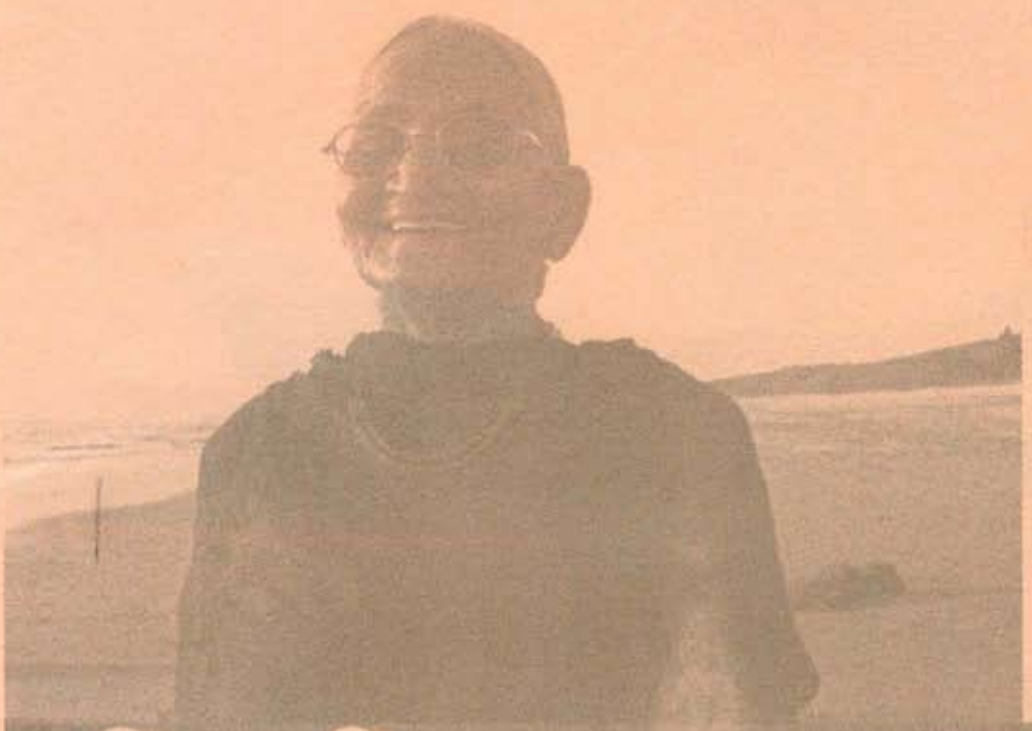
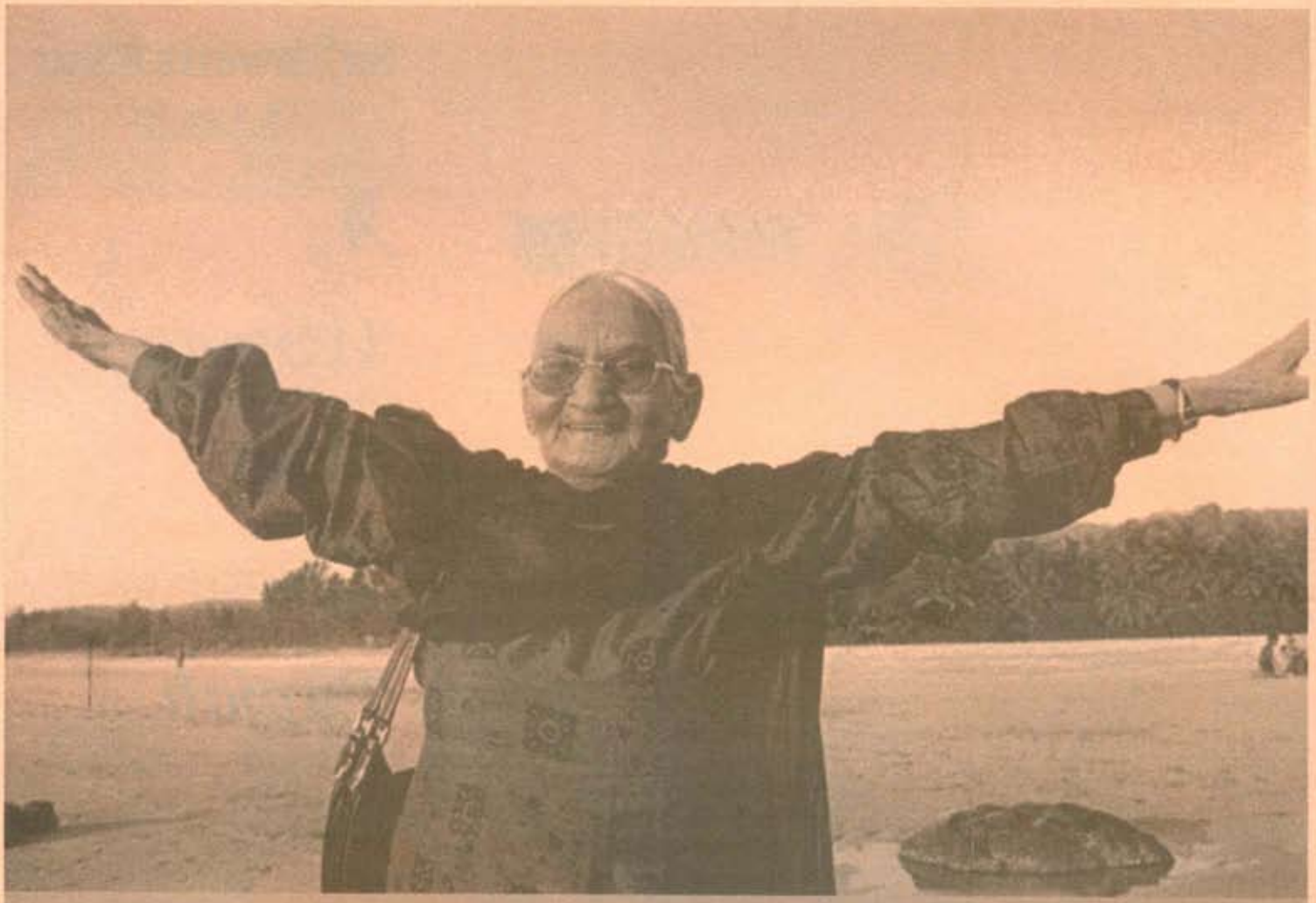


Sukhwant Kaur Mann

A Woman Who Wrote Punjab

Mahasweta Devi

A Woman Who Fought For The Right To Dream



Striking the Titanic Pose: Sukhwant Kaur Mann (1933-June 14, 2016)

In 2006 SPARROW held a writers' meet and among the writers invited was Sukhwant Kaur Mann. We had asked all the writers to send their photographs and Sukhwant Kaur sent us the photograph of a young beautiful girl. When we met her we realised she was a senior Punjabi writer who was 72. We asked her why she had sent her young photograph and she quipped, "I thought maybe you invite only young people!" We had a good laugh and we got to know her well. She is considered a writer who has artistically documented the changes affecting the economic, social and personal relations in Punjab during the post Green Revolution period. She is also among the few Punjabi writers who have delineated minutely the causes and effects of mechanisation and urbanisation on rural life. Capturing the tumult in relationships caused by the crumbling of a feudal structure and seeping in of corruption and politics in all walks of life is the hallmark of her latest writings. Contrary to the known image of a green, bubbly and well-fed Punjab, one finds in her writings a Punjab that is pale, exhausted, suicidal, drugged and frustrated.

She was full of fun and laughter at the camp and when we took a photograph of hers she struck the Titanic pose! All of us went to a Hanuman temple nearby and Sukhwant said, "He is related to me. I am Sukhwant Kaur Mann and he is Hanu-Man." Simrat Gagan, a younger writer teased her saying, "Yes, he must be related to you. He was asked to bring just a root of a herb and he brought an entire mountain!" Sukhwant Kaur burst out laughing. Women like Sukhwant Kaur Mann have made women's history meaningful not just with their books but with the kind of life they have lived.

Sukhwant Kaur Mann

Sukhwant Kaur Mann in dialogue with Sidhu Damdami, Mohali, Punjab, September 15, 2005.

(Excerpts taken from the book
If the Roof Leaks, Let it Leak ...
Poems and Stories of Women in Hindi, Punjabi, Sindhi, Maithili, Santhali and Dogri
Edited by Menka Shivdasani
Published by SPARROW in 2014)

First Story and Other Stories of People Around

Sidhu Damdami [SD]: I see on your book, it's dedicated to the feel you had while writing your first story. What 'feel' was that? Let's start from here.

Sukhwant Kaur Mann [SK]: As you know, it gave me a great sense of elation that I have achieved a feat by writing the first story. But that was just ordinary, an emotional kind.

SD: Which story was that?

SK: Well—it was... It was about woman... her plight. Actually I had experienced my father's behaviour. He would keep fighting the whole day on very flimsy pretexts. I pitied my mother. She was a very nice woman. Even Father was not that bad. But my mother... the whole village said—she is so nice, second to none. Quarrelling became a daily affair in our family. There were so many things in the background that I can't tell you here. One writes these things while writing an autobiography.

SD: What was your age at the time of writing your first story?
SK: I was twenty-nine when I wrote my first story *Maan* (Honour). I started writing very late.

SD: So you had started your college education.
SK: I used to read all the magazines including *Nagmani, Arsi.* Actually, I started it with Urdu magazines *Beeswin Sadi* and *Shama.* These are still in publication. They carried short stories *(afsanas)* and *ghazals.* But I didn't have much inclination towards ghazals. In the beginning I used to speak a lot of Urdu and used Urdu words even in my prose. The teachers would strike them off and annoy me. *Beeswin Sadi* was a magazine of only stories. I was only thirteen years of age. My grandfather was worried lest I read these magazines. He used to hide them. We had come devastated from Pakistan and very shabby houses had been allotted to us. He would hide those magazines in the *bharoli* (a clay-made corn bin) lying in the attic above. I would go, pick them up from there (laughter) and read them. I liked the *afsanas* very much. Thus I became inclined towards *afsanas.* I was impressed most of all by Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chandra and Manto. They were the best Urdu writers. Rajinder Singh Bedi later wrote prolifically in Punjabi also.

SD: You mean there was already a literary environment in your family.
SK: My grandfather was otherwise a truant from school. (Laughter) This, too, is a long story. Grandpa's father, that is, my great-grandfather, was a magistrate, an honorary magistrate. These magistrates were appointed by the British. The villagers used to sit by his bedside. This... Joginder Singh Mann (former Congress minister)—he once sat at the feet of my great-grandfather. My grandmother used to tell me that my grandfather Sultan Singh had two brothers, Suchet Singh and Raghubir Singh. Raghubir Singh had become a disciple of Ram Singh—the great Namdhari revolutionary. He would serve him all day long in the langar (community kitchen) by calling his men to the village. We had huge landed property. My great-grandfather said to my grandfather that he would let him become Tehsildar if he passed eight classes. He got my grandfather admitted to a school in Gujjranwala. But he reached home before my great-grandfather did! My grandfather was very fond of reading. He knew Urdu and Persian well but I don't know whether he knew English or not. He had kept the books in the backyard in a bamboo tub. They were eaten by termites. My grandmother burnt them as refuse when my grandfather laid them out in the sun. Grandfather, coming from outside, flared up at this and there ensued a noisy fight. (Laughter) I still remember it, though faintly.

SD: When you wrote your first story, did you get it published or keep it as such with you?
SK: No, the very first one was published. In *Arsi.*

SD: That one entitled *Maan*?
SK: No, it was *Gharwali* (Wife). Now I remember its name.

SD: Which edition of *Arsi* was that? Any idea?
SK: It was the January 1965 edition. Bhapa Pritam Singh kept it for five months with him. My brother went to Delhi. I asked him to meet Bhapa Pritam Singh there. He went to him. Bhapaji corrected some mistakes here and there in my script and said it would be published. And it was published after five months.

SD: What was the reaction over the first publication? Any furore...?
SK: No, no reaction at all. I didn't ask anybody to read it. Only one or two persons read it in the village. There was one Balbir Singh Mann, a well-educated man. He was a law graduate also and a man of philosophic bent of mind at that. There was a good inflow of books in his house. It so happened that I was coming from Ludhiana. I had got late. The girls were expected to be at home well in time. I was coming alone. He too had to go to the village. He was in a drunken mood as well. He was not my immediate uncle; he was part of our family tree. I've mentioned it at

several places earlier also. Scared of the drunkard uncle I sat huddled in the back seat. We had to go to Talanian from Sirhind. 'Is this a time for girls to come home?' he admonished me, saying, 'I've read your story. This is no story at all... just emotional overflow. Life is not like that.' He was the first man who gave an opinion on my story. 'This man is not so straight but the remarks he has given are quite straightforward,' I thought.

SD: Any other reaction... I mean literary reaction?
SK: Gurmel Madahar had written to me. He was my senior in writing. 'Why is there repetition of one word in the story? It disturbs [me] like a worn-out gramophone disc. The needle is stuck in it time and again. And the repetition mars the whole pace,' he said. No one else said anything. (Laughter)

SD: The journey thereafter?
SK: Then I came on track and never looked back. I am, after all, from the farming community. Actually my Chacha went to Lahore for studies and the whole responsibility fell on my father. My grandfather was a carefree bird. He would never stay at one place. Today he would go to Simla and tomorrow, Kashmir. Staying at home was not his wont at all. He remained a licentious vagabond throughout his life. (Laughter) Reading newspapers and magazines was a passion with him. We used to have a daily supply of a newspaper in our house. It was an Urdu newspaper. I also used to read it. The newspaper was the daily bone of contention in the house. I insisted on reading it first. Father claimed his right to read it first of all. However, the situation was a little short of tearing the poor thing to shreds. The publication of my maiden writing in *Arsi* was of great encouragement to me. I could never ever dream of getting a space in *Arsi*. I did not even know whether to write on one or both sides of the paper. So far, I had never come in contact with any male or female writer. As regards Sekhon Sahib, we were very afraid of him. He seemed very great to us. But later I realised that there is nothing great worth the name about anybody. (Laughter) Then we witnessed many aspects of his personality.

SD: Sekhon Sahib's chapter too must be opened.
SK: I'll tell you that also. My sister was also a student there. Sekhon Sahib was a very colourful personality... a very transparent one. There was one S Kaur. Very beautiful. Just like the Muslim women—tall in stature. She wore sleeveless shirts. She was a lecturer in Social Studies. She had been appointed by him. Beeji, my bhua, who had set up this college, had brought Sekhon Sahib here to Fatehgarh College. Bhuaji was a feminist. 'We shall keep her here, irrespective of the clothes she wears.' She was well-built. There used to be two attics in Bassi Pathana where S Kaur lived. Sekhon Sahib used to go and keep sitting with her. (Laughter) Sujan Singh had also joined him. He was a thorough gentleman. He had a big family to support. His youngest daughter Surinder—I've met her just yesterday—is a good friend of mine. Sekhon's daughter Lali was also my sister's classmate.

SD: Then Sekhon Sahib...
SK: That chapter was then closed like this... You know the village folks... the committee members started speaking ill of him. 'Keeps sitting with her. What type of man indeed! And we call him *likhari* (writer). Are writers like this? What message will he deliver to others?' and so on, But he cared a fig for all this. (Laughter) He was an MA in English literature. He bothered little about them. The management committee people unanimously decided to fire S Kaur. Sekhon Sahib said he wouldn't let her be sacked. Beeji also said she was not in favour of sacking her. But then she herself left the college. Sekhon Sahib too did not stay long after her and left in disgust.

SD: Did this episode appear in any of your stories?
SK: No.

SD: Have you yet to write a story on it?
SK: No, it can come in my autobiography, not necessarily in a story....

Family Stories and Her Stories

SD: The subjects of your stories thereafter...
SK: It was interrupted earlier... My father was a typical spoilt feudalist. He owned fifteen *murabbas* of land. My father owned the whole responsibility. We had our land at three places. At one place, he himself cultivated and the other two chunks were cultivated on contractual basis. Then my chachas took over farming. My father ploughed the fields himself. Eight ploughs moved in our fields. My father's plough led them. He would get up at four in the morning. Only then would the servants get up. We had servants, not *mujaras*... My father was adept at the whole agricultural work. He was a very good farmer. Thus I learned the problems of farming.

SD: Why did you have farming problems?
SK: Our migration from Pakistan had impoverished us... We couldn't afford even a Petter engine. We had come here after leaving behind wells and palatial mansions. Wells were in vogue then or canals were used as irrigation sources for our land holdings in the wasteland area of Pakistan. There used to be a very rich crop there. I remember having borrowed some money from Bhuaji. Although her husband had been murdered, it was a well-off family.

SD: Where were they living?
SK: My bhuaji lived at Kare Katai near Lahore. The whole village belonged to them. But my fuffar (Bhua's husband) was of different stuff. Their sub-caste was Waraich. People advised them to quit. The Mussalmans loved them greatly.

Fuffar would finance the marriages of their daughters, give generously to charity but his only drawback was that he drank a lot. He was drinking sitting on his well when Bhuaji sent a message that Pakistan had come into existence.

His young daughter-in-law was very beautiful. Bhuaji said that they should quit considering the prevailing situation. They had to cross [the river] Ravi. But my fuffarji took a stand that he would not leave this place. 'We have our land holdings here. We belong to this place and have been here since centuries. How can it be possible? Have you ever seen banyan trees walking? We are the banyans of this place.' He was very right from his point of view. Then he was convinced within himself that he would not be spared. He said that no ordinary ruffian but some prominent man should kill him. Then, they say, he was shot dead by the police inspector from Lahore. After recitation of Japji Sahib, he washed his hair and stood up on the well, ready for his sacrifice on the altar of his native soil. The village people were nonplussed to see that the Sardar was being killed. He was not drunk at that time. They could not digest it, as there were no riots in the village.

SD: Was there no commotion from the villagers' side?
SK: No, but they wept bitterly, wailing, 'Our chacha has gone'.

SD: Then the Police Inspector...
SK: He shot Fuffarji dead. He collapsed within no time. I don't know what happened then, whether the Mussalmans made any tomb in his name or not.

SD: Have you mentioned this incident in any story?
SK: Yes, a little bit—that my fuffar and Mama had stayed behind in Pakistan.

SD: A similar memory is there in your short story *Daud* (Race) as well.
SK: *Daud* is a bit different. It was the time when the war of 1965 had begun. That story was, in fact, a figment of my own imagination. We had seen a race during our childhood—the one relating to migration from Pakistan. That *daud* (race) has been depicted in the story, nothing more than that. People refused to recognise their parents; mothers disowned their sons. And she was a mother, after all, the poor old sick woman.

SD: You wrote the first short story just casually. When did you start understanding the art of story writing?
SK: As I've told you earlier, I used to read Rajinder Singh Bedi and Manto. I was not as much under the influence of Manto as that of Bedi and Krishan Chander.

SD: Whose style did you try to emulate?
SK: Qurratulain Hyder has written very beautiful stories. I read her *Aag Ka Darya*. Later it was also translated into Punjabi. I liked her style.
SD: Then how did you evolve the identity of your own style?
SK: I saw that women generally write about women. I deviated from this trend. I started to use the surroundings as subjects. I depicted my milieu, my village and their problems. Thus, I began a trend of my own. I could not even decide whether I should imitate Amrita or Ajit Kaur. Ajit Kaur is an urbanite. She had enough liberty in her atmosphere, while [Dalip Kaur] Tiwana wrote a bit sparingly. They wrote a lot on feminist issues. Dalip wrote four to five small-sized novels and then appeared *Eho Hamara Jeewana*. (This is Our Life) It triggered a lot of discussion. It was then that she got married. It was her second marriage. The first one, you know, had already failed. It was a mismatching. The girl was very nice and noble. No doubt I too had liked that novel.

SD: You liked *Eho Hamara Jeewana or Teeli Da Nishan*? Both are different. *Teeli Da Nishan* (The Mark of the Matchstick) is the story of a modern girl.
SK: But that way *Peele Patteyan Di Dastan* (Story of Yellow Leaves) is also modern—altogether different. *Eho Hamara Jeewana* was quite typical. Then she shifted the trend as she lived in the city. As she learned about urban life, she wrote *Peele Patteyan Di Dastan* which also I liked. Then I read her other novels also, but they didn't impress me. I have read all the five novels published recently. All these—getting the Saraswati Award, for instance—are ok. But I will say one thing—Tiwana knows how to write....

Journey from Gharwali to Jazirey

SD: Generally if the story writer is a woman, the narrator is also a woman and similarly there is a male narrator in the stories of male writers. But your narrator doesn't have any gender. Is it at some conscious level?
SK: No, it's quite natural and there is nothing at a conscious level. Writing is not a deliberate attempt for me. When I wrote most of the stories I was not mature enough and was raw. (Laughter) I couldn't understand how people liked them. I received bundles of letters. At that time letter writing was quite in vogue. I still do have them in plenty. There was no phone or e-mail service during those days. My postman was a Brahmin. He was a very nice old man. Walking in the heat his face used to look red. 'Bibi, I've a letter for you...' he would say. If someone sent me fifteen rupees by money order, I would pay him eight annas or one rupee. He would bring my magazines for me. At that time only Sukhwant Kaur Mann might have been receiving so much mail in village Talania. There erupted one more problem.

Another Sukhwant Kaur Mann appeared on the scene. Actually she was not Mann. She had suffixed her husband's surname to her name. By chance her letter came to me.

Since most of the letters by this name belonged only to me, the postman delivered it to me by mistake. I opened it and sealed it again. I had no interest in it. I sent that letter to her through my grandmother. She (another Mann) raised a hue and cry as to why her letter was opened. She thought she was the only Sukhwant Kaur Mann. Now she is not on speaking terms with me!

SD: Some other Mann from Talania was also in [government] service.
SK: She is Satinder Kaur Mann. You may consider her as my sister as well as a friend.

SD: Let's talk about the narrator again.
SK: Not on a conscious level. I had not given an undertaking that I would not write a story about a woman. I've written some stories regarding women also. But it so happened that our uprooting from Pakistan impoverished us. It pained me to think that we have been robbed of everything. I was not that small and was a student of Fifth or Sixth Standard at that time. But now, in spite of big land holdings, we lived at a hand-to mouth level. The Partition had devastated us. My parents worked very hard but my mother didn't want the girls to work. She was advanced enough to know that the daughters must be educated. I started writing about the economy of women also. I felt that socialism was the solution to all problems. It was my juvenile fancy. I didn't know that I've been under many delusions in life. I've experienced a number of fallacies in life. (Laughter) My bhuaji, who had set up the college, was qualified in Gyani and Parbhakar but she was blind. She was a spinster and very beautiful. She set up Kirti College Nial, also near Patiala. I've been there after the formation of Pakistan. Teja Singh Sutantar used to come and hide himself in her Ashram. America considered him the thirteenth most dreadful man in the world. My bhuaji Gurbachan Kaur Mann would hide him in the old small houses of the Musalmans. What she did was to arrange a Paath before the cell, so that nobody passed by that side. This was kept a secret even from us. We felt that economic prosperity is everything in life. She did not realise that economic prosperity alone was not enough. Later I also read Marx. His books were very voluminous and beyond my comprehension.

SD: Which book did you find difficult?
SK: His most famous book *Das Kapital* seemed very difficult to me. I could understand nothing of it. (Laughter) I don't know how many pages I read and how many I skipped. It was in very difficult language, the language of economics; actually it dealt with the urban labourers and industrialists and not the peasantry. So, I couldn't grasp it. I was not an urbanite. And there was no factory, no big industry in our Punjab. I had an agriculturist background. Then I left that book mid-way. Here started my retreat.

SD: Can it be said that at this stage your external journey ended, giving way to the internal one?
SK: No, my external journey has persisted for long. *Addeya Hoya Hatth (A Hand Stretched Out)* is a story about our servant. I wrote this story when Gurdial Singh had written *Marhi Da Deewa* (Lamp for the Dead). Both the writings have similar subjects. Had I expanded this story, it would have become *Marhi Da Deewa*. He wove this story around his farm-labourer while in my case it was our servant. Since we were a bit progressive, we kept servants, not *siris*.

A servant can be exploited more, we knew. Then why allow him any share in the farm produce? But we cared a lot for the servant. Mother would make him sit near her, give him two *praunthas* with yoghurt followed by tea. I mean to say that servants were fed well in our house. There was no feeling of untouchability with them. Even otherwise our servant was a carpenter by caste. So there was no question of untouchability. He would sit near us. He remained with us and died here. When he grew old my brother dismissed him. Then machinery came, tractors came. It had made the worker redundant and paved the way to his expulsion. My father would say, 'A Jat must have four sons.' Brother would jokingly say, 'Bhaiyaji, you bring eight-ten ploughs and you have ten sons. What's the use of so many sons?' They just kept quarreling with each other. My grandmother was very sensible. She said, 'Only one son is enough. Daughters may be three or four.' My grandmother was very happy at my birth. However, I was the third child. The elder brother had expired. The one younger to him is leading a very comfortable life in Solan. My grandmother said, 'Thank god, it's a daughter. She will not claim a share of the land at least.' Otherwise she loved me very much. *Jadon Raat Paigayi* (When It Became Night) is a story that has a neglected old woman character. She has granddaughters and grandsons but nobody takes care of her. Nobody has any time to spare for her. The special number of *Aks* on short story writers carried my short story *Vapsi Ton Pehlan* (Before the Return) in the number one issue. It shows how the farmers cannot foot even small bills, buy diesel... The urban son demands his share. It depicts a family conflict. *Gharzan Maare* (The Needy) is about a woman who is a water carrier. She remains busy the whole day to please her master. The master also addressed her as *penchni*. (Laughter) I thought how hapless they are for a pittance, a little vegetable and a handful of grain.

SD: You took up mostly rural women living on the margin.
SK: Since they came to our house they had a stronger influence on my stories. Being the daughters of feudal families, we were not allowed to go outdoors. You will get to know the world around only if you move about. The other girls played outside and even swam in the canal distributory... what we call *rajwaha*. We couldn't learn the art of wimming. How could we when we were not allowed to go outside? I was confined to that microcosm.

Education broke the shackles to some extent. Then the college was set up. We remained with Bhuaji. That's how the barrier was broken and that's why I brought home *Das Kapital*. My brothers had not even heard of this book.

SD: Any leftist from your family?
SK: None. They rather ridiculed me. The least educated brother dubbed it as nothing but trash. He was right. The leftists couldn't form any basis in the peasantry. Could Naxalites achieve anything? Just recently some writers had come to the university from Pakistan. One of them started talking of the Naxalite Movement. I refuted him saying there is no base for the hardliners in Punjab.

SD: Do you think the leftists could not have their roots in Punjab because of an utter lack of industry here?
SK: Yes, exactly. There is no big industry. The rural workers could not organise themselves. Then industrial and farm labour came from other States. Punjab's economy is based on them now.

SD: Has this analysis appeared in your short stories?
SK: Yes, I have written a story *Theeha* now. *Theeha* means contraption; we from Doaba belt call it *theeha*. The story goes like this: One boy from the family becomes educated. He comes in contact with a teacher who exhorts him to enter the Naxalite Movement. The father also says with full force and self-respect, that he is the son of Rooda Mazhabi. The father is very bold. He has severed all connections with the farmers. The boy becomes Tehsildar after his education is over. Jobs were not so alarming a problem at that time. The father has a tea stall. His son sends his orderly to ask his father to wind up his *theeha*. The boy says, 'I feel small now. You take whatever expenses you like.' But the father refuses to wind up his tea stall. The boy says, 'I am getting a very big *kothi* built at Patiala. Please come and oversee the construction.' The father says, 'Why, am I your servant?' Then the son says that he should not do anything but simply come. The father says, 'I am not a guard.' (Laughter) He was a man of self respect. Then the Tehsildar son destroys the occupational base of his father—his father's tea stall—and gets him also beaten up. The son develops a friendship with the Sardar's (landlord's) son. The friendship is such that he refuses to recognise his own people. The Sardarni says the marriage [of her son] must be solemnised in the village as there is a record of who gave how much as *shagun* amount. It is a social give and take tradition. The Tehsildar also comes in his limo type car. Without going to his house, he goes straight to the Sardar's house. But an unpleasant situation arises when the grandmother brings out the *shagun* record note-book. His (the Tehsildar's) name figures nowhere in it. When his wife gave two thousand five hundred rupees as *shagun*, the old woman said there was not a word in the notebook that any *shagun* was due against the Tehsildar and his family. So she refused to accept the *shagun*. The disappointed boy goes back to his house, keeps drinking and weeping.

SD: How did the novels follow the short stories?
SK: I have hardly written novels. There is only one small novel *Jazirey* (Islands). Don't know how I could write it. I myself am surprised.

SD: What do you think about your long stories?
SK: I have three long stories: *Khora*,(Erosion) *Woh Nahin Aungay* (She Will Not Come) *and Haveli*. (Mansion) I have got them published now from Lokgeet Prakashan. *Woh Nahin Aungay* is the story of a grandmother. She goes to the city but she cannot live there. *Khora* talks of how the old workers of the village, whom nobody employs now, are facing the erosion (*khora*) of their importance. In the end, the man, a water carrier, kills himself by jumping into the well. He used to draw water from the well. In *Jazirey*, a despondent man and woman meet. It sums up its message as: everybody is an island unto himself in life. We live together but are alienated from within.

SD: What do you feel about your journey from *Gharwali* to *Jazirey*?
SK: First, I shied away from publishing this novel *Jazirey* when it was written. Nobody who read it encouraged me. There was one Harsaran Singh—the playwright. He had a small publishing house. He lived here in Phase-II. One night he came and said, 'Give me your stories'. He almost snatched them from me. I didn't like to give them as he was a new publisher. He was all praise for the novel. Rather he was the first man who said it was a good novel. No one else said anything....

Looking Back, Looking Forward

SD: What do you think at this point?
SK: As you stand above and the things are beneath you don't bother at all. You can look into your misdeeds and feats with the same insight.

SD: How does it feel having a retrospective glance?
SK: The daughters of Jats of Sardars who come to settle at their parents' house—there is no love for them in the family. They force their way into their hearts. Sometimes, they pick up a quarrel with their bhabhis. That's a different thing. Very bad indeed. I never had any confrontation with my bhabhis. Actually, I never said anything to them, never wrote a word against them. Sister became a widow at a very young age of twenty-five. She has two children—a boy and a daughter. Had she married again, some greedy person would have married her with an eye on the landed property. It's natural. A second marriage is generally like this. There is only a one percent chance of a happy marriage by the grace of god. And the educated person has his own way of thinking. He or she feels, 'There is no match for me.'

(Laughter) There is no concept of 'true match' among Jats. You become so mature intrinsically that there seems to be no match that may come up to the mark. My brother says that I was about to be married for the second time.

SD: What was your age at that time?
SK: I was thirty. My husband [who had passed away] belonged to Chandigarh. It was long back. These lower sectors, even Mohali, did not exist at that time. He turned out to be a great drunkard. So he died at the age of forty due to his great love for liquor. I feel I am saved by not marrying again....

SD: Why do women feel afraid of writing?
SK: It's natural. There were so many restrictions in our times like not going outdoors without a covered head, not braiding hair in two plaits, not moving out of the house. Only a very strong, spirited woman could transgress these barriers. Thank god, we could do that. We should be given a pat on our back for this boldness.

SD: Has some writer inspired you in life?
SK: A writer need not necessarily inspire you. You have a number of other sources of inspiration. From writers we take only the basic aspects. We had our foundation from Amrita and then kept progressing. Ajit Kaur opened a very big window to let the fresh air come in. She has taken the right stand. Tiwana's tone is a subdued one. The Sardars of this side are more suppressed. Our women were more advanced. My mother had removed the veil from her face. Ours was an educated family. We wore clothes washed with soap. And here the people (of East Punjab) didn't wash their clothes with soap. We taught them this. There was a lot of difference in our food habits also. However, we gave them much and adopted much from them as well.

SD: Was Punjabi writing dominated by a particular region?
SK: Yes, it was Majha earlier. Nanak Singh from Majha, Bhai Vir Singh from Majha, Preetlari also from Majha. It was said that the language of Majha is the standard language and that all should use it. But no, things have changed now....

SD: Anything else that you may like to say?
SK: It's very strange. Someone says he writes after a cup of tea. Some other says he writes after a smoke. Still another says he writes at such and such time after a morning walk. Thus everybody has his own mode [of writing]. But I sit down to write whenever I feel like. Sometimes there is a gap of several days when I don't write at all. And sometimes it so happens that the teapot burns itself black on the stove while I am busy in my writing.

SD: Your stories are very emotional. Do you yourself pass through that stage?
SK: Stories can't be written unless you are fully involved in them. If you yourself are not emotional, what will come out of it? You mentioned my story *Chooha* (The Rat). It was written in a single sitting, with a pure mind with no intention of titillation of any kind. The story was written to my satisfaction. Gurbachan Bhullar wrote to me asking from where I had got this story. He said, 'I am ready to exchange all of my stories for only this single story.' (Laughter) When my book was published, Mohan Bhandari used to ring me up daily. Our girls had come to stay with us. I asked them to pick up the phone. They said, 'Bhuaji, he's harping on *Chooha* and *Keedian* (Worms). We don't understand anything.' He rang up in a drunken state. I understood at once what was going inside his mind. We were mature enough not to be taken in by such calls. Now it's *makadian* (spiders)!

SD: Why did you entitle your story as *Makadi* (Spider)?
SK: Because the spider lives in a web. She keeps weaving a web around herself and waits for its victim there itself. Now, I have written the latest story *Tinkane* (Twinkling).

SD: Anything else?
SK: Once I chanced to meet Ram Sarup Ankhi at a publication house. He said, 'Sukhwant Kaur Mann?' 'Yes,' I said. 'You keep writing, sitting within your own four walls.' 'I am not living in an underground cell. However Warris Shah had written *Heer* in an underground cell,' I said. He said he would interview me. But nobody turned up. (Laughter) A full year has passed after that.

SD: Any dream about Punjabi?
SK: Why can't we write like *God of Small Things* in Punjabi? Of course, we can. Those who can write good short stories can write a good novel also. I very much aspired to write an epic. Maybe I will write one now. Punjabi literature lacks it badly. So whosoever writes it will lead; the race is on. Punjabis have never found the time away from their fights to write literature. This is also one of the reasons. Punjabis have earned a great name in Gidha and Bhangra and music. I never visit such programmes. I know these can be seen on television. I am fond of cricket matches. I went to see the cricket match here in the cricket stadium. The match was held between Pakistan and some other country. The boys were hooting at a Pakistani player. I stood up and said, 'Keep silent.' 'Are you from Pakistan?' they said. 'Yes,' I said. (Laughter) I didn't tell a lie as I have come from Pakistan. Then they did not hoot again. They thought I was the mother of some Pakistani player....

(Translated from Punjabi by Sidhu Damdami)

The Right to Dream: Mahasweta Devi
(January 14, 1926-July 28, 2016)

Everyone knows the facts about her life. That she worked for the rights of tribals of West Bengal, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh. That she is remembered for her *Draupati* , *Stanadhayini*, *Hajar Chaurashir Maa*, *Rudali* and *Aranyer Adhikar*. That many literary awards came her way like the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Jnanpith Award. Ramon Magsaysay Award Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan—the most distinguished awards were given to her. SPARROW has made a long film on her life and her work. But it is what she spoke in her Jaipur Literary Festival address in 2013 that keeps resounding in one's ears. She concluded her address with these words:

"...I've been thinking about this for a long time. The only way to counter globalisation, just a plot of land in some central place, keep it covered in grass, let there be a single tree, even a wild tree. Let your son's tricycle lie there. Let some poor child come and play, let a bird come and use the tree. Small things. Small dreams. After all, you have your own small dreams, don't you?

I claim elsewhere to have always written about the 'culture of the downtrodden'. How tall or short or true or false is this claim? The more I think and write and think some more, the harder it gets to arrive at a definition. I hesitate. I falter. I cling to the belief that for any culture as old and ancient as ours to have survived over time and in time there could only be one basic common and acceptable core thought: humaneness. To accept each other's right to be human with dignity.

People do not have eyes to see. All my life I have been seeing small people and their small dreams. I feel as if they wanted to lock up all the dreams, but somehow some dreams have escaped. A jailbreak of dreams....As I have been saying for years, repeatedly, the right to dream should be the first fundamental right. The right to dream. This then is my fight. My dream. In my life and in my literature."

How can one say 'Rest in Peace' to such a person? She would want to know where and how. And she would tell us not to rest either and continue to dream.

Mahasweta Devi

1.0

Excerpts from Anjum Katyal's dialogue with Mahasweta Devi at her residence in Kolkata on 23rd March , 2014 as a part of SPARROW Global Feminisms project

On her Childhood, Family and Shantiniketan Days

Anjum Katyal [AK]: The earlier childhood up to the age of ten, there was a point in which you were saying that the house that you remember most clearly was Medinipur and it was right on the edge of the forest and the tribal settlements were there. So was that then your first introduction to a culture that was different from yours, the tribals?

Mahasweta Devi[MD]: Yes. You might. Yes, you might link those days with my later interest but later interest was you know — then I jumped fully into it. At that time, what we found you know, that the Santhals, generally people were not very friendly to them. Santhals are not de-notified tribes. Actually they are more sophisticated and very advanced — all the tribals are. Somehow, they would have to... police would slap cases on them and then they would have to go and report at the police station every evening. It was very difficult for them. And they worked on day-wage in the government quarters this house, that house. That also police insisted. If they worked there, they could keep better watch over them. Then my father asked them — two boys — father would ask them and they said, "We have to do it." Father went to the police station and said, "They work at my house. I refuse to allow them to come to the police station to report. Whatever report you want, you can take it from me. Come to my office and I will give it to you. And those boys will go home. Their home is quite faraway in the jungles. So they were, you know, very close to us. And there was a boy. They would... he would clear some leaves and make whistle-like things and all of us very lustily would blow at it. They always encouraged me, patting my back. Yes *"Hobe"* you will be able to do it. Medinipur was just fantastic. From childhood, father purchased a cycle for me so I would cycle anywhere. One day, cycling, cycling, in the meadow behind our house, there was a quite big — you know... what shall we call it. We call in Bengali *pukoor.*

AK: Pond.

MD: There was quite a big pond and it was far away so people would not come there generally. With the cycle, I fell into it and somehow I knew swimming so I came up ... But mother said yes, she loves cycling, she fell and she knows swimming, she came. She was never perturbed by anything, always encouraged.

AK: So you think that as a child you had as much freedom as a boy in the family would have had?

MD: Yes, yes, fully.

AK: Physically to run and play outdoors.

MD: Yes, yes, If a cycle was purchased for my brother, who was younger than me, one had to be purchased for me as well because father himself would do it, "She loves cycling, she enjoys it, let her do it." Things like that, which is very good. In the family also we have seen great grandmothers and grandmothers. My grandmother, maternal grandmother, she had her own library. And what is remarkable, they were in Dhaka. Definitely in those days, it was a moffusil town. There my father was known as a *Shodeshi* (Swadeshi) *okil,* (lawyer) that means the vakil (lawyer) who fought the cases of the Swadeshi—these people. So there was not much money but my maternal grandmother had a fantastic library and in the evening, my grandfather's friends would come. People who fought such cases, who published magazines and she talked very competently with them. They would come to take guidance from grandma. Because grandma read so much, knew so much, and often she wrote on women's issues. *Jayshree* was a very patriotic magazine published by the then Leela Nag and Renu Sen who became later Leela Rai and then they became, you know, they are known as Forward Block people. Anyway, they were very patriotic. Their magazine *Jayshree...* often these two would be arrested and who is to run the magazine? It would come to our house and grandma, my mother, my aunt all of them would write and sell those magazines here and there. This I—we have seen, so much—we have seen them do, I have seen my mother do so much. So whatever I do now, it's only natural. Had I not done it, it would be very unusual and rather betraying them. Because she always... the entire ambience was very different. During puja time in our East Bengal village, big boats, on the big boats, they took, you know, saris and things for people to purchase. And they would take books. During puja time, the entire village, the women would purchase books. Sarat Chandra and other writers. Their books would go to the villages, remote villages. They purchased books. It was quite common, everyone would read books.

AK: What about some of the magazines?

MD: *Basumati* was a very popular magazine where Mr. Thomas did all the paintings you know. His wife... and those were very popular. But *Probashi* was the magazine edited by Ramanand Chatterjee which was very unusual, published Tagore, published other things. On women's issues, *Probashi* was very, very strong. Any woman passing the secondary examination or becoming a graduate would be big news for *Probashi.* Women writers also wrote there. Sita Devi, Shanta Devi and other writers. They also wrote a lot. Then there was *Bichitra. Bichitra* was very, very... more on pure literature. But *Bichitra* is the magazine for which Bibhuti Bhushan Bannerjee wrote *Pather Panchali.* So since all of them were immersed in all these... books would

come, we would read. *Parichay*— edited by Shudin Dutta. My father also was a writer for *Parichay*. I remember one year in Shantiniketan—in Calcutta, father is not writing anything. And the editor Shudin Dutta is hammering him. Then Shudin Dutta told my mother, "You have to write something." So mother wrote a story. She wrote a story. And she wrote very well. She wrote especially on women's issues....

AK: So Mahaswetadi, you said that around the age of ten, you were sent off to Shantiniketan.
MD: Yes.

AK: And that you were in the beginning very, very upset by this.
MD: Very upset.

AK: Being sent away. But then you changed your mind after...
MD: When I reached Shantiniketan—going to Shantiniketan with father was quite an experience, because that was December and from Howrah we travelled by train. Then father suddenly remembered sometime, long back, I [had] wanted to have another ice-cream which he never allowed. And in those days, Calcutta was fantastic. He went there and purchased four ice-creams for me. Those were, you know—those days they would go with those and Stop Me and Buy One. One *anna* in one those days, *anna, pais, rupiahs*. That one *anna* was painted on the Stop Me and Buy One, *Happy Boy* ice -cream. He bought four. I stared at it, because I was shedding tears like this (looks down). It was very shameful to cry before your parents, I felt. I ate all the four ice creams. Then I went to sleep. In the morning, I reached Shantiniketan; he took me to Stree Bhavan, the girls' hostel. And the superintendent came out and said, "Oh, this small girl. Her name is such a big one. Mahasweta? Which other name she has? I said Khukoo. And from that time, I became Khukoo for Shantiniketan. And very soon, you know, I was so absolutely immersed in Shantiniketan. Everything was very new to me....

AK: Can you tell us something about studying in Shantiniketan in those years? What was it like?
MD: Just three years ago, I wrote a book—*Amader Shantiniketan*. In that, many of the memories, I have brought back. First thing was '36, '37, '38, I was in Shantiniketan, that's five to seven. Tagore was alive. And Shantiniketan was a small place. We could always go to Tagore without any... there was no, you know, no one saying not to come, things like that. Tagore's granddaughter, Rathi Thakur's adopted daughter, Nandini... her nickname was Poope. Poope was also in the school, and after school hours whenever...

Phone rings
MD: ... we found time, we went to *Uttarayan*. That means Tagore's house. Tagore's daughter-in-law was a very affectionate, kind and saintly person. She would give us plenty to eat, to go to play around and things like that.... Plenty liberty there, plenty going out in the scorching sun... when rains came, we would run through the gravely, absolutely ocean wavy-like reddish-reddish from *khoai*. We would run to Kopai river, they would push us into the river and ask us to swim. They would be with us. They would save us all right. That's how I learned to swim. Being thrown into river, turbulent rivers and then fighting with it. Shantiniketan was fantastic. And then Tagore's dance dramas, very famous—thus *Chitrangada, Shyama, Tasher Desh, Chandalika*. When the rehearsals went on in the evenings where Tagore would sit for two or three hours without moving an inch and whenever he found, you know, something is wrong with the song or dancing he would just lift his finger and silently everyone would leave the room.... Happy, happy days Anjum, very happy days. So, in a way, without telling us anything, sense of duty, sense of all the time working, keep busy, find something fruitful to do. These were...

AK: Values
MD: ...values of course....

First Book and Life as a Writer

AK: What was your first real story that came out which was, you know, which you considered creative writing or your first piece as a writer.
MD: You see, ...writing came very easy to me, and in trying to solve my eternal economic problem there was a very good readable weekly, *Sachitra Bharat*. My uncle's friend, Jishu Sengupta was connected with it. He told me, 'Can't you write small sketches for it?' At that time, I was working for Central Government—for two years I worked, then I was sacked by them for marrying a communist but before that I would write but I couldn't use my name. I would take on the pen name of Sumitra Devi and talked about—a person who talked incessantly. That means I gave this name *Anabarato— Anabarato* means continuous. Very light reading but readers enjoyed it. But I was rather toying with it. And then we went to Bombay, Bijon had to write some story, for K A Abbas—it didn't materialise. So ultimately we left Bombay after one year when he wrote his film story on *Nagin*. *Nagin's* story was horrible but it was a super hit of those times. This one year I utilised because I was in *bodo* (elder) Mama's house (Anjum: Sachin Chaudhuri) and with his card, I would go to Asiatic Society, sit and read and then come back....

AK: So how did your interest in the *Rani of Jhansi* come about?
MD: No, just because I read the story. And then, this rang, you know, old some where, some where—yes I have read about her in childhood, in my grandma's library, in other books, other book reference to her. Rabindranath's elder brother referred to her all the time. Only that day, the

Rani of Jhansi, she has proved her courage and resilience and things like that. Anyway, I read that book, I decided to write a biography. I had no—I had not come through the discipline of history or anything or research. I did not see my future—that whole life I will go on researching into strange subjects. I came back and I came across the name of the Rani's nephew who was still living. Actually, when the Rani of Jhansi was married, she was eight years old. Her father also came with her and settled in Jhansi. And Rani of Jhansi's husband Gangadhar Rao— was about 30-32. Her father was also 30-32. So after coming here after her marriage, father also married another 8-year old girl. And this stepmother and the Rani, they were you know, close childhood friends, things like that. So Rani's son, adopted son, different Damodar Rao, but her nephew Naveen Chintamani Pandey, I came across him, he was a member of the— one of the History Congress members. So that year, History Congress took place in Ahmedabad.... Then I had this mad idea, these days, people say this is the subaltern point. I did know anything about subaltern. Actually, when I first came across the word, I thought it is British time *ka* word. *Subaltern Subedar hota hai na?* (Subedar was a Subaltern isn't it?) I went to Jhansi, Gwalior, Kalpi [and] nearby places to collect as much as I can from the people's source. It was fantastic memories. Now. Sitting in the winter-time—it was December again, winter-time sitting in open meadow with all those woodcutters and others. We were sitting around a fire and they are singing songs. I can't remember just now, but it is written somewhere...

AK: Songs about the Rani of Jhansi?
MD: *Hanh, pathar, mithi se fauj banai*
Kaath se kator
Pahad uthake ghoda banai
Chali Gwalior

(She made soldiers out of soil,
A sword out of wood;
She picked up mountains and made horses,
And off she rode to Gwalior)
....

AK: And that was your first book.
MD: Yes, it was serialised for weekly *Desh;* then it came out as a book. I was instantly known as a writer. Don't think there was no resistance. Plenty resistance.

AK: Of what kind?
MD: 'It is nothing, just romanticism, no truth in it.' Things like that. So many things I have forgotten, people, generally, I will not name them but established Bengali writers, you see, 'Her entry is through the back door with her father's influence.' How, I did not know. So, I had to listen to all these things. They made it a point, so I listened to them. There was one situation where direct confrontation with someone. He said, "I will see how you write, you will not be able to write." Then I was much younger then, Anjum. I told him, "But you will see I will survive by writing. I will live on writing alone. I will become a professional writer." They laughed....

Tribals in Her Life and Writing

AK: Mahaswetadi, why don't you tell us about how you first began to visit the tribal areas and what prompted you to do it?
MD: An insertion in Sunday's *Statesman*. I came across this mention of this place Mckluskiegunge where one can go. I wrote a letter, then went there. Mckluskiegunge was at that time—Colonel Mckluskie at some time was the Anglo Indian MP (Member of Parliament). Then for retired railway people—all over India, many Anglo Indians were employed, so they, originally the place name was Lapra. Lapra village or Mouja under which there were so many villages. They purchased land there. Each house with, you know, acres of land like 15 acres, 18 acres, 21 acres, fruit garden, bungalows, cultivation ground. With their money, they settled there and their children, then they migrated to Australia, Canada, these places. They started renting out the houses. Anyway Mckluskiegunge was a very big place, very quiet and the best thing was after alighting from the bus, bus from Ranchi, bus from Dhanbad, you have to walk. In Mckluskiegunge there was no place for any conveyance or anything—we walked. I enjoyed it a lot. With the Anglo Indians, I became very friendly.

AK: Which year was this?
MD: It was I think 1963—63 or '62. While we were moving around, I would leave after breakfast, walking, walking, end somewhere, plenty tribal huts. And all the hills and rivers were connected with so many legends you know. There was a legendary tiger which would come from the Neundra Hills and go into one of the abandoned bungalows, sleep there and then go back.... But the tribal people I found fantastic. They came under... there were some tribals who had been converted and were Christians—they lived separate but all of them were together because they were forest workers and did the same thing, not many households where they could work, they worked some... Delightful people. You remember my story *Hunt*—Mary I found there.

AK: Mary Oraon?
MD: Mary Oraon, Mary Oraon

AK: She was the child of an Anglo Indian and a tribal.
MD: *Hahn* (yes).... Very fair skinned and she would not go to school. She would graze cows and buffaloes and very competent also.

AK: And she was a real person.
MD: Real person. So many persons there in the stories are real persons....

AK: So Mahaswetadi, you discovered the tribals when you went to Mckluskiegunge but how did you get so pulled into their life and how did they become—their cause become—so important?
MD: You see, that way I have been to many places because you will find my writings like Dhouli and others—on people who are not tribals also, but poor village people. I would go anywhere, you know. I had this madness in me. I would walk to their houses, be very well received. Sit with them, talk. Often sleep in their houses, then come. I just like, loved it. But at that time, I was not thinking of writing anything on them. You might say I went to learn from them, not to teach them anything. Because I found them absolutely scientific, absolutely sophisticated, behaviour and everything, very much.

AK: Can you give an example of what you mean? Because most people's idea of tribals is the exact opposite. So when you say scientific and sophisticated, what do you mean?
MD: Very good, you see. Most of the tribals wouldn't use oils and things. They would you know, slow roasting over slow fires, steady, ongoing ground fire. That's very scientific. And I remember once eating venison—fantastic. It was in the morning, and Mckluskiegunge was a place where many kinds of bamboos grew. Natural bamboo forests, not the bamboos planted for, you know, economy, as we see elsewhere. Big, hollow, this bamboo, they chop the meat, put it there—first with *adrak, mirchi, namak, lasun* (ginger, chilli, salt, garlic), everything and seal both ends and put it in the slow fire, very slow fire and we left for the day. We went out here, there, here, there and then when we came back, meat was absolutely cooked, it was delicious. I have not eaten anything like it in my life. So you understand, how sophistication, civilization and true rules of what needed doing. I remember one child was burnt. His grandfather ran, chopped off the head of a fowl and poured the blood all over. He said this blood is also alive and it will cover the burn and very soon, new skin will grow. There should be scientific explanation for it. But actually, the child, when I saw her later, she was all right.

AK: No scars.
MD: No scars. Nothing. And houses were immaculately clean. You could eat from the floor. Cleanliness was one of the prime conditions which everyone abided by and so keen to learn from everything. This I have seen in other tribes also like Vanshavars. They said, 'Why do you use glasses? Why do you have to have a lantern or a torchlight? Just learn to see, penetrate into the darkness and see because the stars also give light.' With such people I have walked in the evenings, never missing my...

Bortika and Associated Memories

AK: Mahaswetadi, let's talk about *Bortika*. The journal that you have been bringing out for so many years. It was started by your father as a literary journal and then you changed it. So can you talk about that?
MD: My father was... he was an eminent writer of those days. The... and he was very close to the young people. They requested him to take it over. They had, I think brought out one number. Then on behalf of a local club, this became their magazine, father started editing it and encouraged many writers who later became well-known like Syed Mustaba Siraz, like Phulakentu Babu, Phulakentu Singh and Abul Bashar—all of them have written for this magazine. He died in '79. Unluckily, I was not there at that time. I had just come to know, that I have been given, awarded Sahitya Akademi prize. And the day I left for Berhampore, that day he had died. So I went there with my other sisters after, you know, after cremation, everything—I had to be there, it is my good somehow luck to cremate my people. The brothers, father, everyone. So anyway, after that I came to know that publisher of that magazine—a local man — a very good man. He was weeping, 'Dada, you are going. *Bortika* would stop." He told him, "*Bortika* will not stop. Ask her to continue it." So that was a command to me. And I started, but the first number we published—yesterday I showed them the very first number— to keep the continuity. The next number was very important—on my father—and I declared in the first number that I would change the orientation. Only villagers, or such people who never write their life stories—the novelists do, they will write their life stories and experiences—so it will come straight from the grassroots. No literacy means nothing to me. Class four onwards, whatever be their literacy, anyone who can write Bengali, will write for my magazine. And then I started, you know, with increasing popularity in the villages. There was a time when I had eight hundred subscribers from the tribal belt of Medinipur alone. Then it increased to 1,600 or 1,900, because increasingly, they started writing their life stories. And their name and everything has come out in print. That gave them a great, very big jolt. And I used to receive so many village subscribers. And then I started to, you know, make the writing more focussed—are you an agricultural labourer, then these are the points you should pursue. If you are a village school primary teacher, these are the points. Are you a rickshaw puller in a small town? ... So many categories are there. And plus, that not only village, rural Bengal started being documented, then I, the very first, one number was on tribal women, women but village tribal women, village Muslim women, like that.

AK: Writing their own stories?
MD: Writing their own stories.... Do you remember about Chuni Kotal, that Lodha girl, who had to commit suicide?

AK: She was the first woman of her tribe who got a BA
MD: Chuni Kotal was like a daughter to me. She would come to me all the time to Calcutta. Then she joined in Medinipur, that tribal girls, hostel and she was also a student of the Medinipur University. Vidyasagar University

it is called. Chuni wrote her life story. She told me 'No *didi*, I can't do it! I said, "You can do it!" I said, "You can do it, you have to do it." Chuni wrote her life story for the first and last time for *Bortika*. And after her death, everyone has borrowed from it. And whatever they have written, is based on *Bortika*. But Lodhas—you know, hunger for literacy was more in them. So, Lodhas on them, written by them, their life stories—school children writing poems and prose pieces, those numbers I have brought out. Five numbers on the Lodhas alone, on the Santhals too, about the Munda tribals one, then others also. Then closed down factories, then life of cycle rickshaw pullers—on so many subjects....

AK: For *Bortika* was there any other particular incident you can remember where, maybe certain kind of information came into the journal from women, which helped with their lives.
MD: ... Yes, Yes. My mother was a source of such stories, because she befriended—she was very nice and very severe also, very strict, with all the village women who after Bengal partition came to work. She would take them. My mother was remarkable. She would take the local—the Harijan children— ho are not allowed in the tea shops. She was a short person and she went there. And her *pallu* (sari end) would be under her armpit, because it would slip, because she was, that way not very... So she would go to school and say, "These boys, I have come to admit these boys and girls." That was never done before in Berhampur. Caste-dominated, these people were untouchables, because for Municipality, they were, you know, they carried shit on their heads. In those days, those were non-sanitary latrines. They said, "How to admit them?" *Ma* (Mother) said, "Government has started these schools, government pays you. Have they told you not to admit them? I am getting them admitted. I am the wife of the local income tax officer and I want to know. After seven days I will enquire and I will sort it [out] myself. And I ask my husband to take the magistrate and visit the town and see what happens. Because husband and wife never cared for government jobs and they went, thus they were. And the horror of it was all of them, Jugal and others, their *ma* (mother) would come to—*daierma* we would call them. She would come to clean our latrine. She would come with her four children. So it was our duty to give them bath, to feed them, then to make them sleep in time. For *daierma* there would be clothes—clean clothes, separate set of soap. So she would go and take bath, wash her clothes. Then in fresh, dry clothes, she would sit and have a big meal. And in the afternoon, after everything, when the sun went down, she would go home. So, she is the person, she said, "*Ma*, you have done so much." *Ma* said, "I want also something from you." "What?" "I want to take your children to school." From that it started. And such a caste-ridden society, you know, everyone said *ma* is supposedly a Brahmin's wife. She never cared. And after years Jugal passed matriculation, he became the Municipal Workers' Union's secretary. She (he) came to my mother and told "Granny, granny, we want to make her, *bodo mashi* (elder aunt) to be our president." I said, "No, *Ma*, don't tell them, 'yes', because I live in Calcutta, I come to see you and father, I cannot do it." *Ma* said, "No, Khukoo, you have to do this." Her words were supreme. By that time, she had gone blind and *bas ho gaya* (that was it)—I became President of the Berhampore Harijan Workers' Union and as such demonstrated on the streets, went and fought the Municipality authorities, things like that. So many things happened. In my lifetime, I could never....

AK: If anybody tries to write a novel about your life, it will be worse...
MD: It will be very difficult.

AK: ...worse than magic realism.
MD: Yes, what did I not do?...

Women in Her Stories

AK: Mahaswetadi, in most of the stories that you have written, the characters, or the locations or the subject is about the most marginalised and dispossessed segments of our society, the most, the people who are leading the most suffering kinds of lives. And within that, there is also a strong collection of women's stories, women's issues, women characters. Now, how do you feel about this all? Because some people do think that you write more about women. Do you agree with that and how do you feel about the whole thing?
MD: ... I try to write about the entire class. Class-wise they are exploited. Men, women, children, all. Women's issues are marginalized. Women suffer more because they have a body. But also, women suffering peculiarly, it's continuing for thousands of years. It starts from home, it starts outside, when she is an adolescent, when she is just growing up. Do you not read in the newspapers? A seven-year child is gang raped. Girls. Only yesterday I read that a girl-child was born and she was a new-born child, was left on the roads of Howrah, things like that. It's a continuous process. ... You remember the story *Chinta*? *Chinta* had to pay such a price. She had to sell both her daughters. She had to pay such a price because she had after being widowed, she lived with another man. That's why. These things happen even in their society. Man goes and marries another girl, brings her home, nothing. In their society also. Their society is also very, very cruel against women. About the tribals, I will not say so. Tribal society is entirely different. Girl child is very welcome. No difference between a boy and a girl. The entire attitude is different, why different—it must be something which has been going on for thousands of years—they are carrying it in, they are carrying it in themselves. And this had to be written, that's why, I wrote. And also I have seen such women....

AK: Mahaswetadi, can you tell us about your experiences with some of these very spirited personalities like Manda, for example, that you have written about.

MD: Manda Hiramanchanda that was the name later given by her admirers, admiring women....Manda belonged to Kolhati tribe. About Kolhati tribe you should read this book, written by Kishore Shantabai Kale. She (He) has written about his mother who belonged to the Kolhati tribe. Also, he is the first person who has written about these eunuchs—very good writing. Belongs to the denotified tribe. So Manda was a girl, very spirited, very beautiful and as per custom in their society, the eldest girl was never married, but she was auctioned off. The highest bidder would take her, *'Chera Utarna' (Chuda Utarna)*—break the bangles—which means have sexual relations with her. So the first person who broke the glass bangles would give the father something like twenty thousand rupees—how much—as much as they could give. Her father, her brothers—they would live on her earning and after some days then she would again be auctioned off to another—the highest bidder. Manda was seething because she was, twice she did it and third time she got hold of a very long whip and she said yes, and this is done very ceremonially—the panchayat—sarpanch would be there, others would be there, the bidders also. So she said, who is the bidder? All the men were there. Also, her mother and others and Manda, as the bidder advanced to take her, draw her by hand, she brought out her whip and lashed at them, all of them, cut their skin, they were bleeding and howling. Manda just ran away. She went out and ran all the way—on the cycle, motorcycle—she knew how to [ride a bike] ... arrived, went to the centre where Lakshman Gaikwad, Maharashtra's undisputed leader of the denotified tribals... Gaikwad is a good writer also. His book, *Uchalya*, or *The Branded* got the Akademi prize. So Lakshman's organisation gave her shelter. Then Lakshman Gaikwad came and came to [the village] and this village was seething, "What she has done? She cannot be forgiven. Let her come. If we can catch hold of her, we will, you know, peel her skin from her body and do this and that, burn her alive in the acid." Things like that. Lakshman came, Lakshman is a very great personality, very dominant, booming voice and everyone listened to him. He had hundreds of followers and everywhere—for making the denotified tribals aware everywhere, he had *karyakarta,* area workers. So came there and said, "He who touches this person, I will skin him alive, I am Lakshman Gaikwad. And how much money did you take?" he asked the father. Manda said this much—first time this much. 'Give me the money.' He took that money and told everyone— 'Anyone tries to harm her, *panch ka koi meeting hua, kuch hua, tum dekhoge* (five-member jury if you have any meeting, just see). And she becomes the local *karyakarta,* you have to listen to her. And with that money, he went to the heart of Jamkheda and there Kolhati women who do this—their music and dance, this profession—this is their profession. They have to earn that way and give it to her *malik,* (owner) for the time being. So they are double-storeyed wooden structure—Manda lived upstairs, I went to that house. Downstairs is their stage. In Maharashtra, this is traditional Tamasha theatre and Manda's whip was hanging there. The idea was that you come, purchase the tickets, see dance, listen to songs, see our dramas. Anyone trying to touch the girls, flay him. And she was having her Bullet, Bullet brand motorcycle and her famous whip, with that Manda, in salwar kameez, goes everywhere....

Documenting History

AK: Mahaswetadi, you have often said that you feel that a writer has a duty almost to document her own time and to document history that she's part of.

MD: That's what I believe.

AK: And so, can you talk a little bit about that?

MD: Documenting my time and my history and I increasingly find that my history, when I say my history it becomes actually the very old, very permanent on flowing history. Yes, I believe in that....

(Transcribed from the film on Mahasweta Devi produced by SPARROW as part of the Global Feminisms project done in collaboration with the University of Michigan.)

SPARROW congratulates Jerry Pinto, one of our trustees, on being awarded the Sahitya Academy Puraskar 2016, in English, for his novel, *Em and the Big Hoom.*

This supplement is published by SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women) along with SNL 35, December 2016.

A Note on SPARROW and Its Achievements

Ours is a Women's Archives that collects oral history and visual material connected with women's lives and experience as important material for future research on women. Our intention is to make such material more visible and accessible to people interested in women's lives and history. Kindly visit our website, *www.sparrowonline.org* which will give you an idea about the work we are doing.

The scope of SPARROW's work includes the entire South Asian continent and it already has both visual and print material from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Where the Indian sub-continent is concerned SPARROW is conceived of as a national archives collecting oral history and visual material from all over India. SPARROW's ongoing projects include oral history recordings and video recordings of several freedom fighters, educationists, feminists, and activists in various movements. The life and work of activists involved in the environment movement, human rights activities and social work activities involving women and children are also being documented in SPARROW. Apart from this SPARROW is also keen to archive cultural traditions in terms of performance and has video documented theatre artistes and folk artistes who are trying to keep alive various traditions of performance. Complementary collection of photographs, books and other print material is also undertaken as part of the regular work of SPARROW.

Throughout its existence in the last twenty-five years SPARROW has functioned as an archiving body which in addition to collecting material on women's history and lives, has also generated its own archival material through oral history recordings, publications, digital video recordings and exhibitions and workshops to reach out to the general public as well as schools, colleges, women's groups and media and communication groups. Utilising unique methods of spreading knowledge about the lives of women, SPARROW has functioned as an archiving organisation that has brought women's history to the public sphere even while keeping up its archiving activities. While SPARROW strongly believes that recording, reviewing, recollecting and reflecting on women's history and life and communicating this knowledge in various ways is an important cultural and educational activity in development, it also believes that constant efforts must be made to recreate and bring this knowledge to the public sphere in a variety of ways for ***positive change is possible only when we understand women's lives, history and struggles for self-respect and human dignity.*** While SPARROW as an archive will always be open for consultation by scholars and others it will also take its archives out as part of its commitment to bringing about change in the society.

In the last twenty-five years' time we have brought out 86 publications, including SNL, our newsletter, several reports, held more than 30 workshops for students (two of them summer workshops for American students), organized exhibition, conducted one film festival called Women's Lives, Women's Words with the support of Global Fund for Women and one Cultural Festival with films, paintings and handicrafts from the North East regions of India called One River Many Streams, held a Women Writers' Camp with the support of Prince Claus Fund, a Dalit Women Writers' Meet supported by Sahitya Akademi and made 25 oral history documentaries ten of them under the title Global Feminisms covering women's activism and scholarship with the University of Michigan. In recognition of our work for the last 25 years, SPARROW received the Prince Claus Fund Award in 2014. We are currently working on five volumes of women's writings with 87 writers from 23 languages of India. Along with all these activities we have also been cataloguing and digitising existing material in the Archives while continuing to augment our collection. We have also struggled hard to collect funds for a building for us and we now have a permanent building. In a city like Mumbai we can say, this is not an easy achievement.

SPARROW has ambitious plans for the future and what it currently needs is generous donations to its corpus fund which will help it to function and carry out its long term plans.

We thank all our trustess and advisors who reposed immense faith in our efforts which has made it possible for us to spread our wings. They continue to stand by us. We also thank our funders, donors, supporters, well-wishers, friends and many more who have supported us in many ways.

Contributions to SPARROW qualify for 80 G.

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