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Search for an Alternative Aesthetic in Bangla Dalit Poetry

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Savarna critics assert that Dalit literature should be critiqued strictly as literature. They assert that it is totally inappropriate to treat this literature from a reverential or sympathetic perspective simply because it has been created by Dalits. According to them, the literary evaluation of this literature should be based on literary criteria. They say that this may well be Dalit literature, but the reader will read it only as literature. Therefore, extra-literary considerations will have to be disregarded in its appraisal. But Dalit writers reject this point of view. It is their opinion that a middle-class criticism cannot properly evaluate this literature. (Limbale, 2004, 103)

I

This paper intends to focus on Bangla Dalit literature- a phenomenon that started in the last part of the 19th century and built its structural pattern on Dalit sensibility. In terms of experience and expression, this literature attempts to invade a new space outside and beyond the middle class Bengali sensibility- the Parnassus of Bengali mainstream literature. But the publication history of Dalit literature is one of upper-caste neglect. Leading Bangla publication houses- *Ananda, Dey's, Mitra & Ghosh* etc. turned a deaf ear to promising Dalit poets. The situation was so hostile that the Dalit poets finally consolidated to establish their own publication house- *Chaturtha Duniya*. It was a very powerful statement on the politics of Savarna publishers. Moreover, it was a loud protest against the diseased Bengali psyche that refused to admit the existence of caste discrimination in West Bengal under the influence of Marxist ideologues and in the name of liberalism and progressive intellectualism.

I propose to concentrate my attention on a groundbreaking anthology of Dalit writing, the first of its kind in the language, *Satabarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya* (Hundred Years of Bengali Dalit Literature), published in 2011 and edited by Manohar Mouli Biswas and Shyamal Kumar Pramanik. In this anthology we find specimens of what Limbale terms 'alternative aesthetic' in the explosive rejection and piercing revolt, occasioned by unrestrained anguish and finding release with aggressive character and insolent, rebellious attitude. I would also like to show, with necessary textual illustrations, the uncharacteristic rhetoric of restraint that completes the construction of an alternative aesthetic.

Dalits of India are farthest from power and hence belong to the lowest stratum of caste hierarchy. The marginalization is based both on the religious principle of pollution and purity and the cultural construction of power. Dalit literature reveals the collective consciousness of people whose voice had been suppressed through long ages of history. It

is a protest against the establishment and a commitment to inculcate the new values for ushering in a new order. This revolutionary aim was rooted in anger and sorrow- the two crucial emotional stimuli of all Dalit writing.

Cursed with the stigma of untouchability, Dalits are “treated like animals, they lived apart from the village and had to accept leftovers from the higher caste people, in return for their endless toil” (Dangle, 2009, xxi). Dalit literature reveals the collective consciousness of this community whose voice had been suppressed through the long ages of history. It is seen in the main as a protest against the establishment, as a commitment to inculcate new values aiming at a new order. This revolutionary aim to create a new order is deeply rooted in anger and grief. In ‘Akkarmashi’ by Sharankumar Limbale one discovers ‘a lofty image of grief’- a major construct of the alternative Dalit aesthetic. He defines Dalit literature as something “which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule endured by Dalits” (Limbale, 2004, 30). He sums up his idea with a beautiful expression, “This literature is but a lofty image of grief” (Limbale, 2004, 30). Arjun Dangle is of the opinion that, “Dalit literature portrays the hopes and aspirations of the exploited masses. Their fight for survival, their daily problems, the insults they have to put up with, their experiences and their outlook towards all these events are portrayed in Dalit literature” (Dangle, 2009, xlviii).

Dalit Poetry, being a branch of the same tree shares the same goal and the same means. It “transfers the themes of isolation, alienation, protest, revolt, and struggle for survival, freedom from all sorts of bondage and exploitation, apathy, estrangement and uprootedness- a search for identity and a longing for human dignity”(Deshpande, 2001, 60).

Modern Dalit poetry in Bangla, which probably originated in the last quarter of 19th century, builds its structural pattern out of Dalit sensibility. Consequently, it is a poem of anger, voicing its opposition to all that is orthodox, traditional and conventional. In terms of experience and expression, it tries to occupy a space outside and beyond the middle class Bengali sensibility. There have been very few attempts to anthologize Dalit poetry in Bangla and even fewer to write any history of its development. Manohar Mouli Biswas, in two of his works, namely *Dalit Sahityer Digbalay* (The Horizon of Dalit Literature) and *Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha* (An Outline of Dalit Literature) made some progress in this direction. Achintya Biswas, a noted Dalit critic, provided valuable insight into the socio-cultural and religious background to the growth of Dalit literature in Bengal in his article published in *Dalit Solidarity*. Journals like, *Adalbadal* (Change), *Chaturtha Duniya* (Fourth World), *Aikyatan* (Symphony), *Dalit Mirror* also publish occasional articles on this subject. But, these are all sporadic attempts exploring only a little part of a vast domain that deserves much more critical attention. As most of the texts on history of Bangla literature confine themselves within the established cannon, one needs to look beyond archival sources.

Bangla Dalit poetry can be traced back to the earliest days of Bangla language when it began to be used after a journey through Sanskrit-Pali- Prakrit-Avahatta. In this period i.e. A.D. 10th -12th century, vernacular literature was created by Dalit people from

communities like Savara, Chandala, Sundi, Kapalik, Doma etc. Their literature, mainly poetry in rudimentary form is known as *Charyapadas*. Achintya Biswas refers to Bhusuka, one of the poets of *Charyapada* who wrote that his wife was plundered by a Chandala and therefore he became a Bengali, “niya Gharani Chandala leliAji Bhusuka Bengali bheli”. From this Biswas raises a pertinent question, “Shall we take it for granted that in those days Bengali was the synonym of Dalit? Otherwise what is the cause behind calling oneself a Bengali?” (Biswas, 1995, 191) The *Kaibarta* (Fishermen) rebellion during the reign of Pal dynasty and the literature associated with it also owes its origin mainly to the low-caste Dalit people. Later, we find a literary tradition of Nathpantha which was protestant in nature and the protest was against Brahminical caste hierarchy. This tradition included *Minachetana* (Fish Cult) or *Gorkha Vijaya* Conquest of Gorkha) and *Maynamati Gopichandreryan* Love Epic of Maynamati and Gopichandra). The *Mangalkabyas* (Oral Epics) is also a literary tradition that got its origin in the consciousness of people from the lowest ranks of the contemporary caste-ridden society. In *Manasa Mangal*, Manasa, the snake-goddess is worshipped by people from the lowest segment of society. “The ploughman (Bacai), the fisherman (Jhalua Malla), and the cowherds (Purandar Ghosh) were the first worshippers of Manasa.” (Biswas, 1995, 192) In *Chandimangal*, one of the two stories has Kalketu as protagonist who was from *Byadha* community, perhaps a tribe of forest-dwelling untouchables. On the other hand, *Dharma Mangal*, a literary tradition of western part of Bengal refers to the bravery of Doma (Cremators) community. The names of the characters like Kalu Dom, Sada Dom, Harihar Baity themselves are indicators to the milieu to which this *kabya* belonged. In *Sibayana* (Oral Epic on Lord Shiva), we see Lord Shiva and his wife Parvati, selling out the *trisula* (holy trident) and after obtaining *patta* (right to land) of a piece of land are trying to fend starvation away. Later, they were found fishing in the muddy water under scorching sunlight. Very rarely one can find such an example of domesticating a mighty god in the image of the downtrodden.

In the modern times, literary activities by Dalit people of Bengal started in the 19th century as “Matua Sahitya” (Literature of the Matuas). Manoranjan Byapari (2010, 457) ascribes the origin of Dalit literature to the influence of Chaitanya Harichand Biswas (1872-78) and his son Guruchand Biswas (1847-1937). Manohar Mouli Biswas, in his two books, mentioned earlier, has also given us some account of this nascent state of Dalit literature in Bengal. In 1909, Rasbehari Roy, a school teacher, popularly known as Roy Pandit started a journal titled, *Namasudra Darpan* (Namasudra Mirror). In the same period, magazines such as *Yogi Sakha* (Companion of Yogis), *Namasudra Bandhab* (Friends of Namasudras), *Namasudra Hitoishi* (Well wishers of Namasudras) and some others were published, initiated by Dalit people and dealing with plights of people who both literally and figuratively lived in the periphery. In the year 1917, in a monthly journal titled *Pataka* (Flag), Raicharan Biswas, a young man from an obscure village wrote a poem- *Musalman*. “History was made. In the search of truth, there are many similarities between a Muslim and a Dalit as both are untouchables to the higher caste people” (Manohar Biswas, 1992, 105). From then on, there has been a steady stream of publications. However, it was only in the 70s and the 80s of the 20th century that Dalit

poetry in Bengal got the momentum and intensity necessary to be counted seriously as a literary movement. Some of the important names include Kshirod Bihari Kabiraj, Upendra Nath Biswas, Amita Bagchi, Shyamal Biswas, Ranjit Sikdar, Manohar Biswas, Achintya Biswas, Chinmay Roy, Harendranath Samaddar, Kalyani Thakur, Manju Bala among others. The list is long and is growing each day. Not that all these poets and others, who could not be mentioned here, have written poems of even merit but they have contributed enough to make Bangla Dalit poetry a part of the great literary movement that swept the country with its revolutionary purpose and a passionate execution of it. Modern Bangla Dalit poetry shares a good many commonalities with Dalit literature in other vernacular languages like Marathi, Tamil, Kannada, Gujarati and Hindi. It marks a rebellion against overbearing religion and tradition as well as hypocrisy masquerading as freedom. Some of these poems are truly revolutionary in terms of idiom, diction and style. They aim to controvert the established norms and literary criteria in Bangla language. In terms of startling images and symbols, differently modulated myths and metaphors, this poetry tries to be as much empathetic as evocative. Although, there have been various influences on Bangla Dalit poetry like the teaching of Lord Buddha and the philosophy of Harichand Thakur, it ultimately tries to be true to the great vision of Ambedkar, “Transform the light of your pen so that the darkness of villages is removed... Get to know intimately their pain and sorrow and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives.” (Ambedkar, 1976, 8)

In spite of sharing the basic revolutionary aim with Dalit literary movement, Bangla Dalit poetry remains rather distinct in one major aspect i.e. its preoccupation with aesthetic quality of literature. There is a general opinion among critics that Dalit literature lacks aesthetic finesse. It has been charged that Dalit literature is propagandist, univocal and very often negative. Vijay Sonwane went so far as to accuse it of being unnecessarily obscene (Sonwane, 1979, 21). Of course, these charges have been successfully refuted by thinkers like Sharan Kumar Limbale (Limbale, 2004, 34-37). L.S. Deshpande justifies it on the ground of purposive nature of Dalit poetry, “If there is a choice between truthfulness and elegance, a Dalit writer chooses to be truthful rather than elegant and that too sometimes at the cost of decency” (Deshpande, 2001, 62). K. Satchidanandan, in this regard talks about an alternative poetics “that throws overboard classical values like propriety, balance, restraint and understatement” (Satchidanandan, 1993, 10). But, such accusations cannot be made so easily against contemporary Dalit poetry in Bangla. In greater part of this corpus, one can find an even balance between revolutionary social purpose and literary merit. Of course, there are innumerable such poems, literary merit of which is a little too suspect. Following lines from Sudanghsu Sekhar Mandal, “Let caste –dividing Brahmnism / Be wiped forever/ From the history of the world” (Biswas, 1992, 49) tend more towards a slogan and even as a slogan it lacks the necessary striking quality. When Asok Arinda writes, “Thrilling history of the deprived voices/ Would remain at every house” (Biswas, 1992, 50) one wonders how can such a sad history be thrilling. Or is the poet a little too tempted by the rhyme between *Banchito* (deprived) and *Romanchito* (thrilling)? Hundreds of such examples can be found but there are also a good number of poems which successfully accommodate aesthetic merits

within the framework of a revolutionary purpose. These poems are imaginative reconstructions of vital truth and the reconstructions are often done with subtle use of images, crafty handling of stylistic devices and reordering of mythical episodes involving neglected characters like Shambuka, Ekalavya or Ghattotkach. One can hear war-cries in the poems but it is almost always supplemented by seasoned reasoning. Intensity of passion is tangible but instead of a verbal explosion we hear bitter sounds of irony and sarcasm and that does not make the attack any less scathing. These poems, that form the core of contemporary Bangla Dalit poetry are accomplished works of art and need no justification from thinkers and theorists. Among the great number of contemporary Dalit poets of Bengal only a few can be discussed in this paper. The poets to be discussed here are Achintya Biswas, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Chuni Kotal and Kalyani Thakur.

Achintya Biswas has published several volumes of poetry including *Charu Baurir Gaan*¹ (Songs of Charu Bauri), *Bidhi Badhdha Satarkikaran* (Statutory Warning) and *Oxygener Bhor* (Oxygenated Morning). The poem, *Nirakharder Kabitar Sabha* (Poetry Meet of the Illiterate) from *Charu Baurir Gaan* (Song of Charu Bauri) is a wonderful evocation of an apocalypse for the Dalit poets and the need to initiate a resilient protest for recording the unique cultural historiography of the downtrodden people.

Galled blue envelope- a courier of death;
 Poison me, poison you, poison us
 And then dwarf us to inane beings.
 Crocodile laughter of the blood-thirsty
 Dracula will lure us into a trap of death.
 The infernal button of explosives
 Will be pressed- night's black agents
 Will hurl us into oblivion.
 But before that overwhelming moment
 Retrieve your lost pen and dreams of
 A thousand benighted years and a milky white
 Piece of paper. Before the poisoned peril
 Once more let's meet to write it in verse- THE DREAM.²

(Biswas & Pramanik, 2011, 121)

This little poem possesses aesthetic finesse and is also what Limbale called, "life-affirming literature" (Limbale, 2004, 105). The bard's righteous anger is quite palpable throughout. The thousand-year old history of oppression is difficult to erase. More importantly, the conspiracy to decimate the Dalit identity is so tantalizingly real in the

¹ Bauri is a very low caste, living in the western part of Bengal. Achintya Biswas, the Dalit poet, hails from that part of Bengal. The anthology is the product of the poet's long association with the Dalit population of that region.

² This translated excerpt of the poem and the subsequent attempts are part of one literary project in the Department of English, Vidyasagar University, West Bengal. The thrust area is documentation and translation of Bangla Dalit literature.

present that the irate poet is desperate to stem the rot with his most potent tool of self-defense- “writing”. This almost superhuman resilience finds an echo in contemporary Aboriginal poetry of Australia. An excerpt from Romaine Moreton’s *I Shall Surprise You By My Will* (2004) brilliantly iterates the necessity and glory of resilience.

For the bullets we dodged
They were difficult
And this ideological warfare
More difficult still
But even now
As we challenge inhumanity
We shall rise
And surprise you by our will. (Heiss and Minter, 2008, 165-166)

However, Manohar Mouli Biswas an author of several volumes of poetry, in his attempt to portray Dalit life and reality depends not so much on crafts like anti-language as on reordering and subverting the established poetics. From his anthology *Vivikto Uthoney Ghar*³ (A hut in a separate Campus), the poem titled *Yuddhe jabo (I shall go to war)* is a good example of the subversive art of the poet. The speaker of the poem is Ghatotkach, unsung hero of Mahabharata. He questions the very efficacy of the marriage between his father, Bhima, an Aryan and his mother, Hidimba, a non- Aryan woman. The poem contains Ghatotkach’s desperate question,

“I can swell and swallow
All the injustice of the world
Then why am I hated? Why am I ignored?” (Biswas, 1991, 12)

It is a question that has haunted Dalits for thousands of years. By reordering the mythical tales, Manohar Biswas has very successfully communicated the continuity of Dalit experience through time and history. The poem presents the argument that the distinct and unique Dalit experience has existed for a long time and is not confined only to the quotidian reality of day to day existence of the present. About the poet it can assuredly be said that he does not need any fiery rhetoric to bring into question the great injustice that is the lot of Dalits. Of course, this reordering of Indian myths and bringing out a new, not-so-visible dimension of caste reality inherent within such ancient tales is a narrative strategy that has been used by Dalit poets of different Indian languages.

I would like to include in the discussion a few lines from a poem by Chuni Kotal titled “Protest”. This poem is included in *Shatabarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya* (2011). It shows the social commitment of this indigenous poet. The note of authenticity is unmistakable as Chuni Kotal was part of the stigmatized Lodha community- a Dalit sect

³ The poem is borrowed from Manohar Mouli Biswas’s anthology, *Vivikto Uthoney Ghar* (1991) published by Dipali Book House in Kolkata. I have also included the English Translation, *Rendering in English as yet unborn* translated by Bishnupada Roy from Chaturtha Duniya publication in Kolkata.

that suffered utmost humiliation and social ignominy in the colonial and even postcolonial times. Chuni Kotal had to commit suicide due to circumstantial pressure. She was a postgraduate student of Anthropology at Vidyasagar University. Her tragic death was a crude reminder to the upper-caste torture of a tribal woman desperate and resilient to promote herself in the social hierarchy through the light of education. The poem is a poignant record of the genocide of the hapless Lodha tribe in Soro, Chakua and Baghjnapa villages of the Jhargram subdivision in Jangal Mahal (The Forest Kingdom) on 2nd July, 1982.

The barren field gets flooded in Lodhas' blood
Deafening shouts of blood-thirsty cutthroats
Some rushed inside forest in a mad zest for life
A rickety old man rolled down embankment;

The dark deed committed- an eerie hush fell
No voice of protest rent the air;
Lodhas hide inside the forest for life-
The braver seek help in BDO office.
Next day the police recover
Six mutilated bodies of hapless Lodhas.
Newspapers on 4th July term them DACOITS
Write the case diary- "Killed for raping...
A sixty-year-old woman"-
Isn't there justice for poor Lodhas in India?
Aren't they fit for justice on their homeland?

(Biswas and Pramanik, 2011, 111-112)

The narration of violence with a rare skill of restrained rhetoric is undoubtedly an achievement of this indigenous woman writer.

Another contemporary Dalit poet Kalyani Thakur has published two volumes of poetry, *Dharlei juddha sunischit* (Touch and be ready for a war) and *Je meyeti Andhar goney* (The girl who counts the Dark). Here, the poem *Jal achal meyeti* (The untouchable girl) from her first anthology will be discussed. In this very short poem, Kalyani writes about the lust that a man from the upper caste nurtures for an untouchable girl. The poem is one brilliant example of a fierce juxtaposition of subtlety and sarcasm. The untouchable girl is proud of her physical beauty and at the same time is aware of the lust she inspires in men. The third couplet and the three line stanza that follows have the precision of a sharp knife that can slice through all the hypocrisies of a caste-based society. The lines might be quoted here

In this case one can drink water
From the untouchable girl
Even being aware of the difference in caste
Hands move around in lust. In search of truth
The hands are firm. (Thakur, 2007, 21)

The hands search for truth. The religious connotation of the act of searching makes the hypocrisy all the more glaring. There is resentment and disgust in the poem but Kalyani has turned it into an arrogant disregard. The victims, from the days of *Charyapada* now wish to play the game in their own terms. Kalyani, in spite of revealing mastery over the art of understatement has managed to make a call for revolution. But, understanding Kalyani's art requires proper contextualization. Title of a poem or of any literary work is believed to be a signpost where key issues might be introduced. However, the title of Kalyani's poem is invested with such socio-cultural significance that demands proper contextualization on the part of the reader. It acts almost like the untouchable girl herself, teasing and provoking the reader to explore the specificity and cultural context to unravel an apparently inaccessible cultural curiosity.

II

A reader of contemporary Bengali Dalit poetry needs to be aware of the fact that Dalit reality in Bengal is somewhat different from that of the other parts of India. To understand this reality one needs to look back at the caste equation in pre-colonial Bengal. It was Nihar ranjan Ray who made the first systematic study of pre-colonial caste society of Bengal in his immensely erudite work *Bangalir Itihas* (History of the Bengalees⁴). According to him, religious and cultural practices of Brahmanism gained popularity only up to the west bank of river Ganga and consequently the rigours of caste system were not as strict in Bengal as they were in the heartland of Aryan civilization. The reason might be the late beginning of the process of Aryanisation and the simultaneous existence of an indigenous tribal culture that interacted with and diluted the *Varna* culture (Ray, 1992, 711-14). However, the caste situation changed quite perceptively in the eleventh-thirteenth century under the Sen-Burman hegemony when with active initiative on the part of the state especially that of King Ballala Sen, there was a clear formalization of the *Varna* social organization in Bengal. But, in the fifteenth century, the Bhakti movement initiated by Sri Chaitanya, once again got the strictures of caste regulation eased. The subversive role of the Bhakti movement is much discussed and Partha Chatterjee has explored the theoretical implications of this subversive role (Chatterjee, 1989, 186-94). In the history of caste relations in Bengal one finds not just a ritual differentiation but also a continuous process of fusion and fission. Hiteshranjan Sanyal refers to an equation of "cooperation and interdependence" between the castes but this appears, when seen from the below, from the view of the untouchables and the low-caste people as acts of subordination and compulsion, not of volition (Sanyal, 1981, 18-19). During the colonial days, the hegemonic process and the inner dynamics of caste society still persisted and quite successfully managed to absorb the tension from below. Partha Chatterjee's article, "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness" presents an instance where Balahadi sect among the Hadis of Nadia district defies the dominance of caste hierarchy

⁴ This book is now available in English translation as *History of the Bengali People: Ancient Period*, translated by John W. Wood .Calcutta: Orient Longman. 1994.

by advocating a unique theory of creation and cosmology in which a Hadi, an archetypal untouchable plays the role of supreme creator whereas a Brahmin is placed at the fringe (Chatterjee, 1989, 180-81). But, such insubordination appears to be too trivial to alter the system and the mental worlds of the subjugated remain hegemonized by the ideological structure of the dominant. It is in this time that an idea of *Bhadralok* (gentleman) modernity was formed in colonial Bengal but, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty, it scarcely touched the Dalits and low-caste people of the region (Chakrabarty, 2000, 11, 234). According to Rajat Ray such ideas of modernity were only imperfectly transmitted to the intermediate peasant castes and remained completely incomprehensible to the untouchables who remained at the fringe of the village community as well as of Bengali society (Ray, 2003). However, there were caste movements during this period that came from below and were results of convergence of various streams of consciousness, ambition of social up gradation as well as a desire to protest. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has referred to the Namasudras⁵ who during the later colonial period developed a protest movement of their own outside the domain of nationalistic politics. The movements were active till the 1930s and opposed Gandhian reformist remedy for untouchability. But, ultimately during the partition and transfer of power the Namasudra movements disintegrated and merged into the dominant political trajectories (Bandyopadhyay, 2004, 34). In reality, most of the scheduled caste movements of Bengal followed the same pattern showing similar fissiparous tendencies within the movements as well as the hegemonic dynamics of the dominant political stream. The situation has not changed much even after Independence. Monumental events like partition of the country, an incessant stream of refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan and the present-day Bangladesh have serious corroding effect on the severity of caste system of Bengal. Prolonged dominance of Leftist politics, might not have contributed much to the development of the low-caste people but it has certainly changed the face of resentment between upper caste and Dalits of the state. The caste reality in Bengal, being woven with issues like class, religion and nation has become a very complex equation where no theory of essential otherness of Dalit identity would help us in understanding the equation. In particular historical context, Dalits of Bengal have been made to identify themselves with sacred insignia of Hinduism and in other moments they have tried to fight or at least to subvert those very insignia of Hindu orthodoxy. "If the conflict was real, collaboration and co operation at different places were true as well" (Bandyopadhyay, 2004, 35). But it does not mean Dalits do not face discriminations in Bengal. In this regard, one has to admit that little beyond the articulate protest movements is known about the day -to-day realities of Dalit experience in Bengal, particularly during the relatively tranquil moments of history. Untouchability is still a practice that exists in thousands of villages in Bengal where there is always a *Namopara* (lower part of a village) at the outskirts, generally inhabited by lower caste people. This physical segregation indicates other separations as well. The play of desire and revulsion, a psychological framework which helped Frantz Fanon to explain Black and White relation, can equally be applied to the scenario in Bengal. But, the revulsion is almost always expressed in an oblique manner or is masked in some other social behavior. Consequently, the reactions on the part of the low-caste people do not generally reach to the degree of fiery explosion.

Manju Bala's poem *Ar Niche Nambo na* (I shall not lower myself anymore), quite successfully portrays the Dalit reality in the present day Bengal. The poem narrates the speech of an upper caste woman, who during a short ride in an auto rickshaw meets a good-looking girl and offers her to be her daughter-in-law. Then, during the conversation she comes to know that the girl belongs to a very low-caste. The reaction sums up all that a Dalit has to go through in Bengal.

Namasudra! Then it is impossible
I was a Brahmin girl
Now am the wife of a Kayastho man
And shall not lower myself anymore.⁵ (Bala, 2007, 13)

The subtlety of this dynamics of resentment calls for a mode of expression that has artistic finesse in it. It is true that sociologists and historiographers have often looked away from Dalit reality in Bengal as there is a general absence of overt conflict on issues of caste and untouchability. But contemporary Dalit poets of Bengal have successfully configured a poetics essential to express the everyday form of resistance to domination and exploitation that Dalits face in Bengal. Bengali Dalit poets have been careful to use the language of modern poetics to accommodate this subtle dynamics within a framework of aesthetic value. One cautionary note was uttered by one of the poets discussed. Achintya Biswas in a special issue of the journal *Adalbadal* (change) said, "Some Dalit writers think that one can compose Dalit poetry without knowing modern poetics. I do not find the notion acceptable. Dalit literature is far different from other literature... It is different and better. Otherwise it could not have been accepted by everyone." (Biswas, 1991, 50) The writer as well as the reader of Bangla Dalit poetry has to be aware of the subterranean nature of resentment and humiliation that form the core of Dalit experience here. When an Arjun Dangle or a Namdeo Dhasal writes poetry they need to be aggressive and bitter as they are giving expression to the anger and anguish raging the hearts of Dalits for thousands of years. The following lines from Dhasal's poem, *Their Eternal Pity* illustrate the point.

No pavilion put up in the sky for us.
Lords of wealth, they are, locking up light in those vaults
Of theirs
In this life, carried by a whore, not even the sidewalks are
Ours
Made so beggarly it is nausea to be human;
Cannot fill our shriveled gut even with dirt.
(Anand & Zelliott, 1992, 52)

⁵ Namasudra is one of the lower castes of Bengal whereas Kayostho is a caste that occupies a place immediately below the Brahmins but much above the Namasudras.

The explosive anger of the final line demands no restraint on the part of the poet and does not need any shrouding of aesthetic finesse as in the words of Limbale, uttered in a broader perspective: “Born from unrestrained anguish, this explosive rejection and piercing revolt is like a flood, with its aggressive character and an insolent, rebellious attitude” (Limbale, 2004, 31) But, Bengali Dalit poetry strives to occupy a space where contradictory feelings of anger, cooperation, frustration, toleration, resentment, pity all cohabit to create a complex web. The poets try to craft the rhetoric of restraint that allows them to accommodate this whole web of complex emotions within a framework of aesthetic value.

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