

Claiming Space: A Study of Manohar Mouli Biswas' poetry

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Abstract

The main effort of the current Dalit movement in Bengal is to claim the space for the underprivileged groups. The Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha has reemerged as the Dalit movement in Bengal, despite numerous obstacles. The Dalit literary movement did not develop here in the same way that it did in other areas of the country because the unadulterated outpouring of Bangla Dalit Writings yearns for a distinct identity while disproving the widely held belief that caste hierarchy is nonexistent in the state. The new influx of Bengali Dalit narratives, however, disproves the prevailing assumption.

The goal of this essay was to analyse Maouli Manahar Biswas's two poetry collections, *Poetic Rendering yet Unborn* (2014) and *The Wheel Will Spin* (2014). (2010). It intends to shed light on the efforts made by Bengal's Dalits to carve out a niche for themselves in literature that was previously dominated by upper caste Bengali Bhadrakalok. The current work also anticipated the deconstruction of Manohar Mouli Biswas' poetry as a model for similar writing.

Key Words: Ideology, Discours, Chandala, Namashudra movement, Matua cult, Partition, Marichjhapi Massacre, Identity.

Introduction:***I 've been floating******This is a life of a refugee******Like a floating hyacinth***— Jatin Bala, *The Life but Smearred with a Stagnant Myth*

Jatin Bala, a writer from the Dalit community of Bengal, wrote these lines about how hard it is to find a home or a place for the poor Dalit refugees. The look for a space or an 'address' is the earnest effort of the Dalit movement in West Bengal is dedicated for the redefinition of their caste identification, hard the set up traditional ideological discourses in the state. At some stage in the previous couple of decades, however, the Dalit movement in Bengal has made a tremendous impact on the socio-political shape. The soul struggles of the movement lie in the method to claim a separate space. This is a fact that the class of Dalit literature has no longer earned that plenty importance as compared to the other parts of the country. But these days, Bengali Dalit writers dismiss the well-known myth that "caste doesn't matter anymore in Bengal." In her introduction to *"Is there Dalit writing in Bengal?"* Meenakashi Mukherjee described:

If one accepts the truth of this claim it will be necessary to probe the historical circumstances that result in this relative indifference to cast identity among Bengalis or one could challenge the statement as a comportsing platitude perpetrated by the upper castes who dominate the literary world of Bengal.

(4116)

In terms of caste-based discrimination, this linguistic region is not an exception from the rest of the country. At the beginning of the twentieth century, caste discrimination was visible in almost all spares of life. In the introduction of Manahar mouli Biswas's

autobiography *Surviving in My World* (2015), Shekar Bandopadhyaya, an eminent scholar pointed out the existence of caste hierarchy and reasons for the emergence of Bengali Dalit writings in the following way-

As for Bangla, it is only recently that we have seen the publication of a few autobiographies by Dalit intellectuals, providing us with a rare glimpse into the lives and experiences of the Dalit in Bengal, and more importantly, giving us a clear idea of how caste discrimination worked or still works in this linguistic region. This literature thus explores that popular bhadrakalok myth that caste does not matter in Bengal. (Biswas xi)

In his essay *Dharmer Adhikar* (1911), Rabindranath Tagore painfully described the abject and deplorable socio-economic and religious conditions of the state's *Namashudra* community. He wrote: "I saw in the village that no other caste tills the land with *Namashudra*... (Byapari 4118 sq). Again in the same essay, Tagore argued that the mental cause of the deplorable conditions was caste fanaticism. According to him, "it is not human nature to stoop like that. It was a religious prohibition that forced people to behave this way. Men and women in our country have been tortured and discriminated against in the name of religion.

However, these caste hierarchies are not a thing of the past. The Dalits of the state still feel marginalized and are treated as outcasts in many ways in almost all walks of life. The recent outpouring of Bengali Dalit writings reveals various layers of such discrimination. Unlike the 13th-century bhakti poets, modern Bengali Dalit writers not only criticize such prejudices, but seek to create a separate space within the mainstream literary discourse. The main voices of Bengali Dalits include Manoranjan Byapari, Jatin Bala, Mauli Manohar Biswas, Kalani Thakur Charal, Kapil Krishna Thakur, Kishore Biswas, Dr. Manorjan Gopal Hira Jagabandhu Biswas, Sripada Das and others.

Monahar Mouli Biswas who is the president of the contemporary Dalit literary movement, *Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha*, is, *one* of the leading Dalit voices of the state. As Shekhar Bandhapadhyia rightly mentions, “Manohar Mouli Biswas has been a leading figure in the Dalit literary movement in West Bengal for almost fifty years now, and his autobiography is informed by a reflexive consciousness that is distinctively Dalit” (Biswas xii).

The majority of the untouchable Community of Bengal earlier was known as *Chandala*. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the two Dalit leaders Harichand Thakur and Guru Chand Thakur from Bengal launched a social movement known as the *Namashudra* movement opposing all kinds of caste oppressions and discrimination. They also formed a new religion identified as the *Matua* Cult rejecting the so-called rigid rituals and religious practices of Brahmanism. At a time, the movement became so powerfully built that Dr. B.R Ambedkar, while not certified to be nominated from his own state Maharashtra, got elected in the constitute assemble in 1946 from the Bengal province. However, one year later, the partition of Bengal in 1947 did not only crush the spirit of the movement but also dispersed the whole Namashudra community in various places. Before the partition of Bengal, Biswas was born into a Namashudra family. After the partition of Bengal in 1947, he crossed the newly formed border and became a refugee in his country.

Biswas has described in great detail the different layers of class and caste discrimination in his autobiography *Surviving in My World* (2015). In the opinion of G.J.V Prasad, “Manohar Mouli Biswas is a significant voice in the growing corpus of the English translation of Dalit literature from West Bengal... He has made the connection between the poverty-stricken life of his community and caste.” (Biswas i). In this book, Biswas discusses the different problems of the lower caste people compare to the people from the upper caste community. After the partition also the community had to go through the same treatment. When the

majority of the upper caste displaced refugees received rehabilitation within the city of Kolkata and its surroundings but Biswas argues that the majority of the lower caste displaced refugees were forcefully “misplaced” to different parts of the country. He argues that the segregation of people belonging to the priestly caste in refugee camps is astonishing. Those with good caste pearls in their pockets were given priority when settling in commercial areas, business centers, developing areas and fashionable areas. On the other hand, those who had bad caste pearls in their pockets were given settlements in hilly provinces, wastelands, unproductive areas, and swamps. And most of these people received assignments outside of Bengal (Bishwas, 91).

Biswas’s autobiography makes the readers familiar with the Namashudra community and its culture, belief systems, social, economic, educational, and religious conditions. This is the world of the Namashudra community where the lower-caste children are born untouchables, grows up as untouchables, and die as untouchables. As he says, “I wrote this autobiography out of pain. This pain is belittled for being unwanted of being enslaved”(Biswas xx).

As the decades pass, these "refugee Dalits" fall behind in nearly every stock of life. West Bengal's Dalit population makes up nearly 30% of the state's total population, but Dalit voices in this state are not as well heard as in other parts of the country (Dalits, Wikipedia). The literary contributions of the Bengali Dalits to the ongoing Dalit literary movement across the country continue to be ignored.

Those who remained in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) became a minority in a Muslim-dominated country. The rest, who came to India and left their property across the new border due to mob violence, turned out to be refugees. They lived outdoors under trees, on railroad platforms, roadsides, and in refugee camps. In the name of rehabilitation, many of them have been forcibly relocated to Dandakaranya Madhya Pradesh, the Andaman and

Nicobar Islands, and other uninhabited areas of India. Some of the Dalit refugees accuse the state of biasing against them. Monaranjan Byapari (2007), one of the refugees and leading Dalit writer in Bengal, denounces this prejudice in his article *Is there any Dalit Writings in Bengal?*

When the upper caste people uprooted from East Bengal set up some 149 unauthorized new colonies in and around *Kolkata*- in *Jadavpur*, *Dumdum*, *Sodepur*, etc, the state did not take any action against them. But when the *Namashudras* attempted to occupy an uninhabited island in the *Sundarbans* area called *Marichjhapi*, unspeakable atrocities were committed by the state machinery to evict them from there (Byapari 4119)

This massacre is best known as the *Marichijapi Massacre* in 1979. Nearly hundreds and thousands of Bengali Dalit refugees, including children and the elderly, have been killed. Newly built huts were burned and women were raped during the evacuation. (*Marichjhapi's Silence*). Meenakshi Muharji calls it "one of the darkest episodes in Bengali history". It was conveniently erased from national memory until writer Amitav Ghosh recreated it vividly in his 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide* (*ibid.*).

Biswas tries not only to highlight the struggle of Dalits for survival but also to create a literary space in the mainstream literary canon of Bengal. In his poem '*Comrade, I Pay a Red salute*', Biswas highlights some of the major atrocities happened to the Dalits of West Bengal. In this poem, he has also described *Marichjhapi Massacre* that happened in 1979.

The poet feels pity not only for the suffering of his own *Namshudra* community but also for the pathetic conditions of the Tribal community of Bengal at large. In this poem, he also talks about The *Cuni Kotal* incident that happened on 16 August 1992, when a tribal girl *Cuni kotal* from *Lodha Tribal Community* of Bengal, also a student of *Vidhaya Sagar*

University of Mednapur district of West Bengal, became a victim of caste hatred and committed suicide (ChuniKotal). Likewise, the poet discusses the case of Sarama sit, where a Dalit woman was fined when she entered a temple to perform puja. He also highlights many other similar incidents in this poem, such as the *Bharnabari* incident, *Birbhanpur* incident, Karandigir Bhangapara, Singur and Nandigram massacres, etc. The poet laments such terrible events. "Let call your name and my name

Be Marchjhapi's days of mass massacre

Your name my name is Padmaja Mandi

And one chuni kotal". (Poetic Rendering 63)

In another poem titled "Separated rooms in the yard", Biswas attempts to describe some of the painful experiences of Dalit refugees due to partition. Such suffering was justified as follows.

"A long line between the two courtyards

Separates me (Poetic Rendering 40)

In the same poem, the poet likens the plight of Dalit refugees in an interesting way to flies entangled in a spider's web. He says, "Like flies entangled in a net/The iron hand is stronger and stronger" (Poem Translation 41).

Also in his follow-up poems "The Winter Wind Blows" and "Torai Deshe" he describes the unforgettable and horrific experiences of Bengali Dalits naked in refugee camps during the winter and summer seasons.

In another poem called "Broken Bracelets", Biswas finds a parallel between the life of a Dalit refugee and a broken bracelet. Interestingly, the term "Dalit" means "broken" and the word "refugee" means someone who refuses to be accepted by all. Do not treat broken bracelets as they have no value and toss them in the trash. Thus, according to the poet, these Bengali Dalit refugees were undesirable people. So sending Dalit refugees to other places like

Dhandakaranya and Andaman-Nicobar Island is like throwing broken bracelets in the trash. So they had to live a miserable life under trees, on railroad tracks, and on the roadsides of refugee camps. The poet described their condition as follows: "Lying roadside broken and uncared" (The Wheel 167). Even today, it is easy to find these unwanted refugees in the dense forests of Dhandakaranya and other parts of India. They may also have been located in other parts of West Bengal, in the slums of Kolkata, Sealdah and Bonga railway stations. Physical labor is done in major cities. Thus they fought for their existence. Dalit refugees are forced to leave for the cities to earn a living. While male refugees are mostly engaged in manual labor such as rickshaws and cleaners, many female refugees work as *jis* (servants) in the City of Joy. The local train from Sealdah to Bonga is called *Jhi* Local, a derogatory term coined by the *Bhadroloks* of Bengal. But they see the return as a kind of 'come home' after a hard day's work. To give you a clear idea of this daily suffering, the poet says: Therefore, they suffer psychologically as well as physically. In the poem "Perception", Biswas regretfully refers to one of the bitter experiences he had in his life. When he was a student he heard the very sarcastic term *Sonarchand*. In fact, the term "*Sonar Chand*" is made up of the first two initials of two words meaning "golden moon", and is a sarcastic expression for prospective caste students who are booked in terms of admissions and work. (Biswas 31).

In the poem Polishing Shoes, the poet describes how the proud *Bodhrolok* of the upper class insulted a Dalit boy who was polishing his shoes. He says; "Here your mother gave birth to you / your grandmother gave birth to your baptism (Ps 13-14).

However, Biswas is very positive about the bright future of Dalits in West Bengal. In his poem "Ode to the West Wind," P. B. Shelley, when he felt the thorns of his life bleed, asked the West Wind to lift the thorns like a loom, care, and clouds. In his poem Mirror of the Dalits, Biswas refers to his English magazine, The Mirror of the Dalits, spreading the news of their silent suffering everywhere. He says:

Take a small part of me and scatter everywhere

Invisible self, I will touch all five senses.

I'm no longer, where I live, ("The Wheel" 42)

Conclusion:

After 70 years of independence, most of West Bengal's Dalits are still fighting to survive. Unfortunately, many of them are still landless, unemployed and homeless, living in slums under makeshift, tattered tents along the railroad tracks. On the one hand, the Dalits of Bengal who live on the outskirts of Bengal still struggle to shake off their identity as 'untouchables'. Because they are refugees, they often do not receive state support. Also, people residing outside Bengal such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan will lose their linguistic identity. Many Dalits in Bengal do not have or have lost ID cards identifying them as Indian citizens. As a result, they pose as illegal Bangladeshi illegal immigrants and are subjected to frequent harassment and torture by the police. However, Bengali Dalit writers said "Can subordinates speak?" Bengal's junior officers therefore spoke in their own way. However, Dalit writers of the state face many problems in publishing their work, the so-called "aesthetic standards" of their work, and translating their work into other languages, not just English. Despite all the upheaval, the Bengal Dalit movement is moving fast towards a national Dalit movement. It can be said that the Dalit literary movement is beginning to take root in Bengal. Byapari echoed this opinion at the end of his article -

"At the beginning of the 21st century, it is clear that dalit literature in Bengal can no longer be wished away or consigned to invisibility or relegated to the margins. Whether one likes it or not, this sapling has taken root in the soil." (Byapari 4120).

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