

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः सर्वे सन्तु निरामयाः।  
सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तुमाकश्चिद्दुःखभागभवेत्॥

He who looks on all as one, on the analogy of his own self, and looks on the pleasure and pains of all with a similar eye, such a yogi is regarded as supreme.

(The Bhagwad Gita VI: 32)

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

(Galatians 3.28)

### **Equitable Order in Society**

Despite such equality preached in the highest revered scriptures all over the world, the reality is utterly grim and disappointing. Not only in the Hindu scriptures but this equality, compassion, forgiveness and sympathy is the essence of all religions and is considered to be the only way to reach God. *The Bible, The Quran, The Guru Granth Sahib* and all social reformers from Raja Ram Mohan Roy to Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekanand to Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, all in one voice have talked about the equitable order in society. But whatever is prevalent in the world of spirituality is not applicable in the real world. Somewhere in the name of class, somewhere in the name of caste, somewhere in the name of gender, money, colour, social position, language, religion and dynasty, human beings have always been divided, exploited, ruled, harassed and killed.

## **Varna-Vyavastha**

In India where Hindu religion is the most prevalent, society is divided mainly in the name of caste. Although some critics do not view caste as the main dividing factor here. Early Indian texts like *Manusmriti* talked of 'varna' and according to it society is divided into four main types: *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*. According to Varna system, the *Brahmins* were enjoined to live in poverty and their occupation was to learn the *Vedas* and sacred texts and teach them to all and pray for the well beings of all. The *Kshatriyas*' chief occupation was to fight for the safety of the others and learn military skills. The *Vaishyas*' main occupation was related to trade and agriculture while the *Sudras* were workers and service providers for all the three higher varnas. One verse of *Manusmriti* also talks about the origin of four varnas from the different organs of Lord Brahma. Manu also says that there is no fifth varna outside these four varnas. Untouchables or outcastes were those persons who did not fall under these four varnas. Now it is a topic of great debate among critics whether this varna vyavastha and jati system is one or the two different notions. Arguments are also there about the reasons of rigidity which were gradually stuck to this.

The Bhagvad Gita also refers to four Varnas - division among human beings in the fourth chapter sloka 13. This verse says:

Chatur-varnyam maya srishtam,  
guna - karma - vibhagashaha  
tasya kartaram api maam,  
viddhi akartaram avyayam

The verse is translated as: The four divisions of human order have been created by me according to quality, activities and aptitude; although the creator of this, know me as the non-doer and immutable. *The Gita* also refers to the karma of the four varnas according to their qualities:

Serenity, self-restraint, austerity, purity, forgiveness, and also uprightnes, knowledge, wisdom, faith, -these are the duties of the Brahmin born of nature.

Bravery, boldness, fortitude, promptness, not flying from battle, generosity and lordliness are duties of the Kshatriyas born of nature.

Ploughing, cattle rearing, and trade are the duties of the Vaisya born of nature. And of the nature of service is the duty of the Sudra born of nature. (XVIII 42-44)

It is evident that varna-vyavastha was maintained in the ancient society for the correct division of labour. But gradually this system deteriorated and became the main reason of discrimination among human beings in India. Down the ages the varna system became very narrow and limited to one's birth and vocation. As a result jati- vyavastha became a weapon in the hands of the privileged to attack on the under-privileged. Although almost sixty-seven years have passed after independence, India has not been able to be free from the clutches of caste-system. Many policies and many committies have been constructed to end the discrimination, yet a few have been able to be benefited from the reforms. Till date we hear many so called low-caste girls being raped and their houses set on fire by the upper caste people. Certainly it is a matter of shame and a big hurdle in the way of bringing equitable order in society.

## **The term 'Subaltern'**

Originally 'subaltern' was a military term denoting the soldiers who were inferior or subordinate in their ranks. In its non – military sense, the term subaltern was used by Italian and Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci for those groups in society who were lacking autonomous political power. These days the term is used to describe all kinds of persons living at margins who are not getting the reward due to them. Labourers, tribals, women and peasants come under this umbrella term. Gramsci first used this term for the proletariat in his 'Notes on Italian History', a six point project in his famous prison notebook. David Ludden in his book *Reading Subaltern Studies* beautifully records the changing meanings of the term subaltern and says,

The word has a long past. In late medieval English, it applied to vassals and peasants. By 1700, it denoted lower ranks in the military, suggesting peasant origins. By 1800, authors writing "from a subaltern perspective" published novels and histories about military campaigns in India and America; and G. R. Gleig (1796-1888), who wrote biographies of Robert Clive, Warren Hastings, and Thomas Munro mastered this genre. The great war provoked popular accounts of subaltern life in published memoirs and diaries; and soon after the Russian Revolution, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) began to weave ideas about subaltern identity into theories of class struggle. (Ludden 4)

## **Marxist Literary Theory**

The theory of Karl Heinrich Marx, the father of modern sociology is about society, economic and politics which is collectively known as Marxism. The main contention of the theory says that the mode of economic production is the base of everything else in society and all societies progress through the dialectic of class struggle. The opening lines of *The Communist Manifesto* set the basis of Marxism which says "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." (Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* 108)

Karl Marx is undoubtedly one of the most influential thinkers of the world. Critics have considered his impact as powerful as that of the founders of two major religions, Jesus Christ and Muhammad. His ideas were so influential that many of the governments used Marxist thought to replace capitalism with communism or socialism. Marx believed that the inherent contradiction within the structure of capitalism would bring its end giving way to socialism. He argued that capitalism will end through the organized actions of an international working class. He famously stated, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." (*The German Ideology* 617)

According to him the working class and the proletariat would grow in number and they will develop a class consciousness and an urge to change the system. But for this, they will have to seize the means of production. They will also have to encourage social relations, to benefit everyone abolish exploiting class and introduce a new system of production which will be in favour to all.

## **Antonio Gramsci**

Antonio Gramsci was born on January 22, 1891. He was a founding member of communist party of Italy. He was imprisoned by the fascist regime for his highly revolutionary ideas. These ten years spent in prison became the reason for Gramsci's early death, but the same ten years were very important since his most intellectual work was the result of this time. His Prison Notebooks saw the light of the day several years after the World War II. By the 1950s Antonio Gramsci became an important man and his ideas attracted a lot of attention from all around the world.

Marx famously stated that the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways but the point is to change it. But this socialist revolution predicted by Marxism had not taken place by the early 20th century. Gramsci analysed the reason of it and told that capitalism maintained control not only through political and economic suppression but also ideologically. He elaborates the dual role of power and the role of art and culture in it by dividing the application of power in two parts. One is the state or the ruling class which ensures the subordination of the other classes, second is the civil society which comprises ideological institutions like schools, church and literature etc. which ensures the same subordination but not through oppression but through making the ruled class agree to be ruled. To perform this function successfully the ruling class has its organic intellectuals who work as mediators to convey the demands of the ruling class. Thus these people help in developing a culture in which working class people consider their welfare with the welfare of the bourgeoisie and rather than revolting they help in maintaining this oppression. To stop this ideological oppression, the working class needs to develop its own intellectuals. To attain power the working class must have its own cultural

hegemony. Indirectly he stresses the need for education for the working class. Gramsci states that the possession of state power is crucial to the subaltern class struggle. Due to the complexity of the formation of subaltern classes and diversity of subjects that constitute the subaltern class, it becomes very difficult for the subaltern classes to unite and rise against ruling classes. Antonio Gramsci asks a question himself whether intellectuals form a separate group in society or does every social group has its special category of intellectuals? He describes two processes of the formation of the intellectuals. In the first process, every social group creates with itself one or more than one types of intellectuals which make the group aware of its functions in the fields of economic, social and political fields. He defines intellectuals as,

Thus it is to be noted that the mass of the peasantry, although it performs an essential function in the world of production, does not elaborate its own "organic" intellectuals, nor does it 'assimilate' any stratum of traditional intellectuals, although it is from the peasantry that other social groups draw many of their intellectuals and a high proportion of traditional intellectuals are of peasant origin.  
*(Selections from the Prison Notebooks. 6)*

This lack of intellectuals works as impediment in starting a revolution. Along with these organic intellectuals, every social group has already existing categories of intellectuals. He says:

The most typical of these categories of intellectual is that of the ecclesiastics, who for a long time (for a whole phase of history, which is partly characterized by this very monopoly) held a monopoly of a

number of important services: religious ideology, that is the philosophy and science of the age, together with schools, education, morality, justice, charity good works etc. (*Prison Notebooks*. 7)

When one distinguishes between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, one is referring in reality only to the immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals that is, one has in mind the direction in which their specific professional activity is weighted, whether towards intellectual elaboration or towards muscular – nervous effort. This means that, although one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals, because non intellectuals do not exist. But even the relationship between efforts of intellectual – cerebral elaboration and muscular – nervous effort is not always the same, so that there are varying degrees of specific intellectual activity. In reference to the intellectuals, he famously stated in *Prison Notebooks* that, “All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say; but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.” (Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* 9)

There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded: homo faber can not be separated from homo sapiens. Each man, finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a "philosopher" an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or, to modify it, that is to bring into being new modes of thought.

Gramsci also asserts that a person can not be called intellectual only on the basis of his eloquence. He should be an active participant in practical life. He should work as a constructor and an organizer. According to him there is a struggle between the state and the civil society. The state does not mean only the government rather it is divided into political society and civil society. The division is not very clear cut and they can often overlap.

Gramsci was also a proponent of historicism. For him, ideas can not be understood outside their social and historical context. The term 'hegemony' was also propounded by him through which he explains the dominance of one group over another. The theory explained by him influenced many intellectual thinkers of twentieth century. Edward Quinn defines the term 'hegemony' as:

...a word meaning predominance, used by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (in Selections from the Prison Notebooks) to explain how a dominant class gains and maintains its power...the ascendant class controls not only the economy but also the cultural and ideological spheres of its society. Thus it is able to persuade the lower classes to willingly support its agenda. (Quinn 146)

For all these ideas Antonio Gramsci has become an important man in the arena of cultural theory and the Indian school of subaltern historiography took the term 'subaltern' from this important thinker. The term has been used by some to denote marginalized groups, the oppressed and the exploited. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an important name in the field of subaltern studies elaborates it in an interview to Leon De Kock saying:

Subaltern is not just a classy word for the oppressed, for other, for somebody who is not getting a piece of the pie..... In postcolonial terms, that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern- a space of difference. Now who would say that is just the oppressed, The working class is oppressed It's not subaltern.....Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and most dangerous. I mean, just by being a disseminated – against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'subaltern'.....They should see what the mechanics of the discriminations are. They are within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern. (Spivak, Interview by Leon De Cock 31)

Postcolonial critics like Homi Bhabha, Boaventura de Sousa Santos also use the word 'subaltern' in their essays. Edward Said's 'Orientalism' is also related to the idea of subaltern since it talks about the other, the third world which was deliberately looked down upon by the Europeans.

### **Subaltern Studies in India**

As Antonio Gramsci stated that the subaltern class has a history of its own which is as important as the history of the bourgeois. To record the history of the struggles and victories of Indian farmers, labourers and other marginal people, Ranajit Guha and his eight academic friends started publishing volumes of essays titled *Subaltern Studies : Writings on South Asian History and Society*. The volumes

were published annually from 1982 edited by Ranajit Guha. He retired as editor in 1989 and till then he had edited six volumes of Subaltern Studies. Till date ten Subaltern Studies volumes have come forth and all these volumes have carved a niche in the history of Subaltern Studies. In fact its presence and influence is being felt on Latin American Studies, African Studies and Cultural studies. There were seven scholars as members of the Subaltern Studies Project and they were Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Gautam Bhadra, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman and Gyanendra Pandey who decided to write down 'history from below'. Where previously the national movement was looked as history of Indian elites who inspired the common and ordinary masses to revolt, now the history was being written as the history of subaltern groups and their important role as leaders.

A Bengali historian Ranajit Guha was undoubtedly the driving force of all the volumes of Subaltern Studies. His another book *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* which was published in 1983 is considered to be a classic. In this book Guha describes six core elements which have historically constituted peasant insurgent movements in India and they are reflective of the ways that the peasants struggled against their subordination. He names these elements as Negation, Ambiguity, Modality, Solidarity, Transmission and Territoriality. Thus Guha was the most important figure in Subaltern Studies group and as David Ludden remarks in introduction to his book *Reading Subaltern Studies*:

Ranajit Guha might be said to be the Louis Dumont of colonialism which in his writings attains a comprehensive power like that of caste in Homo Hierarchicus. (Ludden, *Reading Subaltern Studies* 14)

Along with his collaborators, Ranajit Guha played an instrumental role in re-defining subalternity. He remained silent on Gramsci's use of the term 'subaltern' and in this way invented Indian subalternity. In Subaltern Studies it is used as a name for the general attribute of Subordination As David Ludden remarks in the above mentioned book:

In the 1990s Subaltern Studies became a hot topic in academic circles on several continents; a weapon, magnet, target, lightning rod, hitching post, icon, gold mine, and fortress for scholars ranging across disciplines from history to political science, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism and cultural studies.( *Reading Subaltern Studies 2*)

The emergence of Subaltern Studies in India was a result of the decades of research on history from below. Apart from the founders of Subaltern studies, there were many books which prepared the atmosphere for the popularity of Subaltern Studies. Political leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru also helped in building an Indian subaltern critical scholarship when he said:

The great poverty and misery of the Indian People are due not only to foreign exploitation in India but also to the economic structure of society, which the alien rulers support so that their exploitation may continue. (qtd in *A tryst with destiny* 54)

Thus the people started thinking about the history from below; the culmination of which was the complete 'Subaltern Studies' which gave the voice to the voiceless people over the decades and centuries as David Ludden remarks:

In this new context, the nation was being re-configured, re-imagined, re-theorised. Subaltern Studies became an original site for a new kind of history from below, a people's history free of national constraints, a post nationalist re-imagining of the Indian nation on the underside, at the margins, outside nationalism. Subaltern India emerged in fragments during the eighties nineties. (Ludden 12)

Ranajit Guha in the preface of the first volume explains the term subaltern taking the help of concise Oxford dictionary which says, "subaltern are those of inferior rank, those subaltern in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way" (quoted in SS1, vii).

Subalterns are those persons who are not of the dominant, ruling or the elite groups. Although elites can also act as subalterns according to circumstances. The test of being elites or non-elites lies in according to Ranajit Guha whether they "acted in the interest of the latter (the dominant all India groups) and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social beings." (Guha, SSI 8) In the second volume Ranajit Guha states that the subaltern is "the maker of his own history and the architect of his own destiny." (SSII, vii)

Brinda Bose in her review of Subaltern Studies IX described Subaltern Studies as a touchstone for research in South Asian history, society and culture. Post colonial cultural theory also happened to be attached with Subaltern Studies as Edward said remarks in Forward to *Selected Subaltern Studies*:

this group of scholars in a self conscious part of the vast post-colonial cultural and critical effort that would also include novelists like

Salman Rushdie, Garcia Marquez," and others, as well as" poets like Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Mahmud Darwish, Aime Cesaire, theoreticians and political philosopher and a whole host of other figures ( Said ix-x)

None can deny the need and importance of Subaltern Studies in 1980s. It was not the sudden awakening of some intellectuals to give voice to the voiceless rather the result of gradual and continuous political, economic and social circumstances. Vinay Bahal states in the article "Relevance or irrelevance of Subaltern Studies":

Subaltern studies represented a response to a genuine need for a new methodology, epistemology and paradigms, in order to overcome a crisis of understanding produced by the inability of old categories to account for the world. The old categories ,conceived by modernisationists and radicals alike in the decades after the Second World War to understand the structure of the globe, were called into question in the face of the crisis of 'progress' and increased impoverishment of the 'third world.' Mass migration of the poor countries to the industrialized world due to demand of cheap labour has confounded borders and boundaries. It created a flow of cultures which at once homogenizing in most parts of the world. The infusion and confusion of cultures created a vast identity crisis among the new diasporas. These new global circumstances needed new interpretations and new methodologies to understand people's lives and experiences. (Bahal 365)

## **Can the Subaltern Speak**

Widely known as a post-colonial theorist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born in India in 1940. A professor at Columbia University and a visiting faculty at the centre for studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, Spivak made her presence known by her translation and preface to 'Of Grammatology'. She has applied deconstructive strategies to various theoretical engagements like Feminism, Marxism and Post-Colonialism.

“Can the Subaltern Speak” began as a conference hosted by the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at Columbia University. It questions the notion of the colonial subject and provides an example of the limits of the ability of western discourse even post-colonial discourse to interact with disparate cultures. She is primarily concerned with the issue of whether people who have been historically dispossessed or exploited by European colonialism are able to achieve a voice.

The main part of the essay is an attack on two contemporary critical theorist Foucault and Deleuze. She accuses them of making false claims of objectivity and transparency and in fact cooperating with capitalism and imperialism. Simi Malhotra and Saugata Bhaduri remark in their book:

In this context, Spivak attacks Foucault's and Deleuze's notions of power being multiplicitous and present everywhere, and shows that it is a regression to the non-material and non-social, and to an endlessly atomistic relativistic domain of the individual subject and his or her 'desire'. She also shows how the stress in contemporary theory on 'representation' has to be understood in terms of the distinction Marx

makes between *darstellen*, or simply re-presenting through significant means what is already present and *vertreten*, or making a representation on some issue, speaking for something which cannot speak for itself in a politically interventionist way.(Malhotra and Bhaduri 189)

Spivak's essay describes those historical and ideological factors that hamper the possibility of being heard for those who live at the periphery. The essay interrogates what it means to have political subjectivity, to be able to access the state and to suffer the burden of difference in a capitalist system that promises equality yet withholds it at every turn.

Gayatri Spivak also considers the works of *The Subaltern Studies* which studies the colonized subject. While she understands and supports the aims of the group, she expresses concern over the fact that the voice of the subaltern is being heard through them- a group of intellectuals. She likens this to what Foucault and Deleuze do when they speak about oppressed groups like the workers of Maoists. Additionally, she points out that The Subaltern Studies Collective, like Foucault and Deleuze, suppressed the heterogeneity of the subaltern itself when they attempted to describe 'subaltern consciousness' by talking about it as one single homogenous entity.

She begins the final part of her essay by asking what the elite must do in order to avoid continuing to construct the subaltern. As mentioned earlier, Spivak broadens the definition of the subaltern to include women and their histories. Spivak uses the examples of sati in colonial India and the story of Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri

to affirm that the woman is assigned no position of articulation. Everyone else speaks for her. Spivak formulates the sentence that the white men are saving brown women from men and states that the sentence discloses her politics. Applying this sentence to the example of the practice and subsequent abolishment of the practice of Sati, Spivak shows us that it is either the white man explaining why Sati is a barbaric custom and must be abolished or the brown man insisting that it is a ritual that renders the woman sacred. She was only a tool through whose presentation the British considered themselves to be modern. The nationalists also talked about the reform for their own ends. She mentions the behaviour of the British as their extraordinary paradoxical status. At no point is the voice of the 'brown woman' heard. It is the woman who becomes sati, yet no one comes across the testimony of the woman's voice consciousness. She is continuously written as the object of either patriarchy or of imperialism and eventually it is she who has to become marginalized due to economic dependence or patriarchal oppression. Her misery can be heard only through a dominant medium. Although the writer herself asserts in an interview that her essay was too complicated and she even described it as a result of uncontrolled writing, yet the numerous examples taken by her from philosophy to critical theory and from sociology to history makes the essay an endeavour to theorize the silence of the subaltern especially women. Although, she mentions in her essay the plight of peasants, tribals and other oppressed sections of the society, her focus is on the plight of women in colonial India. In the end, she had to remark:

The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which

she must disown with a flourish. (Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak 308)

## **Mahasweta Devi**

My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness, a curtain that separates the mainstream society from poor and the deprived. But then why my India alone? as the century comes to an end, it is important that we all make an attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, so the reality that lies beyond and see our own true faces in the process.

(Mahasweta Devi, the Ramon Magasaysay award acceptance speech, 1997).

Really great and truly pure (Maha - sweta) Devi undoubtedly deserves a salute for her selfless and tireless dedication for the upliftment of the marginalized. When asked in an interview what she planned to do the rest of her life, Devi answered that she wanted to fight for the downtrodden and write creatively if and when she finds the time.

True to her words, she has consistently been fighting for the cause of subaltern communities. For her activism and writings, this octogenarian has been awarded with the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Bhartiya Jnanpith award, the Ramon Magasaysay award and the Padam Vibhushan. But all these awards together can not describe the glory of who is the true example of woman empowerment, who has heard the voice of the voiceless people so far, who has lived and thought and fought and worked and written for the upliftment of the downtrodden, who has shaken the

soul of many, who has shown a mirror to the so-called shining India, Mahasweta Devi is really an ideal for those who want to use their skills for the betterment of others.

Mahasweta Devi was born on 14th January, 1926 in Dhaka in the house of her maternal grandparents. In west Bengal, she grew up in a large intellectual family. The environment proved helpful in developing her inner personality. Her grandparents were associated with the social reform movement initiated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Her father Manish Ghatak was a renowned poet and prose writer. Her mother Dharitri Devi was also a writer who translated some of the works of Pearl Buck. Devi's parents, also acted as social workers and promoted literacy among poor slum children. Many of her aunts and uncles were famous as artists, journalists, actors and film makers. Sudhish Ghatak, Ritwik Ghatak, Sachin Chowdhary and Sankho Chowdhary are some famous names among them. In this intellectual and thought provoking environment, Devi was encouraged to read more and more about various writers and their works.

Devi's father was a government servant and due to his transfers, she got her education from various places. Devi attended middle school at Shantiniketan and Devi considers herself fortunate to get chance to study from Tagore himself. Shantiniketan or Virhwa – Bharti founded by Tagore in 1921 was an experiment in education. Devi got acquainted with the students from all over the world. Shantiniketan left a deep impression on Devi's memories. Although after attending Ashutosh College of Calcutta University, she returned to shanty-again to get her bachelors degree in 1946, this stay could not prove much enlightening since Tagore

had passed away many important events occurred during this time. Second World War, Quit India movement and the great Bengal famine and then finally on August 15, 1947 the Independence. But with the bliss of Independence came the curse of the partition. Since East Bengal became the part of Pakistan, violence broke out in Bengal too. At the time of famine, Mahasweta Devi along with her classmates joined relief work. All these events changed her comfortable middle-class mentality.

In 1946, Devi married Bijon Bhattacharya, a playwright and a member of the communist party of India. In 1948, they had a son called Nabarun. During this period, the family's economic condition was not good. Bijon could not find a job because he was a communist. Devi had to do odd jobs like selling dye powders and even supplying monkeys for some research in the U.S. She got a job as a clerk but was expelled blaming her being a communist. At this time, she concentrated on writing. She wrote under the pen name of Sumitra Devi for a Bengal weekly. Her first novel *The Queen of Jhansi* came in 1956. To write down the story of this first woman warrior, she travelled on foot to collect first hand information about the Queen of Jhansi. There was no looking back and she was established as a writer. In 1962, she divorced her husband, left her son with him and started living on her own. She went through a period of sheer depression and one day she swallowed an overdose of sleeping pills. She survived and started her life again by pursuing M.A. from Calcutta University. From 1964 to 1984, she served as a lecturer in English at Bijoygarh Jyotish Roy College. She started writing novels, articles, stories, dramas, biographies, textbooks and children's fiction. Nivedita Sen & Nikhil Yadav remark in the very opening of their book:

If the complete works of Mahasweta Devi were brought out as a single edition, number of volumes would probably be enough to fill an entire shelf of any decent library. She has more than hundred fiction titles to her name, and if one were to include journalistic writings, books and magazines edited by her as well as the translations of her books, it might perhaps require the clearing out of another few shelves to accommodate those. And yet her accomplishment cannot be understood purely in literary terms. (Sen and Yadav 11)

In 1965, Devi visited Palamau which was for her the mirror of tribal India. She was shocked to see the pathetic condition of the tribal people over there. Later on, tribals became the chief concern for her social activism as well as the focus of many of her writings. In 1967, a rebellion broke out in the Naxalbari village of west Bengal culminating in the birth of Naxalite movement. History was also one of the main attractions for Mahasweta Devi. Devi uses history to recall the episodes of oppression as well as rebellion raised against the oppressors by the tribal or common people. Nivedita Sen and Nikhil Yadav remark in their introduction to the book:

The predicament of the tribal backwaters, the exploitation of the Adivasis by the landed rich or the urban administrative machinery callously perpetuating a legacy of complicity with the colonizers, bonded labour and prostitution, the destitution and misery of city dwellers who are condemned to live at the fringes and eke out a meager livelihood, the plight of women who are breadwinners and/or victims of male sexual violence, dependent widows, ill treated wives,

and unwanted daughters whose bodies can fetch a price-are adequately represented through these translations.(13)

In 1982, she took a leave from her college and joined a Bengali newspaper as a reporter. In 1984, she resigned from her job and devoted her fulltime to writing and activism. She wrote articles for the Economic and Political weekly, the Business Standard, the Sunday Frontier and the New Republic and through these articles and reports protested against police atrocities, fake government programmes, exploitation of poor labourers and so on.

But writing was not enough to express the growing restlessness inside Devi. In 1979, she started editing Bortika, a literary periodical which her father had edited. She turned it into a platform where tribals, peasants, labourers, and workers expressed themselves.

In 1983, Mahasweta Devi formed 'Pashim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti', in 1983 she founded 'Adim Jati Aikya Pasishad', in 1990, 'Sabara Mela'. She is also one of the founders of 'De notified and Notified Tribal Rights Action Group'. The lives of many thousands have been improved by these grassroots efforts by her.

Besides being a writer, activist, journalist, Devi is a wonderful speaker. Ganesh Devy describes it in his essay "The Adivasi Mahasweta" and says,

Her Elwin lecture was deeply moving. She had no written script. She spoke of the civilizational graces of the adivasis, of how our society had mindlessly destroyed the culture of our great continent, and how

the innocents had been brutalized. She described the context in which the infamous criminal Tribes Act, 1871 was introduced, the process of denotification in 1952 and the plight of the nomadic communities in India ever since. The DNTs (Denotified Tribals) are human beings too, she said. She then narrated the gruesome episode of the custodial death of Budhan Sabar in Purulia in February, a day before we first met her at the Vidyasagar University. The term 'spell-bound' is inadequate to capture the effect, she had on her audience. The utter simplicity of her bearing the sincerity conveyed through her body language and her direct style, defeating all grammar, had completely shattered the audience. Here was a no-pretense, no-rhetoric, no – nonsense person, whose compassion and clarity were an invitation for action. Perhaps Mahatma Gandhi among great Indians, spoke like her. (Devy 74)

The rarely found mixture of an activist and a writer can be judged from her answer given to Gayatri C. Spivak in an interview:

Gayatri, I've been doing this for many years. I write these days for *Frontier* [Calcutta-based], and even for *Economic and Political Weekly* [national circulation], and I have been doing a regular column contribution to Bengali dailies since 1982. Wherever there is exploitation, I report it immediately. I write directly to the pertinent ministerial department. I send a copy to the area, they make a mass-signature effort and go to the local authority. Each minister has one or two hundred of my letters. 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. This sense of duty is an obsession, and I must remain accountable to myself. I ask myself this question a thousand times : have I done what could have been done? My house is full of them, they write to me, they come and stay with me , I go and stay with them. And this journalistic exposure is very necessary. The government officials admit that they are afraid of me. What I will write next? (Devi, *Imaginary Maps* viii-ix)

The corpus of her works is so extensive that it is hard to publish a collection of all her literary and non-literary work together. Many of her works have not yet been translated. Besides, writing text is not the ultimate goal of her life. Her aim is to work for the downtrodden and to bring justice to them. For this purpose, she writes in papers like the *Frontier and Economic and Political Weekly*. She edits a magazine by tribals called *Bortika*. She is unusually observant about her surroundings and is unhappy to see people's nonchalant attitude towards the marginalized people. She remarks in an interview to Naveen Kishore entitled "So Many Words, So Many Sounds":

People do not have eyes to see. All my life I have been seeing small people and their small dreams. I feel as if they wanted to lock up all the dreams, but somehow some dreams have escaped. A jail-break of dreams. Durga, watching the train [in the novel, *Panther Panchali*]. An old woman who simply craves sleep. An old pensioner who finally gets his pension. The people evicted from the forest, where will they go? Common people, and their common dreams like the

Naxalite. Their crime - they dared to dream. Why shouldn't they be allowed even to dream?(Devi "So Many Words, So Many Sounds" 60)

Certainly, Mahasweta Devi dared much to dream. Despite of being a woman, what she did and is doing for her fellow human beings is certainly appreciable. Not only her activism but also her writings are appreciated in literary arena without any gender bias. In a country like India where patriarchy has always decided the roles and actions of a woman, a woman like Mahasweta Devi decided to write her very first novel '*The Queen of Jhansi*' by travelling on foot and taking just hand notes from the natives of the Bundelkhandi region. Not only her themes but her language and style also contribute in fulfilling the mission of her life.

Devi's fiction is not a result of her armchair scholarliness, rather a result of years long real and practical understanding of the sufferings of the subalterns. There is a lot of hard work behind the finess of her works. She remarks in interview to Naveen Kishore:

My writing process is anything but haphazard. Before I write, I think a lot, mull over it, till it forms a crystal clear hard core in my brain. I do all the homework I need to do. Take notes, talk to people. Find out. Then I start expanding it. After that I don't face any hitches, by then the story is in my grip. When I write, all my reading, memories, direct experience, acquired information, come in to it.

Whenever I go, I jot down things.....the mind remains alive..... and I forget things too. I am actually very happy with life. I don't own anything anyone, I don't abide by any rules laid down by the society,

I do what I want to, go wherever I want to, write down whatever I like, roam around.....but when I come back to Calcutta I feel claustrophobic. Anyway, life has been very much worth living. (60)

Everyone who meets Mahasweta Devi, finds a strange mixture of immense strength and child like simplicity in her. Even at the age of eighty plus, she is busy in raising funds for the dispossessed, in giving interviews and writing reports in journals. She does not want to stop here. She wants to live till hundred years and keep writing. She tells in an interview “In Conversation With Mahasweta Devi” to Nandini Sen about this wish and also the source of her inspiration.

I have lived to see the British rule, after that independence. I am still alive and want to live for another 18 years and want to write. Mukunda Ram Chakraborti, the 16th century poet, -“Kobi Kankan Chandi” remains a permanent literary guide for me. Robindarnath Tagore remains a source of inspiration as from 1936 to 1938. I was in Shantiniketan. From Shantiniketan I learned to be self-disciplined. Adherence to time in one’s life, to study nature at first hand, to love insect, bird and animal life, These teachings still remain with me. Of course, writers like Bibhuti Bhusan Bandopadhyay, Tara Shankar Bandopadhyay, Satinath Bhaduri, Manik Bandopadhyay, Jyotirmoyee Devi, Leel Majumdar are my favourite authors. (“In Conversation With Mahasweta Devi” 65)

Taking inspiration from these persons, she started writing under the name of Sumitra Devi. Her canvas of writing reflects many colors. From historical fiction

*Jhansir Rani* to naxalite writing “Mother of 1084”, from many tribal writings to children’s fiction, she has shown her skills. But the ultimate goal of her writings and also of her life is working for the tribals. She talks about this in an interview “Speaking With Mahasweta Devi” to Gabrielle Collu:

In my state now- in the past ten years, I have concentrated on one state alone: that is West Bengal. West Bengal has many districts. The poorest district is Purulia. And while the British were here in 1871, they notified certain forest tribes as criminal tribes and from that time the police and the neighbouring society started treating them as born criminals. Illegal imprisonment always went on. In West Bengal we have two such tribes. Torturing them, killing them. All these things went on. In West Bengal in two such district we have two such tribes. In Medinipur these are Lodhas; in ,Purulia these are Kheria Sobors. I worked for some years with the Lodhas, then I came to the Kheria Sobors. I realized that Purulia is the poorest district in West Bengal and that the Kheria Sobors are the poorest of the poor. They do not have land. I am working amongst them. (“Speaking With Mahasweta Devi” 226)

Devi tries her best to make these people independent. She tries to make them educated and financially independent. In her opinion tribals are more civilized and sophisticated than common. In their society, many customs are better than ours like honour of women, widow-remarriage, right to divorce and community feeling. Devi was the first to write a book on their hero Birsa Munda. For this reason, she is respected among them.

When she is asked the question about the translations of her works, she considers Gayatri Spivak as the best. When Gabrielle Collu accuses Gayatri of writing a long dissertation as prelude to her work and making Devi's works her own, she says:

No, all her translations are extremely faithful. Absolutely, Gayatri does not distort, not even one word. And what she does not understand, she always asks me and we work in close collaboration. That's how it's done. Her translation is the most faithful. Otherwise, the Bengali *Breast-giver* is so challenging. I don't think anyone except Gayatri could do it. ("Speaking with Mahasweta Devi" 222)

The amazing strength of her writing is the output of her immense hard labour. She herself says that she has read more books than she has eaten food. Her vocabulary is quiet extensive and she writes down quickly whatever she finds around her. She tells in an interview to Naveen Kishore:

No no, nothing flows that easily. I have lots of things scribbled down.....let me see.....my notebooks are scattered.....there was a time when I would write down words I came across. Here, for example. *Parnanar*. Made of *polash* leaves. This refers to a strange ritual. Say a man has died in a train disaster. His body couldn't be brought home. His relatives then, using straw or other materials.....area I speak of is full of the flame of the forest tree....the *polash*. So they use its leaves to make a man. There is another extraordinary word. *Subhikhsma*. You've heard of Durbhikshma. Or famine. When one describes a year as being

Subhikshma, it means there was no crop failure that year. Su means good. (“So Many Words, So Many Sounds” 49)

Devi is far above the limited circles of literary excellence. Her true strength lies in her activism. And the result is quiet tremendous. The path on which she moved on by writing *The Queen of Jhansi* is very long. She has hundred plus texts to her credit and the urge to write for the subalterns is not yet diminished. Ganesh N. Devy remarks in his article titled “The Adivasi Mahasweta”:

I have often wondered about the source of her strength, the literary influences that have shaped her powerful style of writing, the political philosophies that have gone into the making of her ideology. She confesses to having no influences, except that she mentions her uncle, the film-maker Ritwik Ghatak, with a great sense of pride. I am often amazed how someone like her, slated to be a middle-class housewife, has managed to transcend so many prisons to become what she is. What is the source of her remarkable memory, the frightening economy of her words, that great simplicity which having divided life between the necessary and the unnecessary, shuns all that is unnecessary? Is she an adivasi taken to literature, or a writer drawn to adivasis? Do I know Mahasweta Devi? Perhaps, perhaps not. (Devy :79)

To sum up, we can say that the oppression of the downtrodden and inequality between male and female is not a new phenomenon in recorded or unrecorded times. Supremacy of the male and the powerful has been taken for granted over thousands

of years. Before independence it was easy to endure this injustice since we could blame the foreign rule for it. But after independence it is certainly a slap over the face of modernization, development and equality. For mahasweta Devi, the oppressed and the downtrodden people of India are neither figures nor a mere percentage of this fat subcontinent. They are her India the real India to her, their slavery is sufficient proof that the war of independence is still to be fought and won.

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