

Dalit Versus Sub-caste: A Study on the problem of identity of the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal

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Identity of a community is a matter of perception. It depends on the context and approaches of analysis. Social identity of a community again is 'relational'. So in a plural society, identity of any community has multiple dimensions. In this context, identity of the Scheduled Castes is also suffering from multiplicity. In the recent years, it has become a common fashion among the social scientists, journalists and popular writers alike to classify the Scheduled Castes of India as Dalits. Their researchers have developed three basic trends in the academic world: --- (i) dalitism among the Scheduled Castes, (ii) researches of the non-Scheduled Castes who have treated all oppressed people as Dalits; and (iii) writings of the Scheduled Caste scholars who have willingly accepted theoretical imposition of both Dalit and the non-Dalit scholars. These trends eventually have encapsulated the Scheduled Castes within the fold of 'Dalit identity'. However, a major section of the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal has reservation to accept 'Dalit identity'. Rather, they are more comfortable with their own sub-caste or Scheduled Castes identity. In this paper I'll argue that the construction of Dalit identity of the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal is a theoretical imposition on them since reality is quite different from the theory.

II

Meaning of Dalit and Dalitism

All though 'Dalit Studies' is gaining popularity as an academic discipline among scholars and popular writers but as a social concept 'Dalit' is an ambiguous one. What does Dalit(s) mean? It is perhaps a significant question for many of us. Literally *dalit* means broken, crushed or reduced to pieces (what is an adjective in English grammar). In Dalit Studies, 'Dalit(s)' is a collective /proper noun. Again, in the Sanskrit *dalita* is a verb.³ Thus grammatically the concept *dalit* is not free from ambiguity.

However, for the Dalit Panthers of the 1970s and 1980's meaning of 'Dalit' was very much clear. According to them 'Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution who believes in humanism, rejects the existence of God, rebirth, soul, sacred books that teach discrimination, fate and heaven'.⁴ It means 'dalit' stands for assertion/ revolution against discrimination through creative writings and reinterpretation of experiences of oppressed/ marginalized people. So dalitology is a voice against injustice, social oppression and discrimination. Thus idea and objectives of the 'Dalit Panthers' are very much clear. They initially used this term in case of the Mahars, a Scheduled Caste community of Maharashtra. Later the term Dalits has included all Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs and other oppressed section of the society. Dalitology got more positive outlook in the 1990s when main producers have been branded as Dalits. In an article Kancha Iliah (a notable Dalit thinker) has argued that 'the Dalitbahujans are the skilled producers-instrument makers, creative builders of the material basis of society. Conversion of their experience into the framework of knowledge can produce an alternative version of history—the Dalitbahujan alternative'.⁵

This assertion suggests that non-dalits are merely parasites that depend on the Dalits for their survival. This assertive voice of the dalitology has been echoed in many such writings

especially in Southern and Western India to express their pain and feeling by refuting and deconstructing the non-Dalit version(s) of protest. In this context, the Dalit Christians of Southern India have treated the 'words' of protest very seriously. In their edited volume (*Dalit Theology*, 2010) Santhianathan Clarke, Dinabandhu Manchale and Philip Vinod Clarke, thus have used 'word' as a tool of Dalit assertion.⁶

The positive meaning of the term 'dalit' or dalitology, is however, often moves downwards particularly when the non-Dalits come forward to use Dalits merely as a synonym of untouchables.⁷ Since the 1980's researches of many non-Dalit scholars have diluted the 'voice' of dalitism of the colonial period. Here we can take Gail Ombetd as an example. She identified the Mahars of Maharastra as untouchables and hence they are Dalits.⁸ Ishita Banerjee-Dube⁹, Imtiaz Ahmad and Shashi Bhusan Upadhyay¹⁰ and such many scholars have done the same thing. According to Shashi Bhusan 'the former untouchables are now called Dalits who are voicing their grievances in various level'¹¹ Similarly, Padma Velaskar wrote: 'Dalit refers to former untouchable caste communities.'¹² These are a few examples only. Influence of such writings is comparatively deeper in the society (than the meaning propounded by the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit Christians). Negative meaning is getting more solid form thanks to media both print and electronic. In such a context of negative meaning of dalit identity we'll now proceed to discuss the dalit identity of the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal.

III

The Scheduled Castes of West Bengal

Territorially, West Bengal is the 14th state of India (with only 88,752 skm² out of 3287240 skm² i. e, 2.69%) while population wise it is fourth with 7.54% of India's total population (91,347,736 out of 1210193422 of 2011 census). Among the Scheduled Castes (SCs) population of India, West Bengal is sharing 12.88% (total 21463270 out of 166,635,700 in India 2011) what is again 23.49% of State's population. Scheduled Castes of West Bengal are divided into 60 sub-castes with wide ranging diversity. While five major sub-castes like the Rajbanshis (3801677), the Namasudras (3504642), the Bagdis (3058265), the Poundras (2450260) and the Bauris (1,228,635) collectively constituted 14043479 souls, i.e. 76% and rest 55 sub-castes constitute only 24% (4409076 heads only). Population of some sub-castes is even less than two thousands like the Banter (138), the Dabgar (252), the Halalkhor (1174), etc). The Scheduled Castes of West Bengal are equally diverse in terms of their education, economic and social status.

From occupation point of view, agricultural works, fishing, bamboo and wood works, scavenging, sweeping, making country liquor, weaving and washing clothes, tailoring, leather works and other menial works, etc, were traditional professions of the SCs of West Bengal in pre-colonial and colonial days. They are still largely engaged in the primary sector of economy. In the agricultural sectors, they have major concentration as agricultural labourer, marginal peasants and agricultural related works. Educationally they are still backward. Although the Rajbanshis, the Namasudras, the Poundras, the Dhobas, the Jhalo Malos and the Jelias Kaibartyas have higher literacy rate than the general rate of the SCs but the educational condition of the Bagdis, the Doais, the Binds, the Tiyars, and the Keyots is really very much deplorable. Only the Namasudras and the Poundras have almost reached to the State average. Rests of the communities have remained far below.

So the upward progress of all Scheduled Caste communities of West Bengal is not identical. Again there is clear difference between the higher educated and lower educated Scheduled Castes of this state. There are also wide variations among the SCs in terms of their

distribution in rural-urban sector. While the higher educated and high salaried Scheduled Castes of urban areas have the opportunity to eliminate their caste background but they are frequently being identified along the caste line by their upper caste neighbours. But in rural area, because of their huge concentration in particular area, the Scheduled Castes communities are comparatively less concerned about their caste identity. The educated sections of the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal again are less attentive towards their poor and illiterate fellows. Politically, there is no homogeneity among the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal. However, a few big Scheduled Caste communities such as the Namasudras, the Rajbanshis, the Poundras, etc., have established their political importance in certain districts of West Bengal because of their heavy concentration. These sub-castes are also trying to organize their fellows under the banner of their caste-based socio-cultural organizations. Other Scheduled Caste communities are politically scattered and now being controlled by national and regional level political parties. So identity of the Scheduled caste communities of West Bengal has multiple dimensions.

IV

Social Identity of the Scheduled Castes in Pre-colonial and Colonial Bengal

Since the term Scheduled Castes was coined in the 1930s by the colonial government, the Scheduled Castes were branded in different names in the pre-colonial literature and colonial records. In the pre-colonial society, they were identified according to their social rank what remained in the bottom of the caste system. The professions followed by the Scheduled Castes were looked down as 'inferior works' followed by the men of low social rank. So, all these caste communities (classified as Scheduled Castes since 1936) had been assigned lower status in the traditional caste hierarchy. Ancient and early medieval socio-religious texts (*shastras*, *puranas* and *smritis*) had treated them as *sudra* or as *antaja* (people of inferior rank) and often almost as *asprishya* (untouchables). *Brihadharma Purana*, an early medieval Sanskrit text, had classified them as *madhyam sankaras* (mixed caste of average social rank) and *antajas*. The *Brahmabaibartya Purana*, compiled in the early medieval period, had also categorized them as *satsudras* (Sudra caste of respectable rank), *asatsudras* (inferior Sudra) and as *antajaas*.¹³ So it appears that they had inferior social rank in the traditional caste society. The *mangala* literatures and the *charitas* (biographies) of the Vaishnava saints¹⁴ composed in the late medieval period (fifteenth to eighteenth century) have also recorded their humiliating social status.

The colonial literatures have recorded more miserable social identity of the lower caste communities of Bengal. Ethnographic surveys, gazetteers, census and official records show that the agriculturist Scheduled Castes such as the Namasudras, Palias, Poundras, Rajbanshis, Bhuiyans, etc. did not have social respect as 'caste group' like other upper caste agriculturists. The Namasudras in the nineteenth century were considered as *Chandals* who were not allowed to enter even into the outer circles of the 'Aryan system'.¹⁵ The Namasudra students in the educational institutes and constable in the barracks were considered to be untouchables by the upper castes.¹⁶ Even the British Government had no hesitation to force the Chandals to work as sweepers in the jails considering them as untouchable.¹⁷

The Rajbanshis, in spite of being agriculturist and even after being educated and competent enough used to be humiliated by the upper caste Hindus solely for their lower social status. Panchanan Barma (1872-1935), a Rajbanshi thinker and social reformer; was abused publicly by his upper caste lawyer colleague in Rangpur only that he was a Rajbanshi.¹⁸ The Rajbanshi students in the hostel, peasants in the *haats* (weekly markets) and villages had to bear social injustice because of their lower caste origin.¹⁹

The Poundras had also similar experiences. In this context, observation of H.H. Risley regarding the Poundras is very much noteworthy. He recorded (in 1886 published in 1891) that “The social status of the Pods is decidedly low. They will eat sweetmeats, drink and smoke with the fishing sub-castes of Bagdis; and these are ordinarily deemed to be nearly their equals in rank. Brahmins and the members of the ‘Nava Sakha group’ will not take water from them; and the Sutradhar and Kapali, while they will eat sweetmeats, drink and smoke in company with a Pod, will not use the same pipe or will not drink from the same lota.”²⁰

It means the Brahmins and other upper castes (such as the Kayasthyas and Baidyas) did not accept water and food from the people of Poundras, Bagdis, Chandalas, Dhobas, Kaibartyas, Malos, Rajbanshis Sunris, Tiyors and other lower castes of Bengal as they were considered polluted and *ajalchal* (from whom water can be drunk)²¹ social groups although most of them were the followers of Hinduism. So in 1891, H.H. Risley found that the Malos were Vaishnavas and got service from the *napits* (barber) and *dhoba* (washermen) and the *patit* Brahmins (Brahmins of lower rank) but ‘upper caste Hindus’ had restrictions to take water from their hands.²² Similarly the Bagdis were considered as outcaste and had no right to dine with other castes except the Bouris, Muchis and Manjhis. Contemporary and near contemporary Bengali novels have also vividly illustrated the miserable social status of these communities.²³

So it appears that the Scheduled Castes of Bengal were considered to be ‘almost untouchables’. Although their products, services and wealth have been greatly used by the Upper Caste Hindus (like Brahmins, Kayasthyas, Baidyas and other Caste Hindus) but as human being or as community, they had no acceptability in the society. Food and drink made by them could not be offer to the Upper Caste. This unjust attitude had its existence in the mind of the Upper Caste. So Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansa Deva (1836-1886), the great saint, before his appointment as priest had his reservation to consume the foods purchased by the money of Rani Rashmoni (1739-1861), the builder of the Dakshineswar Kali Temple who was a Kaibartya by caste. In his own words:

“I felt very sorry to think that I am consuming food supplied by a Kaibartya. Even the poor and beggars were not interested to accept the food offered to the deity of the temple. In many days the sanctified foods had given to the cows and dumped to the Ganges when no person was ready to accept them.(sic)”²⁴

Bengali novels composed in the colonial and early post-colonial period have frequently recorded the marginalized location of the Scheduled Castes. Bankim Chanda’s novel *Debi Choudhurani* (1882)²⁵ and Bhibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyay’s classics like *Pather Panchali* (1929)²⁶ and *Ichhamati* (1950)²⁷ are although not based on the marginal people but they occasionally reflected the casteist attitude of the upper castes. Both of them have used Bagdi, Dom, Hari, etc. as slang terms although they are the names of numerically prominent Scheduled Caste community. Similarly Rabindra Nath Tagore’s *Gora* (1910)²⁸ and *Ghare Baire* (1916)²⁹ and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s stories³⁰ have contained a few sentences about the marginalized social lives of the Scheduled Castes although they are no way the protagonist of Dalit Discourse.³¹

There are a few more literary pieces produced by the Brahmin novelists in the colonial period where attitude of the upper castes towards community-based social systems of the Scheduled Castes have been properly reflected. Among such writings mention may be made of *Hasulibaker Upakatha* (1947)³² of Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, *Padma Nadir Majhi* (1936)³³ of Manik Bandyopadhyay, *Dhorai Charit Manas* (1949-51) of Satinath Bhaduri. In these writings, the Scheduled Caste communities have been invariably constructed as sub-standard,

uncivilized, non-Aryan, and indigenous people who deserve no respect because of their unclean (!) professions.

However, the educated Scheduled Castes have also left their experience in their writings. Among such persons we can mention the name of Adwaita Malla Barman (1914-1952). Adwaita depicted the marginalised socio-economic condition of the fishermen Scheduled Caste like the Malos in his novel '*Titas Ekti Nadir Nam*'³⁴ (*A River Called Titas*), composed in the 1940s. Adwaita Malla Barman, recorded that:

“Those other communities.... don't let any Malo in their homes. Anything touched by a Malo is considered polluted. At their festivals and at worship, even the Malos, who are invited must themselves dispose of the banana leaves they eat off, because their high-caste status will be polluted if they touch them.”³⁵

So it appears that the Scheduled Castes of Bengal were treated as 'almost untouchables' by the upper caste Hindus in pre-colonial and colonial Bengal what was a sheer unjust social practice. It indicates very much ignominious location of the lower caste communities of Bengal. Although they were the producers and suppliers of food crops, fruits, fish and vegetables, workers and builders of building, houses, wooden furniture and other essential items; they were the victims of casteism, an inseparable trend of Indian society. In this sense they can be treated as Dalits in the Dalit discourse.

V

Caste in Official Records and Demand for respectable Caste Identity

'Caste' has been transformed into a matter of official records with the beginning of census since 1871-72. Although the colonial ethnographers had initiated the process of gathering information about social customs, traditions, history and mode of life of the people of India since the very beginning of their rule but it became a serious matter after the outbreak of the Revolt of 1857. Pre-Revolt colonial studies regarding the caste and tribal communities of Bengal (such as the study of Buchanan Hamilton (1807-1914), B.H. Hodgson (1847), etc) were proved insufficient to fulfill the need of the colonial government. Regional level census in North West frontier Province (1865) and Awadh (1869), publication of *Annals of Rural Bengal* of W.W. Hunter (in 1869) and the administrative requirement led to the adoption of a policy of all-India level census in the 1870s. Accordingly First census was conducted in 1871-72 what classified the people of India on the basis of *varna* (caste) and race. In regards to Bengal, H.Beverley (Inspector General of Registration) recorded that the fourfold caste-based parameter was accepted as the basis of social stratification.³⁶ Beverley had even classified the lower caste s as people into a few sub-groups such as Semi-Hinduised Castes, Semi-hinduised aborigines, half-civilized, etc. Caste, continued to be a parameter of classification in the subsequent census too. Since 1881 position of each caste community in the official record began to be determined on the basis of social position of the community.³⁷ In the Census of 1901 and 1911 the colonial surveyors had maintained caste as a parameter of classification. In the Census of 1911 the colonial government had also recorded the sub-castes or occupational groups of each caste.

However, with the beginning of the First World War (1914-18) and to ensure their support the colonial Government had adopted a policy to mobilize the lower Caste with certain promises including providing them political opportunities. So adoption of the *Government of India Act (1919)* and creation of a new concept called 'Depressed Castes' in the 1920s had placed the lower castes of Bengal in a list of castes which are extremely backward in terms of their social, cultural, economic and political advancement. So the Census of 1921 and 1931 had maintained the Depressed Castes and Depressed Class identity of the lower castes of Bengal.

But with the adoption of the *Government of India Act 1935* and the *Government of India (Scheduled Caste) Order 1936* have eventually classified the Depressed Castes as Scheduled Castes. So the Scheduled Castes of Bengal got a constitutional identity under the colonial rule.

Census operation as well the creation of multiple identities of the Scheduled Castes, however, had encouraged many Scheduled Caste communities for establishing respectable caste identity in the official records since 1881 what actually was initiated by the Kayathas.³⁸ Mr. Rajendra Lal Mitra; a reputed scholars of Bengal with considerable knowledge on Sanskrit, had prepared a list of caste communities in 1881 according to their position in the caste hierarchy.³⁹ The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal had issued an order to follow the guideline and list of Shri Mitra in regards to any discrepancy about official position of any caste community.⁴⁰ Since then demand for higher caste position in the official record became a common trend. Such demands for higher caste position in the official record was continued till 1931.⁴¹

In order to materialise the demand for respectable caste identity most of the Scheduled Caste communities had developed a sense of 'self-respect' by rejecting the imposed dictums of the traditional Hindu scriptures (as interpreted by the Brahmins) and attempting to create a notion of 'imaginary' but 'respectable' caste identity. Being instigated by the government policy of social stratification in the late nineteenth and twentieth century⁴² caste organizations of the Scheduled Caste communities had submitted their prayers to the census superintendents for assigning more respectable status in the official records. In most cases, they asserted for 'Kshatriya' caste identity (such as the Rajbanshi Kshatriya, Poundra, Malla Kshatriya, etc.)⁴³ while some castes claimed for Vaishya (such as Dhobas, Sunris, Bhuinmalis, Jelia Kaibartyas) and respectable Sudra (like the Namasudras) identity. These demands of standard caste identity were translated into practice in the first quarter of the twentieth century through the construction of 'self-history', adoption of respectable rituals and social reforms.

Again, they had given maximum emphasis on the spread of education to empower the caste fellows to develop their financial and social status. So 'social justice' was the 'goal' while 'social reforms' was a means to reach to that goal. In such a social context of colonial Bengal, *kshatriyaization* (of the Rajbanshis (1891-1947), the Poundras (1891-1956) and the Malos (1911-1947), etc.), *namasudraization* (Namasudra movement of the Chandals (1872-1947)) and *vaishyaization* (Vaishya movement of the Dhobas (1911-1947), the Sunris, etc.) of the Scheduled Caste communities were basically movements for attaining self-respect and social justice. These castes assertions, however, had structurally integrated many Scheduled Castes communities in the colonial period along their respective sub-caste or community identity.

VI

The Scheduled Caste Identity and Political Reservation

The social movement for establishing caste identity of the Scheduled Castes was turned into a political movement after the beginning of electoral politics in Bengal. During the period between 1920 and 1936 they participated in the election for Bengal Legislative Council. In the elections (1920, 1922, 1926 and 1929), the Scheduled Castes had mobilized the feeling of their belonging to particular sub-caste to get victory in the general (non-Muhamedan) constituencies. Because of their huge concentration in particular area the Rajbanshis, the Namasudras and the Poundras had made considerable progress in the elections.

The Scheduled Castes had appeared as a significant political force in Bengal after the introduction of 'political reservation' in the 1930s. In the election of Bengal Legislative Assembly held in 1937 the Scheduled Caste communities (particularly the Namasudras, the Rajbanshis, the Poundras, the Malos, the Sunris, the Mals, the Bagdis, the Muchis and the

Sunris) had participated in 30 reserve seats as well as in general seats. Most of them came victorious as independent candidate (22) with strong caste feeling while the Congress (6) and the Hindu Mahasabha(2) had also mobilized them. After the election of 1937, the Scheduled Castes (SC) thus established themselves as a political force in Bengal. An analysis on the election results of 1937 also indicates that besides the 30 reserved seats, they won three general seats (1 Congress and 2 Independent). We find that two ministers were chosen from the Scheduled Castes in the government formed by Fazlul Haque (1937-1941).

In the general election of 1946, however, result of the Scheduled Caste organizations like the All India Scheduled Caste Federation (AISCF) and the Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity were very much deplorable. Most of Scheduled Caste candidates contested under the banner of caste organization were defeated. Congress alone got 26 out of 30 reserved seats while the Communist Party won one seat. It indicates that the Scheduled Caste on the eve of the partition of Bengal (1947) began to be controlled by the nationalist organization like the Congress. It is however, beyond doubt that the Scheduled Castes of Bengal had provided opportunity to Dr. B.R.Ambedkar to enter to the Constituent Assembly (who later appeared as the father of Indian Constitution).⁴⁴ Again during the period between 1937 and 1947 the Scheduled Castes political leaders have given maximum emphasis on their Scheduled Caste identity. So the sub-caste based social identity of the lower castes transformed into constitutional identity.

Partition of Bengal had generated a new trend in power politics in both Bengal (West Bengal and East Bengal). The new province of West Bengal (with 90 MLAs) along with the allotted territories also got former Cooch Behar State in 1950 as one of its districts (along with two MLAs). The Partition had divided the Scheduled Caste seats. It is a noticeable fact that the 16 reserve seats went to East Bengal members of which were very much vocal in the Assembly. They mainly belonged to the Namasudra, Rajbanshi, Malo and Kaibartya sub-castes. On the contrary, in West Bengal Assembly there was not a single Namasudra member between 1947 and 1951 while the Rajbanshis had five members. At the same time, West Bengal-based Scheduled Caste communities like the Poundras (3), Mals (1), Bagdis (1), Bauris (2), etc., had their significant presence in the Assembly.

Under the government of Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, three West Bengal-based Scheduled Caste members had their place in the ministry [(Hemchandra Naskar (Poundra), Mohinimohun Barman (Rajbanshi), Radha Nath Das (Bagdi)]. However, after the resignation of Prafulla Chandra Ghosh on 23rd January 1948 Dr. Bidhan Chandra Ray (as Chief Minister) had formed the ministry with 13 members. Two Scheduled Castes ministers (Mohini Mohan Barman and Hemchandra Naskar) were allowed to maintain their portfolios. After the death of Mohinimohun Barman in 1949, Shyamapada Barman had replaced him. This arrangement was continued till the general election of 1952.

General election of 1952 is very much significant for 'Independent India's political future. In case of West Bengal, seats in the Legislative Assembly were increased to 240 (including two seats nominated reserved for the Anglo-Indians). So 1952 election was held for 238 seats where 40 seats were reserved for SCs and 12 for STs.

An analysis of election results of 1952 shows that the Scheduled Castes were controlled by the national level political parties like the Congress and they began to join left politics. In the subsequent elections held in the state (1957-1991) the Scheduled Castes have been controlled by the Congress (Bangla-Congress, Congress-R, Congress-I, Trinamul Congress, etc.), the left (CPI, CMPI(M), SUC, FB (FMB, FB, FB(S), RSP, PSP, etc.) and Hindu nationalist (Jana Sangha, Hindu Mahasabha, BJP, etc.). The results of the elections from 1957 to 2011 shows that the Scheduled Castes were mobilized by the lefts and the Congress as per their own party lines where the Scheduled Castes have been treated on the basis of Sub-caste instead of

‘Scheduled Caste’ identity as a consolidated one. Thus all left and right political parties have nominated the Scheduled Caste candidates according to the population concentration of a sub-caste in a particular constituency. No non-Rajbanshi candidate was nominated by the congress as well left in the Rajbanshi dominated North Bengal in the legislative assembly elections. Such feature has also been noticed in the Namasudra and Poudra dominated regions as well as Bagdi-Bauri dominated regions of West Bengal. So inspite of best efforts of the lefts to treat the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal along the ‘class line’ the Scheduled Castes have failed to cross the level and label of Sub-Castes, i.e. Rajbanshi, Namasudra, Poudra, Bauri, Bagdi, Dom, etc. It is also a fact that the Scheduled Caste communities have failed to organize themselves under their own political party (parties). It signifies their political sub-ordination in the post-colonial West Bengal.

VII

Dalit Identity of the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal

With the beginning of the twenty first century the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal are getting a new political identity under the banner of Dalit Discourse. The concept of Dalit identity is now being invariably applied to all Scheduled Castes. Even the scholars who once attempted to construct the history of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal as ‘caste historians’ are now trying to identify the Scheduled Castes of Bengal as Dalits in a sense that is oppressed / depressed/ inferiors. For instance, we can talk about Prof. Partha Chatterjee and Prof. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay. Very recently Prof. Partha Chatterjee has categorically argued that Scheduled Castes are Dalits. He wrote in a forwarding note of a book ‘that it has been more or less accepted by all that the Scheduled Castes can be identified as Dalits’.⁴⁵ Similarly Sekhar Bandyopadhyay who wrote *Caste, Protest and Identity (1997)*⁴⁶ in the late twentieth century now in the recent work has categorically projected the Scheduled Castes of both colonial and post-colonial Bengal merely as Dalits.⁴⁷

So in the twenty first century, Scheduled Castes of West Bengal including their twentieth century assertion (under the colonial rule) and post independent struggle for survival are being analysed by the non-Dalit scholars only under the framework of ‘dalit’ history in negative sense of the term. Thus the trend of research generated by the non-Dalit scholars like Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Sarbani Bandyopadhyay, Santosh Rana and Kumar Rana and host of others⁴⁸ has transformed the identity of the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal to Dalits!

Influence of both dalitism and academic domination of the non-Dalit scholars have their inevitable impact on the literary and scholastic endeavour of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal. Being induced by dalitism of Western and Southern India, a few Scheduled Castes activists have recorded/are recording their experience of casteism in the recent years. Among them Monohar Mouli Biswas and Monoranjan Byapari got significant attention from the non-Dalit scholars. Monohar Mouli has claimed that he is a ‘Dalit scholar who born in a Dalit family and is fighting for the Dalits through literature’.⁴⁹ In his autobiography Monohar left an impression of traditional life style of the Namasudras. Monoranjan Byapari, on the other hand; has recorded his struggle for survival in post colonial India as refugee, as rikswapuller, as a worker of left political party and as a person who can write his experience against casteism, exploitation and oppression.⁵⁰ Both Monohar and Monoranjan have been accepted as Dalit writers by the non- Dalits. Even to some extent the non-Dalit critics/ protagonists are romantic and bias towards Monoranjan.⁵¹ However, it is beyond doubt that these writers are now branded as Dalit writers either as assertive writers (dalitism) or as oppressed (negative meaning).

In such a context, ‘dalit’ has become a common ‘usage’ for identity of the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal. In our field survey we have asked a question that ‘how do you want be

identified in Indian / Bengali society? 100% of them have replied that they are happy to be Scheduled Castes. 'They don't think that they are Dalits'. For them Dalit identity is a humiliating one (i.e., negative meaning of the Dalit). They replied that their identity as constructed by academicians and media as Dalit is no way acceptable to them.

Table 1: Identity of Scheduled Castes of West Bengal

Sl. No	Name of the Caste	No. of Persons interviewed	No of persons who expressed to be identified as S.C.	No of person who expressed to be identified as Dalit	% of person who expressed to be identified as S.C.	% of person who expressed to be identified as Dalit
1	Rajbanshi	150	150	00	100%	0%
2	Namasudra	25	25	00	100%	0%
3	Poundra	50	50	00	100%	0%
4	Hari	25	25	00	100%	0%
5	Kaora	25	25	00	100%	0%
6	Bagdi	50	50	00	100%	0%
7	Jalia Kaibartya	25	25	00	100%	0%
8	Jhalo Malo/Malo	50	50	00	100%	0%
9	Tiyar	25	25	00	100%	0%
10	Dhoba	25	25	00	100%	0%
11	Bauri	50	50	00	100%	0%
12	Konai	25	25	00	100%	0%
13	Sunri	25	25	00	100%	0%
14	Karenga	25	25	00	100%	0%
15	Mal	25	25	00	100%	0%
16	Mochi	25	25	00	100%	0%
	Total	625	625	00	100%	0%

Source: Filed survey in connection with the ICSSR sponsored Project April 2015-December 2015.

Again the ideologies of the Dalit Panthers like anti-Brahminism and opposing Hindu deities have failed to mobilize the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal. In our survey we have noticed that the Scheduled Castes of this state have embraced all goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. They are not rejecting the Hindu deities. However, a few communities (particularly the Rajbanshis, Poundras, Bagdis and Bauris) in the recent years are popularizing their own gods and goddesses i, e, moving towards Nativism.⁵²

Dalit identity of the Scheduled Castes as many academic scholars and popular writers are trying to build up is not free from criticism from within. While the Dalit Panthers have induced the Scheduled Castes of southern, western and northern India in large scale to accept dalitism, in West Bengal neither dalitism nor Dalit discourse have come up as a dominant trend among the Scheduled Castes. Only a microscopic minority of the Scheduled Castes have accepted the researches of the non-Dalit scholars. Thus they are (Scheduled Castes) transforming themselves into 'academic slaves'.

On the other hand, the Scheduled Castes of West Bengal in general feel that their identity is based on their sub-castes, i.e., the Rajbanshis, the Poundras, the Bagdis, the Bouris, the Namasudras, etc. They again are glorifying their social movement of colonial period in order to organize their sub-castes fellows of present generation. Hence the Rajbanshis, the Poundras and the Namasudras of West Bengal are trying to build up Panchanan Barma (1865-1935), Raicharan Sardar (1876-1942) and Harichand Thakur ((1811-1877) as the father of their respective caste identity. The intellectuals, political leaders as well as socio-cultural organizations of these communities of present days through their writings and activities are drawing our attention to their respective goals and achievements. Thus the sense of sub-castes is more prominent among the Scheduled Castes than the common Dalit identity in West Bengal.

Notes and References

1. Under the leadership of Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, Raja Dhale and Arun Kamble the Dalit thinkers and activists have developed an organization in 1972 called Dalit Panthers in order to fight against casteism/Brahmanism. Through their literary works the Dalit Panthers had organized the Scheduled Castes and neo-Buddhists of Maharashtra as a resistant force. Later this movement has considerably inspired the Scheduled Castes of a few states of India.
2. Post-colonial nationalist historians, journalists and popular writers have branded the low caste communities including the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the Other Backward Castes as "Dalits". According to Kancha Ilaiah they are Dalit Bahujan. 'Dalit' has been appeared as a subject of research to the non-Dalits. However, the educated Dalits are now asserting themselves under the broader umbrella of Dalit Discourse, a discourse by the dalits by their own for raising voice against the social injustices, exploitation and discriminations.
3. The thirteenth century poet Joydev in his *Dasavatara* wrote: *Dalita Hiranyakashipu-tanu bhringam, Keshava dhrita naraharirupa jaya jagadish hare* (दलित हिरण्यकशिपुतनुभृङ्गम् । केशव धृत नरहरि रूप जय जगदीश हरे ॥, Meaning: Thine aesthetic hands ornamented with uncharacteristic sharp nails those are approximating petals of lotus nicely **to**rn, the material body that actually pays no attention to thee of the demon Hiranyakashipu as black bee, O Keshava! Thou art taken an incarnation of a half man and half lion **to** act it. Awfully, I pray to Thee, the omnipresent lord of the Universe; Thine glory is protecting the world eternally). It means *dalita* is a verb. Prof. Jyotishka Ranjan Sarkar, A Sanskrit scholar of Cooch Behar, has given me this translation.
4. Chinna Rao Yagoti: *Dalit Studies: A Bibliographical Handbook*, (Kanishka Publishers and Distributors, 2003), p.11.
5. Kancha Ilaiah : *Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalit Bahujan Alternative*, in Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakraborty (ed): *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1996), p.164.
6. Santhianathan Clarke, Dinabandhu Manchale and Philip Vinod Clarke: *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 1. They wrote-- 'This edited volume is a compendium of words: flaming words, extinguishing words, flowing words, wailing words, faltering words, protesting words, hopeful words, threatening words, freeing words, inviting words, expelling words, and healing words. Yet, this is not a collection of words spouted out by empty minds. Rather it collates numerous words that raised from targeted bodies, heavy hearts, and imaginative minds in collaboration with the world of Dalits in general and, and Christian Dalits in particular. Most of these words emanate from a prior covenant made with Dalit communities: to feel their pain and attest to their hope.' Santhianathan Clarke, Dinabandhu Manchale and Philip Vinod Clarke: *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, p.1
7. Chinna Rao Yagoti: *op.cit.*, p.11
8. Gail Omvedt: *Dalit and the Democratic Revolution: Dr.B.R. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in colonial India*, (New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1994).
9. Ishita Banerjee-Dube (ed): *Caste in History*, (New Delhi, OUP, 2008)
10. Imtiaz Ahmed and Shashi Bhuasn Upadhyay (eds): *Dalit Assertion in Society, Literature and History*, (New Delhi, Orient Black Swan, 2010).

11. *Ibid*, p.1 .
12. Padma Velaskar: *At the Intersection of Caste , Class and Patriarchy*, in Imtiaz Ahmed and Shashi Bhusan Upadhyay: *Dalit Assertion in Society, Literature and History* , (New Delhi, Orient Black Swan , 2010),p.31.
13. *Brihatdharma Purana*, edited by Panchanan Tarkaratna, 2nd ed., (Calcutta, Bangabashi Electro-machine Press, 1314 B.S.), *Part III, Chapter 13, vs. 29-56, pp.339-40.*
14. The *charitas* or biographies of the Vaishnava saints of the late medieval period particularly the biographies of Sankardeva and his disciples have vividly illustrated the lives of the lower castes of Bengal and Lower Assam including the fishermen. Mention may be made of the followings --- Bhusan Dvija: *Mahapurusha Sankardeva*, edited by Durgabar Barkakati, (Jorhat, 1925); Ramananda Dvija: *Guru Charita*, edited by M. Neog, (Nalbari, 1957); Upendra Chandra Lekharu: *Katha Guru Charita*, edited by H.N.Dutta Barua, 4th ed., (Guwahati, Dutta Barua Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2002); Haliram Mahanta: *Sankar Charita* , (Sualkuchi, 1925); Daityari Thakur: *Mahapurusha Sri Sankardeva aru Sri Madhav Devar Jiban Charita*, edited by H. N. Datta Barua, (Nalbari, 1978); Ramcharan Thakur : *Guru Charita*, edited by H.N. Dutta Barua, 18th edn., (Guwahati, Dutta Barua Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2001).
15. H.H.Risley: *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, reprint edn., (Calcutta, Firma Mukhopadhyay, 1981), *vol. 1.* p.183.
16. Rup Kumar Barman: Caste and Class awareness among the fishermen of Bengal, *Voice of Dalit, Vol.1, No. (Jan-June 2008)*, p.71.
17. Letter of A. Mackenzie, Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal; to the Inspector General of Jails , Lower Province , Dated 7th Juen, 1873.
18. Upendra Nath Barman: *Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Itihas* (Bengali), (Jalpaiguri, 1400 B.S.), p.60; Kshetra Nath Singha: *Ray Saheb Panchanan Barmar Jibani Ba Rangpur Kshatriya Samitir Itihas*, (Rangpur, 1940),.p.13.
19. Upendra Nath Barman: *Sekaler Uttar Bangla O Amar Jiban Smriti*, (Jalpaiguri, 1985), pp.43-46.
20. H.H. Risley: *op.cit, Vol. II* , p 176.
21. Hites Ranjan Sanyal: *Social Mobility in Bengal*, (Calcutta, Papyrus, 1981), p.38.
22. H.H.Risley: *op. cit, vol. II*, p.65.
23. For details about the literary impression of social status of the Scheduled Castes see *see----* Rup Kumar Barman: *Adwaita Katha Sahitye Samajchitra: Bahu Kaunik Dristite*, in Susanta Halder (ed): *Bhasaman-5* , (Kolkata, Adwaita Malla Barman Educational and Cultural Society, 2003), pp.104-115; Manabendra Mukhopadhyay: *Gosthi Jibaner Upanyas*, (Kolkata , Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 2009); Ruma Bandyopadhyay : *Swadhinata Uttar Upanyase Nimna Barger Abasthan*, (Kolkata, Bangiya Sahitya Sangsad, 2005); etc.
24. Swami Saradananda: *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lila Prasanga*, 14th reprint edition, (Kolkata, Udvodhan Karyalaya, 1999), p.52.
25. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay: *Bankim Rachanabali, Pratham Khanda, Upanyas Samagra*, (Kolkata, Reflect Publication, 1999)
26. Bhibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyay: Pather Pachali, (Kolkata, Reflect Publication, 2011), p.31.
27. Bhibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyay: *Ichhamati*, (Kolkata, Mitra and Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1419 B.S), pp. 28, 59.
28. Rabindra Nath Tagore: *Gora*, First published in 1910, reprint edition, Viswabharathi Sulabh Rachanabali,
29. Rabindra Nath Tagore: *Ghore Baire*, first published in 1916, reprint edition, Viswabharati Sulabh Rachanabli, 4.
30. For more details see, Manabendra Mukhopadhyay: *Gosthi Jibaner Upanyas*, (Kolkata, Bangiya Sahitya Sangsad, 2009).
31. Post-colonial nationalist historians, journalists and popular writers have branded the low caste communities including the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the Other Backward Castes as “Dalits”. According to Kancha Ilaiah they are Dalit Bahujan. ‘Dalit’ has been appeared as a subject of research to the non-Dalits. However, the educated Dalits are now asserting themselves under the broader umbrella of Dalit Discourse, a discourse by the dalits by their own for raising voice against the social injustices, exploitation and discriminations.
32. Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay: *Hashulibaker Upakatha*, first published in 1947,
33. Manik Bandyopadhyay: *Padma Nadir Majhi*, first published in 1936, reprint edition, (Kolkata, Bengal Publishers, 1395 BS)
34. Adwaita Malla Barman: *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*, translated into English by Kalpana Bardhan, “A River Called Titash” (New Delhi, Penguin Books India (P) L.td., 1992), p87
35. *Ibid*.
36. H. Beverley: *Report on the Census of Bengal 1872* (Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press)

37. Nicholas B Dirks: *op.cit*, pp. 198-227.
38. *Ibid*.
39. *Ibid*.
40. *Ibid*.
41. A. Mitra: *The Tribes and Castes of West Bengal*, (Alipore, West Bengal Government Press, 1953), p.32.
42. Nicholas B Dirks: *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, (Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001), pp. 198-227.
43. Nripendra Kumar Dutta: *Origin and Growth of Castes in India (Volumes I & II Combined)*, (Calcutta, Firma KLM Pvt Ltd, 1986), pp.292-314.
44. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar entered to the Constituent Assembly in 1946 from Bengal since his party failed to get victory in Bombay . For details about political participation of the Scheduled Castes see: Sekhar Bandyopadhyay: *Caste, Protest and Identity*; Swarja Basu: *Dynamics of Caste Movement*; Jaya Chatterjee: *Bengal Divided*, etc.
45. Forwarding Note by Partha Chatterjee in Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal: *Social Mobility in Bengal*, translated into Bengali by Manaswita Sanyal, (Kolkata, Book Post Publication, 2015), p. ii.
46. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay: *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial Bengal: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947*, (Surrey, Curzon Press, 1997).
47. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhury: *In Search of Space: The Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal after Partition*, (Kolkata, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2014).
48. Sontosh Rana and Kumar Rana: *Paschim Banger Dalit O Adibashi* (Kolkata, 2007); Sarbani Bandyopadhyay: *Caste and Politics in Bengal*, EPW, Vol. XLVII, NO.50, (December 15, 2012), pp. 71-73; Ranabir Samaddar: *Whatever has happened to Caste in West Bengal?*, EPW XLVII, No. 36 (September 13, 2013) pp. 77-79; Praskanva Sinharoy: *West Bengal's Election Story: The Caste Question*, EPW, Vol. XLIX No. 17 (April 26, 2014), pp. 10-12; Uday Chandra and Kenneth Bo Nielsen: *The Importance of Caste in Bengal*, EPW, Vol. XLVII, No. 44 (November 3, 2012), pp. 59-61; Partha Chatterjee: *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (New Delhi, OUP, 1997); Partha Chatterjee: *Historicising Caste in Bengal Politics*, EPW, XLVII No. 50 (December, 15, 2012), pp. 69-70.
49. Monohar Mouli Biswas: *Amar Bhubane Ami Beche Thaki* (Kolkata, Chaturtha Duniya ,2013), pp.98-128.
50. Monoranjan Byapari: *Itibritte Chandal Jiban*, (Kolkata, Kolkata prakashan, 2012.).
51. Forwarding Note by Tutun Mukherjee (Professor of Comparative Literature of University of Hyderabad) in Monoranjan Byapari: *Itibritte Chandal Jiban*, (Kolkata, Kolkata Prakashan, 2012.).
52. Field survey in connection with ICSSR sponsored project April 2015-to December 2015. The Rajbanshis are trying to popularize the Bhandani puja as an alternative Durga puja of the Hindu Panther. The Poundras on the other hand are talking about the popularization of their indigenous folk deities. A similar tradition has also been developed among the Bauris, the Bagdis and among the Poundras too.

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