

# *Mahasweta Devi: Witness, Advocate, Writer*

## **Study Guide**

A study guide for the film:  
**“Mahasweta Devi: Witness, Advocate, Writer”**

by **Shashwati Talukdar**  
color, 27 min, 2001

**<http://www.der.org/films/mahasweta-devi.html>**

"Language is a weapon, it's not for shaving your armpits." So says eminent Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi in this documentary about her life and work. At the center of a half-century of tumultuous change, the lifetime of Mahasweta Devi has spanned the British period, Independence, and fifty years of postcolonial turmoil. Her writing has given Indian literature a new life and has inspired two generations of writers, journalists, and filmmakers. A celebrated writer and tireless activist, Devi has, for the last two decades, battled on the behalf of the De-notified tribes of India--indigenous groups who were branded "natural criminals" by the British Colonial State and who face discrimination to this day, despite being "de-notified." Informal in style, this video explores how Devi's daily life and writing are a part of her life as a tireless worker for the rights of the aboriginal peoples of India

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## ***Mahasweta Devi: A Brief Biography***

Roopika Risam, 2006

### **Witness**

Mahasweta Devi, whose name is sometimes transliterated as "Mahasveta," was born in Dhaka (now in Bangladesh) in 1926 and grew up in West Bengal, now part of India. Like Devi herself, her family members were both literary and civic-minded; her grandparents had taken part in Rammohun Roy's movement that promoted Western education and social reform, Devi's father was a well-known Bengali writer whose stories address slum life, and her mother was a writer and social worker who promoted literacy among underprivileged children. As a child, Devi studied at Shantiniketan, a school founded by Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. During the early years of Devi's adulthood, India endured great change; the Quit India Movement began in 1942, the Great Calcutta Riots occurred in 1946, and 1947's Partition--the creation of the separate countries India and Pakistan--instigated great violence in border regions. During this time, Devi joined relief efforts in Bengal, distributing food and locating the living among dead bodies in the streets. After finishing her Master of the Arts in English at Calcutta University, Devi began teaching and working as a journalist.

### **Advocate**

In 1965, Devi visited Palamu in Bihar, India and saw firsthand the dismal conditions under which many of India's indigenous people live. India's tribal people became Devi's primary concern; she sees the tribal people as emblematic of social oppression in India. Devi has used journalism as an avenue for expressing her social concerns and for grassroots organizing. She is also one of the founders of the Denotified and Notified Tribal Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG), which works towards improved conditions for India's indigenous people through outreach, education, legal intervention, and community activism. Devi's involvement with DNT-RAG has drawn attention to existing injustice in India, and she continually works towards correcting those injustices. As a result, many tribal people whose lives have been affected by Devi have so much affection for her that they call her "Didi" (meaning "older sister"). When asked what she planned to do with the rest of her life in a 1998 interview, Devi answered, "Fight for the tribals, downtrodden, underprivileged and write creatively if and when I find the time."

### **Writer**

In 1956, Devi published her first novel, *Jhansir Rani* (The Queen of Jhansi), a fictionalized autobiography of a woman who fought for India's independence in 1857. Several other early novels are also set during the British Raj, but the India's Naxalite (Communist) movement of the 1960s and 1970s are also strong influences on her writing, including her novel *Hajar Churashir Ma* (*Mother of 1084*). A more recent concern in Devi's writing is the condition of India's indigenous people and of other economically marginalized people. These influences can be seen in her short stories, including the ones in *Imaginary Maps*, and in her novels as well. Much of Devi's work has been translated into English; most notable are those translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a postcolonial theorist and professor at Columbia University.

## ***The Adivasi Mahashweta***

Ganesh N. Devy

"CELEBRATING WOMEN: a symposium on women who made a difference." *Seminar*, #540. August 2004

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 Chadrashekhar 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 traveled led 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 brutalised. 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 Tejgadh, 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 Tejgadh 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 Tejgadh 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.

*Every effort was made to contact the publisher.*

## Reading "Behind the Bodice: Choli ke Pichhe"

Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997.

What is there was the national problem that year. When it became a *national issue*, the other fuckups of that time—e.g. crop failure-earthquake, everywhere clashes between so-called terrorists and statepower and therefore killings, the beheading of a young man and woman in Haryana for the crime of marrying out of caste, the unreasonable demands of Medha Patkar and others around the Narmada dam, hundreds of rape-murder-lockup torture et cetera *non-issues* which by natural law approached but failed to reach highlighting in the newspapers—all this remained *non-issues*. Much more important than this was choli ke pichhe—behind the bodice.

That *issues* will and do trample upon *non-issues* in the life of the nation, this is the rule. This is why 'what is there' becomes so important. Proof that India's spirit is not only sealed in slumber, it can wake as needed.

Thus, everyone got busy to find out what was there: national *media*,  *censor-board*, liberated anti-*bra* girls—many associations-organizations on the state-level etc. etc.—cable-tv *channels*—green *eyeshaded lady votarians'* associations—all the religious groups—and politicians. Watching cassettes of *Khalnayak* under cover became the '*norm of the day*.'

Only upon seeing the nation busy with thoughts of this description did wellwishers create explosions in Bombay and Calcutta. In order to bring the nation's brain home—and thus India suddenly discovered that behind the bodice was the Middle East. This discovery was yet another explosion. Because the edifice crumbled was it suddenly known that it is the *Middle East* that controls the putting on and taking off of bodices and subsequent hankypanky etc. That *powerful lobby*, which is engaged in sending *messages* to the brain of the youthful generation to the effect that Bombay *films* are the cultural medium for representing Indian popular culture, that *lobby* was pissed off at this. The leader (honorary and pleased if able to attend *seminars*) of their *counterlobby* (exceedingly sparsely peopled) prints a *handbill* that enters the fold of each newspaper and declares that each year, behind the length of the *raw stock footage* of Bombay *films*, which can circle the globe in a foolproof slipknot, is a similar nation state that makes the Indian masses laugh, weep, dance, and sing by remote control, etc. etc. Reading this news mad Haripada climbs to the roof of the Tata *Building* and shouts '*Invasion! Invasion!*' and is swiftly thrown in jail by way of the ATADF Act (*Anti-Terroristic and Disruptive Forces Act*). Which prison, who imprisoned him, this is not known. The word '*invasion*' worries the nation. The 106-year old freedom fighter Gopikrishnababu says, Eh is the English coming to take India again by *invading* it, eh?—Now from the entire country, Indian intellectuals not knowing a single Indian language meet in a closed *seminar* in the capital city and make the following wise decision known. *Cultural invasion* is much more dangerous than *cultural revolution*. So India is doing what India must do to hold it back. There is no Russia. Marx-Lenin-Mao-Zedong have failed. The natural vacuum must be filled with *pirated cassettes*. In that sense 'Behind the Bodice' or Choli ke Pichhe is an elixir for the times. After all this Shaili's Mother wraps her huge and ever-enlarging corpus in just one piece of cloth and goes on saying, 'Never dragged on a *belouse* [blouse] in my life, how to put on a choli now!' Because the *nation* was busy with all this Upin's news got only an inch-and-a-half of space in the newspaper. Escaped the nation's eye.

## 2

Upin's news did not appear in the paper as news of Upin. It was also not known at first that a nameless person's corpse crushed by the wheels of a railway train midway between Jharoa and Seopura was Upin's body. Already before that Upin's friend and sidekick Ujan had received a *postcard*, *Come to Jharoa. Very urgent*—Upin. This is the letter that took Ujan to Jharoa to find out Upin's end. The postcard had given Ujan a great shock. Now he remembers the first phase of Upin's becoming a missing person. Naturally he took the letter to Shital Mallya. A dead end road in the Salt Lake area of Calcutta, large trees to its south and then the everflowing Keshtopur canal—to the north a few extraordinary houses—Shital had come there to her own apartment. Why such a beautiful, firm and fit, youthful at thirty-three body is called Shital or Cold, Ujan doesn't know. Upin and Shital are husband and wife—but Upin is an itinerant ace-photographer, Shital a famous Himalaya-climber—the two don't spend even a month and a half out of the year together—yet how they remain in love with each other, this too Ujan doesn't know. Ujan can remain greatly unknowing. Ujan is devoted to Upin alone. From time to time Upin goes to Bihar and Orissa to take photos, and he takes Ujan. Since Upin's pictures go at *top* rates abroad and at home, Ujan benefits as well. The apartment in Salt Lake is not to Ujan's tastes. No one lives there, in an impossibly impeccable apartment. Once in a while Shital comes, everything seems problematic. Of course Upin says, Why think about it? Shital is a child of Nature. This dead end road, this green—this silent narrow canal, there she needs.

Shital is supposed to be two people. Violent and *aggressive* Shital attacks the Himalayas again and again. Calm, soft Shital sits submerged in this water-tree-silence. There is a great deal of natural beauty in India apart from the Himalayas and Salt Lake. Shital cannot bear those *landscapes*. Temperamentally Shital is a girl of 2094, or rather Shital's century has not yet come.

Upin says these things with a roaring laugh. You can't tell if Upin is thirty-five or fifty-five. He is of squarish build, bearded, with too-bright eyes. He takes a bath once every few days, eats meat and drinks beer, smokes country cigarettes, in the corner room of Ujan's home, subdivided among the branches of the extended family. In a pricey Delhi hotel he is equally *at home*—an *Esperanto* man.

Now Shital sat still, looking at the flowing canal.

Ujan gives Shital the *postcard*.

Oh, Jharoa.

So he writes.

Not to me.

But you are usually in Kadamkuri at this time.

But he went to Delhi also from Jharoa.

Yes.

I told you to stick to him. You know how much work there is at the *apple-estate* at this time! I gave you money...

I would have looked after Upinda even if you hadn't given me money! How could I know that he'd act so crazy in Delhi? I went to buy bidis, and the police...

Ujan's voice broke.

Yes... pictures in the papers... scandal! scandal!

Yes, the picture of a banner. Written on it in English, 'The halfnaked amplebreasted female figures of Orissa are about to be raped. *Save them! Save the breast!*'

I'd not been to Delhi before. Knew nothing of the city. I came back nonplussed finally.

Great!

Suddenly Ujan rashly says, I knew it was me he would inform. And so he did. I was, yes, waiting after I came back.

You didn't do too much.

Shital controls herself by deep breathing when she is angry or excited. She calms herself in a minute and says, *Why* Jharoa, Ujan?

You do know!

I only don't know why he went there last time. Yes—elephants were migrating that time—

Then drought—

Then *pesticide* in the river water—

Famine conditions, *semifamine condition*—

Yes, yes, yes! All those pictures appeared in the *national press*. Also in *Lens Magazine*. That makes four times. And the fifth time?

Ujan is silent.

The fifth time?

I don't know. I went off to Bitala... Upinda didn't go.

Whose photos are these?

A highbreasted rural woman sits slack with her breast shoved into an infant's mouth. The breast is covered with the end of her cloth. The same girl is walking with many girls carrying water on her head. Breasts overflowing like pitchers

Whose photo, Ujan?

Ujan says, Gangor. Gangor what... that I don't know.

Shital is quite startled. Gangor? *You mean* Gangor? Gangauri?

Meaning?

You are a *free-lance columnist*, Ujan! Don't names make you curious?

No. What's in a name?

Shital instantly becomes the erstwhile Shital Mallya, 'the *docu-maker* for the Festival of India.' Says in the voice that offers a *running commentary*, the Gangor festival takes place in Rajasthan, Ganga worship, Goddess Ganga. Strange! The Ganga River does not run through Rajasthan. Even large rivers...

The land of kings [literal meaning of 'Rajasthan'], perhaps there was Ganga once.

Sujan! Oh no, Ujan! You are *divine*! So little *cultural awareness*! Upin also says, Bengalis are *divine*! They don't think they need to know anything about the other states of India.

Where did you get these pictures?

Upin hid them. With Gangor, did Upin...?

No.

*Semifamine condition*... Gangor's crowd came to Jharoa looking for work. They'll work on a piece wage basis in the kilns for light bricks and tiles. When Upin and Ujan arrived, they had already lived there for two or three months. Gangor's health was fine... Upin took a photo when he saw the baby suckling—Gangor did not object. But she put out her hand... money, Sir, rupees? Snap a photo so give me cash! Ujan got a *shock*. Upin crumpled up all the money in his pocket and gave it to her.

Walking towards the *PWD* [Public Works Department] bungalow Ujan had said, You gave her sixty-seventy rupees? What a shameless girl!

Upin had said, *Now now* Ujan! You found this *shocking*? Listen friend, I will sell these pictures... why shouldn't she take money? They are not dumb beasts Ujan, they understand, that even when the gentlemen distribute relief, they have some hidden agenda.

And then he'd said, God, those breasts are *statuesque*! Did you see the *mammal* projections?

I didn't look.

Happens, this happens. The uncle of a friend of mine went to Dandakaranya Forest after Independence. *Anthropologist*. Seeing the uncovered chests of Aboriginal women...

Shame on him.

He too said shame shame, and asked them to wear blouses. Now they do. Then they didn't. The man lost his mind little by little.

Leave it, talk about something else?

When I saw her breasts...

Shame Upinda! Aren't you married?

Learn to praise and respect a beautiful thing.

Gangor enters Upin's head. No, those pictures are not here. Gangor at night, roasting doughballs on a dried cowdung fire, bent slightly forward. Under the dirty red cloth the cleavage of her Konarak chest, resplendent.

A train passing, Gangor's crowd looking at it. Her breasts like the cave paintings of Ajanta, against the backdrop of the sky. Dirty choli. Dirty red cloth, hair full of lice, filth...filth...

The second time Gangor had said, Hundred rupees per picture.

Upin took off his watch and gave it to her.

Gangor threw away the watch. It was eleven ten. The watch stopped.

The watch is stopped, will remain so. Upin did not get the watch repaired.

Gangor shouted obscenities at the thunderstruck Upin. You bastard ball-less crook! Give me a watch with one hand, and tell the police I stole it? Go, go, old jerk.

Gangor's man came and took her away with a couple of slaps.

That very day Upin went and sat at the chullu [country liquor distilled with cheap chemicals]-stand. No, he cannot forget those *mammal projections*. It has become a seismic upheaval in his brain. Ujan! *There lies all the mystery*. How can this be?

Ujan was sitting on a sack of packed cement at a distance, there to fetch Upin.

He was very angry with Gangor then.

And it was to him that Gangor came.

Sir! Sir! He is not my man! Our contractor, he's come to make us work. My man... not in my room, Sir... the police beat him up for he steals... it's a bad place where I come from Sir.

Ujan said, Get out! Go!

Gangor was weeping and keening, with her cloth in her mouth.... Tell the camera-Sir, why not take me away? A cloth to wear... a bite to eat... a place to sleep for mother and child.... What to do Sir... no field, no land, living is very hard... pots and pans... stove and knife... cleaning rooms... laundry... I'll do anything Sir...

You have a husband!

He can't come to my room Sir... comes under cover at night... I give him money... the contractors are not good people...

Go away. I'll call the police otherwise.

Ujan walks off at speed. Real problem dragging Upin off. He kept saying, Gangor! Gangor! He

and Ujan left the next day.

Upin was stony silent. Won't keep it... can't keep it, Ujan... can't keep such a *bodyline*... not a thing will remain—do you realize that the breasts of the girls at Elora are eroding? Gangor is *fantastic*!

Ujan!

Yes, Shital, tell me!

Is Upin...

Ujan came back to Calcutta. Said, no. Upinda says again and again, *Country liquor okay! Country women repel me!*

Shital smiled slightly.

You know no more about this girl?

No. And I don't want to know.

All right, what happened before going to Delhi?

Doesn't know, Ujan doesn't know. That Upin didn't go to Arunachal, but came to Calcutta, that too he doesn't know.

Didn't go to Arunachal. Came to Calcutta, I didn't know. Went to Jharoa, that too I didn't know. Suddenly he came to me in a great rush—*hurtay-phurtay*...

*What?*

*Typical Bengali expression.*

*Don't be so typical.* I don't understand Bengali all that well. What I learnt was for Upin! *Of course*, many of the mountaineers in our club are *Bengalis*. Upin's Bengali was altogether...

Punjabi only in name. Three generations in Calcutta.

Upin left Calcutta at eighteen.

He'd talk about it.

Then?

It seemed as if something dreadful had happened. He said, I've been running around a lot these last days...

Upin had said, *O hell!* I walked, got on trucks, traveled by police *jeep*—no trace of Gangor's group. No one says anything about where they are. He guard at the *bungalow* said, she has to come to Jharoa... Gangor has done something really bad... I got no info. *A conspiracy of silence!*

What would you have done with this information, Upinda? Ujan had said.

Would have brought her back.

Where?

Wherever.

For what?

You won't understand Ujan... I'd have saved her.

*A married female.*

Would I have... No, Ujan, no. I'm going to sleep.

Your *bags*?

I'm going to sleep.

You do know, Shital. He slept for three or four days—and then he said, I'll go to Delhi. *And...*

What will you do now?

Why, go to Jharoa. Won't you?

No. I'll wait for him.

Where?

In Kadamkuri!

Then I'll be off.

*Yes.*

Shouldn't you be going? You're the wife...

No. Our relationship is not like that at all. Upin gets lost. Comes back again. He and the *camera*—the Himalayas and I—perhaps in some distant future...

You will live in Kadamkuri?

Perhaps.

If you at least lived together. Such a human being... got crazed living constantly alone.

Where did you find him crazy?

Is *save the breast* not a craziness?

Upin no doubt doesn't think so. All right Ujan! Keep this cash. Phone me straightaway if you get him.

I don't need money.

Shital looked at the pictures with care. Chest, *breast*. What is the breast? *Fat tissue*, this that, a lot of bother.

Why was Upin so worried?

Ujan was leaving, he left. Shital closed the door and put her hand on her liquid silicone implanted front. Behind Shital's choli is a silicone chest. Upin had said, This is all artificial, Shital?

How would Upin know their secret—these breasts remain aggressive forever. Like plastic flowers, Shital? Upin would say.

'Had said'—'would say'—no, no, Upin has not become 'was,' for sure. Shital breathed deeply.

Mind, be calm, be calm. Let Upin take all his pictures, let Shital's Himalaya-ascent come to an end, perhaps one will settle permanently in Kadamkuri some day.

Sujan Kabir entered the room. The pictures are still scattered. He took a look and said, Why is Upin so occupied with what's behind the choli?

Shital cannot answer. Ujan doesn't take the money.

3

Why Gangor and her natural, most complex sweat glands or bosom had turned Upin's head he didn't know.

The breast can be called a complex sweat gland. There is plenty of fat in it. This glandular collective is most charming. There are seventeen lactative *units*. The glands go to the stem of the breast. At childbirth the body's blood is transformed into milk.

Upin knew all this, he knew. Not a breast blessed by liquid silicone, but natural, hence unique. He felt that Gangor and her chest were endangered.

He was supposed to go to Arunachal before he went to Delhi, on the way the idea was born that his *destination* was Jharoa. Getting off at Calcutta and rushing helter skelter by *train* to Gomo—then *bus* in such ways to Seopura. Then by train, getting off at Madhpura Halt, to Jharoa.

But even in the midday sun everyone was remaining silent in Jharoa, as if night had fallen. Nights are silent in Jharoa, days soundwaved. Now the days are silent too. Around the shacks and huts of Gangor's group, around the tile-roofed warehouses, their clothes were not drying on the lantana shrubs—no hubbub by the wellside.

Where, where, where?

The Watchman said, Shall I bring you some tea from the shop?

Where is Gangor's crowd?

Would you like to wash?

Where are they?

The contractor is wandering in the market area, adrift. He doesn't know, none of the shop-or stall-keepers knows.

Upin went to Heshegora, to Lamdi, from village to village. In Lamdi in the afternoon Gangor's chullu-befuddled husband had spat on the ground on hearing 'Gangor.'

Hopeless, hopeless. Upin heard a child weeping. A skinny dark twelvish-year old girl was standing with a year-old boy on her hip. The boy was crying.

Suddenly a message flashes through Upin's brain. Upin realizes the boy must be Gangor's. And somewhere a terrible conspiracy is at work. That's why the people are stony silent.

The Caretaker had said, She has to come to Jharoa. Gangor has done a very bad thing.

The police were about in Jharoa.

Upin came back. Something fearful has happened somewhere. The *nation* doesn't know it. The earth shook in Upin's head, the ground cracked, the fault line belched out hot sand, closed, and cracked again. Ujan! Upin grasped, as the train went juddering on, that he would have to come to Jharoa again.

4

When Upin got there, Jharoa had broken its vow of silence. Upin felt it was his first arrival. The same shops, the same unspeakable chips-and-fried-sweets stalls engorged with the dust of buswheels. On this market day the cattle exchange worked as usual. But in his mind's core Upin sensed for sure, Gangor was there, right there. The Caretaker took a look at him, scowling. Somewhere 'choli ke pichhe' was playing.

You left your bag behind last time?

Have you kept the bag?

In my room. Where did you go looking and looking for Gangor?

Where is she?

She...

The Caretaker goes on, You ruined her with your pictures Sir, otherwise would she dare?

What has Gangor done? Is she dead?

The Gangors of this world don't come to die Sir, they come to kill. Shameless country girl... jiggling her body all the time... saying to the market people, didn't snap your *photos*, snapped mine. See!

Then?

Gangor made everyone sin against God.

How?

She pressed charges against the police. When you came she was in Seopura.

Why?

Why not Sir? The jail is in Seopura, the big police station, the Courthouse. Isn't Seopura the county seat? It's there that she has to go now.

She's in Seopura now?

Where else? Come and go, come and go every week—the police is so tight on her back that even the contractors' *labour* has stopped coming Sir! Women have to be careful in Shiva's world. You're punished if you don't understand this. The police came here because of the girl so many times... so many times... when the girl doesn't understand the police are men too, they will craze if you tease them.

Why, why, why will they go crazy?

She will smear the police, and the police will let her go? Have they ever? She could have run off on the *terain* [train]... but she pressed charges... she has to show up, and the police will...

Where is Gangor? And where is her child?

and someone's wife at that!

Where is she, in the village?

Will anyone let her come into the village? No place there, no one talks to her in Jharoa—she comes from Seopura, and she does what is expected.

Where is she?

You'll see her in the market after dark. Drinking so much liquor...

Gangor drinks chullu?

What else?

I will take her away.

Nonsense Sir. You have a name, you're worth something. Who knew Jharoa? You took photos many times. You put us in the news—you'll take her?

She must be saved.

Upin's head wasn't working, he couldn't grasp what the Caretaker was saying.

But the police.

What can the Seopura police do? I've taken a lot of depositions from the Bihar police. I'll put pictures in the news.

Come, take your bag, check it out. The police would have nicked it. You wash up. I'll get food from the *hotel*. She won't come before early evening.

Upin doesn't wash, he lies down on the camp bed. Sleeps till early evening. Ujan would have forced him to eat. Would have said you're going for days on *nervous energy*, you'll *collapse*.

Ujan, Upin has been *collapsing* for some time. Upin is a *failure*. What was the good of taking so many pictures of Jharoa, on so many different trips? So many died drinking poisoned water, so many *migrated* on account of crop failure—at that time Upin, aka the State Government—no you can't call this famine. After all you see the skeletal cattle at the market, food stinking of dust and diesel—*very busy video palace, very loud* 'choli ke pichhe', the national anthem of these times—Gangor knows what's behind it. And nothing has changed. There are more warehouses. A new police station, they harass the women. Obscene laughter, and they eat free food from the stalls. It's not for nothing that Upin is *collapsing*. Now Upin suffocates when he enters Shital's germfree dwelling. No, life must be re-cast from the beginning.

Upin woke up at dusk. Somewhere a feeling of vulnerability, for some time now an *obsession* has been spinning him like a top. Suddenly he feels he's home alone in a place like this—he's alone everywhere.

To live in such solitude, to have denied the natural demands of life so much, was perhaps not right. Gangor's developed breasts are natural, not manufactured. Why did he first think they were the object of photography? Why did it seem that the chest was endangered?—What is this craziness, Sir, go away, don't you have a home? The Caretaker has a home, wife and kids. There is no roof waiting for Upin, matrimony of arrangement—the sort of marriage that one sees everywhere. But now he must rescue Gangor. His sense of emergency takes him to the chullu stand, where it smells of curried tripes, of the strong country liquor, of halitosis, of the ordure that bubbles up in the open drain's thick scum, of the flushless shithole beyond the drain. Upin stops his nose, his ears, and sits down. Suddenly 'choli ke pichhe' starts playing.

And Gangor comes just then. Now she wears a red and yellow polyester cloth, smelling of stale dirt, and still—Upin lifts his eyes nervously—a very dark choli, very insolent breasts, oiled and braided hair, darting suspicious glance.

Upin and Gangor look at each other. A sharp experienced smile blooms on Gangor's lips. She pushes away some man's hands. Says the Camera-Sir has been going around for me for a long time, Contractor. Today he's my client, eh Sir?

Upin offers himself, lets himself go.

Contractor, Gangor?

What to do, Sir? He knows nothing but contracting. But Bhusan! I've *pomoted* [promoted] you after all? It's all profit in this trade.

Everyone laughs, everyone. One says, Gangor, what's behind your bodice, love?

Come on Sir.

Gangor gets up. As if she says to Upin with her beckoning finger, Get thee behind me!

Then the broken road, the lantana shrubs, the railway tracks are all spread out, a broken bus is parked on a *siding*, now everything is up for sale, a working bus, as well as the broken down 'Mahavir.' After that come rows of decrepit warehouses, Gangor walks fast. She kicks the tin door of a shack.

Upin can't see what else there is in the room. Gangor raises the wick and utters her own *running commentary* to herself.

There is more money in it if she goes to Seopura. But the police station will not let Gangor enter. She will have to remain in Jharoa and go to Seopura—the *date* for her *case* will come up, the police will take the *date*. Not enough money comes in that Gangor will run off somewhere. And where she will run—everyone now knows that Gangor identified them, had talked at the police station, had pointed them out, and that's how all was lost.

Gangor!

You snapped many many times my chest, Sir. But I knew your plan. Otherwise would you have given so much cash?

Gangor!

Will Gangor unwind her cloth, or just lift it? Do your stuff, twenty rupees. Spend the night, fifty, tell me quick.

You are doing whore work, Gangor?

What's it to you, son of a whore?

You ...take off...your blouse...

Gangor breathes hard. Says in a voice ragged with anger, Don't you hear? Constantly playing it, singing it, setting the boys on me... behind the bodice... choli ke pichhe... choli ke...

No Gangor...

You are a bastard too sir... you took *photoks* [photos] of my chest, eh? OK... I'll show... but I'll take everything from your *pocket*, a-ll...

In the *silhouette* cast by the hurricane lantern two shadows act *violently*. Gangor takes off her choli and throws it at Upin. Look, look, look, straw—chaff, rags—look what's there.

No breasts. Two dry scars, wrinkled skin, quite flat. The two raging volcanic craters spew liquid lava at Upin—*gang rape*...biting and tearing *gang rape*... *police*... a court *case*... again a *gang rape* in the *lockup*... now from Jharoa to Seopura... Seopura to Jharoa... the Contractor catches clients... terrorizes a *public*... plays... plays the song, the song...

Upin stands up weaving, unsteady.

Gangor puts her hands in his *pockets* with skilled ease, scrabbles in his *pants pockets*, what a smell of violent resentment in her body... and then she kicks the ground.

Upin comes out, Gangor is still screaming, talking, Kicking the *corrugated tin* walls with abandon. Upin runs. There is no *non-issue* behind the bodice, there is a rape of the people behind it, Upin would have known if he had wanted to, could have know.

Upin runs along the tracks.

5

Ujan got there much later. Jharoa was calm. A new bus station where the warehouses used to be. A new police station in Jharoa. He got a months-old picture of a dead man.

No one by the name of Gangor lived in Jharoa.

On paper the search for the missing Upin Puri is still active. But those kinds of *files sink*, way under other *files*.

## ***Resources and links***

### **Bhasha Research and Publication Centre**

The Bhasha Research and Publication Center, established in 1996, is a center for studying, conserving, and promoting tribal languages, literature, history, culture, arts, and crafts, as well as working for socio-economic welfare and human rights for indigenous peoples.

### **Nikhil Bharat Banga Sahitya Sammelan**

<http://www.nbbss.org/>

Nikhil Bharat Banga Sahitya Sammelan (NBBSS) is an all-India organization that organizes cultural and literary events across India.

### **Sahitya Akademi**

<http://www.sahitya-akademi.org>

Founded by the Government of India in 1954, the Sahitka Akademi is India's national academy of letters. The Sahitya Akademi is also one of the largest publishers in India, as well as an agency for literary translations that aims to promote cross-cultural unity.

### **Seagull Books India - Kolkata**

<http://www.seagullindia.com>

Since 1982, Seagull Books has published fiction and non-fiction, committing itself to alternative, experimental, and socially conscious texts. Seagull Books has been particularly instrumental in disseminating Mahasweta Devi's body of work to India and abroad.

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