

# Mahasweta Devi

## The mother of Chotti Munda

One could read hundreds of history books on the Santhal rebellion or the Munda rebellion, but to get a glimpse of the lives of these people, their thoughts, aspirations, and how administration after administration had failed them, one need only read her novels.

**MOYUKH MAHTAB**  
 "I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty toward society. . . This sense of duty is an obsession, and I must remain accountable to myself."  
 -Mahasweta Devi

THE above lines are from an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak published as an introduction to *Imaginary Maps*, a translated collection of three stories by Mahasweta Devi. And, indeed, very few writers, with their corpus of work, have embodied the social and political nature of literature, and a writer's life-long to a cause as has Mahasweta Devi. For this reason, India and Bangladesh, her country of birth, mourn her death - it's the passing of a symbol of courage and craft, of a confluence of art and journalism.

Born in Dhaka in 1926, Mahasweta Devi was from a family of artists: her father was the poet Manish Ghatak, and her mother Dharitri Devi, a writer and social worker, and her uncle was the filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak. Much more has been written, especially since her death due to cardiac arrest last Thursday, of the family's influence on her life - but what interests me is how she was remembered. 'Voice of the dispossessed' read one headline, while another called her the 'Voice of the subaltern.'

Apt, yes, but I feel that she would object to being called the voice of the indigenous communities she worked with almost all her life.



Mahasweta Devi

Unlike the British first, and then Indian governments through the ages, Mahasweta Devi truly loved and trusted the tribals she worked with. There was nothing inherent in them to make

them 'less developed', and it was their continuous exploitation that had resulted in them being pushed to the margins. She believed that these communities could bring about change themselves. "Let them know their rights, and let them stand up and fight for them. Their involvement is an amazing experience," she said in the same interview with Spivak.

It's little wonder then that she did not believe in monetary aid being of much use to bring about meaningful change to years and years of exploitation. Her approach was completely different, one that would take her to the heart of their sufferings, living among them, and sharing in their stories and songs. Her novel *Hajar Churashir Maa* (Mother of 1084) set in the backdrop of the Naxalite Revolution in India, is as political, as it is humane and moving.

It would be difficult to do justice to the large body of work she leaves behind. For me, they remain an essential part of understanding the history of indigenous and tribal India and Bangladesh. One could read hundreds of history books on the Santhal rebellion or the Munda rebellion, but to get a glimpse of the lives of these people, their thoughts, aspirations, and how administration after administration had failed them, deceived them, one need only read her novels. *Chotti Munda Ebong Tar Teer* (Chotti Munda and His Arrow) is the most moving portrait of the systematic exploitation of the Munda tribe in India, while *Aranjer Adhikar* (Occupation of the Forest) tells the story of Birsa Munda, the Indian tribal freedom fighter, who

died in jail, and whose portrait now hangs in the Indian Parliament.

Despite official recognitions of the rights of the indigenous and tribals, Mahasweta Devi believed that the governments over the years had failed in proper rehabilitation of the tribals. She once said that government officials were afraid of what she would write next. Mahasweta Devi would send them letters over and over again to campaign for the cause of the communities she fought for. She would work for newspapers and write reports about bonded labour, eviction, and the flip side of development and economic marginalisation. She herself believed that her journalistic exposure from living among the tribal and indigenous people helped her. She would go on to aid them in uniting for their political ends, helping them with a programme and platform to voice their grievances and demand their rights. In 1986, she formed the *Adim Jati Aikya Parishad* (Tribal Unity Forum) with the aim to collectively mobilise these communities, to undo what the British had started by setting these communities against each other.

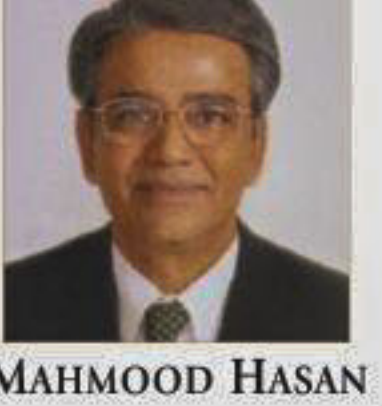
Mahasweta Devi was a woman defined by her courage to speak the truth to establishment. She stood for her cause and devoted her life for the rights of tribal and indigenous communities. The hardships, exploitation and marginalisation she wrote about are still a big part of Bangladesh and India, and therefore, in remembering her, let us remember her work. And that it is still to be completed.

The writer is a member of the editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

## Drama in Nepali politics

# Oli's ouster engineered?

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

incumbent government resigned on July 23, 2016 to make way for a new administration.

Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, Chairman of CPN (UML), was sworn-in as prime minister on October 12, 2015 and headed a coalition government supported by Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist Center (CPN-MC), Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), Madhesi People's Rights Forum-Democratic (MPRF-D), along with 13 other smaller parties.

On July 12, 2016, Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda), leader of CPN-MC, withdrew support to K. P. Oli accusing him of failing to honour agreements. The following day, a no confidence motion was filed in the Parliament. Oli decided to tender his resignation to the President before the vote, when the Nepali Congress, RPP and MPRF-D decided to jump on the bandwagon of Dahal.

In his valedictory speech on July 24, Oli said that the no-confidence motion was a "sudden attack" and was "mysterious". He said the move was "democratic in form, but conspiratorial in essence". It was not natural, considering its moment, condition and nature, he added. He also accused Dahal of practising "politics without morality" and "making politics dirty". He was "sad" that the government was changing at a time when it was overcoming the hindrances to reconstruction that the deadly earthquakes caused in 2015. He further warned that the nation would have to pay a high price for it.

Referring to ties with neighbouring countries, Oli said that his government promoted relations with India and China based on national independence, signing some trade

agreements with China, thereby ending dependence on a single nation for trade and commerce, and turning the nation into "land-linked" from "land-locked".

To obviate the effects of the five-month long crippling economic blockade by India in September 2015, Nepal signed 10 agreements, including a landmark transit trade deal, with China when Oli visited Beijing in March 2016. Oli hoped that the transit deal would end India's monopoly over



Nepali trade and commerce, and also relieve Kathmandu from pressures from Delhi. It has been described by analysts as "a major geo-political shift" in Sino-Nepali relations.

In earlier remarks, the veteran communist leader said, "Maintaining good relations with neighbouring countries is an important aspect of national security but we cannot

jeopardise national security for the sake of maintaining good neighbourly relations". However, he further added that interference in internal affairs of Nepal cannot be accepted, even though the country wants "good relations" with their neighbours.

Just before Prachanda pulled the rug from under Oli, the Nepali Congress, which was vehemently against Maoists, made an unholy deal with CPN-MC, which paved the way for Dahal to

in January 2018.

Nepali Congress and CPN-MC together have 289 members in the Parliament of 597 seats. The Madhes-based parties have 39 seats, which will play a vital role in the formation of the next government. However, it may prove costly for Dahal to cobble together a coalition, given his violent credentials.

The current sequence of events cannot be seen in isolation to the

demands of the Madhesis who are backed by Delhi. The blockade of Nepal by India and subsequent political unrest related to the new Constitution has cost more than 50 lives. The polarisation between the "Pahadis" and Madhesis is so deep that a threat for secession is gaining momentum in Terai.

India's External Affairs Ministry has considered K.P. Oli as an "ultra nationalist", and his Left-led alliance was perceived to be anti-Indian and pro-China. Despite repeatedly raising the Madhesi issue with Kathmandu to be more flexible to accommodate their demands, Prime Minister Oli did not budge from his stance. Another reason for Delhi's ire over K.P. Oli was his inclination towards Beijing. Under Oli, Nepal-India relations slumped to its lowest level ever. Political circles and media in Nepal openly accuse India for Oli's downfall. According to reports, Delhi now hopes that Oli's ouster will help restore balance in Nepal's relations with India. It is a pyrrhic victory for Delhi.

China, on the other hand, is worried about the political developments in Kathmandu. Chinese President Xi Jinping is scheduled to visit the Himalayan Republic later this year. Beijing had even tried to save K.P. Oli's government. But here, Delhi seems to have upstaged Beijing. According to some reports, the Nepali Congress, which is favoured by Delhi, prodded Dahal to topple Oli at Delhi's bidding. It is unlikely that Dahal will be able to change the Constitution and accommodate Madhesi demands, given the stiff opposition from Oli's UML.

It would be interesting to monitor how President Bidhya Devi Bhandari handles the incoming Maoist Supremo, who is expected to form the new government soon, as prime minister. To recall, Dahal in his earlier stint as prime minister was not a popular Head of Government. He resigned in anger, as former President Ram Baran Yadav refused to sack the then Army Chief.

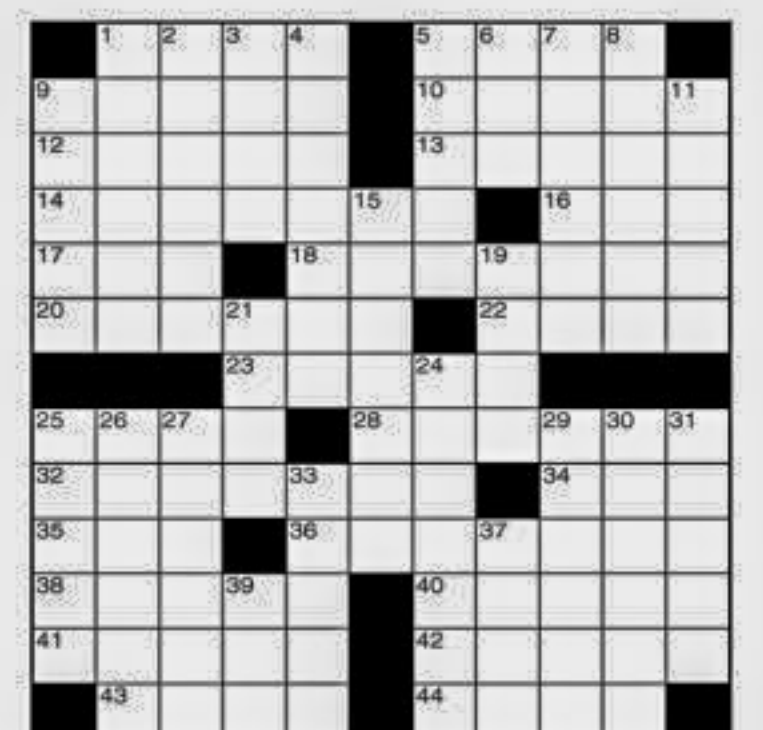
As of now, the stage is set for more drama in Nepali politics.

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.

The current sequence of events cannot be seen in isolation to the happenings over the past two years. The drafting of the Constitution has actually created a deep schism in the Nepali society.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Plays the ponies
  - 5 Rum-soaked cake
  - 9 Hawk's grabber
  - 10 Smells
  - 12 Concert
  - 13 Rolls's partner
  - 14 Cop's words to his partner
  - 16 Letter after sigma
  - 17 Indivisible
  - 18 Tutor's units
  - 20 Grammar study
  - 22 Looks over
  - 23 City on the Mohawk
  - 25 Look over
  - 28 Cotton cloth
  - 32 Desert group
  - 34 Ariz. neighbor
  - 35 Coach Parseghian
  - 36 Chess finish
  - 38 Spring sign
  - 40 Surgery tool
  - 41 Michigan city
  - 42 Happening
  - 43 "The Odd Couple"
- DOWN**
- 1 Noble domain
  - 2 Late hour
  - 3 Way of speaking
  - 4 Menace, in a way
  - 5 Drills
  - 6 Commotion
  - 7 Woman's younger beau
  - 8 Mysterious
  - 9 Folded food
  - 11 Yertle's creator
  - 15 Diego Rivera, for one
  - 19 Barking beast
  - 21 Melt base
  - 24 Cake toppers
  - 25 Muffler's kin
  - 26 Seasonal songs
  - 27 Mideast region
  - 29 "Be right with you"
  - 30 Sidewalk stuff
  - 31 Plain to see
  - 33 Lets off
  - 37 Donated



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

DOCS WAGO  
 ALOES ELOPE  
 RIVETS LEVEL  
 EVEREDCENT  
 SERMONS REO  
 READS TERN  
 DRE POD  
 EGGS BARBS  
 NOR DESIRED  
 DOODADS IRE  
 USUAL EDDIE  
 PENNE RAGED  
 DDAY MESS

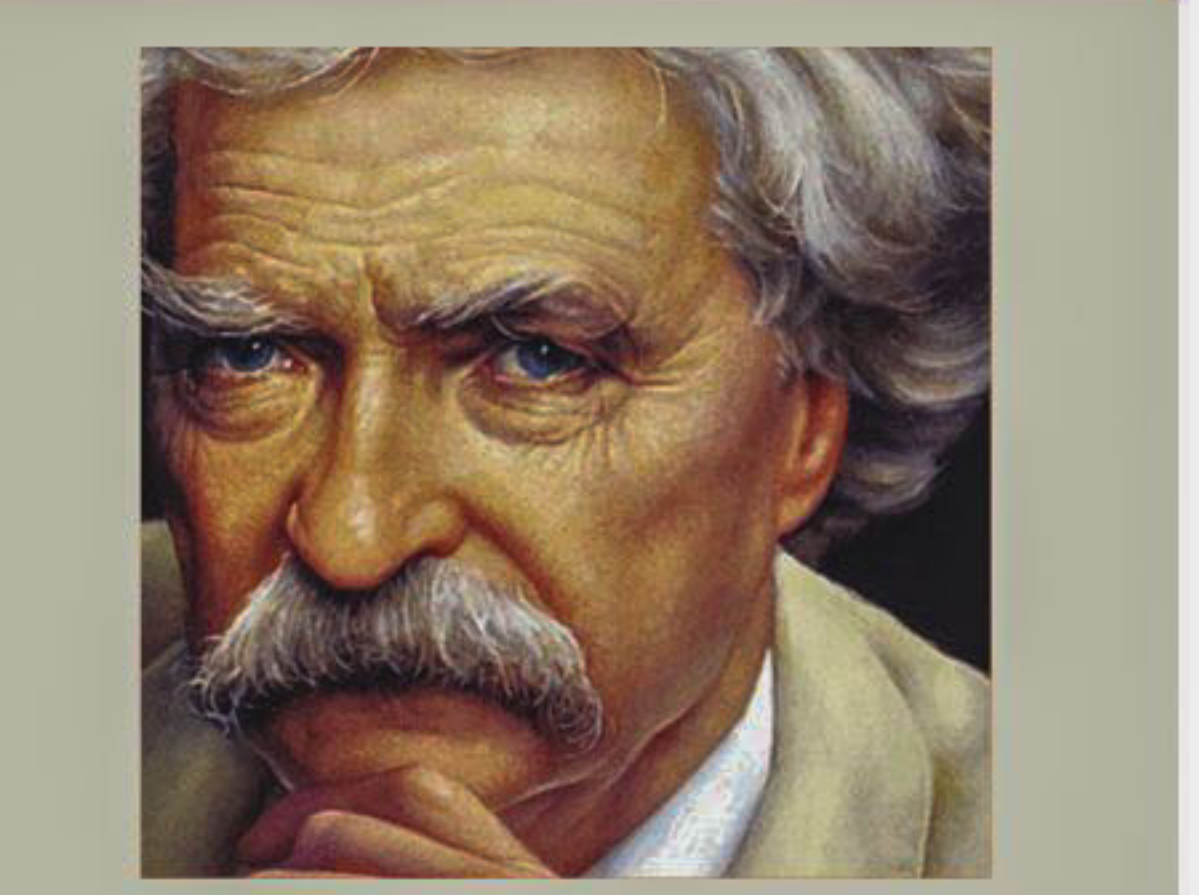
### BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



### BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott



### QUOTABLE Quote



MARK TWAIN

Go to Heaven for the climate, Hell for the