

Mahasweta Devi – Voice of the Oppressed



A litterateur with the zeal of an activist Mahasweta Devi used creative expression as a tool to fight for the rights of the adivasi people and oppressed sections. With the sincerity of an activist and the passion of a writer, she was the voice of the oppressed in her novels and short stories. She passed away in Kolkata on 28th July 2016 after a brief illness. *Class Struggle* pays homage to the departed Bengali writer and activist. Mahasweta Devi was born in 1926 in a village in Pabna district (now in Bangladesh). She studied English literature in Visva-Bharati. Her father, Manish Ghatak, was a poet, and writer with the Kallol literary group in Bengal.

Mahasweta Devi's historical novel, *Jhansir Rani (The Queen of Jhansi)* was published in 1956. The novel was focused on Lakshmibai, the queen of Jhansi, who valiantly fought against British troops in the 1857 mutiny and became a martyr. It was based on extensive research, which explored diverse sources, including family reminiscences and local memories.

Mahasweta Devi had been a keen observer of tribal life since the mid-1960s and started championing their rights, particularly those of the denotified tribes of West Bengal such as Kheria Sabars and the Lodhas. Her important novels connected with the tribal rebellion include *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Right to the Forest), centred on Birsa Munda and the Munda rebellion against the British in the late 19th century, and *Chotti Munda Ebong TarTir* (Chotti Munda and his Arrow), which explored the tribal legacy and memories of the Birsa's uprising. The novelette, *Bashai Tudu*, was framed in the context of the peasant movement and police repression. The peasant movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s had deep influence on her writings. Written in the context of the police brutality, *HazarChurashir Maa* (Mother of 1084) focused on the trauma and mental journey of a middle-class mother, who awakens one morning to the shattering news that her son is lying dead in the police morgue, being reduced to a mere numeral: Corpse No 1084.

In fact, Mahasweta Devi had direct contact with the tribal people. Her short story, *Draupadi*, written in the context of police repression against the Naxalites, tells a tale of brutal state violence suffered by a tribal woman and her unique resistance. Mahasweta Devi's literary journey bears testimony to the tales of tribal insurgency and counter-insurgency in colonial and postcolonial Bengal. Even at her advanced age she did not hesitate to extend her support to the peoples' struggles in Singur, and Nandigram, and came to visit and express her solidarity with the adivasis of Srikakulam and Vizianagaram districts of AP.
