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Sahitya Akademi



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invite you to

meet the author

Mahasveta Devi





“Life is not arithmetic, and man is not made for the game of politics. For me, all political programmes and creeds should aim at the realization of the claims of man to survival and justice. I desire a transformation of the present social system. I do not believe in narrow party politics. After thirty-one years of independence, I find my people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness, and bonded labour. An anger, luminous, burning and passionate, directed against a system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints, is the only source of inspiration for all my writing... I go on writing to the best of my abilities about the people, so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt or shame. For a writer faces his judgement in his lifetime and remains answerable.” So wrote Mahasveta Devi in her introduction to *Agnigarbha* (1978) a collection of stories related to the Naxalite Movement; and, no description of her work can be more accurate than this.

Born in Dacca, in a family distinguished for its contribution to literature and the arts, Mahasveta Devi studied English literature in Visvabharati, Santiniketan and Calcutta University. Her rich and diverse experience of life comes from many different

quarters—her career as a teacher; her brief stint in the office of the Deputy Accountant General of Posts and Telegraphs; her editorial assignments; her close encounters with rural reality as the roving village reporter of *Jugantar*, the Bengali daily; and, perhaps most notably, her work among the tribals of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

To all these experiences she has taken with her a sharp eye for detail, a sense of humour often grim but devastating, and an uncanny ability to identify the nerve-centre of human suffering within the parameters of social existence. These qualities have imbued her writing with rare authenticity and power.

Her first book, a meticulously researched fictional reconstruction of the life of the warrior-queen Laxmibai, *Jhansir Rani* came out in 1956. It was followed the next year by a novel, *Nati* and thereafter by her first collection of short stories *Ki Basante Ki Sorate* (1958). She has published forty-two novels, fifteen collections of stories, five books for children, and one collection of plays. She has also co-authored, in Hindi, *Bharat Mein Bandhua Majdur* and edited three sets of stories. Fifteen of her major works have been translated into other Indian languages.

This tally, impressive itself, acquires even greater significance when one takes into account the impact of her major works. Her novel *Hajar Churashir Ma*, for instance, created and continues to create waves for its unsentimental but profoundly moving story of a mother's discovery of how and why her son lies dead in a police morgue. The story of Birsa Munda, who led a tribal revolt against the British at the turn of the century is the theme of *Aranyer Adhikar* which won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1979. In *Agnigarbha*, she writes with fierce courage about those who have sacrificed their lives for the cause of greater social justice. Other notable works

are *Amrita Sanchay*, *Andhar Manik*, *Subhoga Basanta*, *Noirite Megh*, *Ghare Phera*, *Kabi Bandyaghati*, and the masterpiece for children, *Bioscoper Baksa*.

Her concern for those battered by an intolerant, exploitative society and her admiration for those who raise their voices in protest are recurring features of her work. These qualities are sustained by a compelling interest in the history of the downtrodden. In the preface to *Shrestha Galpa*, she writes: "It is my conviction that a story-writer should be motivated by a sense of history... I have found authentic documentation to be the best medium of protest against injustice."

Mahasveta Devi's identification with those in need is not confined to her writing. Since she first participated in relief-work during the Bengal Famine, as a seventeen year old school-girl, she has over a span of almost half a century provided active support to all efforts directed towards the uplift of the status of the poor and needy, especially among the tribal people. She has a centre at Purulia where tribals such as the Kheria, Bhumij, Orao, Mahali, Santhal, and scheduled communities like the Salis, Dom, Bauri, Charmaker, Ruhidas, Rajoar, Karmakar and other traditionally exploited people can obtain education, training in handicrafts, and health care.



With her husband Sri Bijon Bhattacharya and son Nabarun

In recognition of her services to the tribals, she was awarded the Padmashree in 1986. Among the other honours she has received are the Sahitya Akademi Award (1979), the Saratchandra Chatto padhyay, Bhuvanmohini, and Jagattarini medals of Calcutta University, and the Amrita Puraskar. She has travelled extensively not only in rural Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal but also overseas in France, Britain, Germany and America. As a social activist, journalist and creative writer, she continues to champion and promote the cause of the weak. Her "luminous, burning, and passionate" anger burns on to show the way to those who will dare to follow.



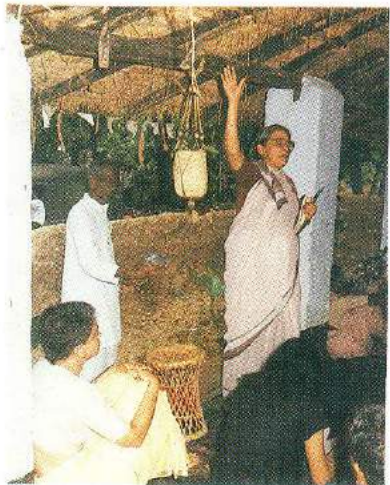
Lecturing at San Diego University

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Radhakrishna Prakashan,
Co-writer : Nirmal Singh.

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Gujarati, Oriya, Marathi,
Telugu and Malayalam).

BIRSA MUNDA (Ho)

**CHOTTI MUNDA EVAM TAR
TEER.** (Hindi)

GHARE PHERA (Hindi and
Gujarati)

GRAMBANGLA Vol. I & II
(Hindi)

HAJAR CHURASIR MA (Hindi,
Gujarati, Malayalam and
Telugu)

A Chronology

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|---|---|
| <p>1926: Birth</p> <p>1946: B.A. (Hons) from Vishvabharati</p> <p>1947: Married to Sri Bijon Bhattacharya</p> <p>1949: Worked as English Teacher</p> <p>1950: Joined the Post and Telegraph Department</p> <p>1956: Publication of <i>Jhansir Rani</i>, her first historical biography</p> <p>1957: Publication of <i>Wali</i>, her first novel</p> <p>1958: Publication of <i>Ki Basante Ki Sarate</i>, first collection of stories</p> <p>1961: Divorce</p> <p>1963: M.A. in English from Calcutta University</p> <p>1964: Joined Bijoygarh Jyotish Ray College as lecturer</p> <p>1965: Second marriage with Sri Asit Gupta</p> <p>1968: Received Amrita Puraskar</p> <p>1978: Saratchandra Chattopadhyay Memorial Medal</p> <p>1979: Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel <i>Aranyer Adhikar</i></p> | <p>1980: Founded Palamou Jila Bonded Labour Liberation Organisation; Editor : 'Bortika', a Bengali quarterly</p> <p>1981: Medal from Nikhil Bharat Banga Sahitya Sammelan</p> <p>1982: Reporter of Bengali daily, <i>Jugantar</i></p> <p>1983: Bhuvanmohini Medal from Calcutta University</p> <p>1983: President of Harijan Workers Union of Baharampur Municipality</p> <p>1984: President of West Bengal Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samity</p> <p>1985: Visited France</p> <p>1986: Awarded Padmashree by Government of India; Visited West Germany and England</p> <p>1988: Visited America on invitation of Marxist Study Circle of Pittsburg University</p> <p>1989: Prestigious Jagattarini Gold Medal of Calcutta University</p> <p>1990: 'Fullbright Lecturer'— Visited eight American Universities</p> |
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In a symposium at Frankfurt Book Fair with Ms Qurratulain Hyder, Smt. Mannu Bhandari and Smt. Shalini Randhawa