



CULTURE & SOCIETY

THE REPUBLIC OF DREAMS

Mahasweta Devi had people in tears at this year's Frankfurt Book Fair. Delivered with passionate heart, her inaugural speech about our freedoms still on hold stirs a kind of moral transformation. Excerpts

Repetition and recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions; for what is recollected has been, it is repeated backwards, whereas repetition properly so-called is recollected forward.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*



At 80-plus I move forward often stepping back into the shadows. Sometimes I am bold enough to step back into the sunlight. As a young person, as a mother, I would often move forward to when I was old. Amuse my son. Pretend I couldn't hear or see. Make mockery of memory, forget things that had happened a moment ago. These games were for fun. Now they are no longer funny. My life has moved forward and is repeating itself. I am repeating myself. Recollecting for you what has been. What is. What could have been. May have been.

Indian culture is a tapestry of many weaves, many threads. The weaving is endless as are the shades of the pattern. The pattern shifts, flows, stutters, forms again and changes shape from one season to the other. I see one India in the pattern. You see another

See the tree, the forest, the field lush with crops, a stream dazzling in sunlight. And see, the spotted deer are jumping and fleeing to the forest, the mothers are filling the pitchers from the stream, clutching their children. And the houses are the ones they left behind at Badihatta. The sun is leaning to see the earth. The peasants are irrigating their fields. What an expanse of forest. How green the hills are.

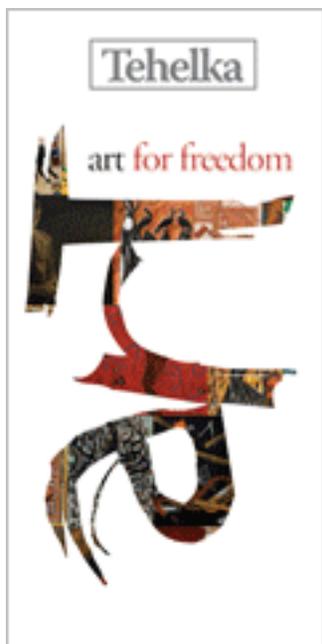
Nothing happens unless you know how to dream. The Establishment is out to destroy, by remote control, all the brain cells that induce dreams. But some dreams manage to escape. I am after the dreams that have escaped from jail. The right to dream is what allows mankind to survive. If you end the right to dream — which the entire world and everyone is doing — you destroy the world. The right to dream should be the first fundamental right. The right to dream. [...]

There's a story about Nanak — his father made him sit in a shop, told him to sell goods... dus, gyarah, barah, tera... tera, tera, tera... and he gave everything away. Everything is yours. With me, everything became tera... nothing touches the inside. Material things don't touch me, I remain an outsider, I can't always be an insider. Genuine warmth, real understanding, some friendship, a few strange things touch me, but I'm an outsider and an insider at the same time. [...]

Since the 1980s, I have been vocal about the daily injustice and exploitation faced by the most marginalised and dispossessed of our people: tribals, the landless rural poor who then turn into itinerant labour or pavement dwellers in cities. Through reports in newspapers, through petitions, court cases, letters to the authorities, participation in activist organisations and advocacy, through the grassroots journal I edit, Bortika, in which the dispossessed tell their own truths, and finally through my fiction, I have sought to bring the harsh reality of this ignored segment of India's population to the notice of the nation, I have sought to include their forgotten and invisible history in the official history of the nation. I have said over and over, our Independence was false; there has been no Independence for these dispossessed peoples, still deprived of their most basic rights.

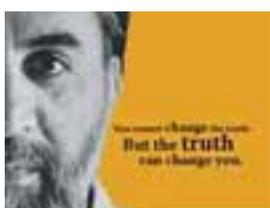
Let the people trace their hands over

How to save and protect one's culture in these circumstances? Which culture do we protect? And what do we mean when we speak of Indian culture in the



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**every alphabet until
they can write for
themselves:
I know, I can, I will**

21st century? What culture? Which India? Sixty years after our hard-won Independence, the khadi sari is India just as the mini skirt and the backless choli is. A bullock cart is India just as much as is the latest Toyota or Mercedes car. Illiteracy haunts us, yet the same India produces men and women at the forefront of medicine, science and technology. Eight-year-old children toil mercilessly, facing unimaginable working conditions and abuse as child labourers. That is India. On the other hand, there is another lot of eight-year-olds who spend their time in air-conditioned classrooms and call their mothers at lunch break using their personal mobile phones. That too is India. Satyam Shivam Sundaram is India. Choli ke peechchey kya hai is also India. The multiplex and the mega mall are India. The snake charmer and the maharishi — they too are India.

Indian culture is a tapestry of many weaves, many threads. The weaving is endless as are the shades of the pattern. Somewhere dark, somewhere light, somewhere saffron, somewhere as green as the fields of new paddy, somewhere flecked with blood, somewhere washed cool by the waters of a Himalayan spring. Somewhere the red of a watermelon slice. Somewhere the blue of an autumn sky in Bengal. Somewhere the purple of a musk deer's eye. Somewhere the red of a new bride's sindoor. Somewhere the threads form words in Urdu, somewhere in Bengali, somewhere in Kannada, somewhere in Assamese, yet elsewhere in Marathi. Somewhere the cloth frays. Somewhere the threads tear. But still it holds. Still. It holds.

The pattern shifts, flows, stutters, forms again and changes shape from one season to the other. I see one India in the pattern. You see another. Light and shadow play. History and modernity collide. Superstition and myth, Rabindrasangeet and rap, Sufi and Shia and Sunni, caste and computers, text and sub-plot, laughter and tears, governments and oppositions, reservations and quotas, struggles and captivity, success and achievement, hamburgers and Hari Om Hari, Sanskrit and sms, the smell of rain and the sound of the sea. A seamless stitching. Many, many hands have stitched, are stitching and will continue to stitch India. My country. Torn, tattered, proud, beautiful, hot, humid, cold, sandy, bright, dull, educated, barbaric, savage, shining India. My country. And its myriad cultures. From time immemorial to now, the 21st country. From the Indus Valley to the bluetooth handset, India has seen it all, contains it all within itself and its cultures. There is room in India for all faiths, all languages, all people. Despite the communal crises, despite the fundamentalism, the backwardness of rural life, the memories of underdevelopment which are no memory but reality for us, the threat of aids, tsunamis, earthquakes, floods and droughts, farmer suicides, police violence, environmental disasters wreaked by industries and farmland being bought over by multinational companies, despite the battering by history and circumstance, India still is. Its culture still is. Hence we all still are. India has learnt to survive, to adapt, to keep the old with the modern, to walk hand in hand with the new millennium whistling a tune from the dawn of time. This is truly the age when the joota is Japanezi, the patloon Englistani, the topi Roosi. But the dil — the dil is and always will remain Hindustani.

As we face the future, and as I stand here, invited to speak of my country's culture before such an eminent gathering and at such an honourable occasion, I wish to share my dream of where I would like to see my India go. I have spoken of the fundamental right to dream. I would now like to exercise that right.

I dream of an India where the mind is without fear and the head is held high. Where knowledge is free. Where the world has not been broken into fragments by narrow domestic walls. Where words come out of the depth of truth. Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection. Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way in the dreary sand of dead habit.

I dream of an India to which the world 'backward' does not and cannot ever apply. I wish to be Third World no more but First, the only world. I wish for children to be educated. I wish for women to step into the light. I wish for justice for the common man. Survival for the farmer. Homes for the poor. And hope for all. I wish for debts to cease. For poverty to vanish. For hunger to become a bad word that no one utters. I wish for the environment to be protected, to be loved and restored. I wish the land to be healed, the waters to be pure again. For the tiger to survive. I wish for self reliance, for self respect, for independence from the shackles of superstition. I wish for equal medical aid for all.

For light and water and a roof above every head. I wish for more and more books to be written, to be published, in every language there is in the country. Let the words pour out. Let the stories be told. Let the people read. Let them learn to read. To trace their fingers over every alphabet until they can spell their names. Their addresses. Until they can write for themselves: I know. I can. I will. Let us fight ignorance with knowledge. Let us battle hatred with logic. Let us slay evil with the sword of the pen.

I wish for no more satis, no more dowry deaths, no more honour killings, no more flesh being bought and sold. Let no more parents sell their children to survive. Let no more mothers drown their daughters in the dead of night. Let the downtrodden awake, let the forgotten faces and the muffled voices arise to claim their own. Let the pattern make room, let these new threads find place, let new colours set afire the tapestry. Set ablaze the future. Into that heaven of freedom, let my India awaken again and again. It is a big dream, I know. But not an impossible one.

When I speak of Indian culture, then, I speak of all this. Culture is what will take us into the future yet keep us in close contact with our roots, our history, our tradition, our heritage. Culture will let us take a quantum leap and land on the moon but first, before all that, it must help us take a few small steps

towards understanding ourselves better, towards knowing each other better. Culture must once again remind us to be a tolerant and truly secular people.

I have tried in my own way to give you a picture of this culture. But how am I to even to begin arriving at a definition that will be acceptable to all across an India that is so chaotic. So calm. So flexible. So rigid. So rich. So poor. So understanding. So easy to be misunderstood. After all, there are many Indias, as I say over and over again. Simultaneous. Even parallel.

And whose culture is it anyway? Yours? Mine? Theirs? There are so many 'theirs' in the land of my birth who have nothing but the harsh landscape of surviving from day to day. The dispossessed remain with us after six decades of becoming possessed of a freedom we all fought for. They all fought for.

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.

This then is my fight. My dream. In my life and in my literature.

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