

BOOKS

Mahasweta Devi, Bengali Writer and Activist Who Fought Injustice, Dies at 90

By KAUSHIK SWAMINATHAN AUG. 2, 2016

NEW DELHI — Mahasweta Devi, a prominent Bengali writer and social activist who immersed herself in the lives of India's poor and marginalized as she chronicled the injustices against them in fiction, died on July 28 in Kolkata. She was 90.

The cause was a heart attack and multiple organ failure, her grandson, Tathagata Bhattacharya, said.

Ms. Devi had cast off the trappings of the middle class she was born into and chose to live simply, often roaming the country with her subjects as she did research. In more than 100 novels and short stories, she wrote of India's tribal communities and Maoist rebels, prostitutes and nomads, beggars and laborers.

In 1997 she earned the Ramon Magsaysay Award, which has been called the "Asian Nobel Prize," for her writing and activism on behalf of tribal communities.

"Her writing addressed one single word: injustice," G. N. Devy, a writer and activist who worked closely with Ms. Devi, said. "Wherever she saw what she thought was injustice, she plunged into the struggle and never looked back."

Written mainly in Bengali but incorporating tribal dialects, Ms. Devi's work has been translated into English, Japanese, Italian, French and several Indian languages.

3

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from an early age, observing her mother and aunt educating illiterate girls in Dhaka, where she spent part of her childhood.

She married the playwright Bijon Bhattacharya in 1947, and the couple lived in Kolkata (then Calcutta), where they had a son. She described her early married life as one of poverty, and she worked odd jobs to supplement her husband's income.

She wrote her first novel, "The Queen of Jhansi," at 30. It is a fictionalized account of a real-life queen turned warrior who dressed as a man and fought a doomed war against the British in the Indian Rebellion of 1857, which toppled the Mughal empire.

Researching the novel took her across north India, where she sat around fires with villagers as they related accounts of the queen that had been passed down through generations.

"Since then, I have a firm opinion that the most precious historical material is what is preserved in the memory of the common people," she said in an interview with the journal *Revolutionary Democracy* in 1999.

Ms. Devi spent decades documenting life among India's tribal communities. In her novel "Mother of 1084" (1974), she wrote of the grief of a bereaved mother fighting for the Maoist rebellion, an insurgency in India's tribal belt that has roiled parts of central and eastern India.

In "The Occupation of the Forest" (1977), she drew on accounts of the Indian tribal leader Birsa Munda, who fought the British for possession of forest land at the turn of the 20th century.

As an activist, Ms. Devi opposed West Bengal's policies of stripping indigenous people of their land, and established an organization that reported atrocities committed against tribes to India's National Human Rights Commission.

Critics complained that her writing could be simplistic in casting India's tribespeople as saints battling the villainous landlords who exploited them.

“Her tribal characters are too much the noble savage,” wrote Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the Indian cultural critic who translated a collection of Ms. Devi’s short stories into English.

Ms. Devi divorced Mr. Bhattacharya in 1964. The next year she married Asit Gupta, a writer and journalist. The two divorced in 1976. Ms. Devi’s son, Nabarun, died in 2014. She is survived by her grandson.

Those who knew her remembered her fondly for her sharp, irreverent tongue and for her dark humor, which was mixed with an almost childlike idealism.

“It was impossible to predict when, in the middle of the most polite conversation with persons she had not previously met, she would curtly dismiss civility and tell the person that he was a fraud,” Mr. Devy wrote in an essay on the Indian website *The Wire*.

“I am tapping my 90th year,” Ms. Devi said in 2013 at the Jaipur Literature Festival, “and look at how much damage I have done by being around.”

Nida Najar contributed reporting.

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