

# **The Dalits Write Back:**

## **The Fourth World Identity of the Namasudras in Bengal**

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by

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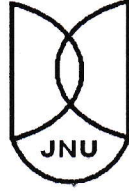
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This dissertation titled “**The Dalits Write Back: The Fourth World Identity of the Namasudras in Bengal**” submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

*Boudhayan Biswas*  
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*To my parents, who made it possible...*

*" না মানি বেদ, না মানি ব্রাহ্মণ "*

(We do not follow the Vedas, nor obey the brahmins)

*- Harichand Thakur (1812-1878)*

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## Introduction

“Can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics?”

- Gayatri Spivak, Post-Colonial Theory: A Critical Introduction

Dalit literary movements embarked on a journey beyond the jealous pages of elitist historiography, providing a solution to the troublesome tussle between representation, representability and the unrepresentable. The body of writing that is designated today as dalit literature began less than half a century ago in Maharashtra. The term was first used in 1958 and took some time to gain currency. This literature is part of a protest movement against the caste-based inequality that has been ingrained in our society for centuries. The language of this writing is direct, blunt and explosive, devoid of stylistic elegance and it creates a problem for the literary establishment by challenging its aesthetic standards. Sprouting out as an immediate effect of the Little Magazine movement, the dalits who were regarded as untouchables, yet in majority, held the first dalit literary conference in 1958 in Mumbai. The sound of the muted voices was heard and the active participation of the pioneers like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule made the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society) significant enough to rebel against the prejudiced downtrodden status of the dalits in post-independence India. Motivated by the Black Panther Party, a revolutionary movement amongst African-Americans, Namdeo Dhasal and J V Pawar founded the reformist anti-caste organization, Dalit Panthers in 1972. The Manifesto of the Panthers clearly stated that, “Untouchability is the most violent form of exploitation on the surface of the earth”<sup>1</sup> and voiced its concerns regarding the social, economic and cultural inequality of the dalits within the hierarchized caste framework and became a symbol of change where the primary aim was the liberation of dalits. Now who were the dalits? Dalits were excluded from the Indo-Aryan upper caste proposed fourfold *varna* system and formed the unmentioned fifth *varna* called *Panchama*. The word ‘dalit’ is derived from Sanskrit, meaning ground or suppressed. While Scheduled Caste (SC) is the legal name for those who were formerly considered untouchable, the term dalit also encompasses Scheduled Tribes (ST) and other historically disadvantaged communities who were traditionally excluded from the society.



But sudras, on the other hand, are part of the *Chaturvarnya* system which has the following hierarchical classification: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Sudras. Though the sudras were not untouchable, they were still placed at the bottom of the gradation and were subjected to innumerable ignominies and disabilities and were prevented from rising above the condition fixed for them by law. The Constitution of India categorically places the sudras along with its sub-castes within the Scheduled Caste community due to their tortured past similar to the dalits. As there is no specific literature named sudra literature, they were incorporated within the broader margins of dalit literature.

In West Bengal, dalit writing began nearly 20 years after Maharashtra, although the central figure of the dalit movement, B.R. Ambedkar, had a close relationship with this eastern region. He was elected to the constituent assembly from Bengal through the enterprise of Jogendra Nath Mandal. Nakul Mallick, following the model of Maharashtra, established the Bangiya Dalit Lekhak Parishad (Bengal Dalit Writers Association) in 1987. The Bengalis are politically conscious people, one has to examine closely a certain sequence of socio-political development. In the colonial period, the East Bengal Namasudra movement had been one of the most powerful and politically mobilized untouchable movements in India. But after independence and partition, the dalit community in West Bengal, where the majority belonged to the sub-caste Namasudra, was so completely demoralized and scattered that there was no collective life to speak of. In their unrelenting struggle for survival and security, creative activities like writing were unaffordable luxuries. It is only decades later that the dalits in Bengal began to piece together their broken lives and today one finds a substantial number of novels, short stories, essays and poems written by them. Some people are unwilling to grant this recent writing a separate status by designating them as dalit. Many of the progressive writers who do not subscribe to the views of the dalits started writing about their condition, but they were like, as Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, “humane doctors who can locate the source of the pain and try to cure it but only the person who has been through the suffering can understand the true nature of the pain.”<sup>2</sup> If one is born outside the Hindu *chaturvarna* structure, the economic deprivation is compounded by social humiliation. Behind every civilization, there is the hard work of invisible groups of people who are deprived of human dignity. These are the tillers of land, producers of food, the cleaners of dirt. They live outside the rituals of religion, surviving on leftover food. In Bengal, dalit literature is not even recognized as a body of literature because of the predominance of upper caste literature and the publishing houses who fail to promote the

works of the marginalized community. The dominant discourse of history is not sympathetic to the struggles of this community and chooses to keep them away from the dominant discourse of knowledge. The institutions of knowledge production fail to recognize the involvement of the Bengal dalits in the literary and political movements creating an invisibility of revolution. The dalit Namasudras of Bengal suffered a process of dehumanization with the stigma of untouchability attached to them. What is all the more disturbing is that such social ostracism was sought to be justified in terms of presumed sins committed in a previous birth. The doctrine of rebirth in the Hindu religion does not only sanction untouchability but even prescribes and justifies it under the idea of *karma*. This scriptural sanction and justification provided by the Hindu law dictators led Namasudras to accept their fate without demur resulting in a state of mental servility. The whole idea of social ostracism through scriptural sanctions may be subverted by stating facts from history.

In the “Theses On The Philosophy Of History” Walter Benjamin writes “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”<sup>3</sup> In this work, I have tried to do the same by taking events from history during moments of political and social dangers concerning the dalit Namasudras of Bengal. My study deals with the overall Dalit collective consciousness depicted in their literature since the beginning of the 20th century till recent times choosing significant political events in history where the Namasudra participation changed the overall outcome of history. It deals with the caste based atrocities this community has faced throughout history. This study solidifies the fact that there is a longstanding grievance of the Namasudra people and dalits as a whole to recognize the truth that there is a caste based politics in progress since the beginning of the 20th century in Bengal which the Bengali upper caste Hindu dominated society fails to address or are in complete denial of. They portray it under the facade of class based politics due to many socio-political inclinations in Bengal. It also deals with the origin of the Namasudra community and its deterioration in the caste hierarchy as a political measure to suppress the most organized community in Bengal till date. This study is an attempt to question the result of the invisibility of the Namasudra, or for that matter the dalit literary revolution in Bengal and the tampering and truncating of history. The mainstream upper caste Bengal literary circles and their deliberate failure to acknowledge the body of writing called dalit literature of Bengal has been challenged questioning their authority over the institutions of knowledge production.

In Marxist philosophy, cultural hegemony is the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class who manipulate the culture of that society-the beliefs, explanations, perceptions and values-so that their imposed, ruling class worldview becomes the accepted cultural norm, the universally valid dominant ideology, which justifies the social, political, and economic status quo as natural and inevitable, perpetual and beneficial for everyone, rather than as artificial social constructs that benefit only the ruling class. In the case of Bengal, the ruling class is the dominant upper castes who for the sake of their own political and social gains try to impose upon the dalits and specially the Namasudras the scriptural sanctions of ancient Hindu texts which state that the untouchables are below the standards of living, and the caste Hindus try to portray their worldview cementing their own dominant discourse further by providing their versions of history. In the dominant version of history, Bengal doesn't even qualify to have a caste based struggle because of the influence of the overarching Class based politics. In the international arena, India belongs to the category of the Third World. But inside India, there are two worlds. One is meant for the 'haves' and the other for the 'have-nots'; the world of the 'have-nots' represent the **Fourth World** where people die of starvation, or suffer from illiteracy, exploitation and humiliation. The Namasudras or for that matter all of the dalits belong to the category of 'have-nots'. This study tries to bridge the gap between the haves and the 'have-nots' by exposing the atrocities faced by the latter in this post-modern world. One of the most significant dalit novelists from Bengal, Advaita Mallabarman, while writing his novel *Titash Ekti Nodir Naam* (1956) (A River Called Titash) faced a lot of criticism and discouragement because Manik Bandopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi* (Boatmen of the Padma) which deals with a similar theme of a river was already published. Mallabarman in his defence stated that "The son of a Brahmin has written from his point of view, I will write from mine."<sup>4</sup> Thus, writing from one's own point of view is the central agenda of Dalit writings in Bengal till date. Dalit Literature passes through the stages of suffering, revolt and negation and this study tells the story of the collective suffering of the Dalits in Bengal via merging of different literary forms produced by dalit Namasudra writers in different periods of time. Through the Bengal dalit literary movement, the time of revolution is upon us when the alternative counter narratives of the dalit Namasudras will be heard challenging and questioning the Hindu upper caste dominant discourses.

I have divided the dissertation into four chapters and in the beginning included two other parts as well named *Who were the Namasudras?*

which tries to trace the origin of the Namasudras from historical and mythological texts and the other one called the *Dalit literature as a consolidated movement within Bangla literature* which gives an account of the dalit literary movement that started in Bengal during colonial times and how it has escalated rapidly in recent times and the significant literary works they have produced from its inception till date. The first chapter, *Awakening of a Caste* deals with Raicharan Biswas' (1878-1938) poetry collection in Bangla *Jatiya Jagaran* (Awakening of a Caste) published in the year 1921. In these poems, he categorically stated that no one could claim to be superior human beings simply by wearing a 'sacred' thread across the shoulder. He pleaded for the abolition of the institution of *varna* in Hindu society which alone could pave the way for the creation of an ideal universal brotherhood among all people. He also draws a clear picture about the involvement of the Namasudra community in the nationalist struggle for independence against the British Raj. I have tried to translate some of his poetry to provide an alternate discourse about the political decisions the Namasudras took and the reasons behind them, during that time. In the second chapter called *Empathy & Reality*, I have taken two autobiographical works, *Amar Jibane Ami Benche Achi* (Surviving in My World, Growing Up Dalit in Bengal) by Manohar Mouli Biswas and *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (Memoirs of a Chandal Life Vol 1 and 2) which is a special mention, to articulate the dalit aesthetics through empathy and reality which can only be portrayed by dalit writers. This chapter also deals with the horrors of the partition of 1947 in India and the condition of the Namasudras during that time. The third chapter titled *Triple Marginalization* tries to go through the pain of homelessness faced by the refugees who came to West-Bengal from East-Pakistan and later Bangladesh in search of a new home after the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Kapil Krishna Thakur's short story *Anya Ihudi* (The Other Jew) though fictionized gives a gruesome account of the atrocities faced by the dalit Namasudras as well as the general population who tried to settle by the sides of the Eastern Railway tracks starting from Sealdah. *Camouflaging Caste* is my fourth chapter and I have taken Nakul Mallick's novel *Khoma Nei* (Unforgiven) which is based on the Marichjhanpi genocide of 1977 in Bengal. This chapter deals with the class-caste binary in Bengal keeping the incident of Marichjhanpi in the background. This chapter also deals with the failure of the government to protect the Namasudra people during that time. This dissertation ends with a Conclusion which tries to argue that caste is a major problem in a civilized society and has to be eradicated from the face of the earth and tries to provide a solution to do so.

This dissertation tries to trace the literature produced by and about the dalits from the Namasudra community of Bengal during the politically significant events starting from the 1920's till recent times and tries to make the voices of the community from the margins heard. Dalit aesthetics seeks to privilege content over form and emphasizes the writer's ideological position, foregrounding authentic feelings anchored in empirical experiences. This study also traces the history of India from the perspectives of different dalit writers from Bengal about the role of the Namasudra community in those events through fiction and non-fictional works. In India, we are mainly concerned with stay-at-home minorities. Minorities as a cultural or political position that is subordinate. This position is occupied by languages and literatures that lack prestige or authority, the non-standard and the non-canonical, what is not spoken or read much by a hegemonic culture. Though it is difficult to put in words one's own humiliation, the Namasudra literature produced by writers from the community itself and other dalit writers sympathetic to the Namasudra cause of Bengal have produced their alternative versions of history which trumps the dominant discourses with their counter narratives. My research deals with the unveiling of the mask that is dalit Literature in Bengal since the 1920's to the present day. To trace the origins of the Namasudra community through different historical writings and chart chronologically the significant political events in which the dalit Namasudras were a part of. The connected events from colonial Bengal to the post independent India and in recent times has revealed the connected pathos of the Namasudra community throughout history and their struggle for existence discrediting the dominant discourse of history which fails to recognize and are in denial of a caste based hierarchy in Bengal due to many socio-political reasons. This thesis is to promote awareness about the misuse of the dominant mode of knowledge production that is the Bengali upper caste mainstream literature backed by elitist publication houses and promote an alternative mode of knowledge production through the tracing of the Bengal dalit movement and its own literature. To establish the fact citing concrete examples that the caste based oppression in Bengal is a serious concern and should not be overpowered by class based politics which would in a way be disrespectful to the long struggle of caste based asymmetry faced by the dalits and specially Namasudras throughout history. The claim of the dominant Hindu upper caste discourse about the non-existence of caste based hierarchy in Bengal should be questioned and challenged giving examples from Namasudra literature from different times of struggle.

## Who were the Namasudras?

In *Who Were the Shudras?* Ambedkar traced the origin of the sudras as one of the Aryan communities of the solar race. There was a time when the Aryan society recognized only three varnas, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. The sudras did not form a separate varna. They ranked as part of the kshatriya varna in the Indo-Aryan society. There was a continuous feud between the sudra kings and the brahmins in which the brahmins were subjected to many tyrannies and indignities. As a result of the hatred towards the sudras generated by their oppression, the brahmins refused to perform *upanayana* for them. Owing to the denial of *upanayana*, the sudras who were kshatriyas became socially degraded, fell below the rank of the vaishyas and thus came to form the fourth varna.

Different sources give different origin stories of the Namasudras, some are historical and some are mythological as well. Shyamacharan Sarkar in *Vyasnastha Darpan* etymologically traced the meaning of the word namah, which means respected, and sudra, a classified section of people who hold the lower strata in the caste society. Dr N.B. Biswas locates the evolution of the Namasudra community in the book *Shaktisangam Tantra*, which is a mythological storytelling. In the chapter named “*Prantoshi*”, Lord Shiva narrates the story of the Namasudra clan and how they came into being to the Goddess Parvati. The story unfolds with the great Saint Namash, son of Saint Kashyapa, leaving his pregnant wife Solochana to find isolation through *tapasya* (prayer) for a long period of 14 years. Returning home, he finds out that his wife expired after giving birth to two sons named Kirttiban and Kuruban who were looked after and brought up by two Saints Afshar and Naidhruba. Namash wanted to perform the Hindu brahmin ritual of purification of the soul and the body by providing his two sons with the sacred thread. But as they reached and crossed the age limit of 12, the ritual could not be performed. Namash again, left home. Later, in search of prosperity, acknowledgement, and to find their father, Kirttiban and Kuruban reached the kingdom of Simanta. Simanta was a sudra king who had two daughters, Shipika and Shapitraka. The king persuaded and convinced the two men to marry his daughters, and they got married eventually. Both the couples gave birth to a number of children and later on their heirs were known as Namasudras by Lord Narayana who was pleased with the dedication efforts and prayers of Namash. The word Namasudra

has its two parts i.e. 'Namah' and 'Sudra', borrowed from the memory of Saint Namash and sudra in memory of the daughters of the sudra king Simanta. The mythological history suggests that Namasudras are the offspring of male brahmins and female sudras.

The infamous Sen period in Bengal was a time of tyranny for the common people because defiance was treated as a gesture of infidelity towards the king and he would go to any extent in order to bring back normalcy. There have been instances in *Vallala Charita* where Ballal Sen vocally announced the status of a particular community or caste as downtrodden without the intervention of the law. Niharranjan Ray, in his magnum opus in Bengali *Bangalir Itihas: Adiparba* (History of the Bengali People: Early Period), has portrayed some instances from the *Vallala Charita* which contains the distorted echo of an internal disruption caused by Ballal Sen himself when he stripped off the social status from all the *Subarnabaniks* (gold merchants) being infuriated by Ballavanandan, a wealthy businessman, and converted them to sudras.

In his book entitled *Namasudra Dvijatattva*, Pandit Rajbihari Roy Swarnakar hints that the Namasudras are brahmin. They were invited by Ballal Sen to preside over his marriage ceremony, but they refused to become priests in an inter-caste marriage. The woman in question was a Dom girl named Padmini. Ballal Sen ordered his soldiers to kill this Rebellious group and he declared this group as sudra. This banished race was even reduced to the status of *chandals* and the king himself ordered the banishment of the entire caste. The Namasudra movement in Bengal was not only limited to Guruchand Thakur's socio-religious and somewhat spiritual anti-government folklore called Matua, which led the Bengal Colonial government to change the name from *chandal* to Namasudra in 1911, But they were also politically involved during the anti-colonial struggle and was a major player because of their numerical strength.

As Sekhar Bandyopadhyay says in *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial Bengal -The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, that the etymology of the word Namasudra is extremely uncertain. It could mean a lower grade of Sudras, a status the *chandals* of Manu had gained promotion to, or it can mean those who were bound to show obeisance even to the sudras. According to another Namasudra commentator, Naresh Chandra Das, the word means the best among the Sudras who were paid obeisance to- an explanation which seems to be the most plausible of all.

## **Dalit Literature as a consolidated movement within Bangla literature:**

In the early Twentieth Century, in a memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission, the Bengal Colonial government in 1928 noted that “the depressed classes in Bengal are not so heavily handicapped by caste prejudice...”<sup>5</sup> The observation was supported by an enquiry headed by the Director of Public Instruction, which revealed that the so-called untouchables of Bengal were in a comparatively better position than their counterparts in other regions of India.<sup>6</sup> The disability of the *antyaaja* (low born mixed caste) castes in Bengal, as an early 20th century social observer noted, was more in terms of unacceptability of water touched by them, rather than untouchability per se.<sup>7</sup> The hypocrisy on the part of that report and the later comment is that the unacceptability of water touched by them is comparatively a better position than in the rest of India and not so heavily handicapped by caste prejudice. It's like we cannot drink water provided by you but we can touch you, that's the limit of exposure you are liable to get. Untouchability as a whole was a grotesque phenomenon that was being practiced in Bengal and all over India and no sort of consolation prize like Bengal was in a comparatively better position than the rest of India could limit the dreadful consequences of such a significant matter. Raicharan Biswas in *Jatiya Jagaran* (Awakening of a Caste) touched upon this cruel practice of untouchability in the poem *Ushar Swapan* (Dreams at Dawn)

### *Dreams at Dawn*

11

Do not beg for your civil right  
whether or not push on in continuum,  
let Adam's ale be in natatorium,  
do not crave for that métier forthright,  
offer them water when they plead and cry,



I have dreamt this dream last night.

Baburao Bagul, a pioneer of modern literature in Marathi said, “Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about change.”<sup>8</sup> And this consciousness makes them writers. So, the Dalit untouchability problem in Bengal needed a change and that was possible only through voicing their opinions and to organize a movement against such horrible circumstances.

The Namasudras’ construction of a new collective self and efforts at self-affirmation reflected their own perceptions of the power relations in colonial society and of their location within it. From this neglect from the predominantly caste Hindu nationalists the Namasudras emanated their own definition of colonial rule, which in some cases differed substantially from that of the mainstream nationalists and produced their alternate way of protest through literature and the first baby step towards greatness was to have education. One prominent dalit writer and poet, Anil Sarkar (1939- 2015), who was born in the village Kachua of Coomila district in a poor Namasudra family and who is acknowledged in every corner as a prominent dalit poet for his famous book of poems *Bratyajaner Kobita* said that if the mainstream writer reads one book the dalit writers needs to go through two books. One book academically for traditional history and the other for dalit history to represent their own condition truly. Otherwise he will write non-sense.<sup>9</sup> Dalit resistance rises as more attacks are mounted on them. Once they had been illiterate and speechless but education gave them a voice. Education is a must in democracy to understand ideology and to write about atrocities against oneself and therefore through writings, the voice from the margins can be heard. A section of them got education and in a realization of their own position in the society, started being vocal through writing. Realization of one’s own position comes from the learning via education about the dominant, mainstream or more traditional discourses of history and also reading the alternative, dalit or marginalized discourse of history. Then one will produce writings based on distress and agonies of their own and thus the genre of dalit literature was formed. To Define what dalit literature is Manohar Mouli Biswas in *Dalit Sahityer Digboloy* says “Dalit Literature is the introspection of the dalit focused by the dalit themselves in the perspective of their retrospective misfortune under the phenomenon of caste-system.”<sup>10</sup>

The Bengal dalits believed that a wholesome literature and a cultural revolution can guide a community in the right direction in order to protect it

from degeneration. The sheer creativity in literature combined with a revolutionary motive can bring about social change. Thus, the Bengal dalit literary movement began in the early decades of the 20th century and several publications, periodicals and journals date back to that time. These publications were edited by dalits who were themselves the readers and writers associated with it. The themes were predominantly about themselves. However, it was not just the tears and suffering that were reflected in these works. In many cases there was evidence of resistance and criticism like Raicharan Biswas' *Jatiya Jagaran* (Awakening of a Caste) (1921). One of the important publications of the time was Rashbehari Ray's *Namasudra Darpan* (The Namasudra Mirror), dated 1909. from the village of Maluhar in Swarupkathi district of Barisal, Sashi Kumar Baroi Biswas edited and published *Namasudra Dwijattwa* (On the Namasudras as Dwijati) in April 1911. *Namasudra Gyanbhandar* edited by Balaram Sarkar was published from Ulpur High School of Faridpur district. The first issue of *Namasudra Chandrika* edited by Jadunath Majumdar of Jessore district was published in June 1913. Haridas Palit, a poor Namasudra of Burdwan district published an autobiography *An Untouchable Worker* in 1915. During this span of time there was an all-out attempt to establish one's identity which has indeed become one of the main criteria of contemporary dalit writing.

Now to talk about the contemporary literary theories spanned worldwide, the Indian dalit literature is likely to be the youngest of all, and of late became a bit prominent in the national panorama because of the fact that it has been under the rubric of postcolonial studies. Indian dalit literature is aesthetically different from the traditional mainstream. Indian dalit literature is dalit identity based and tells of the caste discrimination here in India. In the first All India Dalit Writers Conference held on October 8-10, 1987 at Hyderabad, the manifesto what the dalit writers declared are the following: 1. The writer shall also hold the torch of liberation and participate in people's movement of liberation. 2. On the social front, the dalits are against casteism, communalism, fundamentalism and all kinds of inequality based on birth and sex. 3. On economic front, the dalits are against imperialism and fascism. 5. The aim is emancipation of dalits from social, economic, political and cultural exploitation. 6. Use literature as a weapon for cultural revolution. Use the original peoples form of arts. 7. The program is to demolish all manifestation of cultural hegemony. And finally, 8. The aim is to open the door of learning and culture to oppressed people and to blow up oppressive culture.<sup>11</sup> These were the simple demands of the anti-caste movement against the dominant elites.

## Chapter 1

### *Awakening of a Caste*

‘Let the Namasudras wait a few years more and have more education and their ambition will be satisfied in due course. No one can jump at the top of the tree; he must climb it up in a regular way’ - *Bengalee* 10. Nov.1917 <sup>12</sup>

If we now put the question what is history, the answer is simple. It is the study of the past, how it refers to humans. Furthermore, it is an umbrella term that relates to the past events as well as the memory, discovery, collection, organization, presentation and interpretation of information about the events. And mostly the interpretation should be impartial. If it is not so, history becomes something unjust and fractured and beyond the authenticity of historical events. Sometimes history gives different opinions on the same issue, when it has tried to search the truth from different angles. There we can find two discourses, the dominant and the alternative. What *Bengalee* quoted is from the dominant discourse of history which was mostly fragmented in nature because the dominant history of India has always been dictated by the Caste Hindu Nationalists. This chapter tries to offer an alternate view of history during the second and third decade of the 20th century colonial Bengal taking excerpts from the collection of poem called *Jatiya Jagaran* (Awakening of a Caste) composed and published by a very influential dalit Namasudra intellectual Raicharan Biswas in the year 1921. The poems in the collected works clarifies the position of the Namasudras during the ongoing nationalist movement against the colonial government and the overall condition of the people of the community during that day and age. I am thankful to Manohar Mouli Biswas, the president of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha and Kiran Talukdar, a senior dalit poet and activist for graciously handing me over probably the last surviving copy to work on. The poems are in the Bengali language so I have tried in my limited capability to translate some excerpts for the wider audience to basically acknowledge the existence of such a significant work. The caste Hindu nationalists or caste

Hindu dominated publication houses failed to acknowledge the involvement of the Namasudra literary works and writings in various periodicals during the colonial struggle for independence due to their apriori ideological hegemony of nationalism.

Dalit histories of colonization highlight the normative enlightenment values that enabled the dalits to question the dominant caste Hindu society and to claim their rights as human beings. All dalit movements and their leaders were the product of the colonial period. Those who were the have-nots and had a history of being socially neglected had different sentiments. They were unquestioningly in search of material gains and social upliftment. And they kept aloof from the political mainstream and from mainstream thought. During the period of the swadeshi movement the dalits, particularly the Namasudras of the eastern part of Bengal, were organized for their self-development and their leaders asserted that they supported the policies of the British government. The Christian missionaries were spreading education among the untouchables. It was unwise to go against the British government who have been honestly trying to improve the condition of the untouchables. When Ambikacharan Majumdar, a close associate of Surendranath Banerjea and Faridpur district Congress leader, approached the Namasudras for their support for the Swadeshi movement, their leader Guruchand Thakur declined it directly. Dr. A.K.Biswas in *The Namasudras of Bengal* has also revealed that the Namasudras were poor people. They did not indulge in luxury nor did they know of it. The only foreign goods they used were cheap imported clothes. It was the higher castes who wanted to use imported goods. The agitation or the boycott of foreign goods which was the main propaganda of the Swadeshi movement therefore, should remain confined exclusively among themselves.

One of the major nationalist political agitations in Bengal since the days of swadeshi was the Home Rule movement. The Namasudras of Bengal disapproved of the movement because if the nationalists demanded self-governance, more power would be transferred to the caste Hindus. If more power was transferred from the British government to the nationalists demanding self-governance in Bengal, then automatically it would be monopolized by the more privileged upper castes. For the Namasudras in Bengal, the colonial government was the concrete source of concessions that were constantly forthcoming and which benefited even the rural masses and not just the Namasudra elites (for a lack of better term), after the indigenous nationalist upper-caste endeavors for their upliftment failed one after another. Raicharan Biswas articulates through *Gatrodaho* (Burns Through the Skin), from his collection of poems *Jatiya Jagaran* (The

Awakening of a Caste), that the high-caste people were perturbed by the rise of the lower castes who had been challenging their previous social dominance. Since this rise had been made possible by the introduction of British rule, the high-caste leaders were agitating for Home Rule and if they succeeded, they would once again push the advancing lower castes down to their former subordinate position in society.

*Burns Through the Skin*

16

Alas the anger in my blood doesn't equal my skeletal strength,  
or would have hitched self-governance to a byre.

Drowned neck deep in labour  
days dwindled in longing

Alas amidst the nations' such misery if I catch hold of Home-Rule,  
my grit and guts will make you say "splendid brother".

The term splendid brother is used as a mockery of the prowess of the Namasudra community if Home-Rule or self-governance was indeed implemented by the British government and the nationalist leaders were given authority. The grit and guts of the Namasudra community will just be a mockery of their freedom under the governance of the caste Hindu dominated nationalist struggle.

In the colonial period, the East-Bengal Namasudra movement had been one of the most powerful and politically mobilized untouchable movements in India and in alliance with the Muslims had kept the Bengal Congress Party in opposition from the 1920's. The Muslims were largely untouchables and lower castes who had converted to the emancipatory beliefs of Islam while retaining their Bengali culture. The Namasudra and Muslims were political allies in opposition to the Hindu landlord-dominated Bengal Congress

Party. Due to their organized movements and active participation in the politics of the Bengal partition and Indian independence, the consciousness of being liberated from their social status through literature became a weapon of choice. The *Moslem Hitaishi*, an organ of the Bengali Muslims also believed that Home Rule would sooner or later lapse into Hindu brahminic oligarchy. Mukundabihari Mallick, the president of the Bengal Namasudra Association around that time used to publish a Namasudra monthly named *Pataka* (1916), the first of its kind where Namasudra writers could voice their opinions. In the preface of Raicharan Biswas' *Jatiya Jagaran* (Awakening of a caste) Mallick writes that the poem *Musalman* by Biswas first published in *Pataka* in the year 1917, became a huge success among the Muslim population of Betenga village within Jessore province when a popular Namasudra youth addressed a Muslim public gathering by orating the poem *Musalman* claiming to have written it. He received huge applaus and accolades after the recitation. Chants and roars of *Allah-o-Akbar* pulsated throughout the gathering. People became euphoric while putting the young lad on their shoulders. As the story unfolds we get a clear picture that there was a harmonious comradeship between the Namasudras and the Muslim community. But some external forces tried to fracture this camaraderie and Biswas in the poem *Musalman* warns both the communities to solve their differences and work towards a better future which was social upliftment. Some excerpts from the poem is given below

### *Musalman*

14

The able brothers Namasudra-Musalman  
moulded by evil council and conspiracy,  
they fight and bleed for their ignorance,  
the brothers die and their strength decay.  
They beat their breasts in the end  
they shed tears when stranded,

people laugh, the melancholia in streets,  
the badshahi clan of the world glory Musalman.

15

Look brother Namasudra and think on your feet  
the trivial brawls you engage in with,  
the friend in crisis is the prodigal brother  
who breaks bread with you and sits together.  
Namasudra Musalman  
others praise their identic erudition,  
water 'dries' as both are equals at home  
the badshahi clan of the world glory Musalman

16

Take control of your senses brother Namasudra  
my pompous faith upon you rise Musalman.  
brotherly love and unity cements brotherhood  
in affection let us move forward,  
let everyone watch  
reunion of the two,  
the world will bloom at our delightful union

the badshahi clan of the world glory Musalman

An old complaint of the Namasudra leaders was that the Namasudra youths even when educated could not enter government service. And this they thought was one of the major impediments that restricted the advancement of learning among their caste members, consequently inhibiting their upward social movement. Demand for government jobs was therefore, a major feature of the Namasudra movement from its inception. The nationalist leadership, Surendranath Banerjea and Nilratan Sircar in their haste to patronize the Namasudra, also began to raise the issue before the legislative bodies and thus once again placed the ball in the court of the colonial government. Raicharan Biswas' *Por Baba Por* (Read Kid Read) describes the circumstances tactfully with a sense of humor attached to it.

***Read Kid Read***

1

Read kid read, focus and read,  
draconian days are here,  
all the educated breed  
roam in a suspected groovy speed,  
all are seasoned beasts no warmth amidst  
not even an iota to spare.

During the whole period that is the second and the early part of the third decade of the twentieth century, both the colonial government and the nationalists in Bengal were involved in a tug-of-war to win the political support of the Namasudras, because both considered it to be a crucial factor in the existing political balance of power. For the time being, the administration had the better of their adversaries, as the latter persistently failed to address the caste question in a positive way. The alienation of the Namasudras from nationalist



politics had become almost a settled fact during the days of the swadeshi movement, as they could in no way identify themselves with the aims and aspirations of the high-caste *bhadrolok* fighting the British Raj on issues which hardly at all concerned them. It was in 1921, when the Non-cooperation movement had gathered its full momentum. According to the biographer of Guruchand Thakur, C.R.Das himself had personally written to him to ensure the participation of the Namasudra in the Non-cooperation movement. But he refused to respond, for he believed that this movement too, like the earlier one, was only meant to further the interests of the wealthy upper caste *bhadrolok*.<sup>13</sup> It indicates that this antipathy towards nationalism was not just a manifestation of loyalty to the British. On the contrary, it was more an expression of protest against social and economic injustices perpetrated on them by the high-caste gentry and professional classes, who had for long constituted the leadership of the struggle against the Raj. In a part called *British Gaurab* (British Glory) from the poem *Jagoran*(Awakening) Biswas manages to put forward the cries of the Namasudra people who has been humiliated by the dominant caste Hindu majority.

### *Awakening*

British Glory

81

Showering abuses upon my people,  
spreading scandals in vulgar tongue,  
labeling the righteous me inferior,  
have drowned my being through trickery.

This mentality, in other words, reflected a social perception in which nationalism, for obvious reasons, appeared as elitist, leading to a consequent inclination to defy its ideological hegemony. So, nation as a concept or construct was a vague and distant dream for the Namasudras in Bengal due to the hypocrisy of the nationalist leaders. So, they concentrated on their community itself and tried to quantify Namasudra as a nation among themselves and give more power to their people and strengthen the roots of their caste. So when writing the poem *Amar Swajati*(My People) Biswas had a mechanical drive to glorify his own community in search of a nation within the nation.<sup>14</sup>

### *My People*

11

Their dishes, their clothes

I will clean them both,

they will look after me and I'll offer the same

and follow each other to the end.

If I succeed in this earth

their glory extends,

if my people rise above

I take pride in their labour of love;

Unity and bonds are hand and glove.

## *My People*

3

My birthplace is weightier and better than heaven  
the learned call her motherland,  
but my people are greater to me  
my people beyond compare.

Motherland is greater than heaven, say the wise men; but one's own caste is greatest of all, can there be anything comparable to it! To him it was only for the benefit of the Namasudra community that God had sent to this country the impartial British, under whose egalitarian rule they had for the first time received enlightenment and could compete for the fruits of civilization which is a sentiment shared certainly by many others from the Namasudra community. The British favoritism was a natural transition for Biswas in the poem *Jagaran*(Awakening) because the government's inclination towards their upliftment and because the British had always looked after their social grievances.

## *Awakening*

British Glory

79

The honeyed sway of the British Raj,  
drizzling promises of ceaseless peace.  
Road, port, pool smooth and regular,

supreme impressive rule and practice.

Postal service, and telephones,

railways, trams, motors, ships,

reducing the distance among commons,

creating unity and brotherly relationships.

80

The steady light shines through day or night,

with equal laws and no bias in sight.

80

Broaden desire for basic learning,

birth right of the British king.

In June 1922, a few months after the formal withdrawal of the Non-cooperation movement, the Bengal Namasudra Conference was held at Pirojpur, under the presidency of Rajani Kanta Das, a veteran Namasudra leader. In his presidential address, he argued that the Namasudras had served the higher castes, but in return were despised, receiving only insults and the stigma of untouchability. Hence, they did not have any faith in whatever the higher castes did. On the other hand, it was due only to the British that after centuries of darkness, the Namasudras had received the light of civilization, which otherwise they would remain deprived of for a few more centuries to come. They wanted to prosper further under the gracious protection of the British and hence, any political revolution to replace this efficient administrative system was against the interests of the caste. Manohar Mouli Biswas have said

that the dalit literature provides some structural features such as Identity Politics which means through the politics of identity they wanted their share of the political cake.<sup>15</sup> The part *Charitra O Manushotwa Rokkha*(Safeguarding Character and Humanity) from the poem *Jagaran* (Awakening) by Raicharan Biswas will further cement this position of the Namasudra community.

### *Awakening*

Safeguarding Character and Humanity

27

fear of religion at sword point,

gone are angst of strong arm.

Conchie British, and their roomy hearts

socialist, aesthete extreme.

The upper caste nationalists introduced new movements every time to subvert their rising status under the British Raj. Indeed during 1921 in a series of articles in *Namasudra Hitaishi* their distrust for the Congress politicians was expressed in no uncertain words. Those who were keen to establish swaraj in this country, warned one of them, must remember that their dream would not be fulfilled if the backward classes were left behind. First, work for the progress of those classes, only then swaraj could be attained. They could place very little faith in the untouchability removal initiatives. Unsuccessful as they were in obtaining swaraj

through their own efforts, the high-caste leaders were now trying to woo the untouchables with such concessions. But they were yet to prove the sincerity of their intentions. If they could, so much better for the country; otherwise, the Namasudra wouldn't care to join the nationalist politics.

***Read Kid Read***

28

My heart aches to say  
cutthroat cannibal world,  
your wealth, brilliance, literacy,  
makes men burn in jealousy,  
plot schemes to cause bane  
and bring to ruin your gains.

Nationalist insurgencies have been an important feature of decolonization struggles in the third world. But these insurgent nationalisms are not purely or simply reactions against the fact of colonial dominance. Benedict Anderson famously argues that 'nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our times'.<sup>16</sup> As Leela Gandhi says 'separatist' appeals for nationhood are generally regarded as symptoms of political illegitimacy.<sup>17</sup> In this case the Namasudra community trying to build a nation within the nation though not with geo-political boundaries would also be considered 'separatist' in its approach because they did not take part in the dominating discourse of 'nation-ness'; and their nationalism will be called illegitimate or bad nationalism if they did not take part in any kind of revolt or insurgencies led by the caste Hindu nationalists who were predominantly under the rubric of the Indian National Congress. They decided to focus on the empowerment

of their own people or caste that is the Namasudra community as a whole in colonial Bengal during the 1920's. But Ranajit Guha in the *Prose of Counter Insurgency* states that when someone or any member of a community rose in revolt at any time or place under the Raj, they did so "necessarily and explicitly in violation of a series of codes which defined his very existence as a member of that colonial, and still largely semi-feudal society. For his subalternity was materialized by the structure of property, institutionalized by law, sanctified by religion and made tolerable- and even desirable- by tradition. To rebel was indeed to destroy many of those familiar signs which he had learned to read and manipulate in order to extract a meaning out of the harsh world around him and live with it. The risk in 'turning things upside down' under these conditions was indeed so great that he could hardly afford to engage in such a project in a state of absent-mindedness".<sup>18</sup> Insurrections are not purely spontaneous and unpremeditated affairs. The truth is quite to the contrary. It would be difficult to cite an insurgency, protest or revolt on any significant scale that was not in fact preceded either by less militant types of mobilization when other means had been tried and found wanting or by parley among its principals seriously to weigh the pros and cons of any recourse to arms. In events, so very different from each other in context, character and composition of participants the protagonists in each case had tried out petitions, deputations or other forms of supplication before actually declaring war on their oppressors. What if those petitions or deputations were accepted and the necessary arrangements were made to address the grievances of the people. Will that community still go for violence and bloodshed just for the fun of it? In the case of the Namasudras, the British government actually complied to those grievances and amendments were made for the betterment of the community which the upper caste nationalists couldn't deliver. To avoid any kind of violence upon the people of their community they tried every means possible. It was not a question of making the British their allies, it was a long-term plan not to turn things upside down. If the caste Hindu nationalists were being able to provide protection to their social and civil rights, to become equal in society and abolish untouchability and its practice, then the Congress would be their allies and they would have fought side by side with the Congress against the British Raj. They were looking for a nation based on the principle of substantive, rather than nominal citizenship that was being offered by the Congress. But the reality is they appreciated the efforts of the British and started building their own nation within the nation, a concrete community, the Namasudras.

## Chapter 2

### *Empathy & Reality*

Annada Shankar Ray, a bitter opponent of the partition of 1947 in an immensely quotable Bengali rhyme *Teler Sishi Bhanglo Bole* (Because the Oil Jar Broke) voiced his protest against the absurdity of the country's bifurcation:

"You scold the little lass  
when she drops the glass  
but what about you,  
adult brats  
when you shatter India  
into little parts." <sup>19</sup>

The partition of 1947 by dividing the community geographically and uprooting many from their territorial anchorage, finally destroyed the Namasudra caste oriented movement. They were hesitant about the partition based on religion and they thought that the Hindus and Muslims can cohabit and coexist. They wanted a peaceful communal cohabitation in spite of partition. The leaders like Jogendranath Mandal, Rasiklal Biswas who were associated with the Scheduled Caste Federation founded by B.R. Ambedkar, on the basis of what they surmised, were totally against that kind of freedom of the country, at the cost of dividing the nation; and that too basing it on Hindu-Muslim separatism. Independence from the hands of the British resulted in partition that had an enormously cruel impact on the life of the common people of Bengal. This division had caused both dalits and non-dalits to face tremendous grief and suffering and if reality is examined fully it will be found that the dalits had too few resources to fight the dreadfully adverse conditions in which they found



themselves. This chapter deals with those dreadfully adverse conditions after the partition of 1947 that the Namasudra Dalits faced in independent India and their articulation of those experiences through their own auto biography which cements the dalit aesthetics of empathy and reality.

Sharmila Rege prefers to refer some dalit life narratives as ‘testimonios’. To explain what is a testimonio Rege quoted the understanding of John Beverly: ‘A testimonio is a narrative in book or pamphlet form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of events he or she recounts and whose unit of narration is usually “a life” or significant life experiences. ’In the testimonio, the intention is not one of literariness, but of communicating the situation of a group’s oppression, imprisonment and struggle. The narrator claims some agency in the act of narrating and calls upon the readers to respond actively in judging the situation. Speaking on the significance of dalit life narratives as testimonios Rege emphasizes that they forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the “official forgetting” of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance. <sup>20</sup>

*Amar Jibane Ami Benche Thaki* (Surviving in My World, Growing Up Dalit in Bengal) by Manohar Mouli Biswas translated by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi is a “testimonio” which portrays a hard-hitting picture illustrating the atrocities that the Namasudra community faced during colonial, post-independence and post partition Bengal. The hierarchical disjuncture and asymmetrical power relations in mid-twentieth century Bengal is being highlighted in this autobiographical work. This book establishes the fact that the Namasudras has been a tremendously independent minded as well as a peaceful hardworking community where the majority of them were from East-Bengal in pre-partition era. A kind of extreme hatred in following someone’s dictate or giving in to slavery works in them. They were the people of mud and water. They were natural warriors of physical labour. That something was physically impossible did not have a place in their dictionaries. They were hardworking people by birth. Labour was another name for life to them. They were the living epitomes of life extremely simple and abstemious, wrestling poverty, living on two handfuls of rice a day, a life of enjoying the beauty of nature while living in its midst, learning to tolerate scarcities and complaints. In spite of having talent and intelligence these people remained unwanted in society. They were transformed into leftovers of society. The developmental benefits of colonial modernity like railways, education and healthcare never reached them. This pattern was not of one life, but that of

generations. It was living like a *prisnika*- a water hyacinth- living on the verge of death and dying on the verge of life. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay mentions that in colonial India in the East-Bengal region the land was monopolized by high caste Hindus and better class Muslims. In the socio-economic pyramid, the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* were at the top followed by the Muslim rent receivers who belonged to the peasant community. Then the Namasudra elites who were smaller in number than the Muslim rent receivers. They were land holders, had education and jobs. But despite economic mobility they still had to share the same experience of social humiliation and disability. At the bottom of the pyramid were the Namasudra peasant population who were boatmen and fishermen.<sup>21</sup> Biswas' family belonged to this category.

Manohar Mouli Biswas was born in a remote village known as Matiargati in 1943 in the district of Khulna and experienced caste based discrepancies in colonial Bengal since childhood. He gives example of one event that solidified his belief that Namasudras were untouchable. If on the same spot there were the boats of the Muslims and Shudras, the higher caste Hindus usually avoided the latter. They preferred to board a Muslim's boat. It was a deliberate effort to keep the Namasudra people outside the boundaries of intimacy in the Hindu consciousness. They were only used in the head count for making Hindus the majority. Socially, economically, culturally and educationally, they were a massive heap of garbage at the bottom. Human communities are a matter of natural resources. But they had failed to transform themselves into resources. When Biswas witnessed as a child how people were victims of discriminations even in their attempt to become boatmen, it left a wound within. They could not own anything- It was not even possible for them to hang onto the trade on the strength of ownership. Unable to use money as capital, they were dependent solely on their labors as capital. Opposed towards slavery, in spite of becoming defeated soldiers in occupations under the dictates of others, they were able to wear a kind of crown of victory. Even within the worker or labor class the Namasudras were discriminated and we can see a hint of disappointment and non-admiration for communist ideologies in Biswas' writing. Biswas lived in a joint family, helping his father and uncle to cultivate the land. He was the first to be educated in his family. He recalls a debate on education among his father, grandfather and great uncle. His grandfather, Haradhan by name, would very often say, 'I've no schooling of my own, I couldn't arrange the schooling of my two sons [father and uncle who was the older of the two sons], too, then why do you want to make your children *mukku*[illiterate] as this old man?'.<sup>22</sup> His grandfather had a desire to educate the children.

But he could not manage to do it. Biswas's uncle argued in a different manner from the reality of dalit life, 'Will our children be able to become *babu*[gentleman] if they are educated? They cannot, they cannot, they cannot! Even if our children get educated they won't be able to become *babus*. They will have to do manual labour, they will have to hold on to the butt of the plough- such is the inscription in the scriptures by the gods.' <sup>23</sup> The uncle believed that those who would evaluate qualifications were bound to find deficiencies in the children from illiterate families. But Biswas' father had a belief in himself that was totally different. He believed that our children may not become a judge or bar-at-law after education- but why should we not become a peon in an office or a constable in a police station.

Narayan Rao, a Telegu poet from Warangal made a comment at the All India Dalit Writers Conference held in Hyderabad in 1987, 'The dead cannot be exploited; so, the hoodlums do not want the dalit to die-they exploit him through his entire lifespan.' <sup>24</sup> In the tenth chapter Biswas says,

"Ache with pain under the weight of my memory. Breaking the doors of the past means that so many things have come forth. Many more remain locked in the cage of yester years. Whatever has come out, I have narrated one by one. It is not a story of someone growing up with a middle-class lifestyle that is usually taken to be standard.' Those who are born into light, set forth their feet towards school holding of their parents' hands; those who get to eat a bellyful twice a day, who wear new clothes during festivals, wear shoes on their feet, get treatment when sick, who bear no stamp of malnutrition on their bodies, get to wear warm clothes in winter, who grow up with care and concern- this is not their story.'" <sup>25</sup>

Biswas in his autobiography added another interesting story at the very end, about one of his female friends named Rushita (name changed) during his time as a central government employee long after partition and independence during the 70's in Calcutta. he became an engineering supervisor in the department of Posts and Telegraph. He met Rushita after a long time and was invited by her to her house for lunch. Rushita's mother was a university professor. At some point during lunch Rushita's mother says with a smile on her face, 'A big "but" has defeated us - our minds and hearts have not been able to overcome it. It is our fault, not yours - the fault of all high caste people.' <sup>26</sup> Just when the readers think that the protagonist after huge struggle made it big in life, they are brought into reality within seconds. In spite of being an equal or even a little higher in

educational qualifications, Biswas failed to become equal of Rushita. The words with which her mother had bade farewell remained alive within him as a deep wound and time could not heal it.

Another special mention should be Manoranjan Byapari's autobiographical work *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (Memoirs of a Chandal Life Vol 1 and 2) which is a chilling discourse; militant in texture. His coming to India as a refugee after partition, stories of hooliganism during the Left front government after 1977 and facing jailtime is a story of a deprived Namasudra man who without proper education and guidance fell to the evil forces of the society. But the interesting part is how he became a writer after learning the Bangla language and wrote two volumes of pure non-fictional history of a Namasudra man crossing the hurdles of hardship and surviving a dalit in post-independence Bengal.

Byapari's autobiography also traces the tragic history of the refugee settlements after 1947. In the refugee camp, the segregation of people that was on the basis of caste identity was a surprising one. People with the good caste pearls in their pockets received preferences in settlement in market areas, business centers, developed areas and posh localities; whereas people with bad caste such as Namasudras were given settlements in hilly areas, barren lands, unproductive areas, marshes and on the sides of the Eastern Railway tracks. Most of these people had been given allotment outside Bengal.

The autobiography was published in Kolkata Book-fair 2012. Byapari, once a rickshaw puller, now a cook in a hostel where he prepares daily meals of quite a large number of boarders. He has drawn the attention of the media, both electronic and print. The Times of India published a story, 11 March 2012, where the reporter made a comparison with Alexander Dumas, a French novelist, as well as with an American film Shawshank Redemption. The reporter said, 'Like the Count of Monte Cristo, Edmund Dantes, he learnt his first letters on the prison walls. Like Andy Dufresne in Shawshank Redemption he swam through the foulest-smelling river and came out clean'. The reporter further adds, 'His life is a study in contrast and the contradictions begin right with his name- Manoranjan Byapari, he is not a trader of entertainment that entices the mind but a narrator of pain. His journey from a life among crooks to the world of books fulfills all criteria for an epic- conflict and struggle, journey to hell, redemption and resurrection. He is possibly the only rickshaw-puller in the world set to have his work published by Oxford University Press.'

Autobiography and particularly dalit autobiographies are extraordinary as literature, contributing to a counter-canon. This is a kind of narrative where a single exposure gives multidimensional propensity. These narratives sometimes give rise to self-glorification and sometimes to the glorification of the caste in which the individual is born. They reveal the plight of being oppressed and subjugated by an individual who is stronger than the maelstrom surrounding him.

A dalit autobiography is, by virtue of its merits, a reality-show: a sincere effort of true exposure of life. What happens is that each dalit autobiography exposes a different kind of taste in literature, which can help pupils study the livelihood and survival details of marginal people in depth, in particular, the sub-caste in which the autobiographer is born. It provides a better understanding in the area of cultural and ritual entity. An autobiography implies self-exposure, whether positive or negative, and the dalit autobiography, in particular, demonstrates in addition caste discrimination and its adverse impact on society. In Bengal, the dalit autobiography contributed to identity politics before independence. Indian society is heterogeneous in character and as such the amalgamation through homogeneity becomes impossible. Under such conditions the people at the bottom most layer of the society remain isolated socially, educationally, culturally and above all, mentally which gets highlighted in the autobiographies they have written. When a dalit writes on dalits he is expressing his direct experiences and interactions of life, suffered and battled, in the discourse of his writing. And that can create dalit consciousness and perception, through direct expression to the readers, which is realized by a dalit reader as one that a fellow dalit brother or sister has suffered. It is easily acceptable to him and makes him dalit conscious. To see the dalits through a dalit's eye is one thing and to see dalits through a non-dalit's eye is something else. One stands on reality and the other stands on pseudo-reality, a portrayal attempted through imagination. Dalit men and women are both on the same plank of negation, deprivation and sufferings.

The non-dalit writers were not born into the dalit community, nor did they grow up in its midst. They have seen these people close up and felt their deprivations and sorrows in their hearts. Their pens exude sympathy which evokes pity, love and sharing. But dalit literature is not based on sympathy but survives on empathy and a new component that forms part of the aesthetics of dalit literature- reality. It is based on *anubhava*(experience) and takes precedence over *anumana*(speculation) . No fantasy is involved or works behind it. The fact that hierarchy causes terrible grief to many people is difficult for the mainstream non-dalit writers and individuals residing from the upper strata to

comprehend. Even poor caste Hindu writers cannot fathom and explicitly narrate the caste injustices of society. Writing dalit literature from the mainstream is not aesthetically dalit literature but a literature of imagination and sympathy. The Dalit life narrative emerges as a form that seeks to mediate the position of a Dalit vis-a-vis his society, thus transforming the journey of the 'I' which is central to autobiographical writing into a discourse of the 'we' which is a transformation of the individual into the collective. Tony Morrison, an Afro-American writer, took six years to complete her novel *Beloved* and in the year 1993 she came to international prominence on acquiring the Nobel Prize for Literature. As soon as the news aired the media people assembled in her house and were curious about her next project. In response to the questions what she said was "I'm born in Black, I know the Black well, I write about the Black." Manohar Mouli Biswas in *Dalit Literature, Aesthetic Theory and Movements* reinterpreted her words, "I'm born in dalits, I know the Dalits well, I write about the Dalits."

As Yogendra Meshram says that the awareness of being dalit gives birth to dalit literature. It is the inspiration for emancipation and the essence of identity. The revolt against repression and protests against insults forms the core of dalit writing. Repression and shame give continuity to a dalit past with a dalit present. Keeping the past and the present as witnesses, writers want to shape their futures. Being born in a dalit family gives them access to this individualistic ethical sense that enables to shape a new kind of aesthetics.

## Chapter 3

### *Triple Marginalization*

In an essay *Dissemination: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation*, Homi Bhabha writes that the scattering of the people in the nations of others, becomes a time of 'gathering'. "Gatherings of exiles and emigres and refugees, gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafes of city centers; gathering in the half life, half-light of foreign tongues or in the uncanny fluency of another's language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines;"

Kapil Krishna Thakur's short story *Anya Ihudi* (The Other Jew) translated by Angshuman Kar is a story about such 'gatherings', the loss of identity of a whole community of refugees from Bangladesh specially Namasudra people in a foreign land, India. He was born in an agrarian family of the Namasudra community in Satpur village, Faridpur, Bangladesh in 1956. The name itself suggests that the refugees were like the Jews in Nazi German concentration camps during Hitler rule which automatically paints a picture about the atrocities that are yet to be faced by the homeless people who came to India out of fear of communal violence and settled near the Eastern Railway Tracks of Sealdah in Calcutta, in search of a better livelihood. Losing his wife during the turbulent days of 1971 and after one of his daughters was assaulted and murdered by a man named Ferumiya in violence ridden Bangladesh after the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, Bishtucharan's character in the story moves to India with his other daughter in search of peace. He didn't realize the beautiful dream of a utopian neighborhood with Hindus and Muslims co-existing in a country fueled by the Hindu-Muslim separatism which ultimately led to partition was a lie. But evil operates without religious discrepancies whether in India or Bangladesh. Some frenzied drunken men kidnap and rape Bishtucharan's daughter just like Ferumiya did to his other daughter back in East-Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Religion was not a concern but human beings were. Their hatred for refugees of different caste or class didn't matter, the fact which did matter was that they were refugees from a foreign country wanting shelter from a foreign government. Then for what purpose did they leave their homeland behind is a question still unanswered. As the Namasudra community migrated from Bangladesh in a

huge number, they were the ones who suffered the most after the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.

Thakur's story subconsciously deals with the aftermath of the process of othering initiated by the Pakistani state as it moved towards greater Islamisation resulting in profiling and exclusion of all non-Muslims in East-Pakistan after 1947. This projected 'other' of the Pakistani nation were the Hindus. And therefore, even when the Namasudra peasants fought for social justice, particularly when peasant movements under Communist leadership were renewed after 1947 in various eastern as well as western Bengal districts, the state in Pakistan presented the Namasudra peasant rebels as Hindu miscreants. This policy excluded them from the Pakistani nationhood and out of communal fear a huge exodus of Namasudra middle class and peasants took place after the 1950's and later during the communal violence of 1971, after the Bangladesh Liberation War. The story itself takes place somewhere during the 1980's where the Namasudra identity politics was affected. Their distinctive Namasudra identity was absorbed into a broader refugee identity. In post-partition India, the refugees came to constitute a new community united by a shared past of displacement. While the plasticity of the signifier of the refugee meant that different ideas and identities could be expressed through it, it also served to mask, manage and unify the diversity of the displaced and from that time onwards Bengal became an epitome of class struggle camouflaging the significant concerns of caste. The story revolves around the refugee settlements near the Eastern Railway tracks of Sealdah in Bengal during the 1980's exodus from Bangladesh. They were unwanted, unwelcome in this land where people used to look upon them as objects of pity. They were called 'creatures' who lived by the railway line. To a section of the people of their native land, they were spies of India, and here in India they were known as 'Banglu', an offensive word for Bangladeshi refugees. These innocent refugees did not understand the politics of the state. Somehow, they understood that they won't get any help from the government-no relief, no rehabilitation. They were no part of any arrangement in any state of the world. Nobody counted them as human beings- devoid of citizenship, voter identity card and ration card. A question of safeguarding one's life at the cost of honour. A question of safeguarding one's religion or life.

In the narrative Thakur has exposed what a dalit in Bengal undergoes: a multi-dimensional oppression. Uprooted by the partition of Bengal from their traditional livelihood, dalits had become like rolling stones who gather no moss. Their lives are found to end in catastrophic tragedy. The Partition of 1971 was based on a religious



identity. This division had badly touched upon the poor Namasudras of East Pakistan, and not so much on the poor Muslims of West-Bengal; because from the incision of independence Pakistan declared herself as Islamic state, whereas India declared herself as a secular state and still remains a secular state to this day and age. In Pakistan Hindus felt insecure but on the other hand in India Muslims felt safe.

Salman Rushdie in his novel *Shame* wrote, "What is the best thing about migrant peoples and seceded nations? I think it is their hopelessness... And what is the worst thing? It is the emptiness of one's luggage... We have floated upwards from history, from memory, from time." The two main protagonists of this short story are also like the migrants or refugees Rushdie talks about, who came from East-Pakistan with their hopelessness and emptiness of their luggage. One is Brajabasi and the other is his uncle Bishtucharan or Bishtu Pandit as people used to call him. Brajabasi crossed the border a lot earlier than Bishtucharan and tried to settle in India in search of a new life. What is new and decidedly postmodernist about his character is the emphasis on the productivity, rather than the pain of dislocating oneself from one's original community. He gave emphasis to productivity in a foreign and impersonal city leaving behind the chaos of the homeland. Bishtucharan on the other hand had experienced severe kind of suffocation and personal loss in his own space in this globe and was subsequently forced to leave behind immense resources. He came to live as a literal stranger in a foreign and impersonal city which was Calcutta. While on the other hand he thinks obsessively, copiously of that very land which had been declared suffocating none other than but by himself.

As Aijaz Ahmed says, it is at least arguable that no one ever knows their country fully, regardless of how much of their life is actually lived within its borders. The imaginative apprehension of totality is always constructed on the basis of bits and slices of concrete experience which constitute any individual's life migrant or not. That what eventually matters about any experience, narrated or felt, is not its partiality, because direct experience is always partial. What matters is the quality of the particular bits and slices which constitute and those others which remain outside the felt experience and therefore outside one's imaginative capacity as well. Bishtucharan has known Boultali, East-Pakistan for a long time and yet because of circumstances has learned only bits and slices of it because no one ever gets to know their homeland whole or in totality. Because totality which is the total remembrance of one's motherland, is an imaginative construct and is constituted of bits and slices of concrete experiences. Now there are two sides of these

experiences-Partial and Quality. He is partial because of his degraded social status and the overall pathetic living condition in this new country and he remembers about East-Pakistan as his homeland where his position in the society was that of a respectable primary school teacher and people used to call him 'pandit' and direct experiences are always partial. But what matters is the quality of some of those bits and slices which were not at all satisfactory because he lost his daughter Jhunu, who was kidnapped, assaulted, raped and killed by a person called Ferumiya and his gang in East-Pakistan and also, the overall baggage of being a Hindu minority living in a Muslim dominated state under constant fear of being targeted. According to Aijaz Ahmed the current metropolitan milieu debunks any 'myths of origin'. So, this kind of migrancy creates a vacuum in their existence. Immigrants are generally left without a nation to call their motherland and this is where the first marginalization comes into the forefront. Namasudra as a community was already marginalized from the caste Hindu hierarchy and added to that, the status of the refugee makes it double marginalized.

Amidst all these problems of refugee settlements, political hooliganism and strong arming did not stop. A political leader of sorts came looking for Brajabasi one day and asked him to gather a hundred people who will be loaded in a lorry and taken to a public gathering or meeting on a given Sunday in the story. Brajabasi hesitates by saying, 'So many people...at the peak time of work...' The leader almost snubs Braja and says, 'Dont tell me about work- I don't want excuses...Don't forget my words.' When an old woman named Harimati went to the leader for help regarding the lack of ration-cards to get basic fuel like kerosene, the leader measures her with sharp eyes and says, 'Ration card? old woman, don't talk about that now! If I give ration cards to people who live by the side of the railway line, I'll have to go to prison.' This is a clear indication that the refugees were considered as political pawns and the political leaders and parties used them whenever they wanted without providing basic necessities for them to survive. The shopkeepers like Brajabasi and other refugees were charged outrageous donations during Durga Puja which was like a tax for doing business near the station area which were collected by local frenzied goons who used to roam around near the liquor shops every time. harimati during the course of the story asks Brajabasi and Bishtucharan, 'Whether we eat or don't, we can at least sleep peacefully. Nobody is pulling our daughters out of our houses. We are not having riots over trivial issues. What more do you want?' Little did she know about the events that were going to unfold. When Bishtucharan tried to emphasize on the productivity which was the dailyness of lives under oppression and the human bonding- of resistance and of decay, rather than the

pain of dislocating just like Brajabasi, all hell broke loose. As Aijaz Ahmed points out that the current metropolitan milieu debunks any 'myths of origin' as has been described previously, another important factor which it debunks is the 'metaphysics of presence' which is the current scenario or location the refugees are finally trying to settle in. And the milieu does not really authorize any sustained acknowledgment of such pain dealing with any of the two factors. Pain as we know is a human emotion and without pain we cease to become flesh and blood and by this we can locate the further marginalization or alienation from human being itself. Depriving men of exercising their emotional faculty to grief and cease to exist as a human being hypothetically is another kind of marginalization which becomes possible in reality due to the same nature of grotesque violence being executed upon Bishtucharan's other daughter Runu by some local goons in Sealdah which showed promise to be a safe haven to those who required and believed. Runu with some other girls from the settlement were taken away by drunken members of so-called decent families and taken to the darkness on the other side of the railway line. Though portions torn off from their sarees sealed their mouths but one could still hear the sounds of their groaning. Bishtucharan and Brajabasi were kept on gunpoint and were later wounded by the handle of the pipe guns they were using. After gaining consciousness Bishtucharan sobs and yells 'Bejo, my Bejo...for what then did you leave your home behind?' This simple question becomes so difficult in a moment that nobody finds an answer to it. He stands up with a jerk and again says, 'Tell me, you tell me...where is our real home?' In a frenzy, he starts running down the track in utter desperation, crying out, 'O my Runu...o my Jhunu...' seeing the last train for Bongaon coming.

The ending of the short story is a clear example of that which Bishtucharan like many other refugees who had lost all that was dear to them. Whether he took his life on the railway tracks is unclear but the imagery is comprehensive enough. When there is so much pain that the emotional faculty cannot register or exercise properly through conventional methods of human gestures or postures and an ambience of madness or frenzy overshadows the baser instincts, then it is the confirmation that the person is removed from the margins of humanity as well. This is the marginalization of the third and the most horrifying kind- thus triple marginalization.

## Chapter 4

### *Camouflaging Caste*

In *Atrocities on Dalits since The Partition of Bengal* Dilip Halder mentions certain events that created havoc in the Bengal political scenario, "Since 24.01.79, we have been blocked by the police force of West Bengal Government. All the supply lines have been cut off. Every household is crying for food. Throughout the day, the police launch is patrolling us. In want of food, the people are now eating leaves, foliage etc. As a result, 81 starvation deaths have occurred in the meantime...Seeing the brutality on women the local people of Kumirmari got infuriated. Police fired 5 round teargas on them. Three girls were about to die in this incident...The oppression took more ferocious turn, when on 31.01,79, Wednesday, the police started showering teargas since morning...The police entered into a house and shot a lady to death with a baby on her lap...another 5-year-old boy was strangled to death by a policeman...and indiscriminate firing took a toll of 30 persons...the 30 dead bodies were taken to the Police Station of Sandeshkhali."

This bloodied account is about the Marichjhanpi Massacre of 1978 where Communism and Humanity both failed miserably against the Namasudra refugees who tried to make a living in a foreign land which believed that land for the tigers was more precious than the lives of human beings. It's a staunch and harsh critique of the policies of the left government that failed to live up to their own ideologies about the upliftment of the proletariats. Violence unleashed in Marichjhanpi was both chilling and mind-numbing, it was an orgy of murder and blood-letting. The Namasudra refugees who arrived in the 1950's did not get a fair deal in Bengal. Unlike the first wave of high caste '*bhadrolok*' refugees, they were dispatched forcefully to the 78,000 square miles of inhospitable, unirrigated land in the tribal areas of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh called the Dandakaranya region by 1973. In 1978 about 120,000 refugees, most of them Namasudras, returned to Bengal, and settled in Marichjhanpi, a 125-square kilometer uninhabited island in the Sundarbans. Here they built within a few months twelve settlements, with roads,

drainage, school, dispensary, market and a dike system to hold the tide. At last these enterprising Namasudra refugees hoped that their dream of rehabilitation in Bengal would be realised, as the Left Front government came to power in 1977. Nakul Mallick's novel *Khoma Nei* (Unforgiven) tells us the story of this dream which soon turned into a nightmare as after coming to power the left front's policy towards these refugees changed dramatically. The continued influx of refugees from Dandakaranya, it was feared, might jeopardise the state's precarious economy; also by settling down in a tiger reserve forest area the refugees had broken the forest laws. Their act was regarded as criminal trespass, while the earlier squatter movement of the high-caste refugees was hailed as noble dissent. The government wanted to send them back to Dandakaranya, and when they refused, they were fired upon, and then were subjected to economic blockade, and finally forced eviction. Although many of these refugees later managed to escape, the massacre of Marichjhanpi, where the interests of the protected tiger population took precedence over those of the Namasudra refugees, constitutes the most bizarre part of the saga of refugee rehabilitation in Bengal. The irony in this tragedy is that this left government that came to power in 1977 in Bengal is the same left government who rose to power for their policies regarding the upliftment of the downtrodden-the peasants, farmers, workers who are collectively known as the proletariat or the working class in communist terminology. The leftist *bhadrolok* (educated upper caste people) in power in West-Bengal did not need to use the refugees as a tool for their politics any longer. So, they used their police and cadre in freeing Marichjhanpi from the hands of refugees. In Mallick's novel the tragedy which forms the backdrop proves that when a communist government established with great effort and a lengthy movement uses its police force for the mass killings of dalits, it can without a doubt be called an undeniable failing of West-Bengal's search for equality. The dalit genocide of Marichjhanpi in 1979 is a terrible crime in the history of the communist government, a crime that brooks no pardon. It was in 1979, when thousands of dalits, refugees of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) lost their lives at Marichjhanpi, in Sundarban for their dream of resettling in the region which they considered part of their motherland. Marichjhanpi is just one incident in the tragic tale of one of the most powerful dalit community- Namasudras of Bengal- who first became the victim of Hindu-Muslim communalism during the partition of 1947 and 1971 and later became the victims of caste oppression in independent India. Moreover, the complete silence of Bengal's civil society and the fact that dalits were killed by the Communist government of West-Bengal that came in power in the name of poor and dispossessed raises serious questions about representation of dalits in every sphere, the constitution of civil society and hegemony of few

privileged castes in the political sphere in independent India. Nakul Mallick thus becomes a literary figure and a novelist who stands out. Keeping the cruel history of a dalit genocide perpetrated by the communist government of West-Bengal, Mallick pens his novel and names it *Khoma Nei*(Unforgiven). In this declaration, in the echo of these words *Khoma Nei* which literally translates into No Pardon, one hopes that the axe of someone's resistance will be seen to flower.

In Bengal, there has been a long history of the communist movement, mainly, sponsored by the people of the *bhadralok Samaj*, which Kancha Ilaiah has taken as a focal point in his *Untouchable God*. He mentions of an *adda*(gathering) at the Calcutta Coffee House in his novel: "All I wanted to point out to you is that talking about classes makes no sense unless we also talk about castes. Caste is India's class. caste is India's race...I think it is particularly our duty as communists to discuss this point." Everyone imagined that the high caste Bengali intellectuals have set themselves to destroy hegemony by keeping Gramsci and Marx in front of them as a model. The Leftist especially the Marxists, would rise above caste differences was the fond hope of many in Bengal. But they failed to leave an impact on the marginalized people. In the fabric of everyday life, in everyday needs and complaints and struggles no part of Gramsci's thought has affected organized political existence. In the leftist politics of West-Bengal no attempt has been made to even touch the apparatus of hierarchy and inequality.

Articulated class consciousness would have threatened the facade of class struggle. The Bengal upper caste society contains both caste and class identity combined together to maintain hegemony, very particularly of literary, political, administrative, cultural hegemony. Antonio Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks* talked about cultural hegemony. Hegemony is in reality the dictatorship of the cultured classes over the entire world, which has at some point of time been term 'socialism' by the bourgeoisie. When elections take place, the proletariat casts the vote but the bourgeoisie gets seated in power. Kanshi Ram, who founded the Bahujan Samaj Party, had once said that the vote would be ours and the power all yours-this cannot continue. This state of things must end. By the law of nature, the man or woman of culture does not wish to relinquish his/her pride that comes of being cultured. Bengal being a cultural and intellectual hub because of its literature and intelligentsia camouflaged the caste hierarchy and discrimination prevalent in the grass root throughout history with the more intellectual and fashionable property called class during the years of the United Left Front Government. The

whole discourse on caste and its atrocities which comes with it has been neglected by the publishing houses as well, which are dominated by the caste Hindu majority in Bengal. The mainstream publishing houses under the communist government did not print and publish the atrocities related to the practice of casteism portrayed in different literary forms by dalit writers. Their excuse was that the writing was not literary enough to publish. But the crux of the matter is to deny the people the right to know that there is caste problem penetrating the different stratus of society and create a facade by providing them with a so called bigger problem that is class which was close to their ideology and propaganda. The big shots who were controlling the government as well as the mainstream publication and media diverted the caste question because most of them were caste Hindus themselves operating from the highest level of authority in the state. The Bengali hierarchical mind set and ego would not let such a major phenomenon called caste to spread to the world and let its cultural rating go down or get stained. So came the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha and *Chaturtho Duniya*(The Fourth World) a publishing house daring enough to voice the cries of the oppressed and marginalized in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Bengal. The Bengal Left-Front government chose class over caste because it was dominated by a majority of caste Hindu Brahmins who did not want to sacrifice their social hierarchy and a place of privilege by locating and rectifying the abomination that is caste. That is why Marichjhanpi happened under the Left government. It was an undeclared war to eradicate a significant number of dalit Namasudra population from the face of the earth by using deadly violence. **They were workers of the world united to die.** By doing this they killed their ideological belief in the first place and ran the government on a poisoned principle for the next 32 years. The victims were workers and commoners turned refugees from Bangladesh who came to settle in Marichjhanpi. Before failing to address the caste question, they failed miserably to hold on to the atrocities of class struggle which they promoted to be their ideological viewpoint by open firing upon the working-class people who made a living and built a society or civilization for that matter from scratch, trying to forget the horrors of partition and displacement. They wanted to live peacefully under the so called Communist Government who takes care of the working-class people and takes part in their class struggle against the bourgeoisie powers. But their faith turned against them and in a strange situation of role reversal, the communist during the events of Marichjhanpi became the bourgeoisie oppressor and obliterated the working-class community into ashes. The priority was to safeguard the workers or refugees at Marichjhanpi but the Marxist leaders and their intellectual dishonesty in dealing with the real contemporary problems surrounding the area was an eye opener. The decisions were more of a nuclear

Leninist extremism which insisted political governance to be explicitly committed to the political cause of the Left which was class and not caste. As Marx mentions in the *Das Kapital*, the process of reification which concerns the way when capitalist goals and questions of profit and loss are paramount, workers are bereft of their full humanity, and are thought of as 'hands' or 'the labour force', people in a word become commodities. The incident at Marichjhanpi can be called reification incarnate where the workers were used just as commodities to gain political prominence in the national spectrum.

As Nilanjana Chatterjee in her book *Midnight's Unwanted Children* points out, their use of the slogan 'Amrakara? Bastuhara!' (who are we? Refugees!) speaks a deliberate privileging of the overarching self-definition of refugee. It really raises the query whether a classless society can at all be built within a system that perpetuates caste based discrimination.<sup>27</sup> While explaining 'State Socialism' Dr.B.R.Ambedkar spoke of democracy which is essentially required for the poor masses of India but 'democracy without socialism is a fraud' on them. Would democratic socialism in India be successful? The world of dalit minority writers and literature is seeking to move forward based on the idea of social equality.



## **Conclusion:**

During the colonial period, the nationalist intelligentsia which operated in the all-India scale, had arisen predominantly from the upper and middle castes and from inside the pursuits and professions that were closer to the institutions of the colonial state: administration, law, commerce, English language journalism, teaching, staffs of colleges and universities. There was already, during the colonial period, a distinct hierarchical divide between the national functions of the intelligentsia, which were carried out in English, and the regional functions, which were carried out in the indigenous languages, sometimes by the same people, but at distinct locations. This was as true of the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League or the Communist party.

The further shifts in the post-colonial period have augmented the tendency among the metropolitan intellectuals especially the bourgeois intelligentsia who used to run majority of the publishing houses inside India, to view the products of the English-writing of the cosmopolitan cities by higher caste Hindus as the central documents of India's national literature. In recent times, this problem has escalated and is one of the central reasons behind the failure of the vernacular literatures not getting attention in the national scene. And dalit Namasudra writers writing about their own stories in their regional language and also getting recognition for it at the national stage was and is still a utopian dream because even the people of Bengal were, and even now, not recognizing these genres of work as part of a major literary movement against casteism which was and still widely practiced. Dalit literature are seen ideologically against the caste system of the society and this is the reason why they are not welcome by our religious traditionalists. As Manohar Mouli Biswas says, "Publishing houses are not obliging enough; media people do not highlight our faces; critics do not pay attention to us; politicians in power turn their deaf ears to us. Habitually we kiss the darkness of night. No award comes our way. No chair of honour is allotted to us. And that is the way we-dalits traverse our lives. Now we desire to come out from the black lists and the caste compartment. Let it happen for the betterment of human kind." <sup>28</sup>

The defining moment in contemporary Bangla language and literature is the dalit literary movement, which is trying through radical thinking to bring about change in traditional attitudes and ways of thinking. People who had hitherto being compelled to exist in the lowest rungs of the socio-economic structure of society are now

communicating their woes through stories, poems, novels, essays, thereby creating a new tradition in literature. Breaking the shackles of contempt, torture, oppression, exclusion and shame to liberate a sizeable community of people is the primary goal that leads to the main aim- search for equality.

In Bengal, an active forum for asserting self-identity through dalit literature by bringing all the groups under one umbrella began under the aegis of the organization called Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha.(started a literary and cultural movement in West-Bengal that was a strong and concerted effort since 1992. A literary magazine *Chaturtha Duniya*(The Fourth World) a bookshop and a publishing house in the same name is run by the organization). In 1992 the first annual convention was held in the village of Bhayna in Nadia District. After holding such conventions in various districts of north and south Bengal, in December (24-25) 2003, a two-day long twelfth annual conference was organized in Lalbag in Murshidabad district. So far it has organized 25 annual conferences and the last one happened in the premises of Hridaypur Ambedkar Mission in the district of North 24 Parganas for two days on 24-25 December. They Namasudras may not be a minority in actual numbers but in the world of literature, they are a minority. Minority writers refers to writers who have forged their way through severe social restrictions. If dalit writers remain with this tag of being ‘minority writers’, they would be unable to bring progressive change to their own communities and would hamper the progress of the nation. In tune with the mainstream, the more dalits can engage in creative pursuits, it will signal the upliftment of the people as education is imperative to build a progressive nation. And the Organization is doing the same to promote such literatures from the margins. Caste problem can be resolved if there is a political will to resolve it in contemporary India.

After all this time and experiencing the history of the dalit Namasudras, the majority of the caste Hindu brahmins protest about the Reservation Policy which was implemented after the Constitution of India was drafted and was made for the betterment of the Scheduled caste(Namasudras fall under this category) and Scheduled Tribes who faced innumerable difficulties and challenges to prosper in a caste based hierarchical society throughout history. But no one seems to have a complaint about the practice of proudly wearing the ‘*Janeu*’(the sacred white thread worn by caste brahmins).The caste brahmins seem to have no problem about the fact that in the substantially populated Forth-World pockets of the country, a pat on the back is not always a sign of respect or admiration but signifies the barbaric covert custom of locating whether there is an

insignificant white thread around your body which determines your superiority and almost omnipotence; you cannot use constitutional terms like 'equality' for all in such scenarios where the *janeu* becomes your identity. First, they have to take necessary steps to ditch the concept of *janeu* and other additional perks which comes with it like the caste Hindu last names which even challenges evolution in its absurd model of pre-determination of hierarchy in our 'humble' society. Even the sense of pride associated with the caste Hindu surnames can be difficult sometimes to let go of, but if they take the necessary steps, the Namasudras as well as all the dalit communities will join the caste Hindu brothers in this effort to throw away their prized possession. 'That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.'(note) Identity cannot be associated with caste anymore, period.

My grandfather was lucky enough to gather British intelligence reports about the inevitable partition of 1947 and immediately relocated the whole family from East-Bengal to West-Bengal via the mutual house exchange plan that was unofficially conducted by people from both the countries in search of a better life. I myself though a Namasudra by caste, am from a more economically privileged background, but it took three generations of women and men giving their blood and sweat for the greater cause. To get their children educated under the reservation system promised by the great Babasaheb Ambedkar and make something out of their lives as '*bastuharas*'(refugees) from a foreign country under a foreign government. My family still had a roof above their head, but what about the less fortunate who settled under abominable conditions on the sides of the Eastern Railway train tracks and other refugee camps like Dandakaranya, devoid of citizenship, voter identity card, ration card and life. The educated dalits faced another problem. Their degrees from a foreign land was not recognized by the Indian government for many years. They were unwanted, unwelcome in this land where people can at most only look upon them as objects of pity. Now without Reservations they would not have survived this turmoil and the constant tussle between existence and oblivion. Reservation was a way of equal rights for them, a ray of hope for a better living, an opportunity to live among unequals.

When I look at my family I see the face of the change- we took the opportunity and stood up to the potential and now have taken the job to inspire and educate other people from marginal dalit communities about the priority of education. My Father who is a historian by profession always used to say, "They have tortured and looted us for five thousand years. Let them suffer for five thousand years at least, and then we will give them Reservation." He is a very harsh critic of casteism and I could understand the words

coming from an emotional point of view. But I put logic and reasoning to it and thought that if ninety percent of the dalits in India are educated and have secure jobs then we can scrap the reservation system because the goal has been achieved. But this awareness has to spread and movements like the dalit literary movement in Bengal must not fail. But with the baggage of cultural silence on their part for years and years, overnight transformation of all dalits into educated and ‘civilized’ beings is another Utopia with a hint of irrationality attached to it. Where economically backward dalit students attend schools just for the mid-day meal that is provided in government sponsored academic institutions, even free education is a beautiful lie. We have to feed the hungry stomachs first which is an enormous challenge by itself.

The Bengal dalit literary movement is not only about whining and crying about atrocities. But also, to come to a solution. Hypothetically, a perfect amalgamation of Babasaheb’s vision and the theoretical offerings of communism, might just work in this scenario, because I still think that in Bengal Marxism was not at fault, but the fault was in its application. All the whining and crying about dalit Namasudra atrocities is to make a wider readership and to let the people know about the sufferings of the people from the margins and then when it catches the public eye, to come to a solution through law and Justice. The Bengal dalit movement sought not merely to transform the structure of society in order to ensure social justice and equality but to create a literature which would make dalit society aware of its humiliation and servitude by voicing their anguish in a society ordered on the caste system and the Namasudras are the most prominent part of this movement since the beginning of the 20th century. The master narratives of the dominant class needed to be supplemented by the counternarratives produced by the dalits. The humiliation faced by the dalit Namasudras socially, economically, politically and most importantly, mentally must be addressed to conjure up a discourse which may help strengthen the cause of this movement. As Raicharan Biswas in the poem *Ushar Swapan* (Dreams at Dawn) from *Jatiya Jagaran* (Awakening of a Caste) conveys,

*Dreams at Dawn*

12

Ancient histories of caste,

Will reverse fast,

Will have a fresh start,

The massive "Namasudra" chapter state of the art.

Arrogance will kneel at your door in fright,

I have dreamt this dream last night.

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