



❖ A photograph by Kalyan Verma

Camouflage epitomized! This is why they say that this animal sees you at least hundred times before you get to see it even once.

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❖ 'The Adivasi Mahasweta' by Ganesh Devy

Ganesh Devy is a scholar of linguistics and an activist working on issues related to tribal communities of India. What follows below is a text of speech given by him on his 'special friendship' with the author and activist Mahasweta Devi.

DO I know Mahashweta Devi ? Perhaps, I do. Perhaps not. In the early 1980s, I had launched a journal of literary translations and was keen to have a Mahashweta Devi story for it. I wrote to her, and she sent her own translation of 'Death of Jagmohan, the Elephant' and 'Seeds'. The manuscripts looked uninviting: close type in the smallest possible font size on sheets smudged with blue carbon. The stories were great, for their authentic realism and sharpness of political analysis. I knew that she had written about the kind of India that is mine. After they were published, I sent her two money orders of Rs. 50 each as honorarium. She promptly returned the money requesting that it be used as 'donation for whatever work you are doing.' In the years that followed, I never met her at literary gatherings, not even in Calcutta where she lived. Once I was in Calcutta on a literary call. When I asked friends about the whereabouts of 'Bortika', which I thought was the name of a locality, they were quick to point out that Mahashweta did not like academics. I was clueless as to how I could get to see her.

In the mid-90s, I decided to give up academic life and enter the world of the adivasis. The organization founded for this purpose was called 'bhasha' to represent the 'voice of the adivasis'. Since the work was to be in remote adivasi villages, my colleagues felt that we should institute an annual lecture on adivasis in Baroda. We decided to name it after Verrier Elwin. Every time we started short-listing speakers for the Elwin lecture, Mahashweta Devi's name would come up first. But I had no idea how to get such a renowned person to Baroda, or even whether she would be interested to give a lecture. The Jnanapith Award and the Magsaysay Award given to her in 1996-1997 only made things more difficult for me. Nevertheless, I sent her a letter of invitation. She did not respond. In January 1998, I was at the India International Centre in Delhi to meet Chadrashekhkar Kambar. I ran into Dinesh Mishra who offered to introduce me to Mahashweta Devi. We went up to her room and as introduction, he said some kind words about me. She looked at me once and said that she would accept the invitation to Baroda, but gave no date. She then looked up again. I knew that my time with her was up. In February 1998, Professor Amiya Dev invited me to Vidyasagar University, Midanapur for a seminar. I travelled to Bengal, this time with a team of ten adivasi writers and story-tellers. I was unaware till we reached the university that Mahashweta Devi was to speak at the seminar. It was the first time that I heard her. I did not follow all what she said, because she looked disturbed, speaking with pain and anger. We requested Amiya Dev to arrange a meeting with her, but since she was to leave for Calcutta the same evening, we were given only fifteen minutes. I barely managed to introduce my colleagues such as Bhagwandas Patel, the great folk-lorist and the celebrated Marathi writer, Laxman Gaikwad. She did, however, give a definite date for the Elwin lecture in Baroda. The Elwin lecture was to be in March. Mahashweta Devi chose to speak on the 'Denotified Tribes of India'. Our practice was to combine the Elwin lecture with a major seminar. That year we had more than 50 adivasi delegates from all over India for the seminar. I had earlier fixed to take them to an island in the Narmada, some 90 km south of Baroda, the same day Mahashweta was to arrive. Since I could not receive her at the Ahmedabad airport, 115 km north of Baroda, I requested my activist friend, Ajay Dandekar and Tridip Suhrud, friend and former student, to do so and bring her to Baroda. I returned from the island quite late. They reached Baroda even later in the night. I had asked them to dine en route, before dropping her at the guest house where she was to stay. Throughout their journey from Ahmedabad to Baroda, I kept receiving calls from them that Mahashweta seemed upset, that she was refusing to eat. So I suggested they bring her home. My wife was not in Baroda, and neither had I eaten nor did I know if there was food at home. When Ajay and Tridip arrived, they showed clear signs of some strain. I had no idea how to greet her and so I asked, 'Do you have your own teeth?' I do not

think anybody had ever asked her anything so rude. My intention was to figure out if she would be able to chew the few slices of hardened bread that I was planning to offer her with some pickle and onion. On hearing my question she burst out laughing. She laughed so hard that my neighbours, waiting behind the windows to have a glimpse of this celebrity, came out in curiosity. We had an impromptu meeting across the fencing; she spoke to each one of them with great affection. They rushed into their kitchens, cooked and brought daal and rice for her. She ate. We talked. I made endless cups of tea for her. She offered to stay in my simple house. When I apologised for its simplicity, she said, 'This is luxury for me. You should see my house in Calcutta.' I asked her why she had decided to call it Bortika. She laughed again. She said, 'You have no brains, it is not the name of my house, it is the journal that I bring out.' I poured more tea for her. By now, our other colleagues whom I had packed off for the night in the two small rooms upstairs, joined us. She started telling us about herself, beginning with the famous 'non-vegetarian cow', about her father and mother, her childhood, the brief stay in Santiniketan, her very special views on Rabindranath Tagore and Bengal, and how she started work as a roving journalist, bringing to light the conditions of bonded labour and adivasis. She spoke at length about Palamu, about her adventures collecting material on Laxmibai of Jhansi, about how she lost the Jnanapith award cheque given to her by Nelson Mandela. We all knew that she had found our gang of writer-activists a company close to her heart. She told me how, when I went to see her at the IIC, she had thought that I was a zamindar's son because I was wearing a clean shirt. By the time the clock struck four, our friendship was sealed. She was 73, I was 48, the youngest of my colleagues was barely 23. We knew we were all together.

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

The next morning, several of my young students and colleagues came home to meet and listen to her. Some of them brought food, which we shared. In the afternoon, I asked her if she was prepared to trek out to Tejgad, a good 90 km from Baroda. She was more than willing to undertake the journey. That afternoon I took her to show the location of the Adivasi Academy in Tejgad and the 12,000 year old rock painting in the Koraj hill close by. We then trooped off to a stream meeting the Orsang river, and all of us, Mahashweta included, had a dip. She was only 73. She said, 'I have not been here before but I have seen this rock-painting a long time back. I have seen the Pithora painted in Nagin Rathwa's house a long time back. Read my "Pterodactyl".' I recognize this voice. It is beyond time. She added, 'Do you know about the Saora paintings? They no longer have figures in the same form, but the adivasi memory never forgets.' I knew that yet again Mahashweta Devi had found in Tejgad the timeless voice and the indestructible memory that have made the adivasis what they are. This discovery was the beginning of a long journey for both of us. The next day, in Baroda, we formed the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group, the DNT-RAG. The day she left Baroda, I fractured my foot. Even before the plaster was removed, I was with Mahashweta Devi again, this time in Hyderabad, from where we traveled to Warangal. Malayalam novelist, P. Sachidanandan and literary scholar, Jaidev were with us. Mahashweta Devi spoke of her activist life; I about her literary work. We returned to Hyderabad to hold a press conference and address a gathering of activists on the DNT question. We then went to Bombay where, along with Laxman Gaikwad, we met the

deputy chief minister of Maharashtra. He was keen that Mahashweta Devi address the Marathi Literary Conference. She spoke to him about human rights violations in Bombay. I had by now observed that she spared no one, in particular snobs, ministers, insincere journalists and literary aspirants. During that meeting, I was informed that my teacher, the Kannada fiction writer Shantinath Desai had passed away the previous day. I wanted to be with his family. Mahashweta Devi declared that she would brave the overnight road journey 300 km to Kolhapur. We traveled; she remained absorbed watching the red sky, typical of the Western Ghats, through the long hours of sunset. She also told Laxman and me how she had once decided to release an 'army' of young monkeys near Khandala. This was when she lived in Bombay with her husband, who played a prominent role in the IPTA movement and had a brush with the world of Hindi cinema. She talked of the singer Hemanta Kumar Mukherjee with the same ease as she did about Ernest Hemingway and Arthur Miller, about Madhubala as of Sadat Hasan Manto, all her great favourites. Mahashweta, more a woman of film-songs than of the raagas, of laughter than long-faced pontification, is closer to that which reveals than decorates and conceals. And yet she is detached from everything, completely. You cannot please her by praise or by providing her with creature comforts. She is almost not there when one thinks she is very much there.

Soon we found ourselves together in Delhi. This time the National Human Rights Commission had responded to our letter about the DNT issue. The Commission appointed a committee to prepare a report. We visited Delhi on several occasions in order to complete the report. Every trip meant meeting more people, addressing press conferences, campaigning with greater energy. We met the Election Commission, the Census authorities, the home minister, the welfare minister, former prime ministers, MPs, journalists, addressing gathering at press clubs, university hostels, colleges and institutions. In between these trips we were in Maharashtra, making long overnight journeys to places like Ahmednagar, Yavatmal, Latur, Sholapur, Dhulia, Jalgaon and Baramati. At these places we met with the Pardhis, Wadars, Bhamtes, Bairagis and Kaikadis. We went to police stations to lodge complaints of rape, torture and humiliation, often against those whose job it was to protect people. We visited sites of old and fresh atrocities. Mahashweta brought to those poor and harassed people a boundless compassion, which they instantly understood though could they neither speak her language nor she theirs. She has a strange ability to communicate with the silenced, her best speech reserved for those to whom no one has spoken. Between visits to Delhi and travels in Maharashtra, she made frequent trips to Gujarat. Baroda became her second home, Tejgadh her sacred grove for communion with the adivasis. 'In Tejgadh alone,' she said, 'my bones will find rest. Ganesh, you will understand, I am tired, of it all, this praise, this deification. I hate it.' In Gujarat, she was all over, in the villages of Panchamahals with the poet Kanji Patel, at the mournful ex-settlement of the DNTs in Chharanagar, Ahmedabad, in Khedbrahma to meet the singers of the Garasia-Bhil Mahabharata.

When Budhan was killed in police custody in Purulia, Mahashweta Devi had filed a case in the Calcutta High Court. The judgment ordered compensation to Budhan's widow, Shyamali. By the time this judgment was delivered by Justice Ruma Paul, Mahashweta Devi and I had already started our work at Chharanagar. We established a library there, for which she donated the amount received by her as the first Yasmin award. The Chhara boys and girls, whose parents had been branded as thieves by the rest of the world, found in her a great pillar of support and strength. They started calling her 'Amma', mother, as thousands of adivasis in India had done. They composed a play on the life and death of Budhan and performed it before her during the first national convention of the DNTs held in Chharanagar on 31 August 1998. In the play she was depicted as a character who pleads for the dignity and rights of the DNTs in the Calcutta High Court. She cried as she watched the agony of the branded speak through the play. Mahashweta Devi discovered for herself three places of rest in Gujarat: Tejgadh with its timeless memory and the mysterious voice of the adivasis; Chharanagar, with its intricate imagination of Indian criminality and spirituality; and Bhupen Khakhar's house with its 'forensic' approach to sentimentality. Bhupen had long been a friend, and I thought she would take to him gracefully as a friend's

friend. Their first encounter was not pleasant. She scolded him for not engaging in direct social activism. Bhupen with his typical humour, said, 'Ganesh Devy is an activist. I paint.' But soon they were friends, as profound as friendship has ever been. I knew that both belonged to a different league, akin to Gandhi and Tagore. Every time they were together she would sing for him a Suraiya or a Noorjahan number, but mostly 'Moray baal-pan-ke saathi' and Bhupen would sing for her a few Gujarati bhajans. Both sang with a fullness of their selves. She never failed to remind him that art is nothing if not 'forensic'. Bhupen read out his stories such as 'Phoren Soap' and 'Maganbhai's Glue'. They were happy in this togetherness, which both knew meant nothing to them because it was unreal. When Bhupen passed away in 2003, Mahashweta Devi did not cry. She said, 'Among your friends he was the only real one, all others are superficial. He was Bhupen ...'

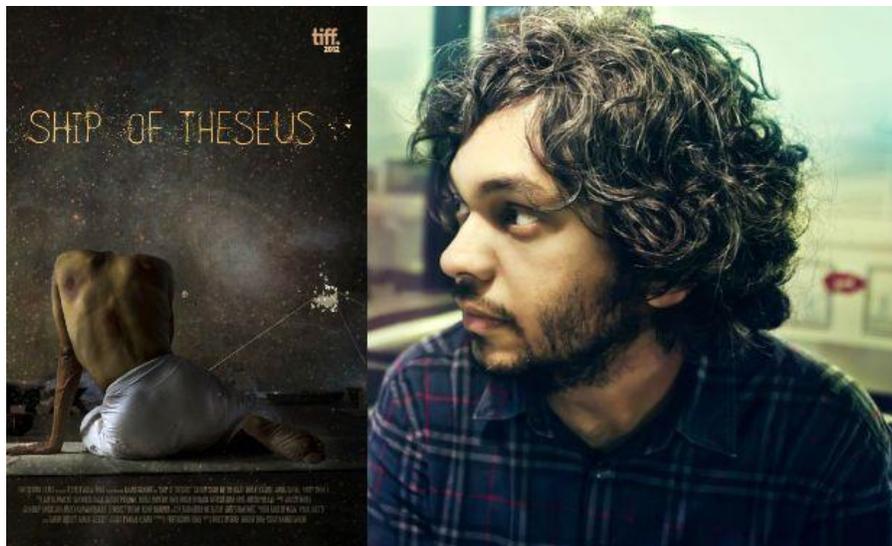
On a Sunday morning in January 2001, we were watching the Ahmedabad news on TV; suddenly we saw the newsreader abandon his desk and run out of the studio. In another couple of seconds, our own house in Baroda started shaking violently. We all ran out of the house shouting, 'It's an earthquake.' The great quake had hit Gujarat. The next day we went through Ahmedabad. Everywhere there were collapsed and collapsing houses. She returned to Calcutta and started writing public appeals for help. For over a month she kept sending relief material. The following year Gujarat was struck by a greater, this time man-made, tragedy. The riots in Gujarat erupted on the last day of February. By March 2, Mahashweta Devi had faxed a letter to the President asking for an inquiry by the CBI. In a week's time she was in Gujarat, when the cities were still under curfew. I will never forget the expression on her face when she spoke to the inmates of the Shah Alam relief camp. A Muslim woman who had seen 18 members of her family, relatives and neighbours killed before her eyes, was talking to Mahashweta Devi. I had to hold her as she fainted in anger and shock. She visited Gujarat twice during March and April 2002, speaking to small gatherings of peace-keepers and writers about the need for understanding, but I noticed that the idea of being in Gujarat no longer appealed to her. Her subsequent visits were mainly to spend a few quiet days with Surekha and me. The days we spend together are very special for all three of us. When together, Mahashweta Devi becomes our mother, friend and child, in turn. She narrates stories that we are unable to read because they have yet to be translated into English. She speaks of her life and times, of experiences that she will be unable to include in the autobiography on which she has been working. She is with us as if she has always been with us, closer than a mother, sister or friend. It is difficult for me to believe that such a relationship can really exist. Yet, I know that she lives on a different plane, that Mahashweta Devi is not accessible to anyone. Halfway through a perfectly normal breakfast, served after her medication, all of a sudden she exclaims, 'Ganesh – land, land is the root cause of it all. Give them land and everything will be "halright". Oh, this wretched "hestablishment".' As I pour another cup of black tea for her, I ask, 'Do you remember our visit to the ex-minister's farmhouse?' She then tells Surekha how she saw women's undergarments of various fashion in the toilet of the 'hhhonourable ex-minister' when she was taken there by mistake by his attendants, and how 'mightily he frowned.' But even before we had finished laughing, she remarks in utmost pain, 'This woman's body is a curse!' Then she turns to me and remarks, 'You will not know, because you are not political.' The very next moment she is focusing on her cup of tea. I have often wondered about the source of her strength, the literary influences that have shaped her powerful style of writing, the political philosophies that have gone into the making of her ideology. She confesses to having no influences, except that she mentions her uncle, the film-maker Ritwik Ghatak, with a great sense of pride. I am often amazed how someone like her, slated to be a middle-class housewife, has managed to transcend so many prisons to become what she is. What is the source of her remarkable memory, the frightening economy of her words, that great simplicity which having distributed life between the necessary and the unnecessary, shuns all that is unnecessary? Is she an adivasi taken to literature, or a writer drawn to the adivasis? Do I know Mahashweta Devi? Perhaps, perhaps not.

❖ “ I have great empathy for anyone who takes shot at meaning”

Anand Gandhi interview by Madhu Trehan

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSgvVp-WyM8>

Anand Gandhi has been in news due to the critical acclaim received by his first movie, ‘The Ship of Theseus’. In this interview, we get a chance to meet this deeply thoughtful filmmaker reflecting about his journey, significant influences (such as evolutionary theory) and the movie. This is undoubtedly a unique voice – makes one very curious and hopeful about the work that this man is going to produce in times to come.



About ‘Treasures’

It's a compilation that I put together every once in a while, of things that I have found to be beautiful and meaningful.

Do share it with others who you think will enjoy it.

Drop me an email at shaileshd.email@gmail.com if you want to add someone to the circulation list.

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