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**Voicing Dalit Identity in Surviving in My World Growing Up Dalit in Bengal**

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**Abstract**

Inspired by Dr B.R. Ambedkar and the American Black Panther movement against racism and civil rights in America, the Dalit Panther movement was founded by writer-poets J.V. Pawar and Namdev Dhasal in 1972 in Mumbai, Maharashtra. Later, this social movement turned into a literary movement aiming to protest and fight against the caste discrimination of the Dalits in India. Though it started and developed in the Marathi language, it gradually appeared in all the major languages of India, such as Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Odia and Bengali, in the form of autobiographical narratives. The English translation of these life narratives written in various Indian languages has increased their readership globally. The elite and the leftist upper caste people of West Bengal have presented an ideal image of the social life of West Bengal to the non-Bengali people across India and abroad. It has been introduced to the non-Bengali world as a land of progressive, educated, liberal and broad-minded people, but in reality, it is not. Bengal has made a significant contribution in voicing against patriarchy, education for women and gender discrimination. It has also been a home for many socio-political, educational, and economic reforms. However, it has always remained silent about the alienation and caste-based discrimination of the Dalits. The proposed paper- Voicing Dalit Identity in Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal, aims to expose the adversities of the Namashudra, a Dalit community and their struggles for self-respect and social equality in West Bengal before and after the partition of India in 1947.

**Keywords:** Childhood, Partition, Dalit Identity, Caste, Namashudra, Poverty, Alienation, Religion.

**About the Author**

Manohar Mauli Biswas was born into the Namashudra, a farming Dalit community, on 3rd October 1943 at Dakshin Matiargati village of Bagerhat District (now in

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Bangladesh) in undivided Bengal during the British regime in India. There is a history of his community in Bengal. His illiterate parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were all great agriculturists. He started his career as a teacher and finally retired as Assistant General Manager at Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited. He is a well-known bilingual (Bengali, English) writer, translator, poet, essayist, and one of the prominent voices of the Dalit literary movement in West Bengal. Biswas has been active in social activities and literary production for over three decades. Above all, he is an excellent source of inspiration for many modern and young Bengali Dalit writers. The author has been one of the founding members and revolutionary activists of Bengali Dalit Sahitya Santha (Bengali Dalit Literary Association) and served as its president from 2013 to 2015. He had been the founding editor of Dalit Mirror, a small magazine he started in 1997. He has also served as an editor of another Dalit literary journal, Chaturtha Duniya (The Fourth World), publishing Dalit writings since 1994. Being the first person from his generation in the Namashudra community, he topped the Indian School Certificate examination in 1961 and a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics in 1963 from the University of Calcutta. He has written a dozen books: "Four collections of poetry, a short story collection, and several collections of essays such as Dalit Sahityer Digboloy; Bhinnochokhe Prabandhamala; Yuktivadi Bharatbarsha: Ekti Aitihyer Sandhan; and Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha. In 2010, Shtobarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya was published. His latest collection of poetry is Bikshata Kaler Bansi (2013). His selected poems have been translated into English and published in two volumes: Poetic Rendering as Yet Unborn (2010) and The Wheel Will Turn (2014). He has taken part in national seminars in different parts of India and has held poetry readings" (Biswas, 89).

About the Autobiography: Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal is the first Dalit autobiographical narrative in Bengali. It has been translated into English by Angana Dutta, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Jaydeep Sarangi, Associate Professor of English, both of Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri College (Calcutta University) and published by Samya, an Imprint of Bhatkal and Sen, in Kolkata in 2015. Its original Bengali version – Amar Bhubane Ami Benche Thaki, was published by the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha in Kolkata in 2013. Initially, the author thought of naming his autobiography Prisnika. After that, he considered renaming it Life and Death of Prisnika, but finally, he agreed with the present title. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, in his Foreword to Biswas's autobiography, writes, "The autobiography written by the talented Dalit poet and essayist Manohar Mauli Biswas is one of the earliest in this genre and probably the first to be translated into English. Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi deserve our congratulations for bringing this insightful narrative to the notice of non-Bengali readers. Manohar Mauli Biswas has been a leading figure in the Dalit literary movement in West Bengal for almost fifty years now, and his autobiography is informed by a reflexive consciousness that is distinctively Dalit. Structurally, the

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book has two parts: the first part deals with his memory of childhood in his village in Khulna in the 1940s and the 1950s, and the second consists of a long interview with the author which brings out his life as a refugee and a Dalit literary activist in post-independence West Bengal. The autobiography thus bridges the temporal divide between the historical and the contemporary in the life of a man and his community. Not only for non-Bengali readers, this book will also provide a glimpse of the Dalit life experiences in Bengal; hopefully, it will also shake the Bengali bhadralok out of their persistent sense of denial about the existence of caste prejudices in their own community" (Foreword, xi-xiv).

### **A Review of Dalit Literature in Bengali**

West Bengal has been the home for many socio-cultural and literary movements started by non-Dalit intellectuals. It has voiced against many irrelevant and wrong practices, values and conventions. On the other hand, it is also a fact that it has witnessed the beginning and development of many socio-cultural and literary movements started by the educated Dalits. They have been producing an excellent amount of literature in Bengali. Most of their writings, including poetry, plays, short stories, novels, and autobiographies, have been translated into English and other Indian and foreign languages. Some of these writings have also been included in syllabi for higher education institutions in India and abroad. Unfortunately, all these things remained unknown to many ill-literate Bengali and non-Bengali readers for a long time due to an untruthful narrative of the non-existence of the caste system developed and propagated by the upper-caste Bengali intellectuals. Manohar Mauli Biswas's contribution to Bengali Dalit literature and social movements in Bengal is incomparable. He is a dedicated social activist and sincere reader of Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar's writings and speeches and his lifelong struggles for social equality and human rights in India. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, in his Foreword to Biswas's autobiography, *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal*, further writes, "Biswas writes from an ideological position that is directly influenced by Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar and informed by the Marathi and Kannada Dalit writings, as well by the radical Afro-American literature. In his view only those who are born in Dalit conditions can properly understand and appreciate Dalit aesthetics, because the lived experiences of the Dalits are so different from those of the upper-caste Hindus." (Foreword, xiii).

The credit for the origins and development of Dalit literature in Bengali goes to social reformer Harichand Biswas (1812-178) and his son Guruchand Biswas. Under their leadership, the socio-cultural and religious movements emerged in West Bengal. The former was the first and most prominent Dalit leader from the Namashudra community. He founded the Matua religion in 1912 and disseminated its principles among his community. The Matua religion emerged as one of the strongest Dalit movements in pre-colonial Bengal. Its purpose was to create social-cultural consciousness among Dalit communities, including Namashudra. It criticised

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the Brahminical hegemony and Dalit oppression and demanded social equality. Undoubtedly, Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar's enduring struggle for social justice in colonial and post-colonial India has proven to be a great source of inspiration for Dalit literature in Bengal. The Dalit Panther movement of Maharashtra, which later transformed into a literary movement, also inspired Dalit writings and played a significant role in the progress of Dalit literature in Bengal.

The Literary writings of the Dalits in Bengal are over many hundred years old. There is no common consensus among the various Dalit writers about the dates of the earliest publications of Dalit literary works in Bengal. "However, the writings of Bengali literature by Dalits, with the consciousness of making a contribution towards an organised literary movement, gained momentum only in the 1990s. Modelled after the Ambedkar-inspired Dalit Panther literary movement of Maharashtra, the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha (Bengali Dalit Literary Association) has been making significant contributions to the Dalit literary movement for the empowerment of Dalits in Bengal since its inception in 1992 by grooming Dalit writers, publishing Dalit literature, holding conferences, rallies, and promoting Dalit culture. The movement thrives with the continuous literary productions of its array of writers who portray the culture and condition of Dalit populations in Bengal and across India" (Introduction, xxv).

Raicharan Biswas (1878-1938) was a Dalit poet in Bengali. His poems significantly awakened the Dalits' socio-cultural consciousness and protested against upper-caste dominion in Bengal. Manoranjan Byapari (1965) is one of the leading Bengali Dalit writers, social activists and politicians in Bengal. He has authored over a dozen novels, numerous short stories and essays. His original Bengali autobiography, *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (2014) and the English translation *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of A Dalit* (2018) have given him wider recognition among readers and academia as one of the pioneering writers in the genre of Dalit literature in Bengal. *Chaturtha Duniya* (Fourth World) and *Dalit Mirror* were started by the Bengali Dalit Literary Association and edited by Manohar Mauli Biswas have been published since 1994 and 1997, respectively. The autobiographies of Manoranjan Sarkar, Jatin Bala, Gopal Hira and Jogabandhu Biswas also inspired the Dalit and literary movement in Bengal.

Voicing Dalit Identity in *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* Voicing Dalit identity means articulating, examining and analysing the various aspects of Dalit life inhabiting a particular geographical region or location. In this context, Dalit autobiography becomes the most appropriate agency for expressing Dalit identity. Dalit autobiography is not only an account of multiple phases of an individual's bygone days' sufferings and agonies but also represents the various ups and downs of his family and the whole community to which the author himself belongs. It creates a strong sense of connection and responsibility between the author and his whole community. The author becomes the voice of his community as a

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whole. His autobiography about the self and the community can inspire and uplift the Dalits of Bengal. By representing his community's everyday struggles for survival, caste oppression in the remote villages of Bengal, and his childhood and adulthood days, the author wants the mainstream readers to understand the history of his community in the proper context and right spirit. Therefore, there will be no exaggeration in saying that Dalit autobiography is a life narrative or life writing of the whole community rather than simply an individual narrative. While talking about the subjects or characters of *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal*, Manohar Mauli Biswas writes, "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. Just as my wife is unacquainted with this autobiography, so are my sons, my daughters-in-law, my grandchildren too. This autobiography is a document of growing up amidst deprivation. It is a document of almost losing in life, touching the margins and then again stepping back among humans" (Biswas, 78-79).

*Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* is not only an autobiographical narrative of Manohar Mauli Biswas as an individual and an author, but it is also a living document of the Namashudra community as a whole who had earlier been living in the Bagerhat District of East Pakistan before the partition in 1947. This autobiography becomes an important literary weapon for the author to express his silent miseries and revolutionise his community's young and educated minds to protest against the hierarchical social order which has been dividing and oppressing the Dalit on the grounds of their low caste identities for centuries. The leftist movement led by the high caste people for subverting the class system denied the presence of the caste system and caste-based differences and discrimination committed against Dalits by the non-Dalits in West Bengal. Biswas further writes more about his autobiography, "This world of mine is the Dalit's world of illiteracy, the Dalit's world of poverty, the world of keeping the Dalits powerless, the Dalit's world of sickness, the world of spending childhood in malnutrition, the world of being unwanted, the world of jealousy-violence-hatred-abuse, the world of the multitudes staying alive, gasping. There has not been satisfying change in the condition of those who were once trapped under the weary weights of untouchability, in spite of over sixty years lapsing after the independence of the country. I wrote this autobiography out of pain. This pain is of being belittled, of being unwanted, of being enslaved. May my people 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" (A Note by the Author, xix-xx).

Manohar Mauli Biswas's autobiography has a powerful message. The author wants to create socio-cultural and religious consciousness among the Dalit masses of Bengal. To fulfil this aim, he wants to promote quality higher education among all the Dalit communities of Bengal to reclaim their human rights and social

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equality. At the outset of his autobiography, the author makes the readers aware of his family's socio-economic deprivation during their habitation in East Bengal, where he spent his childhood and adulthood. His Baba (father) and (Thakurda) grandfather were penurious and illiterate farmers. However, they understood the importance of education and never wanted their children and grandchildren to be illiterate. They encouraged him and their other children to get a good education at any cost. Biswas writes, "Thatched rooms. Mud veranda. I often heard my baba say something which I really cherished. Seated in the courtyard, he would say in a rustic accent, 'The children must get educated'" (Biswas, 1).

Biswas understands that education is the only means of holistic societal change. Growing up, Biswas studied all the great social reformers, social and political thinkers, scholars and various movements led by them for the upliftment and transformation of the underprivileged from abroad and India, including Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule. Above all, he took his grandfather's advice to his father and his father's elder brother about the value of education and time very seriously. Biswas still remembers his grandfather's wisdom about education. The author further writes, "Thakurda was a man of the older generation. He would not interfere in the debates between my father and my jetha. He used to say neutrally, 'I am illiterate, you are illiterate. You want to make your children illiterate too? Go ahead. But rememabr this, times are changing, not like what they were like. I can see so much of transformation-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).

After the partition of Bengal into West Bengal and East Bengal, the people of the Namashudra community migrated to West Bengal. During the initial phase of their being refugees in their own country, they faced multiple difficulties for survival. They were forced to live in refugee camps located in different parts of India. In these camps, they were discriminated against and ill-treated because of their untouchable identity. After spending adequate time in different refugee camps, the Indian government provides them with some land for their permanent settlements. These settlements were not as per their expectations, and they were discriminated against based on their low caste identity.

The author writes, "The fact remains a fact. You know wherever a Hindu goes, he carries with him the identity of his caste. This caste identity is a kind of a good exchangeable pearl in a Hindu pocket. Anyone can make good use of it when needed. Yes, in the refugee camp the segregation of people that was on the basis of caste identity was a surprising one. People with the good caste pearls in their pockets received preferences in settlement in market areas, business centres, developed areas and posh localities; whereas those having bad caste pearls in their pockets were given settlements in hilly areas, barren lands, unproductive areas, marshes. And most of

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these people had been given allotment outside Bengal” (Biswas, 91). In India, caste is the only marker of identity. To be born as an upper caste means to have a privileged position in society, whereas being born as an untouchable or outcasted or a Dalit means to be dishonoured and to be a constant victim of socio-economic disparity. Suppose a Dalit in India wants to change his caste identity from low caste to high caste by adding a fake upper-caste surname or makes other efforts in this direction. In that case, it will never be possible for that person to change his low-caste identity. It is a hardcore reality, and nobody can deny it.

Biswas further writes, “From the base allotment centre that had been at that time at Bongaon the job had been done nicely. One lot of our family was sent to the Chanda refugee camp of Maharashtra, one lot was sent to Baharaich camp of Uttar Pradesh and a small unit, only a few in number, was given shelter in the female camp of Ashok Nagar (in North 24 Paraganas District, West Bengal). They were mostly widows with their minor children. From the hoary past there had been a tendency amongst our people to hide their ‘low-caste’ identity. Chandi Mandal was a man with limited learning at school level. He was a village school teacher. As soon as he came to know that higher-caste Hindus were being provided settlements permanently in business areas, he decided to change his surname in the migration certificate. He and his brother both used the surname ‘Mukherjee’ as the surname in place of ‘Mandal’. It did not help them in the base allotment camp in Bongaon in India. They both were also sent along with the other members of the same caste group” (Biswas, 91- 92). There have been long debates and discussions in Indian and international academia about the position and identity of the Dalits in the Brahmanical social order. Whatever the assumptions and conclusions of such debates and discussions are made, the ultimate truth is that the Dalits have never been accepted as a part of the Brahmanical or Hindu social order (Brahmins, Kshtriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras). They have consistently been recognised as outcasted and were forced to remain excluded from mainstream Indian society. So far, no history book written by the upper caste historian has secured even a page about their lived experiences. They are counted as Hindus only when elections happen in India. Their mere shadow can pollute the high-caste Hindus. They are accepted as untouchables even today. The author writes, “Sometimes or rather frequently, I felt there would remain a gap somewhere in accepting us genuinely as ‘Hindus’ and letting us develop on a par with the more advanced caste groups of the Hindus. We were only used in the head count for making Hindus the majority. Socially, economically, culturally and educationally, we were a massive heap of garbage at the bottom. Human communities are a matter of national resources. We remained a waste. The way this question disturbed me in my childhood still hurts in many forms” (Biswas, 56).

### Conclusion

The English translation of Manohar Mauli Biswas’s *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* has undoubtedly created a significant space in

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the existing corpus of Dalit literature in Bengal and Dalit autobiographical narratives in particular. It has revealed the Bengali upper caste people's false narrative of the non-existence of casteism and caste-based oppression of the Dalits in Bengal. The author firmly believes that Indian society is purely based on caste lines. Hence, talking about economic equality without abolishing social inequality would be meaningless. After getting a central government job, the author gets posted in Kolkata now and Calcutta then and moves to a rented house with his mother and younger sister. One day, just after his office hours, he suddenly meets an unmarried upper-caste girl working as a school teacher, who had once been his fellow trainee at an institution during his postgraduate course. She develops a desire to visit his house, and he agrees. After meeting his mother and sister, she becomes overjoyed. After that, she wants him to meet her family over lunch. She accepts his family, but now she wants her mother to accept him, so she invites him to her house for lunch on a holiday.

The author further writes, "Ruchita's mother was a university professor. Her mama was a doctor. While eating lunch around the same table we had chatted heartily. At some point Ruchita's mother said, 'Your mother is very straightforward and simple, your sister is very nice. Ruchita praised your mother and said she thought very highly of your sister. She really likes them.' Ruchita's mother then continued with a smile on her face, 'A big "but" has defeated us - our minds and hearts have not been able to overcome it. It is our fault, not yours - the fault of all high-caste people. 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 Ruchita. The words with which Ruchita's mother had bade farewell remained alive as a deep wound and time could not heal it'" (Biswas, 85).

The message is very clear from the above-mentioned quotation- the impossibility of having social equality among the high-caste and low-caste people. Through this autobiographical narrative, the author wants to promote readers' awareness about the fact that caste is deeply rooted in the Indian psyche. Because of this caste system, one caste is considered superior, and the other is accepted as inferior. The upper caste people have more honour in society, even if they are illiterate and poor, whereas the Dalits are constantly humiliated and discriminated despite their being well-educated and economically empowered. The author is hopeless whether the non-Dalit readers will accept his autobiography respectfully. Because it is a narrative of his lived experiences as a Dalit in Bengal. The Indian caste system is older and worse than American Negro slavery. As long as the caste system exists in India, the caste discrimination against the Dalits by the high caste will continue; without the annihilation of caste, it will be impossible to have socio-economic equality and unity among the Indian masses.



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