

The Other Bengal: Dalit Women, Marginality, and the Politics of Regional Belonging

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Abstract: *This paper explores the intersection of marginality and regionality in the context of Dalit women in West Bengal, focusing on how the ideological promises of Leftist politics and the cultural dominance of the bhadralok (upper-caste middle class) have shaped their lived experiences and literary expressions. Despite Bengal's self-image as a space of progressive politics and intellectual modernity, Dalit women remain doubly marginalised by caste and gender, within both the social order and the regional literary tradition. After five decades of struggle, from around 1970, contemporary Dalit feminists in India have taken an emancipatory stance for all. But in this history of struggle, the space of Dalit women from West Bengal is hard to locate. Starting from Baby Kamble, Santabai Kamble, Santabai Dani, who were directly associated with the Ambedkarite movement through modern, fearless writers like Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawed, Jyoti Lanjewar, to the contemporary neo-buddhist writers Shilpa Kamble, Pradnya Pawar or Chaya Koregaonkar, there is almost no visibility of Dalit women writers from West Bengal. This paper, therefore, examines the reasons for the non-visibility of Dalit women in West Bengal and argues that Dalit women in West Bengal remained invisible because of the leftist discourse of a progressive, modern and egalitarian Bengal. The emergence of Dalit women with their writings in the last two decades though in a very unstable way, disqualifies this discourse. The alternative perspective of Dalit women here reconfigures their marginal position as zones of exclusion and carves out a distinct space through their narratives. Their poems, short stories, essays and autobiographies are the living testimonies of their memory, cultural resistance and counterpoints.*

Keywords: Bengal, Dalit women, Myth, Politics, Caste

Introduction

The Bengal Renaissance, starting from the Battle of Plassey (1757), through British activism in Bengal, social reformations by enlightened figures, the

establishment of renowned institutions, and the influence of great thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore, positioned Bengal as a distinct site of social, cultural, and intellectual awakening in the political and cultural history of India. The British took advantage of Bengal's strategic geographic location during the colonial period. During the Partition, they also employed political manoeuvres, taking into account administrative control and communal tensions. So, in the context of Bengal, marginality and regionality exist as a complex dynamic of inclusion and exclusion. Leftist politics continued the legacy of projecting Bengal as a place of modern, radical intellectual engagement. This idea has been reinforced by the colonial and postcolonial discourses. The colonial and post-colonial narrative framework perpetuated this idea by systematically erasing the caste dimension in Bengal. Scholars like Anupama Rao and Anand Teltumbde interrogate this casteless modernity¹ by unravelling it more as a myth than a reality. They unmask that Bengal is not "beyond" caste, rather its caste realities are concealed under its progressive, modern, intellectual veneer. Unlike Western and southern India, where caste has been an explicit issue since the Ambedkarite movement, in Bengal, class-based leftist narratives create a rhetoric that veils the caste realities. In Bengal Class, intellect and cultural refinement, being the dominant discourses, caste is strategically silenced if not outrightly rejected.

Dalit women in Bengal exemplify this contradiction, as their delayed emergence and assertion speak volumes about how the very structures that claim to champion reform and social justice simultaneously institutionalize caste discrimination and reproduce exclusionary hierarchies. This paper examines how Dalit women's narratives, rooted in the specific regional and political history of Bengal, reveal the exclusions perpetuated by both *bhadralok* liberalism and Leftist ideology. It explores how their voices articulate new meanings of marginality and regional belonging that unsettle Bengal's self-congratulatory narratives of enlightenment and equality.²

The Myth of Revolutionary Bengal

The political and cultural imagination of Bengal has long been shaped by its reputation as the "revolutionary heart" of India, a land of intellectual ferment, anticolonial struggle, and Marxist radicalism. From the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century to the decades of Communist rule that followed independence, Bengal has projected itself as the moral and ideological vanguard of Indian modernity. Yet, this vision of a progressive, egalitarian Bengal rests on what may be called a myth of revolution, a self-legitimising narrative that masks deep social exclusions along lines of caste, gender, and class.

Bengal's regional identity is closely tied to its Leftist legacy and cultural modernity. The Left Front government in Bengal (1977–2011) implemented significant land reforms and claimed to empower the rural poor. The *bhadralok* class, comprising primarily upper-caste Hindus, has historically shaped the

region's intellectual and political imagination. The Left, which dominated Bengal's politics for over three decades, largely emerged from this bhadralok milieu. As historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay observes, the Bengali bhadralok's universalist vision of progress rested on the erasure of caste distinctions, presenting Bengal as a "casteless" society.³ This ideological blindness allowed caste hierarchies to persist beneath the surface of modernity. The bhadralok internalized Enlightenment ideals-rationality, liberalism, and progress-but reinterpreted them within a caste-bound social order. Thus, Bengal's modernity was paradoxically hierarchical: revolutionary in rhetoric, conservative in structure.

The bhadralok's control over both intellectual and political discourse meant that class, not caste, became the dominant lens for understanding inequality. The early Marxist movements in Bengal, emerging from this milieu, adopted a universalist class narrative that assumed a "casteless" proletariat. As Anupama Rao observes, this form of Leftist universalism "reinscribed the invisibility of caste within the rhetoric of class struggle."⁴ The erasure of caste became central to the ideological coherence of revolutionary Bengal, allowing the bhadralok to claim both moral authority and political legitimacy.

The ideological foundation of Bengal's Leftist politics rested on a particular interpretation of Marxism that privileged economic structures over social hierarchies. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its predecessors framed social conflict primarily in terms of class antagonism, landlord versus peasant, capital versus labor, without acknowledging caste as a structuring principle of production relations.⁵ This theoretical reductionism produced what Sharmila Rege calls a "false universalism," wherein the Dalit experience was rendered invisible under the abstraction of the "worker."⁶ According to her, "The Left's universalist rhetoric of class struggle often masked the persistence of caste hierarchies, producing a false sense of egalitarianism that excluded Dalit experiences from its emancipatory vision."⁷

The caste question, when addressed, was often dismissed as a "feudal remnant" destined to dissolve under socialist transformation. Yet, in practice, caste continued to determine land ownership, labor patterns, and social capital even within Left-ruled Bengal. As Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, "class became the only legitimate idiom of suffering" in Bengali political culture.⁸ This universalism, as Sharmila Rege observes, enacted a "discursive cleansing" of caste from Marxist theory.⁹ The Left's project of social transformation thus remained confined within an upper-caste framework, where the peasantry and working class were conceived as abstract collectives rather than caste-embedded communities. The persistence of caste in so-called revolutionary spaces reveals the limits of Marxist orthodoxy when detached from local histories of hierarchy. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautions, revolutionary discourse that universalizes class without attending to subaltern difference risks reproducing the epistemic violence it claims to oppose.¹⁰

The invisibility of caste in Bengal has its roots in the colonial construction of social knowledge. British administrators, influenced by orientalist categories, codified caste as a pan-Indian system but simultaneously viewed Bengal as an exception, a region where English education and bhadralok reform had supposedly weakened caste distinctions.¹¹ This perception was enthusiastically adopted by the emergent upper-caste middle class, who translated their colonial privilege into moral superiority. As Sekhar Bandyopadhyay argues, the bhadralok used colonial modernity to fashion themselves as “rational, enlightened Hindus” distinct from the “superstitious” lower castes.¹² In his words, “In the bhadralok worldview, caste was not a structure of oppression but a cultural identity to be refined and reinterpreted through the lens of modernity. This allowed upper-caste elites to retain dominance while claiming to transcend caste.”¹³

By the late nineteenth century, the bhadralok had constructed a dual identity: modern and national on the one hand, caste Hindu on the other. This identity is fashioned by the urban Bengal, relegating the caste issue to the so-called backward rural margins. The erasure of caste from modern Bengal was a deliberate spatial and discursive strategy to preserve the egalitarian model of Bengal.

The myth of revolutionary Bengal functions not only as a political narrative but as a regional identity project. Through its literature, cinema, education, and institutions, Bengal not only naturalized the definitive culture of Bengal but also crafted a self-image as the moral and cultural navigator of India, positioning itself as the nation's ethical and intellectual centre. The construction of this regional identity has been made possible through the erasure of rural Bengal. Since rural Bengal constitutes the real Bengal, comprising the tribal areas of Jangalmahal and Dalit settlements across South 24 Parganas and Nadia districts, then-prevailing Leftist politics actively silenced these subaltern spaces. As Partha Chatterjee argues, nationalism, and by extension regionalism, often divides the “outer” material world of politics from the “inner” spiritual domain of culture.¹⁴ The invisibility of caste in Bengal is not only political but cultural because the bhadralok class in Bengal positioned themselves as custodians of both politics and culture. Primarily rooted in upper-caste Hindu traditions the bhadralok class gradually became synonymous with the very identity of Bengal. They shaped a moral cartography that marginalized those who did not conform to the standard norms of refinement and cultural propriety. However, Dalit women's narratives, in turn, trace the shadowed contours of the margins, the silenced spaces that sustain the myth of centrality.

This process reflects Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, where control or domination is secured not by coercion but by the internalization of elite values as common sense¹⁵ or universally accepted truths. For example, even though canonical Bengali writers such as Rabindranath Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee helped shape a national culture, it was rooted in

upper-caste sensibilities. They professed universal humanist ideals, but these were steeped in upper-caste values. The result was a homogenized Bengali identity that celebrated refinement (*bhadra*) and intellectualism while stigmatizing manual labour and rurality—both historically associated with Dalit and lower-caste communities. The Dalit body, as Gopal Guru argues, remained “a site of pollution rather than production.”¹⁶ Dalit labour sustained the agrarian and urban economies of Bengal, yet Dalit presence was absent from the moral geography of Bengali modernity. This absence—what Ashis Nandy calls a “suppression of difference through the idiom of civility”¹⁷, produced the illusion of a casteless society while reinforcing upper-caste dominance. Thus, Bengal’s revolutionary discourse, while rhetorically radical, became complicit in perpetuating what B.R. Ambedkar called the “graded inequality” of Hindu society.¹⁸ The silence around caste within Marxist politics was a mode of ideological containment: it ensured that the revolution would never destabilize *bhadralok* hegemony.

There is a gendered dimension to the regional myth of Bengal. Given the view that many Bengali women, such as Rokeya Shekhawat Hossain, Swarnakumari Devi, Santa Das, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Krishnabhabini Das, Indumati Goenka, Labanya Prabha Ghosh, Matangini Hazra and others, participated in reformist and nationalist movements, Leftist politics projected this as evidence of its progressive approach towards gender. Though these women stood at the frontlines, they were never acknowledged as the architects of these movements; rather, their participation was representational. Their visibility was valorized, but their agency was often marginalized. Thus, Bengal’s Leftist tradition has also been mythologized as uniquely progressive in its treatment of women. Feminist historians such as Tanika Sarkar and Samita Sen argue that the rhetoric of emancipation of leftist politics often concealed the underlying patriarchal authority within Leftist institutions.¹⁹

In Bengal, Dalit women were systematically sidelined. On one hand, their caste dimension was elided because of the class-based leftist framework and on the other hand, feminist discourse, which was primarily shaped by the educated upper caste and upper-class Bengali women, excluded the gender dimension of Dalit women. Even though leftists proclaim gender equality, it remained embedded within enduring hierarchies of purity, labour roles and social respectability. The *bhadromohila* ideal has also been constructed by the *bhadralok* elites as the normative representation of Bengali womanhood. Thereby, excluded they systematically and effectively excluded Dalit women from the revolutionary narrative of the history of Bengal. The *bhadramahila* class comprises educated, modest, culturally superior upper-class and upper-caste gentlewomen, while Dalit women, marked by their embodied labour and caste, remain invisible due to the caste-gender nexus. They, by contrast, were doubly erased: excluded from the caste-blind Marxist imagination and from the sanitised feminist discourse of the *bhadramahila*. As Anupama Rao and Rege

both note, Dalit women's experiences destabilize both Marxist and feminist paradigms because they reveal how labour, sexuality, and caste intersect in material and embodied ways.²⁰ Rao views that "Dalit women's bodies are not simply sites of suffering but of political articulation-where caste, gender, and labour intersect to challenge the universalist claims of both Marxism and liberal feminism."²¹

Bengal's failure to acknowledge caste thus also forecloses the possibility of a truly intersectional politics. The silence surrounding caste is sustained through respectability and aesthetics, qualities central to bhadralok self-definition. Dalit women's bodies, marked by manual labour and sexual vulnerability, do not fit this aesthetic of refinement. Their erasure from cultural representation is therefore both ideological and affective: a refusal to see what contradicts the self-image of the region as rational and humane.

Exposing the Myth: Dalit Women's Counter-Narratives

It is only in the post-independence era that Dalit writing emerged as a genre to be considered. But the voice of Dalit women was largely unheard, even during the Dalit Panthers Movement in the 1970s. In that sense, the first phase of Dalit women's writing started when Savitribai Phule began her literary journey. But in West Bengal, Dalit women were yet to come forward. Though the awakening of Dalit consciousness of Dalit women seems to happen through Matua literature, but Matua literature of that time does not have any compositions by Dalit women. Though many Dalit women joined social movements led by Jogendranath Mandal and Dr. B.R Ambedkar, there was no writing by Dalit women. Even when Dalit adivasi women involved themselves with the Tebhaga movement, the leadership was mainly in the hands of the so-called upper caste women. In West Bengal first Dalit writing by Dalit women came into notice when Chuni Kotal, the first woman graduate among the Lodha Sabars, a scheduled tribe of Bengal, committed suicide in 1992 after being harassed and discriminated against. After this incident, various little magazines and tabloids have raised the issue, although very faintly, over the past two decades or so. Among them are Chaturtha Duniya, Neer Ritupatra, Atoeb, Adal Badal etc.

The invisibility of caste in Bengal is not a mere absence but an epistemological condition, a way of knowing that requires no seeing. Undoing this condition demands sociological recognition as well as what Spivak calls a "counter-epistemology of the subaltern."²² Dalit women's writing in Bengali, such as that of Kalyani Thakur Charal, Manju Bala, and the journal Chaturtha Duniya ("The Fourth World"), performs this counter-epistemic labour, challenging the state's self-image as progressive. The emergence of Dalit women's autobiographical and poetic writing in Bengali from the 1990s onward has begun to dismantle the myth of revolutionary Bengal. These texts expose how the revolution's promises bypassed the most marginalized: landless Dalit women who remained outside

the reach of land reforms, sanitation workers still confined to caste-based occupations, and students facing humiliation in institutions dominated by bhadralok academics. Their testimonies reveal what Ranajit Guha might call the "small voice of history", a subaltern critique of the master narrative of progress.²³

By narrating caste within a culture that denies its existence, they expose the silences embedded in both Leftist and liberal frameworks. Chandalini, a multilingual journal dedicated to Dalit women's voices, edited by Kalyani Thakur Charal, reclaims the term "Charal" as a badge of identity and defiance. "I write because I am a Charal. I write because I want to speak of the pain that is not allowed to be spoken. I write because our history has been erased, our voices silenced, our bodies made invisible. My writing is my resistance."²⁴ Her poetry collections, such as *Chandalinir Kabita* and *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*, foreground the pain, pride, and resistance of Dalit women. Many other writers illuminate the lived experiences of Dalit women. Rupali Jadav, a regular contributor to Bengali journals and anthologies, critiques the neglect by both the state machinery and the upper-caste feminist discourse of homogeneity through her autobiographical essays, as they dismiss the caste trauma of Dalit women in urban slums and rural Bengal. Poet Lily Halder, through her contributions to *Neer*, highlights the interplay of caste, gender, and domestic labour in the lives of Dalit women, especially in urban Bengal. In these urban spaces, Dalit women survive through quiet resilience and strategic silence in the face of caste-based violence. Pallabi Mondal and Saptadeepa Adhikari are also contributing authors to *Neer*, who amplify the voices of Dalit women from the domestic and NGO sectors. Their essays and stories incorporate rich folkloric elements alongside feminist analysis to critique caste-based discrimination in everyday life. Two other consistent authors of *Neer*, and social workers Manju Bala and Kanan Borah, also accentuate caste-driven violence and daily resilience in Bengal's rural areas by documenting them through their writing. Ayesha Khatun, another writer, does not limit herself to writing poetry, essays and editorial activism only; she literally engages herself as a social worker with the Dalit women in tribal areas of Birbhum and Howrah. Juthika Pandey, a college professor, connects the testimonies of Dalit women with scholarly discourse on Dalit identity and representation through her creative and academic writing.

The literary engagement of these Dalit women writers is reshaping Bengal's literary landscape by asserting Dalit women's voices against historical silencing. Beyond these literary engagements, Dalit women in districts like Bankura and Purulia have turned to other art forms like folk performance, street theatre to express their caste inflected traumatic experiences, such as landlessness, sexual violence, and labour exploitation. Though temporary and non-institutional, these art forms also serve as dissent, resisting and contesting the dominant institutional structure of exclusion. Different expressions of Dalit women affirm that caste has been a foundational structure of Bengali life and of the so-called modern society, as it governs access to all spheres of life, such as land, language,

education, employment, and social respectability. So, in Bengal, caste's invisibility is merely a perception. It is nothing but a constructed ideological illusion, as Bengal's self-image is sustained by the belief that caste is not a present issue.

Caste-based oppression has never been a concern of feminism in Bengal, as it is centered on urban, upper-caste, upper-class women. Dalit women's counter-narratives challenge the homogenization of women's experiences by foregrounding caste as a decisive factor in access to education, dignity, and social prestige. As Sharmila Rege argues, the Dalit woman's body becomes a site of intersecting oppressions, economic exploitation, sexual violence, and social exclusion.²⁵ In Bengal, this intersectionality manifests sharply in the story of Chuni Kotal, whose suicide following caste harassment at Vidyasagar University in 1992 remains a haunting symbol of the failure of Bengal's egalitarian promise.²⁶ Her story, retold in activist writings and poems, marks a rupture in the Left's narrative of progress, forcing Bengal to confront its own caste-based violence.

Language is central to the politics of exclusion in Bengal. Bengali, celebrated as a refined literary language, has historically been shaped by upper-caste aesthetics. Dalit women's writing in the regional idiom reclaims Bengali as a space of protest. By incorporating oral traditions, subaltern dialects, and folk idioms, writers like Kalyani Thakur Charal and Manju Bala infuse the language with new rhythms and radical energy.²⁷ This linguistic intervention parallels global postcolonial strategies of resistance, to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's advocacy for writing in indigenous languages.²⁸ In Bengal, such linguistic decolonization is also a caste act, disrupting the *bhadralok* monopoly over Bengali literature and redefining what constitutes "Bengali culture."

Dalit women's literature redefines both the region and the revolution. Dalit literature offers an alternative geography of Bengal, one that includes its villages, tea gardens, brick kilns, and Dalit homes. These are the spaces that have been erased from the *bhadralok* urban lens. In this process, they reposition the "margin" as a critical vantage point that exposes the contradictions embedded in regional modernity. But their testimonies do not seek refuge in victimhood; rather, they rise with pride, dignity and solidaristic belonging. By centring their lived experiences, Dalit women disrupt monolithic representations of Bengal, asserting it as a plural and contested terrain.

Conclusion

In this paper, it is argued that Dalit women's literature in Bengal radically reconfigures the region's political and cultural self-image by exposing *bhadralok* hegemony, Leftist universalism, and regional exceptionalism. Their counter-narratives do not merely critique; they reimagine. Through poetry, testimony, and editorial activism, Dalit women articulate a "third space" of resistance, one that neither assimilates into dominant ideologies nor remains outside them.²⁹

This space reframes regionality as a contested terrain, where memory, labour, and identity intersect. It reveals that Bengal's revolutionary discourse, long celebrated for its radicalism, has often failed to liberate those at its margins. The silence around caste is not accidental; it is structural, aesthetic, and epistemic. Dalit women's voices rupture this silence, compelling a reckoning with the region's unfinished revolution. In reclaiming language, space, and selfhood, Dalit women redefine what it means to be Bengali and marginal. Their writings turn the peripheries of history into its most vital center, insisting that no vision of progress is complete without the liberation of those historically excluded from its promise.

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