

Representation of the Dalits in Bengali Literature

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The term *Dalit* may be derived from Sanskrit and implies a person who has been 'ground', 'crushed' or 'broken to pieces'. It particularly refers to those at the lowest rungs of the caste-system. It is a broad umbrella term embracing large segments of people such as Adivasis, denotified tribes, untouchable communities and neo-Buddhists. These people have been socially discriminated, economically exploited and culturally marginalised in the traditional 'Varna' system for centuries. The origin of the term can be traced back to Jyotirao Phule while B.R. Ambedkar was the one to popularise it.

This paper is an exploration of the representation of the Dalits in Bengali literature as a whole. If one must locate the representation of the Dalits in Bengali literature one has to begin with the poems known as *Charyapadas* written between 10th-12th Century AD by Dalit poets from communities like Shabara, Chandala, Kapalika, Doma etc. The poems include characters from Dalit communities. The *Mangalkavyas* (Oral Epics) derive their origin from the consciousness of the lower castes. In *Manasamangal*, Manasa, the snake goddess, is worshipped by people from the lowest segment of society. So it is with goddess Chandi of *Chandimangal*, worshipped by the Byadhas, a community of forest-dwelling untouchables. One of the two stories of *Chandimangal* has Kalketu as protagonist from the Byadha community. The *Kaibarta* (Fishermen) rebellion during the reign of Pal dynasty and the literature associated with it also owes its origin mainly to the Dalit people. Later, one finds a literary tradition of Nathpantha which was protestant in nature against Brahmanical caste hierarchy. This tradition included *Minachetana* (Fish Cult) or *Gorkha-Vijaya* (Conquest of Gorkha) and *Maynamati Gopichandreryan* (Love Epic of Maynamati and Gopichandra).

In modern time different authors have commented on the condition of the Dalits. In Tagore's poems and short stories, the poor farmers, oppressed by the Zamindars and Mahajans, are none but Dalits. Tarashankar Bandopadhyay provides a graphic presentation of the lower castes of Birbhum while Subodh Ghosh and Mahasweta Devi deal with the lives of Adivasis in their works.

In a paper of this scope which is but a short survey, it is not possible to mention the names of all the authors writing about the Dalits, but it may suffice to state that at present they are numerous.

Another interesting line of development is that of Bengali Dalit Literature. This type of literature seeks to present an 'alternative aesthetic'-the aesthetic of the downtrodden. Fanon talked about three stages in the development of Black literature-Assimilation, Ethnic Discovery and Revolution. Likewise Dalit Literature passes through the three stages of suffering, revolt and negation. In fact the term *Dalit* resonates with a feeling of suffering which has been a historical legacy, but the word also proclaims in a strong way the determination to negate the process. Bengali Dalit authors have produced authentic works of fiction based on empirical evidence of the lives of the Dalits, expressing their hopes, pain and frustration. In their writing not only marginalised communities but neglected mythological characters like Shambuka, Ekalavya or Ghattotkacha have found a voice. In the poem titled *Yuddhe Jabo* (I shall go to war) by the prominent Bengali Dalit poet Manohar Mouli Biswas, the speaker is Ghattotkach,

ungung hero of the Mahabharata, who questions the very efficacy of the marriage between his father Bhima, an Aryan and his mother Hidimba, a non-Aryan woman. The poem contains Ghatotkach's desperate question,

*"I can swell and swallow
All the injustice of the world
Then why am I hated? Why am I ignored?"*

In the 1970s and 80s, Bengali Dalit Literature got the momentum to be seriously considered as a literary movement. However, the beginning of this movement can be traced back to the 19th Century in the form of *Matua Sahitya* (*Literature of the Matuas*). This type of literature flourished under the influence of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, two great social reformers from the Namasudra community. An outstanding example of Matua Literature is *Sri Sri Harilamrita* (*A biography of Harichand Thakur*) by Rasaraj Tarak Chandra Sarkar.

At present some of the important dalit poets include Kshirod Bihari Kabiraj, Upendra Nath Biswas, Amita Bagchi, Shyamal Biswas, Chinmoy Roy, Harendranath Samaddar, Kalyani Thakur, Mampi Bala among others. However the list is long and growing. Some of the important prose writers include Manoranjan Byapari, Manju Bala, Sunil Kumar Das, Kapil Krishna Thakur, Anil Gharai among others.

At this point of my paper, it is relevant to discuss a few issues that may have cropped up about Dalit literature in general and specifically Bengali Dalit Literature. Firstly there is this long-standing contention between non-Dalit and Dalit authors that only a Dalit can adequately articulate the unique kind of experience of suffering and humiliation that any Dalit undergoes under the hegemonic caste hierarchy. This is true to a large extent because non-Dalit authors do not generally undergo the kind of oppression as their Dalit counterparts and thus develop the Dalit vision. However to exclude the concept of *empathy* would be to unacknowledge the works on the Dalits by certain non-Dalit authors like Jyotiprakash Chattopadhyaya whose novel *Manusher Rang* powerfully evokes the trials of a Namasudra WBCS officer. But by and large the Bengali literary establishment churns out novels which are slavish imitations of Western literature dealing with either Freudian perversions or the meaninglessness of the middle-class. The progressive writers have written about the working-class but have conveniently avoided the problem of caste.

Secondly there is the accusation against Dalit literature in general that it is propagandist and contains little aesthetic value. It can be countered by the fact that a Dalit author makes no difference between people and writing. For him the social content and its form merge into an aesthetic whole. Dalit literature is fuelled by a desire for human liberation and, as such, cannot be called propagandist. A Dalit author considers it his social responsibility to create a truly democratic society through his writings. This truth is borne out by the manifesto of *The Bengali Dalit Sahitya Sanstha* which aims to place the Dalits on the cultural, historical and social map of the country. This is in concordance with the manifesto of *All India Dalit Writers' Conference* held in Hyderabad in 1987 which stated that Dalit literature should act as a lighthouse for the liberation of Dalits from Dalitisation.

In recent years Dalit literature has come to occupy an important position in the literary scene of the country. It is even included in the curriculum of certain universities abroad. There is a gradual recognition of the merit of this type of literature in academic circles and some

universities in India offer a course in dalit literature in translation. Perhaps now it may be safely assumed that the taste of the Indian literary establishment is changing and the underdog is making his presence felt everywhere.

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