

## **Expression of Dalit Voice: A Study of Manohar Mouli Biswas' *Surviving in My World***

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### **Abstract:**

Manohar Mouli Biswas who belongs to Namasudra community is a significant voice in the English translation of Bengali dalit literature. His autobiography, *Surviving in My World* gives an account of poor Namasudra families living in the remote villages where they experienced material deprivation and caste discrimination. What was worse that they were unsettled and displaced on account of partition and resulting migration. They lived in an island world of illiteracy being impoverished, powerless and unwanted. Biswas writes that autobiography to express his mute agony so that this may ignite in his fellow community member a pious rage to deconstruct the hegemonic social order. Biswas says: "I wrote this autobiography out of pain. This pain is of being belittled, of being unwanted, of being enslaved. May my people be able to come out of this and stand with their heads held high, may they be able to touch the summits of civilisation- I remain alive amidst such hope" (Biswas,XX). Biswas wants to undo the age-old caste-ridden oppressions against the Dalits by representing their lives, deprivations, struggles, histories and promoting their culture and liberation through literature. His autobiography is rich in with the accounts of Namasudra culture which was not only so long suppressed under the cultural hegemony but looked down upon by the conservative Hindu upper-caste and upper-class populace. But Biswas has portrayed them with empathy and dignity and as a result we find in plenty in the autobiography different facets of Namasudra life, of say their illiteracy, superstitions, food habits, poverty, occupation temperament habitation and so on. This is the autobiography of the author, autobiography of his father, autobiography of his grandfather, autobiography of his great grandfather and autobiography of thousands of impoverished Dalit like him. This autobiography is replete with the painful memories of Biswas regarding his family and community. This autobiography gives vent to the suppressed cry of the Dalit Namasudras.

**Keywords: subaltern, Dalit, hegemony, hierarchy, other, Namasudra.**

Indian Dalit literature runs at par with the main stream literature from the recent past. History of Indian Dalit literature may be traced back to the writings of Madara Chennaiah, an 11th century cobbler-saint who is regarded as “father of Vachana poetry”. According to another opinion Dalit literature has its origin in Buddhist literature; Dalit Bhakti poets like Gora, Raidas, Chokha Mela and Karmamela; Tamil Siddhas or Chittars. However, Indian dalit literature finds its impetus in Maharashtra. Baburao Bagul was the pioneer in this respect. His collection of stories in translation entitled as ‘When I Had Concealed My Caste’ (1963) brought a momentum to dalit literature.

The term “Dalit Literature” was first used at the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha in 1958. It is clear to us that Dalit writing is a post-independence literary activity. Dalits are the ‘Other’ side of the Indian society; they are the marginalised. Inequality in respect of caste creates this marginality which results in insecurity, injustice and exploitation. They were mute sufferers of these for centuries after century. But it was too tough for them to endure the hegemony of the upper castes in recent pasts. The suppressed Dalits began to voice against the oppression in a caste dominated society and as result we have the literature depicting assertion of human rights, self-pride, revolt against social injustice, chronicles of personal and collective suffering and side by side aspiration for a new social order where inequality of caste will remain aloof.

Under the impetus of Dr. Ambedkar, dalit literature flourished as an organised voice in Maharashtra. Gradually the tradition of Dalit writing spread to the states like Gujrat, Tamilnadu, and Karnataka. Later Dalit writing and Dalit movement reached the shore of Bengal. However, trace of Dalit wrting is centuries old in Bengal. Authors like Manohar Mouli Biswas think Charjapadas, composed by Shabaripada to be an instance of Dalit writing. Another dalit author Manoranjan Byapari mentions Matua literature under the teaching of Namasudra social reformers Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur as the fountain source of Dalit writing in Bengal. However, the dalit writing appears as a literary genre from the 1990s. Dalit Panther Literary Movement of Maharashtra greatly influenced the tradition of Dalit writing in Bengal. The year 1992 is a milestone in the history of Bengali Dalit writing because the Bangla Dalit Sahitya

Sanstha was set up in this year with keeping in mind publishing dalit literature, holding conferences and promoting dalit culture.

In Bengali Dalit literature the Namasudra authors and poets play a significant role “to counter the total social exclusion of the dalits, their movements, icons, experiences and worldview” (Kumar,124, Quoted in Biswas,XXVI). According to Manohar Mouli Biswas, “It is a counter cultural movement that has been aiming to undo the age-old caste ridden oppressions against the Dalits by representing their lives, deprivations, struggles, histories and promoting their culture and liberation through literature” (BiswasXXV).

Manohar Mouli Biswas took a great initiative to establish the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha and he is the president of this organization. He was one of the leading activists and literary exponent of Dalit writing in India. He descended from a family of small agriculturists living in a marginal village in the Khulna district of the then East Bengal. He grew up among wrestling poverty, starvation, upper caste hegemony, caste discrimination and stigma of his being an untouchable Namasudra. Side by side Biswas practises their customs, participates in their occupation contributes in their economy and experiences their cultural richness. His deep attachment to his community’s struggle for survival, his suffocation in a hegemonic social order, his love for his own culture and his commitment to his community make him a literary activist for the empowerment of the Dalits. As dalit activists he has been writing for the cause of dalits and arranging activities for the Sanstha since 1967.

Of late a number of autobiographies have been written and published in Hindi, Kannada, Marathi and Bengali across the country and some of them have been translated into English. They help us to reach the new vista crowded with the inner experiences of the dalits and their suppressed pains which were so long inaccessible through the mainstream literature or conventional archives. Biswas writes his autobiography *Amar Bhubane Ami Benche Thaki* which is translated by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep sarangi as *Surviving in My World*. His autobiography is an instrument with which he fights for the dalits against the Centre. With this the author has brought into focus the untold stories of the dalit Namasudras, their culture and deprivations, strengths and struggles so that the mainstream readers get introduced with them. In this respect the remark of Kalyan Das may be mentioned, “The land where dalit writers have different political, ideological allegiances; where internalised casteism still makes its presence

felt; where “caste”/ “identity” consciousness engulfs the larger ideological manoeuvre of dalit cultural politics.... Biswas never forgets to ring the bell..... (He) bears the guiding torch that crates a platform where Dalits of all kinds find a place” (Quoted in Biswas,XXVI).

Manohar Mouli Biswas has attached with the autobiography a note of his own where he has given the gist of the book in a nut shell. He says: “I have named my autobiography Amar Bhubane Ami Benche Thaki (Surviving in My World). My world is of great pain, one of being pitied by others. It is my firm conviction that it will become clear, on reading this autobiography, that my world is a different world. In the beginning I had named my autobiography Prisnika. Later I renamed it Life and Death of Prisnika. Prisnika is an uncommon Bengali word and its meaning is kochuripana (water hyacinth) once thought that let me name it straightway Life and Death of Kochuripana. But it hurt to think of myself as a water hyacinth. This happened because of a sense of glory that had developed in my identity. It is satisfaction of being able to establish myself as a human being. That I’m being able to think myself as a human that is the pleasure” (Biswas XVIII-XIX).

In Indian hierarchical social order, it is caste which dictates and controls the status of the people who live in it and these results in the marginalization of a larger social group which is known as Dalits. The Dalits belong to the lowest among the caste hierarchies. Untouchability, impurity and social ambivalence are the stigmas with which they have to live a painful life. According to Suvasis Das: “When the subaltern in Western literary discourse is thought to be socially and politically marginalized social group without voice and identity, Dalits in Indian social background are silenced and relegated to the margins due to the hegemony of caste stigma, class inequality and gender subordination. From this perspective “subaltern” and “Dalit” can be found to share the same premise- both refers to a marginalized social group and their relation to Centre in terms of power and authority. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Questions the very role of power and authority in the mechanism of silencing the “Other” in post- colonial literary discourse” (Das, 2). Spivak’s main point of argument highlights the fact that the subaltern cannot speak because of their lack of any tongue or any intellectual power. When the marginalized voices are silenced and kept mute and “invisible” by the Centre, we really doubt whether the subaltern can speak. The answer is that The Centre can suppress the voice of the marginalized for a particular time, but cannot continue silencing them forever it must burst out. Again, Suvasis Das says: “The discovery of the self and

the realization of their own voice empowered them to question the hegemony of caste and power in their life of perpetual subordination and oppression. Their new voice is no longer the voice of the meek, subordinate creature, but is full of revolt, artistic creativity and above all subaltern pride.” (Das, 2)

His autobiography is rich in with the accounts of Namasudra culture which was not only so long suppressed under the cultural hegemony but looked down upon by the conservative Hindu upper-caste and upper-class populace. But Biswas has portrayed them with empathy and dignity and as a result we find in plenty in the autobiography different facets of Namasudra life, of say their illiteracy, superstitions, food habits, poverty, occupation temperament habitation and so on. He was not a distant onlooker at the life of the Namasudra life but was an inseparable part of it from the very beginning of his life. There lies the root from where he gets the nourishment to sustain his future life.

In a conversation with Jaydeep Sarangi, Mohine Gurav and Angana Dutta, Biswas says: “As we are born in a caste – stratified society, high and low, in India, anyone born in the high castes does not feel any discrimination, but anyone born in the low castes, and very particularly of the sudra and the ati-sudra castes, faces obstacles at every step to move forward in life. This gradation started to flow in the society from an ancient past, say, from the Vedic times. The Vedas itself stated the stratification of four categories of castes, such as the Brahmins, the kshatryas, the vaishyas and the shudras (Rig:10.90.12), and in the subsequent times the upper castes were pushed forward to form the ‘twice born class’ by Manu in his book of laws (Manusmriti, 10.4: ‘Brahmanah Ksatriya Vaishyastraya Varnas Dwijatya). He had bunched the first three castes in one group and the fourth caste meant the shudras, the larger section of the populace in the society, who were put in another group” (Biswas, 96) It is clear to us that the marginalisation of the dalits in India results from religious dictation. Only way to get rid of this bondage of remaining in the religion dictated well of untouchability is an organisational movement and Biswas believes it from the core of his heart. He wants to challenge it through creating a new domain of culture and literature.

It is education that can help them to get rid of the hegemony of caste, poverty and backwardness. Biswas as well as some of his forefathers believe in it. According to G.J.V. Prasad his auto biography has a prime focus on how difficult it was for a low caste child labour

to get educated, yet how important it was. Biswas was the first in the family to get drenched him in the light of education. He recalls a debate on education among his father, grandfather and great uncle. This debate presents the stance of his community regarding the value of education for betterment and upliftment of their living. His Jetha (elder brother of father) argued from a realistic view point of dalit life. According to him to indulge in the luxury of education with hope of securing a dignified position in an upper caste Hindu society is a far- fetched dream for the children of the Dalit Namashudra community. His Jetha argues: "Will our children be able to become babus if they are educated? They cannot, they cannot, and they cannot! Even if our children get educated, they won't be able to become babus. They will have to do manual labour, they will have to hold onto the butt of the plough- such is the inscription in the scriptures by the Gods" (Biswas, 4). But his grandfather intuitively can see a bright future which can be climbed with a ladder of education. He says "... earlier people used to abuse me as charal- chandal so often. But now no one calls you charal- chandal, no one calls you tui disrespectfully referring to your caste. They are showing a little respect, remember this!" (Biswas, 5).

Like his grandfather, his father also believed that education may bring a change in their life as well as in their occupation. His father immensely supported his zeal for education for he realized that it is only through education one can achieve self- respect and dignity in society. Biswas narrates: "Baba believed that education would bring a new phase in our lives- there would be an improvement in the hereditary occupation (Biswas, 4). The great social reformer of the Namasudra community, Harchand Thakur also believed: "We who do not get to fill our stomachs, who do not get the scope of education in schools; to us the meaning of independence and slavery are the same. You first arrange for our education, take care that we get to eat two full meals, and then we will join you in the struggle for independence" (Quoted in Biswas82).

The Namasudras led a life far from the madding crowd; a life that is simple and abstemious. They lived on two handfuls of rice a day. They enjoyed the beauty of nature which was some time benevolent sometime violent to them in their day to day activities. They got adjusted with scarcities and complaints which were part and parcel of their lives. "This pattern was not of one life, but that of generations" (Biswas,39). This is true about the dalit Namasudras of today, in the twenty first century. What Biswas experienced sixty or seventy years ago, the dalits are experiencing till now. They were living and are living like a water hyacinth on the

verge of death and dying on the verge of life. They were not provided with least life supporting facilities. Biswas says: “Even in the time of such grave danger, not a single doctor was found nearby. We had to do our treatment ourselves in order to remain alive. We were born as children of immortality on this earth. Even after being in the toughest of crises we were somehow salvaged. Just as we survived battling with nature, we also invited our own disaster at times. On one side of our lives were smiles, on the other- tears. I grew up watching the hide and seek play of smiles and tears” (Biswas, 3).

Though they were illiterate and poor, they did not become cynic, rather they remained engrossed in their world. They build up their world in their own style and the outer world had no entry there, even they did not step out of their world. But they were not devoid of common human feelings and which were not melted away under the pressure of penury or utter neglect by the Centre. Amidst hundreds of problems in their personal life or collective lives, they lived a life blooming with love, care, attachment and affection: “parents cuddled their children, while children shared the physical labour of their parents from an early age. This was the natural way of our lives” (Biswas, 12).

From the very early age, any member of this community came to learn that life is a matter of adjustment and learn how to live with tolerance in the faces of hardships. The feelings that they are unwanted in this world never come to them. A fine instance how they live this life of adjustment is given by Biswas with a realistic but pathetic account of their scarcity in day to day life: “the tattered condition of their clothes and that of ours were strikingly similar. Even if some private part of the body got exposed through the wear and tear of the cloth, none mocked, nor bullied. Rather, someone would hint to sit or stand a little more cautiously” (Biswas, 12).

Though born in and brought up by a poor dalit Namasudra family in a remote and marshy village with little opportunity for education, Biswas was a professionally successful man who worked in the Class-1 service of the Central Government of India and served as a senior Lecturer in the Telecommunication Training Centre, Salt Lake, and Kolkata. Despite this success, he could not shake off the stigma of belonging to Dalit community and he did not or does not want to do this. It only gives him pain that in spite of being equal in qualification, he is denied of the equal right as a human being. He says: “There is caste discrimination in this country: some castes are considered high and some low. In spite of being an equal or even a little

higher in educational qualifications, I failed to become the equal of Rushita. The words with which Rushita's mother had bid farewell remained alive as a deep wound and time could not heal it." (Biswas, 85). With these lines the autobiography comes to an end but a question arises to us how long we have to live with this pain.

This is the autobiography of the author, autobiography of his father, autobiography of his grandfather, autobiography of his great grandfather and autobiography of thousands of impoverished Dalit like him. This autobiography is replete with the painful memories of Biswas regarding his family and community. He aches with the pain under the weight of his memory. But side by side a question may arise to him "Can Subaltern speak"? It is true that the subaltern cannot speak even if they anyhow become able to speak, they are not heard. So, he realises that the Dalits must speak and forced the authority to hear them. To do so the dalits have to wage a double battle. He says" "they have to create a literature projecting real aspiration of the dalits and portray faithfully the battle which they are waging against exploitation, social and economical." (Biswas, 97). The literature they create must not only be the source of inspiration for the oppressed people but also an instrument which ignites consciousness and courage to voice their protest.

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