



## The emergence of the progressive self in Bengali Dalit Literature

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### **Abstract:**

The paper highlights the history of Dalit Literature in West Bengal as well as the engagement of Bengali Dalit authors with language. The emergence of Dalit writings in the eastern part of India has been quite late, even though radical movements to make changes in the nomenclature of the erstwhile 'Chandalas' had begun as early as the latter half of the nineteenth century. Yet it took almost a century for Dalit writers in Bengal to come up with their life histories. One prominent reason for the late upsurge can be the presence of the earlier ruling party, which has vehemently and consistently denied the presence of caste. The use of the word 'progressive' is deliberate here, for the paper wants to throw some light on the formation of a new 'self' through their autobiographies.

The paper takes into account two narratives- one is an autobiography, D. P. Das's *The Untouchable Story*, and the other is a fictionalised presentation of an autobiography, Manoranjan Bepari's *Chandal Jibon*. D. P. Das writes in English, even though the contexts are drawn from Bengal, while Bepari writes in the rustic language of Bengal. Thus, both try to present interplay of radicalism and oppression and how they had counter-rejected it.

**Key words:** Language, 'counter-rejection', the Namashudra Movement, humiliation, delegitimizing the hegemonic structure, materialization of the self.

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## Introduction

“Your door is shut against my tightened face

I am sharp as a steel with discontent,

But I possess the courage and the grace

To bear my anger proudly and unbent.” (Das xi)

The above quoted lines from D. P. Das's autobiography *The Untouchable Story* is emblematic of the Dalits' proficient struggle to bear the punitive actions hurled by the upper castes against the untouchables as punishments for being born in an untouchable family. Humiliation, as Gopal Guru mentions, henceforth, becomes almost endemic to 'their' (untouchables) social life that is “active basically through asymmetries of intersecting sets of

attitudes- arrogance and obeisance, self-respect and servility, and reverence and repulsion” (Guru 1). In such a scenario, where the extreme manifestation of the institutionalised marginalization becomes the criterion of social stability, demystification of consistently and traditionally accepted axioms and apothegms becomes a cogent and sententious act of reviving the untouchables’ self pride and dignity. Dalit Literature, in that sense, is an apt flowering of that revivalist culture.

Their vehicle is often the brute, coarse and crude language of the slum, springing from a life of poverty, ignorance and violence. Their jaggedness of word, the granulated structure, the rough hewn expression, the scarcely muted anger- anger which may spit fire like wrath, burn lambently like satire, scorch like cynicism, kindle like anguish and enflame like tragedy- these are some of the allotropic forms which are found in the works of Dalit writers in their various works of poetry and prose, fiction and autobiography, drama and essay (Kumar 148).

Regional praxis and dispositions have often influenced authors in different regions to speculate over the fate and future of their downtrodden brethren. In West Bengal, the narratives of Dalit authors elucidate their assiduous and fervid attempts to recompense lost dignity and honour. Through their writings they seem to validate and corroborate the theory of ‘counter rejection’ of Gopal Guru and the new aesthetics theory proposed by Sharankumar Limbale. The autobiographies of D. P. Das and Manoranjan Bepari are exemplifications of such thoughts.

### **The Namashudra Movement in East Bengal**

However, before delineating the plethora of existential agonies and pangs which piques and vexes an untouchable's life, it is imperative to highlight the historicity of the conditions of the untouchables of West Bengal. Even though, socially, the untouchables in Bengal are relegated to be outside the societal fold, with no fortune of having any upward social mobility, yet there are distinctions within the untouchables as well. Historically and anthropologically, the untouchables of West Bengal are categorised under different classifications such as the Namashudras, the Hadis, the Dhopas, the Doms, the Malos, the Paundra-Kshatriyas, the Rajbanshis and many others. Of these, the Namashudras form the largest community of the core of the untouchables in Bengal, so much so that "if their population is taken into consideration the Namashudras of today or the Chandalas of those days had been the single largest group in east Bengal amongst the different castes or sub-castes of Hindu society" (Biswas 2). The historical Namashudra Movement in East Bengal had been one stringent effort to mobilize the masses against caste bigotries and malfeasances. The movement had been the Chandalas' earnest pursuit for gaining self-respect.

From 1881 to 1911 they had launched a movement continuously for thirty years to make necessary correction in government records their identity as Namashudra instead of the Chandala identity and ultimately they succeeded... The Chandalas, viz the Namashudras have made a renaissance in the rural Bengal of the nineteenth century amongst the downtrodden (7-8).

The abomination of the untouchables and the political/social supremacy of the Brahman rulers had acted as catalysts in transmogrification of the untouchables, especially the Namashudras. Historically, it was only during the regime of the Buddhist Pala kings that caste discrimination began to lose its dominance over Bengal. The ascension of Gopala to the throne

was a big achievement for the Chandalas (present Namashudras) as Gopala was a Shudra and “the election of a Sudra to kingship was as big a thing as the doctrine of *egalite* in 1789A.D.” (Biswas 2004, p.122). However, the Sena dynasty of Bengal, which succeeded the Pala kings rigorously practised the Brahmanic prerogatives and began to dislocate the Chandalas (present Namashudras). The Buddhist liberalism, which was much in force during the rule of the Pala dynasty proved no match against the sagacious and insidious Brahman casteist performances, reinforced by the Sena rulers, especially, Ballalasena and Lakshmanasena.

So, the unmitigated and persistent efforts of the Chandalas to alter their name to the Namashudra in order to avoid the nugatory terminology can be viewed as a quest for identity too. “It had its commencement in 1872-73 in the way of observing a general strike the call of which was given by the Chandalas throughout all the districts of south central part of east Bengal” (Biswas 8). The acute plea for self-integrity demanded a total restructuring of the societal mould which can only ensue if the Chandalas break loose the oppressed identity, coerced upon them through ages. In the formation of their identity the Namashudras also disowned the dominant nationalist movement for freedom.

In the year of 1905 the whole of the Namashudra samaj succeeded in community formation in order to build a greater unity among them which had played a vital role to enable them to dissociate with the Swadeshi Movement of the caste Hindus...The process was apparently completed by 1905, when the Namashudras emerged as a well-knit community in the east Bengal, opposing almost in a body the swadeshi movement, which was considered to be an exclusive concern of the high Hindu gentry who denied them social right. (9)

In this regard, it can be said that this social movement acquired a new political dimension as well. However, to conjecture that the Namashudra Movement was also a reform movement would not be wrong as social progressivism was intended by the untouchables to ameliorate the conditions of their brethren and not contemplated and decreed by the upper caste gentry. Significantly, it is the Namashudra Movement which later gave rise to the 'Matua Cult' or 'Matua Dharma' initiated by Guruchand Thakur. The Namashudra Movement then can be anticipated as the first major revolt against Brahmanic domination in Bengal, a social uprising against the prevailing moral consensus and systematic practise of devaluing the dignity of an untouchable. The endeavour to establish their (untouchable) identity as individuals forms the nucleus of such a movement, ready to dissipate their old abhorrent and repugnant identity in the search for recognition in society as human beings, not to be equated with dogs and cats. Thus, the movement assumes not only a social ideology but belligerently attacks religious basis of practising untouchability too.

### **Quest for identity through unmitigated struggle**

The trajectory of finding and establishing a new and renewed identity has not only been done through the efficacious social movement, but through literature as well. The autobiographies of D. P. Das and Manoranjan Bepari deal with this emergence of new identity through struggle, language and new aesthetics. As Dr. Raj Kumar rightly says, "the writing of autobiography was used by the members of this oppressed group to achieve a sense of identity and mobilise resistance against caste and class oppression" (Kumar 157). However, to equate Das's autobiography with Bepari's will be to overlook the prodigious differences that exist between the two. Forms of humiliation in Bepari's autobiography are more acerbic, acrimonious and splenetic. Bepari's protagonist Jibon becomes an emblematic figure who is busy in carrying

out two conspicuous functions of “‘demolition’ and ‘reconstruction’” (149). He is a living symbol of a Dalit’s struggle with his fate, his caste and most important his life. In this context, it is paramount to focus on the issue of caste in Bengal. The Communist ideology in Bengal, which has ruled the state for a number of years, has never acknowledged the existence of caste in Bengali society. Also, as A.K. Biswas points out, “...the partition of Bengal worked as a great factor in putting down the rough edges of caste distinction and discrimination being less visible. The unfortunate historical event created a tsunami not only in political life but in social life too...” (Biswas 2010, p.10) So, even though caste consciousness and prejudices were rampant in Bengal, the Bengali society has managed in camouflaging it with a colourful tapestry over the society. In Bepari’s autobiography, the author locates the corporeal as the site for the investment of power as well as the site for humiliation. The protagonist Jibon’s ultimate struggle with a mongrel at the end of the text for some leftovers are not just struggles for survival but also metaphorical of life’s struggle. Throughout the text, there is a proud assertion of being a Namashudra, with not an iota of mortification. It would not be wrong to say that Bepari’s text accurately emblemizes Gopal Guru’s theory of ‘counter-rejection’.

The subalterns are rejecting the old ideology of equating their bodies to dirt or animal, arguing that every organic body- human or animal- consists of organic refuse...Bodies in general are undifferentiated because they contain underneath their skin all kinds of refuse or filth. Such bodies containing filth are not treated as repulsive as long as the filth remains hidden within them (Guru 222).

Thus, “amar naam Jibon Chandal” (My name is Jibon Chandal) (Bepari 262) is not only a sublime asseveration of his identity, but a dignified identity through caste. Bepari’s treatment of

Jibon, the protagonist of the narrative also focuses on the recognition of human worth irrespective of their social, economic and religious dimension. Bepari himself has been a Communist and so, the thread of challenging the hierarchy continues in his text. Throughout the narrative, there is a constant struggle to delegitimize the hegemonic structure which has relegated the Namashudras to a position worse than dogs. Jibon's constant identification of different meanings associated with the words "jibon" and "chandal" foregrounds the issue that, life, for the Dalits (here, the Namashudras) is not a cumulative effort of passing through the stages of birth, maturation and death, but a sustained plea for existence and an even more intense and strenuous attempt of minimal recognition of the "normative understanding that every human being is inherently worthy of respect" (Guru 221). Henceforth, Garib Das's (protagonist's father) earnest desire and endeavour to make Jibon a learned man, the collective gathering at the Bishnupur to protest against Government policies of forced rehabilitation, Jibon's persistent and incessant struggle to carry himself forward in the life struggle- all formulate a cognizance of the fact that degradation, denigration are soul mates for an untouchable and it is almost impossible to lead a life which is devoid of it. As even Ashrukumar Sikdar acknowledges, that through the narrative of Jibon, what Bepari has presented is the 'life' of the whole Namashudra community and his ultimate discovery that his only identity is his "prejudiced caste" (Bepari 6). And with this discovery comes his perpetual and eternal attempt to establish the figure of the 'self'.

Years of suppression have been internalized to such an extent that even death looks a bleak and yet desirable reality, enabling them to end their loathsome existence. The emergence of the self in *Chandal Jibon* is also reflective of the changing circumstances of the demographic location of the Namashudras. Maximally from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), their everyday ritualistic struggle was not only against the upper castes' continual exploitation but the political

and religious forces too, which, for their personal aggrandizement have coerced the Namashudra community to head towards an unknown geographical space called India, with a past, which is as troubling as their present and future. The struggles of Jibon then, are a microcosm of the struggles of the entire community which has been thrown out of their native place and the Government of India is not ready to acknowledge their existence and provide for them unless they agree to rehabilitate to the 'Dandakaranya'. The panache with which Bepari has described the last few passages of the text where Jibon is making his "mrityu theke jiboner dikey taar ekok jatra" (moving towards life, through death) (263) describes the whole endeavour of the community's effort to continue the process of life cycle through an unending effort of resurrecting life amidst a plethora of hardships. It is an attempt to delineate the transformation of the Chandalas into the Namashudras.

Thus, the emergence of a new identity, a new self, which is aware of the methods of survival, no longer bothered by the years of depression. The self which finds a final emergence is not however, an outcome of an individual's struggle. It can be traced back to the ideologies of the Namashudra Movement, which initially began as a peasant movement and later developed into a more mature and militant form. Even though Bepari's text does not mention the Movement, yet it draws on its ideology. If Bepari's narrative focuses on the emergence of the self through constant struggle of the whole community, then D.P. Das, on the other hand tries to focus on another sub-caste of the Dalits, the Dhopas (washerman community). If Bepari's core idea in his narrative was to explore the relentless exertion for survival with an identity, then the corpus of Das's autobiography is to inspect and analyse caste taboos. He has not been an acute victim of caste discrimination. Even if he has experienced caste injustices, he mentions it in a

humorous way. The figure of Parudi's mother is the quintessence of social obligations to be strictly observed during social intercourse between the upper castes and the Dhopas.

Parudi's mother- our respected jethima (aunt) used to visit our house quite often during siesta-time carrying a leaf of pan and a little lime on her fingertip from her house opposite ours. Her visit would cause a lot of merriment and fun for us. She would approach mother trying to avoid the polluting touch, or even the shadow, of the playing children of the dhopa basha. Her motion was never straight but zigzag and an invariable warning system "oore, tora kintu amake chushna." When jethima had arrived, mother would offer her a wooden stool, which she would clean with her sari-end before taking her seat. Looking sideways she would measure the distance from playing children in the courtyard of the dhopa basha, and when she was assured of a non-polluting security she would open up her pan leaf (Das 8).

The only embittering experience which Das has to face is his floundering relation with Nalini, his beloved, whom he could not marry owing to his lower caste. The emergence of 'self' in this narrative, however, is not a corollary of the incessant struggle of the untouchables. The conception of 'self' here, is the emergence of an intellectual, progressive individual who is in no way inferior or subjacent to the upper caste gentry. No doubt, the catastrophes and afflictions which had inflicted the lives of the Chandalas (Namashudras) is absent here, but what is present is an amalgamation of Marxist ideologies which coalesces caste distinctions with class exploitation and an understanding that the compassion and empathy shown to the untouchables by the upper caste authors are "like benediction lavished upon them as ungrudging charity" (xi). So, instead of focussing on the insipid insouciance of the upper caste gentry towards the

untouchables, his autobiography acts as a stimulant to inspire a genuine and mainstream and untouchables' literary movement. The materialization of the progressive self is seen through his attempt to go beyond his caste limitations and establish for himself, as well as for his caste, a living example of an individual who resurrects himself from the ruins and reflects the hopes and optimism of the "thick crust of faceless and nameless human anthill which have no singer of their own agonies" (x). Perhaps, Das's struggle with life and society was not as intense as Bepari's protagonist, may be due to the fact that Das has never had to face extreme financial crisis and also may be because the upper castes were not as inimical to the Dhopas as they were to the Chandalas, yet his autobiography is a compelling reminder of the fact that social reform and an egalitarian social order can only be visualized by entirely "discarding the huge monolith named Varnasharam" (xv). In a way then, he is attacking the basis of Hindu religion by questioning the concept of 'Varnashramadharma.'

The emergence of the progressive self in both the autobiographies project two different ideas about 'the self' as well as the concept of 'progression' itself. The self in Bepari's narrative is a typical example of a broken, downtrodden Dalit, doubly inflicted with religious riots accompanying partition and demographic change. The distresses of Jibon, the protagonist, thus become a microcosmic fraction of every Dalit's struggle for survival. The 'self' here metaphorically stands for the body as well as the immense proclivity to survive in spite of onslaughts of calamities, the body which can bear a plethora of pain and emotional turmoil and yet draws on enough supplements to exist. For Bepari, the concepts of 'self' and 'progression' are interrelated as the survival of the 'self' leads to progression of life. The meaning of progression also acquires a magnitude as it is the progression of the downtrodden community,

their march towards continuance through endurance of physical labour. For Das, the progression is a venture to fill up the vacuum in the context of Dalit narratives. It is a sort of a revolution where a member from the untouchable community breaks apart the social and political obscurantism to establish a voice for his community. It is an endeavour to enlighten the depressed classes about the potential they hold, which, if polished accurately, can create a niche for them and be the pioneer of a new literary genre and movement, articulating the concerns of the oppressed. In a way then, both Bepari's text and Das's text are complementary to each other, one highlighting the physical struggle for progression in life, the other portraying the intellectual capacity, progression through refinement, edification and sophistication, both rejecting thus, the conventional, predominant and rudimentary beliefs about the untouchables' servile existence. The 'self' for both then, are representative figures, juxtaposing the two realities of life, still, speaking about the same issue, aptly justifying Guru's 'rejection of rejection' theory as well.

### **Quest for identity through language and new aesthetics**

Sharankumar Limbale had rightly pointed out that the old aesthetics theory cannot be applied while dealing with Dalit Literature as it is a literature of pain and agony. The usage of coarse dialects/language and the presentation of the protagonist's predicaments are repeated rejoinders of the fact that the aesthetic theory of the sacred, sanctified and venerable Sanskrit language can never vindicate or rationalize the untouchables' pain. Bepari and to a certain extent Das project that intensity of language which has the competence and dexterity to evoke alternative aesthetics, an aesthetic which does not provide pleasure through gratification but through vexation and discomposure. The abject and stirring conditions of the refugee camps, the agitated and vehement slogans and the delirium of the mob, slaughtering human beings in the name of religion in *Chandal Jibon*, and in *The Untouchable Story* the author's (Das) subtle

treatment of the ostracised isolation, never been “fully integrated with the bhadrlok society” (5) and the sardonic and cynical treatment of the institution of marriage as disseminated by the Hindu religious scriptures, especially the Manusmriti conjures up authorial politics of framing and constituting a new classification of aesthetics, antithetic and contra distinct from the classical notions.

As far as the pertinences of the language is concerned, the use of rustic Bengali in both Bepari’s and Das’s text promulgates to the origin of the untouchables’ from the lower stratum of the society. The sylvan tones of their lexicons and expressions, for example, “koi go shonte acho, ami aichi. Chaul aante gechilam. Chaul paichi. Ar kichukhon pore tomare bhaat dimu (can you hear me? I have returned home. I had gone out to collect some rice. I will provide you with cooked rice within a few minute) (Bepari 31), “baun kayetra amago chadal kan koy?- sudha, sudha kan amago ghinna kore? Manush hoiya manusher samaje kan amago eto durgoti? Eayar kono pirtikar ache, na nai? (Why do the Brahmins generate so much hatred against us? Why do they humiliate us by constantly referring to us as the chandals? Why do we have to experience such a disgraced condition? Is there no remedy for it?) (33), “oore tora kintu amake chuisna (dear children, be careful, never touch me)” (Das 8), “Aite saal, jaite saal, tar naam Barisal (beware, beware, there he is a Barisal Man/ Look, Folks, good ones, avoid him, if you can./ There he comes with bamboos two./ One for your anus and the other for you)” (21) are significant in that sense as it indicates writing in a language which is the colloquial tone of people from East Bengal. In a way, then, the incorporation of such a demotic language not only debunks the theoretical basis of the use of standardised language for the general public, but also builds, even if hypothetically, a bridge to correlate informal language of the lower castes with the

formal language of the upper castes, through incorporation of the informal into the mainstream literature. That also, accounts for a quest for identity by the untouchables by repudiating the claims of earlier scholars that the languages of the lower castes are not suitable for public reading.

To conclude then, it is imperative to say that much work has been done in the field of Dalit Literature, especially in the context of Bengal, whose sole motive was to accentuate a movement for the untouchables' to get their due credit as individuals. No doubt, much of their literary products are manifestations of their own anger and disgust at the treatment dispensed to them, yet it can safely be argued that slowly they are in the process of merging with the pan-Indian movement, enunciating the concerns of every Dalit, irrespective of their sub-castes or region. Even though the flowering of the Bengali Dalit Literature has been quite late, prompting Meenakshi Mukherjee to ask –“Is there Dalit writing in Bangla?” (Mukherjee), it is gathering up all its inherent, dormant and quiescent forces to strike a cord against the mainstream authors to propagate a veracious and scrupulous picture of the contemporary situation as well as the traumas experienced in the past. It is gathering up the momentum to be the repository of a social movement, an emancipatory force to guide the underprivileged and the downtrodden, and to also cultivate a culture which will cater to the social milieu. It would not be wrong to affirm that the ideology of the Bengali Dalit writers is not to just demand respect for the whole community but also to demystify the previously held myths and beliefs. The extent of social apartheid may have been reduced but what is still prevalent is a mental constriction which prevents inter-marriage within different caste hierarchies. So, the modest attempts of these writers are indeed commendable, for what they are putting forth is stark reality, singing at the same time a paean of their culture and individualism to create a homogenous identity. Thus, going back to the poem at

the beginning of the paper, the ‘courage’ and the ‘grace’ mentioned are just paraphernalia to unfold the stories of “the harsh realities of the life of Indian underdogs” (Das xi). The progressive self, hence, becomes partially and partly, a cogent manifestation of the behemoth and stupendous accomplishment the great Dalit literary figures have achieved and continues to achieve.

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