

MINOR RESEARCH PROJECT
ON
EMANCIPATED SELF IN THE VOLATILE SPACE: A STUDY OF
MAHASWETA DEVI'S INTERVENTION IN KERALA SOCIETY

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STATEMENT BY THE INVESTIGATOR

I, Reena Nair, Assistant Professor of English, Maharaja's College, Ernakulam, do hereby declare that this project report entitled "*Emancipated Self in the Volatile Space: A study of Mahasweta Devi's Intervention in Kerala Society*"undertaken by me under the financial assistance from the University Grants Commission (MRP(H)-1820/14-15/KLMG009/UGC-SWRO dated 04/02/2015) is an original record of study and bonafide research carried out by me.

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CONTENTS

1	Significance of the study	4
2	Objectives of the project	5
3	Introduction	6
4	Chapter 1: Role of Public Intellectuals: Devi as a Public Intellectual.	8
5	Chapter 2: Writing as Resistance: Narratives of Devi	26
6	Chapter 3: Devi's Interventions In Kerala Society	54
7	Conclusion	67
8	References	72

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Women have always been rendered voiceless and victimised to the gruesome violence and exploitation thus leaving them to form the hapless section of the society. Indian society has been notorious for its subjugation of women. In the contemporary society which is an extension of the age old patriarchy, women are still confined to their domesticity thereby hampering their potential and creativity causing trauma over their personal and public lives. Any deliberate effort to bring in gender parity was strongly resisted and the spokespersons of change were brutally muted. It is in this context that the contribution of such a writer-activist like Mahasweta Devi becomes pertinent and relevant. Through her protest writings, she has succeeded in addressing the readers across the length and breadth of India injecting the spirit of emancipation amongst the women population beyond the narrow bounds leaked on language, religion, caste, class, race etc. It is thus hoped to usher in glimmers of hope with regard to the statues of women in Kerala context through an in-depth analysis of Mahasweta Devi's resistance narratives in the form of novels, plays, interviews, essays etc. Her works provide a space for us to critically reflect upon the terrible atrocities and mishaps occurring to women which can bring about a sea change in the current hierarchy based on gender offering a space for self critical reflection in a dire need for such process of transformation. The study aims at initiating gender sensitisation which is optimal in bringing gender parity.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

- To probe into the socio-political background of the exploitation of women in India.
- To examine the attempts of articulating resistance with the female society.
- To generate a powerful and effective public sphere through the writings of Mahasweta Devi.
- To make a theoretical study involving a background study of the socio-political matrix of Kerala society as focusing on the key texts of Devi like Rudali, Breast Stories, essays, letters, interviews, etc is intended.
- To unearth the ways in which Mahasweta Devi's ideologies have attempted to bring about the transformation from a devastating self to an emancipated self in the context of Kerala.

INTRODUCTION

An egalitarian society is the dream of every individual inhabiting a democratic nation. But unfortunately, India, despite its dubious distinction of being a democratic society, had failed miserably to conceptualise this dream of many in reality. Though, in the post independent scenario, many eminent leaders at the helm of affairs made conscious attempts to usher in an egalitarian society as envisaged by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the architect of Indian Constitution, their utopian ideals were crushed down by the malignant discriminatory practices cuddled by its citizens. Indian society has been nurturing these spiteful discriminatory practices based on gender, language, class, caste, etc. for quite a long time without ever realising that they were aiding and abetting the unscrupulous powers.

Gender based discrimination has been in vogue from time immemorial. Even in the contemporary society, gender bias spreads its menacing roots curtailing the freedom of women in both their private and public life. The system, unfortunately perpetrates patriarchal interests confining women to their domestic chores mutilating their innate creativity and competence. All these years we have been vociferous about empowering women but the condition of women remains deplorable and miserable. Endless debates and discourses were initiated globally to resolve this growing malaise. Activists and writers from far and wide conjoined on a common consensus to seek solutions to avert the dangers and atrocities encountered by women. Nevertheless, the predicament of women population underwent no serious change and their strivings to have a dignified existence went unnoticed. In many remote villages, women made persistent efforts to conform to the prescribed roles enforced upon them suiting the vested interests of

patriarchy. It has become the need of the hour to bring about a radical change in the living conditions of women which demands great courage and perseverance on the part of women themselves.

In this context, the resistance writings by Mahasweta Devi gather immense significance and greater prominence. Unlike any other writer, Devi dedicated her life to sing the songs of unsung heroines of India residing in the dark corners of our society. Her sincerity and determination accrued to her the appreciation of many women activists who displayed their enthusiasm to deal with the growing malice on women. Devi spearheaded various resistance movements nationwide thus ameliorating the pain of many suffering women. Her indomitable spirit and undeterred courage were dreaded by the ruthless ruling forces bent on torturing women. Devi showed no reluctance in exposing the debauchery exhibited by men which proved fatalistic. She represented the marginalised section of the society in her writings and lived with the oppressed to understand their problems and feel their difficulties. As a conscious effort, she always projects the female characters over foppish male characters to pave way for suppressed women in realising their goals and thus aid them to come into the main stream society.

Mahasweta Devi became a living example for many to follow as her life has been a struggle for articulating the muted voices. Her selfless service aided many women writers and activists of Kerala to bring about awareness among the subjugated women to come out of their cocoon to take an active role in the socio-political domain. Her inspiring talks, interviews, letters heralded the beginning of a new era where women would reckon their inherent powers and transform themselves into powerful entities.

CHAPTER 1

ROLE OF PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS: DEVI AS A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

‘Justice’, ‘liberty’ and ‘equality’ were conceived as three key concepts by the framers of Indian constitution in the making of India. But it is a despicable fact that Indian society could never ever procure or upkeep these lofty ideals in its real sense. India has always been under the sinister hold of the formidable barriers of discrimination petrifying the multitude. Over a period of time discrimination based on gender has been causing harrowing experiences to the women population weakening the social fabric. Despite battling incessantly for freedom from the clutches of imperial powers, India could never ensure absolute liberty and equality to its citizens even in the postcolonial era. ‘Justice’, ‘liberty’ and ‘equality’ were never exercised in its fullest sense though these concepts were envisioned as optimal factors in the making of the social fabric. Unfortunately discrepancies based on gender as perpetrated by the uncanny male chauvinistic powers have been causing havoc in the lives of women curtailing their basic rights and freedom. Currently the number of women assaulted, molested and murdered is increasing at an alarming rate which insinuates the grotesque realities permeating the society. The general predicament of women belonging to the marginalised section, dalit community, tribal folks and the lower strata of society is still quite pathetic and dismal. Numerous debates, discourses and discussions still reverberate in the academic circle making these issues mindboggling but no drastic measures have been undertaken to change this appalling condition of women.

Researchers, academicians and writers spread all over the nation have always displayed their keenness to take a gruelling step to dispel the gloom lurking among the

women folk but have found to their dismay that there has been a paucity of credible alternatives to bring respite to women. It is in this context that the role of intellectuals in our societies is of immense significance. According to Miliband, 'Intellectuals are those who are mainly concerned with the formation, articulation and dissemination of ideas' (O'Connor, 2014, p.55). Intellectuals are expected to render selfless societal service and act as the best critics of a society. As Edward Said puts it the intellectuals should be 'the ones to question patriotic nationalism, corporate thinking and a sense of class, racial or gender privilege'(Etzioni, 2006, p.52). In a male dominated society like India, the policy makers always favoured the male population guaranteeing all gender privileges to the men rendering the women powerless and hapless. The shrewd and powerful lot manoeuvred unethical means to exercise their own innate and vested interests and to use their ideas and ideologies in moulding social standards and norms disregarding the majority. Consequently such a social arrangement was proven and justified as indispensable, unavoidable, natural and desirable for the fervent multitude. The decision makers, foreseeing the contradictions and protests from the other side, tried their best to convince the people that the most befitting system has been introduced. But in reality the system pronounced legitimacy of male power negating the needs of the underprivileged or the marginalised section. Gendered patterns persist in all realms- political, social, economic, cultural, etc. and even within family life where girl children are deprived of their basic rights which reflect the immutable reality of gender bias.

Thus India, still crippled and caught in the mire of all kinds of discriminations and biases, requires the ardent and dedicated service of intellectuals who can critically evaluate the situation and resolve the crisis rationally. It is really very striking that,

despite remarkable progress in the economic, social, cultural scenario, the institutional structures at the elementary level underwent very little changes in terms of class and gender. It is a bare reality that very few is entitled to enjoying all the privileges offered by the ruling system where women always bemoan the lack of gender justice. It has been a long standing tradition to ignore the disparity between man and woman created upon religious and cultural dogmas that impinge most negatively upon the women's lives. A society thus afflicted deeply by a growing malaise demands a greater involvement and participation from intellectuals in the development practices and policies of the erroneous system. It has now become obvious that the political and moral task of intellectuals under these circumstances is highly relevant and appropriate. In a scene where intentional patriarchal strategies were adopted against women, the role of intellectuals concerned with the problematizing issues of the public, increases by leaps and bounds. The crucial issue of gender justice hitherto ignored and less ruminated upon becomes the genuine concern and moral responsibility of these intellectuals. The accepted views and ideologies perpetuated by the antocentric society are boldly challenged and resisted by such intellectuals.

Intellectuals who display an undaunted spirit to question and rail against the existing regime, social pattern and ideology are now categorised as public intellectuals. The term 'Public Intellectual' is a modern coinage. There are several characteristics that serve as main attributes to qualify a person as a public intellectual. Public intellectuals are mostly concerned with public issues in general and always hold their own personal views on a wide range of matters relating to the public. At the same time they never show any reluctance in speaking aloud their thoughts and views on grave subjects. The two

communication professors, Daniel C Brouwer and Catherine R Squires remarks about public intellectuals as ‘people who are well travelled and broadly educated men of letters who [can] speak on a myriad of topics and [are] listened to by important sectors of the public, thereby shaping public opinion and, in the case of some who [gain] access to political powerbrokers, public policy’. (Etzioni, 2006,p.1). Public intellectuals are expected to possess a profound knowledge about varied topics, exemplary ability to discuss on a wide range of topics and also the capacity to address serious issues as pre requisites. Such people never faltered in their determination to rescue a debilitating crowd struggling in a faulty system. As Richard A Posner says, a public intellectual is one who “expresses himself in a way that is accessible to the public, and the focus of his expression is on matters of general public concern of (or inflected by) a political or ideological cast” (Etzioni, 2006, p.2) is very relevant as general public look forward to knowledgeable people who can interact with them on a public platform with great ease and concern on the most haunting and acute issue enervating the public lot. It becomes imperative for the intellectuals to engage and preoccupy themselves with the pressing problems of the public and then deploy their social intelligence to bring about a social change. These intellectuals are bound to concentrate on grave matters endangering the population and resolve their crisis by endorsing their individual knowledge for the benefit of the society.

Public intellectuals brazenly treaded the untrodden paths to provide psychological succour and social support to the grieving multitude enabling them to endure the tragic situations and also overcome the invincible forces weakening them. They always attempted to espouse the public cause before the apathetic rulers who lack care and

compassion for the common lot. These intellectuals paraded amidst the public with their sincere intention of comprehending and reforming the society. They showed no reluctance to take a leading role to decipher the debilitating effects of bureaucratic powers on the most deprived sections of the society assisting them to reshape and rebuild their lives. Triggered by many stalwarts of politics, the public intellectuals emerged themselves admonishing the bureaucratic powers for their inefficiency to effect a good governance and dauntlessly rebelling for the basic human rights of the underprivileged. Seizing upon the burning issues they illumined the minds of the public with their profound insightful knowledge to bring about a radical change in the lives of muted population. Unabashed by the constant warning from the authorities, public intellectuals embarked on a ceaseless pursuit to combat the malfunctioning of the government and to negotiate better alternatives as a solace to the most vulnerable population. They lampooned the bureaucracy for their avariciousness, disheartedness and inefficacy in implementing noble policies and practices to rescue the suffering people. In other words the public intellectuals are regarded as emissaries by the public who are engrossed or gripped with a vision of instilling justice for all irrespective of class, caste, religion or gender.

It is a noteworthy fact that some intellectuals are bestowed with the special capability of demystifying the accepted views of a society and ‘construct new forms of discourse through which effective opposition and critical expression can be achieved’.(Ransome, 1992, p.196). This capability is probably acquired by way of their attitude to power and the background they come from.As the intellectuals contradicted the accepted views, they always perceived in them diverse challenges ideologically and

often subjected them to close scrutiny and eventually paved way for resisting them. There are umpteen options available to dismantle the accepted norms which go unnoticed in the absence of intellectuals. Such redeeming choices which otherwise are hidden in the social framework are identified and explained by the intellectuals engendering a lot of controversy among the common public thereby mobilising these options as favourable for the general public. Intellectuals have thus become an indispensable part of the society. They have always been dreaded by the policy makers who ruthlessly shrouded the redeeming options under the guise of procuring the best options for the public since the options identified by the intellectuals posed threat to them. These choices were believed to constitute ‘a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision maker’(quoted in Lukes,1974,p.44). This further expounds the point that the governing authorities, besieged by the constant chidings and persuasions by intellectuals, had no choice but to succumb to their pressures in wiping out the inequities from the society. This is the kind of power the intellectuals are supposed to possess paving way for their becoming advisers and spokespersons for major institutions. It is the absolute independence of intellectuals, their right to dissent and their traditional role of being ‘free-wheeling critics’ that captures the attention of the general public. Irving Howe had further remarked that intellectuals were ‘a proudly independent critical group submitting all doctrines and values to critical inspection, asserting the legitimacy of the free mind’(Howe, 2006, p.74).Adding to this he also said “the intellectual life-free wheeling, wide-ranging, speculative- could be regarded as a “permanent revolution “ in consciousness, a ceaseless dynamic of change.”(Howe, 2006, p.74).

Sartre has rightly suggested about the role of intellectuals that ‘If the intellectual wishes to understand the society in which he lives, he has only one course open to him and that is to adopt the point of view of its most underprivileged members’.(Connor, 2014, p.57). Public intellectuals are theoretically said to be mainly concerned with forming new alternatives or agenda and bringing up issues which are otherwise avoided and neglected by the ruling powers. In fact they are truly entrusted with the task of transforming what Wright Mills called (pg.57)‘private troubles’ into ‘public issues’ and henceforth tactful execution of the task amidst all opposition and pressure from the reigning powers. Intellectuals put in rigorous efforts in urging the governing officials to eschew all irrationalities aiding them to bring in a paradigmatic shift in the existence of all affairs. Within the cognitive framework generally accepted by the public, the public intellectuals take a pivotal role in fomenting proactive discussions among the common public enabling the public issues gain precedence over the private desires and develop greater insights and visions where theory and praxis merge seamlessly. Such clear-sighted visions offered fearlessly by the intellectuals become the most quintessential factor for the public to get the ear of people in power in their desperate attempt to come to terms with the present and reshape their future. According to the argument posed by C.Wright Mills, great American sociologist, it is quite challenging to understand a society without peering into the life of the individuals who make up the society. These are two inseparable facets of the discourse of humanities. The enigmatic relation between the historical, social and economic forces and the individual narratives is resolved by the timely intervention of the public intellectuals.

Burawoy elicits four different types of knowledge implicit in the concept of a 'public intellectual'. They are as follows:

- critical knowledge, concerned with challenging taken-for granted ideas and reflecting an underlying commitment to 'better world'.
- policy-oriented knowledge, which attempts to provide policy solutions and, in particular, hold the state publicly accountable.
- knowledge emerging from and concerned with a dialogue with the public around relevant issues
- knowledge about methods and the conceptual frameworks available to those interested in the scientific status of the knowledge, (Connor, 2014,p.56)

Knowledge, professionalism, expertise and specialisation formed the key factors to decide upon the public intellectualism to flourish in a society beset by unfair practices and lack of compassion. Thus the role of academics as public intellectuals and their adeptness in translating their intellectual wealth into novel political strategies and policies gain utmost significance. Academic intellectuals are perceived to possess technocratic knowledge which fruitfully gets transacted into the resolution of public crises.

Though India rejoices the spell of chimerical prosperity, is still mangled by the shackles of outmoded perceptions, oppression and attitudes of power. The peculiar craving for power inherent in human resulting the power hierarchies and gender inequality prevalent now in our society. People who are discriminated, victimised, oppressed and exploited eagerly look forward to a saviour with greater potential. It is this high sense of insecurity, identity crisis and fragmentation felt within one's own society

that paves way for the bold intervention of academic and writer intellectuals bestowed with the special capability of strengthening and emancipating the lacerated section of the society. The imaginative ideas, ideologies and deeds of the writer intellectuals that deal with public issues still brim with life which evinces the desperate urge among the victimised folk to look for ultimate solace in the writer intellectuals. Edward W Said has exactly enumerated the role of writer intellectual as someone 'who ought to be listened to as a guide to the confusing present, and also as a leader of a faction, tendency or group vying for more power and influence'. Relying on writer intellectuals as the best resource to seek advice for a radical change is an outcome of the honoured and revered position held by them in any society irrespective of the different cultures owing to their creativity. In lieu of the exemplary capacity of creativity, rewarding sanctity and wisdom are accrued to them by the public which in effect made the writers accede to the symbolic role of intellectuals. Knowing very well that any attempts to erase social malice or any other unfair practices in the society are bound to have legal ramifications, they are fearlessly led by ceaseless pursuit of dignity and justice for all. Thus they tread the similar path of intellectuals by adopting the adversarial characteristics of intellectuals like questioning the authority, voicing the underprivileged, reprimanding the policy decisions or raising dissenting voice against the powerful.

However in India various researchers and discourses based on gender relating to women have gradually begun to prove an impetus to achieving parity and access for women into the mainstream intellectual life. In a system where gender difference was accepted as normal, the responsibility of women intellectuals has increased by leaps and bounds. Though many claim Indian tradition to be an enlightened one with gender

difference dissolving to a great extent, the nude reality of recognising male as the ultimate definite human cannot be disregarded. This in fact, doubles the responsibility of women intellectuals to perceive the singular, predominant male authority tackling all issues in the society singlehandedly and to utilise their qualification to authenticate the need for a two dimensional nature of human. It has been the long standing tradition of India to neglect and separate the issues relating to women from the mainstream tradition. It is this ultimate realisation that women's issues required a distinct space in the society for further reflections and ruminations which paved way for assigning intellectual role to women. This desperate urge to bring about a radical change in the persisting conditions of women, ignoring the fact that in all facets of life, male outnumbered women with regard to achieving positions, gathered momentum with the selfless and magnanimous intervention made by women intellectuals.

Mahasweta Devi was one among such writer intellectuals who displayed unstinting kindness and support to the discriminated victims of the society. She attempted unabashedly to articulate the hitherto neglected urges and desires of the victimised women particularly the marginalised groups. Devi's unceasing and unrelenting efforts to reassure the rural women of their basic rights and strength continued unabatedly till her demise. Her benevolence and generosity towards the neglected and marginalised population have been recognised worldwide. Devi's charismatic personality could exert a potent and benign influence on women folk and even kindled the enthusiastic and undaunted spirit among the watching public to initiate umpteen movements safeguarding the rights of women. The discriminatory gendered pattern, the ways in which tradition and paradigm were established, the blatant violation of laws by the powerful minority and

power manipulations by political clout formed the numerous perturbing factors which ignited the zealous spirit of Devi to work for the aggrieved multitude. It is an indisputable fact that Devi undertook many risks and challenges in her horrendous journey as a saviour to the grieving women population raising her dissent against the existing patterns of gender.

During a time when literary diaspora exerts a potent influence on the global cultural space, the reputation and renown achieved by Devi's writings exclusively in regional language about issues relating to her own region is a striking phenomenon. It has been a painful recognition for Devi that the system proclaiming to provide legal help to all the poor people has been a farce. Her creative writing was characterised by her intimate knowledge about the bare realities and her altruistic service rendered to the destitute. Devi became so blended with the social fabric keeping herself firmly footed on the ground that she could easily perceive and analyse the despicable situation encountered by the marginalised folk. The unpardonable offences meted on women were taken up with all its gravity by this writer intellectual in her ceaseless struggle against the governing forces. The lacunae and gaps in the administration level were emphasised by her dissenting voice. She always represented the voice of the voiceless and played a dominant role in weak societies. Devi's popularity as a social activist and her extreme solidarity with the oppressed class won her wide global acclaim as a celebrated author. Her profound involvement with the tribals, the dispossessed and other oppressed women enabled the author to write on them with greater authenticity and honesty. Such a proximity with the marginalised population rendered her the status of a distinct author among her other contemporaries. Devi was deeply concerned and considerate about the

women folk who were wading through the quagmire of despair and depicted their woes and sufferings in the most factual way in her literary works.

Mahasweta Devi through her charismatic activism raised her status from being merely a writer to the elevated role of a postcolonial public intellectual. Her writing career got inextricably entwined with the rigorous social activism. She is one of the most radical writers of fiction who could create a paradigmatic shift in the existing paradigms of change implemented at the administrative level. Both her writings and activism focussed upon the conditions of tribal, aboriginal, dalit and other marginalised sections in Indian contemporaneity. She voiced for such bereaved communities who were criminalised by the colonial powers and received no redress even in the contemporary India. As it is natural among the public intellectuals to go by their ideals openly and invoked in her 'a tradition of courage and independence' to serve as a saviour to the innocent victims of patriarchy. She worked incessantly to overcome the invincible forces assaulting the women and to offer social and psychological support to the desperate victims. Devi has always been a strong support for the female population to endure and withstand the severe pressure exerted by the patriarchal system and fight fiercely for asserting their rights. As argued by Julien Benda that intellectuals ought to speak for innocent victims, Devi too championed for the cause of the victimised women who were denied the basic right of dignity. She lived her life for those underprivileged class of tribals and other marginalised sections of the society who were alienated from the mainstream life and culture. Devi had deeprooted convictions about the role of a writer and found her writings to be a strong protest against the injustice and unlawful practices in the society. The underprivileged and marginalised sections of society denied access to

the mainstream life always remained outside the artistic and literary imaginative conscience of the middle class population.

Devi, as a public intellectual, could very easily transact her information and ideas with the general public without losing its essence owing to her constant interaction with them. As a social thinker Devi has certainly foregrounded her community and attempted to topple the social ladder. In an interview with a television anchor Rajiv Mehrotra, when asked about the Adivasi world in eastern India she remarked "...they [Adivasis] were here. We came later...And then think of India as a nation, they're the people who are truly civilised...". This evinces her profound reverence for the underprivileged folk. With regard to the concept of liberation for the underdog, Devi never posed as a mike grabbing moral preacher nor did she indulge in the act of empty rhetoric, but believed in the act of bringing the concept into praxis. Stripping off her allegiance with the hypocrisies of middle class, she chose and exercised austerity in her life, travelling widely all over the nation with her people, the poor and the marginalised. Her travelling experiences augmented her kinship with the underprivileged and kindled in her an undying spirit to support the hapless folk. It is the eternal moral alertness that led her as a writer and initiated her to mingle with the marginalised and lower class population making her avid for work and activism. Devi possessed several traits pertinent to intellectuals as she passionately and selflessly rendered societal service and remained one of the best critics of a mangled social system. She travelled into the distant territories of remote villages in India seeking raw materials for her writing. For the last four decades, Devi's unrelenting voice championed for the cause of women, dalits, and tribal community leaving behind her a legacy which was unparalleled and unmatched. Her mind impregnated with rich

and noble ideas and bound by great reverence for the neglected people, Devi crusaded for their well-being. In the working domain, she stood as a strong pillar for the inept masses by journeying incessantly through the tribal provinces, grabbing the attention from various governing bodies to the reports centred on them, penning down articles regarding their lives and struggles in the magazines and papers, leading processions, creating tribal organisations assuring their solidarity to them. Her grave and resolute efforts to construct laws for the downtrodden categories, on whom befell the stigma of criminals during the colonial regime, bore fruits due to her profound and sincere dedication to the ousted. It dawned upon her that the pivotal haunting moral difficulty in the current scenario is the institutionalisation of violence. Violence gets rather justified and perpetrated in a system that promotes and supports injustice. It is a dismal fact that even in the post independent India, the tribal communities carry the stigma of being notified as criminals which further asserts their accomplice in all the crimes done in their vicinity. Devi manifested a deep intimacy with the tribal women who were denied justice and dignity for being exposed to the menacing brutal molestation.

G.N. Devy, a writer and activist, remarks after his close association with Devi that, “Her writing addressed one single word: injustice. Wherever she saw what she thought was injustice, she plunged into the struggle and never looked back” (Kaushik Swaminathan, New York Times, 2nd Aug, 2016). This evinces her genuine obligation to the tribals, labourers, Maoist rebels, prostitutes, nomads and beggars whose lives were chronicled with all its authenticity in her literary pieces. Devi’s mother and aunt played a catalytic role in her life to pursue backbreaking societal service. They indulged in educating illiterate girls in Dhaka which gave an impetus to Devi which trained her to

steep in service from an early age. Her intense passion for helping the needy elevated her status as a writer intellectual who finally became entitled to many coveted awards like Magsaysay and respect from the poor and the marginalised. The intense reverence showered on her finds gripping evidence in the response made by Jaladhar Sabar, one of the tribals from Sabar group on her demise which follows as: “She had freed us from darkness... We have lost our mother”(Mathrubhumi, July 29, 2016). In reality Jaladhar echoed the sentiments of his community residing in Purulia where Devi was revered as “The Mother of the Sabars”. Devi in one of her interviews with Gayathri Spivak revealed that ignominy was unknown among the tribals. But the ruthless molestation and rape done on women of this tribe led to Santhal riots during the year 1855-56. This further establishes the fact that our system perpetrates violence against women as a normal practice. Devi had always been very keen and diligent in raising the status of such vulnerable few. As an activist she resisted many unjust policies of depriving indigenous people of their own land and took a stellar role in forming an organisation which reported the nefarious activities against the tribes. With unflinching pertinacity Devi struggled to bring the atrocious acts to the notice of India’s National Human Rights Commission.

Devi’s undeterred courage and incredible steadfastness get reflected in the essay ‘The Wire’, written by G.N Devy who commented about her peculiar and unpredictable way of dealing with strangers wherein she may abruptly dismiss civility and politeness to tell that he was a fraud much to the person’s disgrace. After her demise, during a mourning ceremony, one of the Sabartribals echoed the magnanimity of the late litterateur and activist by saying “It is because of her efforts that the world came to know about us. She continuously through her writings highlighted our plight. She had always

fought for our cause, and today it feels that somebody has taken away the roof from above our heads.” She created an inexplicable vacuum in the lives of many bereaved communities suffering severe penury. The diseased activist created an irreparable loss to the world of the downtrodden which was uttered by Amitav Ghosh, the renowned writer in a tweet as “A terrible loss for literature. A great writer and extraordinary activist, a woman with a warm, generous heart.”(PTI, July 29, 2016)

Among the many loathsome deeds of the government, she blatantly rebuked the negligence shown by the authorities in the act of forced displacement of Moolampilly population in Kerala and the unpardonable vily attitude of the concerned authorities in disbursing the promised amount to the evictees. Devi was avid for information about what was happening around and bound by tireless work supporting the underprivileged populace. Partly this owes allegiance to her civic minded grandparents and parents. She grew up seeing her father Manish Ghatak, a well-known Bengali writer, penning about the slum life and her mother promoting literacy among underprivileged children. Devi, being witness to the Calcutta riots and the 1947 partition, took a proactive role in undertaking relief efforts in Bengal by way of food distribution and locating the living among the debris. All the factors have seriously contributed to her becoming a social activist. Devi took a dominant role in Naxalbari movement of 1960s and she was regarded as a local deity in the movement as revealed in the words of Shanti Munda, a participant of the revolt:“I was an unlettered woman when I picked up the cudgels to participate in the Naxalbari uprising, yet I know that Mahashweta Devi inspired many to fight along with us.”

Devi was undoubtedly a distinguished exemplar as a public intellectual who played an effective role in interacting with the people she wrote about, by living amidst them and gaining first-hand knowledge of the vileness shown by the ruthless administrators against such infirm and deprived population. She was a driving force propelling the neglected masses to claim their rights and to be treated as humans and not sub humans. She never wanted to be an indolent being hesitant but she desired to discern the issues associated with deprivation, degradation, exploitation and destitution and the unceasing sufferings of the working poor and the underprivileged. She possessed an astounding fascination for justice, involuntary identification and empathy with the sufferers, the marginalised and the dispossessed. Her intimate knowledge of crude realities made her move undeterred for the good cause despite the intervention the recalcitrant authorities. It was practically beyond the bounds of possibility to separate Devi's activities and her distinct priorities as both were closely interlinked. Constant proximity to the deprived people enabled Devi to depict their life with a hideous accuracy and savagely divulge the shrewd operations of the dominant sections of the society in the form of oppression and exploitation. She blatantly rebuked the weird ways of the state system which misused the resources meant for the progress of the poor and the marginalised and unshrouded the vested interests of the system to retain the poor in abject misery offering no reasonable standard of living.

Devi shone out like a beacon of hope amidst the neglected people disbursing self-denying service. Her leadership was conceived by the public as altruistic. She could discern a palpable fear among the marginalised which left them indolent and debilitated masses. As a public intellectual she never hesitated in unleashing a stream of invective

against the politicians, police or the administrative officers who demurred on the idea of disbursing the resources to the deserving rather they indulged themselves in abhorrent deeds. Devi rose above the bounds of material concerns and emphasised the need to universalise the consciousness of exploitation in order to resist it. On the occasion of honouring Devi as a recipient of Jnanpith Award in Delhi, Dr. Nelson Mandela remarked about her that “she holds a mirror to the conditions of the world as we enter the new millennium”(Ghatak, Introduction, 2000, p. x). Devi had always served as a resource centre for the people in distress, which demanded a major part of her time in community and welfare services giving little time for her privacies. Numerous people from distant corners of India approached her with manifold issues concerning anything imaginable, looking forward to her resolving their crises. With great readiness she registers their problems and feels personally responsible for them offering them a helping hand by urging the authorities at different levels to address the problem and evoke a prompt response. It is with great embarrassment that the powers at various levels are put to action in lieu of Devi’s constant intrusion into their unwelcome zone. She was bold enough not to be politically inclined towards any distinct party and never toed the line of others leaving a unique stamp on herself as fiercely independent person making the administrators feel slightly tremulous. The dominant sections were no longer allowed to keep things under wrap. For all the good cause she espoused, Devi confirmed that they were resolved with positive results putting the Government agencies into action.

During some critical junctures in the lives of poverty-stricken people, Devi felt the dire need for organisational groups to work for their welfare. When Devi was at the apex of her career; she involved herself with the formation of many organisation at the

tribal levels. Her association with a large number of organisations resulted from her deep feeling that many of the fundamental problems experienced by the downtrodden section went unnoticed and neglected by the government or political parties. Thus she initiated many grassroots-level organisations which were conceived by her as the best strategy for bringing in a paradigmatic shift in the planning and implementation of development programmes. Only such a strategy could bring about a radical change in the existing conditions of the deprived sections. Seized by a passionate concern for the public, she engaged herself with myriad social activities like leading processions of bonded labourers, shouting slogans with the women for their rights to education, marching with scavengers and even revelling with tribal dancers. In all respects Devi proved herself to be a public intellectual and zealously clasped by an incredible vigour and enthusiasm to lend a consoling hand to the neediest people. “For her, life has never meant looking back; only looking forward. To new ideas, schemes, projects and activities. To motivating and enthusing others to organise themselves for their own development. To taking sides. To speaking up where silence would be a shame. To making trouble where not to do so would be a crime.” (Ghatak, 2000, Intro, p.xvii-xviii) Engrossed in seeking viable alternatives for the seething problems, Devi brought in a temporary cessation to the hostilities perpetrated by the dormant sections against the poverty-stricken population. Her prime mission was to usher in glimmers of hope amidst the deprived of the prospect of a new government beckoning them to work. With her flamboyant personality, Devi stood as a beacon of hope for millions all over the nation.

CHAPTER 2

WRITING AS RESISTANCE: NARRATIVES OF DEVI

India, as it stands at the pinnacle of technological explosion, takes a back seat in blurring the boundaries between man and woman. Ceaseless efforts in effacing the differences based on gender have been a dismal failure. As we reflect on the existing state of affairs there occurs on every face a grimace of pain. There are millions bewailing their fate for being born as a woman. The trauma that women in Indian society undergo is quite deplorable which denigrates and besmirches the reputation of Indian culture. The social world has been conceived or regarded as significant for men and their interests, which largely ignored and neglected the women. The disparities and inequalities based on gender were never regarded as major sociological concerns or main issues to be discussed and addressed by the larger society. Till the 1970s, women were literally an invisible lot featuring themselves as daughters, wives, mothers, and grandmothers—the prescribed roles assigned to them by the patriarchal prevailing societies. They never realised their innate strength and potential to overcome mishaps and emerge or evolve as a powerful entity capable of reigning or conquering the whole world. In the context of Indian society, the gender based discrimination against women is rampant even in the modern era which is under the guise of a big leap into progress.

Our society has fallen from grace and lost all sense of decency as it accommodates many disgruntled women bemoaning their fate of life. We still perceive a society which revels and rejoices at the birth of a male child while grieving and making muted responses at the birth of a female child. From times immemorial, it has been witnessed that there exists a dispassionate and ruthless killing of girls at birth resulting in low child sex ratio. Gender inequality gets manifested in varied ways in the form of female foeticide, female infanticide, child sex ratio, female illiteracy, maternal mortality

rates which pathetically reflects the status of women. All these form the important factors which depicts the disgraceful situation prevailing in our society much to the embarrassment of the nation. Most inhuman practices like female foeticide and infanticide persist at a large scale which defames and vilifies the women populace. In many remote villages of India, girl children are denied access to education and are nurtured to engage themselves in domestic chores rather than chase their dreams and desires. It remains ironical that though women are conceived as goddesses as per religious faiths, they are brutally and menacingly molested and ripped off by malevolent powers. It is quite unethical to deny women their right to be treated as a dignified human being. Following the religious standards, women are deified and on the contrary, girls are exploited and many ways are sought to discriminate them throughout their life. The society is led by double standards in their attitude towards women. The experiences, desires and thoughts of women are absolutely neglected as trivial matters by the dominant practice of patriarchy prevalent in the society. The gender inequality is an offshoot of patriarchy paving ways for injustice.

The unequal distribution of power in the social system emerged from the patriarchal rule resulting in timeless subordination of women to men. According to the major theory 'Radical Feminist' analysis, patriarchy is understood as the 'primary and fundamental social division in society'. Patriarchy was conceived by the Indian society as a powerful means to dominate women, to possess women's bodies through sexuality and as a befitting property susceptible to male violence in the form of rape and molestation. An inferior position is accorded to women in the system and they are prone to exploitation, degradation, violence and discrimination which go beyond endurance in

both their homes and outside world. Gender itself is discerned as a man-made concept, a social construct which is manipulated to distort the personality of a woman thereby ostracising them. Hence women are forced to succumb to the sly operations of the patriarchal system which insists on dominance over women. One of the famous sociologists Sylvia Wallby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.” This age old customary phenomenon gains precedence due to its strong basis on religious standards which offers sanction and justification for such an evil practice. The foregrounding theories propounded in Manusmriti engenders such a filthy practice of male dominance over women. The ancient law giver Manu dictates terms in which women are regarded as sole possessions of the father, husband and son in different facets of life and women are not supposed to have an independent existence to assert herself.

Patriarchy encouraged the creation of credulous, un-sceptical, unquestioning creatures bound to be docile and naïve under the dominant clutches of men. Thus, decisive powers came to be restricted to male powers and remained alien to women. The atrocities against women and the offensive deeds meted on them can be regarded as palpable influences of patriarchy. In our society prevails the andocentric practices where women’s experiences are judged by the generalised criterion of male experiences. We have been witnessing the times when women were invisible, inconspicuous and unknown featuring only in their prescribed roles of wives, daughters and mothers. Before 1970s, the disparities or inequalities between male and female were not conceived as a matter of sociological concern or never gathered importance as issues to be speculated or addressed. As globally there were growing resentments among the women and situations

started festering, there emerged many feminist movements which ultimately triggered an academic study of gender. This paved way for the academic disciplines to include the experiences, identities, desires and interests of women. This had also led to many eminent writers of India to articulate the traumatic experiences encountered by Indian women as the main subject in their narratives. Mahasweta Devi is one such writer who had delineated the ceaseless exploitation and oppression faced by women and dared to make scathing comments about the unjust authority imposed on women making their lives deplorable. She explicitly manifested her growing concern for the downtrodden and the exploited, rather victimised group through her writings.

Social oppression finds an appropriate definition in the Blackwell dictionary of sociology as “a concept that describes a relationship between groups or categories of people in which a dominant group benefits from the systematic abuse, exploitation and injustice directed toward a subordinate group.” Mahasweta Devi underscores through her narratives the unceasing burden carried by women in a patriarchal framework by their stifling existence within familial and social constraints. Devi is sarcastic about the nude reality that family happiness is contained in a situation where men go for work and women remain at home. In most of her writings, Devi talks about unalterable biological aspects of procreation and child rearing which denies justice to women by way of discrimination based on gender. She narrates tales of oppression, exploitation, struggle and survival. Her most celebrated work ‘Breast Stories’ focuses on the breast as a symbol of exploitation and also a weapon of resistance. Devi’s acerbic writing attempts to expose the virulent and life-threatening attacks on women and the inherent infectious systems prevalent in India. ‘Breast’ as a common motif goes beyond the usual representation of

eroticism and motherhood and extends to manifest the exploitative social system. Devi uses the breast in these stories with a savage irony and reflects on how women became mired and enmeshed in the gruesome social reality.

Devi in her book 'Breast Stories' illustrates the stories of Indian women mangled in servility and self-abnegation who carry on with an undignified existence. Through this radical work, Devi remarks scathingly about the submissive attitude fostered in women making them lead an unobtrusive existence. She outlines women's identity as just a body and object. In the tale of 'Breast giver', Jashoda, the protagonist is bound to take up the role of professional breast giver, due to the unavoidable circumstances at home where Kangali, her husband is unable to go for work with his amputated leg. Such an act of castration leads to heralding Jashoda as wet nurse "the mother of the world." She engages herself on her 25 years of expert weaning of wealthy offspring. Only because of her ability to retain her 'always full' breasts, she is utilised and canonised by the wealthy Haldar family. Tragically, it is the very noble act of suckling wealthy babies that consequentially leads to breast cancer and her painful death. The story reveals how the incessant breast feeding leads to her fatalistic future. This in fact reflects on the tyranny of sexual stereotypes where women are urged to devote their lives to fulfil biological duties of childbirth and child rearing. This further explicates what Kate Millet has described as the ancient and universal scheme operated in the field of sex which allows men to suppress, dominate and make them their subordinates. Though Jashoda is revered for her sole ability to procreate, her body becomes a constant site for exploitation. The story brings us into intimate contact with the excruciating pains of life. The needs and actions of men are highlighted in the story wherein the offences done by men escalate

without being punished or questioned. This finds evidence in the story where Haldar's son-in-law plunges into the destructive act of castrating Kangali's leg and attacking the cook caught by lustful desire. These actions of man pave way for making Jashoda's body and fate a site for palpitating consequence. And finally Jashoda becomes a victim of the sly operations of the patriarchal mode of subjugation. The axiomatic statement made by Simone de Beauvoir "One is not born but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine." (The Second Sex 295) explicates the ubiquitous male control over women with regard to every aspect of her existence.

Patriarchy remains the dominant theme of the text 'The Breast Giver' and it also highlights on the shifting role of women in society. Jashoda, the protagonist, overcomes or forbears the overwhelming pressures of the oppression unleashed by men and her society and she struggles hard to achieve equality by subverting the male norms and values. In every moment of distress, she struggled with unflinching pertinacity. She possessed an intrepid nature of mind to wade through her problems which is reflected in her fearless attempt to embrace "motherhood as her profession" (Devi, 826). She shows her reluctance to resume in a state of penury where her whole family is about to sink furthered by the crippled stage of her male provider Kangali. Jashoda refuses to be enmeshed in the undermining role prescribed by male ideology to remain subordinate and submissive under the iron fist of her husband. She instead approaches the affluent Haldar family mistress for a job and she is abruptly offered the job of being a wet nurse for the family. Jashoda recognises that the opulence of the family can offer her family a great support. But the apparently promising job turns out to be a kind of economic and

psychological oppression wherein Jashoda is exploited by the women members of the family who disregard her as a human being and is merely treated as a commodity and her nursing is reciprocated by sheer clothes, food and shelter. She receives no financial assistance from the family. But the fact that she becomes the sole earning member of her own family in a society, which engenders the reinforcing ideologies of patriarchy allowing only men to serve as providers for the family, reverses the conventional patriarchal norms and establishes her as an empowered woman. Stripping off the stereotypical confines of women, Jashoda takes up a leading role to rescue her family and goes out for work leaving many men feeling envious about her. Jashoda thus succeeds in superseding her husband and other men in the society by providing food to her family which otherwise was solely the privilege of men. The responsibilities otherwise shouldered by men are fulfilled by Jashoda. There occurs a switching over of roles where Jashoda goes out for work while Kanganicharan remains at home supervising the household affairs. Such a reversal of roles questions the power of Jashoda in family and society. Traditionally, the assertion of gender roles has fostered the patriarchal interests and hindered the growth of women. In Jashoda's house, her husband and she attain equality in status by their sharing the domestic chores contrary to the established values of the androcentric world. Jashoda is thus able to usher in a change in the structure of her own family which entails considerable risk to the malevolent powers who nurture common interest to perpetuate male domination over women. Instead of being a passive wife wailing over her fate and her crippled husband, Jashoda uses her ingenuity and becomes resolute to go out for work as a professional mother bringing respite to herself and her family from a miserable juncture of life. It is her persistence that supports her

family. This constant labour offers a starting point for Jashoda to commercialise her motherhood to propitiate the wealthy Haldar household and also rescue her family from further ruin. This decision raises the value of her breast, the organ that determines a mother, which after her own use is exchanged for higher value with the Haldar household's grandchildren. With the emergence of the value of milk, there occurs an appropriation and maintenance in the form of good nutritious food to keep her in good condition for optimum lactation. To produce excess and surplus milk, the gender division of labour is subverted. The mistress of the Haldar family intently supervised on the free flow of Jashoda's milk and called on Kangalicharan and said, "Now then, my Brahmin son? You used to stir the vat at the shop, now take up the cooking at home and give her a rest. Two of her own, three here, how can she cook at day's end after suckling five?"(Devi , 2002, p.52).

Thus Jashoda becomes empowered sharing almost equal status with her husband. She revels at the thought that that her breasts defining her femininity are going to bear the weight of the family. Her excitement gets reflected on the lines where she conceives her breast as the most precious object. : Look I am going to pull our weight with these. Take good care how you use them." (p.51).

Kangalicharans initial hesitation to leave Jashoda outside the house was surpassed by the thought of receiving larger amounts of 'grains-oil-vegetables' out of the benevolence of the Haldar family. He basks in his own glory of being an accomplice in child production. The words of Kangalicharan: "You'll have milk in your breasts only if you have a child in your belly. Now you'll have to think of that and suffer. You are a faithful wife, a goddess. You will yourself be pregnant, be filled with a child, rear it at

your breast, isn't this why mother came to you as a midwife? " bespeak (p.51) his secret revelling in newfound happiness. With this new rule established, Kangalicharan becomes a professional father and Jashoda a professional mother.

Though Jashoda becomes the sole breadwinner of the family she is not completely stripped off her duties of being a mother and a wife. She is forced to do both jobs simultaneously which reflects upon the multitasking indulged in by women in general. It leads the society to extol the virtues of women but in reality it ultimately develops into self-abasing phenomenon for women. Just because Jashoda takes up work outside her doesn't mean that she neglects her duties within her family and home. It demands greater strength and courage from her to balance both work. Working women generally handles things in such a way that her absence at home is never felt by the members of her family. Thus she proves to be both powerful and nurturing at the same time. Despite the fact that Jashoda distorts the conventional patriarchal ideology, she doesn't entirely depart herself from the conventional approach to women wherein she fails to understand the secret ploy adopted by her husband and consoles him saying: "You are husband, you are guru. If I forget and say no, correct me. Where after all is the pain? Didn't mistress-mother breed thirteen? Doesn't hurt a tree to bear fruit?" (pp.51-52). Jashoda is a typical Indian woman who is gripped by an unconditional, unreasonable and illogical devotion to her husband and children capable of inexplicable renunciation and forgiveness retained among some Indian women. She never once curses her crippled husband for her miserable life which is explicated in the lines: "Her mother's love wells up for Kangali as much as for the children. She wants to become the earth and feed her crippled husband and helpless children with a fulsome harvest." (p.47).

Mahasweta Devi through her narrative throws light on the brutal face of India. Many women in India are left in abject poverty and mishaps. The story 'Standayini' displays the true face of India, highlighting an enigma that has long puzzled many, much to the embarrassment of the inhabitants through the powerful, honest lines: "Such is the power of the Indian soil that all women turn into mother's here and all men remain immersed in the spirit of holy childhood. Each man the Holy Child and each woman the Divine Mother." (p.47). Jashoda serves as 'proletarian' contributing to the society with nothing but her power of gestation and lactation thus questioning the sanctity of motherhood. She is unable to use anything but what she possesses as a woman—her breasts and milk to provide for the family. Thus in the narrative there is a transition from domestic (natural mother) to 'domestic' (wet nurse). Jashoda's labour, hence calls into question the gender specific roles assigned to women within the patriarchal framework.

According to Lois Tyson, women occupy the position of 'Other' in a patriarchal society where the father or male's power is absolute. The distinct traits which were conceived as feminine included large breasts, narrow waist, fertility, being emotional, affectionate, sympathetic, submissive and compassionate. It is by possessing all these traits that Jashoda claims reverence from the men of her society who perceives her as equal to God suckling many children of Haldar household creating a progeny to maintain their heir apparatus of the Haldar family. She becomes "the object of the reverence of the local houses devoted to the Holy Mother" (p.62). Her fame spread so rampantly in the whole society where 'Everyone's devotion to Jashoda became so strong that at weddings, showers, namings and sacred-threadings, they invited her and gave her the position of chief fruitful woman. (p. 53). The sudden transformation in Jashoda becomes

very conspicuous as she becomes vocal unlike her initial submissive nature in the Haldar family. Her words “Look at me! I’ve become a year-breeder!” (p.54) declares how she took pride in herself. When the mistress of Haldar household envies the abundance of milk flow through Jashoda’s nipples, she is charmed and responds by saying with great audacity; “How true Mother! Gopal was weaned when he was three. This one hadn’t come to my belly yet. Still it was like a flood of milk. Where does it come from, Mother? I have no good food, no pampering!”(p.50).

Devi broaches the idea of valorising women based on their capacity to procreate and lactate which refute the other dormant talents in women. She derisively remarks on the demeaning notions in India which extol women merely for their fertility finds a manifestation in the song of the path of devotion: “Is a Mother so cheaply made? Not just by dropping a babe!”(p.52). Jashoda is fortified to overcome the oppression of a society controlled by men which forms a vital place in feminist theory. According to Tyson, in every patriarchal society, “woman is *Other*: she is objectified and marginalised, defined only by her difference from male norms and values defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have.” (Feminist criticism, 92). The astonishing factor is that Jashoda overcomes being “Other” by taking up all the responsibilities traditionally shouldered by men and leads her family dismantling the conventional society which held men in high regard. As Tyson opines in ‘Feminist Criticism’, the feminist notion of “sisterhood as a mode of resisting patriarchy” is brought true in the story when the mistress of Haldar family offers Jashoda the job of the wetnurse and supports her family with food and clothes. It is the mistress who shows the boldness to call on kangali and advises him on taking up cooking. Jashoda and the mistress jointly thus reverse the

traditional duties which beckoned women to domesticity. Jashoda gains the freedom to take a decision in the family posing herself as the saviour to the family from moving into further distress.

The novel delineates the brutal death encountered by Jashoda towards the end. She fights her death fiercely when her breasts are affected with a consuming cancer. Her glorious years disappear with the death of the mistress and the 'rising membership' of the Haldar family. The family members get separated and split into various groups with the daughters-in law joining their spouses' workplace. Hence all the food supply abruptly stopped to flow into Jashoda's family leaving her in absolute despair. Her husband and sons too apprehending the situation deserted her without any prick of conscience which enrages her. Jashoda unlike a submissive and taciturn wife becomes vocal and flares at her husband blaming him to be callous and cruel at a crucial time in her life. The words uttered in deep despair "Living off a wife's carcass, you call that a man?" (p.59) are pitched against the conformities of patriarchal ideology where a woman raises her voice against the oppressive system. The awful truth began to dawn on her regarding her uselessness to both her husband and Haldar house. She found it difficult to break away from the addiction of motherhood and started sensing a pain in her empty breasts. She gradually becomes aware of the injustice in her world. She realises how the whole world was distancing from her as her breasts' sores aggravated. She endures years of pain and sleepless nights and bravely fights the terrible phase.

Devi's description of Jashoda's cancerous body "The sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes" (p.67) makes it explicit that nobody dared to look at her leaving her alone to grapple with painful reality. Breasts which had

given her identity betrays her. She overcomes the pain through an extraordinary forbearance and power astonishing everyone in the process. There is a growing reverence for her exceptional tolerance. Lately when her husband and sons come to support her, the chances of her survival are negligent. The extreme phase of Jashoda's struggle for existence becomes evident here when she "showed him her bare left breast, thick with running sores and said, see these sores? Do you know how these sores smell? What will you do with me now? Why did you come to take me?" (p.66). This is the voice of resistance raised against the patriarchal society. This also diminished the importance of male existence who are helpless to save her. Breast experience is solely the experience of a woman through which she rises and radiates becoming a spiritual figure. The story depicts Jashoda to be an emancipated woman who could overcome her lack of being a woman and subvert the accepted notions of women among the readers.

In the short story 'Draupadi', Devi presents the life of a tribal woman Dopti, a subaltern endowed with both traditional and revolutionary role. Resistance in Devi's writings is often an abrupt reaction to oppression and a counter move against the hegemonic perception held in the society. The narrative unfolds the story of a defiant militant protagonist Draupadi, who challenges her oppressors unarmed. The ineffable quality of resilience in Draupadi triggers an unfathomable shift in gendered perception. Draupadi charms the readers with her retaliating power and unflinching determination to fight the repressive system. Devi derisively presents Senanayak, the army officer as a 'pluralist aesthete' whose theory and practice differ symbolically rendering him a diminutive figure. In theory, he wants to identify with the menacing enemy and in practice he needs to destroy the enemy. Through such a difference, Devi highlights the

double standards of a representative of State. Devi's narratives are founded on binary opposition between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the rich and the poor, the innocent and the shrewd opportunist. In general, Devi's writings are products of her own impatience and rage. 'Draupadi' is a story set among the tribals in Bengal. Draupadi Mehjen, the protagonist is gripped with the sole objective to procure the rights of tribals. She bravely fights till the end displaying her undeterred courage putting herself in dangerous plight.

'Draupadi' begins with an outbreak of tribal insurgencies owing to the detection of inequities within the State. It is the desperate need for survival which promulgates defiance and arrogance among the underprivileged. It has been witnessed in the history of India to oppress the tribals and the meek. Many still lament under the hindering factors of destitution, undernourishment, illiteracy, etc. As Gayatri Spivak gives voice to such oppressed subalterns and gendered subalterns in the lines "For if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." This articulates the trauma encountered by the deprived population. Draupadi and Dulna, the couple represent the indigenous community who indulges in backbreaking service of upper class feudal lords with no reward but petty wages. The story reveals the callousness of the feudal lords who denied the poor tribals their basic rights to utilise the natural resource water even when their domicile, Birbhum, is draught stricken. The turbulence in the region culminates in the murder of Surjon Sahay, the rich landowner and moneylender. This incident instigates the state officials to unleash a brutal assault and wreak havoc on tribal protesters mistaken for rebels. This ultimately leads to tribal unrest and they are forced to flee in exile unfed,

half-clad and barefooted. In the army operation, many tribals are slaughtered ruthlessly, bemusing Draupadi and Dulna. The miserable plight of fellow tribesmen accentuates their rage and hence they remain resolute in their confrontation with the State policies. The initial incidents in the story reveal the inherent reason for the tribals' protest. Dalit identity is erased by the ruling affairs in the state much to the disgrace of the downtrodden. After Dulna is hunted down and killed by the army officers, they went on a frantic rush to capture his wife Draupadi. The text unveils the varied guises in which tribal women are exploited.

Devi through the story 'Draupadi' mounts a biting sarcasm against the protectors of law and order who revel in their sanctioned privilege to violate the fundamental rights assured to every citizen. The story unfolds the reasons for the subaltern protest against state violence or social order. Devi expresses her deep dissent for the state officials who grab the freedom of another human being breeding rancour and hatred among the deprived. The weird desire of the State forces to weaken the spirit of tribal males by capturing Draupadi and laying claim on her body is mocked at by Devi. India, despite being a democratic, secular republic calls attention to the issues of exclusion, exploitation and erasure of subaltern women that are constantly practised within the State. Dulna's remarks to his fellow tribesmen, "I'll have the first blow, brothers. My great-grandfather took a bit of paddy from him, and I still give him free labour to repay that debt" manifest the extent of exploitation wreaked on them by the rich feudal lords. After Draupadi is captured, she gets ferociously assaulted by the cops. The moment Senanayak gives orders to his fellow officers to "Make her do the needful" (p.34), they pounce on her giving her the severest punishment. Her rights as a woman are abused by the protectors of law

contrary to the right that every citizen is liable to in a democratic setup. Draupadi's rape elaborates on the multifarious ways in which women are subjected to violence, humiliation and ghastly tortures. Such gruesome and harrowing experiences of women are translated by women into counter-offensive acts against the oppressive and hegemonic social structures. It occurs to women that violence can be overthrown only by counter violence.

Draupadi Mejhén is subjected to the abhorrent act of rape enabling her to transform the accepted image of women as erotic objects to an object of revenge and resistance. Draupadi is avenging the deep bruises caused to her body by faltering the social constructed image of woman as a feeble, meek and sexual commodity and emerging as a powerful woman fit to resist the male assaults. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak opines on the resistance shown by subaltern as: "When the subaltern 'speaks', in order to be heard and gets into the structure of responsible... resistance, he or she is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual." (Devi 1993: xxvi)

Draupadi resists to the bodily violence perpetrated on her by the group of officers. The incident unfolds the various ways in which women devise multifarious forms of resistance against the oppressive legacy of patriarchal notions of woman as a commodity. In the narrative the men easily succeed in disrobing Draupadi as "the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law." Unlike the normal women wailing over the trauma awaiting help, Draupadi plunges into inexplicable animosity and is gripped by a strange courage to oppose the oppressive forces. She investigates her battered body by lowering "her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she's made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn" and strengthens

herself and ‘pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth.’(p.35). Draupadi’s refusal to robe herself by the cloth thrown at her by the officials reflects on her amazing daringness. She adamantly insists on remaining publicly naked astonishing the public. She deconstructs womanhood, voices against atrocities wreaked on women and subverts the notions of the sacred. Draupadi’s refusal to cover her nakedness reveals immense female power where an innocent subaltern woman is forced to speak. Draupadi’s resistance is detailed by Devi as: “Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as 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?”(p.36). Thus she becomes an epitome of strength, symbolising the striking survival of physically abused women. Draupadi’s reaction to rape is a bolt from the blue for male chauvinists who regard women as merely an erotic object and a commodity to be used at his own will. There wasn’t a mark of disgrace on Draupadi’s face instead the oppressors felt embarrassed when she in the end “chooses the front of Senanayak’s white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, “There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed... What more can you do? Come on, kounter me – come on, kounter me- ?”(p.36)

The story surprisingly shows how Draupadi reverses the fear and disgrace to her own exploiters which is evinced in the concluding sentence, “Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.”(p.37). She emerges as an indomitable warrior questioning the typical silence adopted by many women in our society. Draupadi jeers at the apparent toughness of Senanayak who is rendered speechless by the retaliating words

hurled on him by an illiterate, defiant tribal girl. Devi through the work 'Draupadi' exposes the sham of social hierarchy and the multiple guises adopted by the male power to protect the honour of women. The moment Draupadi ceases to seek the intervention of a male counterpart in her moment of distress, the male leadership stops. Draupadi becomes an exemplar of courage disrobing herself and questioning the maleficent powers that she can't be easily subjected to torture emotionally and mentally. 'Draupadi' thus turns out to be a metaphorical resistance asserted through a subaltern girl's experiences. The novel engenders among the ordinary women a revolutionary zeal to resist their oppressors. Thus Devi succeeds in redefining the role of women in the adverse situations.

'Rudali' is yet another work which exhibits the lament of subaltern group of women called Rudalis who labour hard to grieve on occasions of death to maintain a minimum level of subsistence. The story focuses on two women, Sanichari and Bikhni, whose companionship develops into a struggle for survival and ultimately they challenge their subjugation. They jointly embark on a venture to explore every means to procure financial assistance finding succour in a distinct profession of hired mourners (Rudali). In their highly pretentious double faced society, they show readiness to pretend to mourn at the funeral of rich feudal lords. Devi presented her story in a colonial society where the landlord system wasn't abolished with the deliberate intent to highlight the miserable plight of backward class women in rural India. 'Rudali' posits before the marginalised relegated women the basic idea of the art of survival withstanding all pressures of life. Sanichari embarks on the venture of constant strife for change in her society which involves contesting the patriarchal authority. As John McLeod opines, "the term 'patriarchy' refers to those systems -political, material and imaginative – which

invest power in men and marginalize women. It asserts certain representation systems which create an order of the world presented to individuals as 'normal' or 'true'."(Devi, pp.184-85). Thus patriarchy becomes a dominant form of operation which is perpetually challenged by the women for their subsistence and survival. The story takes place in a colonial India where feudalism was still in vogue and made the lives of the rural poor, especially women, more miserable. The Indian society, ostensibly favouring and honouring the women folk, exposes the abominable fact of exploiting women based on class and caste the defining factors of the social fabric. Sanichari and other women characters in the story become enmeshed in the gruesome practices enforced upon them by the patriarchal system. They find no escape but to engage themselves in the spurious labour of mourning most befitting the dual standards of the society. The profession of artificial mourning establishes solidarity among the women.

Sanichari, being born in a small village in Rajasthan, on a Saturday, the unlucky day in Hindu calendar is named so. Immediately after her birth her father died and her mother abandoned her and absconded with a rich lover. Thereafter she becomes the most unfortunate child looked down upon by the whole society. When she grew up, she gets married to Ganju who had an ailing mother to be taken care of. Even her mother-in-law jeers at her for being an ill-fated girl. No remarkable change is brought to her status as an abandoned , poor, low-caste agricultural laborer by bearing a son; Budhua , in her relation with Ganju. She persists in poverty and toils hard to make a living. Her sufferings are not merely restricted to her house but extend to the outside world as well. She even becomes a prey to the amorous approaches of the wealthy and the influential. She is forcefully invited by the local landlord Ram Avatar's son, Lakshman Singh to

become his mistress by abandoning both her husband and son. When she strongly refutes the proposal, she is enervated by the onslaught of the male authority who succumbs her to constant humiliation. The most dreaded seclusion befalls Sanichari when both her husband and mother-in-law die. Her tragic fate heightens when her son thwarts her expectations by marrying a local prostitute and deserting her never to return. Her failure to wail over her loss is misinterpreted by her society as a woman devoid of feelings. It is the very same woman incapable of shedding tears at her immense sorrow who gets transformed into the traditional role of 'rudali', the weeping woman. It is a gripping story about survival amidst gruesome reality of poverty aggravated by the landlords and priests.

Rudali is a custom still prevalent in some remote parts of Rajasthan where aristocratic women were kept secluded and objected from expressing grief owing to their high social status. Hence such families hired professional women mourners on the death of a male relative who came dressed in black attire with untied hair to lament the demise. Their exhibition of grief comprised heavy beating on the chest, rolling on the ground with spasmodic movements, shedding tears and a laudation of the deceased. Hiring such rudalis was regarded as a mark of respect and social status. The landlords, moneylenders, malik-mahajans, who confiscated the land of the poor in the post independent era, conducted rich funerals honouring the dead for which they sought the service of rudalis. Rudalis were given food, cash and clothes in return for the favour. This reflects on the life led by rudalis in complete pittance overcoming their abject penury. They were regarded as a group of women ill-fated for enduring long struggle and for being stoic figures.

Nidhi Dugar Kundalia, journalist and writer, in her book, *The Lost Generation* notes how the profession of Rudalis was always considered as caste-coded and was delivered over generations. The Thakurs believed, “Women’s brains are hardwired to feel loss and grief. They have a weak heart”. Higher caste women were strictly restricted from making their appearance before the commoners. They were bound to preserve their dignity by holding their tears. Hence the rudalis, the low caste women, perform the ritual of mourning and represent the agony and sadness of these women. . The lives of rudalis are decided and dictated by the upper caste men of the village. They become ensnared in the hegemony of caste. Their inability to exhibit the pain and poverty in their daily lives is compensated with this public and professional mourning.

‘Rudali’ is a moving narration of the dismal situation encountered by women addressed as rudalis. It critiques the socio-economic and cultural practices dominant in some parts of India. Sanichari’s tears were kept in abeyance in her traumatic life to be utilized later as a strenuous labour to earn a living for herself. The story purports to set ablaze an ensuing struggle which targets at reprimanding, attacking and exposing the exploitative system which ultimately raises the collective consciousness of such women brought under the canopy of wailing profession. Devi exposes the ironic overtones of commercialized way of mourning foreseeing the subversive potential inherent in it. Sanichari urges the prostitutes to join in the ritual of weeping as a strategic means of revenge at the risk of jeopardizing their trade of living. Sanichari earnestly hoped that the profession of wailing would enable the prostitutes to have a better dignified life and would lead to augmenting the female labour force so as to discover a firm place for themselves in the society. The story endorses the counter initiatives taken-up by the

exploited people in order to resist the onslaught of the dominant hegemonic classes. The plot authentically documents the incessant struggle encountered by the subaltern women to sustain their life which is coupled with their unfaltering efforts to resist the patriarchal policies.

‘Rudali’ testifies the objective of empowering the subaltern female by putting across alternatives which could change their course of life within the oppressive system. Devi’s ‘Rudali’ traces a complete transmutation of Sanichari ,the protagonist, from her initial frail and vulnerable position to a staunch personality powerful enough to manipulate life situation favourable to her end. She deftly implements the survival strategies with profound insight to raise herself from the mere status of subsistence. The issues of survival and ensuing hardships are strewn across the entire fabric of the text. Sanichari’s experiences as a woman of ganju caste brings to light the issues of exploitation, humiliation and marginalization encountered by thousands of subaltern communities. Sanichari’s decision to take up the profession of wailing enables her to taking a leading step towards her empowerment and ultimately subsides her submissiveness to the victimizing forces in her social milieu.

The opening lines of ‘Rudali’ post Sanichari in an antagonistic social system where she along with other villagers shares abject poverty as a member of Ganju community:

“In Tahad village, Ganjus and Dushad’s were in the majority. Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like the other villagers, her life too was lived in desperate poverty”. Her miseries are further augmented by her mother-in-law’s remarks that –“it was because Sanichari was born on inauspicious Saturday that her destiny was full of suffering”.

(p.71). She was even denied to retort the remark as girls of her age were habituated to maintain docility and weakness, quite befitting the village system. But the old woman's words echoed in her ears heightening her apprehensions about the intricate relation between birthday and destiny because she muttered to herself, "Because I was born on and named after a Saturday, that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law ? You were born on a Monday – was your life any happier? Somri, Budhua, Moongri, Bishri – do any of them have happier lives?"(p.71). Ruefully she recognizes the grim reality that there is no association between destiny and the day of birth but this rather exposes the deplorable socio-economic condition.

According to Anjum Katyal, the translator, initial part of the story accentuates the way the concept of a 'natural' order is challenged by the politically and economically framed situation. The story, by placing the protagonist in her socio-political situation, stresses the fact that all people belonging to her community class and gender face similar plight or grotesque fate. "When her mother-in-law died, Sanichari didn't cry. At the time, her husband and his brother, both the old woman's sons, were in jail because of malik-mahajan Ramavatar Singh. Enraged at the loss of some wheat, he had all the young dushad and ganju males of the village locked up". Sanichari is forced to restrain her tears at the demise of her mother-in-law in order to indulge in the cremation rites the very same night eschewing from the cost of repentance rites. When her brother, sister-in-law, husband die, she holds her tears for another apt moment since she is completely preoccupied with the stress of survival and tensed over the fact that Ramavatar, the malik mahajan, would evict all the dushads and ganjus. Ramavatar with his pernicious presence represented a system, which mindlessly vandalizes, dehumanizes and assaults the most

private zone of a person thus distorting the grief. Sanichari is denied the authentic expression of her sorrow which get distorted in her desperate struggle for survival. “Terrified of being driven out Sanichari was on tenterhooks. There was no crying over those deaths either. Was one to weep or to worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbours cheaply at the shraddha ? In this village everyone is unhappy. They understand suffering”.Remorse is manipulated in two different ways in two extreme class of society. Grief was commodified by malik-mahajans’ social class. When deaths occurred in their families, the members of the family refused to weep over the loss instead hired mourners to enhance their status quo. This was grabbed as a golden opportunity by the outcastes and marginalized as a market to mint money for their subsistence. They could supply themselves in this market by exhibiting their deftness in serving as ‘Rudalis’, the hired laborers. “If sorrow is controlled by the malik-mahajan, tears van be used as a produce, a source of earning by professional mourners.”(Katyal, 5).Grief thus becomes the sole means of subsistence for Sanichari.

Every personal incident that happens in Sanichari’s life has a close association with the exploitative system. Religious rituals following her husband’s death after consuming contaminated ‘sanctified’ milk make her pay twice for offerings which further aggravates her poverty. And she becomes indebted to Ramavatar in her attempt to appease the local village priest. Money becomes her dire necessity since all the sufferings and losses she confronts in her life is an outcome of her impoverishment. She leads a life of confinement in utter despair which offers no hope for changes or reforms. She is deserted by both her daughter-in-lawParbatia and grandson Haroa who refused to surrender to the harsh living conditions though their options of prostitution and

wandering were no better. Insecurities of life and utter impoverishment forced Sanichari to succumb to the operations of Malik mahajans as perpetrators of oppression. The story unravels the historic evolution of the subalterns as always taking a defensive side, gruelling under the pressures of corrupt and ruthless 'masters'. Mahasweta Devi exposes the brutal and avaricious nature of upper ruling class and their malicious discrimination against the lower castes. The power of the 'masters' to manipulate and negotiate the bureaucrats including the police force in order to curb down the growing unrest among the lower class becomes explicit in the text. Devi draws a nexus between the socio-economic and religious systems. The absolute penury faced by the villagers, the strategic ways in which the poor are exploited, the massive burden imposed by religion in the name of rituals, the deceitful nature of privileged classes together evinces the victimization of subalterns. The laborious efforts endured by the lower segments of the society to fill in their empty stomachs, the forced austerity and occasional trivial indulgences like bangles and comb stand in stark contrast against the wanton and erratic whims chased by the rich in performing the funeral ceremonies. The contrast is very evident in the lines: "For them nothing has ever come easy. Just the daily struggle for a little maize gruel and salt is exhausting. Through motherhood and widowhood they're tied to the moneylender. While those people spend huge sums of money on death ceremonies, just to gain prestige." (p.95).

People like Ramavatar Singh and Lachman Singh are presented as the most influencing and controlling factors of lower caste villagers who rely entirely on these malik mahajans for their livelihood. Malik mahajans unleashed a reign of terror in the village – getting people locked up in prison as they desired, using and discarding women

as they liked, extracting years of unpaid labour from the workers and numerous other humiliating deeds were endorsed upon the bereaved lot. In an interview with Mahasweta Devi held in 1993, AnjumKatyal quotes Devi's remarks about the text 'Rudali'. "Rudali is about ... "how to survive"... " bread and mouth". It is very important in my story. The whole system is exposed through this". The story unravels the survival techniques implemented by the subaltern as an individual and as a community. 'Rudali' traces the transition that takes place in Sanichari's life from a weak, long suffering repressed woman to an outgoing negotiative, shrewd woman. The text thus manifests Sanichari's growing empowerment with the persistent succour from her children; playmate Bikhni who is more receptive and adaptive to novel ideas and opportunities.

The story also explicates the intimate bonding between women. It shows subtle nuances of closeness between Sanichari and Bikhni – their growing friendship which rarely finds mention in literature with such minute details leading ultimately to a poignant turn of separating them forever. The two ageing, lonely women resolve to team up and fight all odds as both share similar circumstances of being abandoned by the family, poor and striving to find means of subsistence. Such a pairing enable the women to provide companionship mutually and fetch their resources to ensure a stable economic status. There has been a dearth in Indian literature that captures such an intimate relationship between two older women with an unusual affectionate, sensitive tenderness. Surprisingly, the two women receive a warm and compassionate support from the neighboring women in the case of helping in breast feeding, cooking a meal or sharing excess food which normally doesn't occur among women of higher classes. The story shows how all women irrespective of class differences become the victims of

discrimination and social prejudice. Nathuni's middle wife's complaint about the way she is denigrated and defamed being the mother of a girl child evinces the patriarchal interests inherent in the society which privileges women giving birth to sons. Such an attitude holding women solely responsible for all the social ills and misfortunes is widely internalized by men and women alike. This echoes Sanichari's mother-in-law's allegations against accursed Sanichari being the prime cause for all the hardships in the family. Similar social biases and prejudices stand in connivance with the vested interests of the patriarchal domain. The poignant reality is that women of both upper and lower classes are ruthlessly confined to the social and cultural prejudices.

Devi portrayed Sanichari as evolving through the different phases from girlhood to womanhood then to middle age with changing aspirations and priorities in a few lines: "Sanichari felt as if the flames of the funeral pyre were burning within her, she felt the scorching heat blowing about her day and night. She could see that he was going to die and realized that her dreams of building a life around Budhua would never be fulfilled. Even her most modest dreams have never been realized. She had wanted to buy a wooden comb for her hair, to wear shellac bangles for a full year – neither of these dreams had materialized. With time, her dreams had changed shape". (p.77) These lines convey the social conditions of Sanichari curtailing her from having high aspirations and it is disheartening that she dreamt for the minimal things but even that is mercilessly denied to her.

Sanichari's unexpected encounter with her childhood playmate Bikhni helps her to rediscover herself. The story vividly states that it is when Sanichari lost the hope of recovering her last solace Haroa, she bumps into Bikhni. At this juncture, Sanichari is rid

off all familial ties and absolutely free of all circumscribed roles. Being unharnessed from the roles imposed by the family, Sanichari and Bikhni embark on an unusual context for any Indian woman to imagine. They are able to establish such a friendship and partnership untethered from all the societal norms which permit them to reinvent themselves. Thus all the disabilities imposed on them both financially and socially turn in their favour and transform into an enabling force. It is the companionship constructed with Bikhni which becomes instrumental in the gradual empowerment of Sanichari. Bikhni always exhibited an incredible boldness and readiness to spring-up from all the fetters imposed on women by the religion and societal customs which gradually has a lasting impact on Sanichari. When Dulan, a fellow villager, suggests the idea of becoming rudalis, Sanichari dreading the talk in the village dismisses the idea but Bikhni readily accepts the idea which ultimately leads to Sanichari's willing acceptance. In a way the companionship between Bikhni and Sanichari becomes instrumental in developing an empowering attitude in Sanichari. Though initially Sanichari cavils at every hurdle posed before them, gradually learns to embrace challenges that ensued from their commitments to follow reinforcements. By the end of the story Sanichari takes up an assertive role in forming a radical economic organization.

The story traces the unusual relationship between Bikhni and Sanichari evolving into a professional team of Rudalis. Together they decide to discard their initial resilience and fight oppression from the privileged classes. It dawns on them that a concerted effort is needed at community level. This enables them to implement the strategy of resistance thus posing a challenge and threat to the status quo. The story narrates the beginning of the collective onslaught of subalterns in empowering themselves. The novel perception of

Sanichari in accommodating more Rudalis from the town to form a commercial vocation makes her view the alternative methods to fight against the antagonistic environment. She triumphs in trodding the path of success by getting involved in the process of empowerment and developing a sense of solidarity among the subaltern women in Thahad village.

Mahasweta Devi narrates in all her stories the way subaltern women are exploited by the feudal landlords. The economic vulnerability and insecurity are exposed as the two major reasons which lead such women succumb to the sexual harassment of the privileged classes. Devi demonstrates the myriad ways in which the women are victimized by the dominant classes. She also explicates through her stories how women take cue from the faulty exploitative system and finally emerges as manipulators of the same system by negotiating the social milieu in their favour. She tried to promulgate the disparate ways through which the underdog fought injustice and how resolutely they bore the difficulties which ensued from the underhand machinations incurred on them by the inhuman vicious classes. Devi attempted to articulate the aberrant strategies employed by the victimized women to accelerate the subaltern consciousness. She was always motivated by altruism and a genuine faith in human dignity which led her to stand for the rights of the vulnerable section of the society.

CHAPTER 3

DEVI'S INTERVENTIONS IN KERALA SOCIETY

G.N. Devy has rightly remarked about Devi that she “has a strange ability to communicate with the silenced, her best speech reserved for those to whom no one has spoken”. Gripped with a reforming zeal, Devi always narrated stories of the unheard groups and voiced for the silenced victims of the society. Through her narrative strategies she drew the attention of the mainstream population to the unjust brutalities wreaked on the silenced folk. Devi has been declared as one of India’s most touching and important writers who had authentically and fearlessly chronicled the widespread injustice prevalent in the society. A wide range of issues like exploitation and harassment of the poor and the underprivileged, the enduring struggles undertaken by the labouring class, bonded labour, destitution, victimization of the women, clamour of the subalterns, the landless peasants, miners in West Bengal and Bihar were dealt with in her narratives. Her intimate association with the underprivileged and the tribal population motivated her to comprehend the ground realities and to engage in activism and creative writing. In her stories and novels, Devi portrayed real living characters especially women with strong will hidden behind a demure and feminine modesty. As a writer and activist, Devi dedicated herself to document the perennial struggles of the destitute masses and verbalize the frustrations of the deprived lot. Devi’s dauntless leadership and unflinching support rendered to the marginalized and discontented segments of the society made her a remarkable person among the common masses. Devi was regarded as the best chronicler of social reality and the hardships of the muted population.

Mahasweta Devi successfully unfolds the layers of massive exploitation done to thousands of tribal population all over India whose habitats were confiscated in the name

of development projects like dams, irrigation and mining projects, sanctuaries and national parks, industries and townships by the Government. Such issues of depriving the tribals and poor peasants of their rightful land were seriously raised by her and it occurred to her as highly objectionable. According to an estimate undertaken in 1989, it was assumed that more than one crore people including many tribals have been dispossessed of their land in the guise of promising ventures by the governing officials. And only less than a quarter of them were rehabilitated fairly. (Watter Fernandes, J.C. Das and Sam Rao, Displacement and Rehabilitation – An Estimate of Extent and Prospects, 1989). As per statistical data, it has always been found half of the displaced population comprised the tribals. No uniform rehabilitation policy is exercised in its propriety in their regard. Devi's frequent visits to many coal mine areas in Orissa and Madhyapradesh made her come to a gnawing recognition that many tribals were evicted from their habitats many times for the better production of steel and aluminium. The irony lies in the fact that neither steel nor aluminium could reform or better their living conditions. The norm 'land for land' has never been justifiably implemented by either the Central or the State government as a fair compensation for the dispossessed community. The process of alienating tribal lands continued despite the introduction of stringent laws to safeguard the interests of the hapless tribals. Such gruesome incidents of grabbing tribal lands occurred by imposing muscle power or the administrative and enforcing authorities providing support. Those resisting harassment are severely punished by the administrative forces. Sometimes clandestine and devious methods were adopted by the ruling authorities in harassing the tribals taking advantage of their dire poverty and ignorance of existing laws protecting their rights. It was a matter of grave concern that

most of the tribals' lives were ruined by the joined contrivances of the antisocial, police force, landlords and politicians who exerted fraudulent means to violate laws blatantly. It is worth mentioning that Devi always tried to blend the official history of India with the forgotten and unspoken history of the tribal folk in her writings making it more authentic and intimate with common people.

Being the voice of the oppressed, Devi's creative writings abound with the fears, hopes and frustrations of the oppressed. She firmly believed that the trauma and hurt caused to the underprivileged cannot be easily expunged. Though she was anointed as the literary genius of Bengal, Devi gauged her potential as a writer as the most befitting strategy to combat oppression, injustice and exploitation of the marginalised and the dispossessed. She never demurred in proclaiming her ideologies and politics since she openly reprimanded the deeds of the political parties who denied justice to the poor and strode ahead revealing her resentment through reports in magazines, articles, letters to political leaders, participation in activist movements, advocacy of basic rights through 'Bortika' the journal. No threats or hurdles could dampen her spirit as she persistently pursued the role of a daring and zealous social activist, academician, writer who expressed her dissent towards despotic rule at all available opportunities. Battling till the end, Devi mustered courage to announce her idea that the notion of India's liberty held little credence as majority of its citizens were deprived of their fundamental rights. She was fiercely independent as a writer as she never displayed her inclination for the extreme Left despite being a die-hard communist, nor did she side with the favourable group of the Government.

Devi's interventions in Kerala's political scenario deserve a distinct mention since nothing could deter her from travelling to the southernmost state of India. She made a profound observation of the situation of Kerala and expressed timely solidarity with the agitations raised by the deprived segment of the society. Devi's relationship with Kerala dates back to 1982 when she visited the state to partake in the Janakeeya samrakshanavedi convention in Atholi , Kozhikode. She was permanently accessible and approachable to the rural people of Kerala who encountered both personal and environmental problems. All the contentious issues were likely to demand a provision encouraging Devi's involvement facilitating an ardent and voluntary support for the well being of the common people. The downtrodden people of Kerala and Mahasweta Devi were kindred spirits on the issues of exploitation. She witnessed analogous battles waged against inhuman ways of land grabbing in pursuance of development projects in the context of Kerala too. Many social activists and writers of Kerala were stunned by the ardent dedication and unswerving attitude of visionary Devi who led a group of protesters with an undaunted mission. She proved herself as an intrepid explorer who probed into the deeper impacts of development projects on the common masses. She could envisage the hardship encountered by such deprived population by the onslaught of such progressive enterprise chalked out by the Government with an unusual easiness.

Moolampilly eviction was one such incident that resonated all over the State in the year 2008 which marked a permanent blemish on the political schema. Without any reconsideration, Devi travelled to Moolampilly and extended her whole hearted support to the agitators who made an ensuing struggle for a decent rehabilitation by the families whose lands had been procured by the Government for constructing the Vallarpadam

International Transshipment Terminal project. Bemoaning the predicament of nearly 316 families evicted for road and rail connectivity to Vallarpadam ,Devi visited Moolampilly thrice and found to her dismay that the evictees were not fully rehabilitated. Struck by utter disappointment she even posed a threat to the Government by announcing her decision to write about such filthy practice and wrote an open letter to the then Chief Minister Oommen Chandy. Later she even made a visit to Kadamakkudy where turbulence was initiated by the local people against the construction of a 45 metre wide road to Paravur through Pokkali rice fields. Fearing the complete obliteration of fields, the inhabitants proposed an alternative route which fell into the deaf ears of the ruling mob. Devi's timely interference brought respite to the debilitated masses and the movement picked momentum since the alternative promised minimal damage to Pokkali fields. With her sojourn to Kerala, she taught the people to withstand crisis in their life and tried to impart strength to people for their ongoing pursuit for justice. Devi attempted to remind the masses to involve themselves in radical movements by dispensing with lethargy as demanded by the current situations. She always stood as a pillar of support to all the historical revolutionary movements favouring the forced evictees and safeguarding the environment from further devastations. In the midst of all hassles she could suggest corrective measures, better alternatives and offer direction to the lost masses.

Devi's relationship with the famous Malayalee documentary director Joshy Joseph was noteworthy since he chronicled the life of Devi in his documentary titled 'Journeying with Mahasweta'. She grabbed the attention of Kerala public when she visited Rema, the wife of slain Revolutionary Marxist Party Leader T.P Chandrasekharan at Vatakara and promised full support and strength to the widow. The daring presence of

Devi rendered Rema an unusual courage to withstand the trauma. Rema later asserted her strong convictions and fearlessly expressed her resentment against the state affairs. She appeared in the sensational news by raising her voice against the unjust policies of the CPM. After that momentous visit Devi was very vocal about Chandrasekharan for his unabated efforts to be a true communist in its real sense. She remarked about him that he was the people's leader whose selfless service had often been censured by the governing authorities. She also added that it was his strong political stance which dragged him into the political quagmire and eventually his murder. In most of her interviews, Devi expressed her deep sarcasm about the growing intolerance permeating the politics of Kerala and grieved over the fact that the notion of intolerance is celebrated all over Kerala. In an interview with A.V. Sherin, a celebrated journalist of 'Madhyamam' weekly, Devi reacted about the writer's role in reforming a society as indispensable. She desisted the idea of writers being reticent about crucial issues since she grew up having a close interaction with the external surroundings. She always tried to bolster strength and endurance among the weakened population to withstand numerous pressures and impediments. On being asked about the apathetic attitude of mainstream political parties towards the real grave issues affecting the common lot, Devi retaliated about the negligence shown by such parties and supported the notion of pursuing the path of truth by undertaking strikes and protests in the face of all adverse situations. She combated the proposition of succumbing to the vagaries of chance, instead believed that human deeds decided his or her destiny.

Devi had a powerful message to convey to the writers and activists that they must come out of their cosy cocoon and see the real India, get involved in the practical world

of decision making and responsibility. She reminded them of their duties to common people and gave insight to emerge as decision makers. She displayed her genuine concern for the constant availability of drinking water and the basic human rights which were deprived to many lower class people. She openly blamed the group of middle class who detached themselves from the rural life and their problems. She detested the idea of keeping the middle class aloof from the real seething problems afflicting the lower segments of society. It is ludicrous to anoint one section of society with the term middle class instead they should be brought down to the streets to witness the traumatic lives of the common mass. Devi confessed that she never possessed a unique ideology as such but always attempted to chase her passion and interests. She pursued what she believed as right. She dedicated her life for empowering the dispossessed. In her interview with Sherin, when Devi was asked about how to follow the philosophy on non – violence in an utterly dismantled situation she responded strongly about the insignificance of uttering the theory of non-violence in an absolutely despicable living condition , when every life is in jeopardy finding no means of subsistence, the philosophy of non-violence has literally no importance. She made her propositions very clear that she was optimistic about the futuristic events due to her undeterred faith in strikes and protest movements.

Devi manifested an unusual simplicity and tenacious spirit in leading the common public. Her unswerving loyalty to the marginalised section of the society added to her public persona. In her conversation with Sherin, Devi expressed her disinterestedness in the modern political organizations which evinced her faith in Communism as waning. She believed in performing small but relevant acts of benevolence for the welfare of the society which exactly was the reason that prompted her to come and visit

Chandrashekharan's mourning place and console his mother and wife. She considered the visit as part of humaneness. The brutal act of blowing the RMP leader into smithereens was highly objectional to her. Hence she couldn't digest the fact that the conventional and traditional political system can be replaced with an alternative system in the contemporary context of intolerance. Before the advent of Communism, Devi presumed the existence of certain value dating back to 14th century when people brought in revolutionary ideals and radical thoughts. Analogous to the European Renaissance, India too witnessed renaissance with great thinkers and reformers comprising even divine poets who had dared to fight against Brahmanism. There was a time when people repudiated the necessity of sacred institutions to direct human to God's grace. Chaitanya, a seer and visionary scholar of 14th century was endearingly mentioned by Devi as a note worthy personality for his generous and laudable contributions of worldly duty as the universal thought process. Thus history provided sufficient evidence to give credence to Devi's eulogising of Chaitanya as a prominent figure who led a simple life of devotion and had genial communion with all classes of people. Devi asserted that the age of Renaissance enlightened the public with noble thoughts but she lamented the absence of such visionary personalities in the modern context who could lead the people into performing noblest deeds. It is a grieving fact that there is absolute stagnation of ideologies though people and leadership have been under constant flux. Everything but selfishness remained uneffacable, was the loathsome reality perceived by Devi who suggested resistance and protests as the only resolutions.

Devi left a deeper and lasting influence on many writers and social activists with her frequent visits made to the state. She revealed her close association with Vikraman

Nair, the Malayalee journalist working with Bengali newspaper as worth mentioning in one of her visits which occurred in 2008. A longstanding friendship was established between them. She held him in high esteem for the striking manner in which he wrote Bengali language with his exceptional flare for the language. Together they had travelled to many remote and interior areas of Bengal. Vikraman's sudden demise had plunged her in utter despair. Many years back when the Malayalee writer, editor and activist Civic Chandran and his comrades invited Devi, she stepped into Kerala for the first time. In that journey she stayed for 5-6 days and gathered some very important sources of information by visiting many remote villages of Kerala. Chandran remarked about Devi's magnanimity as "If you ask me what she was I would say she was a rare genius who comes under the genre of writer-activist". He also recalled about her arrival in Kerala when he spoke to the Times of India. During her first visit to Kerala she wanted to go to the villages and she maintained that approach throughout her visits to the state, the last one being for the launch of the 25th edition of 'Padabhedam' magazine in 2013". She had been honoured and revered by many celebrated authors of Kerala who were amazed by the austerity she exercised in her both personal and public life. She paid visit to Kerala for the second time when the most acknowledged and popular writer M.T. Vasudevan Nair served as the Secretary of Kerala Sahithya Academy. They maintained a close association being literary peers. In her conversation with Sunil Naliyath, reputed journalist of 'Malayalam' magazine, Devi confessed about her kinship with a few writers of Kerala, including Anand and M.T Vasudevan. She shared her serious apprehensions about her next visit to the place which could be hindered by her physical frailties. Her

third visit to Kerala happened when she attended the Kerala state conference of the Resistance Movement against occupation.

Devi's deeply etched relationship with M.T. Vasudevan becomes evident through her prolonged interaction with him. She put in serious efforts and invested much of her energy and time into campaigning for M.T during Sahithya Academy elections. Her sincere and whole hearted cooperation during the election proved that regional barriers could never hamper her from helping her Malayalee friends. M.T too had high opinion about Devi which is proved in his remarks, "she possessed the ability to communicate across languages and cultures, the hard realities of the lives of India's downtrodden. Hearing the shocking news of Devi's sudden departure from life, M.T reacted at a literacy gathering in Thunchan Parambu in Tirur, "Her death is a loss not only to literature but to the whole country. She literally lived with the tribals and worked for their betterment besides being a wonderful personality. She is irreplaceable". (Deccan Chronicle, July29, 2016). Devi had an unusual zest for activism which was proven through her heedless and audacious deeds. She worked for the cause of the dispossessed and the marginalised which she espoused like her own. Unlike the vocal crusaders of today, Devi laboured without any pretensions and tried to verbalise the fears and upheavals of the poor. Without any reluctance she championed for the cause of the oppressed and lived and had constant interaction with them. The eminent writer K.Satchidanandan referred to her as "as a rare genius to combine literature with activism". He added, "She is the most prominent name in Bengali literature after Ashapoorna Devi. She never wrote about the life of the tribal people as an outsider.

Instead she imbibed their life and devoted her own for their cause”. (ToI, P Sudhakaran, July 29, 2016).

S. Gopalakrishnan, literary critic and columnist opined that Devi’s extreme commitment to the tribal life made her narratives very realistic and universally relevant due to its deep rootedness in the local life. One and a half decades before the notable writer M. Mukundan met Devi personally in a literary fest in France where he was struck by surprise at the way people there addressed her as ‘mother’ and truly he felt she was the mother for the Indians too. He also conceived that Devi received the greatest honour in Kerala apart from Bengal and her works were widely and popularly read by Keralites through her translated works. Mukundan revealed to the Times of India that, “She showed an active interest in the social and political issues in Kerala too. India needed her badly to see it through these tough times”(ToI, Sudhakaran, July 29, 2016). According to K.Venu, prominent writer and scholar, “When West Bengal was rocked by deadly violence in the 1970’s , she understood the gravity of the situation and boldly intervened” (TOI, Sudhakaran, July 29, 2016) which explicated her close involvement with the New Left Movement. Venu added it was awe inspiring to see the dauntless way Devi intervened in the lives of the oppressed communities in West Bengal during the Naxalite uprising. Sudhakaran.P. Purayath, an eminent author mourned the loss of the daring literary genius as “She was an activist and writer in its true sense. A big loss indeed”. Various literary honours Devi received couldn’t lessen her zealous spirit since her whole mission in life was the oppressed community who were brought to literary lime light. No rebuffs or scoffs raised from the mainstream population could dampen her ardour.

Devi's towering personality initiated various organizations protecting the rights of the lower class and the marginalised in many parts of Kerala. She could impart strength to the tribal and dalit women in Kerala through her very presence in different occasions. Devi is today regarded as one of the most celebrated author Arundhati Roy's, most towering peers. Devi and Roy delineated similar issues of development projects marring the lives of tribals and lower class people of India, the oppression of women, brutal demarcation by class hierarchy, the innate corruption of governing officials and bureaucrats in their fictional and non-fictional works. Devi's concern with the deprived people in her works overlapped with majority of the issues dealt within Roy's works. A scornful critique of the inherent hypocrisy of the governing powers found a dominant place in Devi's writings. Reckoning the legacy of devastation of the indigenous folk, there appeared a grimace of pain on Devi's face. She aggrieved at the promulgation of a set of obnoxious ruthless profit motivated rulers bestowing no glimmer of hope for the suffering multitude. Devi inculcated all the great values from her family and considered it as her obligation to unearth the forgotten and repressed histories of the indigenous people.

Irked by the misrepresentations of adivasi's life, Narayan, a member of the Malayarayar tribal community in Kerala, penned a path breaking novel titled Kocharethi. Devi expressed her excitement at the publication of the novel by saying, "Kocharethi, one of the first tribal novels, is a remarkable work and should be translated into other Indian languages." (The Hindu, Saraswathy Nagarjun, 27 April, 2011). The story portrayed the unheard mishaps and earthy tensions of Malayarayar tribals in Kerala. Devi was constantly plagued by the thought that there was a growing distance between the tribals'

access to public information and the mainstream India's ignorance of the stark realities of the indigenous people. Hence she had been urged to reclaim the fundamental rights of the marginalised. Devi succeeded in creating powerful tremors all over Kerala by her instant support and timely intervention in the real problems faced by the common public of Kerala. Many of her plays are still staged in various colleges and universities within Kerala manifesting Devi's exceptional and illustrious personality. Her plays like 'Mother of 1984', 'Rudali' had succeeded in kindling an unusual vigour among the women of Kerala and the youth irrespective of their gender to react to the rampant injustice prevailing in the state. It has reinvigorated the youth to learning about all the contentious issues to the forefront questioning the politically corrupt leaders.

Mahasweta Devi had inspired and empowered many women leaders, activists and academicians in Kerala. Noted among them were C.K. Janu, an activist who has taken the adivasis fight to a new realm like never before in Kerala; Sister Jesmy, a nun turned activist who questioned and challenged the discrimination and ill-treatment meted out to nuns and other women attached to the church establishment by the male dominated church hierarchy and J. Devika, a scholar who has through her teachings, public speaking and writing espoused the cause of gender justice. All of them through their public speeches, media interviews and personal briefing and writing have acknowledged the kind of role Mahasweta Devi played in helping them to have right perspective on issues faced by the downtrodden and weaker sections of the society. These three women represent a large section of Kerala society who assiduously followed the writing, teaching and practices of Mahasweta Devi.

Mahasweta Devi ever remained not only as an ideologue for them but also a practitioner who really made India understand the meaning of the word 'praxis'. In a nutshell, Devi inspired a large section of Kerala society comprising academicians, intellectuals, political leader, grass root workers and finally the common man for fighting for a 'just world'. Her influence in Kerala Society is as deep and strong as it has been in Bengal and other parts of India.

CONCLUSION

“For the intellectual the task, I believe, is explicitly to universalise the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the suffering of others.”

- (Edward Said, Representations of the Intellectual, 1996)

Devi had been a true intellectual in all its sense. Throughout her life she laboured hard demanding for the reclamation of the rights of the disempowered and urged the selfish humanity to be a more humane society transcending class, caste, religion, gender, etc. Her writings accentuate the earthy tensions and the elemental life of the neglected ones who are trampled upon by the ruling monarchs. Devi led a simple life of dedication and established an ardent communion with all sections of society – both low and high. She remained an unwearied annalist of the victimised population seeking clarification from the officials at the helm bragging about the economical gains for the society. Persistent efforts were put in by her in lobbying the self-serving government to bring about radical change in the predicament of the marginalised. Her decade long toil for the exploited women, tribals, dalits, prostitutes and migrated labourers picked momentum and are still relevant. She was most vocal as a campaigner of marginalised dalits, tribals and women. Her steadfastness and fortitude in reclamation of the rights of the underprivileged get postulated through her utterance, “I want to reach as many people as possible. I write for the masses.”

Awards and accolades never diminished Devi’s enthusiasm to work for the poor, because every day she garnered new information by her close interaction with the masses. She loved to cuddle and fondle the most needy. It brought disillusionment to her to witness the inevitable divide between the poor and the mainstream population. In 1997 when Devi received the Ramon Magsaysay Award she spoke with great desperation reflecting upon the future of India, “My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness. A curtain that separates mainstream society from the poor and the deprived.”

Devi's life showed that an individual can mingle and interact with human life to such a deeper extent that a person can develop or grow in the process. Probably in the contemporary India, the perfect example or model to be followed without an afterthought will be Mahaswetha Devi who possessed an exemplary perspective into the worldly matters. For ages Devi had been startling the Indians with her life and personality. She even astounded the people with her amazing skill in writing, chronicling the pangs of despair and humiliation of the common mass. Her works projected the savagery of increasingly apathetic self-centred rulers who devastated and molested the lives of the tribal women with no prick of conscience. She worked passionately giving voice and power to the mutilated mass through her activism and writing. The powerful stories of victimization and struggles of tribal women were penned with an unusual expertise. Her sincere deeds triggered the debilitated folk into forming organizations reinforcing their legal rights. Devi wasn't a mere onlooker of the woes of the people but a strong representative of the ignored and neglected people. She could effectively terrorise and threaten the corrupt and filthy governing officials of India for decades. The various development projects irresponsibly carried out by the profit minded officials were openly denounced by Devi. Such irresponsible projects paved way for the displacement and destruction of thousands of lower caste citizens of India, causing havoc and panic in their lives. The unending struggles faced by the downtrodden was a mind-boggling problem Devi couldn't cope-up with.

The undebatable fact of Devi being an Indian intellectual gets manifested in her perpetual services rendered to the common mass and her eternal fight against globalisation, development policies seeking a sustainable environment development and

credibility of the governing officials. In her lifetime she made incessant struggle for the tribals to get recognised as individuals in possession of complete rights. Articulating the real life of people was her forte. Devastating tales of the indigenous people was brought to limelight by the Bengali writer. Devi was never confined by the regional borders in fulfilling her desires. She traversed through almost every part of India. The gruelling and gut wrenching experiences of the poor could not ever restrict her from chasing her passion of leading a sacrificial life. During a time when false consciousness of class gave way to chaos Devi showed way through her superlative intellectual depth and creative presence and became the voice of the oppressed. With the power of letters of wisdom and firm political convictions, Devi made her presence felt by every section of the society without ever compromising with political powers and never becoming a part of the institutionalisation process. Even when age took a toll on her, Devi staunchly fought for the marginalised section who were on the brink of destruction by the abrasive rulers and vehemently protested the central powers. This was solely the reason why most of the villagers in Bengal had deeper faith in her than their most revered goddesses.

Devi began her associations with Kerala in the early 1980's. She had given extensive interviews to many prominent Malayalam writers, thinkers and journalists which appeared in all forms of media and had a lasting impact on Keralites' perspective with regard to many contentious issues. She inspired many in Kerala to take up the issues of the marginalised and espouse such causes. Sr. Jesme, C.K. Janu, Devikaetc, were some of the women activities who fought for the cause of the deprived. Her translated works had a wider reach on the common public as many of her novels and plays were enacted in many cultural theatres, schools, colleges and universities giving her wider significance.

Every word she uttered sent reverberation in the society very much like the cultural intervention she made. In the era of new bourgeoisie and the man-hunt, Devi grieved over the loss of values and the unforgiveable act of sidelining and exploiting the downtrodden. This bourgeoisie she believed came disguised in many forms and sometimes masqueraded as the leftist. She reminded the writers to lend a helping hand to the most needy and the oppressed sections of the society without which their writings carry no meaning. Their creative output benefit the society only when their deeds reflect their writings and dispense with their alarming silence which support the oppressors. In the era of global capitalism, the power of the corporate and the power of the political hierarchy, Devi strongly felt that the writers should come forward to lend voice to the voiceless and support the oppressed. Several skirmishes she had with bourgeoisie powers and her all out opposition to the Nandigram violence is a clear testimony to this fact. The deep dedication she nurtured for the weaker people enabled Devi to raise radical questions to the autocratic powers during the Naxalite uprising.

A close affinity was developed between C.R. Neelakanthan, social activist, and the Bengali writer in 2008 following the eviction of people from Moolampilly village in Kochi and he rightly observed, "She was definitely different from the writers we know in Kerala who prefer to take positions after carefully weighing the political risks". Many prominent women writers of Kerala too developed profound ties with Devi. K.R. Meera is one among them who revered the vigorous and invigorating spirit of Devi. Through her kinship with the Bengali intellectuals, Meera examined that it is vital to understand the sad plight of Indian masses who remain poor for ages by continuous torture, exploitation, displacement to understand Devi. To commemorate the great writer we need to discern

the social reality of India. Meera's attachment with Devi began with the publication of the book 'Arshilata: Women's Fiction from India and Bangladesh' edited by NiazZamanin 2007 when both their stories appeared in it. Meera considered it a moment of pride for a budding writer like her. Her desire to meet Devi had its fulfilment in the year 2008 during protest meeting at Moolampilly. Meera saw a wounded heart in Devi owing to her serious face in the public gathering. Through her interactions with Devi, Meera observed that the activist was proud of being born in a family dedicated to the cause of the poor which enabled Devi to witness different shades of life. Meera's queries about Devi's involvement with Adivasis and Devi's strong proclamation "The Adivasis need no change. Adivasis are more civilised than you and me. They value the earth. They value the rivers. They consider girls and boys equal. They don't have the dowry system. They value justice. I was extremely fortunate to have a chance to work among them " (Deccan Chronicle, K. R. Meera, 20) left her stupefied for a moment. Devi set an example to the whole masses by being a powerful woman risking her emotional and social security for the advocacy of freedom and equality for the downtrodden and the marginalised. Once Devi confessed to her close and dear ones, "When I die I don't want to be cremated, instead I wish to be buried somewhere in Deogarh (Jharkhand) and a mahua sapling should be planted there. I haven't given anything back to this earth, so I wish to offer myself to this mother earth". These mesmerising words keep resonating among her ardent followers who can never forget the aura of her strength.

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