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On the Margins of History: An Autoethnographic Study of Manohar Mouli Biswas's *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal*

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Abstract:

Manohar Mouli Biswas's autobiography, *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal*, is the restoration of vital truths that have been hidden for too long. It shows that the Dalit lived reality of Bengal is different than other parts of the country. His life narrative acts as an autoethnography and testimony of the Bengali Namasudra community. It portrays a world that is quite different from the elite Bhadraklok society. The autobiography characterizes authentic kaleidoscopic events, from framing the days of Biswas's childhood in the poverty-stricken Namasudra community to the struggling years as a Dalit refugee in post-colonial West Bengal. Biswas reiterates the disparities that exist in this society and urges the marginalized people to voice against the injustices that were meted out against them. His works contain serious research possibilities, as one can investigate the link between Dalit aestheticism and subaltern historiography in the genre of postcolonial Dalit literature.

Keywords: Dalit Refugee, Bengal, Autoethnography, Subaltern, Historiography.

Manohar Mouli Biswas was born in 1943 in a Namasudra peasant family in a remote poverty-stricken village called Matiargati in the district of Khulna in pre-partition colonial East Bengal. As the title of the autobiography, *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal*, suggests, Biswas provides the readers with a rare insight into the Namasudra community of East Bengal. He holds a mirror to the world which is quite different from Bhadraklok's world—a world that is deprived and devoid of basic human facilities; a world where the people suffer from utter poverty, illiteracy, and discrimination. From his autobiography, we come to know that colonial modernity like railways and healthcare centers have never reached his village. Their world forms the 'Fourth World' within the third world. The autobiography implicitly explores the mechanism of Bhadraklok oppression that prevented the Bengali Dalits from

asserting their unique identity, thus exposing the politics of recognition. Biswas provides an alternative history of the marginalization of Bengal in the counter-culture Dalit discourse. He tells the story of an isolated, divided world. Biswas tries to survive against all the odds, 'My world is in great pain, one of being pitied by other' (Biswas, 2015, p. xviii). His life narrative gives a rare glimpse into their diurnal lives. Biswas's autobiography delineates the destitute Namasudra community of East Bengal, where they lived in a distant village enduring extreme poverty, caste discrimination, and exclusion. They were always at the wrong ends of unequal power equations as they were displaced by the Partition. Despite this, they never lacked agency as they fought against marginalization, enjoyed the simple pleasures of their lives, celebrated their religion and culture, and tried their best to shape their future for the better.

Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal (2015) is the English translation of the Bengali version of Manohar Mouli Biswas's autobiography *Amar Bhubane Ami Benche Thaki* (2013). The book can be divided into two parts: the first part is the autobiography which narrates the struggle of being born as a Dalit in an impoverished Namasudra community. He talks about the sufferings of his own life as well as the sufferings of his poor community. Biswas, in general, identifies himself within the community as he boldly declares: 'This autobiography is my autobiography, my father's autobiography, my grandfather's autobiography, my great grandfather's autobiography. This is the autobiography of remembering the bygone memories of my community' (Biswas, 2015, p. 78). The autobiography characterizes an authentic kaleidoscope event framing from the early days of Biswas's childhood in the poor Namasudra community to the struggling years as a Dalit refugee in postcolonial Bengal. It is one of the striking autobiographies that serves as an autoethnography of the Namasudra community of East Bengal. Biswas's autobiography is an account of growing up amidst destitution. It is about surviving against all odds, living on the margins of society, and fighting for mere existence. His life narrative acts as an autoethnographic account where he represents the self and his community by deconstructing the hegemonic cultural order which separates them from the other. As George Yudice observes in *Testimonio and Postmodernism* that generally in autobiography, the author writes about his own experiences as an agent of collective memory, identity, and experience. Here Biswas's autobiography also acts as a memoir and testimony narrative that possesses an aesthetic marker that is at once individualistic and collective in nature. Janardan Waghmare observes that Biswas's autobiography not only represents the journey of his individual voice, Dalit consciousness, and emotions, but also a social and Dalit community-based chorus of all the

voices. Sharmila Rege labels such Dalit narrative as ‘testimonio’ and observes that, ‘[they] forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the “official forgetting” of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance’ (Rege, 2006, p.13). Biswas's autobiography must be analyzed as a testimonio that documents the struggles of the Dalits and the various strategies adopted by the Namasudra community to survive. It is the reconstruction of the Dalit self and it links the individual with the community. The autobiography enables Biswas to share his personal trauma where his personal narrative becomes accurate historical documentation of the socio-culture of the East Bengali Namasudra community. Biswas flawlessly moves from the individual 'I' narrative to the collective 'we' narrative to depict the communal chronicle of the oppression. The autobiography hence is at once personal and communal in nature. His testimonio consists of pedagogy and cultural trauma. Biswas's written testimony consists of an alternative aesthetic dimension which acts as a perfect literary strategy to portray the collective trauma. Thus, it is an autobiography of his whole Dalit community. It explores the socio-economic structure of a cluster of East Bengali Namasudras in the pre-Partition days, where Biswas had grown up. Biswas first had the intention to name his self-narrative ‘Life and Death of *Prisnika*’ (water hyacinth) but he made the conscious decision to change it because it hurts him to identify with *Prisnika* (water hyacinth)- something that is unwanted and has a non-existent life. He thus reiterates his identity as a dignified Dalit man. The new title points towards his self-acknowledgment of his Dalit consciousness and celebration of his self-assertion and a sense of pride and glory as Manohar Mouli Biswas concludes: ‘It is a satisfaction of being able to establish myself as a human being. That I’m being able to think of myself as a human, that is the pleasure’ (Biswas, 2015, p. xix).

The second part consists of a detailed interview with the author and the translators. The interview is supplemented along with the autobiography for closing the gap between Biswas’s early days of struggle in pre-Partition East Bengal and the later unrecorded manhood days as an established Dalit intellectual figure and an activist. Biswas is associated with the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha. Thus, his self-narrative is endowed with inherent aesthetics and truth. The autobiography has been translated from chaste literary Bangla to English by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi. The conversations among the Namasudra community within the autobiography are in Khulna or colloquial East Bengali Dialect. As a result, it becomes an arduous job for the translators to find the exact meanings. Their typical East Bengali dialect is also an epitome of their Dalithood and an ascribed marker of their subalternity. Their bristly, harsh language emanates from a life of utter poverty and illiteracy. One of the difficulties of

most translations is to recreate the unfamiliar world, the culture, the sceneries, the festivals, the soundscapes, emotions, and the dialect of a typical East Bengali Namasudra community for an English-speaking audience. To overcome these challenges, a glossary, 'A Note on the Bengali Calendar', and 'Kinship Terms' have been provided by the translators to help the readers experience an authentic Bengali essence. Even though their dialect is quite distinct from the lexicon of the Bengali Bhadrakok intellectuals but still the translators have done exemplary work by retaining the Dalit essence and the linguistic meaning to the utmost without distorting the actual meaning of the words.

Pramod K. Nayar observes the Dalit autobiography's 'traumatic realism' centers around the Dalit body as the foremost site of marginalization. Biswas employs traumatic realism to convey the suffering, pain, and protest of the entire Namasudra community. His writing links the individual body's suffering with collective trauma. The body of the Dalits acts as the site of appropriation where the 'caste attaches to the body, not to the soul' (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 43). Here the social body of the community becomes the actual site of marginalization through social suffering. He links the personal suffering (body) with the wounds of the social body (the Namasudras). Here caste discrimination becomes an attack on the social body. The traumatic realism of his life narrative focuses more on internal trauma than physical trauma where the psyche of the Namasudras is scarred. The trauma is internalized where it mauls the mentality of the Dalits. Biswas links the individual trauma with the collective trauma of the Namasudra community. His narration moves swiftly as he links the singular with the communal to expose the stigmatization of the caste system by the Bhadrakoks. His autobiography becomes a social documentary where he exposes the shared trauma and physical labour to convey to the audience that trauma is not always visible and represented in the mainstream. His experiences almost act as a metonym for cultural and social trauma experienced by his family over generations and his Dalit community as a whole. Thus, his autobiography can be analyzed as a witness within the dynamics of human rights discourses and abomination inquiries.

The Fourth World

Biswas often calls his world a 'Fourth World' within the Third World. Biswas vividly narrates the pain of carrying the burden of the negative identity upon his own life along with the lives of the other Namasudra families in his autobiography. He tries to link the socio-economic conditions of the Namasudra community with caste identity. 'The notion of the Third World no longer exists, but at the back of the Third World an untouchable Fourth World

exists...Nothing was known about them. Dalit literature will give news of that unknown world' (Biswas, 2015, p. 29). Here he exposes the different layers of exploitation and exclusion in the Bengali society where they are considered the 'leftovers' of the society. There is no definite end to their agony and deprivation. But despite enduring all kinds of sufferings, they were still happy to exist and survive in their own world. They were happy to indulge in the simple pleasures that life provided them with. There was no dearth of love, kindness, and attachment in their community. This was the intrinsic way of their lives. He was doubly marginalized as a 'Dalit' and a 'refugee'. Here Biswas tries to dismantle the negative stigmatized image of the Dalit life. He criticizes social exploitation, oppression, and satirizes the dominant social forces that camouflage the heterogeneity of experiences of the muted subaltern subjects. The very concept of the spatial context of third world Dalits and their inability to speak for themselves is rejected by him because he refuses to conform to the conventional notion that the subaltern cannot speak and urges them to enunciate the pains in their life and break free from the fetters of discrimination. This is also evident in his other work entitled *The Wheels Will Turn* which shows that justice and equality have started to unfold and reveals Biswas's desire to stop the wheel of injustice that had been smashing the Dalits for years. The notion of equality between the Bhadrалoks and the Chotoloks will remain an illusion unless the Dalit consciousness and their culture are brought forward in the public discourse to expose the marginalization that was meted against them. He finds himself within the community and he is bonded by blood forever as they shared similar living, thoughts, religion, and customs.

Biswas recalls how the Bhadrалoks looked down upon his Namasudra community for eating pork and how they scornfully insulted and degraded them by calling 'pork-eating namas': 'YOU ARE ALL pork-eating namas! Well, it was true. Truth is highly valued across the ages. But some truths are never pleasing, never treasured. These are disturbing truths! Pork was a favourite food of the community I was born in. What was there in the food habit to break one's head over?' (Biswas, 2015, p. 9). This angered the Namasudra community because the upper castes Bhadrалoks negated their cultural identity and their traditional food habits. The episode reveals the demeaning position of Dalits in society. This also concedes the rigid caste hierarchies that have relegated Bengali Dalits to a sub-human level. The food acts as identification of social status and caste. It reflects the various aspects of his Namasudra community. The existence of the presumed food culture signifies the economic stature of the East Bengali Dalits. Here the 'pork-eating' episode helps us to understand the hegemonic power relation between the Bhadrалoks and the Chotoloks which arises out of the difference between

them. It becomes a metaphor for social hierarchy. Pork is specific to the Namasudra community. The cooking of the pork is not only to satiate hunger, but it forms an important marker for the construction of the Namasudra identity. The Bhadrals associates pork with impurity/dirty and segregates the Namasudra based on their food habits. The notion of purity and impurity is deeply ingrained in the psyche of the Bhadrals community. It acts as a signifier of the distinction between the two communities. But Biswas subverts the tinge of contempt and the imposed food aesthetic into an idiom of his Namasudra community gathering and celebration of their cultural identity. He also destabilizes the concept of a specific food aesthetic as the normative world. Here the eating ceremony becomes a social weapon that blatantly distinguishes the Chotols from the Bhadrals. Biswas ascribes the ceremony with feelings of liberty and freedom. He revolutionized the episode by portraying the ceremony evocatively which otherwise goes unnoticed by others. It is a part of Biswas's self-assertion of his Dalit identity by depicting the 'pork-eating' episode so vividly.

Biswas's community was deeply rooted in superstitions and blind beliefs. Biswas portrayed the economic crisis very vividly. In the tough times, they even had to starve and go to sleep empty-stomach. They barely could manage to feed their families two meals a day. The colonial modernity like medical centers, proper doctors, and medicines have not seen the face of this village. Unfortunately, Biswas's father passed away due to Cholera at the young age of forty-eight without any proper medication. Biswas considered the children of their community as the 'children of immortality' as they always salvaged in the toughest situation, fighting with nature and deprivation. Their lives were a labyrinth of tears and joys. His village often became a victim of natural calamities. Famine and blood were both inevitable during that time. Nature here acted both as a refuge and a curse for the poverty-stricken Namasudra community. The poor villagers had to endure hardships the most as the famine was inevitable in those years and which destroyed their rice plants. As a result, they would have no food and work in the household and the children cried out of starvation. Just like water hyacinth, they had to fight for their lives and survive against all odds: 'It was living like a *prisnika*- a water hyacinth-living on the verge of death and dying on the verge of life... I was born into such a community and that is how I grew up in my deprived childhood.... the same happened in the case of our children' (Biswas, 2015, p. 55).

They were considered society's 'Other'. They were discriminated against mentally and one public gaze was enough to remind them that they were different from the others and they belong on the periphery of society. The Namasudras were the unwanted beings who were socio-

economically, culturally, and educationally at the margins. In spite of the marginalization, they were engrossed in their world. Just like the Bhadrals did not step inside their world, they did not step outside their world. Despite all the hardships, Biswas in his childhood took refuge in small and simple pleasures of life like watching the train. He knew luxury was something that their family could not afford. In spite of his craving for curd-cheese sweets, it was considered an item that was expensive. Sweets are often culturally considered the delicacy of the rich Bhadrals. Sweets are associated with the 'delicacy of luxury' and not the 'delicacy of necessity'. Here sweets become the symbolism of wealth and power. The juxtaposition of the food items shows the social hierarchy. Even at such tender age, he realized the complexities of life when he told his Baba that he will eat 'mishti' (sweets) only when he is established and educated (Biswas, 2015, p. 60). The name of the autobiography is apt because it portrays a world that is quite different from the elite Bhadrals community:

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... 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- hatred- abuse, the world of the multitudes staying alive, gasping. (Biswas, 2015, p. xviii-xix)

He portrayed how difficult it was to survive in an illiterate peasant Namasudra community where the people were considered the 'leftovers' of the Bengali society. Biswas chose to write his autobiography out of pain. He depicted how he was a victim of neglect and despite all the odds against him, he still remained alive amidst the hope that the subalternity continuum will end someday. He wrote his autobiography out of the pain of being unwanted, exploited, and discriminated against. Biswas wishes his people will come out of this misery. He remains alive amidst this hope.

Deconstruction of the Religion

The practice of 'untouchability' and segregation was still rampant in his village. They were perpetually doomed with the stigmatization of pollution. Even they could not dine with other castes. The social division between all the castes was very prominent. When the priest visited someone's house from his community, a special arrangement would have been made

for him so that he can cook his own food. The women would smear one end of the veranda with cow dung which symbolized purity and acted as a disinfectant. The traditional notion of purity/pollution was again maintained. Even the brahmin priests refused to come to the Namasudra community's Durga Puja because if they were seen to be performing the Puja of the 'untouchable' pork-eating community, their status in the society would be degraded. The autobiography slowly exposes itself that caste stemmed from a despicable act of miscegenation. The Bengali Dalits are endowed with a negative identity and they still are enslaved with the stigma of untouchability. His narrative is quintessentially part of the literature of the resistance and 'dignity discourse' where he revolts against the oppressive traditional shackles. The jarring reality of discrimination that was prevalent in the Bengali society was disclosed by him. Biswas exposes that not all brahmin priests agreed to perform puja in their low-caste community. There were separate brahmin priests who performed 47 rituals in their houses. They did not even get respect in Bhadraklok society as they were the only brahmin priests that came to the Namasudra community. They were abhorred just like the Dalits and even called '*bauns* of the *Charals*' (the Brahmin priests of the Chandals). The Namasudra community was heavily influenced by the reformist religion movement known as 'Matua Dharma'. Harichand and Guruchand Thakur were considered as their gods who had the power to cure all their problems. Biswas's mother was a follower of the Matua religion. Whenever the children would get sick, his mother would pray to 'Hari-Guru' to cure them by running the flowing end of her sari over the children's bodies. Biswas confesses that the immense prayers would miraculously cure them. This shows that without proper healthcare centers and medicines, the community's only hope was their faith in Harichand and Guruchand Thakur.

He believes in setting up a cultural equilibrium through the *Ravanaization* of the Ramayana and *Karnaization* of the Mahabharata. When we go into a macro-level analysis of his Dalit narratives, we find that he often condemns celebrated mythological characters and validates characters that are traditionally looked down upon or who remained unvoiced. Generally, Dalit writers often find aesthetic beauty through the *Ravanaization* and the *Karnaization* of the epics. Dalit writers construct new alternative myths instead of the existing traditional myths of Hinduism. They deconstruct the conventional religious metaphors and symbols, shaping them with new deeper meanings and purpose. Biswas here deconstructs the mythological character of *Mahisasur* as he found resemblance with the people of his community. Raj Kumar advances in *Dalit Literature and Criticism*:

Upper-caste Indian literature is full of myths depicting Dalits as the ‘evil’ counterparts of ‘good’ upper-caste people... Dalit writers, therefore, strongly condemn these myths and have attempted to create new myths and have attempted to create new myths to counterattack these non-Dalit writings...(they) believe that such a deconstruction of Indian upper-caste myths is necessary because mythical values have larger implications for prevalent belief systems. (Kumar, 2019, p. 81)

Biswas uses the common narrative technique used by the other Dalit writers when he subverts and brings forth the hidden dimension of the reality of caste which is inherent within such mythical figures. By subverting the myth and acknowledging the perspective of the mythical figure of *Mahisasur*, Biswas successfully illustrates the continuity of Dalit experience through myths and history and even sketches the subalternity continuum flawlessly. He even gives voice to the ‘other’ characters who are generally condemned by the elite when he reconstructs the characters of *Hidimba* and *Ghatotkach* from the Mahabharata epic in his poem *Ghotokach and Hidimba: A Dialogue*. In this way, he revolts against the fascist characters of the epics. His works are an artistic restoration of hidden truths and these reconstructions are often done by recording the mythical episodes of the ignored characters. Biswas’s narration is an attempt to portray the unfiltered lives of Bengali Dalits by disrupting the established conventional aestheticism to expose the stigma related to caste and identity politics. He delineates that the Bengali Dalit culture and experience is distinct and unique in nature and which has continued for a long time hence it is not constricted only to the diurnal reality of the Bhadrалоks. Biswas criticized traditional Bengali religious festivals like Durga Puja in which Goddess killed a dark-skinned naked man. As a child, Biswas could not understand why Goddess Durga killed a dark-skinned naked man by ripping his chest with her Trishul. He felt pity for that man. He sympathized with that dark-skinned *Mahisasur* and the people of his Namasudra community. He introduces to the readers the very contrasting fourth world in which he survives. Biswas, as a child, got distracted while watching the dark-skinned naked man who was cruelly killed by Mother Durga by ripping his chest with her three-pronged Trishul. Biswas could not find any difference between that dark-skinned naked man and the people of his community who danced with a stick in one hand and a chopper in the other. He could never agree with those people who explained to him that the dark-skinned man traditionally depicted an evil force of their land (Biswas, 2015, p. 70). All his recent narratives contribute to the counter-culture Bengali Dalit movement that aims to deconstruct the traditional caste-based oppressions that the Dalits had to endure by representing their lived reality, marginalization, silenced history, sufferings,

and making the popular discourse aware of their religion, socio-economic conditions, culture, and their new emancipated souls.

On the Periphery of History

The autobiography deals with the earlier days of his life and also vividly describes the aftermath of the Partition and its impact on the Namasudra community. Biswas describes how caste became an important factor in the selection process of rehabilitation. Dalit refugees, who were mainly from an agricultural background, were forced to migrate and were ultimately displaced to various uninhabitable places like Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh, and Orissa. Biswas acknowledged that the segregation of the people in the refugee camp was based on their caste identity. He explained how people with the 'good caste pearls' in their pockets got rehabilitated in the developed and posh areas while people with the 'bad caste pearls' in their pockets got rehabilitated in the barren uninhabitable places especially outside of Bengal (Biswas, 2015, p. 91). Manohar Mouli Biswas offers resistance through language. Here the language has the power to challenge oppression and subjugation. He shares the basic revolutionary ideals of Dalit literature but the expression of anger is well balanced to achieve a truly aesthetic quality. The late beginning of the Aryanization process in Bengal along with the existence of indigenous tribal culture, the Bhakti movement which was initiated by Sri Chaitanya in the 15th century, and the prolonged dominance of leftist politics are some of the reasons behind the intricate pattern of the caste equation in Bengal. Therefore, Biswas tries to mark a space whose contradictory feelings of anger and tolerance, bitterness, and agony intermingle to create a complex web. He laments the failure of Marxist liberals to uplift the Dalits: 'In my student days, I was tremendously attracted to Marxism. It is our misfortune that the Marxists have failed to work on non-caste lines. Just as they had failed in the past, they are failing even now' (Biswas, 2015, p. 79). He just wants a life of dignity and respect for his Namasudra community where his people will be able to come out of the derogatory situation. The burden of the refugee life is very prominent in his autobiography as his life narrative is not a traditional one. It is a testimony of a deprived Namasudra child surviving defying all odds, the agony of a rootless refugee struggling in post-partitioned West Bengal where atrocity comes at a regular interval.

In his autobiography, Biswas used T.S. Eliot's theory of 'Objective Correlative'. The author hopes to evoke the same kind of emotions in the readers that he is trying to convey through his images. As T.S. Eliot remarks: 'The only way of expressing emotion in the form of

art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’, in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked’ (Eliot, 1921, p. 7). The objective correlative employed by Biswas proved to be a highly effective literary technique as it captures the emotional state of the author perfectly. It helps to evoke the sensory experience and emotions of the readers. He inspires readers to discover deeper meanings even in objects that seem mundane or unpleasant. Biswas speaks of the agony and privations of his Namasudra community. Biswas compares the anguish and hopelessness of being a refugee with objects like ‘hanging pendulum’. He emphasizes the helpless feelings of the refugees as they literally hang on for their lives and go to and forth from one place to another in search of their ‘home’. The painful oscillating journey from West Bengal to Uttar Pradesh, then Maharashtra, and then again to West Bengal reminds him of a ‘pendulum’ and his status of a ‘vagabond refugee’ in India. Biswas like an oscillating ‘pendulum’ took refuge in the Baharaich camp in Uttar Pradesh and Chandapura camp in Maharashtra where his other relatives were also rehabilitated. As a ‘vagabond refugee’ he had no money, no food, no permanent shelter to his name. Biswas again compares the forced migration and the various displacement of the Namasudra refugee with ‘water hyacinth’. Like the ‘water hyacinth’, they have no roots, no stable habitat, and always have to move along with the waves of time. As Biswas observes: ‘...I felt that we were living like a water hyacinth plant on this earth. Sometimes steady and unmoving in stagnant water, at other times playing about in flowing water in someone else’s rhythm’ (Biswas, 2015, p. 71). The harsh reality of the Dalit life and the eternal pain of being born into a penurious Dalit family is echoed constantly when he compares the history of life and death with the water hyacinth. Just like it, he grew up being uncared for as he was born in such a deprived community. Like the differentiation between the elite Bhadrlok community and the Namasudra community, Biswas notices the segregation among the fishes. He even notices the ‘aristocratic lineage’ of the big fishes like *rui*, *katla*, *mrigel*, and *bowel*. He compares himself with the non-aristocratic fishes like *chuno*, *puti*, *koi*, and *magur* who are just happy to be alive. He observed ‘a shadow of the aristocracy’ where the big fishes did not meddle with the small fishes. He juxtaposes this same distinct feature between his community and the elite Bhadrlok community. Biswas, while fishing, would secretly notice the different activities of the ‘aristocratic lineage’ of fish under the clear waters of the water hyacinth. Even the big fish maintains ‘aristocratic lineage’ and social hierarchy and tries to stay apart from the others. This scenario is very parallel to the hegemonic hierarchy of Bengali society. Biswas delineates how he saw the *chuno*, *puti*, *koi*, *magur* fishes were joyful

just to be alive. Their presence beside the 'aristocratic lineage' of fishes was completely mismatched and unwanted. He found overwhelming similarities between those non-aristocrats and the people of his Namasudra community (Biswas, 2015, p. 72).

Dalit Struggle for Education

Education empowers the Dalits to move upward socially. It expands the possibility for Dalits to secure employment to escape poverty and marginalization. Biswas's father always believed that education is one of the ways for the social upliftment of the Dalits, as his father would reiterate that the children should be educated. Even though his family has struggled with poverty, starvation, and discrimination his *Thaurbhai* (paternal grandfather) always hoped that education is the way to upward social mobility and respect. His face would radiate with hope when Biswas reassured him that he will indeed get educated. Even though his father was ardent that education could bring a new phase in their destitute lives as there would be a better ascendancy in the hereditary occupation. But his *Jetha* (uncle) firmly believed that even education cannot help the Dalits escape from the eternal curse of subalternity as *Jetha* (uncle) ardently believed that even after being literate he could not escape from the stigmatization of caste and hostility that an illiterate family had to endure. His *Jetha* (uncle) was apprehensive whether the Bhadrals would allow the same privileges to a Chotolok. He, thus, believed the Dalits were eternally cursed and will always remain socially inferior to the upper elite castes. The pain of being a rootless refugee build on to the anguish of living like a Dalit in Bengal. In search of safety and shelter, Biswas starts another odyssey when he comes to West Bengal to get established and educated. Biswas got a scholarship for scoring the highest marks in ISC exam at P.C. College of Bagerhat in East Bengal. His name was put up on the college notice board to collect the money by producing a proper identification letter but unfortunately, he could not avail of it because he became an outsider in this new land due to his newly imposed negative identity of a 'Dalit refugee'. Biswas's work transfers the theme of estrangement, protest, resistance, uprootedness, and a longing for human respect in the casteist Bengali society. His narrative aesthetic lies in the explosive rejection and sharp revolt that gets amalgamated with his unrestrained anguish. He became rootless and his own homeland became alien to him.

The Politics of Marriage

People with higher power and authority-maintained caste segregation by monitoring individuals' activity and behaviour and punishing them accordingly if they found someone

flouting caste codes and challenging the hierarchical authority. Gorringe and Rafanell postulate that caste-based emotions are always embodied and conjure feelings of repulsion and hatred that constitute socially hierarchical identities that inhibit social advantages (Gorringe, 2007, p. 108). By employing Foucault's concept of 'docile bodies', it can be proved that continuous power mechanisms decide what the Dalits should do. It is not that Dalits lack agency but they are situated and constituted in and through power relations. There are numerous Dalit narratives where relationships could not extend to the private sphere of marriage. Manohar Mouli Biswas's courtship could not develop into marriage because he is a Dalit. The continuity of endogamy is again practiced by society. Endogamy is one of the stable characteristics of the caste system in India. To maintain caste purity and social hierarchy Dalits are often prohibited to marry someone from outside their community. Even though the Bengali Bhadrlok society maintains that they are liberal and forward in nature but in reality, the truth is quite the opposite. Endogamy is hence critical to caste and plays an important part in the reproduction of subalternity. Any transgression from it is considered taboo and abnormal. Marriages between Bhadrloks and Chotoloks are opposed in this society. The stringent control over the issue of marriage is done to preserve caste purity within the traditional ideology of sexual purity and impurity. It shows the politics of marriage in the private domain of love. Here the Bhadrloks have the power to cohabit with anyone. But a Dalit is not considered an eligible partner for a Bhadrlok woman. As John Broomfield observes the Bhadrloks are liberal as long as their own privileges remain untouched. This is outrightly true in the case of Biswas as it is understood that he could not continue his courtship nor could marry Rushita even though he was highly qualified just because he was a Namasudra. There was both a caste and class difference between them as Rushita belonged to the elite Bhadrlok society whereas Biswas belonged to a poor Namasudra family. In the veil of a progressive mind, the Bhadrlok intellectuals cannot overcome the caste prejudices as they still practice endogamy and their judgments are clouded because of casteism: 'Rushita's mother then continues 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' (Biswas, 2015, p. 85). As Gorringe and Rafanell observe that such marriages are met with disapproval because of the religious emphasis on blood and semen as the embodiment of the carrier of caste. Hence, the caste is deeply rooted in intricate, and everlasting social conditioning processes. They belonged to two entirely different worlds and hence it is impossible to fuse their worlds into one. Even though, if they try to do so the so-called progressive society won't let them. Thus, the body of the Dalit acts as the site of appropriation:

Caste attaches to the body, not to the soul. It is the biological reproduction of the human species through procreation within endogamous caste groups which ensures the permanence of ascribed marks of caste purity or pollution...The essence of caste, we may then say, requires that the labouring bodies of the impure castes be reproduced in order that they can be subordinated to the need to maintain the bodies of the pure castes in their state of purity. All the injunctions of dharma must work to this end. (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 43-44)

Biswas concludes the autobiography with a reminder of the harsh reality that caste discrimination is still persistent in West Bengal where certain castes are often considered 'high' and the other castes are considered 'low'. Despite being more qualified than Rushita, Biswas failed to become an equal of her. Her mother's words scarred him forever that even time would not be able to heal it.

Caste Continuum and Acculturation

Biswas while celebrating his Dalit identity and Dalit consciousness, acknowledges that he had gone through a sense of 'acculturation' and he somewhat cursed to 'Sanskritization'. By getting educated, Biswas had climbed the social ladder and adapted 'the Bhadrakalok culture'. He no longer remains '*bastuhaara*' (homeless) and the unwanted *prishnika* (water hyacinth). He strongly believes that his urban-bred family won't understand the struggle, the traumatic humiliation, and the marginalization that Biswas and his Namasudra community had to endure. Biswas's wife, sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren are unacquainted with his autobiography because they do not have the humiliating experiences of the lower caste community's discord with discrimination and poverty (Biswas, 2015, p. 78-79). But he is still proud of his Namasudra identity and his autobiography acts as self-assertion and celebration of his Dalit consciousness. It acts as a medium to reject the previously imposed negative identities and create an expression of Dalit liberation. Biswas was drenched in utter agony while narrating the stories of his harsh childhood as he aches with agony under the painful weight of his memory. Dwelling in the past suffocates him and whatever memories he lets out from the cage of yesteryears, Biswas narrates it to the audience. And sometimes the wound is so deep in his psyche that he cannot bring himself to narrate all the phrases of his struggling time. He confesses that he is a lonesome traveller on a difficult path where certain harsh memories remain hidden forever. Biswas's autobiography is the reconstruction of vital truths that have been hidden for too long. It shows that the Dalits lived reality of Bengal is quite

different than other parts of the country and questions the quintessential representation of the Bhadraklok society. Biswas conveyed the continuity of Dalit lived experiences through history which is unique in nature and existed long before the time and is not restricted to the diurnal reality of the present existence. The autobiography reveals Biswas's desire to stop the wheels of injustice that has been meted out against the Dalits of Bengal. The narration of Manohar Mouli Biswas operates along with the issues of Dalit resistance, and identity politics with a spirit of protest. His autobiography can be classified as a 'protest narrative' as he follows an alternative theory of aesthetics as posited by Sharankumar Limbale which amalgamates Dalit experiences and linguistic rendering of pain and qualm of the discriminated section. The autobiography presents political, historical, mythical figures and the oppressed selves of the Bengali society to put persistent resistance against different forms of oppression of Bengal's 'hidden apartheid'. With the publication of the autobiography, Biswas successfully creates a political-cultural space that shows an advancement of the Bengali Dalits towards an egalitarian society. It acts as the micro-narratives that offer resistance and retrieve the silenced voices of the alternate history of Bengal. It also acts as a testimony that explores the rich history, culture, and religion of the Namasudra community of East Bengal. As Sekhar Bandyopadhyay concludes:

(Biswas's autobiography) is informed by a reflexive consciousness that is distinctively Dalit...Through the story of his own life he brings out the various aspects of that hierarchical disjuncture and asymmetrical power relations in mid-twentieth century rural Bengal. He instils this structural dichotomy into the language structure of his narrative...this book will also provide a glimpse of the dalit life experiences in Bengal; hopefully, it will also shake the Bengali Bhadraklok out of their persistent sense of denial about the existence of caste prejudices in their own community. (Bandyopadhyay, 2015, p. xi xiv)

Biswas's autobiography aims at deconstructing the power structures in postcolonial Bhadraklok society which unravels the suppressed voices and cultural traces of the silenced subaltern. Many look for an anti-elitist approach to re-write the silenced history while primarily focusing on the subaltern consciousness that is being represented. The Bengali Dalit autobiographies hence need to be analyzed to decode the discursive traces of the voices of the 'other' in order to expose the hegemonic power relations and hierarchical structure of the society. His revolutionary work tries to give voice to whoever is without a voice or a name especially when the popular discourse attempts to exclude them. It tries to occupy space beyond the Bhadraklok

sensibility. His autobiography gets irradiated by the light of Dalit consciousness. He explores the rhetoric of resistance criticizing the hegemonic power structures to constitute the identity of the oppressed voices of the society within a framework of aesthetic value. Manohar Mouli Biswas authors a narrative discourse that castigates not only prevalent modes of anger, discrimination, and resistance but also resolutely strives towards a better future that is yet to be born. His militant voice speaks of the sufferings and anguish of the suppressed Namasudras in the caste-ridden Bhadrakalok society. His works are evidence of the fact that shows that the Bengali Dalits are fighting against all odds for a better future. With sheer determination and resolution, they can indeed overcome the darkness of caste hierarchy.

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