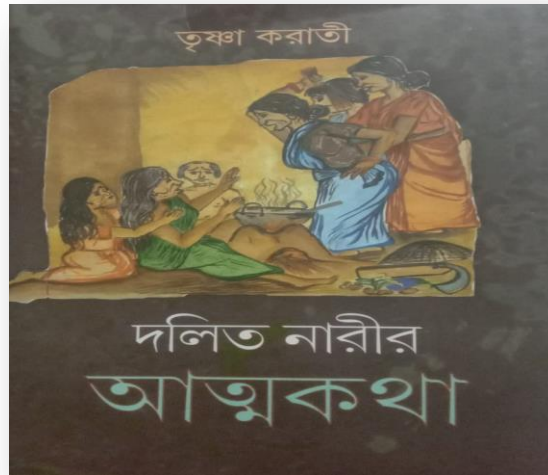


Trishna Karati's *Dalit Nareer Atmakatha*: A Book Review

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A note on the reviewer: Dr. Joylal Das, is an Assistant Professor in English at Alipurduar University (Erstwhile Alipurduar College), West Bengal. He has done his doctoral thesis on Dalit writings from West Bengal. His area of interest covers Dalit literature, Indian writings in English and in English translation, local historiography, literature and culture from margin. He has attended some national and international seminars and conferences. Side by side he has published some research papers in journals and chapters in edited books. Besides academic works, he writes poems on marginal people, marginal culture, marginal society etc.

The Review of Dalit *Nareer Atma Katha*

The name of struggle is Trishna Karati, who in spite of being born in and brought up in an impoverished Dalit Namasudra family, succeeds in securing a prestigious job of Assistant Professor at Alipurduar University. She hails from a poor family at Naxalbari. She has written her autobiography to express her pent up feelings of living in a hierarchical society. This autobiography has been published from a reputed publishing house in Kolkata, Gangchil in 2021. Her autobiography, *Dalit Nareer Atmakata* has authentically documented the struggles of Karati and her family in a class and caste divided society. It tends to be an inspiring saga for the thousands of Dalit girls who are denied of position of honour in this caste dictated society.

She has written this autobiography at the age of thirty. That is why it covers only her experiences extending from material deprivation in childhood, and desperate struggles to get education to her ultimate success as an Assistant Professor. She lived in a Dalit world, the world of deprivation, the world of thousands of lacks, the world of malnutrition, and the world of powerlessness. Her world is a world of darkness which is metaphorically suggested by the author at the very beginning of the autobiography. Because of their inability to pay the electricity bill, the connection to their home was cut off. They were compelled to spend the night in darkness without having provisions of candle or kerosene oil.

The autobiography opens with the darkness that encircles Dalit life without a chasm from which a flame of light can enter into. She writes:

It is moonlit night with the full moon. A lady with four children surrounding her is sitting on the bed. She is their mother. The room is dark. Lights are not out to enjoy the romantic beauty of the night. They could not pay the electricity bill within due date, electricity connection is cut off by the person in charge (1).

Little and innocent Trishna, totally ignorant about the reality of the harsh Dalit life, would ask her mother, “Mother, why have we such scarcity? Why do we suffer too much? When will such scarcity be ended? When will we all become happy” (Karati 1)?

The mother did not find answer to all these questions. But they made her determined that she would have to try her best to educate her children. She knew from the core of her heart that it is only educational which can help them to climb up the social ladder. Once, the icon of the Dalits, Baba Saheb Ambedkar urged the Dalits to be united, to be agitated and to be educated. Like the father of Manohar Mouli Biswas, the banyan tree of Bengali Dalit literature, Trishna’s mother was optimistic about the role of education for betterment of their lives. Biswas writes in his autobiography, “The possibility of living a life of self-respect, free of condescension, always occupied Baba’s mind. This is why Baba wholeheartedly accepted my interest in education” (65). This same thought is echoed in Karati’s *Dalit Nareer Atmakatha*.

Another name of the Dalit world is poverty. The Karati family did not have the provisions to bear the expense of educating four children, but the mother was stubborn to educate them

somehow. Her father could not meet the both ends by working on a meager wage as a helper of mason. So, the mother worked in five to six households as a maid, and sometimes she cooked in the local Bandhan Bank.

This can be said that Trishna was fortunate in her school or college days as she had not to face the caste discrimination in a blatant way in schools and colleges. The agony of exclusion felt at a very tender age was an eye opener for Sharan Kumar Limbale, the Titan of Dalit literature, about the ugly face of caste-based society. Caste discrimination at school wounded the psyches of the Mahar children while they were just budding. The boys from the upper castes had a separate playground where the entry of the Mahar children was prohibited, "We played one kind of game while the high-caste village boys played another. The two games were played separately like two separate whirlwinds" (Limbale 2). They were compelled to smear the walls or floors of the school with cow dung. Omprakash Valmiki became the target of ill-treatment from his classmates as well as teachers. He writes: "The boys would beat me in any case, but the teachers also punished me (Valmiki 13). He was excluded from various extracurricular activities. He was sent to school for study, but he was made to sweep the class rooms and school compound. But, Trishna has received affection from her teachers unlike Sharan Kumar Limbale or Omprakash Valmiki who became victims of caste discrimination at every step on their way to getting education. However, it does not mean that Trishna Karati has not become the victim of caste discrimination. She had to hear abusive words for her being a lower caste Namasudra. She writes, "While walking along the road we can feel that the people are treating us as untouchable"(21).

The path from a one-roomed house at Naxalbari to Alipurduar University was not made of flowers but of thorns on which she got bled at times. The journey was like an uphill journey full of risky bends. She did to have the provisions to take tuition during her under graduation, neither was there any guide.

The entry of the Dalits into the mainstream society tends to be difficult one because of the mindset and mentality of the members of a hierarchical society which feels comfort in oppressing and suppressing them. In the social circle of the main stream a Dalit is an unwelcomed intruder who as if pollutes the sanctity of the restricted fold. Trishna proved to be a good student from her early school days. Without any professional training in want of money and opportunities, she successfully took part in different extra-curricular activities. The fact that she has inborn qualities to shine in future becomes a cause of headache for the social dictators. So long the marginalized people remain bowed to the centre; sharp reactions are not hurled at them. But, when they want to held their heads high, the ugly teeth of society get exposed. This caste-ridden society cannot bear to see the fact of a Dalit family's endeavour of empowerment through education. They did not leave any stone unturned to hamper the education of the siblings of the Karati family. They would play tape recorder at a high pitch so that they could not concentrate themselves on study,

When we cross the road, they use abusive words with an intention of hurting us. When they insult us in the name of caste, we get hurt. We are poor. Education for the poor is not suitable in the society. The children of a maid are destined to be born maid. They laugh

and taunt at us. Actually, they cannot bear that a poor and Dalit mother is educating her children. The poor do not have the right to be equal with the privileged. Why does a dwarf try to touch the moon(Karati 30)?

This autobiography is not only the autobiography of the author herself, but autobiography of the thousands of Dalit girls who do not find opportunities to expand their petals. Actually, Dalit autobiographies have emerged as the mouthpiece of the whole Dalit community of the authors' belonging. *Dalit Nareer Atmakatha* has assumed a representational character.

Those who live in the margin are humiliated and exploited in every sphere. Justice is denied to them. Every line and every page of the autobiography bears the evidence how the society has deprived the family of honour, material possessions, social dignity etc. Police, court, judge, law-everything is under the control of those who are in the centre. She writes, "If you don't have the financial hold, nobody will stand by you"(32).

The subaltern people bear to live by digesting insult and sneer. The privileged laugh at their dress up, way of living, culture, and everything. Karati was the target of that section of society. Durga Puja appears to the Hindus as a festival of joy. Everybody dresses in new clothes. But Karati family could not provide new garments to its members, even to the children. "Everybody wears new clothes. On seeing them we longs for new dress, but we do not have the mean to buy it"(25). For, this they were taunted by others; even her friend told her on seeing her cheap sandals, "Have you brought the shoes from latrine to wear" (Karati 26)?

The autobiography, written in the second decade of the 21st century covering the experiences gathered in the last decade of 20th century and the beginning of 21st century falsifies the saying that caste does not exist in West Bengal. But the subtle existence of caste discrimination cannot be seen unless one falls a victim to it. Karati family feels it well. The lower caste people have their reserved priest to perform religious rites. The priests, who are reserved for the higher castes, do not come to the houses of the Dalits to offer worship. About this discrimination Manohar Mouli Biswas observes, "There were separate Brahmin priests for conducting rituals in low-caste Shudra homes. It was only they who came to worship in the Shudra neighborhood"(68). Karati writes, "I notice that the priest who comes to our home for *puja*, is not coming now though we have told him to come. Later on we find that one neighbour has told him that we are lower caste, we are Namasudra"(20).

They would live in a joint family and they had one single room in their share. Sitting on a single bed of the room four siblings would read together. The family income ran short to bear the expenses of the education for the four children. They could not buy new books when they got promoted to new classes. They would buy old books from senior students at half price.

Dalit literature has given up the literary tradition followed by main stream writers and their aesthetics. The autobiography of Trishna does not aim at providing pleasure or evoking finer sentiments through cultivated gestures. Rather, it deals with the bitter experiences of the Dalits and the poor in the most uncouth language. Though she has written *Dalit Nareer Atmakatha* at

the age of thirty, it bears the stamp of a mature artist in its delineation of a realistic picture of the author's life, which can be applicable to any member of the subaltern group in general.

Bitter experiences gathered at every walk of the small span of the author's life lie scattered in the pages of this autobiography, *Dalit Nareer Atmakatha*. Hardships and trifling have not bowed her spirit; rather they have made her determined to reach the goal. Now, she is a success. The story of her success is narrated in the autobiography to inspire the thousands of impoverished Dalits. Dalit literature is not only a literature but also a cultural movement for Dalit empowerment. Karati is determined to move ahead the movement which begins with her publication of the autobiography.

To sum up the review may be quoted what Trishna Karati has said in a lecture: "I have endured much. But I will endure no more. I will not forget the struggles of my parents. I have lost my sister. Now, I will do something for the common people"