



Celebration of the ‘Dalit-Consciousness’ in self-memoirs: Reading With Manohar Mouli

Biswas’s *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal*

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Abstract:

The paper attempts an evaluation of how the ‘Dalit-Consciousness’ or a ‘Dalit-Awakening’, in Bengal (where an organized and official Dalit-Revolution in the literary aspects appeared much later, as compared to Marathi literature), has achieved the deserved platform to voice the protest against centuries of exploitation and discrimination, and to register and celebrate the ‘Dalit-Identity’, and how self-memoirs have become the desired space to voice the protest, and the paper has zeroed on an close reading of Manohar Mouli Biswas’s self-narrative *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Celebration Dalit in Bengal* (translated by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi from the Bengali original *Amar Bhuvane Ami Benche Thaki*) aiming at a realization of how textuality and self-narratives do help in flaunting the wounds as a protest and bringing in a

parallel textuality and registering a self-identity against the identity-myth created by the 'castocracy' and savarna writers and publication, in derision or in sympathy, and to voice the pains and pride as a Dalit-sufferer.

Key words: Dalit-Consciousness, Self-Memoirs, Caste, Marginalization, Migration.

Introduction

“The Hindus are divided according to sacred tradition into four castes, but according to custom, into five; Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras and Atishudras. The caste system is the first of the Hindu religion. The second is that the castes are of unequal rank. They are ordered in a descending series of each meaner than one before”- so was encapsulated the tenets of the Hindu-feudalism by Dr. B.R.Ambedkar in his famous speech at Mahad on 25 December 1927, and the accusation of 'casteism' being the 'first governing rule' of Hinduism is far from being incorrect. And all this caste-feudalism can be traced back to the ancient Aryan society,-in both scriptures and practices,(a shameful practice for which complete eradication cannot be claimed in his 21-st century as well), instructed in *Vedas*, *Vasistha-Sutras*, and ofcourse in *Manusmriti*,-of much notoriety,- a composition which presented a myth-identity of lowliness and degradation, for a sect of human-beings, selected from those toiling with physical-labours, and attempted to almost negate their human-identities casting labeling them as 'low-castes' and 'untouchables' or 'atishudras', and ofcourse any attempt to upset this mean castocratic exploitation was dealt with much violence with those caste-hindus in power (a cruelty still now continuing as evidenced in frequent news reported of dalit- people being tortured), and even murdered or ofcourse in the

disastrous increase in the rate of ‘honour-killings’). R.C.Prasad in his *Ambedkarism* while discussing and explaining the importance and influence of Buddhism in Dalit-Movement, mentions *Sutras* by Vasistha which propagates the idea that

(...) an impure person imports pollution by his touch and even by his near approach to a member of the first three castes. (Prasad 29)

And such a humiliation and exploitation for a certain section of people, mostly from non-aryan origin and people toiling physically, or in occupations which were economically not-rewarding and hazardous as well, though ultimate necessity as well, like that of scavenging, or burning corpses etc.

In Bengal, referring to both the pre-partition status and the post-partition West-Bengal, the caste-feudalism and exploitation have not found much exposure or to be specific found a much late exposure in textuality, but of course invisibility or rare visibility does not imply absence, and surely the lack of exposure in public podiums, the lack of organized protest does not prove the status of Bengal as a province purged of any casteist affairs. Rather, in Bengal, it had been a long story of the exploitation of the atishudra castes, - such as the ‘Doms’, the ‘Muchis’, or the ‘Chandals or ‘Namashudras’,- who were discriminated against as ‘untouchables, marginalized, secluded, made to live in separate colonies away from the main village and compelled to live a ‘dalit’ existence- socially, politically and of course as a byproduct economically so also, sparing only a very few cases.

If in other provinces, especially in Maharashtra, the Dalit resistance against higher-caste exploitations started much earlier, especially Dr. Ambedkar’s active influence acting as the

biggest impetus, then in Bengal, an organized movement was to arrive much later. But, movements such as the rise of the 'Bala-Hadi' sect (who interestingly created an alternate genesis-story against the brahminical hierarchy, and placed the 'shudras' on the top), the rise of the 'Matua' sect. these movements differed from the Vaishnavism movement by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, that these movements talked about rights of the Dalits, and dared to create an alternate space of their own, rather than begging to be accepted and sanctioned by the caste-hinduism on an account of compassion and sympathy, which, though offered the so called low-castes and untouchables a shelter, a so-called social upgradation, at least theoretically so, in itself was not completely purged of casteist corruption. Even, much later, when Gandhiji's 'Harijan' movement was not a dalit-movement proper as it also opted for the way cut a compassionate space for the 'untouchables', to save them the cruelty and tortures, but not propounding 'equal' rights' for them. But, in the case of Bala Hadi or Harichand Thakur, they both were representatives, and victims of the dominating casteocracy, and though their movements were based on religious drive,(even, critics can interpret these movements as subversive tool for protest where parody and mimicry became weapons of protest, as Bala Hadi propagated an alternate pantheon for the Hindu genesis-sutra, whereas Harichand Thakur claimed to be an avatar of Krishna, the holy – god revered by caste-hindus) the prime purpose became to secure and exert rights, equally so, to pave a way of development for the down-trodden community.

“Consciousness about *dalit* writing did not develop early in Bengal. Caste-related issues are less articulate than other socio-political issues in Bengal social life. However, the voluminous and rhymed text (1916) written by a *dalit* poet named Tarak Chandra Sarkar on the life of Thakur Harichand may be regarded as one of the earliest Bengali *dalit* literary texts.” (Asit Panda)

And later many poets and writers have tried to capture the dalit-consciousness from their point of view, talking of first hand sufferings and painful experiences, and self-memoirs or self-narratives (as some dalit-critics has opposed to the application of the term of ‘autobiography’, as the later exudes a sense of individualism in excess, whereas thec dalit-consciousness care less about conventional literay aesthetics and focus much on creating a space for the dalit-identity against the’savarna’ marginalization) also do claim to be an mean of communicating the woes of the community and celebrating the dalit-ness against brahminic derision. And dalit self-narratives in Bengali can be evidenced in such publications as Dr. Manoranjan Sarkar’s *Ekjon Daliter Atmakatha* (2000), Jatin Bala’s *Shikor Chera Jiban* (2010), Manoranjan Byapari’s *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (2012) or *Adhyapak Sri Sripada Das: Son of a Street Cobbler* by Sripada Das, and falls into this category of asserting a positive dalit-identity, speaking of the pains and struggles , Manohar Mouli Biswas’s *Amar Bhuvane Ami Benche Thaki* (2013), translated as *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* (2015).

“Biswas writes from an ideological position” notes Sekhar Bandopadhyay in the Foreword to the self-memoir by Biswas, where referring to Dr. Ambedkar, he advocate for a first hand account of the dalit sufferings by a dalit-victim him/herself to be much more appropriate and sensitive:

In his view only those who are born in dali conditions can properly understand and appreciate dalit aesthetics, because the lived experiences of the dalit are so different from those of the upper-caste Hindus (Foreward, xiii)

And Biswas's self-narrative, framing the days of his childhood as a member of the 'Namoshudra' community, and later struggling years in post-partition West-Bengal as a 'low-cast' rootless refugee, the struggles of being a 'bastuhaara' doubled up the treatment meted out for being 'lowly' namashudras.

Biswas's self-narrative is certainly not a conventional one, with framing just his childhood, and struggling years of youth, and interepted by interpretations at certain intervals, and repetations scattered through, but then one must remember no to judge a dalit narrative with 'savarna' aesthetics code, and where Biswas's narrative strikes the right chord is that there is a perfect blend of the self-story and the story of his community, and all of it comes in a package of picturesque description.

The title of the composition also creates scope to explore as the history of the title, as shared by the author himself is very much interesting, as the original titled intended for the narrative was "Life and Death of a Prisnika", 'prisnika' meaning a 'water-hyacinth' or 'kachuripana',- a typical water-plant growing without any special care etc. and considered absolutely worthless, and an irritating existence often overpopulating the water surface and there can not be any two opinions on this unique choice of title on the part of the author for his memoir,- which was to present the 'prisnika' existence he was compelled to live in like many others of his community folks. But later he changed his mind and denied to get identified as something as insignificant and considered worthless as 'water-hyacinth'. The author adds that:

This happened because of a sense of glory that had developed in my identity. It is a satisfaction of being able to establish myself as a human being. That I'm being able to thinkof myself as a human, that is pleasure. (Biswas, xix)

And thus was the genesis of *Amar Bhuvane ami Benche Thaki*, a title which is not ashamed to share the anecdotes of humiliation, and not either too humble to accept all those humiliation without voicing a valid protest, though the title to the translated version punches with much of a revolutionary tone with dues to the specific word 'surviving'.

Arjun Dangle in his "Dalit Literature Past, Present and Future", which introduces the collection *Poisoned Bread*, the milestone Dalit- Anthology presenting translated works from Marathi-Dalit Literature, addresses the issue of 'white-collar' attitude among Dalits as well, which he terms as 'dalit-brahminism' (as he showcase subtly the dilemma of such a 'uppity' in his short-story "Promotion"), who bears this typical attitude of being uncomfortable with an open celebration of what actually Dalit culture consists of,- as Dangle notes that "These 'Dalit Brahmins' felt (and feel even today) that Dalit Literature was something dirty which had tarnished the image of their society." To measure Biswas's narrative from this very angle of a successful achiever dalit person anthologizing his earlier days, the narrative bears not any sense of shame, rather Biswas's pupose and practice gets united in the execution where nostalgia meets sufferings meets protest, and yet all this never comes in terms of belittling his community, rather upholding the positivity that bounds the so called 'untouchable' communities, often gone unnoticed when the story is written by an outsider. And though the author admits that he wants to 'forget forever' the 'sadness' that had 'touched' him, as looking back at the 'melancholic past' is too 'painful', the selective amnesia is desired for reasons personal, and he commits and executes his duty to be vocal for the 'Namashudra' and other dalit communities as a successful representative of the same, rather than attempting to erase the humiliating past being a snob.

Biswas, while telling his story of getting educated as a child, shares along the stance of his community on the same issue, where his father and his aged grandfather was eager and looking forward to educate their next generation, considering it as a useful mean to get rid of the plebian living, his 'jetha', elder uncle, was much suspicious about the evaluators of qualifications will ever be generous enough to allow the 'privileges' to educated folks from so called low-castes family, and thus education will bring no occupational or social upliftment sparing one will be able to read and write their own letters. Contrastinbg this, his grandfather's opinion depicts another angle who realizes the power of education over illiteracy:

But remem,ber the times are changing, not like what they werete like. I can see so much of transformation- earlier peopleused to abuse me as charal-chandal so often. But now no one calls you 'charal-chandal', no one xalls you 'tui' disrespectfully referring to your caste. They are showing a little respect, remember this!" ()

Whereas his father's unwillingness to make his son toil physically for an occupation detects how the right to education was for the brahimincs became the right to abuse the and exploit the uneducated, a politics played with instructions barring dalits from education from the very ancient Aryan society. His father banks upon education as the ladder to climb the social-straa monopolized by the Casrte-Hindus:

Even if we could not become judges or barristers, nothing could stop us from becoming at least – lawyer's moktar or clerk. The children could reach some occupation of the learned and become Babus. ()

The 'Namashudra' and other dalit communities were derided by other so called higher castes on account of their food-habits as well,(and food-communalism is nothing new and rather

still in practice where Bengalis of west are generally not much in comfort with their east- origin neighbors consuming 'shutki-mach' or dried fish and such) which included pork or sometimes beef for such like 'Mahad' communities, and the author shares another anecdote where he upholds his own culture with confidence. The author records how the 'nama-shudra' community's preference for pork was looked down by the 'upper-caste' folks, who used to deride them as 'pork-eating Namos', and the author also registers his surprise on how these true words, 'pork being a familiar food of the community' used to enrage the community people, non-consuming ones as well as consuming ones:

Strangely some of our people were extremely sensitive about the matter. Their sensitivity surprised me, when addressed as 'pork-eating Namos', they would get mad with anger.
(Biswas 9)

Of course this anecdote exemplifies the classic case of the extreme manipulation of the powerful in such a way, that the colonization of the minds lead the oppressed towards a state of self-negation, and when situations do not permit to practice it, as in this case, pork was the only affordable source of animal-protein for the community, they try to negate their originality, erase it or at best hide it. But, Biswas here choose the way to celebrate it, and depicts with a pictorial bent the episode of 'pork-eating', and the happiness, excitement and joy it would bring to households, to the community. He describes how they would buy a fat and fleshy animal, and how the community butcher would prepare it and make shares according to demand- (not available in the open market as considered a food for the 'lowlies' only and thus would offend the sensitivity of the higher-caste folks) and how the "faces flashed with smile". And he remembers tenderly how it would be prepared at his home with mother cooking it delicious. The negation to

abide by the pseudo-sensitivity of 'upper-caste' folks to dalit-culture is again noticed in Biswas's writing, when he mentions 'baloi', or the 'babui', that is the weaver bird to be one of his and his communities favourite delicacies,(and the dangers of 'babui'huntingas well, as the fields were infested with poisonous snakes, depicting the hardships) a bird generally not on the diet for the caste-hindus, and rather appreciated for its nesting aesthetics.

While discussing the religious adherence of the community, Biswas notes, that, though the 'Namas' considered them Hindus (and thus separating their clan from the neighbouring muslim communities of equal economical and social status), and practiced Vaishnavism, but they rejected more of it than they accepted, as there was nothing new or ressurective in those ways, nothing to secure proper development, rather they followed the Matua-sect and revered founder Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur. And this mechanical observance of vaishnavist rituals, or an innate apathy towards 'Hinduism' was very much natural only, as Hinduism was the roots to the curse of 'untochability', and the drving force of Vaishnavist Movement was much more religious than reformative, and under the garb of caste-equality, there still lurked a caste-hierarchy in Vaishnavism, which was hard to eradicate completely. One may rely on notes by Sekhar Bandopadhyay in his *Caste, Culture and Hegemony*, while discussing "Caste and Popular religion" that:

Chaitanya never hesitated to visit the houses of the Sudras and Chandalas, and he believed that what qualified a man to become a guru was not whether he was a Brahman or a Sudra, but whether he had attained the knowledge of Krishna. But apart from that, Chaitanya never attempted a frontal attack on the *varnashram dharma* (81)

And contrasted to it was the Matua religion, or a sub-sect as one may call, which focused on a complete upliftment and development of the community, to reawaken the sense of pride and self-consciousness among the dalits who had been down-trodden and exploited for years, the main thrust being 'reformative'. Biswas records scenes from childhood as:

I have never witnessed any enthusiasm in their making of tulsi rosary or the tilak, their own practice. Rather they were attracted to the Matua religion propagated by a great man of our community Harichand Thakur, who came centuries after Sri Chaitanya. ()

A refusal for this mimicking attitude cultivated among the oppressed with shrewd manipulation can be found in the author's questioning the practice of Namoo people inviting Brahmin priests to perform pujas in their homes, and smearing all houses with cowdung to get purged of their 'lowliness' atleast temporarily, to get the priest earn some bucks, a priest who himself was of ill reputation in the castocracy, a priest with low brahminism, thus with no occupation in offer within the mainstream castes, he was compelled to perform for the marginalized.

The festival of 'Durga-Puja' among the 'Namoo' communities is also described with description of the 'visarjan' on the boat and etc. presented scenically, and yet the author registers his protest against the casteist hindu-society by recording the facts that there was always a mark of separation between the 'high' and the 'low' in worshipping the goddess as well, as the dalits were not allowed in pujas performed by higher-castes and nor did they care to visit pujas performed by the Namoo communities, and the author, indirectly put forth his doubt about

offering puja to a goddess who represents the 'higher-caste', celebrating the glory of defeat over 'Mahisasura', who was much more of a representative of the downtrodden non-Aryans:

The dark-skinned man whom Mother Durga killed cruelly by ripping his chest with her pronged trishul was but a child of this land. He was a human too! I did not find any difference between that dark-skinned naked person and those who danced with a chopper in one hand and a stick in the other in the procession boats. I could not agree with those explained that the naked dark-skinned person depicted an evil force of this land. (70)

While sharing the anecdote of the pathetic fate of a village belle, the wife to a mentally ill person, who was actually married to him as a cure for his illness, committing suicide, the narrative portrays how women have always been the exploited, and the women of the exploited class,- even doubly so. But Biswas also shares the positive points of the Matua sect such as advocating 'education for all' and gender equality, propagating equal rights for men and women. Biswas notes more that:

The widows of the Hindu homes observed penance during 'ekadashi'. They fasted and observed various spiritual rituals. They would not eat fish or meat but were vegetarian. The widows of my community were accustomed to eating fish and meat. This practice remains even today. (...) The strict restriction of widow remarriage was not prevalent among them. Their own social reformers had started the practice of widow remarriage a long time ago.(51)

The 'partition'- and the migration and massacre that followed has been a bitter and violent episode in the Indian history,- which wrecked havoc especially the province of Punjab and the Bengal, and anecdotes of migration, rootlessness and refugees has been framed in many

literary ventures and in other medias too, but what it was to live an existence of a dalit-refugee was much more pathetic, and less documented textually or in any other media accounting to the lack of representatives who are able and educated to document the same. As shared Jatin Bala in his interview with Jaydeep Sarangi, quoting that, “No one had ever chosen to write about the experiences of Dalits, who were the worst victims of Partition of India.”, and perhaps this was the premonition of ultimately getting roughed by caste-hindu people which had made the ‘nama’ communities withheld any active participation in the struggle for independence in the initial years. Being a ‘bastuhaara’ was a curse itself with the pain of being uprooted from ones native place, and the struggles that followed to secure a space in a new land, but, though there was attempt to unite all the refugees to fight for their rights and space much more intensely, the treatment meted out to the so called low-caste ‘bastuharas’ were unjust, with forcing them to opt for places much more remote, outside Bengal, and often infested with jungle and such, with no condition for human beings to live. Biswas records that those with the ‘caste-pearls’ were treated much fairly than those with no air of aristocratic casteism, and even folks were treated with violence when asked for the basic-rights, and perhaps a striking evidence of such violence can be found in the ‘Marichjhanpi Massacre’, where the victims were mostly from the so called ‘low-caste’ people.

Though , celebrating ‘dalit-hood’ along with registering his protest against casteism and the monopoly of the ‘bhadralok’-culture, the author who retired as a well-posted government employee, does not go in complete denial, when asked about appropriatization the dalit must face to ‘survive’ in the world dominated by caste-hierarchy. He must adapt to the ‘bhadralok’ culture to climb the ladder to success, and honestly does he admit that he has been a subject to

‘sanskritization’ and ‘acculturation’ too, and perhaps the flow of nostalgia intensifies from the fact that the narrative is ‘his’, and his community, and even his city-bred wife, his sons or his grand-sons are not actually part of it as they had not to face the humiliation, the struggle of living a ‘dalit-existence’ in direct association, as he had to, along with his village community-folks:

This autobiography is my autobiography, my father’s autobiography, my grandfather’s autobiography, my great grandfather’s autobiography. This is the autobiography of remembering the bygone memories of my community.

Biswas’s personal anecdote of a unrequited love with a girl from a non-dalit caste, makes it clear how the educated classes also really loves to live by the class prejudice, as it benefits them while putting on a show of secularism and liberalism.

The conclusion must assert that Biswas’s self-memoir is an honest approach to uphold the dali-aesthetics, the dalit-consciousness, to pave a way of betterment for the downtrodden community, and this textual weapon of a nostalgic narrative serves the perhaps much better than any propaganda.

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