight of workers in factories that have closed down, land alienation among tribals, witch-killing, movements of agricultural labours, sharecroppers and peasants, especially the Tebhaga movement, bonded and contract labour, problems of the Muslim community and any other social issue that interests her. For instance, on can also mention her tirades against the present West Bengal government for violation of human rights at Nandigram. “The name of the time is Nandigram”, she tells Jaya Mitra, a fellow activist. (cf. the most recent issue of Bortika, Sept-Dec 2007 which is special issue on ‘Human Rights’).

Language: Mahasweta’s innovations with language and style have been recognized by critics and contemporaries as important contributions to the history of Bengali literary convention. She makes it very clear that for arts sake she would not write a single sentence. She draws directly on her intimate knowledge of ground realities and this characterizes her creative writing. Like Bama, her movement from standard Bengali to variations of local dialects is noteworthy and inclusion of crude rustic language including expletives in her writing has made critics comment that she writes ‘like a man’. “Language is a weapon, it’s not for shaving your armpits” – she stated in an interview given to Saswati Talukdar. In the translator’s foreword to her story “Draupadi”, Gayatri Spivak states:

the educated Bengali does not know the language of the tribes, and no political coercion obliges him to ‘know’ it. What one might falsely think of as a political ‘privilege’ – knowing English properly – stands in the way of deconstructive practice of the language – using it ‘correctly’ through a political displacement, or operating the language of the other side. It follows that I have had the usual ‘translator’s problems’ only with the peculiar Bengali spoken by the tribals. In general we educated Bengalis have the same racist attitude toward it as the late Peter Sellers had toward our English. (16)

The Documentary:
“A feminist, filmmaker, a writer and a journalist” – Ananya Chatterjee labels herself in that order. For her, nothing beats the joy of making documentaries on subjects close to her heart, without anyone peeping over her shoulder. As a freelance artist Ananya has made several interesting documentaries. The particular documentary discussed here is called The School That Karmi Soren Built. Made in 1996, this 30-minute film was made
to actively support Mahasweta Devi’s cause for uplifting the tribals of West Bengal. It is the story of a school started by Karmi Soren, an unlettered and impoverished tribal woman who donated all her land for the education of the local tribal children as they had no opportunity for education. This school was denied recognition and financial grant for 27 long years due to governmental apathy and political machinations. Though it catered to the needs of 13 remote villages in Tulibar in West Midnapore, six teachers, all tribal farmers, toiled voluntarily without pay for all those 27 years in order to keep the school from being shut down. Mahasweta Devi took up the cause and wrote innumerable letters to the ministers and officials of the education department of West Bengal Government till the teachers finally received their pay and school got officially recognized. Ananya’s documentary in this case provided the necessary impetus to resolve the case.