

# The Pen as a Pickaxe: Mahasweta Devi's Activism, Journalism, and the Subaltern Turn in Indian Literature

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**Abstract:** *This paper argues that Mahasweta Devi's literary and journalistic work is not merely a reflection of social realities but a deliberate and sustained act of activism that serves as a practical application of the 'history from below' methodology pioneered by the Subaltern Studies Group. Challenging the separation between academic "field" and "text," Devi's creative output was a "political act" fuelled by a profound anger against social and economic injustice. Through meticulous, on-the-ground engagement with marginalized communities, she gave voice to the histories and experiences of Adivasis, Dalits, and other dispossessed groups who were systematically excluded from dominant, elite-centric narratives. Her journalism, such as her column exposing the plight of women in Kolkata jails or her public advocacy for figures like Chuni Kotal, functioned as direct interventions to compel state accountability. Furthermore, her editorship of the magazine Bortika served as a tangible platform for the marginalized to write their own stories, providing a powerful, real-world response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theoretical question of whether the subaltern can speak. In her fiction, Devi's narratives, such as the body as a site of unyielding resistance in "Draupadi" and the dehumanizing commodification in "Breast-Giver," provided a literary blueprint for subaltern agency. By weaving together her writing and her activism, Mahasweta Devi established a powerful legacy that not only chronicled the struggles of the oppressed but also provided a living model for their ongoing resistance.*

**Keywords:** Activism, Journalism, Subaltern, Resistance etc.

## 1. Introduction

### Mahasweta Devi: The Writer-Activist Paradigm

Mahasweta Devi's stature in modern Indian literature and public life is unique, distinguished by her profound demolition of the conventional boundaries between creative expression and social engagement. She is not merely a novelist who writes *about* social issues but an activist for whom the very act of writing was an "unyielding fight for the rights of the underprivileged". This approach dismantled the long-standing "myth of a separation between field and text" that persists in academic discourse. Devi's work, a fierce blend of literary and journalistic output, did not subscribe to the ethos of "art for art's sake" but was, in her own words, a "political act".

The animating force behind her creative output was a "luminous, burning and passionate" anger aimed at a system that had failed to liberate her people from hunger, landlessness, and bonded labor. This anger was the sole source of her inspiration, compelling her to use her pen as a weapon to fight against injustice. Her narratives, which often featured strong female protagonists and marginalized communities, were imbued with a reformist vision and a revolutionary determination to expose the "naked brutality, savagery, and caste and class exploitation" of the state. For Devi, literature was a solemn and responsible vocation with a social commitment to uplift tribal communities and give a voice to the voiceless.

### The Inextricable Link: A Living 'History from Below'

This paper posits that Mahasweta Devi's entire body of work—literary, journalistic, and activist—constitutes a living

manifestation of the "history from below" methodology. This approach, which focuses on the narratives of ordinary people rather than the elite, was a crucial counter-narrative to the dominant historical and literary discourses of her time. Devi's aim was to provide a voice to the "unheard" and "uncover the histories of groups" that were "shunted to the margins" or "undocumented altogether" in colonial and nationalist archives.

Her work challenged the elitist bias that had long dominated the field, a bias that Ranajit Guha, the founder of the Subaltern Studies Group, described as "colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism". Devi's writings, which drew from meticulous field research and oral histories, portrayed marginalized individuals not as passive objects of historical forces but as the "active agents" who shaped history itself. By narrativizing the experiences of Adivasi and Dalit communities, she demonstrated that an alternate history could be—and must be—written from the ground up, providing a blueprint for subaltern emancipation as long as oppression persists.

The intellectual foundation of Subaltern Studies lies in the work of Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Imprisoned by Mussolini's fascist regime, Gramsci used the term "subaltern" in his *Prison Notebooks* as a coded reference for subordinate social classes, such as peasants and workers, to circumvent prison censorship. Gramsci's concept was expansive, moving beyond the traditional Marxist focus on the proletariat to include subordinate classes of pre-capitalist eras. He emphasized that these groups are subject to the cultural and ideological hegemony of the ruling classes, but that their history is complex and difficult to unify.

Volume 14 Issue 8, August 2025

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

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The Subaltern Studies Group, led by Ranajit Guha, adopted and adapted this concept to the postcolonial context of South Asia. The group's initial focus was on rewriting the history of colonial India from the perspective of the subaltern, explicitly positioning itself in opposition to the "elitist bias" of existing scholarship. By defining the "subaltern" as the "demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the 'elite'," Guha established a new paradigm for historical inquiry that centered on the agency of marginalized communities, particularly peasants. The group's work provided a powerful critique of narratives that had long silenced the voices and contributions of the masses in favor of elite politics and leadership.

### The Problem of Voice and Devi's Response

The intellectual project of Subaltern Studies was famously interrogated by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Spivak's core argument is that it is fundamentally impossible for the subaltern to truly speak or be represented within the dominant structures of knowledge production. She contended that even well-meaning intellectuals, in their attempts to give a voice to the subaltern, often end up reinforcing the very power structures that silence them. This act of speaking for the subaltern is, in her view, a form of epistemic violence, co-opting their experience and assimilating it into an elite, Western theoretical framework.

Mahasweta Devi's life's work provides a compelling, real-world counter-narrative to this theoretical pessimism. Rather than merely speaking *for* the subaltern, Devi's practice was to create a tangible platform for them to speak *for themselves*. She stated that her stories were not her own "creation" but were, in fact, "the stories of the people of her country". This was not a romanticized claim; it was a statement of a deeply integrated methodology.

This practical response to the theoretical dilemma of subaltern representation is most clearly demonstrated through her editorship of the quarterly magazine *Bortika*. From 1980 onward, Devi transformed the publication into a "mouthpiece for the most downtrodden". She documented grassroots issues and, in a landmark act, invited a rickshaw puller named Manoranjan Byapari to write for her magazine after he asked her the meaning of a difficult Bengali word. This act, which directly empowered a marginalized person to write about his own life and experiences, subverts the conventional power dynamic. Byapari went on to become a prominent Bengali writer, a testament to the efficacy of Devi's model. This is a crucial distinction. While the subaltern may be unable to "speak" in the language of the elite without some form of mediation, Devi's practice shows that a committed intellectual can act as a catalyst or an amplifier, providing the platform and tools for self-expression, rather than simply substituting their voice for the subaltern's. This model directly challenges the fatalism of the Spivakian critique and offers a tangible path toward genuine subaltern agency and voice.

### The Activist's Journey: From the Ground Up

#### Beyond the Ivory Tower: The Roots of a Commitment

Mahasweta Devi's lifelong dedication to the marginalized was rooted in both her intellectual upbringing and her personal

experiences. Born into a family of distinguished writers and social workers, she was exposed to literary and social issues from an early age. Her education at Santiniketan, founded by Rabindranath Tagore, instilled in her a humanistic vision of literature's capacity for social change. However, this intellectual foundation was solidified by her direct experience with human suffering. Her volunteer work during the Bengal Famine of 1942-44, where she distributed food and scrutinized the bodies of the victims, served as a "watershed moment" that cemented her path toward literary activism.

Her commitment went far beyond academic curiosity. She immersed herself in the lives of the people she wrote about, refusing to maintain a detached, intellectual distance. She "lived in the Adivasi villages... years after years, befriending them and learning from them" in West Bengal, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh. Her refusal to use the term "tribal," which she saw as having "colonial connotations," reflected her deep respect for their cultural identity and autonomy. This firsthand experience was the "endless source of ingredients" for her writing, and she claimed that her stories were not her own creation but belonged to the people of the country.

### Journalism as Direct Intervention: The Pen as a Public Tool

Devi's journalism was a form of direct intervention, a public extension of her activism. As a journalist, she meticulously documented grassroots-level issues, serving as a socio-political commentator for the marginalized community. In the 1980s, her sharp and incisive articles in newspapers exposed the plight of women confined to Kolkata jails for years as "non-criminal lunatics," a campaign that forced the West Bengal government to free and rehabilitate them.

This body of work was compiled in the collection *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*, published in 1997 and edited by Maitreya Ghatak. The volume contains Devi's activist prose written between 1981 and 1992, including articles from journals like *Economic and Political Weekly* and editorials from her own quarterly, *Bortika*. The writings address issues such as short-sighted development projects, land alienation, environmental degradation, and the exploitation of landless peasants. For example, the collection includes her powerful writing on the tragic suicide of Chuni Kotal in 1992, a pivotal moment in her journalism. Kotal, the first female graduate from the historically "criminal" Lodha community, took her own life after facing relentless discrimination and harassment from university authorities. Devi's emotional article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* exposed the "sheer injustice and callousness" of the authorities and government and transformed a local tragedy into a national controversy about systemic casteism.

### Direct Activism: Campaigns for Land and Dignity

Devi's activism was not confined to her writing; it was a physical commitment to direct action. In the twilight years of the Left Front government in West Bengal, she emerged as a leading figure in the Singur and Nandigram agitations. She "spearheaded the movement" against the government's forceful acquisition of fertile agricultural land from farmers for industrial development, a policy she vehemently criticized. She mobilized civil society, protesting alongside

farmers and seeing their struggle as a "global issue" of "faceless farmers... standing up to be counted".

A particularly poignant example of her activism was her campaign to remove the chains from the commemorative statue of the legendary tribal leader Birsa Munda in Ranchi, Jharkhand. The statue depicted Munda with manacled hands, based on a British colonial photograph, and was presented by authorities as a symbol of his struggle. Devi, however, saw the chains as a perpetual symbol of subjugation and a distortion of history. She consistently demanded their removal, and her campaign culminated in the Jharkhand state government finally unshackling the statue in June 2016. This act was a powerful, symbolic victory—a literal "unshackling" of the subaltern from the colonial legacy of subjugation and a testament to the tangible impact of her work on public policy and memory.

### The Literary Manifestation of Activism: Subaltern Narratives in Devi's Fiction

#### The Unfiltered Reality of Resistance

Mahasweta Devi's fiction is a literary site of protest and rebellion, functioning as a "manifesto of the Adivasi tradition of revolts". Her narratives are characterized by a stark realism that refuses to romanticize the struggles of the oppressed. She gave voice to those who had been suppressed for centuries, portraying them not as victims but as "active agents of resistance" who fight for their "land and for their dignity". She aimed to "uplift the untouchables" to a status of equality and, through her writing, exposed the "naked brutality" of a system that exploited them. Her work, including novels like

*Aranyer Adhikar*, truthfully portrays the Adivasi struggle for survival and identity, a theme often neglected by mainstream literature.

#### Case Study: The Body as a Site of Resistance in *Draupadi*

Devi's short story *Draupadi* is a powerful exploration of the body as a site of both victimization and profound defiance. Set against the backdrop of the Naxalite movement of the 1970s, a radical communist uprising for peasant rights, the story follows the Santhal tribal revolutionary Dopdi Mejhen. The protagonist's name itself is ironic, as it contrasts with the mythical Draupadi from the Mahabharata, whose honor was divinely protected from disrobing. Dopdi, a subaltern woman, faces a triple layer of marginalization due to her class, caste, and gender, making her a nexus of power dynamics.

The climax of the story is the state's attempt to break Dopdi's spirit through brutal gang rape and torture, a systematic, gendered punishment meant to deter others from joining the resistance. However, Devi subverts this power dynamic in a remarkable act of literary and political defiance. Instead of being broken, Dopdi refuses to cover her naked, wounded body. She confronts her captors with a fearless, unyielding stance, transforming her body from a site of state violence into a powerful symbol of unassailable subaltern resistance. This act challenges the perception of subaltern women as passive victims, portraying them instead as active agents of their own fate. The narrative, as noted by Gayatri Spivak, is

not one of mere protest but of a "profound questioning" of the limits of resistance.

#### Case Study: The Dehumanization of the Body in *Breast-Giver*

In her short story *Breast-Giver*, Devi uses the body as a metaphor to expose the tragic intersection of patriarchy and capitalism. The narrative follows Jashoda, a Brahmin woman who, driven by poverty, takes on the profession of a wet nurse to the wealthy Haldar family. She breastfeeds dozens of children, becoming, in essence, a human dairy cow. Her worth becomes entirely tied to her reproductive and nursing capabilities, which are exploited by both her husband and the Haldar family for their personal gain.

The story demonstrates how a woman can suffer "double oppression," first by a patriarchal society that reduces her to her reproductive function and then by a capitalist system that commodifies her body as a disposable asset. Jashoda's life-giving act of breastfeeding becomes the very source of her exploitation and leads to her tragic death from cancer, after which she is abandoned by the very family she nourished. Her body, once a source of life for others, is valued only for its utility and discarded when that utility expires. This narrative serves as a stark critique of the indifference of the privileged class and the dehumanizing circumstances that helplessness and poverty can create for the marginalized.

### The Enduring Legacy: Devi's Blueprint for Modern Resistance

#### The Post-Independence Predicament: A Hydra-Headed Monster

Devi's work, which chronicled struggles spanning the colonial and post-independence eras, remains profoundly relevant today because the exploitation she documented has persisted under new guises. She argued that the state, once seen as the liberator, had morphed into a "hydra-headed monster". This new form of oppression aligned with corporate interests to dispossess Adivasi communities of their land in the name of "development". The so-called "development" model was, in her view, a cruel process that ravaged land and deprived local inhabitants of their basic means of livelihood for the benefit of a select few. She satirized this "double treachery" of politicians, landlords, and government officials.

#### The Echoes of Devi's Work: Contemporary Adivasi Movements

The themes and strategies of contemporary Adivasi resistance movements are a direct continuation of the struggles Devi documented and participated in. For example, ongoing protests in the Bastar and Hasdeo Arand regions of Chhattisgarh against "illegal land grabs and destructive mining" are a powerful echo of Devi's own fight for land rights in her novel *Aranyer Adhikar* and her activism in Singur and Nandigram. These movements are often led by Adivasi women and youth, mirroring her focus on female protagonists as agents of change. Their central demands—to protect their "Jal, Jungle, Zameen" (Water, Forest, Land)—are an embodiment of the themes she pioneered.

The methods of these modern movements also reflect Devi's integrated practice. To counter misreporting by mainstream



media, protesters have built their own "media ecosystem," creating documentaries with smartphones to raise awareness and amplify their voices. This strategy is a modern application of Devi's own use of journalism as a tool to bypass elite discourse and give a platform to marginalized voices. The adoption of non-violent tactics, such as the "Coal Satyagraha," and their reliance on community-based fundraising and organizing demonstrate a self-sustaining political consciousness that operates independently of elite structures, a key feature of subaltern politics that Devi meticulously chronicled. Her work, therefore, provides not just a historical record but a socio-political blueprint for resistance in the face of what she termed the "double colonization" of tribal communities in independent India.

## 2. Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's legacy is defined by her singular success in synthesizing creative writing, journalism, and activism into a unified and potent force for social change. Her practice offered a powerful, on-the-ground response to the theoretical problem of subaltern representation by creating tangible platforms for marginalized voices to be heard, as exemplified by her editorship of *Bortika* and her advocacy for figures like Chuni Kotal. Through her "unflinching" and "unyielding" narratives, she effectively provided a "history from below" that reclaimed the dignity and agency of the underclass, challenging the elitist historiography of both the colonial and post-independence periods.

Her relentless campaigns, from the removal of chains from a statue of a historical hero to her public advocacy for land rights, were not isolated events but were deeply rooted in the themes of her literary works, demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between her pen and her activism. This integrated approach, in which literature served as both a reflection of and a tool for social struggle, continues to inform and inspire contemporary resistance movements. Her ultimate purpose was to "tear the curtain of darkness" to reveal the brutal realities of exploitation and hold up "a mirror to society". Devi's enduring status as a "conscience of the nation" lies not in having solved the problems she chronicled but in providing the blueprint—and the tools—for the struggle for justice to continue.

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